

Poems Connected to ADHD Problematics

Jana Moravcová, Charles University, Faculty of Arts

Diagnostics by Random Passersby

They tell you a lot
About what
You are not

Yet to learn what you are
They don't even try
Just let out a sigh

The Elephant in the Classroom

In the classroom there's an elephant
Over there, in the front row sitting
Unperturbed and silent
Sleeping
Let's not wake it
It's so quiet
Obedient

Or should we wake it?
What happens then?
What might or mightn't come
At those times, when
We step outside
Do not hide
Talk out loud
Could we make it?

What's voted for is option three
Let's admit that it is real
And act as if we understood
What is wrong and what is good
Let's talk about it as we do
And move the elephant to the zoo

Tolerance

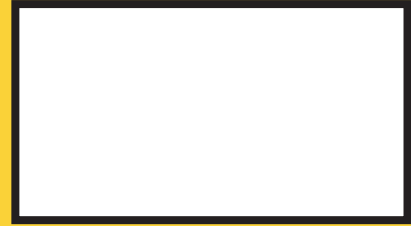
Tolerance seems nice a thing,
but it implies suffering
something or someone you don't like.
And in fact
what's more preferred
is to kind of hide
the uncomfortable sight
of difference.

'Sure, of course, let them do what they need,
just clear them away where we don't have to see.
Because in our sight certain rules apply.
And shame on those who can't comply.'

And that's what tolerance is for you:
assimilate, segregate – up to you!
After all, perhaps tolerance is really not of use,
and it is rather respect that we should choose.

The Yelling in My Head

Yelling, they are always yelling,
no matter what I do.
Inside, they're always saying
things, and outside they do too.
Those things sound like some long-lost words,
though I don't think I comprehend
their meaning. It's like a greater force
is pulling me to the far end.
And all that's left is yelling.
I wish they'd see inside, start caring.



Who's Mad?

Mad
– is it me or you?
Me – 'cause of the way I act?
You – at me for what I do?
I don't wanna – me or you – to fight
this exhausting,
and yet everlasting plight.

Guilt

I'm sorry, my darling,
It isn't your fault
I know we're both trying
It's hard to fight thoughts
Sometimes we're both wandering in the dark
And our worlds are simply set apart



Communication Noise

Go do that
yeah
Did you hear me
what
What did I say
huh
Let's go already
uh

A Brief Reflection on ADHD in Children: Parents' Perspective

Jana Moravcová, Charles University, Faculty of Arts

When considering disability, one might ask what exactly the term encompasses, especially as regards psychological issues. In their case, the difficulty might be that they are not always easy to assess, and they are, therefore, often misinterpreted. Such is also the case of ADHD (attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder), one of the most common neurodevelopmental disorders, which often tends not to be regarded as a large issue by the majority population. However, ignoring or underestimating the condition is precisely what causes problems in understanding the children affected by it. For many people, children suffering from ADHD simply misbehave and can be “fixed” by a more disciplined upbringing. Sadly, these notions are not an exception even in the education system, where, theoretically, the authorities should be well informed about the nature of the disorder and the treatment of the impaired child. Thus, their parents are put in an uneasy position. With the prospect of witnessing the younger generations being inevitably processed through the institutions, parents are forced to view the education system critically, and to necessarily draw comparisons with what has changed since their time at school—and reflect on whether it is enough. This last question is what I have been confronted with myself rather recently through my eight-year-old, who has been diagnosed with ADHD. The diagnosis in the context of education has become an important theme in many of my poems; along with reflecting on the difficulties my son and I face in everyday mutual interactions. This paper attempts to describe an ADHD-child parent’s perspective on the disorder’s reception in institutions, as well as outside of them, in order to provide context for those of my poems dealing with this topic. Therefore, it is inevitably a personal

perspective and far from an expert attempt at mapping the issue in general.

Perhaps a short note to clarify the terminology first. My experience as a parent is limited to the diagnosis my son has been given, namely ADD, which is (as I understand it) a slightly outdated but, at least in the Czech environment, still widely used term,² which refers to ADHD with inattentive clusters of symptoms. As Dave Anderson points out in his article “What is the difference between ADD and ADHD?” the categorisation of the disorder has shifted profoundly in the past 30 years.

