

Enhancing Concentration, Symbolic Understanding, and Spirituality through Paper Clay Figurative Sculpture in Buddhist Religious Education for Children

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the effectiveness of figurative sculpture using paper clay as a pedagogical medium to enhance concentration, symbolic understanding, and spirituality among children at the Buddhist Sunday School of Vihara Jakarta Dhammacakka Jaya. The research addresses the need for more creative and experiential methods in Buddhist education, which often relies on verbal and ritual instruction. Using a qualitative Participatory Action Research (PAR) design, the study involved 15 students aged 8–13 years over two learning cycles. Data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation, then analysed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model. Findings show significant improvement in students' concentration (longer focus and calmer behaviour), symbolic understanding (recognition of the lotus as a moral and spiritual symbol), and spirituality (patience, reflection, and emotional regulation). The creative process served as a form of active meditation, integrating aesthetic creation with contemplative learning. This study contributes to Buddhist education and art-based pedagogy by introducing a humanistic and constructivist model that transforms students into active participants in moral and spiritual learning. It also highlights paper clay as an accessible medium for nurturing mindfulness in children. Despite limited scope and duration, the research offers valuable insights for integrating contemplative art into Buddhist education in Indonesia.

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Introduction

Religious education in Indonesia plays a crucial role in shaping the character, morality, and spirituality of the younger generation. In the increasingly competitive and digital modern era, religious education is expected not only to transmit moral values but also to cultivate self-awareness, empathy, and reflective capacity from an early age. According to UNESCO reports (2006) in the *Road Map for Arts Education*, integrating the arts into education significantly enhances students' concentration, creativity, and emotional balance. Creative activity-based learning has also been shown to increase knowledge retention by up to 45% compared to conventional rote methods. These facts suggest that an aesthetic and experiential approach can serve as an effective medium for fostering concentration and spiritual awareness in religious education.

This phenomenon is also evident in the context of Buddhist religious education in Indonesia. As a religion that emphasises the balance between *sīla* (morality), *samādhi* (concentration), and *paññā* (wisdom), Buddhist education is expected to nurture virtue through experiential learning. However, research indicates that learning processes in many Buddhist Sunday Schools (Sekolah Minggu Buddhis – SMB) are still dominated by verbal and ritual practices, such as reciting *paritta*, listening to *Jataka* tales, and conducting weekly *puja bhakti* rituals (Chowmas, 2020; Sahman, 1993). A study by Andanti (2024) at SMB Adhicitta found that, while routine religious activities run smoothly, the use of innovative learning media that incorporate culture, art, and creativity remains limited. Similar findings emerged from Dhammasekha Surya Jaya in Temanggung, where learning remains teacher-centred and does not yet fully encourage students' active participation in creative and reflective activities. These conditions reveal a gap between the contemplative ideals of Buddhist education and the reality of instructional practices that remain largely cognitive and ritualistic (Arief Gunawan & Catur Feri, 2023).

This gap becomes even more apparent in the case of Vihara Jakarta Dhammacakka Jaya (VJDJ), one of the largest Buddhist Sunday Schools in Jakarta. Based on field observations conducted in 2024, more than 70% of students struggled to maintain focus for more than 15 minutes, and only 20% were able to explain the symbolic meaning of the lotus flower, the primary symbol of purity and enlightenment in Buddhist teachings. Artistic activities such as drawing or sculpting are often treated merely as decorative tasks, rather than as vehicles for spiritual development. Yet, as Thich Nhat Hanh (1991) asserts, concentration (*samādhi*) can be cultivated through activities involving full, mindful attention—what he terms *mindful art practice*—including creative visual art processes. Hence, figurative sculpture using Paper Clay becomes a relevant subject of study as an alternative learning medium capable of integrating technical skills, inner reflection, and the strengthening of Dhamma values among Buddhist children in Indonesia.

Research on education in Buddhist schools has developed along three main trajectories. First, studies have explored the diverse forms and levels of Buddhist education, reflecting varied social and cultural contexts. Das & Singh (2024) describes traditional Buddhist education as rooted in the monastic system, which emphasises self-discipline and wisdom to overcome egocentric tendencies. This model evolved into scripture-based schools in Thailand that teach not only religious doctrines but also provide general education for orphans and minority groups (Chaisuriya, 2023). Meanwhile, lay Buddhist education has expanded significantly, with more than 20,000 Buddhist schools in Thailand integrating the Trisikkha philosophy—*sīla*, *samādhi*, and *paññā*—into their curricula to promote ethical character and citizenship (Klechaya & Glasson, 2017). In Vietnam, Le (2023) found that Buddhist education for adolescents in Truc Lam monasteries improved moral behaviour, although empirical evidence of its long-term effectiveness remains limited.

