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# **Australian teachers and school leaders' use of differentiated learning experiences as responsive teaching for students with ADHD**

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## **Abstract**

There is a paucity of research in Australia about educators' use of differentiated instruction (DI) to support the learning of students with ADHD. This study reports on a small-scale, qualitative research using interviews with teachers and school leaders to identify how they use DI as an effective teaching instruction for students with ADHD. Findings showed that teachers and school leaders have a good understanding of ADHD, teachers use DI as an effective teaching practice to enhance learning for this student group and ensure the classroom environment is safe and secure. However, they do not adjust assessments for students with ADHD. School leaders are not clear how teachers differentiate assessments or adapt the classroom environment. These results highlight the need for further research at the teacher and teacher educator level teachers to ensure teaching practices are effective in reducing unwanted behaviours that prevent students with ADHD achieving to their full academic potential.

## **Keywords**

Differentiated instruction, differentiated learning experiences, ADHD, educator knowledge,

## **Introduction**

Large-scale mandated reform in Australian schools is currently underway as a response to the need for schools to rethink their educational approaches to school

improvement, teaching, and learning so that vulnerable students are provided with high-quality, equitable learning opportunities (Simon et al., 2021). For decades, international declarations have called on the rights of all children to have access to a good education (United Nations, 1948, 1959). In the Australian context, policy and legislation has called for improved teacher practice in order to enhance student learning (e.g., the Alice Springs [Mparntwe] Education Declaration for Australia, 2019), and professional teacher standards (e.g., Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2014) so that students with diverse needs, such as those with ADHD, are able to maximise their learning potential.

According to Ludicke et al. (2019), current reforms to improve educational outcomes for students with poor academic results have been implemented with limited consistency and permanence. This includes students with ADHD, who often experience poor academic outcomes (Jones & Allison, 2010). Students who are unmotivated and disengaged from the learning process (Fried & Chapman, 2011), who have poor connection to, and limited participation in class activities and tasks (Skilling, 2014), or who experience unwanted and emotional behaviours in the classroom, are characteristic of the schooling experience for individuals with ADHD (Gibbs et al., 2016; Gibbs et al., 2020). As a result, this student group often underachieve and do not meet academic year level expectations. While there has been some research around schooling and ADHD from the teacher perspective (Plantin Ewe & Aspin, 2021; Tegtmejer, 2019), few studies to date have investigated teaching strategies effective for students with ADHD (Hamilton & Astramovich, 2016; Nowacek & Mamlin, 2007). Given the increasing number of students with ADHD in Australian mainstream classrooms, and with a commitment to improving schooling outcomes for this vulnerable cohort, the purpose of this study was to examine the following question: How do teachers and school leaders use differentiated instruction (DI) as responsive teaching for students with ADHD?

## ***Students with ADHD***

In an Australian context, ADHD is one of the most common childhood neurodevelopmental conditions, with approximately 8.2 % of all children and adolescents between 7 and 14 years of age diagnosed (Australian Institute of Health & Welfare, 2020). According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition* (DSM-5), the essential features of ADHD include an ongoing persistent pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity-impulsivity over a minimum of 6 months that is inconsistent with typically developing children, impacting negatively on social and academic/occupational pursuits (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). For children and adolescents with ADHD, experiencing difficulty with concentration, focus, and attention can impact their capacity to make and manage friends (Gibbs et al., 2020; Mulholland, 2017), and to achieve academically at school (Bussing & Mehta, 2013; Houghton, 2006; Moore et al., 2017).

Consequently, for many students with ADHD, the classroom can be a highly challenging environment and schooling can be a negative experience. Difficulty managing unwanted behaviours and disengagement in schooling raise serious questions about the way teachers and schools can more effectively support these students with their learning. The broad field of international education has much to say about the teaching/learning processes for students with ADHD (Kendall, 2016; Rush & Harrison, 2008; Smets et al., 2020) but despite this, many students who experience challenges with managing their behaviour continue to underachieve academically and fail to reach their true educational potential.

