

# Challenges and Rewards: My First Experience Teaching a Student Diagnosed with ADHD

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## Abstract

This study explores my first experience as a non-special education (SPED) teacher managing a Grade 3 student diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Through an autoethnographic approach, I reflect on the challenges faced, strategies implemented, and the insights gained from this journey. The paper emphasizes the importance of personalized attention, consistent communication with parents, and the implementation of behavior-specific strategies in supporting students with ADHD. Key strategies that proved effective included providing structured tasks, using a reward system, and placing the student in a seat with closer supervision. However, the study also identifies the limitations of my initial lack of specialized training in ADHD, which created challenges in classroom management and adapting to the student's unique needs. Despite these challenges, the experience demonstrated the significant impact of building a positive teacher-student relationship, fostering trust, and adjusting teaching methods to meet individual learning needs. By sharing my personal experience, this paper aims to provide reflective insights for educators who may encounter similar situations, emphasizing the need for professional development in ADHD management for non-SPED teachers. Additionally, the findings underscore the importance of a supportive classroom environment, family involvement, and a tailored approach to instruction, as these elements were crucial in promoting the student's growth. Overall, the study offers valuable lessons on inclusivity, adaptability, and the importance of a compassionate, individualized approach to teaching students with ADHD. This reflection serves as a resource for educators seeking practical strategies to enhance the learning experience of students with ADHD, particularly in mainstream classrooms.

**Keywords:** ADHD, autoethnography, classroom management, personalized attention, behavior strategies

## Introduction:

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is one of the most commonly diagnosed neurodevelopmental conditions, affecting individuals across various stages of life. In educational settings, ADHD poses significant challenges, as it impacts attention regulation, impulse control, and social interactions (Pirozzi, 2021; Chapman, 2024). These challenges often hinder academic progress and disrupt classroom dynamics, requiring educators to adapt their teaching methods to support these learners effectively (Honos-Webb, 2010; Kang, 2024).

For students with ADHD, academic difficulties are not solely a result of cognitive deficits but are also influenced by environmental and instructional factors (Fleming & McMahon, 2012; Mohamed, Shaaban, & Jmaiel, 2024). Effective management strategies that emphasize a strength-based approach, such as utilizing students' unique talents and fostering self-determination, have been shown to yield positive outcomes (Armstrong, 2012; Govindan, 2024). Teachers play a pivotal role in creating inclusive learning environments that accommodate these needs.

Despite significant advancements in understanding ADHD, most teacher training programs do not adequately prepare educators, especially those outside of special education (SPED), to manage the complexities of teaching students with ADHD (Pitts Jr., 2023; Chapman, 2024). For non-SPED teachers, the experience of working with ADHD students can be both overwhelming and enlightening, offering opportunities for professional growth and a deeper appreciation of neurodiversity (Tibbits, 2024).

As an elementary teacher with over five years of experience, I have always strived to support diverse learners in my classroom. However, when I was assigned to teach a Grade 3 student diagnosed with ADHD, it marked my first direct encounter with the challenges associated with this condition. Initially, I felt unprepared and apprehensive, given my lack of formal training in special education. The transition was stressful, requiring me to balance the needs of the ADHD student with those of the rest of the class.

Nonetheless, this experience also presented an opportunity for personal and professional growth. It compelled me to reflect deeply on my teaching practices, explore creative strategies, and engage with the student's unique strengths and challenges. Inspired by the narratives of other educators and students managing ADHD (Mooney & Cole, 2014; Saline, 2018), I chose to document this journey as a way to share insights and contribute to the ongoing dialogue on inclusive education. This paper is informed by an autoethnographic approach, which places emphasis on personal experiences as a lens for understanding broader educational challenges (Devol, 2022; Fugate & Gentry, 2016). Drawing on journal entries, observations, and reflective accounts, I aim to provide a nuanced perspective on the interplay between ADHD, classroom dynamics, and teacher adaptability.

The primary objective of this study is to analyze my first-hand experience of teaching a student with ADHD, identifying key challenges, strategies, and moments of growth. By doing so, this research seeks to highlight the potential of inclusive teaching practices, the importance of empathy and adaptability, and the critical need for teacher training in managing neurodiverse learners. The literature underscores the need for educators to adopt strength-based strategies that empower students with ADHD to thrive academically and socially (Armstrong, 2012; Honkasilta, 2016). Programs like executive function coaching and motivational support practices have shown promise in helping students build self-determination and resilience (Parker & Boutelle, 2009; Kang, 2024). Additionally, fostering partnerships between teachers, parents, and the broader school community is essential for creating a supportive environment (Goodwin & Oberacker, 2011; Govindan, 2024).

