

REFEREED ARTICLE

The Importance of Relationship Building with ADHD Students

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Abstract

ADHD's becoming more prevalent in classrooms speaks to how schools must train and support their teachers to stop and work with their "non-stop" students to build a strong relationship with them. This concept becomes challenging when behaviours get in the way of learning, and teachers lack confidence to teach and support students with ADHD. There are many techniques teachers can use to help these students be successful. In order for these strategies to work, a teacher must understand that none of these techniques will be successful without building a positive relationship with a student who has ADHD.

All students have the potential to exhibit some form of inattentive, impulsive behaviours, but when symptoms are severe, impairing and persistent, they form part of the diagnostic criteria for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (Gray et al., 2017). Students with ADHD are just as intelligent as the rest of the students in the class, but they struggle to meet teachers' expectations based on their intelligence level (Centre for ADHD Awareness Canada, 2017a). When ADHD-related behaviours get in the way of learning, teachers may lack confidence in knowing how to teach and support these students, and they may focus on the negative behaviours displayed each day, thus forming a negative opinion of those students. A strained relationship leads teachers to view students with ADHD less favourably than other students, putting the students with ADHD at risk for a persistent pattern of negative interactions with their teachers, adversely affecting their learning experience (Rogers et al., 2015). With a rise in numbers of students with ADHD in classrooms, teachers must look at these students through a new lens to build relationships with these "non-stop" students, in order to achieve a positive school experience.

Relationship Concerns with ADHD Students

ADHD affects the academic and social aspects of a student's school experience. Teachers witness students with ADHD displaying significantly more off-task behaviour and shorter attentive states during classroom teaching. These students appear less engaged in the learning environment and show avoidance for working collaboratively with their peers (Rogers et al., 2015). Furthermore, students with ADHD often exude less effort and are less motivated to achieve when compared to typically developing students. Having ADHD behaviours in the classroom raises the questions of how teachers are to teach these students, how they can motivate them to participate, and whether they will receive additional support to ensure that students with ADHD can be set up for success in both academic and social aspects of school.

Due to class size and limited amounts of teaching time, teachers find it difficult to keep up with their non-stop students with ADHD and to make sure they feel successful and included in the classroom. When behaviours begin to be constant interruptions, teachers begin to feel less of an emotional connection with these students and find them more effortful and stressful to teach (Rogers et al., 2015). Moreover, teachers begin to feel increased anger toward these children when they think the children are responsible for their disruptive behaviour. Teachers begin to observe behavioural problems associated with ADHD and attribute them to voluntary, deliberate action (Low, 2019). I have found myself guilty of viewing my students with ADHD, and

their behavioural tendencies, as a “deficit,” creating frustrated and negative feelings toward them, and wondering why they could not just follow instructions and listen when I requested them to listen. Frustrations and negative thoughts lead teachers to try to “fix” the behaviours by applying punitive strategies as an attempt to lessen the behaviours present in the classroom (Mikami, Smit, & Johnston, 2019). Consistently being punished begins a break-down of the student-teacher relationship, until the student does not feel a sense of belonging, success, and safety in the classroom.

Latest Canadian ADHD prevalence rates tell us that every classroom will include at least 1 to 3 students with ADHD (Centre for ADHD Awareness Canada, 2017b). These students will instantly be at a higher risk for lower levels of academic achievement and higher rates of disciplinary referrals. They will also be 2.7 times more likely than students without ADHD to drop out of school before graduation (Centre for ADHD Awareness Canada, 2017b). The rise of student prevalence with ADHD furthers the already ongoing issue of negative student-teacher relationships. Now, teachers must learn how to support more students with ADHD in their classroom while continuing to teach the rest of the class. Although it may seem impossible to a teacher, and to the students with ADHD who are ultimately facing all odds even before they enter the classroom, strategies can ensure that these students can be set up for success and will form positive relationships with their teacher and classmates. Once the relationships are built, the children can be better prepared to learn and work toward academic success. It is crucial that teachers learn these strategies, in order to ensure that there can be a decline in their negative outlook toward having students with ADHD achieve success in school.

Teachers are a vital part of their students’ lives, and it is very important that a strong and positive working collaboration is fostered, especially when a student is struggling. Teachers must take all necessary steps to show students with ADHD that they matter, and that the teachers are there to help them. Teachers are the most influential role models in a child’s life. When a teacher develops strategies to show students with ADHD that they are capable and worthwhile, the children believe it and results follow (Dendy, 2019). No matter how non-stop and tiring these students can be, a new vision of relationship building must be realized in the classroom, in order to break the persistent pattern of negative interactions between teachers and their students with ADHD.

