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TESTING TEXTILE ACTIVITY BOARDS FOR ATTENTION DEFICIT HYPERACTIVITY DISORDER IN SPECIAL NEEDS BASIC SCHOOL CHILDREN

¹Comfort Aba Amissah, ²Effie Koomson, ³Emmanuel Kodwo Amissah, ⁴Edward Baani Buxton

^{1,2,3,4} Department of Art Education, University of Education, Winneba – Ghana

Corresponding author: effiekoomson.ek@gmail.com

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Abstract

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is one of the most common childhood neurodevelopmental disorders. This study aimed to improve the learning experiences of children with ADHD through a hands-on sensory interventionary tool called the Little Leaps Boards. In Ghanaian classrooms, ADHD behaviours such as restlessness, inattention, and impulsivity are often misunderstood as laziness or stubbornness, leading to punishment rather than support. The qualitative research method was employed through the case study research design, with three children diagnosed with ADHD and related conditions, together with two teachers at Reverend Father John Special Unit School, Winneba. Data was collected through classroom observations and unstructured interviews with teachers and analysed thematically. Findings revealed that children were more attentive and motivated when activities were introduced separately. While motor coordination difficulties made some tasks challenging, teacher guidance and repeated practice led to gradual improvements. Activities such as buttoning and applique works were especially engaging and helped sustain attention. The study concludes that the Little Leaps Boards can be an effective sensory-based teaching aid to support inclusive education for children with ADHD in Ghana. It therefore recommends that the LLBs be formally integrated into teaching and learning practices within inclusive classrooms particularly in special needs schools.

Keywords: ADHD, sensory-based intervention, textile activity board, inclusive education, fine motor skills, engagement

1. Introduction

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a common childhood neurodevelopmental condition, affecting an estimated 5-7% of children worldwide, as outlined by the American Psychiatric Association (2022). Gardner and Gerdes (2015) observe that, children with ADHD often struggle in traditional classroom environments where sustained focus, task organisation,

and impulse control are essential. These challenges highlight the limitations of conventional instructional approaches, which frequently do not accommodate the sensory, cognitive, and behavioural needs of children with ADHD.

While widely used interventions such as medication and behavioural therapy offer notable benefits, Soutullo et al. (2013) argue that these strategies often emphasise symptom control rather than holistic development. Skills related to motor coordination, emotional balance, and sustained engagement may therefore remain underdeveloped. This has led to a growing call for complementary, non-pharmacological interventions that combine learning with sensory stimulation, particularly for children who respond best to hands-on, structured, and play-oriented activities. Textile-based activities including embroidery, weaving, appliqué, and macramé, provide such opportunities. Smith et al. (2019) note that these tasks deliver repetitive, tactile stimulation that can enhance fine motor coordination and support emotional self-regulation. Creative textile tasks such as patchwork and tassel-making also encourage problem-solving and self-expression, fostering confidence and intrinsic motivation. Textile activity boards integrate these tactile tasks into a single, interactive tool. Although research on sensory-based interventions is expanding, studies specifically examining textile activity boards remain scarce. Much of the existing literature still focuses on pharmacological treatment (Soutullo et al., 2013), behavioural programmes (Gardner & Gerdes, 2015), or general sensory approaches (Nelson et al., 2013), leaving a gap in evidence for textile-based, context-appropriate tools. While these challenges have been well-documented globally, in Ghana the problem is further compounded by low awareness and misconceptions among teachers and parents about ADHD. Research indicates that many Ghanaian teachers attribute symptoms of ADHD to laziness, stubbornness, or poor upbringing rather than recognising it as a neurodevelopmental condition (Agbenyega, 2007; Opoku et al., 2017). This misunderstanding often results in punishment and exclusion instead of support. Although Ghana's Inclusive Education Policy (Ministry of Education, 2015) calls for equal participation of all learners, implementation remains weak due to inadequate training, lack of teaching resources, and limited access to specialised interventions (Hayford, 2013). Consequently, children with ADHD are at risk of being marginalised in mainstream classrooms. Existing interventions, such as medication and behavioural therapies, are not widely available or accessible in Ghana, and they do not fully address the sensory and motor difficulties that many children with ADHD experience (Soutullo et al., 2013). Moreover, there is very little research on the use of creative, sensory-based tools such as textile activity boards to improve attention, motor coordination, and emotional regulation among Ghanaian children with ADHD (Nelson et al., 2013). Given that children with ADHD often learn better through hands-on and play-based approaches rather than prolonged passive listening, there is a pressing need to explore practical, context-appropriate tools.