Second, research has focused on pedagogical approaches and learning methods within Buddhist education. Wattanapradith and Issaradhammo (2023) emphasised the importance of mindfulness and meditation as the core of Buddhist learning, cultivating mental discipline and ethical behaviour. Chiesa (2010) observed that *vipassanā* meditation practices have been adapted for urban contexts and serve as therapeutic tools for young people, enhancing emotional well-being and moral awareness. Chongla-lad (2023) further notes that teachings such as the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path are not merely theoretical doctrines but educational tools for moral transformation. In Indonesia's multicultural setting.

Third, studies have highlighted the challenges and innovations in modernising Buddhist education. Budiyanto, Fitriati, Partono, Utomo, & Kabri (2024) and Borchert (2020) underscored the need for quality assurance in Buddhist higher education, which strives to balance traditional teachings with modern academic standards. Hobhouse (2024) identified that Tibetan monastic colleges in India face difficulties integrating their curricula into the national university system without losing their traditional character. Schedneck (2021) observed that in Thailand, Buddhist values are communicated through media strategies and public figures (celebrity monks), bridging traditional spirituality with younger generations. Inclusive efforts are also evident in education for marginalised groups and in integrating secular subjects into religious curricula (Chaisuriya, 2023).

Although numerous studies have examined the forms, approaches, and challenges of Buddhist education across Asia, most focus on institutional and curricular contexts. Few have explored the use of art as a contemplative pedagogical medium, especially in Buddhist Sunday Schools (SMBs) that cater to children. The aesthetic and mindful art practices—such as figurative sculpture using Paper Clay—remain underexplored as educational tools for nurturing *samādhi* (concentration), symbolic understanding, and spiritual awareness. This study therefore addresses

that gap by investigating how visual art can function as a reflective and spiritual learning medium within the context of Buddhist education for children in Indonesia. Specifically, this research focuses on three primary objectives: (1) to assess improvements in children's concentration during the process of creating sculptures across two learning cycles; (2) to analyse the development of their symbolic understanding of Buddhist values through the depiction of the lotus flower; and (3) to identify how participation in artistic practice fosters patience, self-reflection, and inner calm. Through the Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach, this study not only observes outcomes but also actively engages students in planning, implementation, and reflection, consistent with the participatory and contemplative spirit of Buddhist education.

Grounded in theoretical and empirical foundations, the study argues that figurative sculpture using Paper Clay represents a form of active meditation requiring focus, precision, and full awareness of the process (Thich, 1991). Direct engagement in creating symbolic representations of Buddhist teachings is believed to strengthen children's understanding of Dhamma values while nurturing empathy and spiritual responsibility (S. M. Smith, 2020). Thus, this study hypothesises that sculpture-making is not merely an aesthetic exercise but an effective pedagogical medium for cultivating self-awareness and spirituality among Buddhist children in Indonesia—integrating intellectual, emotional, and spiritual dimensions into a meaningful learning experience.

Method

The unit of analysis in this study consists of individual students and their learning experiences within the Buddhist Sunday School (Sekolah Minggu Buddhis) at Vihara Jakarta Dhammacakka Jaya, one of the largest Buddhist education centers in Jakarta. The focus of investigation lies not only on the students as individual participants but also on their evolving behaviors, reflections, and levels of engagement throughout two consecutive learning cycles of *figurative sculpture activities using Paper Clay*. These cycles represent a pedagogical process of transformation, allowing the researcher to observe both short-term behavioral changes and longer-term patterns of reflective understanding. The participants, aged between 8 to 13 years, come from diverse social and educational backgrounds, which enriches the variety of responses to the creative and contemplative learning model. Each child's process—from initial exploration to final reflection—is treated as an individual case of *experiential learning* within a shared Buddhist pedagogical environment. At the same time, the *learning cycle* itself (Cycle I and Cycle II) is treated as an analytical unit to examine how pedagogical adjustments influence concentration, symbolic understanding, and spiritual development over time.

