

Young Students with Attention Deficit Disorder.

A study based on the stories of four girls with ADD in Icelandic elementary schools.

"I decided to listen and copy what the other kids wrote down. I never took part in discussions. Still, I always knew what they were talking about. I just listened. Nobody ever asked me what I thought anyway"

This is how a young girl diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder describes her participation in the elementary school classroom. According to research findings, her story is similar to stories told by many other ADD students. ADD is an acronym for *attention deficit disorder* and marks one end of the ADHD spectrum. Different from students with ADHD, these students are usually more quiet and tend to draw back and avoid attention. They are easy to miss, and sadly enough, often mistakenly thought to be "slow learners". Nothing could be further from the truth. However, they are *different* learners.

For the next 30 minutes, I want to give you a glimpse into the world of four girls diagnosed with ADD in Iceland. Finishing my masters in educational theories and pedagogy in 2008, I decided to do a qualitative study built on interviews and creative writings of four girls who are now in their early twenties. They had all been diagnosed with ADD in their adolescent years. They had gone through their school years thinking there was something wrong with them and believing they were not smart enough to learn.

I wanted to know how these girls felt about their teachers' reactions to their learning problems and the resources and accommodations that were made in school to support their learning. I also wanted to know how they view their social-and emotional being during their school years and how their experience has affected their future plans and expectations in life. The overall question was this: *Did the schools' reactions to the girls' learning problems encourage the girls' learning?* My aim was to get a better understanding of what students with undiagnosed ADD are possibly experiencing in and outside the classroom. The purpose of the study was to draw attention to these students and encourage discussions among school professionals about interventions concerning them.

The girls in my study were found randomly by the Icelandic ADHD Association who called for volunteers from their members list. To ensure the validity of the study, I used varied approaches to collect data, like interviewing, a self-rating scale, creative writings, mind mapping and group

discussions. When analyzing the data, I used cross-case analysis, where I coded themes and stories across cases, that could help answer my main study-questions. Lastly I reflected on my findings in the light of our current school policy on inclusive education and individualized learning.

I emphasized that my findings only describe the girls' perception of their school experience and are in no way indications about teaching practices in the schools they attended. Also, as the sample is only four subjects, they do not represent the experience of ADD students in general. However they can give us an idea of how ADD affects learning and well-being of students in our schools and which actions to take to improve their learning environment.

In the process of my research I have been asked; "Why just girls"? My main reason for focusing on girls was my teaching experience. I had been a special ed. teacher for years and often wondered about the quiet girls in regular classrooms who were constantly striving with their assignments, busy as bees, but kept failing on tests and getting low grades. I often wondered how that affected them. A research performed in Iceland a few years ago, found that a girl's self-esteem and identity in early adult life is closely related to school performance and their level of education, while boy's self-esteem seemed to be more related to things like income. Another research performed in 2005 by educators and feminists from Finland, USA and Australia, pointed out that some minority groups of women in western societies have not benefitted from the women's rights movement to the same extent as others. These women tend to be powerless, deprived of education and career in life. Women with undiagnosed disorders that seriously affect their ability to cope with the challenges of daily life can be considered as one of those minority groups. Thereby, girls with ADD may be considered vulnerable in more than one way. Because of their disorder they are vulnerable to school failure and therefore at risk of maintaining low social status in life.

I also noticed while working on my study, that researchers seemed to agree that in the studies of ADHD and ADD, more attention needs to be given to girls, as there are indications that there are more girls with the disorder than are identified. On the ADHD spectrum, boys seem to get diagnosed and treated considerably more often than girls.

For these reasons mentioned, I decided to take a feminist perspective in my study but keeping boys with ADD also in mind.

In order to understand how ADD affects student's performance I will briefly name a few things. First of all people tend to think ADD means having problems with noticing things but rather it is a problem with controlling what one notices, that is, moving the attention from one place to another and keeping it there. For this reason, student's attention in the classroom is irregular and inconsistent.

