UNDERSTANDING THE CLASSROOM CHALLENGES AND COPING STRATEGIES OF STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

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Abstract. Inclusive education in Malaysia aims to promote equitable access, meaningful participation, and belonging for students with special educational needs. However, comparatively fewer studies have explored the lived classroom experiences of school-aged students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), particularly from the students' own perspectives. Existing Malaysian research has predominantly examined inclusive education through teacher perspectives, implementation challenges, and institutional factors. This study addresses this gap by exploring the classroom challenges experienced by students with ADHD, the coping strategies they employ, and the role of teachers and peers in supporting their emotional well-being. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Self-Determination Theory, this study employed a qualitative narrative case study design. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with two female students diagnosed with ADHD in an inclusive international school located in Gombak, Malaysia. Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis approach. Findings revealed that students experienced challenges related to attention regulation, sensory overload, instructional pacing, anxiety during presentations, and communication during group activities. Despite these challenges, participants demonstrated adaptive coping strategies, including movement-based self-regulation, breathing techniques, sensory tools, task segmentation, and cognitive refocusing. Teacher understanding, instructional clarity, and peer support emerged as important factors influencing students' emotional comfort, classroom participation, and sense of belonging. The study concludes that meaningful inclusion requires more than classroom placement; it requires flexible pedagogy, emotional validation, and neurodiversity-informed practices that recognise students with ADHD as active participants in their own educational experiences.
Keywords: *Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD), classroom challenges, coping strategies, inclusive settings, students with special educational needs (SEN)*

Introduction

Inclusive education has become an essential global priority, shifting the focus from the mere physical placement of students in mainstream classrooms to ensuring their meaningful participation, sense of belonging, and the removal of educational barriers (Ainscow, 2020). Despite this international progress, many students with special educational needs (SEN) continue to face significant challenges regarding classroom engagement, instructional practices, social relationships, and emotional well-being. These barriers frequently arise when educational environments lack sufficient responsiveness to diverse learning profiles. Research highlights that rigid instructional structures, limited teacher preparation, and inadequate resources demonstrate that successful inclusion relies heavily on classroom environments that actively support students' academic, emotional, and social needs (Woodcock et al., 2022). Among students with SEN, those diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) often experience unique difficulties within highly structured classroom

settings. ADHD is associated with differences in attention regulation, impulse control, and emotional management, which can impact a student's ability to maintain concentration and consistently participate in learning activities. Crucially, contemporary perspectives acknowledge that these ADHD-related difficulties do not solely stem from student deficits; rather, they emerge from the interaction between individual characteristics and inflexible environmental demands. Recent qualitative studies support this, showing that students with ADHD face significant barriers when school structures fail to accommodate their specific needs for attention regulation and self-management (Carr et al., 2026; Krtkova et al., 2023). Therefore, understanding ADHD inclusion requires examining students' everyday experiences within their specific educational contexts.

To fully evaluate and improve inclusive practices, research increasingly emphasizes the importance of the student voice. While qualitative studies have shown that learners with disabilities can adeptly identify classroom barriers, supportive teaching practices, and factors influencing their sense of belonging (Patricio-Martínez et al., 2025; Connor and Cavendish, 2020), research specifically exploring the lived experiences of school-aged children with ADHD remains comparatively limited. In Malaysia, national policies have expanded inclusive education, yet implementation challenges persist. Existing Malaysian studies have predominantly explored these issues from a system-level or teacher's perspective, focusing on professional knowledge, classroom management, and pedagogical adaptation (Othman et al., 2025; Hosshan, 2022). Consequently, there is a notable research gap regarding how students with ADHD personally experience everyday inclusion and develop coping strategies. Addressing this critical gap, this study aims to explore the lived classroom experiences of students with ADHD within inclusive educational environments in Malaysia. The specific objectives are to investigate the challenges these students encounter, the coping strategies they develop, and the roles of teacher and peer support in shaping their educational experiences. By centering on the students' voices, this study contributes to a deeper, more nuanced understanding of inclusion as both an educational and psychological experience.

