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Managing short attention span and low engagement behavior among early childhood learners: Perspectives of early childhood teachers

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ABSTRACT

Attention and engagement are critical to early childhood learning, yet context-specific evidence on how these behaviors and teacher responses manifest in actual classrooms remains limited. This study examined the behavioral manifestations of short attention span and low engagement among early childhood learners and identified teachers' responses to these challenges in authentic classroom settings. A mixed-methods approach was employed, involving 20 early childhood teachers from private schools in Pasuquin, Ilocos Norte, who were surveyed using a structured questionnaire to gather classroom-based responses. Means and thematic analysis were used to analyze the data. Results revealed that attention-related difficulties were generally moderate, characterized primarily by distractibility and difficulty sustaining focus, while engagement-related behaviors ranged from low to moderate, often reflected in passive participation, limited initiative, and minimal communication. Distractibility and environmental sensitivity emerged as prominent factors affecting learners' ability to maintain attention, whereas engagement was influenced by task design, instructional clarity, and opportunities for interaction. Teachers reported employing various strategies, including instructional scaffolding, environmental modifications, behavioral reinforcement, and socio-emotional support, to address these concerns. The findings suggest that attention and engagement are interrelated constructs shaped by both internal developmental factors and external classroom conditions, aligning with sociocultural perspectives that emphasize the role of guided interaction in learning. Therefore, early childhood educators adopt structured, learner-centered, and interactive teaching strategies, strengthen classroom management and scaffolding techniques, and engage in continuous professional development to enhance their capacity to support sustained attention and active engagement. Additionally, educational institutions should provide institutional support and training programs that promote developmentally appropriate practices to improve overall learning outcomes among young learners.

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Introduction

Attention and engagement are widely recognized in research as essential processes that support early learning. These constructs enable young children to focus on relevant information, sustain participation in learning tasks, and persist in completing classroom activities. Studies indicate that attention and

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engagement are closely associated with early academic outcomes, including literacy, numeracy, and executive functioning skills such as working memory, inhibitory control, and cognitive flexibility (Bakker et al., 2021; Waters et al., 2021). When children struggle to maintain attention or remain engaged, learning opportunities decrease, particularly in tasks that require listening, following instructions, and sustained participation. Developmental research further emphasizes that early patterns of attention and engagement contribute to school readiness and can influence later academic success (Uraipong et al., 2024).

However, sustaining attention and engagement has become increasingly challenging in contemporary early childhood classrooms. Research describes modern learning environments as complex and demanding due to noise, competing stimuli, and diverse learner needs, which may overwhelm children's developing self-regulation skills (Cevher-Kalburan & Ivrendi, 2021). As a result, teachers frequently observe behaviors such as restlessness, task avoidance, shifting between activities, and limited participation, which may reflect a mismatch between classroom demands and children's developmental capacities (Firth et al., 2020). These concerns are further influenced by broader developmental and environmental factors, including reduced opportunities for sustained play and increasing exposure to digital media, both of which have been associated with challenges in self-regulation and behavioral adjustment among preschool-aged children (Bochicchio et al., 2022; Zoromba et al., 2023). Such patterns indicate that attention and engagement difficulties are not isolated classroom issues but are shaped by multiple contextual influences.

Despite the growing body of research explaining attention and engagement challenges, an important gap remains in how these concerns are documented and examined within real classroom contexts. While existing studies provide theoretical explanations and experimental findings on attention, engagement, and self-regulation, fewer studies present systematic data on the observable behavioral manifestations of these challenges in everyday early childhood classrooms. Scholars note that classroom realities—such as large class sizes, limited learning materials, and diverse learner needs—often shape how attention and engagement difficulties appear during routine instructional activities (Molina, 2018; Granlund et al., 2021). In the Philippine early childhood education context, teachers continue to report behaviors such as task incompleteness, poor listening, physical restlessness, and minimal participation that may interfere with learners' engagement in learning (Aldemita, 2022; Guevara & Ramos, 2021). However, there remains limited locally grounded research that systematically presents and analyzes classroom data on how these attention- and engagement-related behaviors manifest among early childhood learners.

The need to examine these concerns is further reinforced by the researcher's personal experience in early childhood classroom settings. Through direct observation and interaction with young learners, the researcher has frequently encountered situations in which children struggle to sustain attention during instructional activities, become restless during structured tasks, or disengage from group learning routines. These experiences revealed recurring patterns of behavior that affect the flow of classroom instruction and the completion of learning tasks. At the same time, the observations highlighted the need to better understand how these behaviors manifest in real classroom conditions. Such firsthand experiences motivated a systematic examination and presentation of empirical data on attention span and engagement among early childhood learners, contributing to a clearer understanding of these challenges

Literature review

This chapter presents a synthesis of related literature and studies that provide theoretical and empirical support for the present research. It discusses attention and engagement in early childhood education, short attention span in early childhood learners, low engagement in early childhood learners, and teachers' roles and strategies in supporting attention and engagement.