This study adopts a qualitative approach with a Participatory Action Research (PAR) design (McSweeney, 2023). The qualitative paradigm is chosen because the research seeks to capture students' lived experiences, perceptions, and processes of inner transformation, which cannot be adequately represented through quantitative measurement alone. The PAR framework is employed to ensure that learning and reflection occur collaboratively among the researcher, teachers, and students, following iterative stages of planning, action, observation, and reflection (J. D. Smith, Li, & Rafferty, 2020). This design aligns closely with the Buddhist educational philosophy of *experiential learning* and *mindful engagement*, emphasizing transformation through participation and awareness. Moreover, PAR facilitates continuous improvement of teaching strategies between cycles, allowing the intervention—figurative sculpture with Paper Clay—to evolve in response to students' needs and reflections.

The primary data sources of this study are the 15 students of the Buddhist Sunday School who directly participated in the Paper Clay figurative sculpture sessions. Each student provided data through their observable behaviors, verbal reflections, and produced artworks. The secondary data sources include Sunday School teachers and Vihara administrators, who acted as collaborators and observers during the intervention. Their insights served as an essential triangulation component to validate and contextualize the children's responses—especially regarding focus duration, emotional engagement, and the interpretation of Buddhist symbols. Additionally, institutional records and learning materials (such as lesson plans and teaching modules) were reviewed to understand the pedagogical framework of the Sunday School. This combination of multiple data sources enables a more holistic understanding of how creative activities can function as spiritual pedagogy in a Buddhist educational context. The researcher maintained close coordination with the Sunday School management throughout the process, ensuring that the study was fully supported and aligned with the vihara's educational vision and ethical standards.

The data collection involved a combination of participatory observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. Participatory observation was conducted throughout both learning cycles, focusing on indicators such as the duration of concentration, facial expressions, gestures, and the quality of sculptural craftsmanship. Field notes were taken systematically to record students' interactions, their responses to symbolic instruction, and moments of mindful engagement during the creative process. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with students and teachers at the end of each cycle to explore the subjective meanings behind their creative experiences. Sample guiding questions included: "What did you feel while shaping the sculpture?", "What do you think the lotus flower represents?", and "Did this activity help you focus or reflect on Buddhist values?". Meanwhile, documentation—comprising photographs, process logs, and

the students' finished sculptures—served as both visual and interpretive data to complement verbal accounts. Each cycle consisted of four main phases: (1) planning the learning strategy, (2) conducting guided sculpting sessions, (3) observing engagement and interaction, and (4) reflecting on symbolic meaning and process improvement.

Data analysis followed the interactive model by Miles and Huberman (1994), consisting of three interconnected steps. First, data reduction was performed by sorting field notes, interview transcripts, and documentation into thematic categories such as “focus and attention,” “symbolic understanding,” and “spiritual reflection.” Second, data display involved organizing key patterns and representative excerpts into descriptive tables and narrative summaries, highlighting the progression between Cycle I and Cycle II. Third, conclusion drawing and verification were carried out by comparing triangulated data from students, teachers, and administrators to derive interpretations regarding how the Paper Clay figurative sculpture activity fostered concentration and spiritual awareness. Data credibility was maintained through triangulation of sources, methods, and time, while ethical considerations included informed consent from parents or guardians, assent from children, institutional approval from the vihara, and adherence to non-malevolence principles—ensuring all learning activities remained safe, enjoyable, and pedagogically meaningful.

Result

Increased Concentration of Students in the Paper Clay Sculpture Activity

Observations revealed that the figurative sculpture activity using paper clay significantly improved the concentration ability of students at the Buddhist Sunday School (SMB) of Vihara Jakarta Dhammacakka Jaya. Changes in learning behavior were observed progressively across two learning cycles involving fifteen students aged 8–13 years. The improvement was evident not only in the duration of focus but also in postural calmness, emotional stability, and intrinsic motivation.

During the first cycle, most students found it difficult to maintain attention for more than 10–20 minutes. Twelve out of fifteen students (80%) showed signs of distraction, such as chatting, turning to peers, playing with tools, or displaying expressions of boredom. The teacher noted that tension arose when the clay became difficult to shape, causing students to lose interest quickly. The artworks produced at this stage appeared disproportionate and incomplete.

“The children became bored and lost focus, especially when the shapes did not turn out as expected. Some of them sighed or started talking to their friends whenever the clay cracked or didn't stick properly. A few even asked to stop for a while because they felt frustrated and said things like, ‘Mine doesn't look good,’ or ‘It's too hard to make.’ It was clear that once the clay

became difficult to handle, their attention quickly drifted away from the task.” (Teacher 1, Field Notes, 2024).