This study therefore seeks to fill this gap of a lack of context-appropriate teaching-learning aids for children with ADHD in special needs learning environments by testing textile activity boards, hereafter referred to as the Little Leaps Boards (LLB) tailored to the Ghanaian classroom context and evaluating their effectiveness in supporting attention, skill development, and engagement among children with ADHD in a selected Ghanaian Basic School for children with special needs.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study is hinged on Constructivist Learning Theory (Piaget, Vygotsky). Constructivist Learning Theory (Piaget and Vygotsky) provides a strong foundation for understanding how textile activity boards can support children with ADHD. Piaget (1952, 1972) argued that

children actively construct knowledge through interaction with their environment, progressing through distinct cognitive stages. In this context, these textile boards that are rich with tactile and visual stimuli tend to offer opportunities for exploration and problem-solving, aligning with Piaget's emphasis on hands-on learning. Vygotsky (1978; 1986) extended this perspective by highlighting the role of social interaction and cultural tools in learning. His concept of the Zone of Proximal Development suggests that children learn best when guided by more knowledgeable peers or adults. The textile activity boards, when used in classroom environment, can serve as scaffolding tools where teachers and peers can support children in mastering tasks that initially exceeded their independent capacities. This collaborative engagement not only enhances attention regulation but also fosters social development. Together, Piaget and Vygotsky's theories justify the use of these textile activity boards as useful interventions that are both developmentally appropriate and socially enriching, making them particularly effective for children with ADHD who benefit from structured, sensory-rich, and interactive learning environments.

3. Methods

This study employed a qualitative research approach to explore the use of the Little Leaps Boards (LLB) as a sensory-based intervention for children with ADHD in their natural classroom setting. Qualitative research is particularly suited for examining complex educational phenomena, as it captures the lived experiences, behaviours, and interactions of participants within real-life contexts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). A case study research design was adopted to provide an in-depth examination of the intervention within its authentic setting (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this study, the case study facilitated an intensive focus on a small group of children with ADHD and comorbid conditions, alongside their teachers, enabling a detailed understanding of how the LLBs influenced attention, engagement, and skill development. The purposive sampling technique was employed to select five (5) participants based on their relevance to the research problem (Musa & Alkassim, 2016), three (3) children with ADHD and comorbid conditions and two (2) teachers. The study adopted the direct-non-participatory observation technique and unstructured interview. The observation provided direct evidence of the children's engagement, attention span, and motor coordination with the LLBs without influencing their natural behaviour (Cohen et al., 2018). It was conducted over multiple sessions, documenting each child's activity individually. The unstructured interviews with teachers allowed for open-ended discussions of children's progress, learning experiences, and the effectiveness of the board as a classroom tool. The flexible format enabled the researchers to explore emerging themes and gain rich and context-specific insights (Patton, 2015).

4. Results and Discussion of Findings

4.1 Pre-Test Findings

Preliminary observations were conducted to establish baseline behaviours, attention levels, and task engagement. Children displayed challenges with sustained attention, frequent distractibility, and hyperactive behaviours, including fidgeting, leaving seats, and shifting between tasks without completion. Impulsivity was evident in acting out or attempting tasks without instruction. Fine motor coordination difficulties were notable, particularly in manipulating objects, holding pencils, or performing precise movements, which often led to frustration or withdrawal. Teachers emphasised the need for structured, engaging, and multisensory activities to support attention, participation, and motor skill development.

