Diagnoses often blamed when kids struggle at school

ADHD and Asperger’s are sometimes used as explanations when a pupil has troubles at school. When the focus is on an individual child’s psyche, problems needing attention in the social environment might be overlooked.

Employees in the school health services, in special education, school psychologists and others whose jobs involve pupils’ physical and mental health can be undiscerning about use of neuropsychiatric diagnoses, such as ADHD, say researchers at the University of Gothenburg.

They interviewed employees at nine secondary schools in southern Sweden. They found that these persons have a lot of faith in psychiatric diagnoses. They often use them when school kids are disorderly and in situations involving bullying and harassment.

A magic formula releasing resources

One explanation, suggest the researchers, is that since the 1990s Swedish schools have had tight budgets and lacked the money to help pupils who don’t fit the form. Classes can be overcrowded and teachers overworked.

Diagnoses can be used to trigger funding for the extra help needed to tackle problems with individual kids.

A pupil’s behavioural problems could be linked to the social environment at school or issues within their family rather than a neurological or psychological disorder.

School personnel can overlook such problems when their focus is on diagnoses, say the researchers at the University of Gothenburg.

Instead of working to improve the school’s social environment, educators and professionals in student welfare teams might be quick on the draw in talking about diagnoses of individual kids. They might decide the kid has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or autism spectrum disorder (Asperger Syndrome).

December’s child

Norwegian researchers have also found that educators can be overlooking problems with school discipline and order by focusing on individual diagnoses.

For instance, the Norwegian Institute for Social Research has looked at the connection between being the youngest in the class and getting an ADHD diagnosis.
They found that the most immature children in a classroom are more often given ADHD diagnoses.

“More children born in December, the youngest in a class, are diagnosed with ADHD than kids born in January, the oldest in a class. The younger children are more often disorderly than the oldest. That could be expected. It is worrisome if being youngest leads to an ADHD diagnosis and perhaps the use of medication,” says researcher Marte Strøm.

International studies also show that the likelihood of the youngest kids in a class receiving an ADHD diagnosis increases when there are more children in a single classroom.

“This points towards the school playing a role in the diagnosis. We don’t know if this applies to Norwegian schoolrooms too, but when diagnostics vary so much we need to look for the reasons. Maybe we should examine the Norwegian school system,” says Strøm.

Researchers at the Norwegian Institute of Public Health have investigated ADHD diagnoses among 510,000 Norwegian children aged 6 to 14. They have found a considerable deviation in the frequency of ADHD diagnoses and use of medication between children born early in the year and ones born late in the year.

**Pedagogical challenges**

An ADHD diagnosis can be a relief for parents and teachers, as it seems to identify a problem, give it a name.

“But there might really be pedagogical challenges in the classroom that are being individualised,” said Professor Aksel Tjora at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology to ScienceNordic’s partner forskning.no earlier this years.

Tjora thinks ADHD diagnostics and medication of inattentive and restless children could be simultaneously letting the school system go free, relieving the system from responsibility for improving pedagogical relationships for the youngest children.

Read the Norwegian version of this article at forskning.no [5]

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**A pupil’s problems at school can link to the school’s social environment or troubles at home.** Teachers and school officials can oversee such problems if they are too eager to think in terms of neuropsychiatric diagnoses, say Swedish researchers. (Photo: Shutterstock) [6]

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