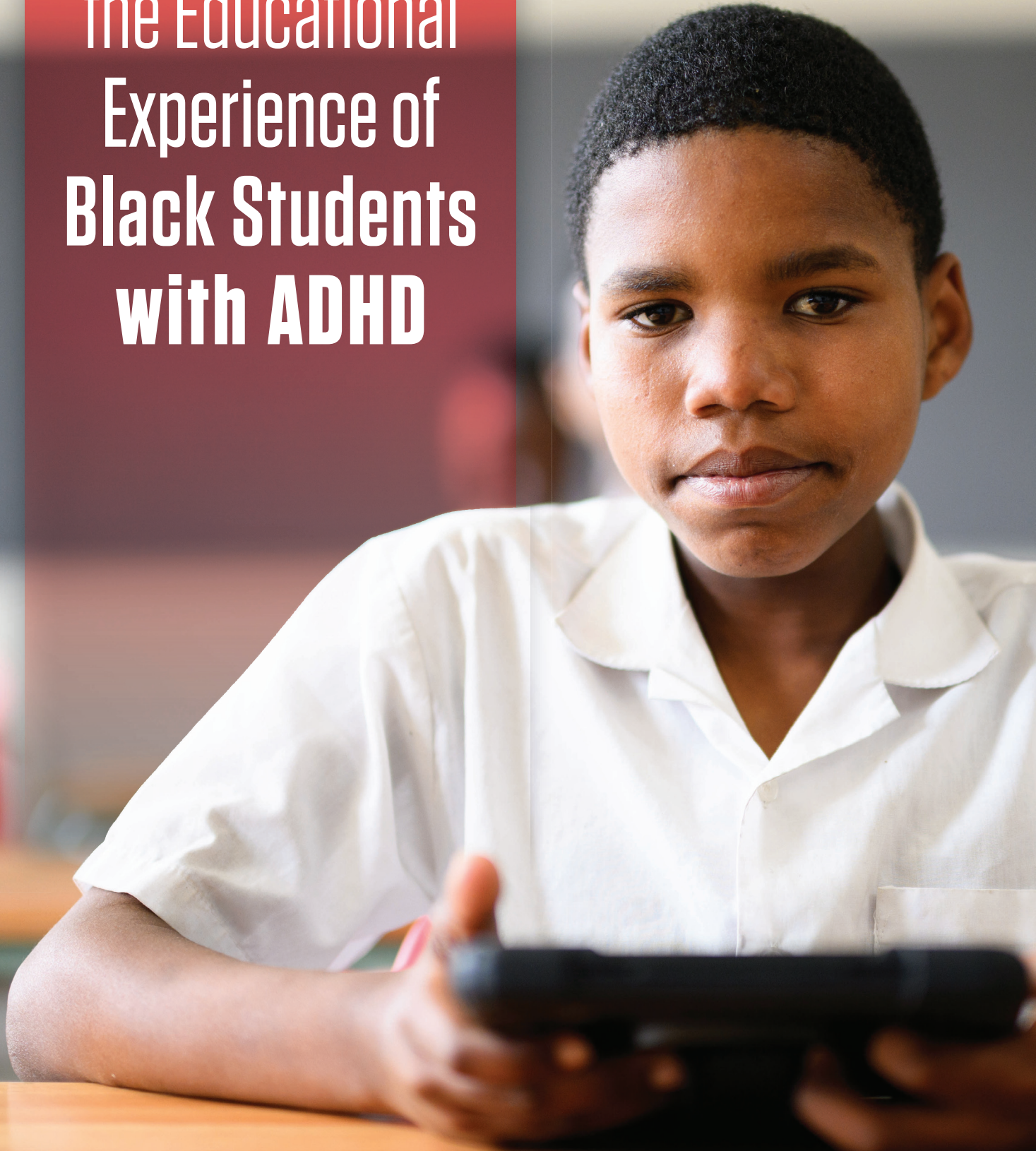


How to Improve the Educational Experience of Black Students with ADHD



Joy Banks, PhD, interviewed by Rachel James, MSLIS

AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS ARE MANY TIMES MORE LIKELY to be diagnosed with disabilities than their peers. Why does this happen, and what should schools do differently? Joy Banks, an associate professor at George Mason University, speaks on the overrepresentation and disparities in treatment of African American students in special education. She also shares the steps that schools must take to create environments where all students can thrive. This *All Things ADHD* conversation was edited for clarity and length.

