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# What We Can Learn from the Classroom Experiences of Former Students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder in Australia: A Phenomenological Approach

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## Abstract

Despite the prevalence of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) in classrooms and the availability of pharmacological and behavioural interventions, students with ADHD often encounter systemic challenges that hinder academic performance, social inclusion and emotional stability. It is, therefore, necessary to listen to the 'voice' of these students to understand their classroom experience. This phenomenological study of ten recently graduated (within the last seven years) secondary school students with ADHD in Australia uses semi-structured interviews to explore the educational experiences of these students through the lens of lived experience. The study identifies key themes from student narratives that negatively impact learning outcomes, including academic challenges due to executive function difficulties, poor teacher attitudes, strained peer relationships, and emotional distress. Findings suggest that effective supports include the key role of an 'executive assistant', inclusive classroom strategies, positive teacher-student relationships, and environments that recognise individual strengths. Educational implications include: the need for improved teacher training to increase teacher awareness of the challenges experienced by students with ADHD; career-oriented learning pathways for students; and system-wide adoption of inclusive classroom practices.

**Keywords:** ADHD, executive function, inclusion, lived experience, emotional regulation, student voice

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## INTRODUCTION

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is recognised as a lifelong neuro-developmental disorder (American Psychological Association, 2013), often manifesting in deficits related to executive functioning, including problems with focus, inhibitory control and organisation (Bachmann et al., 2016). Persistent patterns of inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity are characteristics of ADHD, giving rise to difficulties in academic and social functioning (Castellanos & Proal, 2012). Globally, approximately 7.2% of children and adolescents between the ages of 5 and 19 years are affected by ADHD (Thomas et al., 2015), and an estimated 50% to 66% of these individuals continue to display ADHD symptoms into adulthood (ADHD Institute, 2017). Mulholland (2017) suggests that most classrooms in Australia include at least one student with ADHD.

Children and adolescents diagnosed with ADHD often face significant challenges in education, including underachievement, repeating grades, disciplinary infractions, frequent absences, and lower chances of completing high school or enrolling in post-secondary programs (Faraone & Larson, 2019; Mezzanotte, 2020). Furthermore, they are at a higher risk of developing co-occurring mental health disorders and engaging in criminal behaviour, both of which carry considerable social and economic consequences (Faraone & Larson, 2019). Even with ongoing research efforts, ADHD, as identified globally, continues to rank among the top 15 causes of disability for individuals aged 5 to 19, contributing to persistent difficulties in emotional health, social functioning, and overall quality of life (Congressional Research Services, 2020; Erskine et al., 2014).

While behavioural and pharmacological interventions are commonly used to manage ADHD symptoms and enhance classroom conduct, their effectiveness in improving academic achievement remains inconsistent (Arnold et al., 2020). Research has largely focused on the viewpoints of adults, such as educators, parents, and health professionals, when determining classroom supports for students with ADHD (Blotnick-Gallant et al., 2015). A growing body of research has examined the perspectives of students with ADHD, identifying key elements that shape their classroom experiences, such as relationships with peers and teachers, and the extent of their academic engagement (Gibbs et al., 2022; Levkovich & Elyoseph, 2021; McDougal et al., 2023; Taneja Johansson, 2021). Despite these insights, relatively few studies adopt a qualitative approach that foregrounds students' lived experiences through the lens of student voice (Kendall, 2016; Rushton et al., 2019). Moreover, only one qualitative study from the North of England was located that directly addressed academic achievement from the perspective of students with ADHD (Kendall, 2016).

Caslin et al. (2019) emphasised the importance of supportive teacher-student relationships, pointing out that misunderstandings around student behaviour can be exacerbated by stigma and inadequate teacher knowledge. McDougal et al. (2023) identified both strengths and areas for support, for example students often excelled in

creative subjects but were challenged with literacy skills, suggesting the need for tailored, strength-based approaches. Gibbs et al. (2022), focusing on Australian secondary schools, reinforced these themes and underscored the impact of teacher attitudes and structured strategies on student outcomes.

