***Can't Sit Still***

***How to address students with ADHD***

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Abstract

One of the most common disabilities plaguing our classrooms is Attention Deficit Disorder (ADHD). As teachers, we may find ourselves challenged with trying to meet the needs of a struggling learner that has trouble focusing. In many classrooms, students with undiagnosed ADHD are often labeled with behavioral problems, being easily distracted, and as low academic achievers. Many students struggling with ADHD are often battling an additional learning disability, which is often hidden under the vast symptoms of ADHD.

Our Islamic schools are charged with the responsibility of developing a realistic screening process and accommodations to meet the needs of our students in the Islamic setting. This paper is designed to take an innovative approach towards addressing the needs of our students with attention differences. Participants will have an opportunity to develop a 504 Disability Plan, learn new strategies and accommodations that work, and create a realistic plan for students struggling with attention/focus concerns and learning disabilities.

Statement of Problem

During my ten years of experience educating Muslim children, I have found an increasing amount of children coming into our classrooms with attentional needs and concerns. In 2011, the CDC reported that the prevalence of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder in children ages 4 to 17 years was 11%, with 6.4 million children diagnosed with ADHD and 4.2 million taking psych stimulants. This represents a drastic increase in the rate of ADHD cases during the past thirty years (CDC, 2015). There are many reasons for this growing epidemic, like an increased awareness of the disease, diet, and home dynamics. Our Muslim children are no different in their daily struggles to stay attentive in class.

The rise in diagnosis of students with ADHD does not compare to the daily struggles our students face in our traditional classrooms. It is no secret that many of our Islamic schools still encourage a traditional teacher-centered classroom, which promote students sitting still and listening attentively for hours during a school day. I have worked in over four Islamic schools throughout this country and I have found a similar trend in our classrooms. Typically, behavioral problems in our Islamic schools are minimal, which causes the behavior of our hyperactive and inattentive students to be magnified in our classrooms.

Our schools need to begin to look at this growing problem and find more realistic solutions to address the needs of students with attentional differences. In *The ADHD Explosion*, Stephen Hinshaw, PhD, demonstrated that educational accountability policies in schools have had a significant influence on ADHD rates (Hinshaw, 2014). During the past decade, our schools have focused many efforts on testing and improving standardized test scores. Many experts believe that the increase in testing has shifted our classroom culture to become very regimented, structured, and rigid. This type of classroom culture does not allow for the diverse learner to thrive. In every classroom, there is always a student that doesn’t learn in the exact manner they are taught. These learners are typically labeled as slow learners or attention deficient.

It is my hope to challenge the minds of our educational leaders to address the needs of students with attentional differences in a systematic manner. I believe we must begin with a mindset shift. It is not the minds of our students gifted with ADHD that should be “fixed” to fit the mold we place in front of them. Rather, it is on us to create model classrooms that encourage, promote, and highlight the great gifts our students with attentional differences possess.

Review of Literature

According to the American Psychiatric Association, Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is one of the most common mental disorders affecting children. Symptoms of ADHD include inattention (not being able to keep focus), hyperactivity (excess movement that is not fitting to the setting) and impulsivity (hasty acts that occur in the moment without thought). According to the CDC, there are three forms of ADHD, predominantly inattentive type, predominantly hyperactive-impulsive type, and combined type. In order for a child to be diagnosed with ADHD, at least six symptoms would need to occur in two or more settings and the significantly impair a child’s ability to function in daily life activities.

A student with ADHD can display an array of characteristics that are sometimes confused with other disorders. “Of children diagnosed with ADHD, approximately 35 percent also qualified for a diagnosis of oppositional defiant disorder, 28 percent qualified for a diagnosis of conduct disorder, 26 percent qualified for a diagnosis of anxiety disorder, and 18 percent also had a depressive disorder, and 12 percent had learning disabilities,” (Atkins, 1999). It is fairly common to confuse the traits of ADHD with other learning disabilities. Students with ADHD can have difficulties with reading, blending and segmenting sounds, writing cohesive sentences, and solving mathematical equations. The significance of these academic challenges can be easily misunderstood for an actual learning disability. It is critical for our Islamic schools to have a thorough process to help adequately identify students with attentional challenges.