Attention and engagement in early childhood education

Literature consistently identifies attention and engagement as foundational processes that enable young learners to participate meaningfully in classroom learning. Attention refers to the ability to focus on relevant information while filtering out distractions, an important aspect of early self-regulation and cognitive control (Gallen et al., 2023). Engagement, on the other hand, reflects the learner's active involvement in classroom activities through behavioral effort, emotional interest, and cognitive investment (Fredricks, 2023). These constructs function together in classroom learning because attention helps children initiate tasks while engagement sustains their participation long enough for learning to occur (Martin et al., 2024). Empirical studies further support this relationship. For instance, Fuhs et al. (2023) found that preschool children's engagement patterns vary with classroom context and instructional practices, highlighting that engagement is shaped by both learner characteristics and the learning environment. Similarly, Kotila et al. (2024) demonstrated that sustained attention in early childhood is shaped by social context and interactive environments, emphasizing that children maintain focus more effectively in settings that involve meaningful interaction and responsive support. These findings suggest that attention and engagement are dynamic processes influenced by developmental readiness and classroom conditions, reinforcing their importance in early learning participation.

Short attention span in early childhood learners

A short attention span is a common developmental characteristic in early childhood because executive functioning and attention regulation systems are still maturing. Research shows that sustained attention gradually improves during the preschool years as children develop working memory, inhibitory control, and the ability to maintain focus on tasks (DiCarlo et al., 2025; Eng et al., 2025). However, when attention is frequently disrupted, learners may demonstrate observable behaviors such as distractibility, task avoidance, incomplete work, poor listening, and difficulty following directions. These manifestations can interfere with classroom routines and reduce meaningful participation in learning. Literature further emphasizes that attention patterns are shaped not only by developmental factors but also by classroom conditions and instructional design (Martin et al., 2024). Empirical research supports this perspective. Kotila et al. (2024) found that attentional focus among young children varies with environmental stimuli and social interaction, indicating that the classroom context plays a crucial role in sustaining attention. These findings highlight that attention difficulties should be understood as an interaction between developmental processes and environmental influences rather than solely as individual learner limitations.

Low engagement in early childhood learners

Low engagement in early childhood classrooms is a multidimensional concern that affects children's

opportunities to develop academic, social, and emotional competencies. Engagement is typically described in terms of behavioral participation, emotional interest, and cognitive investment in learning tasks (Fredricks, 2023). When engagement is consistently low, learners may exhibit behaviors such as minimal participation, passive or withdrawn responses, emotional detachment, and limited communication during classroom activities (Ng & Graham, 2021). These patterns signal a disconnect between learners and the instructional environment, potentially limiting their access to meaningful learning experiences. Empirical studies reinforce the importance of engagement in early childhood development. McGregor et al. (2023) proposed that children's interests strongly influence their engagement, demonstrating that when instructional activities align with learners' interests, participation becomes deeper and more sustained. Similarly, Fuhs et al. (2023) observed that children's engagement fluctuates depending on classroom context and teaching practices, suggesting that engagement is shaped by both learner motivation and environmental support. These findings emphasize that addressing disengagement requires understanding how classroom experiences influence children's willingness to participate and persist in learning activities.

Teachers' roles and strategies in supporting attention and engagement

Teachers play a central role in shaping attention and engagement in early childhood classrooms by influencing classroom routines, instructional methods, and the emotional climate of learning environments. Research consistently shows that supportive teacher-child interactions contribute to improved participation, stronger self-regulation, and better classroom adjustment among young learners (Rüdisüli et al., 2024). Establishing predictable routines, providing clear expectations, and creating emotionally supportive relationships help children feel secure and motivated to engage in classroom activities (Hiltunen et al., 2024). Instructional design also influences learner engagement. Strategies such as breaking tasks into smaller steps, integrating play-based and hands-on learning, using visual supports, and providing guided participation help learners remain attentive and involved in tasks (DiCarlo et al., 2025). Positive reinforcement and constructive feedback further strengthen children's willingness to participate and persist in learning activities (Chen, 2023). Empirical evidence also suggests that classroom practices that align with children's interests and developmental needs enhance both attention and engagement, demonstrating that teachers' instructional decisions significantly shape learners' classroom participation (McGregor et al., 2023; Fuhs et al., 2023). Collectively, these findings highlight that teachers play a critical role in creating learning environments that support sustained attention and active engagement among early childhood learners.

Statement of the problem

This study investigated the behavioral manifestations of short attention span and low engagement among early childhood learners in the Municipality of Pasuquin, Province of Ilocos Norte. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

1. How frequently do early childhood education teachers encounter in class the manifestations of short attention span and low engagement among early childhood learners?
2. How do early childhood teachers respond to the manifestations of short attention span and low engagement?

Methodology

This chapter presents the research design, sources of data, including the study locale, population, and sampling; data-gathering instrument; and data analysis, including its ethical standards.

