

ADHD labelling of kids can mask other problems: study

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Labelling children with learning and behavioural difficulties can be detrimental to the children in question as well as their teachers, research by a QUT graduate has found.

Dr Linda Graham, who recently received the AARE Award for Doctoral Research in Education, found that children who were labelled as having "ADHD-like" symptoms, for example, were at a disadvantage when it came to people's perceptions of them.

"I have been looking at the things we say and how that affects what we do, and I have looked at the files of students who were referred to special-schools for behaviour," she said.

She said her interest was in the pervasive nature of the discourses around ADHD.

"ADHD went from something which was relatively obscure in the early 1990s, which most people didn't know about unless they had a child with it, to all of a sudden becoming something everyone knows about," she said.

"It is especially problematic when children can end up with an "informal" diagnosis which becomes a kind of pop-culture explanation for why children behave in certain ways.

"I am not saying these behaviours are not real, but I am saying it is not good to use ADHD as a label to describe them, as it doesn't offer teachers and schools an adequate road map with how to proceed in helping a child through school - when a child walks in with a diagnosis of ADHD what does that really tell the teacher? Not much."

She cited the example of one boy who had speech problems and learning difficulties from the age of six and had been described numerous times by schools as having "ADHD-like behaviours".

"This phrase was used to describe everything about him with the use of words like impulsiveness and inattention and hyperactivity, which turned out to be a big problem because his first school, as well as subsequent schools, became fixated on this label informally diagnosing the boy.

"As it turned out, he did not have ADHD, but was speech and language-impaired, which would also give a good explanation to why he was explosive: if he was verbally challenged by another child he would be more likely to hit out.

"However, because of the red-herring effect of ADHD, this was misinterpreted as impulsivity with terrible, long-lasting consequences for the boy concerned."

She said she thought the labels were deceiving, but that people tended to think all the children with a particular diagnosis would be the same.

"An informal diagnosis is like a signpost, saying this child is likely to do certain things, and the more dominant these diagnoses become, the less inclined a teacher might be to work out individually what will work with these kids."

She said schools were becoming disempowered, and that the individualised and instinctive intuition which was used by teachers for years is being eroded, often to the detriment of children and the teachers themselves.

Provided by QUT

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