“I want to help kids like me be heard!” A survey about schooling from the perspective of adolescents with ADHD

Kathy Gibbs, Lukas Barker & Leah Le

To cite this article: Kathy Gibbs, Lukas Barker & Leah Le (27 Nov 2023): “I want to help kids like me be heard!” A survey about schooling from the perspective of adolescents with ADHD, Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties, DOI: 10.1080/19404158.2023.2286301

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/19404158.2023.2286301

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

Published online: 27 Nov 2023.

Submit your article to this journal

View related articles

View Crossmark data
“I want to help kids like me be heard!” A survey about schooling from the perspective of adolescents with ADHD

Kathy Gibbs, Lukas Barker and Leah Le

Education and Professional Studies, Griffith University, Mount Gravatt, Queensland, Australia; Independent School, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia; School of Education and Professional Studies, Griffith University, Mount Gravatt, Queensland, Australia

ABSTRACT
This study sought to increase awareness of ADHD though the context of a school assignment completed by a student with ADHD. The student (pseudonym Jim) sought opinions of 67 Australian school students with ADHD between 11-16 years to investigate their schooling experiences. Findings revealed that schooling mostly was a positive experience due to the student/teacher relationship, scaffolded learning opportunities and devices such as fidget toys to reduce off-task behaviours. However, school was challenging for some due to their teachers and peers’ limited understanding of ADHD. These findings provide starting points to ensure educators receive on-going professional learning about ADHD and offer evidenced-based academic supports and interventions to enhance the academic learning for these students. Finally, it is important to consider the personal views of this student group to ensure schooling is a positive experience and teachers gain further knowledge and understanding about ADHD through adolescents’ own life and school experiences.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 23 September 2022
Accepted 16 November 2023

KEYWORDS
Student voice; teacher knowledge; accommodations; attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD); schooling

Introduction

Five years ago, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2016) reported that approximately 7% of Australian students have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). There has been a steady increase in diagnosis since then, with more recent indications suggesting that ADHD is the most common childhood disorder affecting 8.2% of all children and 11% of boys (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2020). Globally, the prevalence of this neurodevelopmental condition among developed nations is similar to that of Australian children and adolescents (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). This continuing rise in diagnosis raises serious questions about the schooling experiences of adolescents with ADHD who continue to lag in academic success (Houghton, 2006; Moore, Russell, Arnell, & Ford, 2017) and have few if any friendships throughout the schooling years (Gibbs, Mercer, & Carrington, 2020). Furthermore, limited research has been conducted on adolescents with ADHD (Krueger
& Kendall, 2001) and from their perspective (Honkasila, Vehmas, & Vehkakoski, 2016). As such, there is a need for further insight into school and educational experiences of adolescents with ADHD and their own experiences and perceptions of the disorder. Therefore, the aim of this study is to explore issues such as what it is like to be a student with ADHD and the kinds of interventions that will enhance their academic learning.

**Background**

The context of the study revolves around Jim (pseudonym), an 11-year-old student, who attends a co-educational, independent, Prep-Year 12 school in Melbourne, Australia. The school is situated in a semi-rural area approximately 30 km south-east of the central business district. To ensure every student’s individual needs are catered for, there is a strong emphasis at the school on the development of creativity and thinking skills through the use of structured inquiry and differentiated learning.

As part of the learning process in Year 6, Jim was required to complete an assessment task of choice with a focus on making a difference in the lives of others. He wanted to know more about ADHD as he had recently been diagnosed. He designed a survey in concert with his mother and class teacher in order to explore what having ADHD could be like for other adolescents. Jim came to the attention of the lead author of the current study via his guest speaking appearance at a recent national summit celebrating ADHD Awareness Month. He spoke about the findings of his survey to over 700 attendees. Following the presentation, he agreed to co-author a paper with the lead author who was also a speaker at the summit. An email between his mother and the lead author leads to an exchange of the survey instrument and the collected data.