Research design

This study employed a mixed-method research design to systematically examine the behavioral manifestations of short attention span and low engagement among early childhood learners. A descriptive approach was adopted to identify, describe, and analyze existing classroom conditions and observable behaviors without manipulating variables, ensuring that data reflected authentic instructional settings. Descriptive research is widely used in educational studies to capture patterns of learner behavior and participation as they occur naturally in real classroom contexts (Loeb et al., 2017; Nassaji, 2015), making it well-suited to documenting attention and engagement among young learners.

Locale of the study

The research was conducted in four private early childhood education institutions within the municipality of Pasuquin, Ilocos Norte.

Population and sampling

The study population consisted of 20 Kindergarten-to-Grade 3 teachers employed at private schools in Pasuquin, Ilocos Norte, during the 2025–2026 school year. Total enumeration was employed to include all eligible teachers.

Data gathering instrument

The study utilized a structured survey questionnaire as the primary data-gathering instrument, designed to systematically identify and describe observable behavioral manifestations of short attention span and low engagement among early childhood learners. The instrument employed a dual-component format, combining 5-point Likert-scale items to quantify the frequency and severity of specific behaviors, along with short attention spans and low engagement with open-ended questions, which allowed teacher-respondents to elaborate on instructional strategies they currently use.

Data gathering procedure

Data collection began after securing administrative clearance from the Graduate School. The researcher formally requested permission from the heads of the selected private schools through an official letter, seeking approval to administer the survey questionnaire to Kindergarten to Grade 3 teachers. The questionnaire was included in the letter and made accessible via a QR code, allowing respondents to complete it conveniently online through Google Forms. To maximize response rate and ensure total enumeration, the researcher personally distributed the survey to teacher-respondents who were unable to access the online version. The entire data-gathering process was conducted over a period of one month, providing ample time for participation and careful, thoughtful responses.

Data analysis tool

Descriptive statistics were used to quantify the prevalence and severity of behavioral manifestations. Qualitative data from open-ended survey responses and expert feedback were processed using Thematic

Analysis, which involved transcription, coding, and categorization to identify recurring patterns and themes.

The following range of values with their descriptive interpretation was used:

Range of Means	Descriptive Interpretation
4.51 – 5.00	Always
3.51 – 4.50	Often
2.51 – 3.50	Sometimes
1.51 – 2.50	Rarely
1.00 – 1.50	Never

Ethical considerations

The study adhered to ethical research principles, ensuring voluntary participation, informed consent, and the confidentiality of respondents' identities. Data collection emphasized minimal disruption to classroom routines, and participant anonymity was maintained in all reporting. Experts and teachers were briefed on the purpose of the study, the intended use of collected data, and their right to withdraw at any time.

Presentation and analysis of results

This section presents the collected data and corresponding analyses in response to the study's research questions.

Problem 1: How frequently do early childhood education teachers encounter in class the manifestations of short attention span and low engagement among early childhood learners?

Tables 1 and 2 present the frequency of behavioral manifestations of short attention span and low engagement among early childhood learners. Table 1 shows that teachers sometimes encounter behaviors related to distractibility, task avoidance, listening difficulties, and physical restlessness, while Table 2 indicates that low engagement is generally encountered at a lower to moderate frequency, with occasional manifestations in participation, social interaction, emotional engagement, and communication.

Table 1. Frequency of behavioral manifestations of short attention span

Indicator	Mean	DI
A. Task avoidance and incompleteness		
1. Frequently shifts from one task to another before finishing.	3.06	Sometimes
2. Leaves work incomplete without attempting to finish.	2.47	Rarely
3. Rushes through tasks with little attention to detail.	2.88	Sometimes
4. Starts tasks with focus but loses it quickly	2.76	Sometimes
5. Frequently loses place while reading or writing.	2.71	Sometimes
Sub-composite Mean	2.78	Sometimes
B. Distractibility and Sensory Sensitivity		

6. Easily distracted by noise or movement	3.71	Often
7. Talks to peers during instruction.	3.24	Sometimes
8. Plays with unrelated materials during work.	3.18	Sometimes
9. Becomes visibly frustrated when required to focus.	2.94	Sometimes
10. Frequently brings up unrelated topics during lessons	3.24	Sometimes
Sub-composite Mean	3.26	Sometimes
C. Listening and Direction-following		
11. Has difficulty following more than one instruction.	2.94	Sometimes
12. Regularly asks, “What are we doing?” or similar questions.	2.71	Sometimes
13. Forgets instructions shortly after hearing them.	3.00	Sometimes
14. Interrupts others while speaking	3.12	Sometimes
15. Appears confused during group work.	2.76	Sometimes
Sub-composite Mean	2.91	Sometimes
D. Physical Restlessness		
16. Appears disengaged (ex. Stares into space) during lessons.	2.88	Sometimes
17. Frequently fidgets or moves frequently without clear reason.	2.88	Sometimes
18. Leaves seat without permission during structured tasks.	3.00	Sometimes
19. Moves or talks excessively during quiet work time.	2.88	Sometimes
20. Requires 1-on-1 assistance to stay focused.	3.06	Sometimes
Sub-composite Mean	2.94	Sometimes
Composite Mean	2.97	Sometimes