Methods

Addressing the needs of students with attentional concerns can be a complex task for educators. Many times, teachers are plagued with providing too little or too much support to students with ADHD. In our Islamic schools, we battle with our own personal misconceptions about ADHD and our ability to offer fair and positive alternatives for our learners. Students struggling with issues with hyperactivity, focus, and inattention require a variety of social and academic outlets to be successful in a school setting. During the past few years, I have outlined a process for teachers to utilize to help identify and accommodate students with ADHD.

Students of concern should be carefully monitored and assessed over the course of several months prior to any changes being made to the student’s learning plan. It is extremely important to not rush to judgment and to self-evaluate your own teaching style before assuming a student has ADHD traits. In our school setting, we use a variety of benchmark assessments to assess the progress of all students. One of the first indicators of an attentional difference is the inability to get through a test. Most students struggling with attentional differences find test taking extremely challenging and they will often be unable to get through a lengthy test. Their test results and observed testing behaviors will clearly indicate a pattern of concern. Additionally, students will display certain consistent traits in class. Teachers with often complain about the child’s behavior, inability to focus, and work completion. Although, these are traits of any common student, a consistent and severe display of some of these characteristics can signal a greater concern with the student.

After thoroughly monitoring student data and observations, the RTI Director will ask all of the student’s teachers to complete a survey. This survey, which is created by NICHQ **Vanderbilt** Assessment Scales and utilized by doctors and psychologists, is used to identify a pattern of certain behaviors from the student. Upon review of all surveys, I will typically meet with all of the student’s teachers to gain additional clarity about the concerns in the classroom. Additionally, we will review the child’s data as a team and make a plan for our next steps. It is important to address any concerns with tier one classroom strategies at this time. There may be instances that highlight the need for the teacher to change a particular method of teaching or differentiate certain lessons. We continue monitoring the student for a few additional weeks and notate any changes in the student’s overall progress.

Upon a thorough review of data and observations, we will typically meet with the parents to discuss our findings and recommendations for the next steps. This is a very delicate part of the process and it must be handled with extreme care. In my experience, I have found that many families have many hesitations with accepting ADHD as a real diagnosis. Honestly, there is a lot of evidence to support the theory that ADHD is overly diagnosed and a disease created to label active children. It is important to have an honest conversation about these views and be well informed before meeting with the parents. The parents should be presented with facts and data. It is important for the parents to hear directly from the homeroom teacher and for them to have a visual representation of their child’s progress and current concerns. Typically, it is very difficult for anyone to argue with clear and concise data.

After the student has been assessed and diagnosed by a doctor or psychologist, it is important to immediately consider a 504 accommodation plan for the student. “The **504 Plan** is a plan developed to ensure that a child who has a disability identified under the law and is attending an elementary or secondary educational institution receives accommodations that will ensure their academic success and access to the learning environment, (University of Washington, 2017).” The development of the 504 Plan must take into consideration the child’s diagnosis, allowable accommodations, and the individual needs of the student. The parents should be involved in the process of developing the student’s 504 plan. Once the accommodation plan is in place, all accommodations must be implemented by the teachers and monitored by an administrator.

Recommendations of Practical Implementation

Successful implementation of a successful process for addressing the needs of students with ADHD begins with addressing the mindset and learning approaches of our teaching community. We can’t ignore the rise in cases of students diagnosed with ADHD in this country. These students are entering into our classrooms in droves and we have to realistically look at our current state in education. We must begin with creating classrooms that allow more movement, alternative seating, and project based learning. Our students should be actively engaged in their learning process. Having teacher-centered classrooms does not work for every child and we often find ourselves frustrated with a child that can’t seem to comply with the rules of this setting. Our traditional Quran classrooms must be reviewed to identify alternate ways to reach specific types of learners. ADHD impacts the working memory and we have found this drastically impacts a student’s ability to retain verses from the Quran.

