

Neurodiverse perspectives on learning English in a secondary school context

Lena Blaskovich and Judit Kormos

This paper reports findings from a qualitative interview study conducted with nine neurodiverse students and eight of their teachers in a European secondary school context. Contrary to the results of previous studies, our teenage participants with attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) did not report reading difficulties in English and autistic students enjoyed peer interactions. However, both groups gave accounts of challenges with listening comprehension. Language learners with ADHD enjoyed creative, hands-on tasks but struggled with focus and emotional regulation. Autistic students excelled in structured tasks and showed attention to detail, despite often being affected by sensory sensitivities and changes in routine. Language teachers cited frequent disruptions, inconsistent academic performance, and emotional regulation difficulties among their neurodiverse students as key challenges. Several felt underprepared due to limited training in inclusive education and institutional barriers. Nevertheless, teachers highlighted the value of professional development, collaboration with parents, and fostering strong student relationships.

Key words: neurodiversity, attention deficit and hyperactivity, autism, inclusive language teaching, language learning processes

Introduction

In many European and global contexts students from diverse linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds often learn together. However, teachers frequently feel unprepared to address neurodiversity, defined as ‘human variation in perception and communication styles’ (Goldberg 2023: 972), which encompasses learning differences such as dyslexia, attention

deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and autism spectrum disorder (ASD). With approximately one in 100 children aged five to eighteen identified as being on the autism spectrum (Fombonne 2018) and seven in 100 children with ADHD (Salari et al. 2023), neurodiverse learners are present in nearly every classroom.

Existing research often focuses on the experiences of adult neurodiverse learners and the perspectives of parents and teachers (e.g. Clark and Adams 2020; Goldberg 2023; Mirenda et al. 2024). Consequently, there is a scarcity of studies concerning children and adolescents in school settings—contexts in which neurodiverse characteristics are frequently evident and significantly impact daily life. Without direct insights from neurodiverse students themselves, there is a risk of overlooking their strengths and challenges, both of which are crucial for implementing effective language teaching methodologies.

Neurodiverse learners often face bias due to behavioural traits and inconsistent academic performance, which can negatively affect teachers' perceptions of their abilities (Loe and Feldman 2007). Language teachers need greater awareness of both the challenges and strengths of these students to foster inclusive and supportive learning environments.

To address this research gap, our study investigated the strengths, challenges, and learning experiences of neurodiverse students with ASD and ADHD in English language classrooms in a European secondary school context (RQ1). We also examined the types of learning strategies and external resources these students use, as well as the support they receive in language learning (RQ2). Furthermore, we explored language teachers' challenges in supporting neurodiverse learners and the strategies they employed (RQ3). By comparing students' and teachers' perspectives, we identify potential discrepancies, analyse the challenges of teaching neurodiverse learners, and suggest instructional strategies to address these challenges.

Review of literature

The challenges of students with ASD and ADHD

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities defines disability as a socially constructed barrier that 'may hinder full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others'. According to this interactional view of disability, students' diverse characteristics and abilities may pose learning challenges if educational systems do not adapt to their needs. From a social justice perspective, neurodiverse conditions such as ASD and ADHD are part of the naturally occurring diversity of human cognitive development and functioning. This conceptualization recognizes the diversity of the lived experiences and identities of neurodiverse individuals. Inclusive pedagogies and educational initiatives aim to remove barriers to the full and effective participation of neurodiverse students and to support their academic success.

Despite legal commitments to inclusive education, autistic students often face spatial, social, cognitive, or academic challenges in school settings, resulting in substantial barriers for equitable access in education. For example, autistic adolescents frequently report feeling

overwhelmed in crowded school environments due to heightened sensory stimuli, pervasive noise, and frequent changes in classrooms and teachers (Tesfaye et al. 2023). Socially, parents identify communicative situations as key obstacles for neurodiverse students, which often derive from lack of supportive school resources or adjustments (Clark and Adams 2020). Negative experiences with teachers or peers can lead to a decline in mental health and increased anxiety, while difficulties with organization, rigid routines, and awkward social behaviour may also hinder effective participation in group work and result in peer rejection (Tesfaye et al. 2023). Previous research has also found that autistic students may experience difficulties in learning additional languages, including challenges with pragmatics such as understanding context, tone, or social cues and with the use of non-literal language such as irony or metaphors.