4.2 Teacher Insights

Unstructured interviews were held with two teachers (pseudonyms are used for confidentiality) to gain insights into the children's typical classroom behaviour during daily activities. The teachers, referred to here as Miss Kumi and Mr. Mensah shared observations on how the children engaged with tasks, interacted with peers, and responded to instructions. During the interviews, the teachers provided valuable observations about the children's classroom behaviours. Miss Kumi explained that "the children often struggle to maintain focus for extended periods. For instance, during exercises such as colouring, matching shapes, or completing simple puzzles, the children were prone to distraction, leaving their seats, or switching tasks before finishing. Similarly, Mr Mensah mentioned that the children sometimes became frustrated when faced with challenging activities, expressing their emotions through outbursts or withdrawal. Miss Kumi further added that "when tasks are repetitive, the children lose interest quickly and will not complete them unless they are encouraged or guided through the activity. The teachers emphasised that the children responded best to short, structured, hands-on activities that provided immediate feedback or tangible results. Tasks involving play, movement, or concrete objects kept the children more engaged than purely written or verbal instructions. These observations offered valuable guidance for understanding the children's behaviour and learning preferences, which informed the design and subsequent testing of the Little Leaps Boards. Below is the bio data and observation for each child (all names used are pseudonyms to protect the identities of the participants).

Child "A" – Kodwo Mensah

- **Age:** 12 years
- **Diagnosis:** ADHD with learning disabilities
- **Background:** Kodwo has been enrolled in the special needs school for two years. He receives additional support from teachers but continues to struggle with maintaining attention, following instructions, and identifying basic learning materials.

Observation: Kodwo was highly hyperactive during lessons, frequently moving from one activity to another without focus. He was easily distracted by surrounding objects and peers, making it difficult for him to concentrate on a single task. When given instructional tasks, he often ignored directions, preferring to explore materials on his own. His difficulty in recognising basic shapes and symbols was also evident, leading to frequent teacher intervention.

Child "B" – Kofi Baidoo

- **Age:** 9 years
- **Diagnosis:** ADHD with behavioural disorder
- **Background:** Kofi has been in the special needs school for three years. Teachers report frequent episodes of frustration and aggression when tasks do not interest him. Despite these challenges, he shows strong curiosity and persistence in activities he enjoys.

Observation: Kofi struggled to sit still for any meaningful length of time. He was resistant to participating in structured tasks, often banging objects on tables or attempting to abandon the activity altogether. His frustration levels were high when he could not understand an activity immediately. However, teachers observed that once he discovered enjoyment in a task, he became highly engaged, repeating the activity multiple times and refusing to stop.

Child "C" – Abena Andoh

- **Age:** 13 years
- **Diagnosis:** ADHD with cerebral palsy
- **Background:** Abena Andoh has limited motor coordination due to cerebral palsy. She has difficulty with grasping and manipulating objects but shows enthusiasm for learning activities. Teachers describe her as eager to try tasks despite physical challenges.

Observation: Abena displayed poor motor control, with her hands and head often moving uncontrollably, which made it difficult to focus on objects. She struggled with grasping learning materials and required repeated teacher support. Despite these difficulties, she demonstrated determination and persistence. When successful in completing even small tasks, she expressed visible pride and happiness, highlighting her motivation to learn.

Research Objective: to test three textile activity boards and to evaluate its ability to improve the attention and skills of children with ADHD. From the classroom observations, these major themes emerged, reflecting the children's varied responses to the activities.:

1. Task engagement and motivation
2. Attention and concentration difficulties
3. Motor coordination in task execution
4. Emotional reactions and frustration tolerance

Thus, the researcher took into consideration the data gathered from observations through these emerging themes and channelled this information into designing and creating the LLBs.

Appliqué (Shape Matching and Fixing)

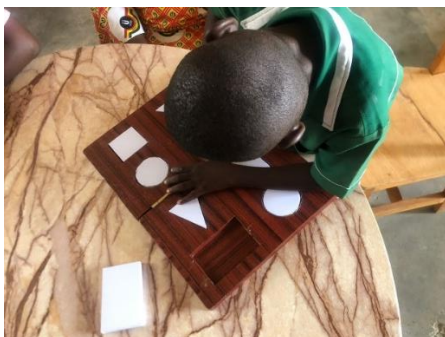


Figure 2



Figure 3

(Children practicing Appliqué)

Barkley (2015) argues that children with ADHD struggle significantly with tasks requiring sustained attention and error correction. The appliqué task was chosen to engage visual-motor integration while requiring analysis, shape discrimination, and problem-solving. As Schilling et al. (2003) highlight, visual-perceptual activities foster executive functioning by pushing children to maintain focus in a structured yet playful setting. The activity also encouraged tactile exploration, as fabric textures provided sensory input, which Pfeiffer et al. (2011) found to be calming and regulating for children with attention and sensory challenges. Thus, appliqué served as both a cognitive exercise and a therapeutic sensory activity.