The mindset shift that must take place starts with all of us. Classroom teachers have the largest impact on individual students. Teachers must be open to all types of learners and be willing to adjust their teaching style and approach, when it isn’t working for a student. We have to move away from immediately accusing our students of being inattentive and hyperactive before trying alternative ways to reach them. At my school, we found that many students’ diagnosed with ADHD have difficulty memorizing the Quran. Since there is no research on this topic, our team of Quran teachers and I developed a process to help meet the needs of these students. We differentiate their classes to promote a smaller learning environment, we offer memory aids during the learning process, and encourage more movement during the memorization process. These simple strategies have a tremendous impact on our students. There are countless other examples of simple classroom adjustments that help turn around some of the behaviors and attentional concerns found within our students.

It is absolutely critical to identify if your Islamic school is required to follow Section 504 law. Any school, public or private that receives federal funding (Title I, free lunch program, etc.) must comply with Section 504. This was an eye opening discovering for our school a few years ago. If your school is required to follow the law, you must appoint a 504 Coordinator. This individual can be an administrator, counselor, or interventionist. I currently serve for this role at my Islamic school. A 504 Coordinator is responsible for recommending a child for testing, creating the 504 plan, and monitoring the implementation of the plan. Most students diagnosed with ADHD will receive a 504 plan. ADHD is one of the most prevalent diagnoses that directly impacts a child’s learning and students tend to require additional supports to thrive in a school setting.

The purpose of the student’s 504 plan must be to encourage and prepare the student for self-management of their attentional challenges. A plan can easily be seen as a crutch by teachers and even students. However, a good plan is designed to promote self-awareness and a pathway to self-management. Students may receive accommodations in the classroom, such as seating arrangements, shortened assignments, and extended time. As the student matures and develops, you should expect to see less of a need for providing these supports on a daily basis. Addressing the needs of students with ADHD cannot be achieved without the use of a plan. The plan individualizes the student’s needs and provides an opportunity for continual monitoring. Each student identified with a plan is subject to an annual review. This takes place at the school and involves the teacher, administrators, and parents. This allows for the team to review the child’s progress, accommodations, and make any necessary changes at that time.

Islamic education is the right of every Muslim child and it is our collective responsibility to continuously evaluate our educational settings for the benefit of all learners. Frankly, hyperactive and inattentive students can intimidate and frustrate any educator, as many students can struggle with sitting still, complying with the classroom rules, and impulsive behaviors. Islamic schools that are the recipient of federal dollars must admit and accommodate students with certain disabilities, so we must find a way to be less intimated and more empowered. We can empower ourselves by educating ourselves about the realities of ADHD and the importance of creating multiple pathways to achieve academic success in the classroom. We must re-evaluate our behavioral policies and classroom management plans to motivate and encourage hyperactive and impulsive learners. Once we begin to adjust our understandings, approaches, and processes to meet the needs of these phenomenal learners, we will allow them the opportunity to flourish in school and in life.

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Appendix A

**Supplemental: Toolbox of Strategies**

Classroom strategies should address the needs of students with inattentive, hyperactive, or combination type ADHD.

## Environmental considerations

## Physical environment

## *Seating considerations* – proximity to teacher, away from distractions, distance between student desks

## *Organized classroom* – supplies should be clearly labeled and well organized, avoid distracting items in the classroom,