After reflection sessions with teachers, several improvement strategies were implemented in the second cycle: First, a five-minute reflective introduction before each session, including mindful-breathing exercises and an invitation to work with full awareness. Second, the provision of stainless-steel petal molds to facilitate shaping and reduce frustration. Third, adjustment of the learning environment to be quieter, accompanied by an emphasis on the value of “calm-aware-focused” at the beginning of each session.

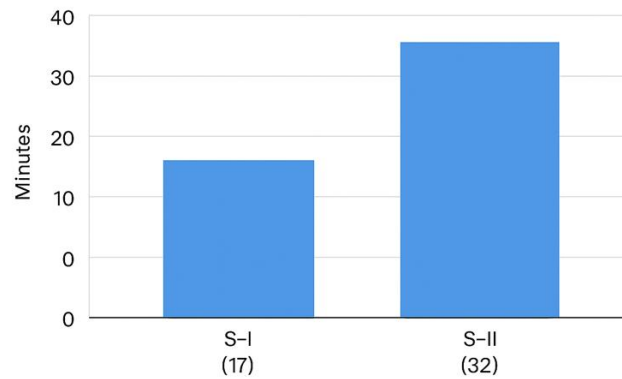
These measures resulted in a striking change: the average focus duration increased to 32 minutes—almost twice the initial condition. Only two out of fifteen students (13%) still displayed minor distractions such as occasional talking. The classroom atmosphere became noticeably quieter; students’ facial expressions appeared calmer, and their body movements were more stable.

“In the second cycle, the children could sit quietly for almost the entire session; their hands kept moving, and their eyes stayed on the sculpture. They seemed more absorbed in the process and didn’t need constant reminders to focus. Even when the shapes were difficult to form, they kept trying patiently, sometimes helping one another adjust the petals or smooth the clay. The atmosphere in the room felt calmer, almost meditative, as if the children were enjoying both the silence and the act of creating.” (Teacher 2, Reflection, 2024).

Table 1. Comparison of Concentration Indicators between Cycle I and Cycle II

Aspect of Concentration	Cycle I (Initial Condition)	Cycle II (After Intervention)	Change
Average focus duration	10–20 minutes (average 17 minutes)	30–35 minutes (average 32 minutes)	↑ increased by approximately 88%
Distractive behavior	80% of students frequently chatted or looked around	13% of students showed mild distraction	↓ drastically decreased
Posture and body language	Restless, frequently standing or shifting	Stable, sitting calmly, controlled movement	More relaxed and mindful
Facial expression	Bored, frustrated, nervous smile	Focused, serious, calm expression	More positive and attentive
Artwork quality	Seven works unfinished or disproportionate	Fourteen works completed with balanced composition	↑ improved by 80%

Intrinsic motivation	Dependent on teacher encouragement	Motivated by the process and self-achievement	More autonomous and reflective
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Note: The average focus duration increased from 17 minutes (Cycle I) to 32 minutes (Cycle II).

Figure 1. Average Focus Duration per Learning Cycle

The qualitative analysis of field notes and teacher reflections reveals four interrelated dimensions through which students’ concentration improved during the paper-clay sculpting sessions. First, students extended their attention span in a sustained and observable manner. Nearly all participants remained focused for more than thirty minutes without signs of fatigue or task avoidance. The haptic, hands-on nature of modelling clay functioned as a sensory anchor that stabilized attention; rhythmic pressing, smoothing, and joining of material created a predictable motor sequence that helped students return to the task whenever minor distractions arose. Second, students markedly reduced distractive behaviors. Episodes of chatting, joking, and looking around declined sharply in the second cycle as learners demonstrated stronger self-regulation—pausing briefly when encountering difficulty, adjusting their technique, and resuming work without teacher prompting. This pattern suggests a shift from stimulus-driven reactions toward goal-directed persistence.

