

Solving the ADHD puzzle: Unveiling little-known strategies for classroom success

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In today's media landscape, ADHD related stories are seemingly everywhere. Reports related to ADHD often spotlight schools struggling to cope with students out of control and the masses of teachers leaving the profession because they are struggling to manage behaviour in the classroom. The media often attributes this issue to the fact that many children wait months for a diagnosis due to the daunting wait times seen by paediatricians. However, it could be argued that these topics are casting a shadow over a more immediate and actionable concern: the lack of attention and awareness given to the essential classroom strategies that can support children with ADHD. As ADHD prevalence rises, many parents and teachers seem to lean heavily on the reliance of medication as a quick fix to make the symptoms of ADHD and many of the stresses and problems associated with it, simply go away. However, it's not quite that simple, while medication can help, even children who are medicated continue to experience challenges within a classroom setting. As such, there is more to this puzzle, a puzzle that has a large, ignored piece just waiting to be placed in the right position. They are overlooking the critical piece

labelled, 'tailored teaching methods'. If acknowledged and implemented correctly this piece can have a profound impact on children with ADHD in achieving success and disruptive behaviours being reduced.

This theme was highlighted in a recent encounter I had with a graduate teacher who was celebrated for her organisation, fancy classroom with Pinterest-inspired laminations, and impeccable punctuality. Despite her many strengths, she was struggling greatly with her students diagnosed with ADHD; unaware of what ADHD truly entailed, let alone the strategies available to her teaching practice that can support these students. Furthermore, it became apparent that her colleagues were additionally unable to offer her much support as they too seemed to be as she termed it "winging it". Her experience underscores a significant reality experienced by many teachers across Australia, the lack of adequate training for teachers in supporting students with ADHD (Strelow, et al., 2021). There is a lack of training available for both pre-graduate students and those already practising. Due to this lack of training, many teachers lack insight into how best to assist these students to thrive.

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a neurodevelopmental condition that affects a significant proportion of the student population in Australia. According to various studies, the prevalence of ADHD among children in Australia is around 7.7% to 9.3%. (Salari, 2023) Well documented symptoms of ADHD include attention

regulation, hyperactivity, and impulsivity. These symptoms can make traditional classroom settings particularly challenging for



overwhelmed teachers already struggling to cope with a multitude of challenging classroom related factors including allergy management, rising compliance protocols and mental health issues.

This rescue kit disguised as a feature article explores the key strategies that teachers can use to support students with ADHD. This article aims to equip teachers with skills to ensure these students receive the support they need right now and allow teachers to feel that they are meeting an important need. In this article, I will focus particularly on how cognitive load affects students with ADHD and will suggest several key strategies that could be implemented to mitigate its impact and greatly enhance both the teaching experience and academic success of students with ADHD. In their book, Sweller, Ayres, and Kalyuga (2011) provide an in-depth analysis of cognitive load theory. They discuss a variety of developmental factors that can exacerbate cognitive load which in simple terms is the amount of mental effort being used in one's working memory at any one moment in time.

So what is cognitive load and what impact does it have on learning?

Cognitive load is divided into three types: intrinsic, extraneous, and germane load. Intrinsic load is related to the difficulty of the material itself. Extraneous load pertains to how the material is presented. Finally, germane load involves the effort required to process and understand the material (Sweller, Ayres, & Kalyuga, 2011).

For students with ADHD, managing cognitive load can be particularly challenging as their working memory often functions less efficiently than that of their classmates, leading to quicker mental overload. These challenges are compounded by the well-entrenched symptoms of ADHD, such as distractibility and impulsivity, which further strain their cognitive resources (Martinussen et al., 2005).

The impact of high cognitive load

As discussed in *Effective Classroom Interventions for ADHD Students*, (Nelson, 2023) high cognitive load can significantly impact students with ADHD in several ways. These include reduced academic performance, increased frustration and anxiety, behavioural issues, fatigue and burnout.

Reduced academic performance

Students with ADHD may struggle to keep up with the curriculum when the cognitive load is high. They might find it difficult to understand complex concepts or complete multi-step tasks, leading to lower academic achievement.

Increased frustration and anxiety

The constant struggle to manage high cognitive demands can cause frustration and anxiety. This emotional stress can further impair their ability to concentrate and learn effectively.

Behavioural issues

Overwhelmed by high cognitive load, students with ADHD often exhibit a variety of behavioural problems. They might act out, become disruptive, or withdraw from classroom activities and even display school refusal behaviours.

Fatigue and burnout

Continual cognitive strain can lead to mental fatigue and burnout. Students may become disengaged or exhibit signs of exhaustion, making it even harder for them to participate and benefit from classroom activities.

So what can teachers do about the challenges of cognitive load?

Teachers can positively influence the academic performance of children with ADHD, and peer relationships of students with ADHD, by employing strategies that build strong teacher-student relationships and effective classroom management practices. These methods help improve student engagement and reduce disruptive behaviours (Hamilton & Astramovich, 2016).

Let's explore some key strategies that I have found extremely beneficial in my role as a teacher and ADHD Coach.

1. Keep instructions simple! Very simple!

By consistently breaking down instructions into small, manageable chunks; presented in a clear, consistent and predictable way, helps students with ADHD process information more effectively. Teachers should check for understanding throughout the lesson through brief supportive check-ins. Written instructions should also be given to students to free them from the task of needing to rely solely on their working memory and allows them to focus on the task at hand.