Other studies have echoed the academic and social challenges faced by students with ADHD. Bolic Baric et al. (2016) and Levkovich and Elyoseph (2021) reported on issues like difficulty concentrating, the need for routine, and feelings of social exclusion. Some researchers also identified students' emotional distress, low self-esteem, and experiences of exclusion (Bolic Baric et al., 2016; Honkasilta et al., 2016). Cueli et al. (2024) drew attention to the concerning finding that secondary school teachers often possess the least knowledge about ADHD and hold more negative perceptions compared to their peers in other educational stages.

Importantly, the presence of empathetic adults, such as parents, friends, and school-based professionals, emerged as a key protective factor for students' emotional well-being and academic resilience (McDougal et al., 2023). Supportive relationships were linked to greater self-esteem and motivation to pursue academic and future goals. While these studies provide valuable insights, there remains a clear gap in qualitative research that centres on student voices, especially regarding academic achievement in Australian secondary schools. By focusing on student perspectives, this study aimed to address this gap by presenting the voices of Australian secondary school students with ADHD and shedding light on their specific educational challenges and needs.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study adopted a transcendental phenomenological approach grounded in Husserl's philosophical tradition, as outlined by Moustakas (1994). This methodology was chosen to explore the nuanced, first-person experiences of students with ADHD in educational contexts. Its rigorous and reflective structure supported the exploration of participants' subjective realities by focusing on their own detailed descriptions, with the goal of identifying the essential features of their classroom experiences during secondary schooling in Australia.

### **Participant Recruitment and Sampling Strategy**

Participants were young adults with a confirmed ADHD diagnosis who had completed at least five years of secondary schooling in the Australian education system. Eligibility required the presence of at least one core ADHD symptom: inattention, hyperactivity, or impulsivity (American Psychological Association, 2013); and allowed for participants using or not using pharmacological treatment (such as methylphenidate). Co-occurring conditions, including dyslexia, anxiety, depression, or conduct disorder, did not exclude participation.

This study employed a purposive sampling method to recruit individuals who met specific inclusion criteria aligned with the research focus (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Initial recruitment was supported through professional referrals from mental health practitioners, including a psychiatrist and psychotherapist affiliated with a private hospital, and an educational psychologist from a private practice. As the study progressed, snowball sampling was used to reach additional eligible participants through peer referrals (Bhattacharjee, 2012). Sixteen potential participants received invitation emails from the researcher, and ten agreed to participate in interviews (see Table 1 for participant characteristics).

Table 1. Participant Characteristics (Keiper, 2024)

Part. ID	Gender	Age (yrs)	Yrs Post School	Years in Aust. Educ.	Medication Use	Co-Occurring Conditions
1	F	20	2	12	Yes	Anxiety
2	M	20	2.5	5	Yes	Anxiety
3	M	18	1	13	Yes	Anxiety Depression
4	M	22	3	13	No	Anxiety Depression
5	F	24	6	7	Yes	Anxiety
6	M	19	1	5	No	Anxiety
7	F	23	5	13	No	Anxiety Depression
8	F	21	3	13	No	Anxiety Dyslexia
9	F	22	3.5	13	No	Anxiety Depression
10	M	19	1	9	Yes	Anxiety Depression Dyslexia

Interestingly, the gender distribution was evenly split consisting of five males and five females, differing from typical prevalence trends that show higher ADHD diagnoses in males (Hinshaw et al., 2022; Reuben & Elgaddal, 2024). In total, ten semi-structured interviews were conducted. This sample size proved adequate for phenomenological research, as data saturation was reached, and no new themes emerged in later interviews (Boyd, 2001). This sample size aligns with Creswell (2014), who suggests that 10 or more in-depth interviews are generally sufficient in phenomenological studies.

## Data Collection

To explore students' personal accounts of their classroom experiences with ADHD, this study employed in-depth, semi-structured interviews guided by open-ended questions. This format allowed participants to express their perspectives freely, while also enabling the researcher to follow up with probes for clarification and elaboration where needed. In line with phenomenological traditions, the researcher also maintained reflective field notes (memoing) throughout the data collection process to document emerging impressions and contextual observations.

