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ATTENTION DEFICIT-HYPERACTIVITY DISORDER IN EFL STUDENT'S LEARNING: INFLUENCING FACTORS.



» Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative research was to identify some of the factors that influenced an ADHD student's learning. This study showed how these factors ensued problems which were the origin of the academic failure in the fourth grade student. Symptoms were identified at school and they affected the participant's academic performance as well as his community life. Furthermore, some strategies were implemented to help ADHD students to focus in class. The results showed how these implemented strategies contributed positively to the participant's academic improvement to the extent that this student was able to take control of some of the ADHD symptoms.

KEY WORDS: Attention Deficit-Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Factors, Academic Problems, Learning, Strategies, Improvement.

» Resumen

El propósito de esta investigación cualitativa es identificar algunos factores que influyen en el aprendizaje de un estudiante con problemas de Déficit de Atención e hiperactividad. Este estudio muestra como estos factores conducen a problemas que son el origen del fracaso académico de un estudiante de cuarto grado. Sus síntomas son identificados en la edad escolar y en la manera en cómo afecta su desempeño académico y su vida social. Además, algunas estrategias fueron implementadas para ayudar a estudiantes con estos problemas a concentrarse más fácilmente en las clases de inglés. Los resultados muestran como estas estrategias contribuyen positivamente en su mejoramiento académico en la medida que los estudiantes con problemas de Déficit de Atención e hiperactividad sean capaces de controlar algunos de sus síntomas.

PALABRAS CLAVES: Déficit de Atención e hiperactividad, Factores, Problemas Académicos, Aprendizaje, Estrategias, Mejoramiento.

Introduction

Attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder is a common issue teachers tend to come across in their school classrooms. The *ParentsMedGuide for the Treatment of ADHD* (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2009) defined it as a neurobehavioral condition characterized by excessive restlessness, inattention, distraction, and impulsivity. It is usually first identified when children are school-aged, although it also can be diagnosed in people of all groups (p.1). Taking the previous definition into account, it is common to hear school teachers say how difficult it is to work with the “troublesome child” who does not pay attention to instruction, never works, and is frequently distracted. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV), 4th, American Psychiatric Association [APA], 1994) also argues that the ADHD individual has difficulty taking turns, talks excessively, often appears not to be listening when being spoken to, and tends to interrupt and intrude on others in games, conversations and classroom discussions (p. 85). The main purpose of this research thus is to investigate what factors influence an ADHD students’ learning in the context of a private school in the Caribbean coast in Colombia. Also, this study attempts to identify useful strategies to engage ADHD students to learn and to help teachers to get equipped with the necessary tools to tackle the problem successfully.

Theoretical Framework

Nowadays, the term “lack of attention” is being used more frequently than ever before. It is also seen as a growing problem in schools. Inattention not only occurs at school, but also at home. Researchers have defined this kind of problem as Attention Deficit-Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Gregg (1995) defined

ADHD as “a neurobiological-based disorder characterized by inappropriate levels of three observable behaviors: inattention, impulsivity, and hyperactivity.” (p. 2). Those behaviors have negative effects on the teaching and learning process given that they can affect the acquisition of basic academic skills not only for ADHD learners but the whole class.

In addition, Villegas, Hardwood, Brozovich, (1995) named these three symptoms as being decisive in the identification of ADHD: a) Short Attention Span: these children have a hard time when they are requested to pay attention. This problem is mostly evidenced in the classroom setting. b) Impulsive behavior: these children usually act before thinking. This impulse control deficiency seems to have a biological origin. This means that they react impulsively without stopping to think about the consequences of the behavior. c) Hyperactivity: these children are always on the go, endlessly talking, running, getting easily bored because “they do not have anything to do (p. 9).”

Jakobson & Kirkas (cited in Incorvaia, 2009) affirm that “hyperactivity may be the most recognizable symptom, recent research suggested that children’s academic difficulties are most directly linked to inattentive behaviors” (p. 1). As a consequence, students may be at risk of showing poor academic performance when they present attention problems. In some cases, these students do not listen to the teachers’ attention calls which in turn generate apathy in both students and teachers. In the worst case scenarios, ADHD students can even be expelled from schools. Golden, Peterson, & Meyers state that ADHD symptoms affect people from all walks of life, all nations, and all cultures. (2010, p. 80). In the school context, ADHD can lead to serious setbacks such as academic failure and rejection. In this article, however, we say that ADHD learners may succeed if school tasks appeal to their individual preferences.

Treiber & Lahey (1983) indicated that behavioral

interventions to decrease disruptive behaviors do not necessarily result in improved academic performance. They proposed that interventions should focus on improving academic behaviors rather than on inattentiveness, disruptiveness, and excessive motor activities that are incompatible with learning. Reid & Harris (1993) found that both self-monitoring of attention and self-monitoring of academic performance may result in increased levels of attention, but they also suggested that on-task behaviors are not necessarily correlated with active academic engagement.