Source: Mateo (2026)

The results show that within Task Avoidance and Incompletion, the highest mean was for frequently shifting from one task to another before finishing, while the lowest was leaving work incomplete without attempting to finish. This suggests that learners tend to initiate tasks but struggle to sustain attention, rather than completely refusing to work. The lower incidence of task abandonment implies some level of compliance, likely influenced by classroom structure. This pattern aligns with recent literature indicating that attention difficulties in early childhood are more often reflected in inconsistent focus and reduced task persistence rather than total disengagement (Mashburn et al., 2022; Farran et al., 2021).

In the domain of Distractibility and Sensory Sensitivity, the highest mean indicated being easily distracted by noise or movement, while the lowest indicated becoming visibly frustrated when required to. This indicates that environmental stimuli strongly influence learners’ attention. The lower frustration level suggests that distractibility often occurs without overt emotional reactions. These findings support research highlighting that classroom environmental factors, such as noise and movement, significantly affect children’s attention regulation without necessarily triggering strong emotional responses (Magnuson et al., 2023; von Stumm et al., 2021).

For Listening and Direction-following, the highest mean was interrupted by others while speaking, and the lowest was regularly asking, “What are we doing?” This suggests challenges in inhibitory control and sustained listening. The lower tendency to seek clarification suggests that learners may attempt to

follow instructions but struggle to retain them. This aligns with studies linking attention difficulties to executive functioning limitations, particularly in inhibitory control and working memory, which are essential for processing and retaining verbal directions (Blair et al., 2021; Willoughby et al., 2022).

In terms of Physical Restlessness, the highest mean was required 1-on-1 assistance to stay focused, while the lowest was shared by several behaviors such as disengagement and fidgeting. This indicates that individualized support is important for maintaining attention. The moderate and consistent ratings of restlessness suggest these behaviors are present but not dominant. The literature indicates that physical restlessness varies with context and task demands, and that structured teacher support enhances children's ability to regulate attention and behavior (Downer et al., 2022; McClelland et al., 2023).

Table 2. Frequency of behavioral manifestations of low engagement

Indicators	Rating	DI
A. Participation and Initiative		
1. Rarely volunteers or participates during class discussions.	2.94	Sometimes
2. Appears withdrawn during group or partner activities.	2.29	Rarely
3. Often avoids physical or hands-on tasks.	2.06	Rarely
4. Needs encouragement to join group games or projects.	2.71	Sometimes
5. Frequently reports feeling unwell to avoid tasks.	2.06	Rarely
Sub-composite Mean	2.41	Rarely
B. Social Interaction and Engagement		
6. Avoids eye contact during teacher interaction.	2.12	Rarely
7. Copies others' work rather than trying independently.	2.29	Rarely
8. Prefers solitary play over group activities.	2.35	Rarely
9. Sits quietly but does not engage with the lesson.	2.71	Sometimes
10. Engages in unrelated activities (e.g., doodling, playing with clothing).	3.12	Sometimes
Sub-composite Mean	2.52	Rarely
C. Emotional and Motivational Engagement		
11. Shows little interest in class activities.	2.94	Sometimes
12. Appears bored or indifferent during lessons.	2.47	Rarely
13. Displays low energy or flat affect during routines.	2.53	Sometimes
14. Does not respond to praise or encouragement.	2.24	Rarely
15. Complains that tasks are "boring" or "too hard."	2.06	Rarely
Sub-composite Mean	2.45	Rarely
D. Communication and Initiative		
16. Does not respond when name is called.	2.41	Rarely
17. Rarely asks questions or seeks help.	3.29	Sometimes
18. Avoids interactive learning stations.	2.24	Rarely
19. Does not initiate interaction with peers.	2.65	Sometimes
20. Wanders during structured classroom activities.	2.82	Sometimes

Sub-composite Mean	2.68	Sometimes
Composite Mean	2.52	Sometimes

Source: Mateo (2026)

In Participation and Initiative, the highest means were rarely volunteers or participants during class discussions, while the lowest means were often for avoiding physical or hands-on tasks and frequently reported feeling unwell to avoid tasks. This indicates that learners show limited active participation but do not strongly avoid tasks altogether. The low avoidance behaviors suggest that disengagement is more passive than deliberate. This aligns with recent literature describing low engagement in early childhood as reduced initiative and limited active involvement rather than overt resistance, particularly in structured classroom environments where compliance is still maintained (Fredricks et al., 2021; Christenson et al., 2022).

The results show that within Social Interaction and Engagement, the highest mean was for engaging in unrelated activities, while the lowest was for avoiding eye contact during teacher interaction. This suggests that disengagement is more evident through off-task behaviors than social withdrawal. The lower avoidance of eye contact indicates that learners are not entirely socially detached. Research indicates that low engagement in early learners is more commonly manifested as inattentive or off-task behavior rather than as complete social disengagement, as children may remain socially present but cognitively disengaged (Downer et al., 2022; Mikami et al., 2020).