Two core interview prompts structured the conversation. The first encouraged participants to reflect on their own schooling:

1. *“Can you describe what it was like to be a student with ADHD in your school?”*

The second invited them to consider the experience from a more empathetic or advisory stance:

2. *“How would you describe your school to a new student with ADHD?”*

Follow-up questions and clarification requests were posed as needed, and any necessary elaboration after interviews was obtained via email communication.

## Data Analysis

This study utilised Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological framework for data analysis, which includes three core steps: epoche (suspension of researcher bias), horizontalisation (reduction and elimination), and imaginative variation (constructing meaning through multiple perspectives). Interview transcripts were reviewed in detail to immerse the researcher in each participant's unique account. In addition to reading the transcripts, the lead researcher repeatedly revisited the audio recordings, attending to vocal inflections, silences, and emotional undertones that might not be fully captured in written text. This iterative listening deepened the interpretative process by adding affective and contextual richness. To enhance the rigor of the findings, all authors participated in the analysis, with two bringing advanced qualitative research expertise for collaborative co-coding.

## RESULTS

Following transcribing, the lead researcher engaged in repeated readings of each interview to gain a deep understanding of the participants' individual experiences. Through the process of phenomenological reduction, key patterns began to emerge. This analysis led to the development of four overarching themes: classroom experience, social experience, emotional experience, and perceived academic support. Each theme also included several subthemes that captured more nuanced aspects of the participants' academic journeys. A detailed account of these themes and subthemes is presented below.

### Classroom Experience

Participants described a range of challenges within the classroom that affected their ability to achieve academically. These challenges included difficulty sustaining attention, problems with executive functioning, engaging in English class, lack of helpful teacher feedback, the transition to online learning, negative classroom environments, and the role of creative subjects.

All participants consistently referred to difficulty staying focused during class as a major barrier to learning. As Participant 10 reflected,

*“It was very difficult for me to pay attention for extended periods of time. The sheer amount of knowledge that you have to understand at once...”* (P10).

Another participant suggested that her inattentiveness challenged her ability to keep up with content and complete tasks,

*“I had to kind of drag myself... to keep up and match their [peer's] pace, but it was always still a few steps behind”* (P9).

Several participants noted that they needed more repetition and time than their peers to fully understand content. Fast-paced lessons and limited time for processing made it difficult to maintain focus and complete tasks, contributing to frustration and academic challenges.

Participants stated that poor executive functioning skills, such as organisational skills, planning, and managing workload, were key academic obstacles. One participant described the structuring and planning challenges of essay writing:

*“And I need the most structure I can get... I need a structure or I'm going to be lost. I am going to be overwhelmed”* (P1).

Many participants reported feeling overwhelmed when expected to complete large tasks without structured support. As another participant highlighted,

*“Break down tasks for me a little bit easier, rather than lumping a whole, whole, whole lot of work on me or a big assignment or whatever...” (P5).*

Among all the school subjects, English was described as particularly difficult due to its abstract nature, extensive reading and writing demands, and the sustained attention it required. One participant illustrated:

*I feel instead of cramming into 40-50 minutes.... especially for English, I feel like it's all about memorising and writing. It's not more. I feel like it's not really about grasping concepts and like... books and novels and whatever. (N4)*

Participant 10 further highlighted how English literature was boring, long and tedious, demanding sustained attention; and he was also challenged by essay writing and reading. This subject placed heavy demands on executive functioning and attention which were areas that already challenged the participants' academics.

Unconstructive feedback from teachers was often perceived as vague or discouraging. Rather than receiving constructive guidance, they were left unsure of how to improve, as one participant highlighted teachers would say,

*“... 'You can't pay attention'. There was no solution, there was no roadmap. Actually, I don't remember any teachers offering 'maybe we can try this or let's try this...'” (P5).*

These teacher-students interactions undermined motivation and reinforced a sense of failure among participants.