It is widely reported that students with ADHD are more likely to experience academic challenges that result in poorer grades in comparison to their same-aged peers (Houghton, 2006; Loe & Feldman, 2007; Martin, 2012; Moore et al., 2017), and school exclusion (Parker et al., 2015). However, researchers situated within this genre do not identify teaching

practices that could benefit these students. Hamilton and Astramovich (2016) and Martinussen et al. (2010), however, proffer that today's schools require a rethinking of teaching practices so that equitable learning opportunities are provided to students with ADHD.

There have been some enlightening studies recently that have focused on teacher strategies to reduce unwanted behaviours (Gibbs et al., 2016; Tegtmejer, 2019), interventions to address ADHD-related behaviours (DuPaul et al., 2001; Zelenka, 2017), and specific classroom management strategies (Gaastra et al., 2016; Hamilton & Astramovich, 2016). However, the author is unaware of research on DI as an effective teaching approach for students with ADHD. DI is currently a trending topic internationally, and one way that educators provide instruction to the diverse learning needs of students in mainstream classrooms (UNESCO, 2017, 2020). This paper will report on the views held by mainstream classroom teachers and school leaders at an independent secondary college where DI is used as a teaching practice to support the learning of all students, including those with ADHD.

### ***Differentiated Instruction as a Responsive Teaching Practice***

Differentiated Instruction (DI) is not a new concept; it can be traced back to mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century USA when much of the population lived in rural areas. In one-room schoolhouses, teachers differentiated by sorting students into different groups for instruction (Mayer, 2008). More recently, DI is seen under the semblance of “mixed-ability” teaching (Westwood, 2016) and of teachers being accountable for the way students learn (Turner et al., 2017). Tomlinson (2004) described student learning as a process of “ensuring that what a student learns, how he/she learns it, and how the student demonstrates what he/she has learned is a match for that student’s readiness level, interests and preferred mode of learning” (p. 188). As such,

teachers who use DI in their classrooms ensure that every child is learning to their true ability and no child is excluded from the educative process.

Of late, the research literature has referred to DI in different ways. Variations include *differentiated learning* (de Jager, 2013), *responsive instruction* (Chick & Hong, 2012), *curriculum differentiation* (Schofield, 2010); and *differentiation* (Brevik et al., 2018). For the purpose of this study, the term *differentiated instruction* will be used to describe this teaching practice, as the author recognises its wide use in reviews, research studies, and other published papers arising from readings on the topic.

For students, DI teaching strategies are learner centred, to cater to a wide range of abilities and needs (Gaitas & Alves-Martins, 2017). This is beneficial for students who experience difficulty with focus and attention because it places them central to the teaching process, so they are able to receive scaffolds and adjustments if required, thereby allowing learning that is self-paced. Many students with ADHD experience stigmatisation (Gwerman-Jones et al., 2016) and low self-esteem (Russell et al., 2016) around their learning capability, including teacher and peer rejection (Murray & Greenberg, 2006). However, DI is respectful of each student, viewing them as an individual by acknowledging difference and variance in abilities (Smale-Jacobse et al., 2019).

Teachers who use DI create a positive classroom environment where personal growth is fostered and student-to-teacher and student-to-student relationships are respectful. This important aspect of DI is particularly relevant to students with ADHD who are often marginalised by their peers (Gardner & Gerdes, 2013; Murray & Greenberg, 2006), chastised by their teachers for “not doing their work” (Graham, 2016, p. 123), or facing disciplinary action (Nurmi, 2012). As DI is student centred, it is a way of respecting each student. This important DI principle removes the focus around unwanted behaviours, limited focus, and

concentration which is typically seen in students with ADHD. Their individual needs are considered through responsive teaching.

