

Enhancing Attention through Contextual Creative Art Activities: A Case Study of Early Childhood Learners in a Southern Border School of Thailand

Ummul Ummah Tohlong¹, Nurnee Bukehmatee², Muhammadzofree Baru³

^{1,2,3}Department of Teaching Malay Language and Educational Technology, Faculty of Education, University Fatoni Thailand

¹t.ummah@ftu.ac.th, ²nurnee_bkt@ftu.ac.th, ³zoff.baru@ftu.ac.th

ARTICLE INFO

Submit	24-05-2025	Review	24-05-2025
Accepted	31-05-2025	Published	11-06-2025

ABSTRACT

This quasi-experimental classroom action research examined the effectiveness of creative art activities in enhancing attention among early childhood learners in Thailand's southern border provinces. The sample consisted of five kindergarten (K3) students from Ban Yaring School in Pattani Province, selected via purposive sampling based on preliminary attention assessments. Over a period of three months, participants engaged in 12 creative art sessions specifically designed to be developmentally appropriate and culturally relevant to the local Muslim context. Quantitative findings revealed a statistically significant improvement in children's attention levels ($p < .05$). Qualitative observations and interviews further indicated that children could concentrate on tasks for longer durations, exhibited better self-control, and parents reported a noticeable reduction in unnecessary screen time at home—demonstrating concrete positive changes in daily behavior. The study suggests that contextually relevant, age-appropriate creative art activities can serve as an effective tool for fostering attention development in young children, particularly within multicultural settings characterized by ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity.

Keyword : Creative Arts, Attention Development, Early Childhood Education,

1. Introduction

Attention is a fundamental skill essential for children's learning at all levels, particularly during early childhood when the brain develops rapidly and is highly responsive to environmental experiences. Children with good attention can better control themselves, listen effectively, and participate meaningfully in learning activities, establishing a crucial foundation that influences long-term development of language skills, mathematical abilities, social interactions, and intellectual growth.

In Thailand's southern border provinces, which represent a multicultural society with diverse ethnic groups, religions, and languages, early childhood learners face several factors that may affect their attention span. These include parents' limited knowledge about managing screen time and technology use by young children, lack of learning activities promoting creative hands-on experiences, and family and community environments that may not systematically support attention training.

From an Islamic perspective, cultivating children's akhlaq (ethics) and ikhlas (pure intention) in learning is considered a responsibility of both families and teachers. As Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) stated, "Every child is born in a state of fitrah (natural purity)" (narrated by Al-Bukhari). Cultivating attention and inner calmness is thus part of restoring the natural learning disposition of children according to Islamic teachings.

At the policy level, the Thai government has seriously emphasized early childhood development. The National Early Childhood Development Plan 2017-2027 focuses on developing executive functions (EF), which include attention, self-regulation, and systematic planning skills¹. This aligns with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4, which emphasizes quality and equitable education from early childhood, highlighting the importance of family and community participation within local cultural contexts¹.

The approach of enhancing attention through creative art activities is supported by several international research studies. Scholars suggest that art activities allowing

children to engage freely in expression, such as drawing, molding, painting, and crafting, can effectively develop children's ability to focus and control their behavior. Modern early childhood education concepts like the Whole Child Approach emphasize holistic child development covering emotional, social, intellectual, and physical aspects, with creative arts being central to this concept (Darling-Hammond et al., 2019; OECD, 2020)¹. OECD research (2020) further indicates that creative learning integrating arts clearly promotes children's attention, critical thinking, and adaptability for the 21st century¹.

However, for Thailand's context, particularly the southern border provinces, studies on using art activities to enhance attention remain limited. This research thus aims to design and test creative art activity sets appropriate for early childhood development and aligned with local cultural contexts, to effectively promote children's attention in the long term.

Research Objectives

The primary objective of this research is to study the effects of developmentally appropriate and culturally relevant creative art activities on attention levels of early childhood learners in Thailand's southern border provinces. A secondary objective is to explore supporting factors or barriers affecting children's attention in real-life contexts both in classrooms and at home, through qualitative data collection from teachers and parents.

Literature Review

Research and theories related to enhancing attention through creative art activities can be summarized as follows:

Diamond (2013) indicates that EF skills, including attention, can be developed through appropriate practice, such as art activities that challenge thinking and concentration abilities¹. Meanwhile, Posner, Rothbart, and Tang (2014) found that attention training through specially designed activities significantly increases children's attentional capacity¹.

Erikson's (1963) child development concept addresses the period when children need to initiate activities independently (Initiative vs. Guilt), noting that when children engage in appropriate creative activities, they develop confidence and self-worth¹. Similarly, Montessori (1967) emphasizes creating learning environments that allow children to act freely and use their senses fully, with art activities serving as important tools for promoting direct experiential learning¹.