Students with ADHD may also experience difficulties in school settings because daily tasks and expectations typically require concentration and attention. These difficulties can be aggravated if frontal and traditional language teaching methods are used (Köder et al. 2024). Individuals with ADHD often have difficulties with hyperactivity and regulating emotions, which may manifest in temper tantrums and result in arguments with peers and teachers. Other challenges include following directions and controlling the urge to move (Kačdonek-Crnjaković 2024). Teachers frequently describe the classroom behaviour of students with ADHD as disruptive and cite issues such as interrupting classmates and difficulty waiting their turn, which can strain peer relationships (Fabiano et al. 2009; Köder et al. 2024). Kačdonek-Crnjaković (2018) further highlights that language learners with ADHD might struggle with task completion, time management, and understanding the expectations of their teachers. Inconsistent academic performance, where students excel one day and struggle the next, is another common characteristic of students with ADHD (Loe and Feldman 2007). Previous studies found that adult L2 learners with ADHD might find reading in an L2 demanding (Köder et al. 2024), which was also confirmed by reports of primary and secondary school teachers in Kačdonek-Crnjaković's (2024) research. Difficulties of adult learners with ADHD related to processing verbal information, maintaining focus, and selecting key details can also influence the understanding of listening texts (Köder et al. 2024). In addition, adult students with ADHD reported challenges with memorizing complex lexical and grammatical structures and with spelling, content planning, and maintaining coherence while writing in their L2 (Köder et al. 2024).

The strengths of students with ASD and ADHD

From a neurodiversity perspective, it is also important to highlight the strengths of students with ASD and ADHD. Clark and Adams (2020) found that parents of autistic children often recognize their strengths, such as outstanding memory skills, focus, and attention to detail, as well as honesty, loyalty, and empathy. Similarly, teachers in Mirenda et al.'s (2024) longitudinal study acknowledged the independence and originality of autistic students. Autistic adolescents themselves identified their ability to focus on specific interests, memory for detail, and creative viewpoints as advantages (Tesfaye et al. 2023).

As regards language learning, parents of autistic children often highlight their strengths such as attention to detail, which might help them notice and memorize grammar rules, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Furthermore, autistic children and adolescents frequently have special interests which, in some cases, may include learning an additional language or using another language to pursue that interest. However, to our knowledge, no previous studies have conducted interviews to gain insights directly from autistic L2 learners themselves.

Recent studies have also aimed to identify the positive characteristics of students with ADHD. In some studies, children with ADHD viewed their neurodiversity as a positive asset and described a variety of inter- and intrapersonal strengths, such as the ability to control their behaviour and pride in their accomplishments. Researchers have also highlighted the importance of cognitive dynamism, including hyper-focus—intense concentration and mental flow—which fosters creativity and enjoyment for individuals with ADHD. Köder et al.'s (2024) recent study with adult Norwegian language learners with ADHD showed that hyperfocus can spark interest in learning languages, although this interest is not always sustained.

In language learning contexts, adults with ADHD frequently describe themselves as being creative in their use of language, which benefits their writing and the acquisition of new vocabulary. Furthermore, Sparks et al. (2008) found that college-age students with ADHD, if they did not have additional learning difficulties such as dyslexia, achieved similar results to their peers. However, most previous research on ADHD and L2 learning focused on adult or college-age students or teachers' perspectives, and we currently lack information on how younger language learners view their challenges and strengths in classroom learning contexts.

Method

Context and participants

Our study is an interview-based case study conducted in an Austrian lower secondary school (middle school) in Vienna. The participants of our research were students and teachers whose perspectives allowed us to gain insights into how educational contextual factors might interact with characteristics of disabilities. In the investigated school type, students can choose from three main curricular strands: arts, sports, or information technology. In accordance with the Austrian middle school system, two teachers simultaneously teach one class in the three main subjects (English, German, and maths), which allows for the division of students into smaller learning groups and ensures that additional support during lessons is available.

