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Beyond Behavior: Understanding ADHD Burnout and the Need for Belonging in UAE Schools

Muhammad Hossain¹  | Justine Bain^{2,3} 

¹Birmingham City University, Birmingham, UK | ²University of Wolverhampton, Wolverhampton, UK | ³School Counsellor, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Correspondence: Muhammad Hossain (muhammad.hossain@bcu.ac.uk)

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ABSTRACT

Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is one of the most common neurodevelopmental disorders in the UAE and poses specific difficulties in school settings. There is a wide gap in researching internationally, and within the UAE specifically, ADHD burnout, defined as emotional fatigue and mental overwhelm, is an emerging concept. Despite growing awareness, ADHD burnout is under-researched and poorly addressed in education systems. This qualitative study explores parents' views on ADHD burnout and its connection to the children's sense of belonging in schools in the UAE. Informed by Social Identity Theory and Cognitive Load Theory, the study aims to understand how these theories, when combined, impact the students' experiences. Eight parents took part in four online focus groups, and discussions were analyzed through reflexive thematic analysis. Four key themes were identified: (1) Assailable humans—feelings of overwhelm and the struggle to fit in; (2) Behavior as communication—manifestations of social isolation; (3) The surrounding ecology—supportive relationships versus lack of understanding; and (4) Collective assistance—challenges in maintaining pace with peers. The findings emphasize the need to address ADHD burnout and school belonging, highlighting the need of met staff training and policy initiatives aimed at fostering neuro-affirming practices in inclusive schools.

1 | Introduction

Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a common neurodevelopmental condition that typically manifests in childhood and often persists into adulthood (American Psychiatric Association 2013). ADHD is associated with inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity that negatively impact academic achievement, social integration, and emotional well-being (Cheesman et al. 2022). While the global prevalence of ADHD ranges from 5% to 11% (American Psychiatric Association 2013; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC] 2020), research within the United Arab Emirates (UAE) highlights a persistent underdiagnosis and limited awareness (Al-Yateem et al. 2023). Despite a well-developed healthcare system (Al-Yateem et al. 2023), ADHD often remains formally undiagnosed, particularly among expatriate families who rely on private

services. The absence of centralized data collection contributes to knowledge gaps about ADHD prevalence, symptom presentation, and the educational challenges faced by children and young people (CYP) with ADHD in the UAE (Al-Yateem et al. 2023).

ADHD can significantly disrupt CYP educational experiences. In the UAE, students with ADHD frequently encounter barriers to academic success, often exacerbated by limited teacher understanding and inconsistent school policies on inclusion (McDougal et al. 2023). Particularly, private schools are able to function independently, which results in different ways of addressing and coping with ADHD. In the absence of formal diagnostic labels being provided by parents (typically because of stigma or cost), these children are likely to receive insufficient support, which may result in declined academic performance and increased social isolation (Cheesman et al. 2022).

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Practitioner Points

- Recognize and respond to ADHD burnout: ADHD burnout—characterized by emotional detachment, low participation, and high withdrawal—significantly lowers belonging for students. Practitioners must know how to respond to the early signs of burnout and provide appropriate support.
- Promote an inclusive sense of belonging: Building a positively reinforcing and accepting school culture is crucial in promoting the feeling of affinity among students diagnosed with ADHD. As an example, improving the quality of student–teacher interactions and peer relationships may mitigate the impact of burnout.
- Provide targeted and ongoing staff training: Comprehensive training on ADHD awareness and management is critical for school staff. Continuous professional development can enhance understanding, reduce stigma, and equip educators with practical strategies to support neurodivergent learners effectively.