This study also resonates with the broader narrative of educators navigating the demands of inclusive classrooms, where the needs of neurodiverse learners often intersect with systemic limitations (Connor, 2012; Almborg et al., 2017). By reflecting on my journey, I hope to shed light on the practical implications of teaching ADHD students in mainstream classrooms and advocate for enhanced professional development opportunities for non-SPED teachers (Gafford, 2024; Bussing et al., 2005).

### **Methodology:**

This study employs an autoethnographic approach, a qualitative research method that integrates personal narrative with cultural, social, and educational contexts. Autoethnography allows researchers to examine their lived experiences as a way to illuminate broader issues, fostering a deeper understanding of both personal growth and systemic challenges. By focusing on my journey as a teacher working with a Grade 3 student diagnosed with ADHD, this method provides a platform for critical self-reflection and contextual analysis.

Autoethnography is particularly suited for this study because it bridges the gap between personal experiences and collective educational challenges. As a teacher without formal special education training, my story encapsulates the emotional, cognitive, and pedagogical complexities of teaching a neurodiverse learner in a mainstream classroom. This approach not only documents the strategies and adjustments implemented but also captures the emotional nuances and professional realizations that arose during this journey. By situating my experiences within the broader discourse on ADHD and inclusive education, the study aims to contribute meaningful insights to the field.

The primary source of data for this research was a reflective journal maintained throughout the school year. This journal served as a repository for documenting daily interactions with the student, observations of behavior, teaching strategies employed, and moments of success or struggle. Each

entry provided an opportunity to critically analyze classroom dynamics, assess the effectiveness of interventions, and record feedback from colleagues and parents.

The journal also captured personal reflections, offering a holistic view of my evolving understanding of ADHD and its implications for classroom management. Specific events, such as the implementation of a reward system or communication with the student's parents, were detailed to provide context for the strategies employed. These records not only chronicled the practical aspects of teaching but also highlighted the emotional and intellectual shifts experienced throughout the process.

Additionally, informal conversations with colleagues and parents were documented to gain insight into the broader support system surrounding the student. Feedback from these stakeholders played a crucial role in refining my teaching methods and understanding the student's needs from multiple perspectives.

Given the sensitive nature of this study, ethical considerations were carefully addressed to protect the student's identity and ensure the integrity of the research. Pseudonyms were used to maintain confidentiality, and all personal information related to the student was excluded from the narrative. The focus of this study remained squarely on my teaching experiences and reflections, avoiding any form of evaluation or diagnosis of the student's condition.

The research design adhered to the principles of respect and inclusivity, ensuring that the student's dignity was preserved throughout the process. Additionally, care was taken to present the findings in a manner that emphasizes growth, empathy, and the potential for inclusive teaching practices, rather than highlighting deficits or challenges in a way that could stigmatize the student.

## **Findings:**

### **1. Description of the Student's Behavior and Needs**

The student displayed several hallmark traits of ADHD, including impulsivity, difficulty maintaining focus on tasks, and attention-seeking behaviors. These characteristics often manifested during classroom activities, where he would struggle to stay seated or follow multi-step instructions, a challenge noted by Chapman (2024) in the context of elementary school teachers managing ADHD. Despite these challenges, the student exhibited notable strengths, aligning with Armstrong's (2012) emphasis on a neurodiversity approach that highlights the abilities of students with ADHD rather than focusing solely on their deficits.

Among his strengths were proficiency in reading comprehension, creativity in art, and an impressive level of competence in household responsibilities. This aligns with Honos-Webb's (2010) perspective, which frames ADHD as a condition that can foster unique strengths, such as creativity and problem-solving skills. His reading comprehension abilities stood out as a significant asset, even though writing remained a struggle. This dichotomy mirrors findings from Govindan (2024), who underscores the importance of individualized approaches to support both strengths and challenges in ADHD learners. Social interactions presented another area of difficulty, as the student occasionally exhibited bullying tendencies towards peers. Such behaviors can be linked to impulsivity and underdeveloped social skills, as discussed by Saline (2018), who emphasizes the role of emotional regulation and interpersonal understanding in ADHD management. However, his ability to excel in certain areas, such as art, suggests that fostering these strengths can positively influence his self-esteem and peer relationships, echoing Mooney and Cole's (2014) advocacy for empowering students with learning differences through their strengths.