The nine students interviewed for the study were between eleven and fourteen years old (see Table 1), attending classes from Grade 6 to Grade 8. Eight participants were male and one female, reflecting the fact that for girls ADHD and ASD are often undiagnosed in childhood. All participants had been officially identified as having either ADHD or ASD. Seven out of nine interviewees were taught in an integrative classroom with a focus on creativity, while one attended a mainstream classroom with a focus on sports and another with a focus on information technology. Eight

Participant	Age	Gender	Grade	Neurodiversity	L1
Student 1	12	Male	7	ADHD	German
Student 2	14	Male	9	AS	Russian
Student 3	13	Male	8	AS	German
Student 4	14	Male	9	AS	Turkish
Student 5	13	Male	8	ADHD	German
Student 6	12	Male	6	AS	German
Student 7	11	Male	6	ADHD	German
Student 8	12	Male	6	AS	German
Student 9	12	Female	7	AS	German/Romanian bilingual

TABLE 1 The relevant demographic characteristics of the student participants

participants were male and one female. The participant sample reflected the multilingual nature of classrooms in Vienna, with two students having an L1 other than German and one female student being a balanced German–Romanian bilingual. The multilingual participants all had high levels of German proficiency, which allowed them to follow the curriculum in German.

The eight teacher participants were between twenty-eight and fifty-eight years old and had been teaching English at the school between three months and twelve years. The teachers differed in teaching experience, second-subject combinations, and educational background, but all of them had experience working with neurodiverse students during their career (see Table 2 for more information on the teachers' background). Except for one teacher, all spoke German as their L1.

Instruments and procedures

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews. The interviews with students were conducted in a one-on-one setting to ensure they felt comfortable sharing their experiences. The teachers were interviewed in focus groups consisting of two groups of three and one group of two. This method was used to encourage an interactive exchange of ideas among the teachers and to discuss shared challenges and strategies for supporting neurodivergent learners. All interviews were conducted in German.

The interview guide for the student and teacher interviews consisted of a total of nine main questions, each with three follow-up questions. One focus group meeting was held online, and all other interviews were conducted in person. The teacher focus group interviews lasted approximately one hour, while the individual student interviews varied between eleven and twenty-one minutes. The interviews were transcribed into German and analysed in the original language using thematic analysis.

Results and discussion

Strengths, challenges, and language learning experiences of neurodiverse students

Our first research question (RQ1) enquired into the strengths, challenges, and language learning experiences of neurodiverse students with ASD and ADHD in learning English in an Austrian middle school. The findings revealed both expected and unexpected patterns in students' experiences. For example, students with ADHD reported strong reading comprehension

Participant	Age	Gender	Years of teaching experience	Years of experience in inclusive classrooms	Other subject	Teaching qualification
Teacher 1	28	Female	2	0	Philosophy	BEd degree
Teacher 2	37	Male	5	0	History	MA degree
Teacher 3	58	Female	38	3	Music	Teacher training college degree
Teacher 4	30	Female	3	3	History	BEd degree
Teacher 5	55	Female	12	12	History	Teacher training college degree
Teacher 6	34	Female	6	3	Biology	MA degree
Teacher 7	38	Female	11	0	–	MA degree
Teacher 8	46	Female	22	1	German	Teacher training college degree

TABLE 2 The relevant demographic characteristics of the teacher participants

skills, whereas previous studies hypothesized that ADHD would be associated with L2 reading difficulties (Kačdonek-Crnjaković 2018). Similarly, although prior research frequently described students with ASD as socially withdrawn (e.g., Clark and Adams 2020), participants in our study reported enjoying pair and group work as well as peer conversations. Smaller class sizes, familiarity with peers and the possibility that teachers implement these activities in a more structured way taking the students' neurodiversity into account might explain the reported higher enjoyment.

Another novel finding of our study was that participants with ASD and ADHD highlighted issues with listening comprehension, scanning a text for information and pronouncing various words. Although several participants described vocabulary learning as their strength, two interviewees reported challenges with lexical retention, disproving general assumptions about outstanding memory skills of autistic learners often held by teachers or parents (cf. Clark and Adams 2020). These results highlight that teachers' perspectives of language learning challenges investigated in previous research (e.g. Kačdonek-Crnjaković 2024) might differ from those of the learners and underscore the importance of insights gained from neurodiverse students themselves. Furthermore, they also indicate that profiles of autistic L2 learners regarding memory abilities might vary, and therefore it is important that teachers are aware of this variability and the specific individual characteristics of their neurodiverse students.