ADHD is a prevalent neurodevelopmental condition that poses unique challenges within school environments. In the UAE, where private schools dominate the educational landscape, the management of ADHD remains inconsistent and underexplored. This study seeks to address these gaps by examining the interplay between ADHD burnout and a sense of belonging (SOB) within private school settings, drawing on parental perspectives. The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform targeted interventions and policies that foster inclusive practices and improve outcomes for children with ADHD. A SOB is a crucial aspect of school life that directly correlates to academic achievement and mental well-being (Fernández et al. 2023). It enhances the student's ability to be self-motivated, bounce back from setbacks, and maintain good mental health (Fisher et al. 2023). On the contrary, a feeling of absence of belonging leads to disengagement and withdrawal from the school community (Kalkan and Dağlı 2021). For learners with ADHD, school belonging is often difficult to achieve because of issues in social interactions, bullying, and fitting within the contorted school frame (Korpershoek et al. 2020). In the UAE, the implementation of policies is lacking, and private schools show a major gap in fostering belonging for students with neurodevelopmental disorders (Samways et al. 2019). These difficulties are made worse by sociocultural stigma, especially concerning neurodevelopmental conditions, resulting in increased social isolation (Ilyas et al. 2021).

ADHD burnout is a new term used to define the ongoing bodily, emotional, and mental exhaustion caused by residing in an ADHD symptom management “hyper” state (Donaghy et al. 2023; West 2023). Initially considered under the scope of work-related burnout models (Maslach and Jackson 1981), ADHD burnout encompasses enduring overwhelm along with a profound sense of diminished self-efficacy followed by withdrawal (Madigan et al. 2024). Students with ADHD are particularly prone to experiencing burnout due to poor symptom management in school, accentuated by academic stress and social ostracism (Kuttner 2023). There is significant evidence of research on ADHD burnout, particularly among adults in

Western contexts (Morgan 2023; Oshima et al. 2024), but little has been done regarding children and adolescents—and even less in the case of non-Western countries like the UAE.

School culture—defined by shared values, beliefs, and practices of school staff—plays a central role in fostering or hindering student belonging (Čamber Tambolaš et al. 2023). In the UAE, private schools operate under the regulatory oversight of the Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA), which monitors attendance and academic results but lacks comprehensive neurodiversity inclusion mandates (Samways et al. 2019). As a result, ADHD inclusion policies and teacher training are inconsistent (Massouti et al. 2024). While some schools implement progressive practices, many rely on deficit-based approaches that emphasize compliance rather than support (Schuck and Fung 2024).

This study is underpinned by Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel 1978) and Cognitive Load Theory (CLT) (Sweller 1988).

- SIT explains how group membership influences self-perception and belonging (Tajfel and Turner 1979). SIT is critical for understanding how CYP with ADHD perceive themselves within school communities, particularly when they feel excluded or stigmatized.
- CLT highlights how the cognitive demands placed on students with ADHD—both academically and socially—contribute to overwhelm and burnout (Sweller 1994; Fisher et al. 2023). These theories were used to inform the data collection and interpretation phases, providing a lens through which to understand the interaction between ADHD burnout and school belonging.

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is increasingly recognized as a significant challenge within educational settings, particularly in the UAE, where cultural and systemic barriers often hinder effective support for children with ADHD. This study addresses the critical problem of insufficient understanding and implementation of inclusive practices for ADHD in UAE schools. Drawing on the second author's extensive experience as a school counselor, as well as the both authors' combined expertise as educators and researchers in this field, the study highlights the urgent need for evidence-based strategies to foster inclusivity and mitigate the negative impacts of ADHD on children's academic and social outcomes. By situating this problem within the broader context of educational reform in the UAE, the study underscores its relevance to policymakers, educators, and parents alike.

Alongside the international recognition of challenges concerning students with ADHD, there is little literature on ADHD burnout in children and adolescents, especially regarding how school belonging is associated with this phenomenon, gauged in the context of the UAE. There is a lack of local data to support educators and policymakers in developing neuro-affirming schooling frameworks (Al-Yateem et al. 2023). Additionally, the contribution of parents as active participants in understanding the children's lived experiences has not been explored in depth.

This study aims to address these research problems by analyzing parents' perceptions of their children's ADHD

burnout and school belonging in private schools in the UAE. Parents have a distinct advantage of witnessing their child's experiences, and they can evaluate the schools' contributions toward reducing or increasing burnout (Dekkers et al. 2021; Kruger 2023). The results advance both local and international knowledge regarding ADHD burnout and social belonging in schools and inform relevant policy and practice.

This study explores the following research questions:

- How do parents perceive ADHD burnout in their children within UAE private school settings?
- How do parents perceive their children's SOB in school, and how is it related to experiences of ADHD burnout?