**ADHD and schooling**

The symptomology of ADHD, according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5), is characterised by inappropriate levels of inattention and/or hyperactivity-impulsivity over a minimum of 6 months that is inconsistent with typically developing children and that impacts negatively across school, home, and social settings (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Many students with ADHD experience ongoing issues with focus and concentration, thereby hampering their capacity for classroom learning. More specifically, students with ADHD experience difficulty in managing unwanted and off-task behaviours in the classroom environment (Daley & Birchwood, 2010; Gaastra, Groen, Tucha, & Tucha, 2020), leading to poor school-level outcomes (Russell, Moore, & Ford, 2016) and a higher chance of dropping out of school (Ek, Westerlund, Holmberg, & Fernell, 2011).

There has been recent research around schooling and ADHD from the teacher (Plantin Ewe & Aspelin, 2021; Tegtmejer, 2019) and the parent perspective (Climie & Henley, 2018; Ogg, Rogers, & Volpe, 2020), but there remains a less visible account of the schooling experience of adolescents from their viewpoint (Gibbs, Mercer, & Carrington, 2016; Kendall, 2016). Despite some recent research, this has focused on living with ADHD (Ecclestone, Williams, Knowle, & Soulsby, 2019; Ringer, 2020) and not schooling experiences. Therefore, there is an urgency to further explore what schooling is like for
adolescents with ADHD from their perspective. By hearing the student perspective, teachers could be more inclined to adopt a student-centred approach to formulating learning goals, which could lead to exploring evidence-based solutions to address such goals and gain further knowledge and understanding about ADHD through adolescents’ own life and school experiences.

**Adolescents with ADHD**

As stated previously, in the past two decades, there has been scant research conducted on adolescents with ADHD. However, the research has expanded more recently to include studies on self-image and identity (e.g. Jones & Hesse, 2018), treatments (e.g. Boyer, Geurts, Prins, & Van der Oord, 2015), the negative impact of having ADHD (e.g. Berchiatti, Ferrer, Badenes-Ribera, & Longobardi, 2022), and symptomology (e.g. Ringer & Cerniglia, 2019). From the schooling experience perspective though, the research remains meagre. What has been completed suggests that adolescents recommend that their teachers use low-intensity interventions such as preferential seating and positive reinforcement (Martinussen, Tannock, & Chaban, 2011), a classroom which has few distractions, and teachers who scaffold learning tasks (Weiner & Daniels, 2016). Furthermore, an Australian study by Gibbs, Mercer, & Carrington (2016) revealed that as adolescents progress through their secondary years of education, school is a more positive experience for them. They are able to make few but meaningful peer friendships, appreciate teaching strategies that support their learning, and they value teachers who provide an engaging classroom environment (e.g. use humour, know the subject content well, are firm, and set boundaries for appropriate behaviour). Therefore, it is important to broaden current research to gain further insight into school and educational experiences of adolescents with ADHD and their beliefs about those experiences by the students themselves.

**Student voice**

Student voice as an educational research medium has been evidenced since the early to mid-1990s “in reaction against the traditional exclusion of young people from dialogue and decision-making about issues of schooling” (Cook-Sather, 2007, p. 391). Educators have made significant progress since that time to include student opinions and encourage their participation in decisions about their learning, teaching approaches, and schooling. Collaborating with young people and valuing their ideas through consultation with school administrators and classroom teachers is one way to improve educational outcomes and foster positive and rewarding schooling experiences (Manefield, Collins, Moore, Mahar, & Warne, 2007). For students with ADHD, student voice is particularly important as it provides a subtlety about ADHD that enables educators to have a greater understanding and appreciation of these young people and their schooling (Johansson, 2021).

**Context and current study**

The current study is an approach at bringing forth a qualitative initial exploration in hearing directly from adolescents with ADHD. Due to this early stage, it is a novel attempt
at describing these perceptions in a primarily descriptive manner. Listening to the student perspective may lead to new insights into what it is like to have ADHD, and how to best manage ADHD in a school setting so that school is a positive experience, and academic success a reality.

The following research questions framed the study:

- What do adolescents with ADHD have to say about their schooling?
- What do students with ADHD want others to know about themselves and their diagnosis?

