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“He’s so Defiant!”

Darnell’s Story

This chapter asks us to reflect on:

- the ways **internalised bias** creates harmful interpretations of ADHD when discussing Black students;
- the diagnosis of oppositional defiant disorder and what this means for Black, Brown and Indigenous students;
- when dyslexia co-occurs with ADHD and why we might not recognise it;
- how prioritising reading and writing for expressing understanding impact ADHD learners;
- how standardised testing impacts ADHD students while also centring **whiteness** in school.

I came back from the break time only to find Darnell at the principal’s office, again. There was always something he’d been accused of doing: teasing other students, refusing to do classwork, arguing with teachers or just general class disruptions like walking around or talking during class instruction. Today it was about a playground scuffle he’d had with some younger students. Darnell was also never one to take responsibility for his own behaviour and often accused others of causing the issues he found himself in. Many of his subject teachers were becoming concerned about his “lying and aggressive behaviour”. Words like

“defiant” were being tossed around to describe him and frustrations about his lack of engagement in lessons were also rising.

It wasn’t long before I noticed that Darnell was the only student with ADHD who was considered defiant. I could easily name a few (white) students who behaved much the same way, but unlike Darnell, ADHD was frequently mentioned and misbehaviour was usually excused. Now, I couldn’t deny that Darnell would frequently argue, refuse to do work or lie about his actions, but I also couldn’t unsee how quickly he was accused of being in the wrong either. He was in a difficult position, already considered guilty before he opened his mouth. No wonder he’d lie or lash out. When Darnell is seen as defiant, it only fuels the belief that his behaviour is done purposely in order to harm others and it’s up to him to decide to change it. If he can’t do that, then the result is usually being punishment for it. But it was becoming quite evident that this approach wasn’t working at all.

Meet Darnell:

- 8 years old
- Black, Caribbean ethnicity
- identifies as a boy
- fluent in the language of instruction
- outgoing, funny, creative
- loves: maths, music, science
- detests: writing, reading, drawing
- Interests include: space, computer games
- future aspirations: astrophysicist
- best known for losing his temper, resisting reading and writing tasks, disrupting classes
- learning challenges: ADHD (possibly ODD), dysgraphia, suspected dyslexia
- additional information: new student to the school, newly divorced parents

Darnell had been diagnosed with ADHD when he was much younger and took medication for it, but many teachers wondered if, instead, he had oppositional defiant disorder (ODD; see Dhruv’s story for more details). He had arrived at the school only a semester before me and were two of only a few Black people in a predominately white school environment. That can be hard enough on anyone that isn’t white, but often more so when you’re Black. To make matters worse, Darnell wasn’t an easy-going student either, which only amplified his difficulties. I also noticed that he had significant learning challenges in reading and writing that never seemed to be discussed as often as his *defiant behaviour*. From what I knew of Darnell, he didn’t seem to be a particularly angry or vindictive child. He could get discouraged easily, but when considering his learning challenges, it was easy to see why. Under all the “defiance”, he seemed more discouraged, untrusting and anxious than anything else.

Intersectional insight: What’s in a name?

Okonofua and Eberhardt (2015), conducted two different studies, where teachers were given school records describing two incidents of misbehaviour by “male” students with names that were either more typically Black-sounding or white-sounding. The teachers were then asked if they believed the behaviour was a pattern, how badly they were upset by the misbehaviour, how severe the punishment should be and if they felt the student was a troublemaker. They found that the Black-sounding names led teachers to see the child’s behaviour the second time around as being more troubling than compared with white-sounding named students. After the second offence, the teachers considered the behaviour a pattern for the Black-sounding named students that needed more severe consequences and envisioned suspension in future. They were also more apt to call Black students troublemakers, believing that after the second infraction their behaviour could not be changed. It makes you wonder how a label like defiant might further influence the interpretation of behaviour and treatment of Black-students too.

The racism of oppositional defiant disorder

Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) is diagnosed when a child has a pattern of acting out in hostile, aggressive, vindictive and argumentative behaviour (generally towards authority figures), which happens over a period of time of at least six months. Their behaviour must be interpreted as so disruptive that it impacts their relationships and aspects of their daily life. While it’s suggested that possible causes of ODD could be a combination of biological, psychological and social factors, additional possible causes can include a lack of structure, inconsistent discipline practices, parenting practices, abuse and exposure to community violence too. A disproportionate number of Black, Brown and Indigenous students are diagnosed, leading many to question whether ODD is an actual neurodivergence or whether it’s a diagnosis as the result of systemic and institutionalised racism instead.