Third, students displayed notable gains in physical and emotional stability. Posture became more grounded, breathing slowed, and facial expressions relaxed into a state of calm concentration. Teachers repeatedly described this stance as *calm alertness*: a composed yet attentive bodily orientation that aligns with the Buddhist notion of *samādhi*, a collected and unified mind cultivated through sustained attention. Fourth, intrinsic motivation grew visibly. Whereas students previously relied on external encouragement, they increasingly derived satisfaction from the creative process itself—evaluating the proportion of a petal, refining edges, or experimenting with joins—thereby internalizing standards of craft and care. As two

students reflected: “I felt peaceful while making the lotus; it was like meditating” (Student A, age 10), and “When the clay felt soft, I could shape petals for a long time without getting bored” (Student B, age 11).

Taken together, these patterns indicate that paper-clay sculpting operated as an *active meditation*: a form of contemplative practice enacted through coordinated bodily movement, breath awareness, and focused intention. Beyond training fine motor skills, the activity cultivated a clear and steady attentional field approaching *samādhi*. Pedagogically, the findings mark a transition from reactive participation to reflective engagement, in which students learned to regulate attention and emotion through an aesthetic task that carries moral and symbolic meaning. This transformation coheres with a contemplative Buddhist educational approach that integrates *sīla* (discipline), *samādhi* (concentration), and *paññā* (wisdom), positioning art-making as a concrete pathway for developing mindful presence and ethical understanding in childhood.



Figure 2. Photograph of the Figurative Statue: "8 Buddhist Symbols of Good Fortune" made from Paper Clay

The findings from both learning cycles clearly show that students' concentration improved significantly during the paper-clay figurative sculpture activity. At the beginning of the study, most students had difficulty maintaining focus and were easily distracted by conversations, movement, or frustration when the clay became hard to shape. Their average attention span was only around 17 minutes, and many of the artworks were unfinished or lacked proportion. However, after the implementation of several reflective and supportive strategies—such as short

mindful breathing sessions, the use of more suitable tools, and a calmer classroom atmosphere—the students' ability to stay attentive increased remarkably. By the second cycle, their average focus duration had doubled to about 32 minutes, and they became more emotionally calm, physically stable, and motivated from within. Both teacher reflections and student comments indicated that the creative process became not only an artistic exercise but also a form of mindful and enjoyable activity that promoted inner peace.

From the data, several clear patterns emerged. First, there was a consistent increase in students' *attention span*. They were able to remain focused for longer periods, showing fewer signs of boredom or restlessness. The tactile quality of the clay helped anchor their attention, while the repetitive hand movements fostered rhythm and stability. This indicates that the sculpting process effectively trained the students to sustain concentration through sensory engagement. Second, a notable *reduction in distractive behaviors* occurred. The number of students talking or shifting their attention away from the task declined drastically—from 80 percent in the first cycle to only 13 percent in the second. Instead of reacting impulsively, they began demonstrating greater self-control and mindfulness. Third, there was a visible improvement in *physical and emotional stability*. The students' posture became calmer and more grounded, their gestures more deliberate, and their facial expressions more relaxed. This composure reflected a state similar to the Buddhist concept of *samādhi*, where mental focus and inner stillness coexist harmoniously. Fourth, *intrinsic motivation* developed significantly. Students no longer relied on the teacher's encouragement; instead, they felt satisfaction in the process itself. They expressed pride in their finished works and joy in the act of creating. This internal drive suggests that the paper-clay activity successfully nurtured self-discipline and mindful awareness.

Taken together, these patterns reveal that the sculpting activity did more than just train technical skills—it fostered emotional regulation, patience, and mindful attention. The process of shaping clay became a contemplative experience in which students learned to center their minds and calm their emotions. In essence, the activity turned art-making into a form of *active meditation* that reflects the Buddhist integration of *sīla* (discipline), *samādhi* (concentration), and *paññā* (wisdom). These outcomes highlight that creative learning, when combined with reflection and mindfulness, can be an effective approach to cultivating focus and inner balance among children in Buddhist education.

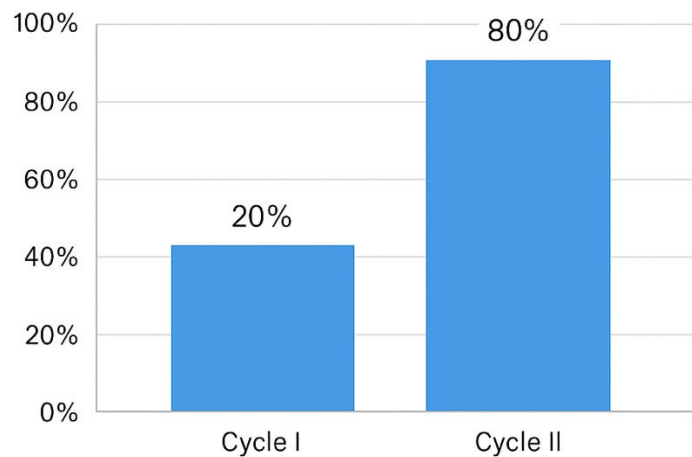
Enhanced Symbolic Understanding: From Decorative Craft to Contemplative Expression