**Method**

**Participants**

Ethical approval for the study was obtained through the university’s Human Research Ethics Committee and given retrospectively. Using a mixed-method approach, the present study explored the kinds of educational support that adolescents with ADHD perceived were helpful to their schooling and provided them with an opportunity to report on what it is like to have ADHD. Data were gathered from a small online survey with questions designed by Jim in concert with his mother (a teacher) and his Year 6 teacher. The survey was uploaded by his mother to two parent group Facebook sites for 1 week. These sites offer support to parents who have a child with ADHD. Sixty-seven respondents completed the survey. As seen in Table 1, participants ranged in age from 11 years to over 16 years, with the highest representation of students coming from the 11–13-year-old group (n = 50) and with the 16 years and over group reporting the least representation (n = 6). The gender of the participants was unknown as this was not a question asked in the survey. This is reported in the Limitations section of the paper.

**Data gathering**

In addition to collecting basic demographic information, the survey gathered data using Likert scale and open-ended questions. The first section of the survey examined student perceptions about the ways in which schools and teachers are supportive of students with ADHD. The second section of the survey was aligned with students’ observation of their teachers’ actions and behaviours and their identity (e.g. the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Values</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Types of school</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>64.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>35.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>11–13</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>74.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14–16</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>16.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16+</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
positives and negatives of having ADHD). A copy of the survey is provided in the Appendix.

Data analysis
Survey content comprised two demographic items targeting school choice (private or public) and age, one school-related question (formatted on 5-point Likert-type scale using categories from really bad to excellent) and one personal-related question (formatted on 5-point Likert-type scale using categories from burden to superpower). The three open-ended items invited the participants to respond to ways schools and teachers accommodate for students with ADHD, how teachers and schools could be more helpful in managing issues associated with having ADHD, and a final item to explore what adolescents with ADHD would want others to know about their diagnosis. Information about the study and the survey, together with consent material, was then inserted as an introduction.

Data from the demographic and Likert scale questions were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences software, and frequencies and percentage distributions were calculated. The open-ended questions were analysed from participant written responses following the phases of thematic analysis recommended by Braun and Clarke (2012). First, the lead author read and reread the transcripts to be familiar with the data. Notes were taken and portions of data were underlined or highlighted with a marker. Initial codes were then generated to provide a label for data that were relevant to the research questions. The codes were then grouped into categories and themes emerged and were identified. Potential themes were reviewed in relation to the coded data, checked, then defined and named. The lead author analysed the responses for comments that aligned with the emergent themes. Chosen quotations were presented but identifying students using pseudonyms is not included.

Results and discussion
Before focusing on the qualitative data, the Likert scale results will be presented and discussed using descriptive statistics of students’ perceptions and correlations about the ways in which schools and teachers are supportive of young people with ADHD. Following this, the three key themes and associated sub-themes will be identified and examined. As seen in Table 1, of the students who completed the survey, most (approximately 65%) attend a state or public school, while 35% attend a private school.

First, it is acknowledged that the results do not provide a generalisation that most students with ADHD attend a public or state school. However, of interest is research by Kern, Amod, and Vorster (2015), who found that there is no significant difference between students with ADHD attending either a state or private school in terms of the types of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Comparison between public and private schooling.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How well does your school accommodate for your ADHD?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
support provided to them. The results in this study agree with Kern, Amod, and Vorster (2015), in that students indicated they were supported at school regardless of whether they attended a public or private school (see Table 2).

Inspection of the survey data about how well schools accommodate for students with ADHD as seen in Table 3 revealed that 7.5% of respondents indicated really bad while 9.0% stated excellent. Overall, results were slightly more positive about accommodations, but, in general, it seems that close to one-third of students appear ambivalent one way or the other.

In response to whether ADHD was a superpower or a burden, results were mixed as indicated in Table 3. The same percentage of students rated ADHD as a burden or superpower (11.9%), but many erred on the side of a burden (32.8%) more so than a superpower (14.9%). About 28.4% of students indicated that it was neither a burden nor a superpower. Taken together, the results indicate that having ADHD is somewhat of a burden. With further follow-up questions related to this topic, more information on the personal experiences about having ADHD could have been provided. Overall, the results are not clear about how or why ADHD is a burden or a superpower. The types of accommodations offered to students with ADHD are examined in further detail in the analysis of the open-ended questions.