School, for example, is a much different experience for Black students than for their white peers. They are more apt to be severely punished for subjective reasons like “disrespect” when they express themselves in their own vernacular. Their behaviour is more closely monitored with less room to make mistakes, harsher punishments when they do and even less support to make things right. Black students in particular are seen as older than they are, making it easier to rationalise treating them more strictly than their same-aged peers. This keeps Black learners from accessing the skills development and resources required to support their social-emotional needs. It’s as if ODD was created for a group of students that were already considered to be defiant whether they had an ADHD diagnosis or not.

Diagnostic tools for ADHD were initially normed for white male-presenting children and therefore further excluded historically marginalised groups, often resulting in Black, Brown and Indigenous peoples being diagnosed with what are seen as more “severe” social or emotional conditions. ADHD was considered something that only white children had, even within Black communities. Centring white children for ADHD diagnosis also meant that similar behaviour in Black children was seen as more aggressive or violent.

Children who are considered to be “more aggressive” than their peers are said to have more trouble identifying and interpreting social cues from peers. These children tend to see hostile intent in “neutral situations” and think they should be rewarded for their aggressive response too (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 2019). But living in a culture that designed the **systemic inequalities** which created many of the conditions for ODD would make many “neutral situations” hostile. For historically excluded students, these “neutral situations” are often infused with **microaggressions** and other forms of discrimination which they’re expected to accept as “neutral” in order to avoid the repercussions that come from being seen as more threatening and aggressive than they already are. They must endure many situations throughout a school day that may be defined as “neutral” to those with more privilege, but in actuality are incredibly harmful and violent to those who are most marginalised.

Describing a student as defiant may seem neutral but depending on the context from which someone is describing and the student being described, labels like this can indeed be interpreted as hostile. Studies have shown how having a diagnosis for disruptive behaviours (like a conduct disorder or ODD) negatively impacts a teacher’s ability to objectively evaluate other behaviours such as inattention or hyperactivity. Without even considering **internalised bias**, a label like defiant or any kind of conduct disorder would have a negative impact, particularly on Black, Brown or Indigenous students who are already perceived as a threat simply by existing. But when these diagnoses are decided in place of ADHD (or ADHD is not included as a co-occurring diagnosis), this limits the child’s access to medications, therapy and other supportive services that an ADHD diagnosis would otherwise provide.

Without access to these treatment options, ADHD students aren’t just at risk for poor grades or relationship problems. Unmanaged ADHD can also lead to riskier sexual choices, car accidents, addictions, smoking and eating disorders, and takes an average of up to ten years off a person’s life. Some research suggests that anywhere between 25–45 per cent of people¹ in prison also have unmanaged ADHD (Fields, 2021). Labels help us categorise our students’ possible needs, but only when we learn to interpret them in ways that consider the identity and experiences of the whole child, through a lens that’s as free from **internalised bias** as possible.

1 Black and Indigenous students are more likely to be incarcerated and the pathway to incarceration begins in the education system. Studies repeatedly show that the more a student is suspended or expelled, the more likely they will not complete high school and end up in the **school-to-prison pipeline**.

By the time Darnell came back into the classroom, we had already started on a writing assignment we began a few days earlier. Darnell moaned loudly as he entered the room.

“I’m not doing this!” he declared, before announcing he had finished already. He went over to his seat, tossing aside his paper that awaited him there. While learners were scattered around the room writing drafts, revising drafts with partners or doing writing workshops with myself or my teaching assistant (TA), Darnell proceeded to then pick up his pencil and doodle on his eraser instead.

Here we go ... again, I thought to myself as I walked over to him.

“Darnell ...” I said as gently as possible, “You’re not quite finished yet. You had to write at least half the page. Remember?”

“No. I’m done ... I just write small.” He continued doodling on the eraser.

“Really?! This is done, is it?”

I looked at the paper again. He had written a few words that were more like bullet points. His writing was varied in size, with a few upper-case letters incorrectly mixed with lower-case ones. The one sentence he’d written started with a capital letter and had a full stop (neither of which happened often). He did have some interesting initial thoughts (which to his credit actually *did* happen often). But I always hoped he’d continue by clarifying them with more details.

“Darnell ... I’ve made notes on the paper with some questions for you to answer to help you expand on your thoughts.”