Despite these discrepancies, several of our findings aligned with observations from previous research. Students with ADHD performed well in creative tasks, storytelling, hands-on activities, and speaking tasks, but struggled with concentration, emotional regulation, and inconsistent performance (e.g. Kačdonek-Crnjaković 2024; Reaser et al. 2007). Their ability to reflect on their learning processes, especially when receiving

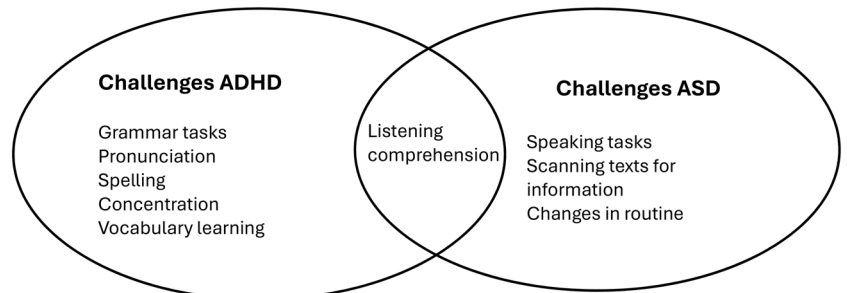
targeted, specialized support and help from parents, was highlighted as a positive trait by several teacher interviewees.

Autistic students displayed independence in task completion, and heightened attention to detail, preferring structured tasks such as grammar learning activities. Their logical thinking and appreciation for rule-based tasks were emphasized by both teachers and students. In some cases, autistic learners excelled in digital media use and were recognized as technologically confident by their teachers. However, their reliance on routine often led to emotional distress when faced with unexpected changes and sensory sensitivities, which impacted their ability to process auditory information. Challenges with scanning texts, holding conversations in English, and reacting spontaneously during speaking tasks further demonstrated the need for clearly structured, predictable language learning environments tailored to their learning profiles (see Figures 1 and 2 for a summary of the challenges and strengths of the interviewed students).

Our findings also revealed similarities as well as differences across the language learning experiences of students with ADHD and ASD. Most participants, regardless of the type of their neurodiversity, considered the English classroom a suboptimal learning environment, citing distractions such as noise and misbehaviour from classmates, which were mentioned in previous studies (e.g. Tesfaye et al. 2023). While several interviewees preferred studying alone in quiet settings such as their bedrooms, only two students favoured the home environment over the classroom due to limited family support for language learning and additional distractions at home.

In terms of learning formats, most students preferred working with a partner, particularly if it was a friend, while other students, especially those with ADHD, appreciated working in small groups. An interesting finding was that students with ASD expressed a preference for pair work, which contrasts with findings suggesting that they tend to avoid social interactions². Some autistic participants gave accounts of enjoying group work and conversations, which could be explained by the inclusive nature of their classroom, allowing them to connect with other neurodiverse students and the support of their classmates and teachers (Figure 3). Learners with ADHD frequently mentioned anxiety about grades and time pressure during tests, often struggling to achieve consistent performance, while those with

FIGURE 1
Challenges of
students with
ADHD and ASD



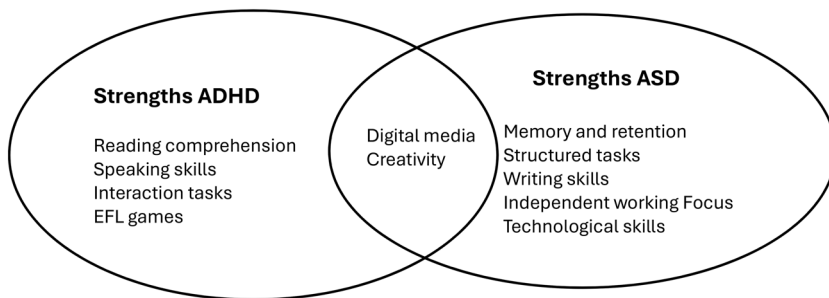
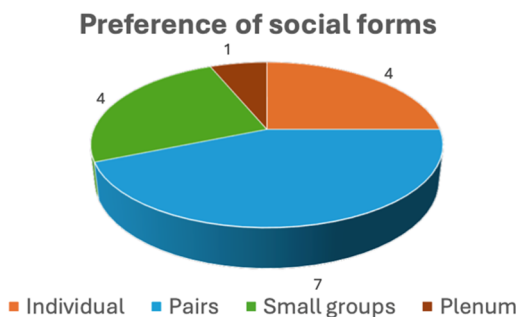


FIGURE 2
Strengths of students with ADHD and ASD

FIGURE 3
Preferences of participants regarding social forms of learning in class



ASD reported greater concentration in class despite distractions and expressed a preference for clear structures and predictable routines.