Additionally, Loe & Feldman (2005) state that “attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder is associated with poor grades; poor reading and math standardized test scores, and increased grade retention. ADHD is also associated with increased use of school-based services, increased rates of detention and expulsion, and ultimately with relatively low rates of high school graduation and post-secondary education.”

This study proposes that ADHD should not be seen in negative terms. If proper procedures are followed good results may ensue from intervention.

Method

This study followed a qualitative research method to investigate the factors that influence ADHD students’ learning processes. The setting for this study was a private primary school on the Colombian Caribbean. The main participant was Peter (pseudonym), a ten-year old child who was in 4th grade. Peter came from a well-to do family whose life style was very comfortable. This does not mean however that his parents gave him everything he wanted since he misbehaved at home as well. This child’s problems had influenced his academic learning and skills development. During classes Peter paid attention to everything around him, talked all the time, and walked while he worked.

Data was collected by observing the participant in context. We observed the way he behaved in class when completing a task. We observed him working individually and in group. We also observed him in direct contact with the teacher and interacting with other students during the school time.

3 interviews were carried out with three of Peter’s teachers and two of his classmates to know their perceptions about the participant’s behavior in class. Also, Peter the main participant was interviewed. Besides, written data such as tests, logs and field notes, grades were considered as key elements to write every detail that could be relevant or useful for this study. Finally, data was transcribed and analyzed to help us find a solution to the stated problem.

Results

This analysis attempted to focus on the factors that influence ADHD students’ learning. This study also narrowed down on different tasks that can be used to help Peter be focused more. Significant changes occurred during the observation process, and the interviews. Also, the written data helped us to support the evidence found in the collection process. The data analyzed below demonstrated the most salient factors in determining the lack of a favorable outcome of an ADHD students’ learning. During the observations we observed three relevant factors that affected the participant’s learning: Negative reinforcement, classroom size, and distraction. This will be fully explained in the following sections:

Negative Reinforcement

The constant negative reinforcement the participant received from some teachers was a steady observable trait. “Negative reinforcement

is an unpleasant stimulus that is removed after a behavioral response". (Stolerman, 2010, p. 822). We could observe that it was a way teachers used to control and get the participant to be brought into line in class. However, the data showed that this only worked a few minutes and the misbehavior continued despite the repetitive times teachers told the participant off in classes. When one of the teachers was asked about Peter's behavior in class, he answered:

Example # 1

I: *How is Peter's behavior in your class?*

T: *umm...Peter never behaves; he is always talking and distracts the rest of the class. He does not pay attention.*

Also, it was observed that verbal reprimands were the most common form of punishment used in the classroom. Peter's teachers usually used the same words to scold him "It is always you" – "you are never quiet" – "you never pay attention" – "sit properly" – "close your mouth" – "work quickly". These phrases had created a "mental model" about how Peter behaved in class. That is why he disregarded the negative feedback and in some cases laughed.

It was what the teacher answered about Peter's attitude toward the repetitive scolds he received.

Example # 2

I: *How is Peter's attitude when you scold him?*

T: *well... he sits down, but in few minutes he stands up again. It is as if "the reprimands" were for that specific moment.*

Another negative behavior was evidenced in "El observador del alumno". In each term of the academic year it contained the difficulties presented during the terms ("he frequently gets up from the chair", he talks too much

during the classes", "he gets distracted easily"). These phrases are informed to his parents who talk seriously with Peter about his behavior. Moreover, it was observed that Peter was not well seen as a good student among their classmates, specially the girls who protested when the teacher asked them to include him in their groups. They refused to work with him. When the teacher asked them "why", some of them said:

Example # 3

S1: *-he never works and speaks all the time*
S2: *-he always does something different from classwork and he never helps us.*

Classroom size

In Peter's School there were 28 students per group and the classroom size was small considering the number of students; they had to work together since their chairs were a little close one to the other. It is an aspect that affected Peter negatively because he gets distracted with any noise or comments from his classmates. During the observations we noticed that the little distance among chairs permitted Peter to get easily distracted with sounds or objects. He was the one person who looked at everything that happened around the classroom without paying attention to instruction. Also, throughout the interviews, Peter's teachers agreed that the classroom size was not adequate to have many students in it.

Example # 4

I: *What do you think about the way students are organized in the classroom?*

T1: *Well, I think that the classroom is "tight" and there are some activities that require more space to work in, it is something that affects Peter's concentration in class.*

I: *Considering the classroom size as a negative*

aspect that affects Peter's concentration, how do you supervise his behavior during your classes?

T1: *I always sit him in front of my desk to control and supervise what he is doing. Sometimes I ask to "the leader of the week" to check if he is working or not because I need to supervise the rest of the class as well.*

This answer demonstrated that the teacher has to be in a permanent supervision of Peter's performance in class. It is something that could affect him since he is receiving more verbal reprimands than the rest of his classmates.