Review of literature

Global and Malaysian perspectives on inclusive education implementation

Inclusive education represents a fundamental shift toward creating environments where all students, regardless of learning differences, can participate meaningfully. Contemporary inclusion emphasizes not just physical access to mainstream classrooms, but also belonging, achievement, and the removal of educational barriers globally (Ainscow, 2020). However, despite this policy expansion, students with special educational needs (SEN) continue to face barriers such as limited teacher preparation, inadequate resources, and inflexible curricula, demonstrating that successful inclusion requires learning environments to actively respond to individual differences (Woodcock et al., 2022). Within these classrooms, students may encounter challenges regarding academic engagement, emotional regulation, and social interaction, especially when environments are designed primarily for typical learning patterns. In the Malaysian context, inclusive education has progressively developed through national policies aimed at increasing SEN student participation. Yet, achieving meaningful inclusion in Malaysia remains complex. Recent studies highlight teacher preparedness as a critical factor, noting that while teachers may show positive readiness, successful

implementation requires adequate professional knowledge, classroom resources, and structured support systems (Othman et al., 2025; Hosshan, 2022). Furthermore, effective inclusion demands responsive pedagogical approaches, requiring teachers to possess the instructional skills necessary for differentiated instruction (Radzi and Mahmud, 2026; Abdulah and Mahmud, 2025), alongside robust institutional support and multidisciplinary collaboration (Zainol et al., 2025). While these studies offer valuable insights into systemic and teacher-level challenges, they largely reflect adult perspectives, leaving a gap in understanding how students themselves experience everyday inclusion.

Student voice and lived experiences of ADHD students in inclusive classrooms

To comprehensively evaluate whether educational environments are genuinely inclusive, researchers increasingly emphasize the importance of the student voice. Listening to students with disabilities provides crucial insights into classroom barriers, supportive relationships, and emotional experiences that adult observations may miss. Qualitative research has demonstrated that students can clearly articulate effective teaching practices, challenges, and factors influencing their sense of belonging (Köç et al., 2025; Patricio-Martínez et al., 2025; Connor and Cavendish, 2020). Understanding these lived experiences is particularly vital for students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), a common neurodevelopmental condition affecting attention regulation, impulse control, and emotional management. Difficulties experienced by students with ADHD often emerge from the interaction between individual needs and rigid environmental demands, such as traditional classroom structures that emphasize prolonged sitting and standardized learning approaches. Qualitative research highlights that students with ADHD perceive mainstream classrooms as challenging when routines and expectations fail to recognize their specific learning differences (Carr et al., 2026; Krtkova et al., 2023). Consequently, contemporary research emphasizes supportive, rather than deficit-based, approaches, noting that teacher knowledge and flexible strategies profoundly influence ADHD students' engagement and well-being (Wilson et al., 2024). Despite this, learner-cantered qualitative research specifically centering the narratives of school-aged children with ADHD regarding their everyday classroom challenges and personal coping strategies remains limited.

Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (1979) and Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan, 1985), providing a dual psychological lens that connects environmental influences with internal motivational dynamics. Bronfenbrenner’s theory conceptualizes learning as shaped by interconnected environmental layers, where the microsystem (daily interactions with teachers, peers, and routines) directly influences a student's academic and emotional regulation. This perspective frames learning difficulties as outcomes of systemic interactions rather than individual deficits. Complementing this ecological lens, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) explains that well-being and adaptive coping rely on fulfilling three basic psychological needs: competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Integrating these theories frames inclusion as both a contextual and motivational process, where classroom challenges emerge from environmental systems, and coping strategies reflect students’

efforts to fulfill their psychological needs. Collectively, the existing literature highlights significant gaps in the current understanding of inclusive education. While systemic challenges and teacher perspectives have been well-documented, particularly in Malaysia, the personal, everyday experiences of students with SEN remain underexplored. Furthermore, student voice research has predominantly focused on broader disability groups, leaving a specific need for qualitative inquiry into how school-aged students with ADHD interpret challenges, regulate emotions, and perceive peer and teacher support. By centering on students' voices, the present study addresses these gaps, contributing a learner-focused perspective to understand how inclusive educational settings in Malaysia can be adapted to foster psychological safety, meaningful participation, and a genuine sense of belonging for students with ADHD (*Figure 1*).