Various models of DI have been published in the literature over the last three decades, with many of them shaped by the work of others (e.g., Oaksford & Jones, 2001; Smit & Humpert, 2012). For the purpose of this paper, a model by Tomlinson (2014), a recognised expert of DI, will be explained. Her model has progressed from an organisation representation for thinking about DI (Tomlinson, 1999), to a comprehensive, multi-strategy model (Tomlinson, 2014). Tomlinson has characterised DI by focusing on the reciprocity of content (what students are learning), process (how students learn), product (student demonstrations of their learning), and environment (classrooms that are safe and student friendly). According to Tomlinson (2014), as students learn differently, teachers must know their students in three ways: readiness level to learn content, content-related interests (topics that motivate students and promote autonomy and achievement), and variance in learning profile (preferred mode of learning). These key principles of DI are particularly effective for students with ADHD because many of these young people report difficulty engaging in classroom activities and tasks as they are unable to sustain the mental effort to do so (Rogers & Meek, 2015; Youssef et al., 2015). Actioning individualised learning ensures students with ADHD are engaged and motivated during the educative process (Tomlinson, 2005).

Another important element of DI is pre-planning by the teacher to establish clear learning goals that focus on essential knowledge. Further to this is pre-assessment and ongoing formative and summative assessment to inform teachers' instructional plans. Moreover, the flexible use of whole-class, individual, and small teaching-learning groupings, and quality teaching practices (e.g., varying instructional materials and time, adapting the pace of instruction as a way to address learner needs) are important characteristics of the DI

classroom. DI is therefore a comprehensive teaching practice used to maximise the learning potential of every student, including those with ADHD.

### *Context and Current Study*

Currently, DI is a relatively new teaching practice in Australian schools. Current national and state policy documents that support diversity and quality education for every student (including those with ADHD) specify and recommend differentiated learning experiences (e.g., the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on Students with Disability, 2020; Queensland's Whole School Approach to Differentiated Teaching and Learning, 2019). Both documents highlight the importance for teachers to adjust teaching and learning to meet the needs of all students (e.g., extra time to complete an examination, speech-to-text software, preferential seating). Combined, these documents and those already mentioned make it clear that addressing learner diversity, making educational adjustments if required, and teaching to difference is integral to teaching in Australian classrooms.

The current study is part of a larger program of qualitative inquiry (Gibbs & Beamish, 2021) that seeks to explore how Australian educators view DI in their schools. This is the second study to be conducted; it was exploratory in nature and small in scale and sought to investigate how teachers and school leaders view DI as a responsive teaching practice for students with ADHD in mainstream classrooms. The following research questions framed the study:

- How do teachers and school leaders in a Queensland independent secondary school use DI as responsive teaching for students with ADHD?
- What key themes are identified in the use of differentiated instruction for students with ADHD?

## **Method**

### ***Research Site***

The setting for the study was an Independent Prep-Year 12 school situated on the northern end of the Sunshine Coast, Queensland, serving approximately 1,300 students in a mid-to-high socioeconomic area. The school's vision and mission focus on providing a distinctive learning environment for students with exemplary standards of care, Christian values, and academic rigor through the encouragement of independent and positive learning. Students are educated in mixed-ability classes across the campus.

### ***Participants and Procedure***

Ethical approval for the study was obtained through the university's Human Research Ethics committee. Participants were three secondary teachers and two school leaders who consented to be interviewed following the completion of written consent. Table 1 shows that the three classroom teachers were young, having teaching experience of ten years or less. The three teachers taught across three distinct subject areas (Science, Technology, and Languages other than English). The two school leaders had taught in classrooms for over 30 years. The first school leader (Principal) did not have a current teaching load; however, the second school leader (Director of Student Learning) taught Year 5-7 Mathematics, Year 5-6 Engineering, and Prep-Year 2 Sport.

**Table 1***Key Characteristics of Responding Teachers and School Leaders (n = 5)*

Characteristic	Count	%
Gender		
Female	3	60
Male	2	40
Age group		
Under 30 years	0	0
30–39 years	3	60
40–49 years	1	20
50+ years	1	20
Years of teaching experience		
1–2 years	1	20
3–5 years	1	20
6–10 years	1	20
11–20 years	1	20
21+ years	1	20
Years teaching at school		
<4 years	2	40
4+ years	3	60

Interviews were the chosen method for collecting data allowing for an insightful perspective on each participant’s experiences, observations, or opinions. Prior to conducting the interviews, an initial email was sent to the school principal outlining the context of the research and including a request to seek volunteers. Once volunteers were sought and written consent forms completed, a mutually convenient time was established between the researcher (the interviewer) and the five participants to conduct the interviews using Zoom, a cloud-based video conferencing platform allowing audio recording, video, and web collaboration capabilities to be integrated, thereby providing flexibility of device and interview setting for each participant.