It was called ADD up until 1987, when the word ‘hyperactivity’ was added to the name. Before that [...] a child would be diagnosed with ADD, either with or without hyperactivity. From the early 1990s, the diagnosis included one of three types of ADHD. Children who only had the inattentive symptoms were called inattentive type. Kids who were only hyperactive and impulsive were hyperactive/impulsive type. Kids who had all three symptoms were called combined type. [...] The newest way of thinking about ADHD is actually to get rid of types altogether and just think about which symptoms present prominently.³

The approach to ADHD in the psychological counselling centres I encountered in the Czech Republic seems to be in accordance with this “newest way,” i.e., not labelling but describing. However, it seems to stick to established terms where terminology is concerned. In this paper, though, I will adhere to the term ADHD, as it seems to be generally more understandable.

² Pavlína Hublová, “Problémy v chování – porucha pozornosti s hyperaktivitou (ADHD), opoziční vzdorovitě chování,” *NPI: Metodický portál RVP.CZ*, published February 5, 2020, <https://clanky.rvp.cz/clanek/c/p/22408/PROBLEMY-V-CHOVANI-...>

³ Dave Anderson, “What Is the Difference between ADD and ADHD?,” *Child Mind Institute*, accessed October 3, 2023, <https://childmind.org/article/what-is-the-difference-between-add-and-adhd/>.

There are a number of points which make one pause and reconsider the approach to disorders in Czech society in general; the first question being where the whole confrontation of the mainstream and the marginal begins. Indeed, it happens long before the child enters elementary school. Preschools are places where the child (and the parent) is confronted with a teacher for the first time, but I dare say that the clash comes even before that. Maybe on the bus where your child says something inappropriate? Or in the playground where elderly ladies give you contemptuous looks as your child is throwing a tantrum? Or is it at the doctor's, when the child, unable to cooperate, is hostilely glared at by the nurse? Honestly, I have come to think that an ADHD-child becomes stigmatised right after birth while still in the hospital. The fact is that they simply act differently from the majority and they, therefore, disrupt "the routine" (which is sacred in all kinds of institutions, particularly in the hospital).

The development from there is partly a matter of chance. As a parent, it soon dawns on you that your child is not mainstream. Your paediatrician possibly also realizes that the child possesses certain specifics and, if you are lucky, articulates the presumption in a sensitive way. Often, though, the doctor does not say anything, or, at times, says something insensitive. Preschool is what parents tend to see as something with the potential to be helpful, believing, or, at the very least, hoping that teachers will think of a useful strategy that would lead to the child's easier adaptation in an educational institution. Perhaps, a debate is what one would expect; a discussion between teachers and parents working together to find ways to respect the child's specifics *and* to integrate the child effectively into the class and its programme. However, the reality in most preschool facilities is different, and all that parents receive is complaints, often as if blaming the parent for having an "incompetent" child or for providing poor upbringing. I remember the comments that I used to be showered with the moment I arrived at preschool to pick up my son:

The kid did this or didn't do that and even

though *absolutely everyone* did that, the kid just wouldn't, and we don't know what to do, I've never seen anything like it in my twenty years of teaching, you should see a psychiatrist, there's something not right with the kid, really, go, we need a manual, or better yet, get us rid of the problem, the kid should go to a specialised school, yes, it shouldn't be our problem.

Those are statements that a parent of an ADHD-child may hear on a daily basis—a chain of complaints not aimed at a practical solution, but simply the venting of a teacher's unchecked frustration. A simple picking up from daycare becomes an overwhelming pressure.