Goodwin and Oberacker (2011) describe ADHD as a dual-sided condition where challenges are often accompanied by untapped potential. This duality was evident in the student's behavior: while he struggled with task persistence and social engagement, his talents in creative and practical domains hinted at significant latent capabilities. Addressing these behaviors required balancing immediate classroom management with long-term strategies for skill-building and self-regulation, a principle emphasized by Parker and Boutelle (2009) in their executive function coaching framework. Research

by Fleming and McMahon (2012) highlights the importance of developmental context when addressing ADHD-related challenges.

For this student, interventions focused on creating structured routines and providing consistent positive reinforcement to nurture his strengths while mitigating disruptive behaviors. Chapman (2024) further suggests that psychoeducation and stress management strategies for teachers are critical in supporting such students effectively, enabling educators to better address complex classroom dynamics.

The student's behavior underscores the necessity of a strength-based, individualized approach that integrates his unique capabilities with targeted support for his needs. This aligns with the broader consensus in ADHD literature (e.g., Kang, 2024; Fugate & Gentry, 2016), which emphasizes the importance of blending strengths-focused teaching strategies with interventions aimed at improving executive functioning and social skills. By viewing the student's challenges and abilities as interconnected aspects of his learning profile, the potential for growth and success within an inclusive classroom environment becomes clearer.

## **2. My Challenges as a Non-SPED Teacher**

As a general education teacher without formal training in special education (SPED), addressing the unique needs of a student with ADHD proved to be a significant challenge. My primary difficulty lay in classroom management. Balancing the demands of the entire class while simultaneously addressing the specific needs of a student with ADHD required a level of expertise and strategic intervention that I initially lacked. This scenario is common among educators, as highlighted by Chapman (2024), who emphasized the gap in preparedness among elementary school teachers to manage ADHD-related behaviors effectively.

The student's impulsivity and frequent need for redirection often diverted my attention, leaving me feeling stretched thin and unable to provide equal focus to all learners. Govindan (2024) noted that teachers often feel unprepared to juggle the dual roles of instructor and behavior manager when working with neurodivergent students. This lack of preparation exacerbated my sense of inadequacy, further amplifying my stress and reducing my confidence in implementing effective strategies.

Moreover, the absence of specialized training left me reliant on trial-and-error methods to identify interventions that worked for this student. Parker and Boutelle (2009) underscored the importance of targeted executive function coaching for students with ADHD, suggesting that educators should be equipped with knowledge of such approaches. Unfortunately, without this training, I often found myself reacting to behaviors rather than proactively supporting the student's needs.

The experience also underscored a broader systemic issue: the lack of professional development opportunities for general education teachers to acquire skills in supporting neurodivergent learners. Fleming and McMahon (2012) emphasized that ADHD interventions require a nuanced understanding of developmental contexts and individual student profiles. My limited exposure to these principles made it challenging to tailor my instructional methods effectively, leading to frustration and moments of self-doubt.

Additionally, managing my own stress became a critical factor. As Pitts Jr. (2023) pointed out, educators often experience emotional strain when they lack resources or strategies to handle the complexities of ADHD in the classroom. This stress can inadvertently impact their ability to maintain patience and consistency, which are crucial for creating a supportive learning environment. My personal experience aligns with this finding, as I struggled to balance empathy with discipline, frequently questioning whether I was doing enough to meet the student's needs.

Despite these challenges, this experience highlighted the need for a strength-based approach to ADHD management, as advocated by Armstrong (2012). By focusing on the student's strengths, such as his creativity and reading comprehension, I began to reframe my perspective. Honos-Webb (2010)



supports this approach, emphasizing that recognizing and cultivating strengths can empower both students and educators, fostering a more positive and productive classroom environment.

This journey illuminated the importance of professional development and collaboration. Engaging with colleagues and seeking advice from experienced educators became invaluable resources. As Mohamed et al. (2024) suggested, game-based learning and other innovative strategies can offer practical solutions for managing ADHD-related challenges. By integrating these techniques, I gradually developed a more adaptive and responsive teaching style, underscoring the need for continuous learning and systemic support for educators navigating such complexities.