ADD is a neurobiological disorder that people are born with or can be a result of, or a part of an injury or an illness. There are two main symptoms; the first is *impulsive shifting in thinking* and the second is *slow physical activity*. Commonly ADD is under-identified in childhood and remains undiagnosed in adulthood, often resulting in a life of disorder, confusion, underachievement, low self-esteem and anxieties. Psychotherapist Sari Solden gives us a humorous example of a woman with ADD trying to get her house in order:

"I start out to straighten the house but I notice we are out of towels, so I go down stairs to get some more and I forget why I'm there when I reach the bottom of the stairs. But I notice my shoes so I take them upstairs to the bedroom and then I see the travel article open on the bed because I wanted to plan a trip, and since I remember now about the deadline I go to find the travel agent's number, but I am confronted by a mass of papers and scribbled illegible numbers so I start to dig around, and then I see the bills I haven't paid and think maybe I should go to the bank, but I remember I don't have any gas and I can't find my keys"

I guess in a way we can all relate to this story. But this is every-day life for women with ADD and it often takes on a much more serious form, or like Solden continues:

"For the women with untreated ADD, however, the demands of daily life can be crippling. It cripples their self-esteem, their families, their lives, their work and their relationships. With undiagnosed and untreated ADD, there will be some serious effect somewhere in their lives, even if it's invisible and hidden. They don't always talk about it. Only those closest to them know the level of difficulty they confront each day of their lives".

Back our young students. The typical girl with ADD tends to drift away, daydream, and has trouble with organizing her thoughts. Therefore she is forgetful, easily bored in class and has often problems with keeping the thread in conversations. To others she may seem awkward, shy or indifferent. But probably she is just trying to make sense of what's really going on around her and how she should tackle it without giving herself away. While she may move slowly and appear inactive, her mind is hyper active and impulsive and her thoughts disorganized. She may turn assignments in late or not at all, giving all kinds of explanations. She loses things, forgets to bring things and has trouble starting and finishing things she is not interested in doing. But then again, she may be overly organized and accurate, constantly seeking confirmation from teachers on whether she's doing things right. She often seems to be not listening when spoken to, has trouble with keeping track of time, her ability varies between days and she may have trouble staying awake in class. She probably doesn't show much initiative, doesn't volunteer or show much independency in classwork.

ADD students often make great effort to bluff and hide their difficulties. They may do that by avoiding demanding situations and attention from others. Girls have told how they hide in their clothes, sit themselves in the back or on the edge of the classroom, put their hair down to hide their face and avoid eye-contact, hoping they will not be noticed. Teachers may be frustrated by the fact that the girl with ADD can work for hours on a project that interests her, while she can not focus for ten minutes on a project that doesn't impress her. It has been pointed out that students with ADD and ADHD, biologically need much stronger stimulus to be motivated than the average person, and that partly explains why they can't dwell on projects they find uninteresting. It should not be forgotten that students with ADD and ADHD are often very creative and critical thinkers, and they are skilled learners when they have skilled teachers. It is also important to know that students with ADD often have anxiety problems as well, which may be a consequence of their disorder and learning problems or a complementing disorder.

This is how one of the girls in my study describes her first years of school:

"It wasn't before later, when I got my diagnoses that I realized I had learning difficulties. Before I always thought I was just dumb and that I just wasn't interested in learning. I mean, I never got what the teacher was trying to say. I couldn't even write on the board 'cause either I had forgotten how the words were spelled, or I had forgotten what words I was suppose to write. And you know, - I was always the last. I just couldn't do it. No matter how hard I tried. I just had to be dumb. And so I stopped trying. I think that happened very early on. I just gave up. I was always behind on everything"

Another girl wrote a poem about her experience that goes like this:

*The forrest was dark
and the path was unclear
The owls stared at me
without understanding
Other smaller birds
led me through.*

Finally I'd like to quote the psychiatrist dr. Larry B. Silver who said:

"These individuals have the types of disabilities that create doubt in people's minds because they cannot be seen. These are the disabilities that cause those who have them to doubt themselves, often leaving them without a purpose, a goal, and a dream".

Now to my findings.

Teachers' reactions to the girls' learning problems:

The girls do not remember their teachers paying much attention to them in general. When they did it usually had to do with their learning problems. And they did not experience that regular teachers had faith in them as learners. One of the girls said; "No-one remembers me now because no-one ever knew me". In their mind the special ed. teachers were more interested in them as persons and they also felt they had more faith in them as learners. Diagnosis didn't change their learning conditions in school as far as they can recall, but proper medication seemed to help two of them concentrate more on their studies. They all agree that most teachers were never aware of *how* ADD affected their learning.