2 | Aims

This study aims to comprehend ADHD burnout and school belonging through the views of parents with children studying in private schools in the UAE. To comply with the ethical guidelines of working with CYP (British Psychological Society [BPS] 2021), the vantage point of the parent perspective was used to capture exhaustively the ADHD concern and school interaction. This concern impacts how well children with ADHD are integrated into school life and the attention they receive. All parents invariably participate in the diagnosis of ADHD, and they provide crucial insight into the educational environment and life of the child socially in terms of belonging.

3 | Methodology

Regarding this qualitative study, an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach was implemented to assess how parents of children in private schools in the UAE perceive ADHD-related burnout and its impact on belonging. This approach was selected considering the attention to lived experiences and the need to achieve positively transformative ends, which was the goal for observing phenomena of ADHD burnout from parents' perspectives (Alhazmi and Kaufmann 2022; Burns et al. 2022). IPA was complemented by Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) that was designed for the purpose of data analysis because of its effectiveness in capturing patterns across multiple data sets (Braun and Clarke 2019). Online interviews and focus groups (OIs and OFGs) were utilized as all-encompassing data collection methods physically situated across the UAE (Flynn et al. 2018). Throughout the course of the study, reflexivity was comprehensively maintained in all stages of the study to deal with bias considerations. The school counselors in the UAE are specialized in aiding families with children who have ADHD, and they perceive biases, actively work toward transparency and clear biases (Olmos-Vega et al. 2023). Boundaries were always respected and followed as laid down by the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) (2023), ethical respect, competence, responsibility, and integrity.

3.1 | Participants

A purposive sampling strategy was utilized to recruit participants who had experience pertinent to the objectives of the study (Etikan et al. 2015). Inclusion criteria stipulated that participants must be parents of children within the 5–18 age range who had a formal ADHD diagnosis and were enrolled as full-time students in the UAE. Ultimately, eight parents (both genders) were part of the final sample. Thirteen parents expressed initial interest but most encountered scheduling challenges because of Ramadan and Iftar, resulting in participant attrition at one point or another, leaving a final sample of eight.

In relation to the IPA methodological framework, the sample size suggests an optimal scale between 5 and 25 participants, enough to provide rich, detailed accounts, yet remain feasible for in-depth analysis (Creswell and Plano Clark 2007; Saunders et al. 2018; Hossain 2020). This was appropriate considering the study's phenomenological stance. Unlike for general qualitative research, where the approach's sample size recommendation fluctuates depending on design and research question, this orienting lack was a guiding concern.

Once consent was obtained, participants were assigned anonymised identifiers (P1 to P8) to ensure confidentiality during data analysis. This approach balanced convenience in recruitment with strict adherence to ethical guidelines for data protection and anonymity. Limited demographic data were collected to protect confidentiality and avoid potential ethical complications related to sensitive data interpretation in non-Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (non-WEIRD) populations (Call et al. 2023; BPS 2021).

3.2 | Recruitment and Materials

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling. Initial contact was made via WhatsApp, a widely used communication platform in the UAE, to disseminate the study's information sheet and consent forms. Flynn et al. (2018) cite the geographical dispersion of the population as one of the reasons for convenience sampling. As part of the recruitment, participant information sheets detailing the objectives, processes, ethical issues, rights, and signed consent forms that required electronic signatures from the participants and the researcher were circulated.

The study was conducted using semi-structured interviews and focus group sessions. The SIT (Tajfel and Turner 1979) and the CLT (Sweller 1988) frameworks provided fundamental concepts, and prior studies on belonging and burnout (Allen, Slaten, et al. 2021; Godfrey-Harris and Shaw 2023; Popescu et al. 2024) shaped the guides. Topics included participants' perceptions of their child's experiences with school belonging, overwhelm, social interactions, teacher support, and ADHD-related interventions. Open-ended questions were designed to minimize response bias and facilitate rich, reflective discussion.