## Structure and Organization

## *Assignment Considerations* – homework and assignment notebook, color coded folders, extra set of textbooks at home

## *Time Management consideration* - calendars, visual checklist, timers

## Instructional considerations

## Written Assignments

## Assignments should be *broken into shorter and manageable segments*

## Students should be provided with *graphic organizers* prior to writing

## Giving Directions

## *Number of directions should be minimal*

## *Directions should be provided in steps*

## Deconstructing Tasks

## *Extra time to complete tasks*

## *Allow for breaks*

## *Shorten Assignments*

## *Limit amount of work on page*

## Test Taking

## *Extended time for test*

## *Administer test in shorter segments*

## *Simplify words in directions*

## *Allow frequent breaks*

## Behavioral Considerations

## Preventive Strategies

## *Visual and Verbal Prompts* - pictorial reminder cards and one word verbal cues to keep students on track in class

## *Proximity Control –*teacher maintains closeness to student during lesson

## *Priming –* teacher primes student before lesson of expectations and possible incentives/consequences

## Reinforcement Strategies

## *Verbal Praise*

## *Corrective Feedback*

## Appendix B

## Sample 504 Plan

|  |
| --- |
| **Student:** |
| **Grade:** |
| **Date of Plan:** |
| **Projected date of Review:** |
| **Mental/Physical Impairment: ADHD - Hyperactive and Inattentive Combination Type** |

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Physical Arrangement of Room** | **Special Considerations** | **Lesson presentation** |
| **(x ) special seating (specify) away from distraction, teacher discretion**  **(x ) avoid distracting stimuli**  **(x ) stand near the student when given instructions**  ( ) special desk  ( ) special chair  ( ) seat student next to positive role model | **( ) provide individual school counseling**  ( ) develop intervention strategies for transitional period  ( **X ) other - allow to visit counselor if visibly anxious**  **( X ) Allow student to use an acceptable fidget object during instruction** | ( ) provide study guide  ( ) teach through multi-sensory modes  (X **) repeat directions for understanding**  ( X **) break longer presentations into shorter segments**  ( ) write key points on board  **( X ) provide visual aids**  ( ) use computer assisted instruction  ( ) other |
| **Person Responsible** | **Person Responsible** | **Person Responsible** |
| **All teachers** | **All teachers, School Counselor** | **All teachers** |
| **Frequency of Accommodation** | **Frequency of Accommodation** | **Frequency of Accommodation** |
| **Daily** | **As needed and/or requested by student, parent, or teacher** | **Daily** |

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Assignments/Worksheets** | **Organization/Behavior** | **Testing** |
| **( X ) give extra time to complete all classroom tasks (specify amount of time)**  ( ) simplify complex directions  ( ) chunk items on worksheets and assignments  **(X ) use self-monitoring devices (timer, checklists)**  ( ) reduce homework to show concept mastery  ( ) reduce visuals on a worksheet  ( ) allow use of a word bank  ( ) break assignments into shorter segments  **( X ) shorten assignments in class to allow for a focus on content mastery and not work completion**  **( X) Offer extension for homework assignments (specify amount of time in Jupiter Grades)** | ( ) monitor homework/assignment book  ( ) repeat instructions for understanding  ( ) allow for movement  **( X) mark correct answers/not mistakes**  **(X ) nonverbal cues to stay on task/student should be provided with 1 -3 redirection prompts for off-task behavior**  ( **X**) **allow for movement every 30 - 40 minutes during stationary activities** | **( X ) extended time to complete test**  ( ) administer test in shorter periods  ( ) highlight verbs in directions  **( X ) simplify words in directions**  ( ) allow frequent breaks |
| **Person Responsible** | **Person Responsible** | **Person Responsible** |
| **All teachers** | **All teachers** | **All teachers** |
| **Frequency of Accommodation** | **Frequency of Accommodation** | **Frequency of Accommodation** |
| **Daily** | **Daily** | **Daily** |

**Speaker Biography**

Sabria Mills is currently serving at Al-Falah Academy as the Intervention Coordinator and 504 Plan Coordinator. She is currently Georgia certified in elementary and special education. Additionally, she currently holds an ESOL Georgia certification. She currently serves on the administrative team at A-Falah Academy and monitors the growth and success of students at risk. In addition to her role as an academic interventionist, she is the lead 504 Plan Coordinator. She utilizes the RTI process to develop accommodation plans for students struggling with disabilities, such as ADHD and dyslexia.  She has worked diligently to develop a process to help support students with disabilities in an Islamic setting. Through this process, she monitors students at academic risk, trains and coaches teachers, and facilitates an identification process to support students with exceptional learning needs. She currently resides in Atlanta, GA with her husband and three daughters.