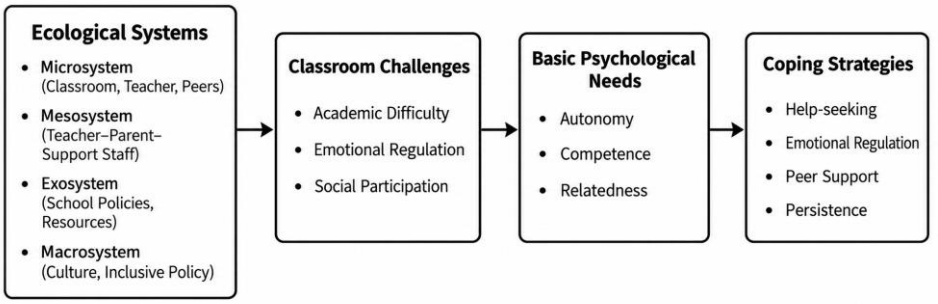


Figure 1. *Integration of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and the self-determination theory and its relation to the present study.*

Materials and Methods

Research design and participants

This study employed a qualitative narrative case study design to deeply explore the lived classroom experiences, personal interpretations, and emotions of students with special needs within an inclusive educational context (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Purposive sampling was utilized to select two female students formally diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) who were enrolled in an inclusive classroom at an international school located in Gombak, Malaysia. The inclusion criteria required participants to have a formal special educational needs diagnosis, be enrolled in a mainstream inclusive environment, and be capable of communicating their experiences verbally with appropriate support. This specific, small sample size aligns with the purpose of qualitative case study research, which prioritizes in-depth contextual understanding over statistical generalization.

Instruments, data collection, and analysis

The primary data collection instrument was a semi-structured interview protocol tailored specifically for students with special needs. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as they provide both structural guidance and the flexibility needed to enable participants to express their authentic experiences (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). The protocol consisted of a warm-up question and seven open-ended

questions exploring classroom experiences, learning challenges, coping strategies, social support, and suggestions for improvement (*Table 1*). To maximize comprehension, questions were phrased in simple, child-friendly language and supported by visual aids, such as emotion cards. Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the school, informed consent was secured from parents or guardians, and assent was provided by the students. The study strictly adhered to the ethical standards outlined in the Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 (Act 685), the Ministry of Education Malaysia guidelines (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2023), and MERA (2021). Individual interviews lasting approximately 10–15 minutes were conducted in a calm, familiar school environment (e.g., a resource room) to minimize sensory distractions and promote emotional comfort. Each session began with rapport-building and demographic questions. To protect participants' rights and confidentiality, pseudonyms were used, and all data were securely stored for academic purposes only. With consent, the interviews were audio-recorded, supplemented by field notes to capture nonverbal cues, and transcribed verbatim. Data were subsequently analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis. Transcripts were read repeatedly for familiarization, followed by the initial coding of meaningful segments related to classroom challenges, coping strategies, and social support. These codes were then organized into broader themes reflecting the instructional and emotional dimensions of the students' experiences. Finally, trustworthiness was established following Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria, credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability, through consistent procedures, peer debriefing, reflective journaling, and detailed contextual description.

Table 1. *List of interview questions.*

Research Objective	Interview Questions
RO1: To explore the classroom challenges experienced by students with special needs in inclusive learning environments.	IQ1: "What do you like most about your classroom? What things make learning hard or not fun sometimes?"
RO2: To identify the coping strategies used by students with special needs to manage classroom challenges.	IQ2: "When you feel upset, bored, or confused in class, what do you do to feel better or understand the lesson?"IQ3: "Who helps you when you face problems in school?"IQ4: "What makes you feel happy or calm again when something is difficult?"
RO3: To explore the role of teachers and peers in supporting students' coping and emotional well-being.	IQ5: "How do you feel when your teacher or friends help you?"
RO4: To understand students' suggestions for improving their classroom experiences.	IQ6: "If you could make your classroom a better place to learn, what would you change?"

