

**Forming Strong Attitudes: Teachers' Attitudes toward Children with Attention-Deficit/  
Hyperactivity Disorder**

Donnah Lee Anderson

Bachelor of Arts, University of New England

Bachelor of Arts (Honours), University of New England

Diploma of Professional Counselling, Australian Institute of Professional Counsellors

A thesis submitted for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy of the University of New England,

Armidale, NSW, Australia

September, 2012

## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to express my gratitude to everyone who assisted me in completing this research. I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr Sue Watt for her invaluable guidance and advice. I also thank my co-supervisors, Professor Bill Noble and Dr Dianne Shanley, for their helpful feedback and support. Thank you to Dr Tony Marks for statistical advice. I thank the School of Behavioural, Cognitive and Social Sciences at the University of New England for providing me with opportunities to gain experience in other academic activities while conducting this research. Kerry Bowden, thank you for your life-long friendship, loyalty and unwavering belief in me. Lea Williams, thank you for your friendship, insight, compassion and laughter. Belinda Smith, thank you for your friendship and collegiality. Thank you to my family: Mum and Dad, Sam, Ben, Kristin and Aydin, for all your support and love. Thank you to Zac, for all the walks while I thought about what to write.

This thesis is dedicated to my grandson, Aydin James Boyce.

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### **Thesis Summary**

Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a childhood condition whose characteristic behaviours of hyperactivity, inattention and impulsivity are salient in school settings. Teachers' actions and decisions when working with children who demonstrate behaviours consistent with ADHD can be expected to be impacted by their knowledge of ADHD, and their attitude toward teaching such children. Teachers are exposed to numerous sources of inconsistent information about ADHD during their training and classroom experience. The formation of attitudes in response to such complexity is poorly understood. The present research used models of attitude content, structure and strength to investigate the formation of teachers' knowledge of ADHD and attitudes toward teaching children who display its characteristics. The results are reported in journal article form comprising studies reported in Chapters 2 to 4.

The first article (Chapter 2) surveys how teachers' knowledge and attitudes develop with increased teaching experience. In-service teachers ( $N = 127$ ) had stronger objective knowledge, perceived knowledge, and knowledge of characteristics and treatments of ADHD, relative to pre-service teachers with ( $N = 218$ ) and without ( $N = 109$ ) teaching experience. While all groups had slightly favourable overall attitudes, they also showed incongruent beliefs, emotions and behaviours, which suggested ambivalent attitudes.

The second article (Chapter 3) surveys how specific types of experience with ADHD (direct, indirect and personal experience) are associated with teachers' knowledge and attitudes. For pre-service teachers ( $N = 327$ ), personal experience and four or more instances of indirect exposure to ADHD via training or the media, were associated with stronger objective and perceived knowledge than less experience. For in-service teachers ( $N = 127$ ), direct experience teaching children with ADHD was associated with stronger perceived knowledge, while direct and indirect experience interacted with personal experience in their

associations with objective knowledge. Increased teaching experience was positively associated with favourable attitudes.

The third article (Chapter 4) extends a model of the formation of attitude certainty (Smith, Fabrigar, MacDougall & Wiesensthal, 2008) that was initially developed using hypothetical scenarios. An experiment (Study 1) and survey (Study 2) applied the model to teaching children with ADHD. Study 1 manipulated the amount of information, thought, and consistency of information delivered to pre-service teachers ( $N = 224$ ) with no prior experience with ADHD. Structural equation modelling (SEM) of Study 1 did not support the original model, in which relationships between attitude certainty and objective knowledge, thought and consistency were mediated by perceived knowledge, thought, and ambivalence. Instead, amount of objective information, thought, and consistency interacted in their effect on attitude certainty. Study 2 ( $N = 368$ ) tested whether experiences with ADHD (personal, direct and indirect) among in-service and pre-service teachers were antecedents of attitude certainty, and whether perceived accessibility, or perceived ease of recalling an attitude, was a mediator. SEM supported both these hypotheses. Together, these results suggest the psychological processes that form strong attitudes differ according to familiarity with the attitude object, and the context and stage of attitude formation.

The findings from this project carry practical implications for teacher training on ADHD, and for school psychologists. Strong attitudes were shown to develop via combinations of direct, indirect and personal experiences with ADHD, and via amount and structural consistency of information and thought about ADHD. The results highlight the need to investigate such complex attitudes in ecologically valid ways. The development of models of attitude strength is important for understanding attitudes toward other social issues that polarise opinions and have enduring consequences, such as global warming or genetic modification of crops. Like ADHD, these topics are based on large amounts of structurally

inconsistent information. Thus, the research reported in this thesis pertains to the formation of complex, real-life attitudes and may generalise to other multifaceted, personally relevant attitude objects.