Students who completed Year 12 during the COVID-19 pandemic described additional difficulties with the remote learning format. They found it even harder to focus without in-person supervision and were easily distracted online. One participant described how the volume and intensity of online delivery challenged him academically:

*“It was very difficult for me to pay attention for extended periods of time. This was especially the case due to the heavy amount of content... amount of classes a day and the pace... Online learning also hindered progress, made it even harder to learn.” (P10)*

Participant 6 highlighted that

*“When we switched to online, I found myself drifting off to other websites like YouTube or just playing games” (P6).*

The virtual environment increased distractions and made content delivery feel overwhelming, which further reduced their ability to stay engaged.

Participants described feeling labelled, excluded, or unintelligent in classroom settings that lacked empathy or support. Being separated for special instruction contributed to this perception. Participant 1, for example, described feeling stupid and looked down upon by teachers when they were addressed as “*special kids*”. Participant 9 described the emotional toll of being forced to stay back in class to complete tasks when other students have already left, making her feel “*stung and stupid*”. Such experiences left students feeling humiliated, misunderstood, and disconnected from their learning environment.

Despite these challenges, all participants showed high levels of engagement and success in creative and hands-on subjects, including drama, woodwork, art, and food technology. One participant noted:

*“I enjoyed music because it was very hands on, very practical... Art class, being able to wander off in my own head, but still be doing hands-on work, not have to grasp concepts or being entirely switched on, I think that’s why I potentially excelled in those areas.” (P5)*

Participant 9 further highlighted that music class was very enjoyable and made her happy, as creating songs and playing them was effortless for her. Engaging in subjects that aligned with their learning strengths activated their intrinsic determinants of resilience and helped participants stay engaged with school and demonstrated their capabilities when provided with the right environment.

## **Social Experience**

The theme of social experience captured students’ interactions with peers beyond the classroom, yet still within the broader school environment. These interactions included the way they navigated friendships, peer dynamics, emotional challenges, and the role of their personal strengths or talents in shaping social inclusion.

Many participants described using humour, impulsive actions, or exaggerated personas as a strategy to fit in socially and gain peer approval. These behaviours, often rooted in masking ADHD-related difficulties or being funny, sometimes led to popularity, particularly for those who took risks or acted unpredictably. While these behaviours sometimes led to social rewards, they could also be emotionally exhausting.

Participant 9 reflected on the effort required to maintain a different identity to gain peer acceptance when she tried to mask ADHD symptoms and behaviours to fit in with her peers:

*“Honestly, I tried to hide a lot of the ADHD, so it was never really too noticeable... I was very overexcited and very focused on certain things. And a lot of that came out in just very noticeable actions and movements...” (P9)*

These behaviours highlight how participants often developed their own coping strategies to meet social expectations, even when doing so conflicted with their authentic selves.

Students who experienced emotional distress at school often reported fewer friendships. Those who experienced anxiety or other internalising conditions tended to withdraw from peers and avoid social settings, partly due to fear of judgement.

One participant described how his anxiety

*“Just amplified me having a problem. Friends treated me alright, accepted me, but other students not too much” (P10).*

Others who exhibited more outward behaviours, such as aggression or confrontational tendencies, found themselves socially excluded. As Participant 2 illustrated, seeking physical fights ensured no one bullied him physically or verbally, but he did not have any close friendships. Across these different experiences, it was evident that emotional and behavioural difficulties often limited opportunities to form close peer relationships.

A number of participants explained that excelling in a particular area, such as sport, music, or the arts, enhanced their social standing and helped them form strong friendships. This recognition and respect from peers often served as a buffer against negative school experiences.

One participant described how sport provided lasting social connections:

*“I was quite good in sport. So, I was respected in terms of that... So, school wasn't too bad, if you have friends around you. If you don't have many friends, you're very isolated” (P4).*

For these participants, their strengths became a means of earning peer acceptance and building friendships, which may have also positively influenced their overall school experience.

## **Emotional Experience**

Participants in the study described a range of emotional experiences that significantly influenced their engagement and wellbeing throughout their schooling. These emotions included anxiety, sadness, anger, and feelings of low self-worth. However, many also demonstrated resilience and found motivation, both intrinsic and extrinsic, particularly

when supported or engaged in activities that aligned with their strengths.