Results and Discussion

Classroom challenges faced by students with special needs in inclusive settings

Analysis of the interview data revealed that students with ADHD experienced classroom challenges arising from the interaction between their individual regulatory needs and the demands of inclusive classroom environments. Five interconnected

themes were identified: (1) attention regulation and self-regulatory difficulties, (2) sensory sensitivity and environmental stress, (3) instructional pacing and cognitive overload, (4) task engagement and motivation, and (5) performance anxiety and communication challenges.

Theme 1: Attention Regulation and Self-Regulatory Difficulties

A major challenge experienced by both participants involved maintaining attention and regulating physical restlessness during classroom activities. Participant 1 (P1) connected this difficulty directly with her ADHD experience: "Basically that means it's very hard for me to pay attention." She further explained that maintaining focus became more difficult when lessons were less personally engaging: "If it's not a subject that I really like, I feel very restless." Similarly, Participant 2 (P2) described difficulties remaining physically still during lessons: "I'm very energetic… so like sitting down in one place is like very hard for me."

Theme 2: Sensory Sensitivity and Environmental Stress

Sensory sensitivity, particularly related to classroom noise, emerged as another significant challenge affecting students' concentration and emotional comfort. P1 described how excessive noise influenced her ability to participate in lessons: "The noise is a big one because I have a bit of a sensory issue." She further explained: "Where there's too much noise, I will not be able to focus on the lesson."

Theme 3: Instructional Pacing and Cognitive Overload

Another significant challenge involved lesson pacing and the difficulty of processing information delivered too quickly. P1 explained: "If the teacher is going way too fast, I won't be able to keep up." She further described the experience of falling behind: "When I look back up, already we're on question 14."

Theme 4: Task Engagement and Intrinsic Motivation

Beyond attention regulation, participants also described how their level of interest influenced their ability to engage with classroom activities. Participant 2 (P2) explained that motivation and concentration were strongly affected by whether the learning content was meaningful to her: "If the topic interests me, then I'm like okay. But if the topic doesn't interest me, I get bored."

Theme 5: Performance Anxiety and Communication Challenges

Participants also experienced emotional difficulties related to classroom performance and social communication. Presentation activities were particularly challenging for P2, who described difficulty maintaining focus during situations involving public speaking: "When we're talking in front of the class or presentation… Yeah, I lose focus really easily." Group activities also created communication difficulties: "It's hard for like all of us to communicate at one time. It's like very stressful."

Coping strategies used by students with special needs to manage learning and emotional difficulties

Despite experiencing multiple classroom challenges, both participants demonstrated active coping strategies to regulate attention, emotions, and learning behaviours. Four coping strategies were identified: (1) movement-based self-regulation, (2) sensory management, (3) structured task management, and (4) emotional regulation strategies.

Theme 1: Movement-Based Self-Regulation

Both participants described using movement as a strategy to maintain concentration during classroom activities. P1 explained: "I have a fidget toy actually. If I don't do

something, I'm not focusing." Similarly, P2 described using small physical movements to regulate attention: "I [scratch] my nails or I move my legs like this."

Theme 2: Sensory Management Strategies

Sensory regulation was another important coping mechanism identified by participants. P1 explained that headphones helped her manage classroom noise: "This is why I always wear them. It quiets it down so I can focus better."

Theme 3: Structured Task Management and Cognitive Regulation

Participants also demonstrated strategies to manage overwhelming academic demands. P1 described using a "five-minute rule": "You do something for five minutes, and then if it's interesting, you keep going." She also described taking short breaks when overwhelmed: "I need to walk away for a while."