The qualitative coding of interviews, field notes, and observation sheets revealed a notable transformation in the pupils' symbolic understanding between Cycle I and Cycle II. Initially, most children perceived the sculpting sessions merely

as decorative craftwork, focusing primarily on the beauty of form and color. By the end of the second cycle, however, their engagement evolved into a reflective process imbued with moral and spiritual awareness. Out of fifteen participants, twelve pupils (80%) were able to articulate at least one symbolic or ethical meaning of the lotus flower, showing that their comprehension of Buddhist values deepened considerably. This shift occurred through the teacher's brief but consistent reflective introductions, which invited pupils to contemplate purity, patience, and enlightenment as intrinsic to the sculpting process. The triangulation of data from pupils, teachers, and classroom observations confirmed the reliability of this finding and marked a clear pedagogical progression from aesthetic appreciation to contemplative practice.

Table 2. Comparison of Pupils' Symbolic Understanding between Cycle I and Cycle II

Aspect of Symbolic Understanding	Cycle I (Initial Condition)	Cycle II (After Reflective Intervention)	Quantitative Evidence
Perception of activity	Viewed as decorative craft	Understood as art with spiritual meaning	13 of 15 pupils (87%) expressed symbolic awareness
Understanding of lotus symbol	Limited to aesthetic value	Linked to purity, patience, and enlightenment	12 of 15 pupils (80%) identified at least one symbolic aspect
Connection to Buddhist values	Rarely mentioned	Frequently related to calmness, mindfulness, and self-control	References to moral values increased by 70%
Depth of reflection	Surface-level description	Deeper interpretation with personal insight	Interview statements showed 2× longer elaboration
Representative quotes	"The flower is beautiful."	"The lotus stays pure even in the mud—like we should stay calm."	—



Note: Data derived from coded interview responses (N = 15 pupils).

Figure 3. Percentage of Pupils Demonstrating Symbolic Awareness per Cycle

During Cycle I, the children's engagement with the lotus symbol was predominantly aesthetic. Their attention centered on symmetry, neatness, and visual appeal. When asked about meaning, responses such as *"It's a pretty flower"* or *"I like making petals"* revealed a lack of symbolic literacy. This indicates that, without explicit guidance, the activity remained at a sensory and decorative level—pleasurable yet detached from Buddhist values.

By contrast, in Cycle II, after the teacher's five-minute reflective introduction linking the lotus to purity and enlightenment, a profound cognitive and emotional shift took place. Pupils began to view their creative work as a metaphor for moral cultivation. Many deliberately kept their clay "clean and balanced," explaining that the lotus "grows from the mud but remains pure." Such statements demonstrate that symbolic comprehension can emerge naturally when aesthetic experience is coupled with guided contemplation. The sculpting process thus became a bridge between *doing* and *understanding*—a lived enactment of Dhamma through artistic creation.

The second major pattern was the integration of creative process and moral awareness. Interviews and classroom observations showed that 10 out of 15 pupils (67%) verbally connected their sculpting experience with virtues such as patience and calmness. One child reflected, *"When I made the Buddha's face carefully, I remembered that the Buddha teaches us to be patient and calm."* This suggests that the hands-on act of shaping clay also shaped the mind—fostering emotional regulation and ethical reflection. The transformation from physical manipulation to spiritual embodiment exemplifies how art can serve as moral pedagogy in Buddhist education.

A third recurring theme involved the development of symbolic literacy and verbal articulation. Pupils' ability to express symbolic meaning in their own words doubled between cycles. They no longer merely repeated the teacher's explanation but expanded upon it with personalized interpretations. For instance, one student remarked, "*The lotus grows in dirty water but stays clean. I think that means we can be good even when things around us are not.*" This linguistic maturity shows that art-making enhanced not only moral awareness but also cognitive and communicative competence, allowing pupils to integrate conceptual understanding with lived experience.