Every participant reported experiencing anxiety at school, often at an intense level. In many cases, this stemmed from doubts about their ability to complete tasks correctly, triggering emotional and physical symptoms. Participant 9 captured this self-doubt by stating how she would procrastinate with starting tasks as she was convinced, she would definitely do it incorrectly.

The anxiety was often exacerbated by comparisons with peers, fear of criticism, or prior negative experiences, leading to heightened distress. Some participants described physical symptoms of anxiety, including excessive sweating, nervous tics, muscle tension, and fatigue. Sweaty palms were experienced by Participant 3 through anxiety caused by over thinking, while Participant 5 stated:

*“My nail-biting really started anxious habits. Everything's just quite tense and tight around my shoulders, from that insecurity I started to sort of hunch...”* (P5)

Similarly, Participant 10 dreaded even entering school as he was anxious about the unsupportive school environment.

Persistent feelings of sadness were also reported, especially when students felt unsupported by teachers or misunderstood in the classroom. A lack of empathy appeared to deepen emotional distress:

*“It was definitely a sense of sadness that I couldn't keep up with the people around me. I think I got put in this box by the teachers that made me feel a little bit isolated maybe from the rest of the class.”* (P5)

Over time, these emotional struggles sometimes progressed into clinical depression. Participant 7 illustrated how sadness from younger days developed into depression by age 15 or 16 years.

Several participants reported experiencing both internal and external forms of anger, often in response to perceived disrespect or unfair treatment by educators. This treatment included being misunderstood, dismissed, or stereotyped.

One participant shared their frustration over unfair expectations and lack of support in the classroom:

*“It would come out sometimes a bit as anger. I never was very nice to my teachers, but I'll get quite angry internally at them”* (P9).

Others described how perceived injustice could drive oppositional behaviours or rebellion:

*“I was the person to carry grudges in secondary school... I wasn't treated fairly like the other kids... When you ask them [teachers] a question... they'll [teachers] tell me no and stuff, but when someone else asks they can go. Why, why is there this unfair treatment? Then it got to a point where... I just stepped out, I just walked out of class.” (P2)*

To manage emotional challenges, participants employed various coping mechanisms, some adaptive, others avoidant. For example, some avoided effort that triggered anxiety:

*“I coped with my anxiety with exams by just not doing anything. I just didn't study. I did really bad in my exams, [but] it kind of took away a lot of those pressures...” (P7).*

Others turned to music during class as a form of emotional regulation or escapism. One participant described the effect of using music in this way as:

*“Listening to [drill] music in the classroom, when we were allowed to, it helped me relax a bit, maybe help me focus. It made me stop overthinking...” (P10).*

External support, particularly from family or tutors, was instrumental in shaping participants' confidence, self-esteem and ability to cope with school demands. Participant 1, for example, experienced a positive shift through structured support from her parents and tutors, which helped her achieve better in academics and boost her confidence. However, when support was lacking or withdrawn, especially, in areas such as task management, scheduling, or academic planning, participants were often challenged. Participant 6 illustrated feeling lazy or procrastinating and not meeting expected academic standards when his parents' organisational support was compromised.

Despite emotional difficulties, most participants demonstrated notable resilience, especially during the later years of high school. This resilience was often fueled by external expectations, such as family pressure or the desire to meet academic benchmarks. As one participant described:

*“The anxiety sort of started to come. And that's when I started to really, really care about my grades and what people would be thinking. I had this sort of drive to stay on top of everything in a way... I didn't want to be behind, really didn't...” (P5)*

Another linked their motivation to social expectations of achieving success, as he stated:

*“...I definitely [wanted a] good uni. Whatever mark I get, depending on what the best option is I'll choose [the degree]” (P3).*

For a few participants, motivation came from within. Participant 1 described using resentment as a catalyst for determination, as she was determined to prove those who ridiculed her that she is smart. As a result, her academic achievement improved, and she developed an inner drive to achieve better.