3.3 | Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Wolverhampton Ethics Committee. In addition, the study adhered to UAE legal and ethical standards, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF 1989) and Wadeema's Law (UAE Federal Law No. 3, 2016). Ethical procedures aligned with the British Psychological Society's Code of Human Research Ethics (BPS 2021), covering informed consent, confidentiality, data security, and participants' right to withdraw. Data storage complied with UK and Dubai data protection regulations, with all digital files stored on encrypted, password-protected devices.

3.4 | Data Collection

Data were collected between February and March 2024 through a combination of online focus groups (OFGs) and online interviews (OIs) to accommodate participants' schedules and the geographical dispersion of the sample. Four OFGs were initially planned, but due to low attendance—attributed to scheduling conflicts during Ramadan—the second author (J.B.) facilitated two fully attended OFGs and conducted six individual OIs as an adaptive strategy (Bolin et al. 2023).

All sessions were conducted via Microsoft Teams and followed a structured yet flexible guide to ensure consistency while allowing for emergent narratives (Turner and Pratkanis 1998; Luke and Goodrich 2019). Audio-only recordings were used in adherence to UAE's cybercrime laws and to protect participant anonymity. Sessions began with rapport building and an overview of the study's aims. Participants were reminded of their rights and consented again verbally before the recording. Verbatim transcripts were generated using Microsoft Teams' transcription feature and subsequently cross-checked for accuracy.

3.5 | Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using RTA (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2019), supported by NVivo 12 qualitative software (QSR International 2013) to enhance the rigor and transparency of the analytic process. An inductive, data-driven approach was taken, consistent with IPA's emphasis on lived experience and meaning-making.

The six-phase RTA process involved:

1. Familiarization with the data through multiple readings of the transcripts.
2. Generation of initial codes, facilitated by NVivo's coding functionality, allowing for efficient organization of meaningful data extracts (QSR International 2013).
3. Development of potential themes by analyzing patterns and relationships across codes, visually represented in thematic maps.
4. Refinement and definition of themes, ensuring clarity, coherence, and distinctiveness, with thematic evolution documented in the final coding table.

5. Naming and describing themes in detail, using representative quotations from participants.
6. Producing a narrative that contextualized the findings within the framework of SIT and CLT, illuminating the complex interplay between ADHD burnout, belonging, and the school environment.

The iterative and reflexive nature of this process allowed for the exploration of nuanced interpretations while maintaining fidelity to participants' lived experiences. Four overarching themes and seven sub-themes emerged, illustrated in Figure 1 below.

3.6 | Reflexivity and Bias Mitigation

The potential for researcher bias was carefully considered due to the second author's (J.B.) dual role as both a UAE-based school counselor and the researcher. To address this, reflexivity was prioritized throughout the research process. Other strategies that were used include maintaining a reflexive journal, peer debriefing, and active listening to neutralize bias and improve the interpretative legitimacy of the results (Olmos-Vega et al. 2023). During the data collection, open-ended questions were used to reduce the chances of steering respondents toward a particular mindset or applying preset frameworks (BACP 2023). Furthermore, the second author revealed their professional role to participants at the beginning in an effort to maintain transparency and build trust. Participants were invited to offer diverse opinions, including favorable as well as unfavorable experiences within their children's school contexts. However, as noted in the study's limitations, some participants may have opted to highlight negative experiences as a way of protecting their children, which was not intended.

4 | Results

The present study highlighted four themes that encapsulate the experiences of CYP with ADHD in the eyes of their parents. These themes: Assailable Humans, Behavior Is Communication, The Surrounding Ecology, and Collective Assistance, encapsulate the myriad psychosocial difficulties confronted by CYP, particularly concerning ADHD psychosocial exhaustion alongside SOB within the school sphere. Their experiences and feelings are categorized into various themes and sub-themes which constitute the complex realities of their lived experiences with ADHD as shown in Figure 1, a thematic map depicting the relationships between the different conceptual elements. It depicts the interplay between personal factors including overwhelm and fitting in, social factors such as social exclusion, and school ecology characterized by supportive yet unsupportive relationships and understanding. In addition, the themes were examined through the lenses of two theories: CLT (Sweller 1988), and SIT (Tajfel and Turner 1979). According to the CLT, overload profoundly affects CYPs' emotional self-regulation and their learning capacities, which often results in feeling overwhelmed and burned out. SIT, in contrast, describes how