Recent research by Darling-Hammond et al. (2019) proposes the Whole Child Approach framework, supporting the integration of creative activities into

balanced child development covering emotional, physical, social, and intellectual domains¹. This is reinforced by the OECD report (2020), emphasizing that 21st-century skills require development through direct, meaningful learning experiences¹.

In Muslim contexts, research shows that art activities aligned with religious principles and culture help build attention and positive behavior in children. Al-Jubouri and Al-Qaisy (2021) in Iraq found that art promotes calm behavior and attention following the principle of *tadabbur* (contemplation), while Ghani et al. (2020) in Malaysia confirmed that Islamic art activities enhance attention and social skills of Muslim children in rural peripheral areas¹.

In Thailand, evidence suggests that creative art activities positively impact early childhood attention. Research from Srinakharinwirot University (2021) found that interactive art games in kindergarten help children maintain focus and improve self-control in classrooms¹. Somphon Phuttharaksa's (2022) study of southern border schools found that art activities integrating local culture (such as batik pattern drawing and creating toys from local materials) significantly enhance both attention and cultural identity pride in children¹.

This study builds on this knowledge foundation, aiming to apply concepts of learning through art and culture appropriately to the southern border provinces context where Muslims constitute the majority population

2. Research Methods

This research employed a quasi-experimental classroom action research methodology conducted at a kindergarten in Pattani Province, a southern border area with Islamic cultural context. The researcher followed classroom action research steps: planning, acting, observing, and reflecting throughout the experimental cycle of creative art activities.

The sample group was selected through purposive sampling, consisting of five K3 students who were preliminarily assessed by their homeroom teacher as having attention problems and hyperactivity (according to the SNAP-IV attention behavior assessment). All children received parental consent to participate in this experiment.

Research instruments included:

- a. Two sets of creative art activities (totaling 12 activities) designed by the researcher considering age-appropriate physical and cognitive development, as well as alignment with local Malay-Muslim religious and cultural principles. Each activity set focused on developing EF through hands-on practice, such as coloring batik patterns, molding clay into flowers found in Malay culture, cutting and pasting kolek boat (traditional fishing boat) images, crafting toys from natural materials,

and drawing illustrations for children's hadith stories. All activities were reviewed for content appropriateness and safety by experts in early childhood education and local culture before implementation. In designing the activities, the researcher considered Islamic principles, such as avoiding detailed drawings of living beings (according to certain Islamic interpretations about not drawing detailed images of living creatures), promoting cleanliness alongside artistic creation, and incorporating spiritual values (such as beginning activities by reciting Bismillah). The activities also encouraged family involvement through art-based homework, where children took their work or simple activities to do with parents at home.

- b. Data collection instruments included a child attention behavior assessment form (developed by the researcher by adapting the SNAP-IV assessment to suit early childhood), used by homeroom teachers for pre- and post-activity evaluation. Additionally, there were observation forms for monitoring children's behavior during activities and interview guidelines for parents after program completion to collect qualitative data regarding children's attention behaviors and related environmental factors.

For data collection and analysis, during the experimental phase, children participated in creative art activities according to the predetermined sequence, 1-2 times per week until completing all 12 activities. After completing all activities, the researcher assessed each child's attention level using the prepared evaluation form and recorded scores to compare with pre-activity scores. For qualitative data, the researcher and teachers observed children's behavior throughout each activity session and noted interesting events or behaviors, such as periods when children lost focus or showed special concentration. After completing the entire program, the researcher individually interviewed each child's parents to inquire about changes in the child's attention behavior at home and opinions about the activities their children participated in. These qualitative data were analyzed through thematic analysis to identify key factors that promote or hinder children's attention.

For quantitative data analysis, the researcher compared children's average attention scores before and after participating in all 12 creative art activities using paired t-tests to examine pre-post experimental differences. The statistical significance level was set at .05.

3. Results and Discussions

3.1 Results

The quantitative analysis comparing children's attention levels before and after participating in creative art activities is summarized in Table 1:

Table 1: Mean and standard deviation of early childhood attention levels before and after the experiment (score 1 = low, 3 = high)

From the table above, the average attention level of children increased from 1.2 before participating in activities to 2.7 after participation, with a slightly decreased standard deviation. The test results showed that this change was statistically significant at $p < .05$, indicating that after participating in creative art activities, children had significantly improved attention development.

In behavioral terms, the homeroom teacher reported that "some children who previously could not sit still and work continuously for more than 5 minutes can now focus on art work for more than 20 minutes without distraction." Meanwhile, one parent provided feedback that "after my child participated in art activities at school, when returning home in the evening, they showed more concentration with homework, could sit and work longer, and did not ask to play with mobile phones at all."