Building Positive Relationships

Teaching is a non-stop job, which makes it hard to stop and work with non-stop students who have ADHD. In order to work toward creating a relationship with these students, teachers must first step out of their ego and step out of power (Katz, 2013). Teachers must move out of the “authoritarian” role and come down to the students’ level, setting aside time to understand ADHD and how this “invisible disability” (Low, 2019 “An Invisible Disability,” para.1) affects their students’ lives. Hyperactivity and inattention may be obvious, but other issues may be hidden beneath the surface (Low, 2019), such as chronic anxiety, worrisome or painful issues at home, or being bullied on the playground (Miller, 2019). Therefore, factors for teachers to consider include whether the students had a good sleep, whether they ate breakfast before coming to school and, if needed, whether medication was taken. Looking back to past years in my teaching career, there are times I wish when I witnessed non-stop behaviour, I would have taken the time to find out what was preventing the child from engaging in the class in that moment. Instead, I would get frustrated with the behaviour and call the students out for their behaviour in front of their peers, because I was the teacher and they needed to listen to me. Taking two minutes to focus on the students’ circumstance would have created 28 minutes of success in my physical education classes for these students.

Teachers should learn their students’ boundaries in stressful moments and how far they should challenge their students with ADHD. Katz (2012) found that ADHD is a disorder that prevents students from managing impulsivity and multiple demands at once. Asking students

with ADHD to sit still, stay focused, organize their materials, and interact positively spirals them into stress instantly if they feel they have to deal with multiple challenges. While it is hard to take a step back during instruction time, teachers must remember to have these students focus on one thing at a time, while giving them support when needed. This makes achieving academic goals more attainable in the children's eyes and shows them that the teachers understand what they need and will be available when they may need help.

Maximizing Academic Success

When a teacher understands how students with ADHD are able to work, and the students can achieve goals in smaller tasks, their strengths are brought to light. Medoff (2016) reported that the number one strategy that worked in her classroom was showing students with ADHD that she liked them and saw their strengths. For these students, finding this connection and changing the way they think teachers see them is incredibly important. Instead of clamping down on off-task behaviours that arise during instruction and work time, teachers should stop and use this time as an opportunity to get to know the students better (Medoff). Teachers may choose to include off-task behaviours in what the class is doing if it is an appropriate time, or let the students know that once they have completed their goal, then they will have a chance to meet and share what they are trying to share. Teaching physical education, I have witnessed students with ADHD having a hard time focusing in a large and noisy environment, resulting in numerous off-task behaviours. On many occasions, I have taken these students' behaviours and included them in the activities for the rest of the class. If we were working on our warm-up, and my student with ADHD was doing spins on the floor in a corner of the gym, I incorporated spinning on the floor as part of the warm-up. Doing this included that student with the rest of the class and thinking it was funny. The class loved the opportunity to spin on the floor, and in return I did not call out the off-task behaviour. I then continued to get the student to give me different moves to add to our warm-up. Encouraging myself to see that student's strengths with movement enhanced not only our class warm-up but our relationship, too.

Students with ADHD not only contribute to class with their strengths, but they can also help a teacher plan for their success by letting the teacher know exactly what they require to be successful. Instead of reprimanding misbehaviour, the teacher should turn it into a question of whether the students are making a good or bad choice in that moment (Dendy, 2019). Not reacting negatively, but instead having them recognize their actions, gives the students ownership over turning their behaviour around and shows them that the teacher is there to help them to do so. This leads students with ADHD to being their own person and making their own choices about what adaptations they prefer, and what would help them to achieve success and meet their goals, ultimately setting the stage for a trusting relationship (Medoff, 2016). Furthermore, children with ADHD who are given choices for completing an activity produce more work and are more compliant, resulting in less negative behaviours (Dendy, 2019). Medoff (2016) suggested an example of asking students to decide whether they would like to sit in the back of the classroom, where they are free to stand up and move around if needed, instead of placing these students at the front of the classroom (which most strategies suggest). Students with ADHD know what they need best, so they are the best support in helping a teacher to create a successful classroom environment.

Conclusion

There are many strategies that teachers can use to help students with ADHD be successful. However, none of these techniques will be successful without building positive relationships with these students (Knowles, 2009). School may not work for many students who have ADHD, and that is why it is very important for teachers to listen and assure these students that they will help them to acquire skills and knowledge while letting them know that they are

valued and cared for (Knowles, 2009). ADHD is a label, but if teachers listen, they will truly get to know the child behind the label, and that is where success begins. ADHD becoming more prevalent in classrooms speaks to how schools must train and support their teachers to stop and work with these non-stop students, in order to build a strong relationship with them.

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Brittany Lasko is a teacher in Seven Oaks School Division. She teaches physical education and dance, and she recently took on a learning support role. This role is what inspired her to enrol in Brandon University's M.Ed. program in special education, in order to learn more about supporting the students and teachers with whom she works.