GETTING EASILY DISTRACTED:

It is really common to know that children get easily distracted with everything that calls their attention, especially when it relates to their likes and preferences. During the observations it was noticed that he enjoyed doing something different from the rest of the class. When teachers asked him to follow any instructions, he just looked at the window or concentrated on another activity. Besides, he used to play with toys like little cars, little plastic soldiers or paper, color pencils every time the teacher was not looking at him. In addition, during the interviews it was evident that his distraction was one of the main aspects that influenced Peter's learning. The teachers were in agreement about this negative influence on his performance.

Example # 5

I: *What kind of things do you believe distract peter in class?*

T2: *There are many things that catch Peter's attention, but the ones that influence his behavior more are cars, toys or picture cards that he brings to the class and they do not let him focus on.*

I. *What kind of strategies do you implement in class to reduce this negative factor?*

T2: *I always take those things away and call his attention but sometimes he does not care. Also, I ask him to do any task or extra activity to spend time and keep him busy during the whole class.*

In the learner's log many comments about the participant's negative trait were found. They let us know how frequently he brings distracting objects that catch his attention in class and disturb his classmates.

Example # 6

"It is recommended not to use distracting objects during the classes" - "It is recommended that his parents talk with him about the way he plays and relates with his classmates".

INTERVENTION

After having identified the negative factors in Peter's behavior, we applied some strategies that were key to get Peter to behave better. Also we needed to know if they really could help him to succeed in the English class. In the following section, we will define some of the tasks in which Peter showed better results.

Role Plays

Jarvis, Odell, and Troiano (2002) affirmed that these kinds of tasks emphasize the social nature of learning, and see cooperative behavior as stimulating students both socially and intellectually (P. 2). In this sense, it was observed that Peter and his classmates got more integrated and it improved his relationship and interaction during the English class.

Example # 7

"During this task it was observed that Peter showed more interest, motivation, and a good performance since he was involved in an active way with his classmates. Also, it was observed that he enjoyed performing as a main action character which led him to show his artistic

abilities” (taken from field notes, August 19th-September 8th).

In an interview, Peter gave his opinion about role plays.

Example # 8

I: *what did you like from the role play?*

Peter: *“mmm that I was the villain and that I could do many things”*

I: *how did you feel about working with your classmates?*

Peter: *“... good because my classmates accepted me in the group and they liked how I did it.”*

Regarding artistic abilities the data showed that Peter was also good at dancing. He could coordinate dancing steps in presentations in front of the school community.

Example # 9

“During the talent show organized by the school it was observed that Peter was one of the best participants in the dancing event. He kept the same rhythm and was coordinated with the rest of the group. It was evident he enjoyed it a lot; Peter assumed this activity with responsibility” (taken from field notes, August 19th- September 10th).

Presentations

This kind of task encouraged him to express himself using his own words, opinions and ideas related to his interests and likes about the topic. Also, these tasks helped to engage Peter and motivated him to search and find information about this artistic event.

Example # 10

“In the presentation he was motivated and well prepared to present about “sea life”, he used

slides, videos and colorful pictures that helped him to do a very good presentation” (taken from field notes, September 20th).

Also when Peter was interviewed, he supported what was observed during the presentations. This gave us a research match in which we state that school, home, and students’ interest need to adjust to each other.

Example # 11

I: *what do you think about making presentations?*

Peter: *“Cool teacher, to talk in front of my classmates”*

How did you feel when you present your topic?

Peter: *“I liked it because my parents helped at home. My father looked for the video about sea horses and the way they live and my mother looked for the pictures for the slides”*

Conclusions

Considering the aspects mentioned in this study it can be concluded that Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity disorder is related to academic problems since it affects children of all ages and its symptoms are mostly noticed at school. Children with ADHD contribute in a negative way to a classroom environment affecting the whole class and the process of it. There are some factors that influence ADHD students’ learning as: negative reinforcement, small classroom size and how easily distracted students get not only at school but at home. These three aspects reduce students performance and ensue misbehavior in the classroom.

The constant negative reinforcement towards ADHD students from his teachers and classmates can increase Peter’s problem, since students with ADHD do not care about negative

reinforcement. It does not provide positive feedback that can help to guide the participant. Another factor is the fact that the classroom size gave the ADHD participant more distraction, allowing him to talk with classmates around. Taking into account this into account, all of them led out ADHD participant to fail in his academic performance.

On the other hand, during the intervention stage it was observed that out ADHD participant got more attracted to roles that involved him with active characters. The different tasks above mentioned could help him to get focused more easily in the English class. Role plays were one activity which encouraged students to work and participate actively. They led him to express his emotions through the use of his body language. Besides, it was perceived that he could be attentive when he received good feedback.

ADHD students can control their inattention and impulsivity to some extent when they are motivated by something. However, hyperactivity is something a little bit more difficult, since it is like the motor that pushes him to do things with all his potential.

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