RACHEL JAMES: Are there any estimates on the number of students with disabilities in grades K-12 in the United States? What about the number of Black students with disabilities, especially those with ADHD?

JOY BANKS: African American students have been overrepresented in special education for over fifty years. Disparities and identification are greatest for those students in the subjective disabilities, sometimes called soft disabilities, like specific learning disabilities, intellectual disabilities, and emotional disabilities. These are the areas in which the teachers make the decisions very often about whether or not the student has a disability. African American students are twice as likely to be labeled as emotionally disturbed and are three times as likely to be identified with an intellectual disability when compared to their white peers.

Consequently, even before examining data to determine the prevalence of students of color with ADHD, it's also important to acknowledge that those prevalence rates vary widely across the United States and vary widely across age ranges. For example, New Mexico, New York, and California identify a prevalence of ADHD that is significantly lower than the national data of 8.7%, whereas a cluster of south-

eastern states, such as Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi, comprise the most states with significantly higher ADHD identification rates.

The variance in these prevalence rates across different states is an indication that the administration and scoring during the diagnostic period varies according to the context, varies according to the disposition of the individual that's administering the test, and according to their skill level when interpreting the results. The number and percentage of rates of ADHD provides a starker realization about the quantity of children in the United States that have ADHD. For example, the CDC estimates that 6.1 million children, which is a rate of 9.4%, are diagnosed with ADHD.

The fewest children diagnosed with ADHD are between the ages of two and five, with those between the ages of six and eleven as having the next highest rates. We also know that males are more than twice as likely to be diagnosed with ADHD as compared to females. And rates of diagnosis in African American children are estimated to be 65% to 75% the rates of diagnosis in white children of similar socioeconomic status and symptom severities. Researchers have suggested that teachers or assessment bias could have greater impact on the more subjective disabilities, thus leading to these racial disparities.

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What are the experiences of Black students with ADHD and other disabilities? And how do they differ from their peers with disabilities at school?

If we take a look at the history of special education, we can see that the US educational system continues to struggle with how best to educate African American youth. The talents that African American students bring to the classroom are often overlooked, and their behavioral styles, which some researchers have called *verve*, is often characterized as a behavior problem. As a result, African American students receive higher levels of disciplinary actions, are placed deeper into special education, and experience limited exposure to rigorous academic curriculum. We know that they experience harsher disciplinary actions than their European American peers. African American students in general experience higher rates of suspension, restraints, and expulsion.

As an example, African American students account for about 16% of the total school age population, yet they account for 42% of students who experience out-of-school suspension. After being identified as having special needs, African American students are more likely to be taught in separate classrooms. While 55% of white students with disabilities spend more than 80% of their school day in a general education classroom, only a third of African American students spend that much time in the general curriculum classroom. This is important, because access to the general curriculum provides students with exposure to more academic rigor and opportunities for advanced coursework. It's important to note that days away from school, due to expulsion, and limited access to academically rigorous coursework have long-term academic and economic consequences for African American students.

What are some of the biases held by educators and school personnel? How can these views be changed?

Some of the conversations around teacher bias begin with economic differences. But even when African American students are from the same economic level as other students, economic status does not fully explain the disproportionate placement of African American students in special education. We have to take a deeper dive into systemic racism and teachers' implicit bias about African American children, families, and communities, and explore how these teachers are perceiving difference and why is difference being perceived as a deficit. To address these biases, school districts will need to consult with outside agencies to identify the way the students' culture and linguistic differences contribute to the identification process. School districts will want to commit to hiring teach-

ers and school personnel from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. There's also a need for school districts to begin implementing equity audits.