Theme 4: Emotional Regulation Through Breathing

P2 described using breathing techniques to manage anxiety during stressful classroom situations: "I usually just breath in, breath out."

Role of teachers and peers in supporting students with special educational needs

Theme 1: Teacher Influence: Emotional Safety and Instructional Support

P1 explained that her willingness to approach teachers depended on whether she felt emotionally safe: "It depends on how I feel about the teacher. If I'm scared of the teacher, I'm not asking anything." Regarding instructional support, P1 explained: "If the teacher is just like boringly explaining it, I'm not paying attention. If it's just the right amount, then it helps a lot." Similarly, P2 emphasised the importance of engaging explanations and meaningful classroom activities: "Activities or like the teacher explaining like really well." Participants also expressed the importance of teachers understanding behaviours associated with ADHD. P2 explained: "If I talk a lot… don't mind me at all. If I like stand up randomly… it's just like how I am."

Theme 2: Peer Support as Emotional Motivation and Belonging

P1 described feeling happier and more motivated when learning with supportive friends: "If I'm with my friends, I'll be like, 'Oh, yay. Happy.'" P2 similarly highlighted the importance of peer acceptance: "They should like probably be supportive."

Suggestions to improve classroom experiences

Three major themes regarding recommendations were identified based on the participants' experiences: (1) responsive instructional pacing, (2) teacher awareness and emotional validation, and (3) interactive and activity-based learning approaches.

Theme 1: Instructional Adjustments Through Slower and More Responsive Pacing

One of the strongest recommendations identified by participants was the need for teachers to adjust instructional speed. P1 expressed: "Sometimes I wanna tell my teachers to slow down. Slow down makes me catch up easily."

Theme 2: Teacher Awareness, Empathy, and Recognition of Student Effort

P1 recalled a negative classroom experience: "There was this teacher who didn't know about my ADHD. They like blew up in my face." P1 also expressed a desire for recognition of her effort: "I swear I'm trying my best." Similarly, P2 explained: "It's just like how I am."

Theme 3: Instructional Variety and Activity-Based Learning

Participants also highlighted the value of engaging learning approaches. P2 expressed: “I like activities because it makes me learn better.”

Interpreting classroom challenges

Rather than reflecting students’ inability to learn, the identified challenges highlight the importance of creating learning environments that accommodate diverse cognitive, emotional, and sensory needs. The participants' accounts suggest that attention difficulties were closely connected with students’ need for movement and active self-regulation. Behaviours such as restlessness should therefore not be interpreted simply as classroom disruption, but as attempts to manage attention and maintain engagement. From Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (1979), these experiences reflect the influence of the classroom microsystem, where daily routines, expectations, and instructional structures shape students’ psychological functioning. This finding supports previous research showing that students with learning difficulties often experience challenges related to attention regulation and emotional control but may develop adaptive strategies when supported appropriately (Sarkar and Gupta, 2024). Therefore, inclusive classrooms should recognise self-regulatory behaviours as part of students’ learning processes rather than viewing them solely as behavioural problems.

These experiences demonstrate that classroom environments designed for typical learners may unintentionally create barriers for students with sensory processing differences. Although inclusive classrooms encourage interaction and collaboration, increased noise levels and environmental stimulation may contribute to cognitive and emotional overload among some students. This finding aligns with Nugraha et al. (2025), who highlighted that inadequate classroom adaptations can negatively affect participation and motivation among students with special needs. Furthermore, overly rapid instruction influences students’ confidence, participation, and sense of competence. When lessons progressed beyond students’ processing capacity, they experienced difficulty maintaining engagement and completing learning tasks. From the perspective of Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan, 1985), overly rapid instruction may reduce students’ sense of competence because they are unable to experience successful task completion. Therefore, differentiated pacing and structured instruction are essential components of psychologically supportive inclusive classrooms. This finding is consistent with Woodcock et al. (2022), who emphasised that effective inclusive education requires teachers to adapt instructional approaches according to students’ diverse learning needs.