He wouldn’t budge. I pushed the paper towards him, pointing at it insistently with my pen as if it might be the “on switch” that would urge Darnell to finally get started. Only he leapt up and pushed the paper across his desk.

“No!” he shouted, “You’re always getting me in trouble and no one else!”

I paused and backed away. When Darnell reacted like this, I knew that debating with him wasn’t going to get us anywhere. All I’d successfully done in this interaction was continue to try the same ways to get him to express his understanding hoping that this time it would be different. I’d have to talk with him another time.

Reading and writing are often fraught with a lot of insecurity in students if they can’t perform to grade level expectations. Darnell would have angry outbursts over what he believed he couldn’t do in literacy lessons. I knew it was an area that I would have to address delicately. The longer the school year went on the less reading and written tasks he would attempt to do. It was impacting his confidence as a learner and his overall self-esteem. But when you consider the messages we get in school about the importance of being “good readers and writers” it’s not surprising it was affecting Darnell so deeply.

The prioritising of the written word

The messages we receive about English-language usage and the written word in **white supremacy culture** are everywhere. As educators, we bring our beliefs and experiences about how we see ourselves as readers and writers into the classroom, influencing the ways we teach literacy too. Written communication is used

as a way to preserve the power of **whiteness**. It not only tells us what writings are deemed most important (the ones that centre **whiteness**, of course) but also insists that the ideas and beliefs of white people are best too. Societal norms for student behaviour when it comes to reading and writing create **internalised biases** about which students are more often criticised, and assumed to be less intelligent, careless or lazy for their efforts and who are deemed worthy of more support.

It’s seen when it’s assumed that Black students who speak African American Vernacular English (AAVE; which is its own unique language, not a form of slang) are less intelligent than those who *speak white*. They must **code-switch** in order to be perceived as intelligent (but not *too intelligent*, as that can be interpreted as a threat too). Or how Brown, Indigenous, Asian, Arab, Pacific Islanders and other melanated peoples who speak English with an accent, (even while communicating fluently), are considered less intelligent than white people who do the same. Or how non-speaking people are frequently assumed to be incompetent and unable to understand the world around them. It’s also why many non-white immigrant families impress upon their children to learn the language of their new school and county, not prioritising learning their **home language**. The message is clear in the education system, if you can use (English) written (and spoken) language well, you’re perceived better than if you can’t.

The belief that the written word and all the knowledge produced by it is inherently more valuable than anything else (while also deciding that it’s been best used and shared by white people) simultaneously erases, **whitewashes** and **appropriates** the knowledge, skills and histories of Black, Brown, Indigenous, Asian, and other melanated peoples. **White supremacy culture** conditions us to ignore and disregard the many other ways that wisdom has been passed down through historically excluded groups over centuries and the ways that different people learn and work together. We learn we must prioritise centring **whiteness**, limiting students in what they learn, (either from each other or their communities) and expressing what they know. But attempting to decentre written work, especially within a system that has used testing for almost a century, is not an easy feat. We’ve all internalised a lot of messages about our proficiency as writers and readers both as educators and learners.

Since ADHD learners can struggle with emotional regulation, Darnell’s reactions in writing class make sense. His writing challenges would impact how he saw himself as a learner and what he felt capable of. Like every other student, Darnell would receive the messages of what makes a good reader or writer and from those messages determine whether he fits the description or not. Couple these messages with the ones that inform him about how he is perceived as a Black child in this society, it’s no wonder his nervous system would become much more hypervigilant to threats in his environment, even if he didn’t have the words for it. All of this could further impact his ADHD presentations too, perhaps by being more easily dysregulated. His body was already aware of the threats in his environment that reminded him that no matter what he did, his efforts or any of his accomplishments, would never be good enough.

Reflect now

Where have you been quick to judge repeated similar behaviours as worse in one student over another? What beliefs did you have about that student that kept you from seeing them as perhaps not having the skills or knowledge to deal with a problem rather than simply being one?

Darnell huffed himself around his peers and went over to the corner of the class which had the carpet, a bunch of pillows, a teacher’s chair and a small tent. It was where we had our class library. He sat with his arms crossed, purposely looking away at me next. I stood back for a minute and decided to give him some space. Darnell had set himself up quite comfortably in the space and conveniently next to another learner who was working at a mini-table. This led to him trying to push his peer’s pencil as they wrote, which of course frustrated them. Darnell laughed. Clearly, there wasn’t going to be any more writing today.