Nonetheless, the criticism cannot be applied only to teachers; there are other factors, often intertwined, which complicate the situation for children with this disorder. In the education system, a word often debated in this context is "inclusion."⁴ Unfortunately, there seems to be a gigantic gap between what is promised in official statements of the ministry and what happens in reality. "We'd need an assistant," is one of the first responses to an ADHD-child's in-class behaviour. That in itself would not be a bad thing; on the contrary, a good assistant can be a blessing for an ADHD-child. The difficulty lies in three things. First, it is not easy to get a *good* assistant as, on the basic level, there are very few requirements for their qualifications.⁵ Having an assistant in class does not automatically guarantee their understanding of the child's condition or a supportive attitude towards the child, as their awareness of the disorder is mostly dependent on self-study. Second, there is often one "shared" assistant for several children in a class, which can only be fruitful up to a certain number of disordered children. The higher the number, the less of quality assistance can be expected per child. Third, to get *any* assistant at all, there are many administrative matters to be dealt with. The school needs a document from the educational and psychological counselling centre—and not just any document. The child would have to be diagnosed with a more severe form of the disorder which would

⁴ See, for example, Martina Vitáková, "Společné vzdělávání je přirozená věc," *msmt.cz*, accessed May 15, 2023, <https://www.msmt.cz/ministerstvo/novinar/spolecne-vzdelavani-je-prirozena-vec-m-vitakova>.

⁵ Portál pro školní asistenty a asistenty pedagogů, "Kvalifikační předpoklady," *asistentpedagoga.cz*, accessed May 15, 2023, <https://www.asistentpedagoga.cz/asistent-pedagoga/kvalifikačni-předpoklady>.

correspond to level 3, 4 or 5 of support measures.⁶ As for the children reaching level 1 or 2, no individual assistant can be assigned, which, however, does not mean that they would not benefit from one. Yet, the disorder cannot be conclusively diagnosed until the age of seven;⁷ as such, no professional psychologist can provide the diagnosis document at preschool age.

It is understandable that teachers in preschools are reluctant to take full responsibility for a “problematic” child. Among other things, as was explained to me, in case of an inspection there could be some inconvenient consequences for the teacher or, possibly, the institution (although what exactly could happen was never specified to me by the teachers). In elementary schools, teachers are better informed and possibly even trained for working with children with ADHD.⁸ Nevertheless, often the issue is the teachers’ capacity. There are approximately 19 children per teacher in a classroom.⁹ With such a number, it is extremely difficult to approach pupils individually, resulting in a learning environment where counsellor-recommended studying conditions for ADHD children are not guaranteed. Moreover, in connection to capacity, there are larger issues the school’s leadership has to address. Just recently, I discovered that for inclusion to have the intended impact—i.e., for the majority children to learn to respect otherness while setting an example for the “included” children—the maximum number of children with support measures in one class has been estimated to be around 5 (depending on the overall number of pupils in the class and the levels of support measures the “included” pupils have).¹⁰ With schools overcrowded, though, which is a phenomenon that has been making itself known acutely in the recent years, especially in cities, this is unsustainable. In my son’s class, a group of 26 pupils, 10 children are in need of a specific individual approach. Although the ministry’s directive says differently, the school simply does not have the resources—economical, personal,

or spatial—to ensure that. Yet, they cannot send the children away to another school, as they are lawfully bound to educate them. Needless to say, the situation may be very similar at other schools.

As a consequence, both teachers and parents are put under additional stress. Speaking from a plain human perspective, the working environment becomes extremely challenging for teachers, and not being able to sort the problem out systematically, they turn to parents, who, however, are even more powerless. Although I do believe that most teachers sincerely want to come up with a solution, the helplessness of the situation eventually drives them to similar frustrated venting that I witnessed at preschool. That results, for instance, in grading my son’s in-class work 5 for “rejecting to cooperate,” or in a note that I have received, which said “Please, explain to your son the importance of education.”

Teachers’ wellbeing has, rightfully, been a subject of more than one study.¹¹ The problem is that although, theoretically, there is a general interest in the wellbeing of both teachers and children, in practice less people ask about what would be beneficial for the child. And, let’s face it, the impaired children, although backed by their parents, always get the short end of the stick, in my experience, at least. Additionally, one thing that is being neglected but should be put in the spotlight is the wellbeing of parents. Partially, it seems logical to implement parents into their child’s education; however, this often consists of delegating the school’s responsibilities to them. When my son does not cooperate at school, all the work must be done at home, which often takes about two hours. Teachers—experts in education—are not able to motivate him, but we, parents, who are only qualified to work with children from the title of being parents, should know the way? What an absurd situation, even more so if we consider his disorder actually prevents him from staying focused for more than a short while, or even

6 Portál pro školní asistenty a asistenty pedagogů, “Můžeme získat asistenta pedagoga na více dětí s PO2 ve třídě?” *asistentpedagoga.cz*, published June 5, 2020, <https://www.asistentpedagoga.cz/poradna/dotaz/3264>.