Buttoning Activity

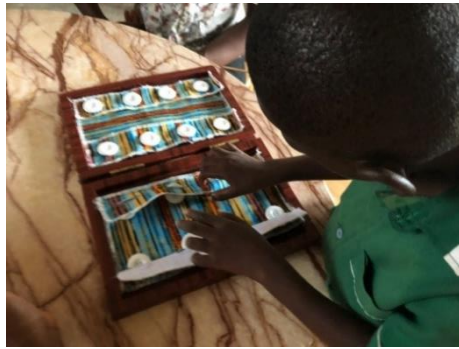


Figure 4: Child practicing Buttoning work

Self-care routines, particularly dressing, form the foundation of a child's independence. Parham and Fazio (2008) emphasise that mastering skills like buttoning contributes not only to autonomy but also to self-esteem. However, buttoning demands precision, bilateral hand coordination, and patience, areas where children with ADHD often encounter frustration (Raggi & Chronis, 2006). The buttoning task was intentionally included because it mirrors daily dressing requirements and provides a safe space for practice, allowing the repetitive fine-motor practice to strengthen neural pathways associated with attention and planning (Diamond, 2013).

Lacing / Unlacing Activity



Figure 5: Children practicing lacing / unlacing work)

Lacing requires careful sequencing, step-by-step planning, and bilateral coordination. Case-Smith (2010) notes that children with ADHD often avoid such tasks due to impulsivity and distractibility. The activity was selected for its functional relevance: being able to lace or unlace shoes is an important milestone in school readiness and daily life. Medwell and Wray (2013) show that sequencing-based motor tasks also support working memory, which is frequently compromised in ADHD. Moreover, the rhythmic nature of lacing, as Wilkes-Gillan et al. (2017) suggest, can promote regulation and calmness, making the activity beneficial beyond Skill acquisition. Thus, lacing connected cognitive, motor, and emotional development in one task.

Table 1: Child “A” – Kodwo Mensah

Activity	Day 1 Observation	Day 2 Observation	Day 3 Observation	Notes / Comments
Buttoning	Struggled, fidgeted, kept undoing buttons	Tried repeatedly, still needed guidance	Completed slowly but independently	Gradual improvement, patience increased
Beadwork	Frustrated, dropped beads often	Showed more patience, completed partially	Completed most of the pattern independently	Creative engagement increased
Appliqué	Frustrated, gave up quickly	Needed continuous guidance, still slow	Completed with teacher support	Patience and persistence are improving

Table2: Child “B” – Kofi Baidoo

Activity	Day 1 Observation	Day 2 Observation	Day 3 Observation	Notes / Comments
Buttoning	Frustrated, complained about difficulty	Completed with guidance, still slow	Managed independently but slowly	Persistence improved, frustration decreased
Lacing	Fidgeted, distracted, needed prompts	Focused better, completed partially	Completed independently, motivated	Fine motor coordination improving
Appliqué	Highly resistant, gave up quickly	Needed encouragement and step-by-step guidance	Completed with teacher support	Patience and attention developing

Table 4.3 Child “C” – Abena Andoh

Activity	Day 1 Observation	Day 2 Observation	Day 3 Observation	Notes / Comments
Buttoning	Needed guidance, fidgeted	Completed with minimal prompts	Completed independently, consistent effort	Improved patience and coordination
Lacing	Needed prompts, distracted	Completed partially, focused better	Completed independently, showing pride	Fine motor skills improving
Appliqué	Hesitant, frustrated at first	Completed with teacher support	Completed most of the design independently	Perseverance improving

From the analysis of classroom observations, three themes emerged:

1. Improvement in sustained attention and task persistence
2. Development of fine motor and problem-solving skills
3. Role of teacher scaffolding and peer support in effectiveness of the Little Leaps Boards

The Little Leaps Boards, therefore, not only served as a skill-building tool but also as an emotional regulation aid, allowing children to experience both manageable struggles and rewarding successes. Designing the board with opportunities for “quick wins” alongside more challenging tasks can help balance frustration with motivation, supporting both skill development and emotional well-being.