Three key themes were identified during the analysis of the three open-ended survey questions: (1) support at school and in the classroom, (2) teacher knowledge and understanding of ADHD, and (3) sharing the ADHD identity. Within the third theme, two sub-themes emerged, namely (a) positives of having ADHD and (b) negatives of having ADHD. The first theme captured the ways in which schools and teachers accommodated students and adjusted teaching and learning to improve their academic, social/emotional, and well-being outcomes. The second theme identified the importance of teacher knowledge and the need for a better understanding about ADHD. The third theme identified the positive and negative aspects of ADHD from the personal perspectives of the participants.

### Support at school and in the classroom

Some of the adolescents indicated several positive aspects of their schooling from the school and classroom perspective. For many students with ADHD, the high degree of self-control required at school presents a challenge for those who experience difficulty managing unwanted behaviours such as an inability to remain seated, to focus, and to concentrate for long periods of time (DuPaul, Gormley, & Laracy, 2014; Fabiano, 2014). The participants identified a number of ways in which the school and teachers accommodated their inattention, hyperactivity, and/or impulsivity. One of the most popular support by the 11–13-year-old participants was fidget spinners. Students indicated that teachers

### Table 3. Student perceptions about ways schools and teachers are supportive of students with ADHD and whether ADHD was a superpower.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>1 Really Bad</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5 Excellent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How well does your school accommodate for your ADHD?</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>25.4</td>
<td>26.9</td>
<td>31.3</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>67</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you feel like your ADHD is a burden or a superpower?</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>32.8</td>
<td>28.4</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>67</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
allowed them to use a “fidget toy”, “let me fidget”, or “play with a fidget spinner” during class time. These results indicate that these tools are a popular choice by teachers for students in the junior secondary years as an aide to help with on-task classroom behaviour. Despite the research suggesting that schools require a remodelling of teaching practices to ensure students with ADHD have equitable access to learning (Hamilton & Astramovich, 2016; Martinussen, Tannock, & Chaban, 2011), finding ways to improve focus and concentration is still poorly understood and therefore remains a hot research topic (e.g. Gaastra, Groen, Tucha, Tucha, & Christiansen, 2016; Johansson, 2021; Moore et al., 2016).

Many school-based interventions focus on adjustments and accommodations to educational practices, such as extra time to complete tasks and note-taking interventions (DuPaul, Gormley, & Laracy, 2014; Evans, Langberg, Egan, & Molitor, 2014); however, these are often time-consuming for teachers to implement or perceived as placing some students at an advantage over others (Aspiranti & Hulac, 2021). As such, interventions that are effective but also feasible are often preferred by educators (Domsch, Ruhmland, & Lissmann, 2022). This includes tools such as fidget toys. The benefits of these interventions for students with ADHD remain elusive at best, and, at this time, there is little evidence to support their use (Schecter, Shah, Fruitman, & Milanaik, 2017). Reports about their effectiveness are somewhat ambiguous and controversial, because they are marketed as devices to improve focus and concentration (Cohen, Bravi, & Minciacchi, 2018). Although the students in this study do not report how these devices are beneficial, they appear to be a popular choice from the junior secondary school student perspective.

Similarly, many participants identified “a movement break”, “a run outside”, or “a brain break” as ways to accommodate for ADHD type behaviours. There has been a plenitude of literature attesting to the cognitive benefits of physical exercise for school-aged students (Barbosa et al., 2020; Ludyga, Gerber, & Kamijo, 2021; Martin & Murtagh, 2017). However, according to Grassman, Alves, Santos-Galduroz, and Galduroz (2017), the research on the benefits of physical activity for an improvement in focus and concentration for students with ADHD is less robust. The authors completed a systematic review of the literature to analyse articles that evaluated the executive functions of children with ADHD after 30 minutes of robust exercise. Results indicated only three articles that supported improved executive functions of students with ADHD through physical exercise. Similarly, a study by Verret, Guay, Berthiaume, Gardiner, and Béliveau (2012) explored the effects of a moderate-to-high-intensity physical activity program on fitness, cognitive functions, and ADHD-related behaviour in children with ADHD. Results indicated that high-intensity exercise may be beneficial for students with ADHD; however, outcomes were exploratory due to methodological issues associated with the study. Although the participants in the present study appreciate the opportunity to have “activity breaks”, “brain breaks”, “movement breaks or time out”, there is limited evidence to support the link between exercise and improved focus, concentration, and behaviour for students with ADHD.