## ***Data Gathering***

Interviews occurred over a 3-week period at a time mutually agreed between the interviewer and the participants. Three days prior to each Zoom meeting, the teachers were sent an email to remind them of the interview times and that the interviews were voluntary; it included the list of open-ended interview questions (see Appendix). Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) recommended a list of key probing questions; these were also developed but were not emailed to the participants. Probing questions are used to assist the interviewer to gain more content related to the introductory questions if a participant requires further clarification of a question (see Appendix). The interview questions related to each teacher or school leaders' perception of DI and how they use this responsive teaching approach for students with ADHD. Some of the questions directed to school leaders were slightly different from those for the teachers (see Table 2). Duration of the interviews ranged from 28 minutes to one hour. Interviews were audio-recorded, and notes of potential interest were taken. Transcripts were then transcribed orthographically. A transcript of the interview was then emailed to each participant for verification and authenticity (Creswell, 2014).

**Table 2**

### *Interview Guide*

DI and ADHD questions for school leaders	DI and ADHD questions for teachers
How does the school administrative team accommodate students with ADHD? - Can you tell me what you understand about students with ADHD? - What interventions do teachers use to support students with ADHD? - How do you think teachers vary their assessments to cater for students with ADHD? - How do teachers adjust the classroom environment then for students with ADHD?	How do you differentiate for students with ADHD? - How do you adjust the classroom environment for students with ADHD? - How do you vary assessments to cater for students with ADHD? - How do you adjust the classroom environment for students with ADHD?

## ***Data Analysis***

Following the completion of all interviews, a “theoretical” thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012) was adopted because it is particularly appropriate when examining data captured from more than one participant, it illustrates data in detail, it is flexible, and it is systematic. A six-phase process was used beginning with the researcher reading the transcripts, highlighting words or phrases of interest, and then conferring with a research colleague to discuss and note things of relevance to the research questions. Codes were identified and generated and then analysis process began with immersion in the data by reading, reviewing, and writing. The researcher clustered the codes, generated them into unifying patterns and emerging themes resulted. Next, potential themes were checked against the coded data to ensure each theme worked and to certify that emergent themes were representative of the entire data set. Finally, in consultation with a research colleague, themes were identified, named, quotations selected, and pseudonyms presented using guidelines by Kvale and Brinkman (2009).

## **Results**

Three key themes were identified from the transcribed interview data: (a) *understandings of DI*, (b) *accommodations and academic support for students with ADHD*, and (c) *the classroom environment and students with ADHD*. The first theme captured the importance that staff placed on DI as an effective teaching approach for all students. The second theme reflected on how teachers adjust and accommodate assessments for students with ADHD (e.g., assignments and examinations). The final theme provided insight into how educators use DI at this secondary campus to ensure classrooms are safe and student friendly.

### ***Understandings of DI***

On initial examination of transcripts, it was clear that the teachers and school leaders had effective understandings of DI. Participants saw DI as integral to their daily teaching

practice and spoke about it using conventional terminology from the literature. As analysis of the interview data continued, it emerged that school leaders understood DI from a broader perspective than the teachers by recognising the need for DI to be happening in every classroom.

Teachers mostly viewed DI in terms of the needs of their students with ADHD. Sarah indicated that DI was about “delivering knowledge and assessing whether that has been understood or not in different ways for different student’s needs ... [because] every child should have access to the same opportunities”. John, on the other hand, stated that DI was about “trying to meet [student] needs”, while Kate described DI as a teaching approach that “catered to the needs of all students”. Their descriptions of DI align with key policy documents previously mentioned that describe the need for educators to cater for student diversity and to provide equal opportunity for every student in their classrooms, including those with ADHD.