Participants reported thriving when engaged in subjects that matched their personal interests or learning styles. Doing well in these areas bolstered academic performance and emotional wellbeing. As participant 5 demonstrated, she excelled in music and art class.

Creative subjects were also viewed as a critical emotional outlet, as Participant 7 described, drama class was her sole motivational factor to attend and complete school. Excellence in extracurricular areas such as sport also fostered social recognition and boosted self-esteem:

*“I really enjoyed sport. I was really good at it too and won athletics champion for a few years and won cross-country for a few years, and biathlon. I loved doing netball, volleyball and football and go internationally for competitions and things. So, that was cool, and I got recognition from sport. It's a really good feeling to do well in sport to show I'm good at something.” (L1)*

Overall, being able to engage in areas of personal strength contributed significantly to participants' confidence, motivation, and resilience, providing a buffer against negative emotional experiences in school.

### **Perceived Academic Supports**

Participants identified a range of supports that enabled them to engage with their studies and achieve academic success. These supports included relationships with both temporary and consistent support persons, individual tutoring, structured instruction, personal abilities, ADHD medication, the use of music, exam adjustments, and psychological factors such as motivation and mindset.

Even short-term interactions with empathetic teachers or staff had a meaningful impact on students' learning experience. Participants described how feeling understood by a teacher, even briefly, could lead to significant improvement in their educational engagement. As Participant 2 described, he felt very fortunate to have a caring Welfare Head who showed him empathy and helped him without judgement. Participants found

that being granted classroom accommodations or simply receiving encouragement helped build trust and motivation.

Long-term support, particularly from parents, was often described as a foundation for academic success. Parents who regularly assisted with scheduling, time management, and task completion reduced participants' academic stress. Participant 10 described his mother's support in managing time and volume of work helped him feel less anxious. This practical support was further enhanced through emotional encouragement, as another participant reflected:

*"I was very lucky having very understanding parents... Having my mum to talk to about things, she could empathise. I didn't feel any pressure; I think that was the big thing. I never felt I was a burden, that was dealt with very nicely." (P5)*

Participant 6 described how parental accountability in managing his time and behaviour helped him sustain focus and perform well in academics.

Many participants highlighted that one-on-one tutoring, especially in subjects they found difficult, was a turning point in their academic progress. Individualised attention allowed them to learn at their own pace and fill in conceptual gaps. One participant recalled:

*"One-to-one learning, [I] think was the main difference. Someone looking over your shoulder is always good. And you can actually interact with another person [tutor] and it was just you and them, and then they would tell you things and you would talk about it. It's more of a practical way, or communication way of learning, instead of just looking at books." (P4)*

Participant 10 added that one-to-one tuition was better because he could learn at his pace.

Participants frequently described challenges with abstract or unstructured content but flourished when lessons and tasks were structured clearly. Participant 8 illustrated that knowing the end point and where concepts fit, as well as concise information, such a short YouTube video explaining concepts, made learning easier. Subjects that broke tasks into smaller, more manageable parts were particularly effective. Without support for structure one participant stated:

*"I'm on autopilot and like I'm writing, but I'm not really thinking about it a lot... I'm going to start like this and then write about this paragraph and that paragraph" (P3).*

Participant 4 highlighted the effectiveness of visual learning:

*“For sure I'm more interested in more of a visual way of learning and more practical instead of just through a book...”. (P4)*

Structured learning environments helped to scaffold their understanding and reduce anxiety around academic tasks.

Despite challenges to learning, participants' natural abilities often contributed to their academic perseverance and achievement. Participant 2 performed well in final exams and got selected to study a degree in chiropractic and Participant 1 felt smart when she achieved the ATAR she required to get into exercise physiology. Even in the absence of consistent support, some participants were able to succeed by drawing on personal strengths and interests. Using her talent in drama, Participant 7 got into drama school, despite her difficulties with academics.

Some participants identified medication as a vital tool that enhanced focus and emotional regulation. In some cases, medication enabled a complete transformation in academic functioning.

*“When I started medication stuff became easier, very easy they were much easier for me...”, (P5).*

Participant 3 described improved focus and emotional regulation with the use of medication:

*“I was hazy couldn't think too much... But after I got the medication... I felt a lot better” (P3).*

However, while medication improved attention, participants also acknowledged side effects such as anxiety and appetite loss.