Theme 1: Improvement in Sustained Attention and Task Persistence

The Little Leaps Boards demonstrated effectiveness in helping children sustain attention for longer periods when compared to their baseline pre-test behaviours. During initial pre-test, the children often displayed wandering behaviour, distractibility, and restlessness during classroom tasks. However, during the board testing, an activity like the lacing encouraged longer stretches of focused engagement. For instance, Abena, who was initially resistant, became deeply engaged with this task. Kodwo also showed persistence with appliqué after being guided, repeating the task until he could place the shapes correctly.

Table

Activity	Day 1 Observation	Day 2 Observation	Day 3 Observation	Notes / Comments
Buttoning	Struggled, fidgeted, kept undoing buttons	Tried repeatedly, still needed guidance	Completed slowly but independently	Gradual improvement, patience increased
Lacing	Frustrated, dropped beads often	Focused better, completed partially	Completed independently, motivated	Fine motor skills are developing
Appliqué	Needed guidance, fidgeted, distracted	Needed continuous guidance, still slow	Completed with teacher support	Patience and persistence are improving

This improvement in sustained focus, though task-specific, indicates that the board provided a structured environment that captured attention more effectively than ordinary classroom activities. This aligns with Zentall (2006), who suggests that structured, hands-on tasks help regulate attention in children with ADHD, particularly when they involve multisensory feedback, also helping with focus and reducing distractions. The Little Leaps Boards’ effectiveness, therefore, lay in its design as a sensory-based, interactive tool, which helped channel attention toward manageable tasks.

Theme 2: Development of Fine Motor and Problem-Solving Skills

Another clear outcome of using the textile board was the development of fine motor and problem-solving skills. Each child demonstrated gradual improvements in their ability to

manipulate buttons and laces through repeated attempts. Abena, despite her significant motor challenges due to cerebral palsy, showed progress in the appliqué over multiple trials. Kodwo also demonstrated skill development by moving from total confusion with appliqué shapes to partial independence after repeated practice. These improvements reflect the role of textile-based activities in fostering fine motor development, hand-eye coordination, and adaptive problem-solving. As Piek et al. (2008) notes, repeated motor practice in a supportive setting can enhance both motor proficiency and self-regulatory capacity in children with developmental challenges. The Little Leaps Boards functioned not only as a tool for motor practice but also as a problem-solving platform, requiring children to figure out methods to succeed at tasks, thereby fostering resilience and skill acquisition.

Theme 3: Role of Teacher Scaffolding and Peer Support in Effectiveness of the Little Leaps Boards

The effectiveness of the Little Leaps Boards was also strongly mediated by the role of teachers. Observations showed that teacher guidance was essential for initiating and sustaining task engagement, particularly for Kodwo and Kofi, who often required redirection when distracted or frustrated. Abena also benefitted significantly from teachers breaking down tasks into smaller steps and providing encouragement when she struggled. Without such scaffolding, children often abandoned tasks prematurely. With it, they not only completed the activities but also developed greater independence over time. This reflects the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) by Vygotsky (1978) where children achieve more with guidance than they can independently. In the context of ADHD, Gardner and Gerdes (2015) also stress that structured teacher involvement is critical to sustaining task performance and reducing disruptive behaviours. Additionally, peer modelling and encouragement (observed when other children in the classroom praised task completion) appeared to enhance motivation, indicating that social reinforcement played a role. This suggests that the Little Leaps Boards is most effective when embedded in a supportive instructional framework, rather than used in isolation.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of this study demonstrate that the Little Leaps Boards (LLBs) are effective tools for supporting children with ADHD in educational and developmental contexts. The findings also underscore the influence of motivational and emotional factors in learning. Again, the study reinforces the relevance of play-based, hands-on interventions in inclusive classrooms can bridge therapeutic strategies with educational practice. The study therefore concludes that the LLBs as practical, versatile and innovative tools can facilitate attention, motor development and functional life skills in children with ADHD. Also, the teacher guidance influences motivational and emotional factors such as enhanced focus, reduced frustrations that fosters self-confidence and learning among children living with ADHD. Overall, this study contributes to a growing body of evidence supporting tactile and play-based approaches in inclusive education. It is therefore strongly recommended that the Little Leaps Boards be formally integrated into teaching and learning practices within inclusive schools in Ghana.

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