Strategies, external resources, and support neurodiverse students use in language learning

Our second research question (RQ2) explored the strategies, external resources, and support that students with ASD and ADHD used in language learning. Vocabulary learning was the key focus for learning strategies, with students with ADHD favouring active strategies such as reading aloud and self-testing, while those with ASD preferred more receptive techniques such as note-taking. Furthermore, self-regulation strategies differed considerably: students with ADHD were more likely to abandon difficult tasks, which aligns with [Kačdonek-Crnjaković's \(2024\)](#) findings, while autistic students attempted to work through their challenges. Both groups managed overstimulation by relocating to quieter spaces or using noise-cancelling headphones.

Our study showed that family members, tutors, classmates, as well as digital media served as the primary sources of support in language learning. While several students described their parents' English proficiency as rather limited, the majority mentioned parents and siblings as key resources for support, especially during preparation for school exams. Experiences with teacher support varied, with some students feeling valued and understood, while others reported that their coping strategies and individual needs were overlooked, which affected their confidence and concentration. Peer relationships were also described as playing a positive role, with

classmates offering academic and emotional support. This support was valued by both students with ADHD and ASD, despite the latter group often being characterized as more socially reserved and having fewer friendships (Tesfaye et al. 2023).

In listening and speaking tasks, autistic students relied on independent digital resources, whereas students with ADHD benefited from watching English-language videos or engaging in interactive online gaming. Digital tools such as Helbling Ezone, Anton, and Duolingo were popular among the participants, with gamified platforms enhancing engagement and focus, especially for students with ADHD (Reaser et al. 2007). However, preferences for traditional (non-digital) learning methods persisted among some participants. The participants' mixed opinions on the use of digital media mirror current debates, which include proponents advocating for the increased integration of digital tools to support learning and those recommending a reduction in screen time due to potential negative impacts (Westby 2021).

Teachers' perspectives on neurodiverse language learners

The third research question (RQ3) aimed to uncover the challenges faced by teachers in supporting neurodiverse learners and explored the strategies they employed to address these difficulties. From the teachers' perspective, supporting neurodiverse students in English language classes presented a range of complex challenges that required adaptive teaching approaches and considerable perseverance (Figure 3). Common concerns highlighted by the teachers included frequent disruptions to lessons and difficulties with emotional regulation in both groups of neurodiverse learners (Kałdonek-Crnjaković 2024). These difficulties further impacted students' language learning outcomes, leading to inconsistencies in their achievement and fluctuating academic performance. Educators repeatedly described these issues as disruptive to the flow of language classes, as well as posing barriers to the students' learning progress. In addition, several teachers stated that they felt underprepared for dealing with the challenges and cited insufficient training in inclusive teaching methods as a significant obstacle. These challenges might lead to negative bias among teachers toward students with ADHD and ASD and can potentially result in teachers emphasizing negative behaviours rather than reinforcing positive ones (Loe and Feldman 2007).

The interviews also revealed significant variation in knowledge and expertise regarding inclusion. Despite their varied educational backgrounds, the participating teachers expressed the need for more targeted professional development opportunities that would equip them with hands-on strategies for differentiation, behaviour management, and accommodating diverse learning needs effectively. This finding is in line with Kormos and Nijakowska's (2017) study, which concluded that effective training, experience, and knowledge of neurodiversity contribute to language teachers' self-efficacy in inclusive language teaching practices.

Institutional limitations further compounded language teachers' challenges. The participants pointed out that a lack of time, human resources, and teaching materials restricted their ability to implement tailored

interventions. For instance, large class sizes made it challenging to provide individual support, while limited access to specialized materials impeded the differentiation process. Despite these constraints, the teachers emphasized the importance of ongoing professional development and expressed a clear need for more training on inclusive education to better prepare them for diverse classrooms. Moreover, they underscored the value of collaboration with parents and other specialists, such as special education teachers and school psychologists, to create a cohesive support system for neurodiverse students. Maintaining positive relationships with students was viewed as a vital component in fostering a trusting and motivating learning environment.