Teachers’ apparent self-confidence in identifying key implementation elements of DI and using these for students with ADHD seemed to correlate with their teaching experience. Kate, who had been teaching for just over 9 years, reported that she was able to adjust her teaching to match the students with ADHD abilities and indicated that she used DI as a teaching practice “relatively well”. Sarah, a new graduate, was not confident to explain DI principles or how they related to responsive teaching for students with ADHD, as she stated, “I don’t know that much about the practice of differentiation yet”. On the other hand, John, also a relatively inexperienced teacher, spoke about the importance of ensuring students with ADHD were not grouped by fixed typologies but according to readiness level, interest, and their learning profile. It is unclear whether there is a relationship between length of teaching and confidence in teaching students with ADHD, but widely reported is that many teachers

do not have the confidence to teach student with ADHD as they have limited knowledge and understanding of it (Guerra & Brown, 2012).

From the school leader perspective, Sonya described DI as “providing the ability to enable learning and to extend learning in many ways”. Furthermore, she highlighted the need for teachers to individualise and personalise learning for all students, including those with ADHD:

Every student has a different zone of proximal development in different subject areas, at different points in their learning and so as teachers we need to try and understand where that zone is and actually then accommodate and meet them at their learning zone to actually help them achieve good growth and understanding in skills and concepts.

Sonya saw the relevance of DI through the lens of Vygotsky’s concept of the zone of proximal development where students with ADHD work at their appropriate level (Morgan, 2014). An effective DI classroom teacher, then, creates a positive classroom environment where personal growth is fostered and relationships—students-to-teacher and students-to-students—are respectful. By assuming responsibility for their learning, students with ADHD, like their peers, are able to engage in the learning process, thereby providing opportunities that will enable them to reach their true academic potential.

School principal Colin indicated that his view of DI was “pretty simple” and focused on the idea of DI as responsive teaching. He stated that “differentiated instruction should be normal practice. I've never really thought it should be anything other than good teaching.”

Overall, it seemed that the participants use effective teaching practices, classrooms are communities of learning, and the learning potential of every student is attained.

## *Accommodations and Academic Support for Students with ADHD*

In most Australian schools, students with ADHD are educated in mainstream classrooms; therefore, it is important that they receive interventions and accommodations that afford them opportunities to reach their full academic capability. DuPaul and Weyandt (2006) suggested that classroom management strategies fall under three broad categories: antecedent based (e.g., preferred seating, adjustments to assessments), consequence based (e.g., praise, reprimand), and self-regulation implemented by the student themselves (e.g., self-talk, self-motivation).

The interventions most commonly used by these teachers during class activities were the typical antecedent-based interventions. For John and Sarah, who were aware that students with ADHD frequently lose focus and concentration during the delivery of instruction, these included scaffolding activities and frequent check-ins with students to ensure they fully understood the teaching and learning requirements. John was conscious of the importance of supporting students with ADHD to ensure they are provided opportunities for full participation in learning activities. Similarly, Sarah used “prompting” as a means to check in with her Year 7 student with ADHD, stating that she “gets a bit worried if they seem as if they are presenting symptoms, but she [the student] is very mindful of perception and not getting work done and is bothered when she is off task.” Kate saw student organisation as key to successful learning for students with ADHD. She ensured they arrived at class with the necessary equipment by ensuring reminders are written in the school diary. She was also conscious that students with ADHD needed to move about in the classroom so prepared “hands on” learning activities when possible. The interventions; easy to implement and not work intensive, were used by the teachers as a way to support the learning needs for students with ADHD.

Our teachers indicated that they do not differentiate assessments (e.g., assignments and examinations) to accommodate for students with ADHD. Sarah, delivering an Engineering course in its second iteration to her Year 9 class, stated,

I'm hesitant only in the fact that that is what they are going to have in their senior years. I have kind of modelled it, watered it down, modelled it on what they are going to be exposed to in Year 11 and 12 so I am hesitant to vary it too much.

Likewise, John and Kate made no changes to assessment tasks other than chunking the task sheet and encouraging students to remain on task. Kate also highlighted that unless an assessment task was modified, students with ADHD “are still doing the same assessment, just scaffolded and supported a bit more.”