For Emotional and Motivational Engagement, the highest mean was shown by those who showed little interest in class activities, while the lowest means were those who complained that tasks were “boring” or “too hard”. This implies that learners exhibit low intrinsic interest but rarely express it verbally. The findings suggest that disengagement is often internalized rather than openly displayed. This is consistent with studies indicating that young learners tend to exhibit passive or subtle indicators of low motivation—such as reduced enthusiasm or interest—rather than explicit verbal complaints (Skinner et al., 2021; Magnuson et al., 2023).

In terms of Communication and Initiative, the highest mean was rarely asking questions or seeking help, while the lowest was avoiding interactive learning stations. This indicates that learners tend to limit verbal interaction and help-seeking behaviors. The lower avoidance of interactive stations suggests some willingness to engage when guided. Literature highlights that reduced communication and help-seeking are key indicators of low engagement in early childhood, often reflecting developing self-regulation and limited confidence in participation (Willoughby et al., 2022; McClelland et al., 2023).

Problem 2: How do early childhood teachers respond to the manifestations of short attention span and low engagement?

Tables 3 and 4 present how early childhood teachers respond to manifestations of short attention span and low engagement in the classroom. Together, the tables show that teachers employ a range of instructional, behavioral, environmental, and socio-emotional strategies to address challenges related to attention, participation, and communication, highlighting their adaptive and supportive approaches in

Table 3. Responses of early childhood teachers to the manifestations of short attention span

Themes	Categories	Significant Responses
Domain 1. Task avoidance and incompletion		
Instructional scaffolding	Task decomposition	“I break the tasks into smaller and manageable steps so the learners can complete them” (Teacher 17).
	Clarity of communication	“I give clear and simple instructions so the learners understand what to do” (Teacher 14).
	Curricular adaptation	“I adjust the activities based on the learners’ ability and attention span” (Teacher 11).
	Temporal structuring	“I give enough and structured time for learners to finish their tasks” (Teacher 6).
Behavioral & motivational support	Positive reinforcement	“I give rewards or praise to encourage learners to complete their tasks” (Teacher 15).
	Affective encouragement	“I encourage and support the learners so they stay motivated” (Teacher 12).
	Accountability measures	“I remind learners to be responsible for finishing their work” (Teacher 5).
	Engagement enhancement	“I use engaging strategies to keep the learners interested in the activity” (Teacher 9).
Direct intervention & environmental management	Individualized mentorship	“I provide one-on-one guidance to learners who need more help” (Teacher 8).
	Attentional prompting	“I give prompts or reminders when learners lose focus” (Teacher 13).
	Environmental optimization	“I arrange the classroom to reduce distractions” (Teacher 7).
	Regulatory breaks	“I allow short breaks so learners can regain their focus” (Teacher 4).
Domain 2. Distractibility and sensory sensitivity		
Environmental modification	Visual and auditory reduction	“I minimize noise and visual distractions inside the classroom” (Teacher 16).
	Controlled atmosphere	“I maintain a calm and organized classroom environment” (Teacher 13).
	Strategic seating	“I arrange seating so learners are less distracted” (Teacher 10).

Regulatory & sensory support	Sensory integration tools	“I provide sensory materials to help learners focus” (Teacher 6).
	Self-regulation breaks	“I let learners take breaks when they feel overwhelmed” (Teacher 14).
	Task adaptation	“I modify tasks based on the learners’ sensory needs” (Teacher 3).
Attentional redirection & engagement	Call-and-response routines	“I use call-and-response to get the learners’ attention” (Teacher 11).
	Active questioning	“I ask questions to keep learners engaged” (Teacher 15).
	Cognitive prompting	“I give cues to help learners refocus on the lesson” (Teacher 8).
	Rule reinforcement	“I consistently remind learners about classroom rules” (Teacher 5).
Domain 3. Poor listening and following directions		
Pre-instructional engagement	Physical & sensory anchoring	“I engage learners in short physical or sensory activities before giving instructions” (Teacher 7).
	Environmental readiness	“I make sure the classroom is ready before starting the lesson” (Teacher 12).
Instructional delivery & modification	Linguistic simplification	“I simplify my language so learners can easily understand the instructions” (Teacher 17).
	Multi-modal support	“I use visuals, sounds, and movements when giving instructions” (Teacher 14).
	Strategic redundancy	“I repeat the instructions to make sure learners understand” (Teacher 11).
Comprehension monitoring & validation	Active verification	“I ask learners questions to check if they understand the instructions” (Teacher 9).
	Feedback & reinforcement	“I give immediate feedback to guide learners” (Teacher 16).
	Social learning	“I let learners learn from their classmates to improve understanding” (Teacher 4).
Domain 4. Physical restlessness and fidgeting		
Structured movement & energy release	Planned physical breaks	“I include movement breaks during the lesson” (Teacher 16).
	Kinesthetic learning	“I use activities that allow learners to move while learning” (Teacher 13).