2. Use the right type of visual aids

Clear uncluttered visual aids such as charts, mind maps and images that only contain relevant information and minimalist colours can help students with ADHD better understand and retain information. These tools can provide a visual representation of complex concepts, making them easier to grasp and more fun to create.

3. Create a predictable and structured classroom environment every day

A well-organised, predictable and routine-focused classroom environment can reduce student uncertainty which can lead to rumination, anxiety and negative behaviour. Students find

safety in knowing what is happening in the classroom that day. Most children with ADHD hate surprises. Consistent routines and clear expectations can provide the structure and sense of safety they need to be able to relax and be able to really engage in quality learning.

4. Implement flexible seating options

Allowing students with ADHD to choose seating arrangements that minimise distractions can enhance their ability to concentrate. Options such as seating away from windows or doors, sitting at the front of the classroom and using noise-cancelling headphones can all be beneficial. In addition, many children with ADHD actually focus better when they are able to move and have proprioceptive feedback. Proprioceptive feedback is where the student obtains some feedback about where their body is in space. Students with ADHD often seek to obtain this feedback by rocking on a chair, touching things or rocking their torso around. Students with ADHD therefore often find it challenging to sit on the mat where they are not getting that proprioceptive feedback. Activities in which they are expected to "stay still and listen and don't touch anything" can in fact make it even harder to learn. Choosing seating that allows movement and/or proprioceptive feedback that is not as disruptive for other students can be very helpful, such as stand up desks, bumpy cushions, wobble stools, floor level "hug chairs" and allowing stretch kick bands around the legs of a chair.

5. Enforce regular movement breaks

Short, frequent movement and proprioceptive breaks can help students with ADHD to manage their cognitive load more effectively. These breaks allow them to recharge and return to tasks with renewed focus and can also provide incentive and reward for good work. Integrating playful breaks into school curricula can enhance learning gains in most students (Parker, Thomson & Berry, 2022).

6. Use of the Pomodoro Technique in lesson design

The Pomodoro technique is a time management method designed by Francesco Cirillo in 1992 originally using a tomato timer. The Pomodoro Technique initially involves allocating 5 minutes to a task followed by a 5-minute break, aiming

to enhance productivity and maintain focus. These short breaks, beneficial for memory and emotional regulation, aid students in better-recalling information and staying on task (Que et al., 2023). By sectioning short periods of work in between regular breaks, students can achieve success supported by clear and manageable work sprints.

7. Mix up your teaching, don't be boring!

Having an open mind and tailoring instruction to meet the diverse needs of students can help those with ADHD stay engaged and succeed. This might include offering alternative assignments, using technology to support learning, or providing fun out of the box lesson ideas. By taking the time to know your students and what makes them tick, while blending your findings into the curriculum, can be extremely effective in supporting children to engage in learning.

8. Teach and model organisational habits

Helping students develop organisational habits can reduce cognitive load. Teachers can guide students in using age-appropriate easy to use planners, help set goals, and model how to create to-do lists. By verbalising how these skills help you in your role as a teacher, students can see the value in them and are more likely to implement them.

9. Immediate rewards

Many children with ADHD are unable to work towards long term goals or be able to work on goals unless they can see an immediate benefit or physical reward. When planning activities in the classroom, try to build in immediate rewards for achieving goals. Many children with ADHD also benefit significantly from praise. Remember to praise behaviours that you want to reinforce.

10. Communication and collaboration with parents

The most effective support for students with ADHD involves strong collaboration between teachers and parents. Regular communication between these stakeholders can ensure that strategies are consistently applied and adapted at school and at home to meet the student's evolving needs. It will also foster a sense of collective efficacy.

Engaging parents in their child's education can provide valuable insights

and support. Teachers can share strategies and progress updates, while parents can reinforce these strategies at home.

11. Working with specialist ADHD coaches, psychologists, occupational therapists and special education professionals

ADHD coaches who are trained in education, school psychologists, occupational therapists and special education professionals can all offer additional resources and support for students with ADHD. Collaborating with these specialists can help teachers implement effective interventions.

12. Seek out professional development opportunities and coaching

The more you learn about ADHD the more you will be able to support students in your classroom. Ongoing professional development and coaching can equip teachers with the knowledge and skills needed to support students with ADHD. Training about ADHD and related strategies can enhance their ability to create an inclusive and supportive classroom environment. Some ADHD coaches are also teachers and can provide training to individual teachers to aid them in the management of children with ADHD.

Conclusion

In conclusion, making small changes to your classroom and your teaching, can benefit many children with ADHD. By reducing cognitive load as much as possible a student's memory reserves can be saved for the times when they need it most. These changes can result in improving children with ADHD's self-esteem, academic performance and behaviour. By understanding the challenges these students face, and implementing strategies to reduce cognitive load, teachers can create a more supportive and effective learning environment for everyone.

About the author

Andy Hayes is a qualified teacher, an Accredited ADHD Coach, and a former Director of Teaching and Learning at a private school in Perth. His educational journey also includes a six year stint teaching in London, UK. Now, as an ADHD

coach and consultant he combines his unique lived experience with ADHD with his extensive educational background to support families and schools to support children with ADHD effectively. He is passionate about educating schools to become more neurodiversity aware, and welcoming. His approach is to empower children with ADHD to reach their full potential and lead fulfilling lives through evidence-based practices. Andy lives in Perth with his family. He is a graduate of The ADDCA Training Academy in New York, He holds a Master of Education from The University of Notre Dame Australia and a Graduate Certificate of Instructional Leadership from The University of Melbourne.

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