### **3. Strategies and Adjustments**

- **Implemented a Reward System and Frequent Praise**

To encourage positive behaviors, a reward system was introduced. This method aligns with Armstrong's (2012) strength-based approach, which emphasizes recognizing and reinforcing a student's efforts and achievements. Frequent praise served as immediate feedback, helping to build the student's self-esteem and reinforcing desired behaviors, as highlighted by Honos-Webb (2010). ADHD students often respond well to immediate and tangible rewards, as these align with their preference for instant gratification (Goodwin & Oberacker, 2011).

- **Assigned Simple Tasks**

Assigning simple, manageable tasks, such as picking up papers, provided the student with a sense of responsibility and accomplishment. According to Fleming and McMahon (2012), tasks that align with a student's abilities can enhance their executive functioning and self-confidence. These activities also allowed the student to channel his energy productively, reducing the likelihood of disruptive behaviors. Govindan (2024) supports this strategy by advocating for task differentiation that leverages a student's strengths.

- **Regular Communication with Parents**

Maintaining open communication with the student's parents via Messenger created a collaborative environment for monitoring progress and addressing challenges. Sharing both positive and negative observations ensured that parents were actively involved in the intervention process. Saline (2018) highlights the importance of strong home-school partnerships, noting that parents can provide valuable insights into strategies that work at home, which can be adapted for classroom use. This communication also helped build trust and consistency in the approaches used across settings.

- **Desk Placement Near the Teacher**

Placing the student's desk near mine allowed for closer supervision and quicker intervention when necessary. Proximity helped in redirecting attention and minimizing distractions. As noted by Kang (2024), physical classroom arrangements play a crucial role in managing ADHD symptoms, as they can reduce stimuli that compete for the student's attention. This setup also fostered a sense of safety and support for the student, encouraging better focus and participation.

- **Adjusted Strategies: Minimized Group Work**

Group work was minimized as it often led to conflicts and distractions. Instead, individual tasks or paired activities were prioritized. Bussing et al. (2005) found that students with ADHD often struggle in unstructured group settings due to difficulties with impulse control and social cues. By adjusting the teaching approach, the classroom environment became more conducive to learning for the student. Chapman (2024) advocates for tailored strategies that balance inclusivity with individual needs, ensuring that the student remains engaged without causing disruptions.

### **Moments of Growth**

The student demonstrated a heightened sense of responsibility and self-motivation by excelling in tasks such as sweeping the classroom and watering plants. These tasks not only provided him with a structured outlet for his energy but also instilled a sense of accomplishment and purpose.

According to Armstrong (2012), providing students with meaningful roles fosters self-efficacy, especially for those with ADHD, who benefit from structured opportunities to channel their strengths. Govindan (2024) further supports this, noting that emphasizing responsibility through manageable tasks can improve focus and confidence in students with ADHD.

Over time, the student exhibited better adjustment to the classroom's routines and expectations. This adaptability signifies growth in executive functioning skills, such as transitioning between tasks and adhering to classroom norms, areas often challenging for students with ADHD (Fleming & McMahon, 2012). His improved behavior also indicates that the consistent application of strategies, such as a reward system and positive reinforcement, was effective in helping him feel secure and valued within the classroom community.

A significant marker of growth was the student's ability to travel home independently, a task requiring planning, time management, and self-control. This development points to an increased sense of self-reliance and trustworthiness. As noted by Honos-Webb (2010), fostering independence in students with ADHD helps them recognize their potential and builds confidence in their ability to navigate daily challenges.

The behavioral improvements observed reflect the cumulative impact of consistent teacher support, effective communication with parents, and tailored classroom strategies. According to Saline (2018), ADHD students thrive in environments where their achievements are acknowledged, and their challenges are addressed with empathy and structured guidance. By the third quarter, the student's growth highlighted his ability to respond positively to a supportive and adaptive learning environment.

### **Discussion:**

Research consistently emphasizes the importance of structure, clear expectations, and positive reinforcement in managing ADHD behaviors. My classroom strategies, such as implementing a reward system and providing consistent feedback, align with these principles. For instance, Armstrong (2012) highlights the effectiveness of structured, strength-based approaches in enhancing the performance and behavior of students with ADHD. Similarly, Govindan (2024) underscores the value of a strengths-focused curriculum that integrates positive reinforcement to improve engagement and self-regulation. However, my experience also revealed the complexities of applying these strategies. Excessive praise sometimes unintentionally reinforced disruptive behaviors, as the student appeared to seek attention rather than respond to the intended corrective feedback.