Collectively, school leaders Colin and Sonya did not really comment specifically about how the school administrative team accommodates assessments for students with ADHD; however, Colin indicated that he “supported the work of his learning support coordinator to do it.” It is noteworthy that this school leader articulated connections between the role of learning support teachers and accommodations for students. This aligns with the work of Bourke (2010), who identified that the role of the learning support teacher has moved from helping students to advising and facilitating teachers and other school personnel. Additionally, Bettini and colleagues (2016) showed that learning support teachers depend on continuing assistance from school leaders so that the right conditions are enabled for students with additional needs, including those with ADHD.

Referring to assessments, Colin doubted that teachers adjusted assessment tasks to cater for students with ADHD. He lamented, “if anything they might ... well, I just don't think they do. Sadly, I don't think they do.” In comparison, Sonya spoke about common adjustments that teachers use at the school, such as extra time, rest, and brain and movement

breaks. These approaches can reduce stress for students with ADHD and improve behaviour during the assessment period (DuPaul & Eckert, 1997; Gaastra et al., 2016). Importantly, she highlighted the stigma that some students identify with when offered adjustments.

It's quite a battle that sometimes when we do these little adjustments and things, it's like why are you doing that for me and why are you not doing that for somebody else? And they don't want to be, especially boys, boys are really unhappy with you when you ... and you're not even making it public.

Sonya's comments confirm the need for teachers to be mindful to avoid possible stigmatisation along with lower student self-perception (Gwernan-Jones et al., 2016) when negotiating ways to make assessments manageable and clear. By interacting sensitively and responsively with students with ADHD, teachers can ensure the right accommodations are afforded to them to facilitate academic success.

### ***The Classroom Environment and Students with ADHD***

The classroom is an integral part of providing a safe and non-threatening environment for students with ADHD, thereby fostering positive student-teacher relationships (Plantin Ewe, 2019). Actioning this contributes to removing barriers for this student group (Tomlinson, 2005). John provides random seating for students in his classroom. For students with ADHD, this reduces distraction as they are less likely to be seated next to someone who will distract them or whom they might distract. Likewise, Sarah confirmed that seating arrangements were an important factor in maintaining student engagement and learning for students with ADHD.

The students with ADHD gravitate to a particular seat because they want to. One of my Year 7s is actually happier now that he is gravitating to the seat that I actually put him in

and that's because I think he was getting more work done at that revised seat. He is sitting front and centre. Away from the door. He gets all his work done now.

Kate allows some students with ADHD to move around in the classroom too, as this helps to “harness their energy in a positive way.” She also uses preferential seating but indicated that “honestly, it depends on the child. I have one boy who is ADHD. He really self-manages quite well, and I let him sit wherever he wants.” She also has another student who “has to be close to me all the time so I can monitor him.” The unpredictability of student behaviour can make the classroom challenging for teachers; however, our teachers appeared to have established a flexible but firm educational environment, whereby its operation and tone is highly beneficial to students with ADHD (Gibbs et al., 2016; Gibbs et al., 2020).

The school leaders had little to say about how teachers viewed the classroom environment as responsive teaching. Sonya indicated that “the environment itself is not adjusted but where the student is positioned within the environment. We have wobble chairs and couches, highchairs, low chairs, which those environments accommodate.” Colin’s perception of the classroom environment focused more on the teacher role in the classroom. “I think they probably adjust, they try and create the classroom environment to suit. But I don't think they don't think they change their teaching style. I could be wrong.” Collectively, the school leaders’ responses highlight the importance for them to be “knowledgeable leaders” (e.g., understanding the various complexities involved in DI implementation) and for them to be fully committed to DI (Hertberg-Davis & Brighton, 2006). This, in turn, will help realise that the academic potential for students with ADHD is cultivated if the classroom environment is one which promotes learning and where they know they feel safe and secure, and where they belong.

## **Discussion**

The primary purpose of the current study was to explore the use of DI as an effective teaching practice to meet the academic needs of students with ADHD. To the author's knowledge, this is the first qualitative study of Australian teachers and school leaders' experiences of using DI as a teaching practice for students with ADHD. Overall, these data show that teachers and school leaders at this secondary college have an adequate understanding and knowledge of how DI can enhance schooling for students with ADHD. Teachers revealed that they utilise some DI principles by varying content, process, and the environment for students who experience difficulty with focus and concentration. School leaders, on the other hand, promote DI by recommending that teachers individualise learning opportunities for this vulnerable group of students.