Several participants described using music, particularly intense or aggressive genres, to stay calm or enhance focus in class. This coping mechanism provided a sense of control in otherwise stressful situations. Participant 10 described that 'drill' music helped him relax and overthink less. For these students, music functioned as a self-regulation tool, helping them navigate the emotional and cognitive demands of the classroom.

Modified assessment conditions, such as extended time or alternative exam settings, were particularly helpful for participants who experienced slower processing speeds or heightened anxiety. Participant 1 emphasised she would not have received a good HSC result, if not for exam accommodations, especially the provision of extra time for writing.

Such provisions allowed students to demonstrate their capabilities more accurately and contributed to improved outcomes and reduced exam-related stress.

Lastly, several participants described the power of mindset and motivational factors in overcoming academic challenges. Support from individuals who believed in their potential helped fuel their determination. Participant 2 described the impact of a staff member who had hope in him that made him want to do well, in order not to let that person down. Participant 6 illustrated the shift in mindset needed to adapt to school expectations set by his mother (e.g., paying attention, listening to teachers, completing tasks and aiming for good results), which occurs automatically as he enters school every day.

## DISCUSSION

This research examined the classroom experiences of secondary school students diagnosed with ADHD, shedding light on the multifaceted nature of their academic experiences. Participants shared accounts of ongoing difficulties experienced when attempting to keep up with the pace of instruction, sustain attention, and carry out tasks that rely on executive functions, including time management, organisation, and task persistence. These accounts align with established findings that identify executive dysfunction and distractibility as core barriers to academic progress for students with ADHD (Kosheleff et al., 2023; Levkovich & Elyoseph, 2021). Fast-paced instruction and content-heavy lessons hindered participants' ability to process and retain information, consistent with research linking reduced working memory due to inattention and slower processing associated with learning difficulties (Braaten et al., 2020).

Students reported that clearly structured teaching and a pace adjusted to their processing needs significantly enhanced their learning. Educators who incorporated these adjustments were particularly valued. These preferences reflect existing recommendations for ADHD-inclusive pedagogy, such as segmenting information and providing consistent scaffolding (Bolic Baric et al., 2016; DuPaul et al., 2011). English emerged as a notably difficult subject for participants due to the abstract and extensive content and executive function demands of essay writing and reading. The prevalence of critical feedback also undermined motivation and self-belief. The shift to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated these academic difficulties. Many students experienced heightened distraction and reduced motivation in the absence of physical supervision. Anxiety increased, particularly in situations where they were called upon unexpectedly in online sessions, compounding cognitive challenges and reducing overall academic participation.

The level of understanding and attitudes held by teachers towards ADHD also emerged as a decisive factor in shaping classroom experiences. A limited awareness of how ADHD affects executive functions often led to a lack of appropriate accommodations or empathy (McDougal et al., 2023). Teachers who demonstrated flexibility, understanding, and patience were seen as fostering a safe and supportive classroom climate that enhanced students' motivation and willingness to participate. Educators who appeared

dismissive, critical, or impatient contributed to increased stress and disengagement. Criticism from teachers in front of peers was highlighted by the participants as a particular source of embarrassment and resulted in social retreat.

Teacher attitudes were also reported to influence peer dynamics within the classroom. When educators modelled inclusive and respectful behaviour, it often resulted in greater peer acceptance. Conversely, unsupportive teacher responses appeared to reinforce exclusionary behaviours among classmates, including bullying. These findings underline the importance of professional development for educators focused on ADHD-related challenges in emotional regulation, cognitive function, and social inclusion.

Several participants shared that, in response to feelings of social rejection, they developed compensatory behaviours such as adopting humorous or exaggerated personas to gain peer approval. While these strategies occasionally resulted in temporary social acceptance, they often led to further misunderstandings or rejection. For others, improvements in academic performance led to increased respect from peers, echoing prior research that links academic success to social integration (Gallardo et al., 2016; Tępordei et al., 2023). Nonetheless, persistent emotional challenges and co-occurring conditions remained significant obstacles to forming and maintaining meaningful peer relationships (Bagwell & Schmidt, 2011; Mishna, 2012).