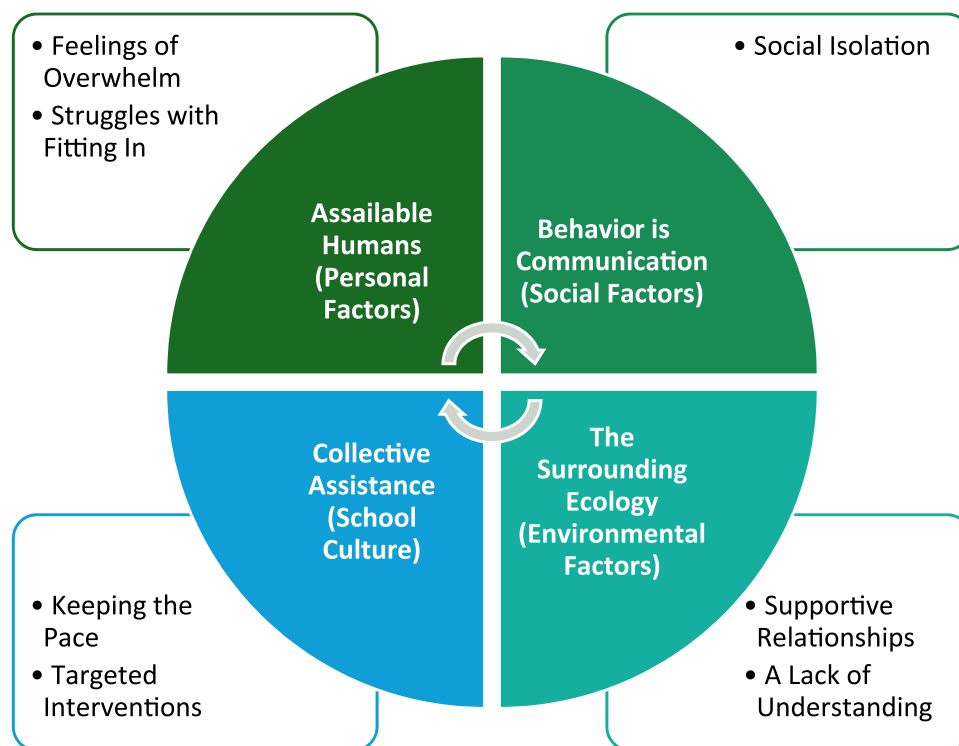


FIGURE 1 | Thematic map showing the relationship between ADHD burnout and school belonging. This figure visually represents the four overarching themes and their sub-themes, illustrating the dynamic interconnections as perceived by parents of children with ADHD.

group membership and identity profoundly affect social interactions and provide a SOB in educational contexts. Through the integration of a framework, the thematic analysis uncovers the intricate relationships between cognitive demands, social identity, and ADHD burnout within situational constructs.

4.1 | Main Theme 1: Assailable Humans

The theme Assailable Humans encompasses personal factors contributing to the vulnerability of CYP with ADHD to burnout. Parents described how internal struggles, including negative self-perceptions and the pressure to conform to social norms, increased their children's emotional exhaustion. This theme closely aligns with CLT, as CYP appear to experience cognitive overload, particularly when faced with high demands for emotional self-regulation and academic performance. SIT is also relevant here, as CYP efforts to “fit in” reflect attempts to establish a valued social identity within the peer group.

4.1.1 | Subtheme 1: Feelings of Overwhelm

This subtheme reflects the emotional and cognitive overload experienced by CYP, as described by parents. Feelings of overwhelm were cited by all participants, indicating the significant mental and emotional effort required of their children to navigate school life.

Negative view of his perception of himself.
(P2)

My son just felt stupid.
(P3)

She tends to think negatively about herself and school in general now.
(P7)

Even when self-confidence was reported, parents noted that their children required recovery time to manage emotional exhaustion—evidence of the intrinsic and extraneous cognitive loads described in CLT:

He needs recovery time at the end of every day.
(P5)

He was struggling with his own coping mechanisms.
(P6)

If he's feeling very overwhelmed, he actually can't get out of that zone.
(P1)

This subtheme illustrates the interplay between unmanaged cognitive demands and emotional dysregulation, key components of CLT (Sweller 1988).