Also reported by some students are adjustments afforded to them during teaching and learning processes. These included adjustments to the environment (e.g. preferred seating, a quiet room), school administration (e.g. a flexible timetable, half-day attendance), and assessment tasks (e.g. extra time, modifications, extensions). Other important interventions were teacher aide support and targeted teaching practices (e.g. one-on-one learning, chunking tasks). As described by the students, the class teacher is a crucial
support for academic success at school. Many students spoke positively about their educator and described ways they supported them with their learning. A typical comment was: “lets me take more time with my work”. One student mentioned that the teacher “gives me private tutoring every morning before school . . . re-explains concepts explained in class and also works on fundamentals such as adding and subtraction”.

These important teaching factors not only nurture the student/teacher relationship but can also be effective in reducing unwanted behaviours and in promoting learning and the achievement of academic goals (Gibbs, 2018). While the research about the importance of the teacher/student relationship in promoting academic success and student emotional well-being is wide ranging and well founded (Ansari, Hofkens, & Pianta, 2020; Portilla, Ballard, Adler, Boyce, & Obradovic, 2014; Quin, 2017), few studies have specifically focused on teacher relationships and students with ADHD (Ewe, 2019).

Only a small number of students indicated that their teacher was not helpful or did nothing to support their learning. Examples included “I am waiting on the day for it to happen”, “they never recognise it”, “nothing, I just get sent home”, and “not point out every mistake that I make”. Although these comments are disheartening, it is pleasing that very few respondents reported negatively about their teacher. Worth highlighting is the importance of the student/teacher relationship and their emotional engagement in learning (Rushton, Giallo, & Efron, 2020). Despite issues with focus, attention, and hyperactivity placing demands on the relationship (Rogers, Belanger-Lejars, Toste, & Heath, 2015), it is crucial for teachers to be patient but firm and motivating, to know their content matter well, to speak clearly and in a way that is easily understood, and to take a personal interest in their students. Just as important are clear and consistent teacher and teaching factors for those who experience challenges in managing behaviour and concentration (Gibbs, Mercer, & Carrington, 2020; Bartlett, Rowe, & Shattell, 2010; Sherman, Rasmussen, & Baydala, 2008). Ensuring that the student/teacher relationship is positive and egalitarian reduces risk factors associated with disengagement from learning and possible school drop out for vulnerable students, including those with ADHD.

**Teacher knowledge and understanding of ADHD**

In contemporary multi-ability classrooms, teachers are expected to teach students of diversity. Considering the important role that teachers have in the education of young people, it is vital that they are knowledgeable about and understanding of students with ADHD, so that they are able to meet their academic, behavioural, social, and emotional needs at school. However, the literature continues to report that teachers have a limited knowledge and understanding of ADHD (Beckle, 2004; Flanigan & Climie, 2018; Liang & Gao, 2016). Similarly, the participants in this study also agree that teachers need further knowledge and understanding about ADHD, so that they are able to fully support them with their learning.

A few students indicated that teachers need to be better educated about ADHD, highlighted the importance for their peers to also have some knowledge. It is interesting to note that some students would like their class colleagues to know more about ADHD. Perhaps by doing so, the perceived stigma, bullying, and few friendships that many adolescents with ADHD experience (Gibbs, Mercer, & Carrington, 2020; Gardner & Gerdes, 2015) may be reduced.
Of most importance was the need for teachers to be more understanding of students with ADHD. Some respondents highlighted the need for teachers to be more understanding of them in general but also understand “how I feel and what I need at that time”, understand “how an ADHD brain works”, understand “what it is like”, understand “why I need to talk all the time”, and “help others to understand it more”. It appears that some of our students want their teachers to know and understand that their unwanted behaviours are not premeditated or planned but are part of the symptomology of this neurodevelopmental disorder. If teachers were more knowledgeable and understanding, then perhaps schooling could be a more positive experience for many students with ADHD.

Sharing the ADHD identity

Improving knowledge about the daily school experiences for students with ADHD, and teacher understanding of these experiences, is important, so that the educational journey for these young people can be further enhanced (Ringer, 2020). The students in this study identified a number of positive attributes associated with having ADHD as well as the challenging aspects. It is important to hear what the students have to say about having ADHD, so that educators can better understand the reality of living with this neurodevelopmental disorder. This section will begin with ADHD traits that are positively described by the participants.