Emotional dysregulation was a recurring theme in participants' narratives. Feelings of anxiety, frustration, and sadness frequently presented and often intensified their ADHD symptoms and co-occurring conditions (Faraone et al., 2015; Tan & Teng, 2020). Peer conflicts and negative teacher interactions also intensified these emotional states, sometimes leading to psychosomatic symptoms and, in more severe cases, avoidance of school. Notably, some students reported using aggressive music genres as a strategy for emotional regulation, a finding that opens avenues for future exploration, including into the potential benefits of alternative forms of auditory regulation, such as calming music.

Over time, several participants described developing greater resilience, which they attributed either to internal motivation or to their efforts to disprove negative perceptions of others. This shift often coincided with improvements in academic performance and growing self-confidence, consistent with the principles of self-determination theory, which identifies competence, autonomy, and relatedness as fundamental to motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2022). Subjects such as art, music, drama, and physical education were particularly important to fostering a sense of engagement and self-worth, as these areas allowed students to feel capable and recognised within the school environment (Bolic Baric et al., 2016; McDougal et al., 2023).

Another key factor in supporting participants' educational progress was the presence of a dedicated and emotionally invested adult, typically a parent, who played a pivotal role in daily academic and routine management. These individuals, often mothers, are

likened to 'executive assistants', providing planning, encouragement, advocacy, and structural support to navigate school demands effectively. Similarly, individualised tutoring tailored to each student's pace was seen as particularly effective in boosting comprehension and academic confidence.

In addition to human supports, practical tools such as medication, modified exam conditions (e.g., extra time), and the strategic use of personal strengths played important roles in improving participants' academic engagement and outcomes. Overall, the findings underscore the importance of informed teaching practices, emotional responsiveness, and personalised support systems in enhancing the academic, social and emotional experiences of students with ADHD.

## CONCLUSION

This research underscores the centrality of emotional wellbeing in shaping the educational experiences of students with ADHD. When empathy and understanding were extended by both teachers and peers, students reported feeling more confident and felt they belonged, which encouraged active engagement and contributed to stronger academic performance. While difficulties with attention and executive functioning were major barriers to learning, it was the interplay between these challenges, comorbid emotional conditions like anxiety and depression, and unsupportive social dynamics that had the most detrimental effect on participants' confidence and achievement.

One recurring theme was the insufficient knowledge some teachers had about the broader impacts of ADHD, especially regarding emotional regulation and executive function difficulties in the working memory. This gap in understanding sometimes resulted in responses that unintentionally intensified students' distress. Such classroom dynamics often set off a chain reaction of emotional withdrawal, reduced participation, strained relationships, and higher rates of absence, which could eventually threaten students' connection to school. In contrast, when students experienced success—particularly in areas that aligned with their interests, their sense of self-worth grew, often sparking renewed motivation and perseverance.

Another prominent outcome was the role played by dedicated support persons, frequently parents, who took on a coordinating and supportive role in participants' daily routines. Acting like 'executive assistants', these individuals helped manage time, supported emotional regulation, and acted as key advocates with the school system. They also secured access to tailored supports such as individual tutoring, therapeutic services, or medication. This consistent and personalised assistance was critical in helping students navigate both academic expectations and emotional demands, making a significant difference to their classroom experiences and overall educational trajectories.

## LIMITATIONS

The scope of this research was centred on mainstream secondary schools in Australia. While the themes identified may resonate with findings from studies in primary school settings (Evans et al., 2014; Liang & Goa, 2016; McDougal et al., 2023; Rushton et al., 2019) and potentially apply to secondary schools in other international contexts, caution should be exercised when considering generalisability. Additionally, the relatively small participant group restricts the extent to which findings can be generalised. Nevertheless, the depth of the qualitative data offers a meaningful contribution to the underexplored area of ADHD in secondary education, particularly within the Australian context.

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