Here is what one of the girls said about her special ed. teacher:

"She was always very nice to me and helped me a lot. I was mostly with her during my last two school years. She even gave me a birthday present. She was always surfing the internet with us trying to find what we could learn or do when we would finish school. She was always there for me. She was really the only one I could confide in"

About her regular teachers she said:

"But the teachers, well I didn't get so much help from them. Not really. But they allowed me to take more time to finish assignments or skip them and things like that. When I was ten I was spending almost every class in a small room between two classrooms with a few other students who were also behind. We were just put there. Every time. They always said I was doing my best. But how could they know? They didn't really know me."

Resources and accommodations made to support them:

The most common accommodation made was to take students out of regular classrooms into special classrooms or special learning groups, and have them skip certain subjects and standardized tests on the grounds of their learning problems. They all agreed that even though they felt better in the special classroom and saw it as a kind of a shelter, they also said it had isolated them even more and

harmed their feeling of self worth. They also said that even if they knew they would never pass the standardized tests they would have wanted to have the chance to try, or make that decision themselves to skip the tests. This resulted in the girls finding themselves devalued and powerless in their learning environment.

On that matter one of the girls said:

"It was not my idea to skip the tests. I was going to do my best you know. But my teacher and the head-master talked to my mom and she talked me into skipping most of the standardized tests. And you know- how could I pass the tests anyway when I had already been made to skip the whole subjects? I felt they were underestimating me"

Social and emotional being:

When asked on the scale of one to ten, how they would generally mark their feelings in school, they marked from 0-7, depending on different schools and grades. Three out of four girls remember feeling awkward from day one in school and one of them remembers being an outsider already in preschool. They remember constantly worrying about not understanding the teacher's instructions, and also worrying about making friends and remembering what to do. They felt anxious about reading out loud, speaking up in class and about finishing homework. Different from other research findings, for these girls, the 4th and 5th and the 6th grade was for them the hardest time in school while the adolescent years were their best. Their learning problems were getting more and more obvious and they had trouble making friends. Three of the girls were bullied at that time and two of them said that they made friends with some other girl who was also without friends, even if they didn't like her. Making friends with someone, even just anyone, was better than the alternative. All of them said they were usually alone after school. Sadly none of the girls saw any advantage in having ADD.

What made the most difference for them was being diagnosed, which for all of them happened in their adolescent years. All the girls said that being diagnosed with ADD freed them from the image they had, that they were stupid, forgetful and lazy. Having finally an explanation for their problems, their feeling of self worth changed as did their attitude towards their future.

In my line of work, the value of diagnoses is questioned. It is seen as a label that tends to stigmatize and overshadow the person behind the label. In my opinion diagnoses is not the problem. The problem is what we do with it. Or what we don't do with it. In the case of our four girls, it was the absence of diagnoses that stigmatized them. Being diagnosed, they could finally reveal their true self.

Effects on future plans and expectations in life:

Most research findings state that high proportions of students with attention disorders tend to drop out in secondary school. These girls did not. Three of them continued their education and the fourth was saving up for school. Their experience hasn't discouraged them. On the contrary, it seems to have strengthened them. Life has not treated some of them all that well since they left school. But they are used to struggle. And they are used to surviving. That's their advantage. Like the famous feminist Carol Gilligan once said about ADD and ADHD girls:

"Whether they lurch in all directions at once, or pull back into a turtle shell, no one can protect them from being buffed about by unpredictable winds. Ultimately, girls with ADD/ADHD must learn for themselves that they cannot change the wind, but they can learn to adjust their sails". (Gilligan, C. 1982. In a different voice).

These girls did. Here is an example of one of the girls' poems she wrote about how she felt when finishing school by flunking all the standardized tests, but determined to keep on trying for secondary school:

*Maybe the door of
happiness
will open in some place
at the same time
It closes
in another.*

At the end of our time together I asked the girls what they would like to say to the school system. What they said is worth listening to. I was amazed by how critical and conscious they were on the matter. But then again, they are the experts. They want teachers to monitor students' well-being more in general. They want them to show more initiative in offering students help, because many with learning problems will not ask for it themselves. They want teachers to have students' problems tested earlier, and they want more professionals in the schools to help. They want authorities and school personnel to keep the discussion on bullying alive and they warn about

separating students from their regular class and devalue their ability to learn. At last two of the girls mentioned the necessity of teaching students with learning problems study skills.