Equity audits ensure that all students and families have access to the same resources and that there is the absence of opportunity hoarding. Opportunity hoarding is the idea that only a select few students will have opportunities—as an example, for honors classes or advanced placement classes. So school districts will want to implement equity audits, and these equity audits intentionally include parents, teachers, and community members in the process of data analysis. All of these stakeholders come together in order to analyze the data, propose solutions, and identify causes, if there are any disproportionate representation of students of color in special education in the school district. The importance of an equity audit is that it allows for and encourages shared decision-making among school personnel, as well as families and the larger community.

Building on that, how can schools help to create environments where students with disabilities thrive?

Schools will have to ensure that teachers, principals, and counselors adopt an anti-racist and an anti-ableist approach to education, and they have to be explicit about adopting those positions. For special educators who advocate for inclusivity and social justice, teaching is viewed as a political endeavor in which teachers and students continuously confront the problems of oppression and marginalization in the school system and in the general society. So teachers have to acknowledge how their own classroom, the school, and the general society may have ableist perspectives.

Ableism is a form of discrimination that favors able-bodied people. To be anti-ableist requires that school personnel acknowledge the way deficit beliefs about people with disabilities influence educational decision-making. Similar to ableism, racism is the discrimination against a person due to their race or ethnicity. So schools will need to create educational spaces that use universal design for learning, so that everyone's learning needs and behavioral needs are taken into consideration. Schools will need to adopt culturally sustaining pedagogies and even an inclusive approach to education. These approaches increase the chances that students from differing abilities, racial backgrounds, languages, and perspectives feel a sense of belonging and ensures that their cultures are valued. They even provide educators with an approach to critique existing school processes while still working toward improvements in educational practices.



What could an educator say to parents if they suspect a student has a learning disability and/or ADHD?

I'll approach this question by describing the actual process that should be implemented, because the process is one of problem solving, as opposed to identifying a child with a disability.

The initial step is called Response to Intervention, a multi-tiered system of intervention. RTI is an early intervention approach designed to provide students with the appropriate academic and behavioral supports, before they are referred for special education. An RTI team is designed to determine which interventions are best for the student. The intention is that the student will receive early intervention while in the general education classroom, and the hope is that intervention will actually support that student to perform at the same level as their peers. If that intervention is not successful, then that is the point where a referral to special education might be made.

That RTI team is important because that team is a problem solving team. During the stage of problem solving, the team does not label the student as having a disability. Instead, the team explores possible academic or behavioral interventions. During this phase of exploration, the teacher has the opportunity to share their observations with other teachers. The teacher has the opportunity to share their observations with parents and express their concerns. However, the teacher does not make the determination that the student has a learning disability or ADHD.

Instead, teachers should invite parents to be a part of the problem-solving team. The parent can provide insight about the student's academic and behavioral performance in school and at home. The parent is also able to develop a better understanding of the teachers' concerns and the teachers' interpretations of the behavior or academic performance of the student. After the RTI problem-solving team has explored multiple interventions, the student may be referred for special education assessment. The evaluation process and the evaluation team will make the decision about whether or not that student is eligible for services within special education. So again, that teacher can't say that the student has a learning disability

or ADHD or any of the other categories that are serviced through special education. Instead, that teacher can initiate an RTI problem-solving team that could include the parent.

So, from there, what are some specific school-based services Black students with disabilities need, that they often do not receive?

Within special education, there are multiple categories, so it is very difficult to pinpoint the exact services that a student might need, because those services will vary according to that individual student's disability and the severity of their disability. Instead, what I would rely on is

that these processes that we've already discussed, and that's the processes that take place before diagnosis or labeling a child with a disability. Again, that's the process of ensuring that an RTI team is implemented—and that's also the process of ensuring that that RTI team consists of individuals who are diverse, who understand the school culture as well as the culture of the community.

I use the term, "culture," very loosely to mean the norms of the school, as well as the norms of the community, and of course, the language differences that might be found in both. If you pull together a knowledgeable and diverse intervention team, that will increase the likelihood that the students will receive a nonbiased evaluation. That will also increase the likelihood that that team will be able to make strong recommendations for the appropriate services for the student and make appropriate placement decisions, so that that student is not placed deeper into special education, but that the student does have access to the general curriculum or the least restrictive environment to the extent possible as determined by the student's disability. 🗣️



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