

ADHD School Systems Generalization

By Louise Levin

There is the way that you want the world to be, and there is the way that the world is. Though the intentions of the public school system are laudable, the reality of implementing the ideals of “education for all” have become increasingly complex. In the current financial environment, municipalities no longer have the financial resources to cater to public school students with specific, and expensive, educational needs. The ADHD student demographic is among the hardest hit, and challenges associated with the disorder are often left unchecked and unacknowledged to the detriment not only of the ADHD student and their classmates, but also of the overworked, and underpaid, teachers. It is estimated that 18 million adults and children in the United States are diagnosed with ADHD. Of the 17.5 million students in grades 9-12, it is estimated that 5.8% of females, and 13.8% of males, are diagnosed with AD/HD.

Though it is a subject hardly spoken of, every parent will undoubtedly have a story to tell of their experience with an ADHD student, either directly or indirectly. As parents, we all believe in the exceptional capabilities of our children, reluctant to attribute boisterous behaviors, poor marks or social awkwardness to anything but the intangible and infinitely convenient cause—“growing pains.” ADHD is not a mere “growing pain,” but a real genetic disorder, located in the prefrontal lobe, impacting attention, generalization and impulse control.

Prior to this current iteration, ADHD was believed to be caused by bad mothering, or that it was a politically correct label for people who were “stupid, lazy or crazy.” In effect, ADHD was considered to be a ruse, a made-up complaint and excuse to give wealthy children extended time on tests and unfair accommodation in the classroom. These and other socially constructed stigmas have insinuated themselves into the ADHD conversation, and have resulted in a modern educational crisis, where students’ needs are often recognized too late, or not at all.

Overlarge, and understaffed classrooms in the modern public school system have become standard; harried teachers, left to the management of 30 students or more, struggle to apportion their time equally. Because educators find it impossible to divide their time according to specific needs, they inadvertently cater to the “middle,” or the class median. This method, however necessary, does not address the population needing more individualized attention/solutions.

Though ADHD students have exceptional capabilities in certain subject areas, their innate inability to generalize behavior from one situation to the next *does* require more attention from educators than can realistically be given. The manifestation of this particular symptom of ADHD is one of the greatest contributing factors to classroom chaos and disruption when exhibited by an affected student. Examples of this may include: the failure to grasp basic concepts despite repetition, the inability to adhere to fixed-term assignments and deadlines, the incapacity to adhere to rules/codes of conduct despite repeated warnings, or the failure to exhibit proper behavior in diverse social situations.

The general codes of conduct for the classroom are similar to those mandated in a civil society. Penalties for transgressions accompany each ordained rule, and all are made known to each new student upon arrival. These rules and regulations must be adhered to in order for group situations to run smoothly. An ADHD student, because of the failure to generalize, is not unaware of the rules in place to govern their behavior; they simply are at a neurobiological disadvantage to adhere to them.

This failure to generalize, or to translate behavior and conduct from one situation to another, will greatly affect both the classroom dynamic and an ADHD student’s positive self-perception. A student, along with peers and his or her teacher, may struggle to understand *why* they cannot manage conduct to meet the expectations of a well-ordered classroom, or *why* they continue to

commit the same transgressions again and again. This often leads to a negative pattern of self-assessment, supported by continual condemnation, conscious or not, by peers and educators.

Without guidelines for managing and mitigating the challenges of ADHD, the classroom will become increasingly chaotic, and may lead to a collective feeling of having had “enough” with the student. “Compassion exhaustion” is the term used to define the state achieved when parents, teachers or peers can no longer support the extreme and erratic symptoms of the disorder. Consequent feelings of guilt, blame and shame are not only appropriated to the ADHD student, but also those emotionally involved with him or her, resulting in a collective feeling of failure.

Teachers, friends, parents and siblings will come to feel that they have failed the struggling individual, who him or her self will come to believe, as all others finally have, that they are a hopeless case. These perceived limitations are, unfortunately, further reinforced by the school system. Bad progress reports, consistent trips to the principal’s office, social trouble and, potentially, recurring notices of suspension; all without positive recommendations for improvement, will further reinforce negative methods of ADHD management.

Though others may perceive these errant behaviors as proof of the student’s mentally deficient, willfully obstinate or lazy attitude, the failure to generalize is a very real problem. This symptom, however, can be treated and lessened with proven practices and techniques, not unlike those used to teach a musical instrument or sport. The student must accept responsibility for his or her disorder. With the help of faculty, friends, family, therapists and/or and ADHD coach, he or she must work to alter disruptive behavioral patterns, minimize negative effects and learn to become an effective self-advocate to educate others, in the classroom as well as out.

The first step, however, is the most difficult; a child must be diagnosed, parents must accept the realities of the disorder, and the school must work to accommodate the needs of the student. Following diagnosis and appropriate education of school officials, parents and peers regarding the inherent challenges of the disorder, an ADHD student’s unbounded energy and enthusiasm can become a positive force in classroom productivity.