It had only been a few weeks into the school year but writing had already become a source of contention for us. It seemed strange that he would struggle with something so intensely especially when there were signs of how talented he was in other subject areas. Darnell was a creative kid who showed this most often through hands-on, problem-solving tasks. I was impressed with his wide vocabulary and many insightful contributions he’d add to class discussion. This initially surprised me because it was never previously mentioned when talking about him, but since Black students are not often recognised for their academic strengths, I shouldn’t have been surprised at all. What was certain to me was that reading was not the best way for Darnell to acquire new knowledge and writing was certainly not his best way of expressing it. I had to make some changes.

Standardised testing, whiteness and ADHD

Decades of research show that Black, Brown and Indigenous students, as well as students from some Asian groups, experience bias from standardized tests. These assessments, given from childhood to higher education, are designed to measure intelligence and knowledge. But since they are often normed to the **dominant culture**, they are an inherently biased tool, showing inaccurate scores of a student’s knowledge and ability (Rosales and Walker, 2021). Standardised testing doesn’t consider how differences in race, gender, **culture**, language, socio-economic background and more can impact student learning outcomes. Instead, it keeps **whiteness** (and with it the written word) as the primary benchmark to measure students’ academic success. It’s no wonder we consider learners (and even more so if they aren’t white), who make frequent mechanical errors or use “simplistic” vocabulary as being less intelligent. Students that can’t conform

to these expectations learn that they won’t be seen as successful unless they reach these standards. They don’t realise that these tests were designed to exclude them from the beginning.

Our focus on the written word as a measure of success and expression of understanding can have a detrimental impact on the academic outcomes of ADHD learners. Challenges with written expression are seen through “less organized written work, writing fewer words, and making more mechanical errors (e.g., misspelt words and poor handwriting) in comparison to their peers and are still apparent even when they have the basic rules of writing” (Molitor, Langberg and Evans, 2016). In fact, “writing composition difficulties are twice as common (65%) as learning challenges in reading, mathematics and orthography individually” (Mayes and Calhoun, 2006). This is thought to be because of the cognitive load of working memory and sustained attention that writing entails over other academic subjects. ADHD children “score 5–6 points lower on average on standardized tests of intelligence” (Frazier, Demaree and Youngstrom, 2004), and depending on the severity of ADHD and how it presents has also been shown to affect students’ academic performance (Barry, Lyman and Klinger, 2002; Riccio, Homack, Jarratt and Wolfe, 2006). When the written word is considered the most valued way of communication and accessing information alongside our unchecked implicit biases, it keeps the lens of what we believe our learners are capable of and how we support them extremely limited.

And it’s students like Darnell who continue to endure the consequences.

Reflect now

What have you learned about the importance of being a good writer or reader and how has that influenced how you see yourself? How has a student’s ability to speak or write influenced the ways that you saw them or their abilities? What might need to change in your beliefs when race, gender, socio-economic status or other social identity markers are considered while assessing a student’s reading, speaking or writing ability?

When ADHD co-occurs with dyslexia

Dyslexia appears in up to 15 per cent of the population, but only 4.5 per cent of students are diagnosed and that number is even less for Black children. With such a significant emphasis on literacy in schools, struggling in reading, writing, grammar or spelling can create immense stress and a loss of self-esteem for children. Without proper support, these students end up feeling increased anxiety and depression (both of which can co-occur with ADHD too), which can also manifest in increasingly disruptive and/or challenging behaviour. This might make us want to look at how we can eliminate the behaviour rather than get to the root cause of it. For Black, Brown and Indigenous children, whose behaviour is closely monitored for mistakes and harshly policed in schools, the needs under the behaviour often go unnoticed and remain unmet.

Intersectional insights: Mental health in marginalised students

It’s important to remember that many of our most marginalised students also come to our spaces with anxiety or depression just because of the challenges they must deal with in this **white supremacy**, patriarchal culture. Multiracial/Biracial youth report experiencing anxiety and depressive symptoms at higher rates than their monoracial peers (Fisher et al., 2014, in Campbell, 2020). Additionally, multiracial/biracial youth with non-white mothers have far lower emotional well-being than their monoracial minority and white peers (Schlabach, 2013, in Campbell, 2020). Black and Latine trans students experience significantly more intense mental health challenges when compared to white trans students. Indigenous peoples have reported the highest rates of depression, more than any racial group. Even though “depression and anxiety are reported at lower rates in the Asian and Pacific Islander communities, they are also least likely to seek treatment options. Southeast Asian refugees are more likely to be diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) because of difficulty adjusting to a new culture or escaping conflict in their home countries” (Hsu, Davies and Hansen, 2004; Office of the Surgeon General US, 2001). Even though anxiety and depression commonly co-occur with ADHD, they also can be further triggered by systemic and structural racism and victimisation due to gender and sexuality too. We can’t always know if it’s anxiety or depression that’s driving dysregulation, but there are plenty of daily realities for marginalised students that explain why they could be present.