	Functional movement	"I allow learners to move as long as it helps them complete the task" (Teacher 10).
Sensory & environmental regulation	Sensory tool integration	"I provide sensory tools to help manage learners' behavior" (Teacher 6).
	Flexible workspace	"I allow flexible seating arrangements for learners" (Teacher 12).
	Self-regulation techniques	"I teach learners strategies to control their movements" (Teacher 8).
Behavioral frameworks & redirection	Rule-based positioning	"I set rules on proper movement and behavior in the classroom" (Teacher 14).
	Standard setting	"I establish clear expectations for behavior" (Teacher 9).
	Positive reinforcement	"I reward learners when they show appropriate behavior" (Teacher 15).

Source: *Mateo (2026)*

The findings indicate that early childhood teachers employ a range of instructional, behavioral, and environmental strategies to address manifestations of short attention span among learners. Across the domains, teachers described practices that focus on structuring learning tasks, sustaining motivation, managing classroom environments, and supporting self-regulation. These responses suggest that attention-related challenges are addressed through a combination of pedagogical adjustments and responsive classroom practices. This aligns with contemporary research emphasizing that attention in early childhood is shaped by both instructional design and environmental support (McClelland et al., 2023; Rimm-Kaufman & Sandilos, 2021).

The domain Task Avoidance and Incompletion reflects how teachers respond to learners' difficulty in initiating and completing tasks. Teachers described breaking tasks into smaller components, simplifying instructions, and adjusting activities based on learners' abilities and attention span. In addition, motivational strategies such as praise, encouragement, and engaging activities were used to sustain learners' interest. Teachers also reported providing individualized support, prompting attention, and allowing short breaks to help learners refocus. These responses suggest that task avoidance is addressed not only as a behavioral concern but also as a function of instructional clarity and task design. Supporting studies indicate that scaffolded instruction and motivational supports enhance task persistence and reduce avoidance behaviors among young learners (Fisher et al., 2021; Kim & Lee, 2023).

The domain Distractibility and Sensory Sensitivity highlights how the classroom environment and sensory experiences influence learners' attention. Teachers described minimizing noise and visual distractions, maintaining organized classroom settings, and strategically arranging seating to support focus. Additionally, the use of sensory tools, self-regulation breaks, and task adaptations indicates an awareness of learners' sensory needs. Teachers also employed engagement strategies such as questioning, prompting, and call-and-response routines to redirect attention. These findings suggest that

attention is closely linked to sensory processing and environmental conditions. Recent research supports the role of sensory-informed practices and structured environments in improving attention and reducing distractibility in early childhood settings (Ashburner et al., 2020; Pfeiffer et al., 2021).

The domain Poor Listening and Following Directions reflects challenges related to learners' comprehension and processing of instructions. Teachers addressed these difficulties by simplifying language, using multi-modal instructional strategies, and repeating instructions to ensure understanding. Pre-instructional practices, such as preparing the classroom and engaging learners through physical or sensory activities, were also described. Furthermore, teachers emphasized checking for understanding and providing immediate feedback to guide learners. These responses indicate that listening difficulties are influenced by both attention and the manner in which information is delivered. The literature highlights that multimodal instruction and explicit feedback are effective in supporting comprehension and improving listening behaviors among young learners (Goh & Burns, 2022; Cabell et al., 2023).

The domain Physical Restlessness and Fidgeting underscores the importance of movement and behavioral regulation in sustaining attention. Teachers described integrating movement breaks, incorporating kinesthetic activities, and allowing functional movement during tasks. In addition, sensory tools, flexible seating arrangements, and self-regulation strategies were used to help learners manage their behavior. Teachers also implemented behavioral frameworks, including clear rules, expectations, and reinforcement, to guide appropriate actions. These findings suggest that physical restlessness can be addressed through structured opportunities for movement and proactive behavioral support. This is consistent with recent studies indicating that movement-based and self-regulation strategies contribute to improved attention and reduced disruptive behaviors in early childhood classrooms (Daly-Smith et al., 2020; Vazou et al., 2022).

Table 4. Responses of early childhood teachers to the manifestations of low engagement

Themes	Categories	Significant Responses
Domain 1. Lack of participation		
Collaborative & social learning	Peer-mediated support	"I let learners work with peers so they feel more encouraged to participate" (Teacher 15)
	Assigned roles	"I assign specific roles to learners so they are involved in the activity" (Teacher 10).
Instructional Design & gamification	Active engagement methods	"I use interactive activities to actively involve learners in the lesson" (Teacher 17).
	Gamification	"I incorporate games to make participation more enjoyable" (Teacher 13).
	Learner autonomy	"I give learners choices so they feel more motivated to participate" (Teacher 6).
Psychosocial support & confidence building	Low-stakes questioning	"I ask simple questions so learners feel comfortable answering" (Teacher 14).
	Safe environment cultivation	"I create a safe classroom where learners are not afraid to participate" (Teacher 12).
	Incremental reinforcement	"I give small praises to build learners' confidence in participating" (Teacher 8).