These qualitative observations and interview data align with the quantitative results, showing clear positive changes in children's behavior after receiving the activities. Children tended to sit still longer, spend more time focusing on tasks or toys than before, and respond to teacher instructions with greater attention. Additionally, children could better control their emotions when distractions occurred compared to before.

However, interviews with parents and observations revealed certain factors that hindered children's attention before participating in activities, including allowing children to use smartphones or tablets for long periods without control, lack of consistent daily routines, and classroom atmospheres lacking order or environments not conducive to concentration. After the experiment, the researcher found that when teachers adjusted classroom environments to be more orderly and calm, and parents reduced young children's unsupervised screen time, children could maintain attention longer and showed noticeably calmer behavior. Therefore, environmental factors both at home and school play important roles alongside well-designed activities in developing early childhood attention.

3.2 Discussions

The research results clearly indicate that creative art activities designed in accordance with children's development and local cultural contexts play a significant role in enhancing attention in early childhood learners in Thailand's southern border provinces. After participating in activities, children showed increased attention and focus in their work, which aligns with Diamond's (2013) findings that arts and hands-on practice are important tools for developing EF skills, particularly attention and self-control in children.

Additionally, our results support Erikson's (1963) developmental concept that kindergarten-age children feel valued and empowered when they can initiate creative work independently¹, as well as Montessori's (1967) principles promoting learning through sensory experiences and environments prepared for children to work freely¹.

When compared with research in Muslim societies, our study results align with the work of Ghani et al. (2020) and Al-Jubouri & Al-Qaisy (2021), who both reported that integrating cultural and religious elements into art activities promotes attention, calmness, and positive behavior in Muslim children participating in their research projects¹. Qualitative data from teachers and parents in our research support these findings, providing a clear picture that children show greater intention and commitment in daily activities, which are concrete signs of improved attention.

Beyond international research, our study results also align with previous related research in Thailand, such as Srinakharinwirot University's research report (2021), which found that using art games resulted in better focused behavior in children¹, and Somphon's (2022) work confirming that art activities connected to local culture enhance attention in southern border school children¹. Our research findings thus strengthen empirical evidence in Thailand's context that culturally-based creative art activities are an effective approach for developing attention and learning behaviors in early childhood learners.

Additionally, the discovery regarding barrier factors, such as excessive screen time and unconducive learning environments, emphasizes the importance of parental involvement and appropriate environmental arrangements alongside creative learning activities. This issue aligns with the holistic child development concept that values all dimensions of children's lives (Whole Child Approach) and supports recommendations to improve environments both at home and school to promote attention.

4. Conclusion

Finally, there should be no reference. Conclusions contain facts learned, simply answer the problem or purpose of the research (no more discussion). State possible applications, implications and speculation accordingly. Provide advice for further research if needed. Summarize conclusions measured and in paragraph sentences, not numbered/item lists.

Reference

- Montessori, M. (1967). *The discovery of the child*. Ballantine Books.
Office of the Education Council. (2017).
National Early Childhood Development Plan (2017–2027). Ministry of Education. Phuttharaksa, S. (2022).

- Developing concentration in early childhood through cultural art activities in southern border schools. *Journal of Community Development Research*, 15(3), 78–92.
- Srinakharinwirot University. (2021). Research report on promoting executive function through art activities in early childhood. Faculty of Education, Srinakharinwirot University.
- Al-Bukhari. (n.d.). *Sahih al-Bukhari* (Translated by Islamic Committee)
- Scientific Journal Al-Jubouri, A. A., & Al-Qaisy, L. M. (2021). Islamic principles in early childhood education: A qualitative study in Iraq. *Southeast Asia Early Childhood Journal*, 10(1), 47–58. <https://doi.org/10.37134/saec.vol10.1.4.2021>
- Darling-Hammond, L., Flook, L., Cook-Harvey, C., Barron, B., & Osher, D. (2019). Implications for Educational Practice of the Science of Learning and Development. *Applied Developmental Science*, 24(2), 97–140. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2018.1537791>
- Diamond, A. (2013). Executive functions. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 64, 135–168. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-113011-143750>
- Erikson, E. H. (1963). *Childhood and society*. Norton.
- Ghani, A. A., Shukor, S. A., & Zubair, M. (2020). Integrating Islamic values in creative art activities for early childhood education in Malaysia. *Journal of Islamic Education*, 28(2), 65–78. <https://doi.org/10.17576/jpki-2020-28-02-05>
- OECD. (2020). *The future of education and skills: Education 2030 – OECD learning compass 2030*. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. <https://www.oecd.org/education/2030-project/>
- Posner, M. I., Rothbart, M. K., & Tang, Y. Y. (2014). Enhancing attention through training. *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences*, 4, 1–5.