Positives of having ADHD

Perceived academic competence and self-worth are important factors for children and young people with ADHD, as these factors can assist educators to be able to better support students to reach their full potential at school. Even though there appear to be recent studies in this area associated with adults with ADHD (e.g. Sedgwick, Merwood, & Asherson, 2019; Taylor, Zaghi, Kaufman, Reis, & Renzulli, 2018), the lead author was unable to identify studies which included secondary students. However, in this study, optimism about having ADHD was identified by many of the respondents. One student indicated that ADHD “is not a big deal”, while another said “my energy is an asset”. Interesting to note is one student who stated “I am just a normal kid that sometimes has trouble controlling my feelings … ADHD is part of who I am”. Although it is unknown how long the participants have had a diagnosis, it seems that as adolescents transition through secondary school, the schooling experience is more positive and rewarding. An investigation of the schooling experience of adolescent boys by Gibbs, Mercer, & Carrington (2016) supports this notion by identifying the importance of being able to manage behaviour in order to fit in with peers, to manage friendships, and to not feel different. The authors concluded that this became easier for the boys in adolescence than in their earlier school years. For the respondents in the present study, it is unclear whether they are able to better manage unwanted behaviours as they move through school or whether specific aspects of school are more positive (e.g. supportive teachers and adjustments).
Negatives of having ADHD

Despite some students in the study who spoke positively about having ADHD, the experience for others is less favourable. For them, schooling and having ADHD is a challenge and a struggle for a number of reasons. First, a number of students spoke about their inability to control or stop unwanted behaviours. This common representation of ADHD frequently leads to underachieving at school and to failing to meet year-level expectations, because many of these behaviours contravene classroom expectations (Daley & Birchwood, 2010; Tegtmejer, 2019).

Second, other participants stated that they were not errant or disobedient. An example by one student highlighted that “it’s not because I did it on purpose or that I’m the naughty kid”. Another student commented that “I can’t help some of the things that I do”. According to Jones and Hesse (2018), “nobody arrives at a diagnosis of ADHD without a personal history, a self-narrative and real-life experience” (p. 93). Their description of socially inappropriate behaviour identifies academic and social risk factors which can be stigmatising (Gwernan-Jones et al., 2016), can lower self-esteem (Castens & Overbey, 2009), and can hamper peer and teacher relationships. These personal accounts provide important insights to highlight the need for schools to fully understand the needs of these young people, so they can be better managed in school settings and afforded a positive schooling experience.

Third, many students identified that ADHD meant their brains functioned differently. Comments included, “my brain operates faster than people without ADHD”, “my brain works differently, not less”, and “my brain operates really fast and that can be overwhelming”. These statements reflect how ADHD can provide areas of specific difficulty (e.g. academic, social, and behavioural) in the classroom. The participants’ acknowledgment that their “brains are different” also highlights how ADHD is viewed from widely varying perspectives and how these young people adjust to the diagnosis in different ways.

Summary

Overall, these findings highlight what having ADHD is like for many young people at school. The respondents’ comments proffer the positives and the challenges associated with their schooling experience through the analysis of three analytical themes. The synthesis of the themes offers new insights into what school is like for adolescents with ADHD and the factors that may amplify or diminish the impact of ADHD on the learning and the social aspects of school. Gaining young people’s perspectives about their schooling strengthens their experiences and progresses the argument for increasing student opinion and decision-making about their education, so that schooling can be a more meaningful and positive experience.

Implications for practice

The results of this study have a number of practical implications. The findings have shown that teachers use a variety of less labour-intensive interventions to enhance on-task behaviour. These include devices such as fidget spinners, providing opportunities for short breaks or bursts of high-intensity exercise. However, there is little evidence to date
to suggest that these are effective methods for enhancing focus and concentration during classroom activities. Adjustments to the environment, school organisational structures, and specific teaching practices are evidence-based interventions. An established teaching practice such as differentiated instruction has also been recognised as one way to ensure the academic needs of students who are working below year-level expectations (Dixon, Yssel, McConnell, & Hardin, 2014) are met. This could include students with ADHD.