Domain 2. Passive or withdrawn behavior		
Relational & affective support	Trust and rapport building	"I build a good relationship with learners so they feel comfortable engaging" (Teacher 17).
	Individualized check-ins	"I check on learners individually to understand their behavior" (Teacher 13).
Interest-based engagement	Strength-based tasks	"I give tasks based on learners' strengths to encourage participation" (Teacher 9).
	Relevance and connection	"I connect lessons to learners' interests and experiences" (Teacher 14).
Confidence scaffolding	Incremental success	"I give easier tasks first so learners can experience success" (Teacher 12).
	Skill enhancement	"I help learners improve their skills gradually" (Teacher 7).
	Social integration	"I encourage learners to interact with their classmates" (Teacher 5).
Behavioral & classroom management	Consistent encouragement	"I continuously encourage learners to participate in class" (Teacher 16).
	Structured response	"I guide learners step-by-step in responding to tasks" (Teacher 10).
Domain 3. Emotional disengagement		
Affective connection & rapport	Trust and rapport building	"I build trust with learners so they feel emotionally connected" (Teacher 16).
	Empathy and validation	"I listen to learners and validate their feelings" (Teacher 11).
	Individualized attention	"I give attention to learners who seem emotionally withdrawn" (Teacher 14).
Psychological Safety & Support	Safe space cultivation	"I create a safe space where learners feel accepted" (Teacher 17).
	Emotional regulation support	"I help learners manage their emotions during class" (Teacher 9).
	Supportive feedback	"I give positive and supportive feedback to learners" (Teacher 13).
Pedagogical Re-Engagement	Interest-based integration	"I use learners' interests to bring them back into the lesson" (Teacher 10).
	Collaborative socialization	"I involve learners in group activities to re-engage them" (Teacher 8).
	Curricular adaptation	"I adjust my teaching strategies to meet learners' needs" (Teacher 6).
Domain 4. Minimal Communication		
Temporal & linguistic adjustments	Wait-time extension	"I give learners more time to respond to questions" (Teacher 15).
	Prompt simplification	"I simplify my questions so learners can answer more easily" (Teacher 17).
	Patience and affirmation	"I show patience and affirm learners when they try to respond" (Teacher 14).
	Non-verbal alternatives	"I allow learners to express themselves through gestures or drawings" (Teacher 12).

Multi-modal & social scaffolding	Peer-mediated communication	“I let peers help learners communicate their ideas” (Teacher 9).
	Gradual public exposure	“I gradually encourage learners to speak in front of others” (Teacher 7).
Environmental & behavioral support	Psychological safety	“I ensure that learners feel safe when expressing themselves” (Teacher 16).
	Proactive problem-solving	“I address communication difficulties early” (Teacher 8).
	Incremental reinforcement	“I reinforce small attempts in communication” (Teacher 1).

Source: Mateo (2026)

The findings indicate that early childhood teachers employ a range of interactive, relational, and supportive strategies to address learners’ low engagement, particularly in situations characterized by low participation. Teachers described using collaborative learning approaches, such as peer-mediated support and assigned roles, to encourage active involvement. In addition, instructional strategies, including interactive activities and gamification, were highlighted as means of making learning more engaging and meaningful. These responses suggest that engagement is enhanced when learners are given opportunities to actively participate in structured, enjoyable learning experiences. This aligns with recent research emphasizing the effectiveness of play-based and interactive pedagogies in promoting engagement among young learners (Zosh et al., 2022; Hadley & Rispoli, 2023).

The domain Lack of Participation reflects how teachers intentionally design classroom experiences to foster involvement. Teachers shared that they create opportunities for learners to collaborate, make choices, and gradually build confidence through low-stakes questioning and positive reinforcement. Moreover, establishing a safe and supportive classroom environment was emphasized as essential in encouraging learners to participate without fear. These findings suggest that participation is shaped not only by learners’ abilities but also by the learning environment and instructional approaches provided by teachers. Studies support that autonomy-supportive and socially interactive environments significantly enhance learner engagement and participation (Reeve & Cheon, 2021; Wood et al., 2022). The Passive or Withdrawn Behavior domain highlights the importance of building strong teacher–learner relationships in addressing disengagement. Teachers described efforts to establish trust and rapport, as well as conducting individualized check-ins to better understand learners’ needs. Additionally, strategies such as connecting lessons to learners’ interests and providing strength-based tasks were used to make learning more relevant and meaningful. Teachers also emphasized gradually building learners’ confidence through achievable tasks and continuous encouragement. These responses indicate that passive or withdrawn behavior may stem from low confidence, lack of connection, or limited motivation. This is supported by literature showing that positive teacher–student relationships and meaningful learning experiences contribute to increased engagement and reduced withdrawal (Roorda et al., 2021; Núñez & León, 2022).