On the whole the experience of our four girls is not positive. But in their own words they don't see it as a result of bad teaching or bad schooling, but a result of "not knowing". And their attitude is not an attitude of blaming.

The findings in the study are my interpretations of the stories, told by the girls themselves about their school years. They are not stories their teachers would tell. And in these stories there is no absolute truth. Only perspectives based on memories of things that happened, and not things they missed out or have forgotten. But this is how they see things when looking back, and how they feel about them. And that tells us something. Of course they had their good moments in school. But on the whole they see themselves as bewildered and invisible throughout their school years. Also, not every student with ADD is "quiet" and "invisible". And not all of them see themselves as failures in school. But they all have attention problems that affect their learning and self-esteem if their problems are not acknowledged and tackled by teachers.

Let's go back to the main question: *Did the schools' reactions to the girls' learning problems encourage the girls' learning?* You could say that the answer is simply no. But in a way they did. The girls probably learned lots of stuff that wasn't on the curriculum. Useful stuff. They learned how to be observant and critical and good listeners. And they developed coping skills that probably will come in handy throughout life. But most importantly, they learned not to give up on themselves, or like one of the girls stated:

"This is of course different from the experience the other kids had. I have gone through some tough things that they haven't and I've had to work much harder to pull through. And I can honestly say that I'm proud of myself. This is not as easy as people might think".

It would be easy to say that these students are our lost students. But that would be wrong. The thing is, they are not found. Looking back to my study in 2008, I've noticed that school professionals in Iceland are more and more aware of what ADD stands for and how it affects our students. I do however believe we still have a long way to go. And we need more research.

I believe the lesson for us professionals here is that we need to increase our understanding of ADD in our schools and be more attentive to our "quiet" students. Also we should take to heart that encouraging and empowering disadvantaged students is equally important to teaching our lesson plans. If we are really serious about building diverse schools in the spirit of equity, we may need to change our way of thinking. Diverse schools demand a diverse group of professionals to achieve

their true goal. In my opinion social educators should definitely be a part of every school 's professional team. The need for them and utility is clear.

I am a teacher of social education at the University of Iceland and I'm also a social educator myself. So I know what social educators can do and how they can support students with ADD and ADHD in regular schools. The number of social educators working in the Icelandic school system is increasing. I strongly believe it would be highly beneficial to students like our four girls to have a social educator in school to help them brake barriers and encourage them to shine, both in and outside the classroom. Quoting Kelly and Ramundo:

"Often ADD people just need a „bridge over troubled waters“- a coach, a partner, or a professional, to sit down and help them structure their day, help pick out a few things that they should focus on. Without that small bridge, they're trapped hopelessly on the other side, alone on an island, not even knowing that they can signal for help"(Kelly, K. and Peggy Ramundo. 1995)

It is a painful experience to be a little girl or a boy in school, and discover that the picture you have of yourself doesn't match the picture the other kids have of you. To slowly realize that you are different but can't figure out in what way, or why. To be constantly afraid of making mistakes, learning to draw back and becoming invisible. To grief when you see yourself through the eyes of the other children and never being able to reveal who you really are or can be. To finally sentence yourself to isolation, to best protect yourself. To learn to trust the opinion of others better than your own and come to the conclusion that you are not as good or as clever as the others, even though you don't feel that way.

To know that some students experience school in this way and leave it quietly again ten years later without their true problems being identified, is unacceptable. We need to educate our school system about the signs and affect of ADD and other invisible disorders. And we need a new mindset in supporting these students. A mindset, best defined by one of our Children's books writers in Iceland, Þorvaldi Þorsteinssyni, who past away just recently. These are his words:

"It is every child's unconditional right to feel that they themselves are enough. Only then can a child learn to see him or herself and others as an unforeseen adventure, loaded with good gifts. A child who is allowed to be a child learns from experience that he or she knows much more than what they only remember, and that they can do more things than those measured on a test. A child who is allowed to be a child knows that it is ok to be "outside themselves" and that "attention deficit" can mean that they are just paying attention to other things than the ones that suit authorities at that given moment."

I'd like to end by dedicating this talk to all the girls and boys who are sitting in classrooms all over the world, quiet and "outside themselves", waiting for someone to tell them they are

- enough!

Thank you for listening.