Conclusion

Understanding the educational experiences of students with ASD and ADHD is crucial for creating an inclusive learning environment. Using qualitative thematic analysis of interviews with nine students and eight teachers, the study aimed to foreground students' perspectives and inform more inclusive language teaching practices. The findings of our study yield several important implications. First, the results highlight the necessity of adopting a strength-based approach to teaching neurodiverse learners. Rather than focusing on deficits, educators are encouraged to recognize and build on individual strengths associated with ASD and ADHD, such as creativity, attention to detail, and phases of heightened focus. This shift in perspective supports learner motivation, self-efficacy, and sustained engagement in the language learning process.

Concerning challenges, an unexpected finding of our study was that both groups of neurodiverse students reported difficulties with listening comprehension. Therefore, these learners might need more support in developing oral language comprehension skills through explicit instruction in metacognitive listening strategies. L2 learners with ADHD might benefit from guided listening activities and practising how to focus on specific detail and redirect their attention if they lose focus. Autistic students might find listening guides useful and can be taught how to use guessing and inferencing if they miss specific details.

Digital tools and gamified learning platforms can also support differentiation, individualized learning, and learner autonomy, especially for students with ADHD. However, their use should be balanced with the application of more traditional, non-digitally mediated learning strategies, because neurodiverse learners might find some of these tools overstimulating and distracting. Students with ADHD can be encouraged to use more active and multisensory learning strategies, while autistic students might be recommended more elaborative and receptive techniques such as note-taking.

Regarding language teaching methodology, the findings underscore the effectiveness of interactive, multisensory, and task-based instructional approaches in inclusive language learning contexts beyond primary school settings. These types of language learning activities were valued particularly by secondary school students with ADHD but can also support autistic L2 learners in this age group if they follow well-established routines and do not

create distraction and high levels of noise in the classroom. Furthermore, autistic students also reported enjoying pair and small-group work activities in familiar settings. Collaborative learning activities do not only foster L2 learning but can support the development of social skills of autistic secondary school students.

In terms of classroom management, the findings indicate that sensory and emotional factors play a decisive role in shaping the learning environment. Noise, overcrowding, and excessive stimuli were reported as major barriers to concentration and emotional regulation. Consequently, practical measures such as the provision of noise-cancelling headphones, access to quiet working spaces, and temporary withdrawal options can be valuable strategies for reducing overload and supporting self-regulation.

From the educators' standpoint, teachers cited frequent disruptions, inconsistent academic performance, and emotional regulation difficulties among their neurodiverse students as key challenges. Several felt underprepared due to limited training in inclusive education and institutional barriers, including insufficient time, staff, and resources, which further complicated efforts to implement effective differentiation. Nevertheless, teachers highlighted the value of professional development, collaboration with parents, and fostering strong student relationships, which are key components of inclusive teacher competencies.

This study offers valuable insights into the educational experiences of neurodiverse students and their teachers in a European middle school language learning context, but it is subject to some limitations. The small sample size and focus on a single school restrict the generalizability of findings. Furthermore, the complexity and variability of ASD and ADHD make it difficult to capture the full spectrum of experiences. Nonetheless, the research examined the lived experiences of neurodiverse students and their teachers in a bounded case study and as such yields relevant situational understanding that is transferable to other contexts.

Despite these limitations, the study highlights the importance of recognizing and supporting the strengths of neurodiverse language learners across educational contexts. Support systems, such as parents, tutors, teaching assistants, school psychologists, and peers, play a critical role in students' success. Teachers are encouraged to actively engage with these networks to enhance cooperation and support language learning. Fostering strong cooperation and communication within teaching teams can help reduce educator stress, enhance teacher well-being, support differentiated instruction, and allow more time to tailor instruction to the needs of neurodiverse learners.

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Notes

- 1 United Nations. 2008. *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Optional Protocol*. <https://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/convention/convoptprot-e.pdf>
- 2 World Health Organization. 2019. *International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (11th ed.)*. <https://icd.who.int/>

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