Emotional Disengagement underscores the role of emotional support and psychological safety in fostering engagement. Teachers highlighted the importance of building trust, validating learners’

feelings, and providing individualized attention to those who appear emotionally withdrawn. Creating a safe space and offering supportive feedback were also identified as key practices. Furthermore, teachers described using interest-based activities and collaborative interactions to re-engage learners in the learning process. These findings suggest that emotional disengagement is closely linked to learners' sense of belonging and emotional well-being. Research indicates that emotionally supportive classroom environments play a critical role in enhancing engagement and motivation in early childhood education (O'Connor et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2023).

Reflecting challenges in learners' expressive participation during classroom activities was evident in the Minimal Communication domain. Teachers reported using strategies such as extending wait time, simplifying prompts, and demonstrating patience to support learners in expressing themselves. In addition, the use of non-verbal communication methods and peer support provided alternative ways for learners to participate. Teachers also emphasized gradually encouraging learners to communicate in more public settings, while ensuring that the classroom remains a safe and supportive space. These findings suggest that communication difficulties are multifaceted and require flexible and responsive strategies. Supporting studies highlight the importance of multi-modal communication and supportive environments in facilitating expressive language and participation among young learners (Justice et al., 2021; Cabell et al., 2023).

Results and discussion

The findings show that early childhood learners generally have a moderate short attention span and a low-to-moderate level of engagement. This means that while attention and engagement are both present in the classroom, they manifest differently. Learners are most commonly affected by distractibility and sensitivity to their surroundings, while low engagement is often evident in limited communication and a lack of initiative. These results suggest that attention and engagement are closely related yet distinct, and that both are influenced by cognitive, environmental, and socio-emotional factors (McClelland et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2023).

When it comes to attention, the results highlight how much the classroom environment matters. Many learners are easily distracted by noise and movement, which is consistent with studies showing that busy or unstructured environments can make it harder for young children to focus (Pfeiffer et al., 2021; Vazou et al., 2022). However, task avoidance was less common, suggesting that learners are generally willing to participate but struggle to stay focused for longer periods. This reflects the nature of early childhood development, where self-regulation skills are still developing (Fisher et al., 2021; Kim & Lee, 2023). Difficulties in listening and following directions also indicate challenges in processing and retaining information, reinforcing the need for clear, engaging, and varied teaching approaches (Cabell et al., 2023).

In terms of engagement, learners were not openly resistant but rather quietly disengaged. This was observed through low participation, limited initiative, and minimal communication. Instead of refusing tasks, many learners simply did not actively take part or seek help. This supports research indicating that disengagement in young children is often subtle and easily overlooked (Núñez & León, 2022; Reeve &

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Cheon, 2021). It also suggests that learners may lack intrinsic interest, especially when activities are not meaningful or emotionally engaging. Motivation at this stage is strongly influenced by the relevance, support, and engagement of the learning experience (Hadley & Rispoli, 2023; Wood et al., 2022).

Encouragingly, the study also shows that teachers are responsive to these challenges. They use a variety of strategies such as breaking tasks into smaller steps, incorporating movement and sensory activities, and adjusting the classroom environment to help learners stay focused. To improve engagement, teachers promote collaboration, use game-based activities, and build positive relationships with learners. These approaches reflect effective, learner-centered practices that support both attention and engagement (Daly-Smith et al., 2020; Vazou et al., 2022; Zosh et al., 2022; O'Connor et al., 2022). Overall, the findings highlight that supporting young learners requires not only addressing their cognitive needs but also nurturing their emotional and motivational development.

Conclusion

The findings show that early childhood learners exhibit short attention spans and varying levels of engagement. Attention difficulties are generally moderate, often evident in distractibility and limited ability to stay focused, while engagement tends to be low to moderate, as reflected in passive participation, low initiative, and minimal communication. These results suggest that attention and engagement are closely connected yet complex, shaped by learners' developmental readiness, classroom environment, and teaching practices. They also reflect how learning happens through social interaction, guidance, and support, as explained in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory.

In this context, learners gradually develop their ability to focus and participate actively when supported by teachers and peers. With proper guidance—especially within the Zone of Proximal Development—teachers play a key role in helping learners build attention and engagement skills over time.

The study also highlights the important role of teachers in responding to these challenges. Through strategies such as instructional scaffolding, adjusting the learning environment, reinforcing positive behavior, and providing socio-emotional support, teachers help create conditions that encourage participation and self-regulation. These practices show how theory can be translated into meaningful classroom actions.

Overall, the study provides practical, real-world evidence from early childhood classrooms, showing how attention and engagement behaviors are directly linked to teaching strategies. It offers a useful guide for educators and institutions in designing structured, interactive, and developmentally appropriate learning environments. At the same time, it emphasizes the need for continuous professional development to better support socially guided learning and promote sustained attention and meaningful engagement among young learners.

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