4.1.2 | Subtheme 2: Struggles With Fitting in

Parents described their children's efforts to conform to social norms and gain peer acceptance. These experiences map

directly onto SIT, which posits that belonging to valued groups shapes self-concept and social behavior (Tajfel and Turner 1979).

We started to see the gaps in his learning and his ability to kind of fit in socially.

(P6)

She is always trying so hard to fit in.

(P7)

Efforts to “fit in” highlight the tension between individual identity and group belonging, often at the expense of authenticity—a distinction SIT addresses through its focus on in-group/out-group dynamics.

4.2 | Main Theme 2: Behavior Is Communication

This theme explores how CYP use behavior to communicate their internal experiences, particularly when they struggle to verbalize emotional distress. Parents reported behavioral expressions such as withdrawal, which they interpreted as coping strategies. This theme resonates with SIT, where failure to achieve social belonging often results in social withdrawal and isolation.

4.2.1 | Subtheme 1: Social Isolation

Social isolation emerged as a common behavioral response to overwhelm and burnout. Parents described their children's tendency to withdraw as a way to self-protect from the social demands and expectations of the school environment.

I'd get a call from the nurse saying he's got a headache, and I know that that's his way of escaping.

(P1)

It limits us as a family in doing an extracurricular activity because he needs recovery time at the end of every day.

(P5)

The social withdrawal described here reflects SIT's assertion that when CYP perceive themselves as outside of the in-group, they may disengage socially to avoid further rejection (Tajfel and Turner 1979).

4.3 | Main Theme 3: The Surrounding Ecology

This theme captures the environmental influences within the school that affect CYP experiences of belonging and burnout. Both SIT and CLT offer explanatory value here. Positive peer and teacher relationships bolster social identity and belonging (SIT), while a lack of understanding from school staff increases cognitive demands, contributing to overload and burnout (CLT).

4.3.1 | Subtheme 1: Supportive Relationships

Supportive peer groups and teacher relationships were identified as protective factors against burnout and isolation, reinforcing the importance of positive social identity formation (SIT).

A group of boys that really get each other and support each other. It's marvellous.

(P3)

The few teachers that he does respond well to or like, we definitely see an improvement academically.

(P6)

These examples illustrate how supportive environments foster inclusion and enhance CYP SOB, buffering against burnout.

4.3.2 | Subtheme 2: A Lack of Understanding

Conversely, parents consistently described deficits in staff understanding of ADHD, leading to inappropriate educational demands and exclusionary practices. This reflects increased extraneous cognitive load (CLT), making it harder for CYP to manage their symptoms in the classroom.

I think they should go in for training, because they don't understand it.

(P1)

Staff don't know how to handle those situations.

(P8)

This lack of understanding not only increases stress but reduces opportunities for CYP to integrate socially (SIT).

4.4 | Main Theme 4: Collective Assistance

This theme explores the systemic and cultural aspects of school environments that either support or hinder CYP participation and well-being. The connection to CLT is evident in how curriculum pacing affects cognitive load, while SIT helps explain the social consequences of perceived inclusion or exclusion.

4.4.1 | Subtheme 1: Keeping the Pace

Parents reported that their children struggled with the pace of schoolwork. Fast-paced learning environments contributed to cognitive overload (CLT), increasing the risk of burnout.

It was too fast-paced for him.

(P3)

When he could control his own pace.

(P6)

Tailoring the learning pace to individual cognitive capacity can reduce extraneous load and promote better learning outcomes (Sweller 1994).

4.4.2 | Subtheme 2: Targeted Interventions

Parents advocated for structured interventions, such as regular check-ins with supportive staff, to help their children manage daily challenges. These interventions can mitigate cognitive overload (CLT) and foster a greater SOB (SIT).

Sessions and interventions that would help with my child.
(P4)

Teachers he can email and say, please, can you take me for a walk?
(P1)

Proactive interventions help CYP integrate into the social environment, supporting both their academic engagement and social identity (Tajfel and Turner 1979).