The findings also suggest that engagement among students with ADHD is not simply determined by their willingness to participate, but is influenced by the interaction between instructional approaches and personal interest. This finding is consistent with Self-Determination Theory, which emphasises that motivation is strengthened when students experience autonomy, competence, and meaningful involvement in learning (Deci and Ryan, 1985). Inclusive classrooms involve not only academic demands but also emotional and social expectations. Activities such as presentations and group discussions require students to manage attention, anxiety, communication, and social interaction simultaneously. This finding supports Ručman and Šulc (2025), who highlighted that students with disabilities may experience additional social pressures within inclusive environments when sufficient emotional and relational support is unavailable.

Understanding coping mechanisms

Rather than being passive recipients of support, participants showed personal agency by developing strategies that helped them navigate classroom demands. These findings highlight that students with ADHD possess adaptive capacities that can support successful participation when classroom environments provide appropriate flexibility and acceptance. The observed behaviours represent self-regulatory strategies rather than simple classroom distractions. Movement may function as a compensatory mechanism that allows students to regulate attention and remain involved in classroom tasks, aligning with Sarkar and Gupta (2024), who highlighted that students with learning difficulties often develop individualised coping approaches to support persistence and academic engagement. Furthermore, environmental adjustments, such as using headphones for sensory regulation, demonstrate how simple accommodations can support students' participation without removing them from inclusive learning environments. This finding supports Nugraha et al. (2025), who emphasised that adaptable classroom environments and appropriate learning supports contribute to improved engagement. By developing structured task management and conscious emotional regulation strategies, participants demonstrated self-awareness and emotional monitoring. Such strategies reflect adaptive coping and align with Self-Determination Theory, particularly the need for competence and autonomy.

The relational nature of inclusion (Teachers and peers)

The findings demonstrate that teachers and peers play a central role in shaping students' emotional experiences, help-seeking behaviours, and ability to cope with classroom challenges. Consistent with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), teacher–student and peer relationships represent important components of the classroom microsystem that directly influence students' psychological well-being. The data highlights that teacher behaviour influences more than academic learning; it shapes students' psychological security within the classroom. When students perceive teachers as intimidating or judgmental, they may avoid seeking clarification or requesting support, which can increase academic difficulties and emotional stress. Therefore, emotional safety represents an essential dimension of inclusive education. Instructional quality also plays an important role in sustaining attention among students with ADHD. Students valued teaching approaches that were clear, appropriately paced, and engaging, supporting Woodcock et al. (2022), who argued that successful inclusive education depends on teachers' ability to adapt pedagogy according to diverse learner needs. Furthermore, teachers who recognise neurodiverse behaviours can respond through supportive strategies that maintain students' dignity and classroom participation. From Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan, 1985), teacher acceptance strengthens students' sense of relatedness and competence. Peer relationships contribute directly to students' emotional comfort and classroom engagement, providing encouragement, reducing feelings of isolation, and creating a sense of belonging. Overall, these findings demonstrate that inclusion is fundamentally relational. A student may be physically present in a mainstream classroom, yet still experience exclusion if their needs, behaviours, and perspectives are misunderstood.

Implications for improving inclusive environments

The participants provided meaningful recommendations based on their personal experiences, reflecting not only academic needs but also emotional and psychological considerations. Importantly, participants were not requesting reduced academic expectations; rather, they were requesting sufficient processing time to engage successfully with classroom content. Therefore, responsive pacing should be viewed as an inclusive teaching strategy rather than a modification that lowers educational standards, aligning with Woodcock et al. (2022). The students' negative experiences illustrate how limited understanding of ADHD may negatively affect students' emotional safety. Rather than interpreting behaviours through a deficit perspective, teachers need awareness of how neurodevelopmental differences influence attention, movement, and emotional regulation. From a psychological perspective, validation from teachers contributes to students' sense of relatedness and belonging. This finding supports Malaysian research highlighting the importance of teacher awareness and inclusive leadership in creating supportive educational environments (Mohamad and Ismail, 2023). Activity-based learning may also support attention regulation by reducing prolonged passive listening demands and providing opportunities for students to engage through different modes of learning. Therefore, teachers should consider incorporating collaborative activities, practical tasks, visual supports, and interactive strategies to enhance engagement among students with diverse educational needs.