About 50–60 per cent of ADHDers have co-occurring learning challenges (Olivardia, 2022) and dyslexia is the most common with estimates of 25–40 per cent having both (McGrath and Stoodley, 2019). Dyslexia is a language-based neurodivergence that impacts phonemic awareness, which is difficulty recognising and breaking down the sounds of letters. Dyslexia is not always easy to spot right away, especially when initially learning to read or when alongside co-occurring conditions like ADHD, which have a significant overlap in presentations. We often think of dyslexia as writing letters backwards or not being able to read, but it’s a lot more than that. Although they can overlap in terms of information-processing speed challenges, working memory deficits, naming speed and motor skills deficits, the ways these presentations manifest in both are slightly different. With ADHDers, you see these challenges appear at any time and usually not connected to specific skills or subjects. For dyslexics, you see these issues predominately around specific reading and writing tasks. However, each condition often exasperates the other.

With dyslexia, it’s helpful to notice the “unexpected learning challenges” with a student as early as possible. For example, dyslexic learners have a spiky profile. This means they have incredible strengths in some learning areas while struggling significantly in others. They might have a wide vocabulary and strong oral skills, yet struggle with identifying the letters of their name, finding the right word

to say or making rhymes. They might have significant maths ability but can’t recite the days of the week, recall information from rote memory or name all the letters of the alphabet. Having dyslexia (or even ADHD for that matter) doesn’t equate to being unintelligent, but it’s often treated as if it does.

If we believe that the learner should be able to do the task but can’t, especially in light of having significant strengths in other areas, we need to be asking ourselves why that is. What is it that we need to address in order to reduce barriers to their learning? However, problems arise when teachers have unchecked biases that consider a student’s learning challenges as evidence of what they are capable of. Conroy (2021) writes:

For an educator to suspect dyslexia, the educator must first expect that a child can be taught to read. Given the research on implicit bias and lower teacher expectations, the reliance on *unexpected difficulties* negatively affects Black children with dyslexia.

When educators are unaware of their bias, there is no internal check to self-monitor, which increases the likelihood of perpetuating bias when applying the definition of dyslexia as *unexpected*.

Black children are often given lower learning expectations, their strengths go unnoticed and therefore their learning challenges don’t raise any alarms with their teachers. It leaves Black dyslexic children undiagnosed and unsupported. They aren’t seen as intelligent enough to have unexpected learning difficulties in the first place.

Reflect now

Consider the importance society places on the written word and what you’ve learned as a person and teacher about what it means if you’re not proficient in it. What might it mean to Black boys like Darnell who are routinely seen for what they can’t do and assumed their behaviour or attitude is why they’re not working as expected? How might this story be different when considering different social identity markers including white children? When or with whom might you be quick to assume a student is less competent or have lower expectations for them?

I knew that I needed to make an intentional effort to create extra time to connect with Darnell. With the added stress of his changed situation at home, coupled with still being a relatively new student, it wasn’t surprising that he was showing more ADHD presentations. He was visibly hyperactive and often emotionally dysregulated, becoming easily frustrated and lacked cognitive flexibility. But it wasn’t a surprise either. Darnell had experienced a lot of changes lately, in both his home and with starting a new school setting. Both of which would take time to adapt to, but Darnell’s adjustment period was already quickly coming to an end.

When I first brought my lunch over to the dining hall and took a seat next to Darnell, he rolled his eyes and looked suspiciously at me. I knew he wouldn’t be pleased to see me there but it worked in my favour because he had to eat and there was nowhere else to go. It wasn’t going to be easy. He didn’t want to talk about writing, reading or any kind of problems we had in the class. Luckily, that didn’t matter. I was there to talk about whatever he wanted to share – which wasn’t all that much at first. Eventually, he answered a few questions that involved the others at the table initially too. I didn’t want my presence at the table to become overwhelming for him. What I soon realised was that I barely knew him beyond school work and what he couldn’t do. At that point I decided, I’d have to spend a couple of minutes with him each day to further develop our relationship. I wanted him to know that I genuinely liked him and maybe that could help him learn to trust me as a teacher too.