Fleming and McMahon (2012) suggest that while reinforcement strategies are beneficial, they must be balanced and context-sensitive to avoid unintended consequences. This indicates a need for nuanced applications of positive reinforcement, a point also emphasized by Saline (2018), who advocates for blending acknowledgment of achievements with consistent behavioral boundaries.

This experience underscores the significance of adaptability, empathy, and a proactive approach to learning. For non-SPED teachers, simple adjustments like seating arrangements, task delegation, and frequent parent communication can create a more supportive environment for students with ADHD. Chapman (2024) emphasizes that elementary teachers equipped with therapeutic stress management strategies can better address the challenges posed by ADHD, fostering both teacher resilience and student success.

Effective teaching for ADHD students requires personalized interventions. Kang (2024) highlights that motivational support practices, such as recognizing individual achievements and assigning manageable tasks, can mitigate ADHD symptoms and enhance classroom engagement. My decision to place the student's desk near mine for closer supervision reflects this principle, as proximity allowed me to provide immediate guidance, helping the student stay focused and feel supported.

This experience also highlights the importance of open communication with parents, a practice validated by Honos-Webb (2010), who identifies parent-teacher collaboration as a critical factor in managing ADHD behaviors. Regular updates through messaging apps not only informed parents of their child's progress but also enabled them to reinforce consistent behavioral expectations at home.

While the findings offer valuable insights, they are limited by the subjectivity of personal experience and the single-case focus. Insights drawn from this experience may not apply universally to all students with ADHD, as each individual's needs and responses to interventions vary widely. Pirozzi (2021) emphasizes that ADHD manifests differently across contexts, necessitating a broader scope of inquiry for generalizable conclusions.

Additionally, the absence of formal SPED training may have influenced the effectiveness of my strategies. Tibbits (2024) notes that teachers with ADHD-specific training are better equipped to handle challenges, suggesting that my observations and outcomes might differ if specialized training were in place. The single-case focus, while providing depth, limits the study's generalizability, aligning with Pitts Jr. (2023), who asserts that broader, multi-case analyses are essential for drawing comprehensive insights.

### **Conclusion:**

This teaching experience provided valuable insights into managing and supporting students with ADHD in a general education classroom. It illuminated the significance of patience, adaptability, and trust-building as foundational components for fostering positive behavioral and academic outcomes.

One of the key lessons was the importance of patience. ADHD often presents behaviors that can disrupt classroom routines, requiring teachers to remain calm and persistent. Saline (2018) emphasizes that students with ADHD thrive when educators approach challenges with understanding rather than frustration. My ability to observe and adjust to the student's needs over time demonstrated that progress, while slow, is achievable with consistent effort and a positive mindset. Adaptability also proved essential. My initial lack of SPED training created challenges, as I had to rely on trial-and-error methods.

The need to revise strategies—such as shifting away from group work when it caused disruptions or introducing task-based rewards to channel the student's energy—aligned with Honos-Webb's (2010) recommendation to treat ADHD behaviors as opportunities for creative problem-solving. This approach helped me meet the student where he was, gradually fostering both his academic engagement and personal growth.

Building trust was another crucial takeaway. My regular communication with the student's parents and the creation of a supportive classroom environment encouraged mutual respect and accountability. Armstrong (2012) highlights that trust between educators and students with ADHD enhances the latter's sense of security and belonging, which was evident in my student's increased responsibility and self-initiative over time.

While my tailored strategies yielded positive outcomes, the experience also highlighted the critical need for comprehensive training and resources for non-SPED teachers. Kang (2024) and Chapman (2024) both advocate for equipping general education teachers with practical tools and knowledge to address diverse learning needs. My journey underscores this necessity, as formal training could have enabled me to implement evidence-based interventions more confidently and effectively.

This experience was a transformative journey that not only supported the student's growth but also deepened my understanding of inclusive teaching. It reaffirmed the importance of empathy, proactive learning, and professional development in creating a classroom environment where all students, regardless of their challenges, can succeed. As schools aim to embrace inclusivity, equipping educators with the right tools and resources will be vital for fostering the success of students with ADHD and other diverse learning needs.

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