Teachers' capacity to implement the important elements of DI for students with ADHD seemed to correlate with their teaching experience. This aligns with Anderson and colleagues (2012) whose work in this area suggested that knowledge of ADHD increases in parallel with classroom experience. Likewise, a study by Amha and Azale (2022) revealed that teaching experience correlates positively with teaching students with ADHD. The author stated that years of teaching experiences enabled educators to develop strategies that they regularly use in their classrooms to support students with ADHD.

Teachers are responsible for creating learning environments that are responsive to the needs of all the students; the educators in this study adjusted and accommodated for those with ADHD by ensuring the classroom environment was safe and secure. Many young people with ADHD experience difficulty managing and maintaining peer relationships (Gibbs et al., 2020), student-teacher relationships (Daley & Birchwood, 2010), and social and academic competencies (Ros & Graziano, 2018). Therefore, it is crucial for the classroom to be an

environment wherein the social, emotional, and academic capabilities of students with ADHD can be nurtured and enhanced. A safe and non-threatening classroom environment is an important guiding principle of DI (Tomlinson, 2014). The participants in this study were cognisant of the importance of a welcoming and positive learning environment which promoted the personal and academic growth of students with ADHD. They were able to flexibly respond to this vulnerable student group to ensure they were able to meet the needs of the curriculum and be accepted by their peers.

However, the teachers in this study did not adjust, accommodate for, or differentiate assessments for students with ADHD. Likewise, the school leaders were not clear about how teachers differentiated assessments but were of the opinion that this was the responsibility of support teachers and other personnel. Key national policy documents such as the Disability Discrimination Act (Australian Government, 1992) and the Disability Standards for Education (Australian Government, 2005) highlight the need for students with disability (including those with ADHD) to receive reasonable adjustments (e.g., extra time to complete an assessment, preferential seating, note-taking interventions) to accommodate and support their learning needs. Furthermore, the NCCD (2020, para. 8) define a reasonable adjustment as “actions taken to enable students with disability to participate in education on the same basis as other students [without disability] while balancing the interests of all parties”. According to Cumming et al. (2013), in Australian schools “adjustments are required in all aspects of educational provision and engagement to enable full participation by students with disability” (p. 296).

The findings from this study agree with a recent scoping review by Duncan et al. (2020) which focused on the extent to which the policy documents eliminate discrimination for students with disability in school settings. In regard to assessments, Duncan et al. found the “matter of reasonable adjustments in general, and reasonable adjustments in assessment in

particular, is especially problematic, and there is a lack of systematic guidelines to assist schools to determine reasonable adjustments” (p. 67). Furthermore, Cumming et al. (2013) suggested that providing high-quality assessment adjustments is often difficult for teachers to implement. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that the educators at this school experienced difficulty in navigating and understanding the complexity of providing reasonable adjustments to assessment tasks.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

In interpreting the current findings, it is important to note the limitations. First, as the research was exploratory in nature, it is difficult to draw a strong link between DI and improved academic success for students with ADHD. To this author’s knowledge, there has been no study that has researched DI as an effective teaching practice for students with ADHD. As such, this study should not be undervalued. Second, the sample of teachers and school leaders may not be representative of the population of secondary school teachers across the three Australian school sectors and it is unclear if teachers in their pre-service training completed. Therefore, it would be interesting to compare teacher use of DI with students with ADHD across state, independent, and Catholic schools. Third, only a small proportion of the approached teachers volunteered to participate in the study and the classroom teachers had been teaching for less than 10 years. It would be interesting to conduct further research with a larger cohort of teachers (newly graduated and in-service) to identify if length of teaching experience impacts knowledge and understanding of ADHD as precursor to using DI teaching strategies to ensure engagement and success in the learning process. As there have been relevant few studies to date, the scope of work in this area needs to be urgently broadened. Fourth, it is unclear if the teachers received pre-service training about students with additional needs. Due to the small-scale nature of this study, it is impossible to draw conclusions about the effectiveness of initial teacher education programs

in the past or currently in preparing pre-service teachers to teach students with ADHD. Therefore, further research into teaching students with additional needs at the pre-service teacher level is vital.