4.4.3 | Summary

The results indicate a dynamic interplay between CLT and SIT in explaining the experiences of CYP with ADHD. Themes related to overwhelm and academic pacing align with CLT, while struggles with fitting in and social isolation are better understood through SIT. Together, these frameworks offer a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing ADHD burnout and school belonging.

5 | Discussion

This study offers a new perspective on the interplay between ADHD burnout and a SOB within school cultures, focusing on private schools in the UAE. The findings confirm and extend previous international research by offering context-specific insights into the UAE educational landscape. For CYP with ADHD, negative self-perception emerged as a key risk factor for burnout, corroborating earlier findings (Gallardo et al. 2022). In particular, unmanaged feelings of overwhelm were frequently identified by parents as leading contributors to ADHD burnout, in line with existing research that identifies poorly managed ADHD symptomology as a predictive factor (Kabigting 2019; Morgan 2023; Tigist 2023; Wheeler 2022).

This study also highlights the impact of social isolation, which is characterized by disengagement from peer groups and activities (Taylor et al. 2023). It is important to distinguish between “fitting in” and “belonging”: while “fitting in” often requires adaptation to external expectations, belonging entails authentic inclusion without such change (Brown 2021). These findings suggest that school belonging functions as a protective factor against social isolation, promoting feelings of social value and acceptance without the demand for conformity (Allen et al. 2024).

The relationship between social isolation and feelings of overwhelm underscores the buffering effect of belonging on unmanaged ADHD symptoms (Gopalan et al. 2022). These findings support SIT, which posits that group belonging fosters a positive self-concept (Tajfel and Turner 1979). When CYP with ADHD perceive themselves as valued members of a group, their SOB increases, mitigating the psychological toll of ADHD-related stressors.

The findings highlight the interplay between cognitive overload, social belonging, and environmental factors in shaping ADHD burnout. For example, the theme of “overwhelm” underscores how the absence of differentiated instruction exacerbates cognitive demands, consistent with CLT (Sweller 1988). Similarly, the theme of “social isolation” aligns with SIT (Tajfel and Turner 1979), emphasizing the importance of peer acceptance. These insights suggest that targeted interventions, such as teacher training and individualized support systems, are essential for mitigating ADHD burnout and fostering inclusion in UAE schools.

5.1 | Context-Specific Implications for UAE Private Schools

The UAE's school system is diverse, encompassing both public and private institutions. Private schools, which serve the majority of expatriate families, operate under various curricula (British, American, IB, etc.) and governance structures (UAE Government 2025). While all schools are encouraged to align with the UAE National Policy for Empowering People of Determination (UAE Government 2017), the implementation of inclusive practices varies widely between schools. The Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) inspections for private schools and Ministry of Education oversight for public schools evaluate the extent to which these guidelines are applied, but differences in resources, training, and leadership priorities can create inconsistencies.

In the context of private schools, parents in this study reported that ADHD diagnosis and support often depend on the individual school's policies and willingness to accommodate neurodivergent students. The lack of a unified strategic approach to ADHD for private school settings complicates the consistent identification, support, and intervention processes for learners with ADHD. Additionally, given that ADHD diagnoses in the UAE generally require private evaluations (Al-Yateem et al. 2023), some families may face financial barriers to support and identification. These systemic issues highlight the necessity of more coherent and comprehensive policies commensurate with the complexity of the challenges posed by neurodivergent learners across private schools.

5.2 | Teacher Training Needs

The data underscores the lack of attention given to ADHD and neurodiversity in both preservice and in-service training. Even with the inclusion mandates put forth by the KHDA, there is no formal, standardized requirement for training specific to ADHD

in private schools across the UAE (UAE Government 2025). Participants in this study reported a widespread lack of understanding and knowledge about ADHD among teachers, which is in line with prior literature concerning the exclusion and social isolation disabilities due to miseducative practices, including teacher biases, oversimplifications, and stereotypes (Ewe 2019; Krtek et al. 2022).