It is important that schools offer professional learning opportunities to all teachers on a regular basis through in-school mentoring and coaching, workshops, and teacher observations, so that teachers are upskilled in support mechanisms, teaching pedagogies, and adjustments, so that all students with ADHD are afforded the best opportunities to achieve academic success. Even though some teachers do not have a high level of knowledge and understanding about ADHD, a positive contribution to the students in this study was their teachers’ capability to cater to their needs in ways that ensure for these students that schooling is a forward-looking experience. Of value is knowing that their teachers care about them and understand their academic, social, and behavioural needs. As this study identified limited research that specifically focused on teacher relationships and students with ADHD, this is an area worthy of further investigation. In addition, there is the need for class peers to have a better understanding of what school is like for young people with ADHD. In this way, what it is like to have ADHD might be better understood by students who can otherwise make schooling a negative experience for students with ADHD.

Much of the research on education and students with ADHD focuses on diagnosis and schooling in relation to medication and treatment (Johansson, 2021). What is unique about this study is that the emphasis is on the student experience of schooling, represented by the students themselves. The ability to hear what these students have to say about how school and teachers are helpful, or how they could be more accommodating, provides a more nuanced understanding to better appreciate their experience of school.

**Limitations and future research**

As this was not experimental methodology and as there is no independent verification that respondents have ADHD, caution must be exercised in interpretation of findings. In interpreting the data, several areas warrant further investigation. First, the authors note that the research was conducted in a westernised country. It would be interesting for the survey to be conducted in other cultures to gain a greater diversity of participants, so that the interpretation by different social groups of students with ADHD can be further enhanced. Second, there was limited demographic information provided. By including the gender of participants, age of diagnosis, and diagnosis sub-type, the results of the analysis regarding ADHD identity and self-esteem could be further analysed and enhanced. In addition, the state of residence and geographical location (e.g. city, rural, remote) of the participants, and identification of all three school sectors (Independent, Catholic, state), would allow for a more in-depth data analysis. Third, there could have been more questions overall in the survey, including asking a binary-choice question. Questions requiring a response may have been better presented on a continuum rather than as “really bad” to “excellent” options.
Another issue open to future studies is to examine the effects over time of the specific interventions identified to support the academic, social, and behavioural needs of students with ADHD. Although this paper is representing the student voice, what students think is a good idea, or what they think helps them does not necessarily result in things like higher on-task behaviour, greater engagement or more learning. Even though the sample size did not limit the scope of the findings, including individual and focus group interviews as well as the survey data would make the research findings more robust.

Furthermore, the results do not indicate what teachers do and do not understand about ADHD, as stated in the analysis, but more correctly the results indicate that there might be limited understanding. Students cannot read the teachers’ thoughts and therefore cannot know how well they understand ADHD. All students can do is attest to their experiences. Moreover, there may be a myriad of other reasons for teacher inaction to follow evidence on best support for ADHD. This could include but is not limited to: limited professional learning opportunities, lack of resources, funding, support, excessive class sizes, classroom management difficulties, and school culture. What the results do indicate is that student voice should be foremost when schools and teachers set learning goals, adhering to a student-centred or client-centred approach, which is best practice in goal-setting.

Conclusion

Much of the research about students with ADHD and their experience of school comes from the perspective of parents and teachers, with very few papers drawing data from the students themselves. This unique paper has identified what it could be like to be a school student with ADHD. Though many students are positive about school and see ADHD as a superpower, others find their education and learning experiences more challenging. Translating these findings into practice can go some way towards ensuring that school is a positive experience, so that students with ADHD are able to achieve to their true academic capacity in classrooms that are welcoming and cognisant of their needs.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Kathy Gibbs  http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0826-767X

References


Appendix: ADHD Kids Survey

For my school project, I would like to get input from kids with ADHD so our voices can be heard

Do you go to a public or private school?
☐ Public
☐ Private

How old are you?
☐ 11–13
☐ 14–16
☐ 16+

How well does your school accommodate for your ADHD?
  1 2 3 4 5
Reallybad ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Excellent

Do you feel like your ADHD is a burden or a superpower?
  1 2 3 4 5
Reallybad ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Excellent

What is the best thing your school or teacher has done to accommodate for your ADHD?
Your response

In a perfect world, what would be the one thing your teacher or school could do to help with the issues your ADHD is causing you?
Your response

What is something you would want others to know about your ADHD?
Your response