Overall, the findings from this study point to the need for further research about (a) DI as an effective teaching practice for students across all diagnostic sub-types of ADHD, (b) how teachers can be better supported to teach students with ADHD in multi-ability mainstream classrooms, (c) how teachers can effectively differentiate assessment tasks for students with ADHD to improve their academic proficiency, and (d) the student perspective from the viewpoint of the kinds of teaching practices best suited to their learning needs.

## **Conclusion**

This small-scale, exploratory study provided a glimpse in the field of teacher practices that are beneficial to the learning and social/emotional development of students with ADHD. This current study identifies DI as an effective teaching pedagogy for students with ADHD. Adequate knowledge and understanding about ADHD and ways to effectively teach and accommodate for these students to ensure their schooling needs are met, is vital. Having initiated research into this important area, will hopefully enhance the need to further extend and explore how DI can be used as an effective teaching practice to support the needs of students with ADHD who often find schooling challenging.

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## Appendix

### Interview Guide for Teachers: Introductory and Key Probing Questions

1. What are your views on differentiated instruction?  
Probing Questions  
*How would you define differentiated instruction?*  
*How would you describe the principles of differentiated instruction to another teacher?*
2. Describe some key strategies you use when differentiating during planning.  
Probing Questions  
*Describe how you track and monitor student performance.*  
*How do you pre-plan lessons prior to teaching a unit of work to capture the academic needs of all students?*  
*Describe how you cater for the varying interests that students in your class have*
3. Describe some key strategies you use when differentiating for instruction  
Probing Questions  
*Describe how you structure teaching/learning activities to ensure all students in your classes can better understand the content taught.*  
*Describe how you support students who require extra assistance.*  
*Describe the types of resources you use to deliver the content material taught*
4. Describe some key strategies you use when differentiating assessment tasks.  
Probing Questions  
*How do you accommodate assessment tasks for those students who are not meeting year level expectations?*  
*How do you accommodate assessment tasks for those students who are part of the NCCD?*
5. How do you differentiate for students with AD/HD?  
Probing Questions  
*What interventions do you use in the classroom to support students with AD/HD?*  
*How do you vary assessments to cater for students with AD/HD?*  
*How do you adjust the classroom environment for students with AD/HD?*  
*In what ways do you vary student assessment to cater for individual student needs?*

### Interview Guide for School Leaders: Introductory and Key Probing Questions

1. What are your views on differentiated instruction?  
Probing Questions  
*How would you define differentiated instruction?*  
*How would you describe the principles of differentiated instruction to another teacher?*  
*How would you describe the principles of differentiated instruction to a member of the senior management team?*
2. Describe some key strategies you would expect teachers to use when differentiating during planning.

Probing Questions

*Describe how teachers track and monitor student performance.*

*Describe the schools process of planning allocation for teachers*

3. Describe some key strategies you would expect teachers to use when differentiating for instruction?

Probing Question

*How does the school administration support teachers to use DI in their classrooms?*

4. How does the school administration encourage professional learning on DI for mainstream teachers?

Probing Questions

*How interested are teachers in attending PD about students with diverse learning needs?*

*Tell me how often training courses are available for teachers in regard to diverse student needs?*

5. Describe the key administrative role in regard to informing teachers about making accommodations to assessment tasks.

Probing Questions

*Describe the schools tracking and collection of data on students with additional needs.*

*How do you accommodate assessment tasks for those students who are part of the NCCD?*

*How do you approach staff who are not open to adjusting assessments for students who are working above or below year level expectations?*

6. How does the school administrative team accommodate students with AD/HD?

Probing Questions

*Tell me what you understand about students with AD/HD?*

*What interventions do teachers use in the classroom to support students with AD/HD?*

*How do teachers vary assessments to cater for students with AD/HD?*

*How do teachers adjust the classroom environment for students with AD/HD?*

*In what ways do teachers vary student assessment to cater for individual student needs?*