Foundational education curriculum should include modules on ADHD and neurodiversity in preservice teacher training. Continue professional development (CPD) programmes focused on ADHD should also be offered to current faculty members from all educational backgrounds and regardless of the curriculum taught. Training content should be developed in partnership with the KHDA and BPS-accredited programmes to make them applicable in all private schools. Moreover, ADHD Tips and Tricks in the Classroom (ATTIC) (2021) offers web-based resources for teachers, supporting them with the application of classroom management strategies through a neuro-affirming approach that Weisleder et al. (2023) endorse. As Rajotte et al. (2024) argue, the focus should shift from adapting the child to fit the school to adapting the school to meet the needs of neurodivergent students. This “neuroinclusive school model” emphasizes environmental and policy changes rather than deficit-based interventions targeting students’ perceived shortcomings.

5.3 | Policy Recommendations and Practical Implications

The study findings support the need for systemic policy reforms within private schools in the UAE to address ADHD-related challenges. Although the UAE government has made strides in promoting inclusive education (UAE Government 2017), there is a need for enforceable policies specifically addressing ADHD within private schools. Schools should develop Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) for students with ADHD, aligned with best practices and guided by evidence-based frameworks such as CLT (Sweller 1988, 2011).

Practical interventions should include:

- Mandatory CPD programmes on ADHD for all teaching staff.
- Clear policies ensuring the early identification and referral of ADHD cases.
- Establishment of inclusion teams tasked with monitoring student well-being and implementing neuro-affirming strategies.
- A shift toward flexible teaching methods and pacing adjustments to accommodate diverse learning needs, thereby reducing cognitive overload (Le Cunff et al. 2024).

Furthermore, awareness campaigns at the community and school leadership levels can help reduce stigma surrounding neurodiversity. Schoeman and Voges (2022) highlight how stigma acts as a barrier to care for ADHD populations; addressing this through teacher and parent education can facilitate more supportive environments.

5.4 | Contribution to Theory and Practice

This study contributes to the understanding of ADHD burnout and school belonging through the application of CLT and SIT. Sweller (1994) and Fisher et al. (2023) suggest that CYP with ADHD are especially vulnerable to cognitive overload, or cognitive burnout, in fast-paced learning environments. Group membership is in itself a source of stress and isolation, which can also be exacerbated by a lack of belonging (Verkuyten 2021). These theories helped frame the specific pedagogical strategies to be targeted, including paced learning cultures and affirming inclusive school identity systems.

Stigma, despite being one of the most anticipated findings, did not emerge as a dominant theme (Ilyas et al. 2021). This is surprising and perhaps marks an increase in awareness and acceptance, but not within the private school sample used in the study. The focus given to supporting communication by Bishop and High (2023) discusses stigma from the other side, which makes understanding within school communities so important.

6 | Conclusion

This study provided a detailed analysis of the association between ADHD burnout and belongingness from the lens of private schools in Dubai, UAE. Through the parents’ viewpoints, the findings highlight the complex issues faced by CYP with ADHD regarding their emotional health, including concerns about social functioning and participation in the wider school context.

The study identifies supportive relationships, individualized pacing systems, and neuro-affirming interventions as key protective factors that mitigate the risk of ADHD burnout and social isolation. These findings have significant practical implications for educators, school counselors, and support staff, offering evidence-based strategies to enhance school belonging and promote the overall well-being of CYP with ADHD.

Additionally, the research highlights existing gaps in current school practices, particularly the need for comprehensive and sustained training for teaching staff on ADHD awareness, management, and inclusive pedagogical approaches. Interventions such as individualized pacing strategies, as well as the implementation of resources like ATTIC (2021), which provide continuous support and professional development, are recommended to foster a more inclusive, understanding, and supportive school culture. Grounded in principles of positive psychology and tailored to the unique needs of neurodivergent learners, these interventions have the potential to reduce the incidence of ADHD burnout and improve educational outcomes.

While the study acknowledges its limitations—including a relatively small sample size and the focus on parental perspectives—the insights generated contribute meaningfully to the existing body of literature. These findings underscore the urgent need for policy and practice reforms in UAE private schools and offer recommendations that may be applicable in international contexts. By addressing the identified gaps and

implementing the proposed interventions, schools can more effectively support CYP with ADHD, promote their psychological well-being, and foster a genuine SOB within school communities.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.