Lunch was almost over when I realised that I hadn’t address the issues around his literacy lessons. As the bell went for playtime, I walked alongside Darnell on his way to break

“I’m really glad I got the chance to talk to you today, Darnell,” I said.

He didn’t say anything, so I just continued.

“I know the writing is a lot in class. We’re going to find better ways to get your ideas out.”

He paused before telling me, “I don’t wanna write anything!”

I nodded. “I get that. And teachers always want you to write so much ... but we’ll figure something out for you.”

He didn’t respond, only racing outside to the playground. I wasn’t surprised by that either. I certainly hadn’t earned his trust yet, but working together to reduce these learning barriers would be a good start. I wasn’t sure where his reactions stemmed from the uncertainty in his life or not, but for whatever reason, he didn’t have the skills or capacity to manage them, yet. If I continued to interpret his outbursts to mean something personally about me, then I’d still be expecting him to make changes to his behaviour on his own and experience was telling us both that this approach wasn’t working. For Darnell to believe that he could depend on me, he’d have to know that I saw that he was capable of learning. It would be an integral part of creating a space he felt safe enough to take the risk to learn in.

ADHD Support: increasing perseverance and managing anger and aggression

Darnell needed additional support to address the gaps in his executive function skills, but because of the way he experienced dyslexia, alternative ways to access the curriculum and express his understanding were needed too. Although ADHD and dyslexia can overlap in strategies for support, helping students with dyslexia often means providing additional, specialised, daily support for building phonemic awareness too. We knew that Darnell became easily dysregulated, so that meant tracking his reactions to see whether we could note some triggers. We also realised that his ADHD presentations weren’t going to miraculously improve because we made a few curriculum changes. Anything we implemented was going to take

time for him to incorporate into his self-management strategies. There would be a lot of scaffolding we’d have to do in the meantime.

Forcing learning on students who feel like Darnell isn’t going to make it happen any faster. Helping these students might mean prioritising their mental and emotional well-being first. For Darnell, that meant looking at how he could better manage his emotional regulation for his anger and frustration. We also realised that helping him build more perseverance with learning meant creating more opportunities for success. But he’d also have to be engaging in appropriately challenging learning experiences in order to do this (no one feels particularly successful doing things that don’t have a purpose or are noticeably simple). Accepting that the learning outcomes expected for Darnell’s age might not ever become achievable or visible to us this year helped shift the focus to monitoring his well-being and self-regulation instead. It didn’t mean that we didn’t care about his academic achievement, but that we recognised that his frequent dysregulation was a sign of his lack of readiness for learning in the current environment. What we realised that the priority for Darnell included building the skills necessary to engage in his learning more effectively.

Supporting Darnell

Darnell was getting frustrated. I could see it. It had started slowly at first but I knew that if I didn’t get over to him then it could become something bigger. He was staring at the paper, his face scrunched up as he angrily scratched out the last thing he wrote. Darnell’s aversion to writing wasn’t changing overnight but the additional support was helping him make progress. I approached him just in time to avoid the paper ending up in a ball on the floor.

“Hey. It’s OK.” I leaned over and whispered, “Let’s take a break.”

Darnell looked down at his work for a moment, before getting up and shuffling over to the classroom’s newly improved quiet corner. There he found a small handheld fidget toy from the **sensory bin**.

I looked closer at his paper. Anything he’d managed to do was significant. I needed to tell him that when we met after his break. If I had checked in sooner, I might have helped him see that his efforts weren’t unnoticed and they mattered too. Although I’d managed to connect more with Darnell, he still became easily dysregulated when I wasn’t careful with the learning activities I planned. I was learning to recognise when he was becoming dysregulated sooner and found I could de-escalate them a little quicker when I did.

I went over to him now engaged in a simple Sudoku activity he found in a box filled with short paper activities alongside the sensory bin. Since Darnell would naturally walk away when he’d had enough, incorporating his go-to strategy alongside a short activity helped him to take his mind off the problem, calm down and come back ready to discuss solutions. This way, he could do what he already did to self-regulate, but the added activity gave him a way to cool off so he could engage better with me later on. I waited for a few minutes before I went over.