7 ÚZIS ČR, “ADHD U Děti: Příčiny a Diagnóza,” *nzip.cz*, accessed May 15, 2023, <https://www.nzip.cz/clanek/675-adhd-u-deti-priciny-a-diagnoza#:~:text=Sou%C4%8D%C3%A1st%C3%AD%20diagnostiky%20ADHD%20v%20d%C4%9Btsk%C3%A9m>.

8 Blanka Hrbková Hrudková, “ADHD - termíny, definice a integrační praxe,” *msmt.cz*, accessed May 15, 2023, <https://www.msmt.cz/vzdelavani/socialni-programy/adhd-terminy-definice-a-integracni-praxe>.

9 Jiří Svatoš, “Česko patří k zemím s nejvyšším počtem žáků na učitele v Evropské unii, vyplývá z údajů Eurostatu,” *iROZHLAS*, published September 14, 2019, https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/skola-ministerstvo-skolstvi-ceska-skolni-inspekce-ucitele-evropska-unie-eurostat_1909141847_gak.

10 MŠMT ČR, “Počet žáků ve třídě,” *msmt.cz*, accessed October 18, 2023, <https://www.msmt.cz/vzdelavani/pocet-zaku-ve-tride>.

11 Irena Smetáčková and Veronika Pavlas Martanová, “Strategie zvládání stresu vyučujícími v základních školách,” *Orbis scholae* 14, no. 1 (2020): 101–19, <https://doi.org/10.14712/23363177.2020.16>.

from “turning” his attention “on” at all. But if I bring this point to discussions with teachers, I learn that this surely is not connected to ADHD, and that he is just lazy. A truly vicious circle. The system put in place by the state has poorly defined priorities, does not properly instruct teachers in preschool education, and it overworks those working in elementary schools. That all leads to an ineffective and discriminatory education system with potentially dangerous consequences for the psyche of teachers, parents, and, consequently, children.

Finally, it is quite safe to say that Czech society in general is not famous for its affability towards minorities.¹² It should not come as a surprise that the situation concerning attention-disordered children is not ideal either. ADHD is a very common diagnosis, reaching approximately 5% of the child population in official statistics, although the actual numbers are likely to be higher,¹³ as in many children, especially girls, ADHD is never diagnosed.¹⁴ Surveys focusing on the adult population have estimated the proportion of ADHD-adults to be around 8% of the population. Since the disorder persists into adulthood only in two-thirds of the cases, this necessarily means that the number for children must be even higher. Despite its high occurrence in the population, I dare say that the majority of people look at ADHD in a distorted way, not viewing it as a specific characteristic that should be respected and worked with. Rather, it tends to be seen either as a made-up term for difficult kids or as a nasty deviation whose label it is better to avoid, as it implies psychological problems and stigmatisation stemming from them. Therefore, even parents who suspect that their child could be impaired in this way often prefer not to seek expert advice: they are afraid of the reaction of the people around them, as well as of the threat of the child’s condemnation by teachers or other authority figures.

Indeed, the reactions to an ADHD diagnosis can be discouraging, starting with immediate family

members, but extending as far as experts in all sorts of fields. More than a few of my acquaintances have told me stories about their encounters with speech therapists who did not hesitate to label a child quite tactlessly with anything from ADHD to autism. Such “diagnostics” are completely misguided and based on impressions gained in half-an-hour sessions, such as the child’s unwillingness to cooperate during consultations or, for example, the fact that the child did not fancy drawing. (All sorts of children-focused professions work with the assumption that children like drawing; therefore, drawing is a fairly common activity even at the speech-therapist’s.) Additionally, the comments about a possible psychological issue were made in a very negative and accusing tone.