Integration with theoretical framework

The findings of this study demonstrate the value of integrating Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) and Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan, 1985) to understand students' experiences within inclusive classrooms. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory explains how students' classroom experiences are shaped by interactions between individuals and their surrounding environments. In this study, many challenges emerged within the classroom microsystem; including teacher practices, peer relationships, instructional pacing, and sensory conditions. For example, difficulties related to classroom noise, rapid instruction, and social communication demonstrate how environmental factors can influence students' emotional regulation and academic participation. However, supportive teacher behaviours, peer acceptance, and flexible classroom practices functioned as protective factors that reduced these barriers. At the same time, Self-Determination Theory provides insight into the psychological processes underlying students' coping strategies. The participants' experiences reflected the three fundamental psychological needs proposed by Deci and Ryan (1985): Competence: Students required appropriate pacing, clear explanations, and supportive instruction to feel capable of completing learning tasks; Autonomy: Students demonstrated autonomy through self-developed coping strategies such as movement regulation, sensory management, and task segmentation; Relatedness: Teacher acceptance and peer support strengthened students' emotional security and sense of belonging. Together, these theories demonstrate that successful inclusion involves both environmental responsiveness and psychological support. Students are more likely to participate meaningfully when classrooms accommodate their needs while also recognising their agency and capabilities. Therefore, this study extends understanding of inclusive education by showing that inclusion is not merely a matter of physical placement within mainstream classrooms. Instead, inclusion is a dynamic psychological and social

experience shaped by the interaction between classroom environments, relationships, and students' personal coping processes.

Conclusion

This study explored the classroom challenges and coping strategies of students with special educational needs within a Malaysian inclusive school, specifically foregrounding the lived experiences of students with ADHD. The findings indicate that while inclusive classrooms are designed to promote equity, they can inadvertently present barriers related to attention regulation, sensory overload, rapid instructional pacing, performance anxiety, and social communication. Crucially, these difficulties do not reflect an inherent inability to learn; rather, they highlight significant mismatches between conventional classroom structures and the students' specific psychological and regulatory needs (Deci and Ryan, 1985; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Despite these environmental challenges, the participants demonstrated notable resilience and agency by employing adaptive coping strategies, including movement-based regulation, sensory management, task segmentation, emotional control, and peer-supported learning (Sarkar and Gupta, 2024). The insights gained from these students' experiences carry important practical implications for both classroom pedagogy and institutional policy. To foster genuine inclusion, teachers must adopt flexible, learner-centred approaches that accommodate diverse sensory, emotional, and attentional requirements (Woodcock et al., 2022). Implementing strategies such as responsive instructional pacing, providing clear explanations, designing structured yet interactive activities, and cultivating a tolerance for self-regulatory movement can significantly enhance students' competence, autonomy, and sense of belonging (Deci and Ryan, 1985). Furthermore, at the institutional level, there is a critical need for ongoing professional development to strengthen educators' understanding of neurodiversity, ensuring they are equipped to deliver emotionally responsive and inclusive pedagogical practices (Othman et al., 2025; Hosshan, 2022).

While this study provides valuable learner-centred perspectives, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The generalisability of the findings is limited by the small purposive sample size, which consisted of two female students with ADHD from a single school, aligning with the qualitative narrative case study design constraints (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Furthermore, the findings rely solely on self-reported interview data without triangulation from teachers, parents, or direct classroom observations, and students with more severe communication difficulties were not represented. To build upon this work, future research should incorporate larger, more diverse samples and utilise multiple data sources within longitudinal or mixed-method designs. Additionally, exploring culturally grounded coping processes, such as those within Islamic educational contexts, would provide a more nuanced understanding of inclusive practices across diverse educational settings in Malaysia.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this study.

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