“Great choice of activity.” I tried to consistently praise Darnell when he worked effectively independently. I wanted him to know that I noticed him working well

Table 1.1 ADHD support: increasing perseverance and regulating anger and aggression

Perseverance (Goal-driven persistence)	Being able to complete a goal or task even when challenges arise, it gets difficult or feels boring. It’s staying the course even when another goal or project feels more interesting
Possible ADHD presentations	Possible accommodations
Lacks stamina (and motivation) to continue or complete unpreferred tasks	It’s not a lack of motivation but lacking a skill or an emotion (anxiety or fear, for example) that is blocking attempts to engage in the task. Reduce these barriers, then consider scaffolded support in learning how to engage with the task more effectively (see more in the chapter)
Doesn’t feel capable of doing a task (and gives up quickly)	Offer solutions when the learner feels calm. Under the resistance are emotions (not being seen or heard, shame, embarrassment, uncertainty, anxiety) that can be addressed by scaffolding the task by breaking it down into smaller parts, offering encouragement, working alongside them, having the focus remain on the process rather than the outcome (which might be the part that feels unsurmountable)
Struggles to complete a task at the same quality and attention as when they started	Offer examples of what mastery might look like in a task so that the outcomes are clear, with an open invitation to meet and adjust where necessary Reducing the number of questions needed or writing expected and slowing down to engage more deeply rather than adding more content
Teases or fights other students; argues with teachers about assigned tasks rather than attempt given tasks	Developing collaborative learning skills that are easily integrated into the class like Kagan structure Adjusting my language to show empathy to students’ frustrations and undesired behaviour without engaging in it, rather than ignoring it, which is another way of abandoning the student Consistently checking in during independent tasks at a set time (with a timer) to praise specific examples of on-task behaviour
Emotional regulation: Managing anger and aggression	
What’s under the aggression presentations and frequent flight or fight outbursts is high levels of anxiety. This anxiety could stem from various roots besides ADHD. When a student acts out like this but also has ADHD, there is the complication of developmental delays with executive function skills that make interpreting the cues in the environment around them more challenging. Including trauma alongside possible ADHD makes the student even more hyper-vigilant, interpreting interactions with others as possible threats, resulting in the need to attack	

(Continued)

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Table 1.1 ADHD support: increasing perseverance and regulating anger and aggression
(Continued)

Possible ADHD presentations	Possible accommodations
Lies and won’t often take responsibility for actions	<p>Telling lies to solve problems quickly especially when ADHD students want to stay out of trouble or need additional attention (and not sure how to express that). They happen automatically without thought especially when dysregulated (feeling anxious or another discomfort they can’t necessarily name) especially when they can’t find the words they need right away</p> <p>When tempers are high, it’s best to give all parties space to think about what happened before they speak. This is about finding out the facts of what happened, different perspectives and how to make things right, not punishment and blame, which will only bring up more anxiety and not get to the root of the problem</p>
Anger and frustration seem to happen quickly	<p>When calm, give direct teaching for strategies to self-monitor for clues that anger is arising. Introspection difficulties or sensory challenges can make it even more difficult for some students to recognise changes in their bodies that indicate volatile emotions are emerging</p> <p>Teach strategies to practise pausing before reacting when the learner is calm. (Pausing allows for time to reconnect to the thinking brain.) Practise perspective-taking skills so students can learn how their decisions and reactions impact others and what choices they might make in future with this different insight</p>
Seems like the student is purposely trying to manipulate or upset others	<p>Keep the focus off ODD labels and on what works to create an environment of safety</p> <p>Look for patterns in their reactions to identify possible triggers and what helps de-escalate situations quickly</p>
Decides work is complete when it could be improved and will not engage with the reflection process	<p>Be clear on the expectations of projects. Give examples to avoid confusion. Be flexible depending on difficulties shown in the process of engaging in the learning (other skills beyond the outcome could be difficult for the learner to further engage in)</p> <p>Choose intentionally about what outcomes are worth insisting on. Where else has this competency been met or are there other ways they could meet it?</p> <p>Rethink completing lots of questions as a way to show skills development</p>

(Continued)

Table 1.1 ADHD support: increasing perseverance and regulating anger and aggression
(Continued)

