

Educational practitioners' beliefs and conceptualisation about the cause of ADHD: A qualitative study

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Introduction

Current research suggests that the causes of attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) are complex, multi-dimensional and interacting– not just nature or nurture. Because children spend a high proportion of their time at school, teachers and educational staff are well placed to help clinicians and parents determine whether a child has ADHD. Their beliefs about the cause of ADHD may influence which children they may suggest need referring for services. This study aimed to explore how educational practitioners conceptualise their beliefs about the causes of symptoms of ADHD.

Methods

- 41 educational practitioners
- 6 focus groups and 3 individual interviews
- Primary, secondary and pupil referral units (PRU's)
- Transcribed and analysed using Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006)
- Topic guide covered wide range of questions about working with children with ADHD

'...in the gene pool somewhere possibly'
(teacher and co-ordinator, Primary school)

'my opinion would be that it's very...learnt behaviours from birth'
(deputy head teacher, Primary school).

'...doing things which aren't healthy and aren't great for the child, actually maybe it's because they're struggling to really make sense of how to parent as well'
(pastoral leader, Primary school).

'... you know, some sort of biological thing'
(deputy head teacher, PRU).

Biological and Environmental beliefs about the cause of ADHD

'I assumed it's some sort of chemical imbalance, I've always assumed that because then if you give them Ritalin which is a chemical it affects, it in some way it calms that'
(SENDCo, Secondary school).

'I think it can be exacerbated by various environmental factors, like...how much support, emotional support and guidance kids are given and probably also diet'
(LSA, Secondary school).

How do school staff conceptualise the causes of ADHD?

Based on the views of the practitioners around causes of ADHD, we have constructed a model to capture the spectrum of beliefs about the causes of ADHD

1– 'True' ADHD: biologically caused, severe, uncontrolled and rare
'Probably about 10% of the children [with ADHD have] that pure'

2– Biological predisposition to ADHD influenced by environment

'It's something that you're born with ...however I think that home situations can improve it or make it worse'

3– Poor environment causes symptoms, becomes hardwired and therefore a biological condition.

'possibly by the time a child is that much older, that it, the patterns are so entrenched, perhaps hard to tell the difference between what was nature and what was nurture... so fundamentally it actually has become a physical part of how they work'

4– Symptoms caused entirely by poor environment, considered to be a 'misdiagnosis' of ADHD.

'It would be nice if it was a medical problem you could then call it ADHD and if it wasn't a medical problem and you grew up and you've learnt it or something, it's just "you're a little bit naughty"' (teacher, Primary school).