These are precisely the situations that contribute to ADHD having a derogatory connotation, informing its understanding by authorities and, as a result, by parents. Some of those children I mentioned in relation to speech therapists turned out to be quite fine psychologically; for the parents of others, however, the experience was so uncomfortable that they were afraid to address the possibility of ADHD in their child for many years after. Poor awareness of people in child-related professions about psychological disorders in general can, therefore, be quite harmful to children. And the issues become magnified when we consider ADHD-children who would benefit from medication. Leaving aside the fact that children’s psychiatric care (with the only sort of specialists who can prescribe the relevant medicine) is extremely hard to reach, the waiting time for a newly registered child to see a psychiatrist being approximately one year,¹⁵ the stigmatisation of child medication in Czech society is notorious. However, it seems to be improving.

Presently, the most important thing to be done is to raise awareness about the issue of attention disorders: show the public what a life with the disorder looks like, tear down the myths of “misbehaved boys,” and let people know that there are very individual

¹²Amnesty International, “Inkluze je zrcadlem, které nám ukazuje, kde ještě máme v systému rezervy,” *amnesty.cz*, published June 30, 2020, <https://www.amnesty.cz/zprava/4905/inkluze-je-zrcadlem-ktere-nam-ukazuje-kde-je-ste-mame-v-systemu-rezervy>.

¹³Vítek Svoboda, “Jako když člověku chybí tlačítko start. Stále více dospělých zjišťuje, že mají ADHD,” *Deník N*, published September 15, 2022, <https://denikn.cz/950400/roztomila-rozevlatost-ktera-muze-prerust-pres-hlavu-stale-vice-dospelych-zjistuje-ze-maji-adhd/>.

¹⁴Svoboda, “Jako když člověku chybí tlačítko start.”

¹⁵Iva Bezděková, “Překvapivá čísla: doktorů v Česku přibýlo, zdaleka ne však všude,” *Deník N*, published March 17, 2023, <https://denikn.cz/1103458/prekvapiva-cisla-doktoru-v-cesku-pribylo-zdaleka-ne-vsak-vsude/>.

manifestations of the disorder with very individual symptoms. People might say, “Well, of course we know about ADHD,” but being aware of its existence is not enough. Our society—from the children themselves to specialized children-oriented professions—needs to be better informed in order to provide the most suitable approach in education to talented kids who are congenitally handicapped in this way; and their parents need more information in order to be able to support their child. What I regret most about the journey my son and I have gone through is me not understanding him in everyday situations. I saw that attention was a problem, of course, but since there was no hyperactivity, I simply ruled ADHD out. I had no idea about the range of symptoms the disorder can include.

As these parenting mistakes cannot be taken back, and they are not easily avoided even if the parent is aware of them, misunderstandings, and troubles in communication are the theme of many of the poems that I write. These tend to be shorter and quite fragmentary, since the dialogue marked by ADHD, even an inner one, inevitably lacks focus. This is reflected in “Who’s Mad?” and, more explicitly, in “Communication Noise.” Another group of poems are the frustrated poems such as “The Elephant in the Classroom” or “Tolerance,” typically conceived as opposition to authorities, for whom it is naturally easier to focus on the majority children and neglect the needs of children from the inclusion group. These poems are also lined with the bitterness stemming from injustice, and disappointment with those who have the power to bring about change. They express disillusionment with those who are informed about the subject and the needs of ADHD-children, but who choose to ignore the supportive measures and try to remodel the children instead.

The poems do not offer reconciliation, hope, let alone a solution. They do not offer truth either, only a personal type of truth, ever changing. They are simply expressions of and reflections on everyday life’s struggle with a condition complicating interpersonal relations at home, school, or anywhere else. That

struggle is ever present and ever challenging, and it brings anxiety and frustration with the current status quo. Any prospect of change seems to be too far away and any legislation which might be approved by the system will come into effect rather late for my child. Nevertheless, as ADHD is a genetically conditioned disorder, future generations will still struggle with the same systemic issues as ADHD-people do today. To that end at least, it is worth attempting to amplify the discourse on the matter of ADHD through activism, education, media, or, at the very least, occasional poetry.

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