<p>Becomes easily emotionally flooded</p>	<p>Have a calming space in your classroom that also has short activities that help refocus a student’s attention from the incident so they can calm down and come back to the thinking part of their brain</p> <p>Separate students to give some space and time to calm down first before discussing the incident. The body is in flight or fight, so any kind of discussion to “reason with them” will likely further upset the student and escalate the situation. Stand by as a way to offer co-regulatory support as they calm down, but refrain from pressuring them to “explain themselves”</p> <p>Don’t engage with the anger, language or complaints. After they’ve calmed down and had some space from the incident, it’s easier to explain what happened and discuss with/give them a chance to make things right (this isn’t necessarily an apology either, but what they could do that actually helps them fix things for the other person and makes them feel better about doing this)</p> <p>Share stories, role play and guide class discussions for students to hear various ways to solve problems and how to manage anger and other big emotions during times of calm. Include exercises that connect these emotions to what they might feel in the body. Practise these skills often when students are regulated</p> <p>Develop their ability to visualise how their actions impact others and reflect on what they think are other people’s perspectives on problems and solutions through stories, simple small group discussions using SEL problem-solving cards and role play</p> <p>Model your own strategies to address big emotions in class (this helps address some SEL needs where there is no curriculum)</p>
<p>Becomes easily argumentative and defensive (may physically or verbally attack someone quickly)</p>	<p>Tone of voice and how you present requests and demands are important to students who experience anxiety. Phrases that give simple choices or are an invitation like, “I wonder whether...”, “Let’s see if...”, and talking about the object or task rather than directly asking the student themselves and telling them what they must do helps create a sense of autonomy and a felt sense of safety. Using declarative language is important</p>

(Continued)

Table 1.1 ADHD support: increasing perseverance and regulating anger and aggression
(Continued)

Struggles with confidence	<p>Daily two-minute chat for ten days (or more!) on topics of choice to develop a relationship with the student</p> <p>Finding ways to encourage the student to share any talents with younger students or willing to help others</p> <p>Make a point to catch them on task and doing as expected. We often notice when some of our more difficult students are doing things wrong, but rarely check in with them when they are working well independently or with a friend</p>
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when he worked alone too. He was so used to being talked to when he did things wrong that it became important for me to keep noticing the little things that he did well or made progress with, even when they were expected behaviours for his age. I set the visual timer for the corner to three additional minutes.

“Darnell ... The timer is set for three more minutes. Do you see that?”

He briefly looked up and nodded.

“Great. Three more minutes, then we can decide what to do next.”

“OK,” he spoke quietly.

Timers don’t always make for smooth transitions as they can be easily ignored, so Darnell still needed support with this. When the timer went off, my TA was quick to use a reminder that shared why they needed Darnell’s help.

“Let’s see about turning off that timer, Darnell.” They wandered over and I watched Darnell’s attention go towards turning it off. I could see his body droop as he looked back at his desk and where a moan of displeasure would have been interjected, he heard my voice instead.

“Darnell ...” I called over. He looked up to see me waving the chromebook in my hand with a smile, motioning him over. I could see the relief wash over his body. He would have input on how that could look for him too. I could see his body’s increasing ease as he walked over to me. I breathed deeply as he approached, so I could continue with responding calmly. If we were going to work together, it was imperative that however Darnell might react to what was going to happen next, I wouldn’t react because I’d decided to take it personally. He needed to trust that I could consistently handle my own discomfort however he decided to react.

Key takeaways:

- **Internalised bias** keeps many Black, Brown and Indigenous children from being diagnosed with ADHD and dyslexia, while oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) and other conduct disorders are disproportionately diagnosed in historically excluded groups over white children exhibiting the same presentations.

- ADHD has many overlapping presentations with dyslexia. One way to distinguish between the two is if the similar presentations are only seen during reading or writing or also noticeable in different subjects and environments too.
- Prioritising writing and reading in schools not only serves as a way to centre whiteness but also keeps us from considering other ways students could engage with the curriculum and share their understandings.
- ADHD students are 65 per cent more likely to also have challenges with written expression, which is also seen to create lower academic outcomes for these students in standardised testing.
- Standardised testing was created to ensure that Black, Brown, Indigenous and melanated immigrant students to excluded them from accessing higher education opportunities.
- Supporting students with significant social and emotional needs often means prioritising their well-being over learning expectations.

Resources to explore

Dyslexia

Black, Brilliant and Dyslexic by Marcia Brissett-Bailey

Dyslexia and Me: How to Survive and Thrive If You’re Neurodivergent by Onyinye Udokporo

British Dyslexia Association: www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/

Dyslexia Action: <https://dyslexiaaction.org.uk/>

Irlen Syndrome

Irlen Institute: <https://irlen.com/>

Restorative Justice

Hacking School Discipline, Nine ways to create a culture of empathy and responsibility using restorative justice by Nathan Maynard & Brad Weinstein

This Restorative Justice Life Podcast with David Ryan Castro-Harris