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A comparative study of ADHD prevalence in 4 Gauteng schools and an exploration of the experiences of adolescents diagnosed with the disorder

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ABSTRACT

ADHD is one of the most prevalent disorders in child psychiatry today. Whilst the phenomenon of ADHD is well researched in Europe and North America, there are limited studies available in South Africa that explore the link between ADHD and different forms of schooling. Furthermore, few studies focus on the children who have been socially positioned in this way. This study focused on the prevalence of ADHD with a particular aim to explore how gender, race and class play out in an unequal schooling system. The secondary aim was to contribute to the knowledge about adolescents' own understandings and experiences of ADHD. The research was conducted in two distinct phases, Phase 1 included the administration of a demographic questionnaire to determine the prevalence of the disorder within four different Gauteng schools. Phase 2 of the project included semi-structured interviews to explore the understandings, perceptions and experiences of children living with this diagnosis. This study explored the prevalence of ADHD across four different schools in Gauteng. Results of the study propose that the diagnosis and prevalence of this phenomena is strongly influenced by gender, race and class, as the majority of children diagnosed are boys (65%), more than half are from upper class families (61%) and most of the children are white (71%). The adolescents who were interviewed indicated that teachers were mostly the initiators of their diagnosis due to deviations from classroom behaviour and academic performance. While the children claimed that the diagnosis and the medication had certain benefits, they also identified distinct disadvantages with the most notable adverse effects on mood and interactions with their peers. The predominant biomedical view of the disorder seemed to be internalised by the children which positioned them in a subordinate relationship with health care professionals. A strong theme of disempowerment emerged, with medical experts and mothers, identified as gatekeepers to their sense of agency.

Keywords: ADHD, prevalence, race, class, gender, schooling, adolescents