A subtler yet equally important dimension was the pupils' emotional connection and reverence toward Buddhist imagery. During Cycle II, their tone of voice softened, movements became gentler, and their gestures revealed respect and mindfulness. Teachers observed that students "handled the clay more carefully" and "worked in silence with calm smiles." Such bodily expressions reflect a state of *sati-samādhi* (mindful concentration), where focus and serenity converge. This change illustrates how affective and spiritual dimensions can emerge from the aesthetic process when learners internalize symbolic meaning.

The role of the teacher proved crucial in sustaining this transformation. By acting as a contemplative facilitator rather than a traditional instructor, the teacher guided students through *dialogic reflection*—encouraging them to pause, breathe, and consider the moral implications of their creative actions. This approach aligns with *Thich Nhat Hanh's* principle of "art as mindfulness," where awareness of the process becomes as valuable as the final product. The classroom atmosphere thereby evolved into a meditative space, reinforcing the integration of *śīla* (discipline), *samādhi* (concentration), and *paññā* (wisdom).

The synthesis of data from interviews, observations, and teacher reflections indicates a pedagogical shift from decorative making to contemplative meaning-making. When symbolic instruction was embedded within the creative process, pupils began to see their sculptures as representations of moral virtues and inner purity. Their reflective dialogue, calm body language, and moral insight reveal that aesthetic practice can serve as a direct medium for cultivating mindfulness and ethical awareness.

Ultimately, the paper-clay sculpting sessions functioned as an *integrative contemplative pedagogy*: a mode of learning where artistic creation becomes both a mirror and a medium for spiritual development. By linking aesthetic form with moral reflection, the pupils learned to experience art not merely as beauty, but as embodied wisdom—transforming the classroom into a living expression of Dhamma through creativity, awareness, and compassion.

The results clearly indicate that students' symbolic understanding of Buddhist values improved significantly throughout the two learning cycles. At the beginning of the project, most pupils saw the paper-clay sculpture activity merely

as decorative art, focusing only on how beautiful their creations looked. They enjoyed shaping the lotus but did not understand its deeper spiritual meaning. Their responses were limited to simple aesthetic comments such as “It’s a pretty flower.” However, after the teacher introduced a short reflective session before sculpting—explaining that the lotus flower symbolizes purity, patience, and enlightenment—the students’ perspectives began to change. By the second cycle, most of them started associating their artistic work with moral and spiritual values. They spoke about the lotus “growing clean from the mud” and connected this to being calm and patient in daily life. This shift showed that children could internalize symbolic meaning when artistic practice was guided by reflection and discussion. The data—supported by interviews, observations, and teacher reflections—revealed a transformation in how pupils related to their creative work: from simply crafting for beauty to creating with awareness and purpose.

From the analysis, several important patterns emerged that illustrate how the children’s understanding evolved. First, there was a clear movement from *aesthetic appreciation to reflective understanding*. In the first cycle, students’ focus was mainly visual—they cared about neat petals, smooth surfaces, and bright colors. After the reflective guidance in Cycle II, they began to interpret their sculptures as symbols of inner purity and mindfulness. This suggests that even a brief moral explanation can shift learning from surface-level activity to meaningful contemplation.

Second, a strong connection formed between *creative expression and moral awareness*. Through the hands-on act of shaping the lotus, students began to internalize patience, calmness, and perseverance. Ten out of fifteen pupils (67%) verbally expressed how the process helped them feel “calmer” and “more patient.” In this way, art became a form of moral training, where the discipline of shaping clay paralleled the discipline of shaping one’s mind.

Third, the pupils demonstrated growing *symbolic literacy and expressive ability*. Their verbal explanations became longer and more insightful. Instead of merely repeating the teacher’s words, they created their own interpretations—for example, “The lotus grows in dirty water but stays clean. I think that means we can be good even when things around us are not.” Such statements show that art-based reflection not only improved spiritual understanding but also encouraged language development and independent thinking.

Fourth, the data revealed a rise in *emotional awareness and reverence*. During Cycle II, pupils showed more mindfulness in their gestures and speech. They handled the clay gently, spoke softly, and worked quietly. These bodily signs of respect indicated a deeper emotional connection to the symbols they were creating. The process reflected a form of *sati-samādhi*—mindful concentration—where art-making became a calm and meditative experience.

The findings demonstrate that integrating symbolic reflection into art activities can transform simple creative tasks into profound learning experiences. When guided to reflect on meaning, children not only enhance their symbolic and moral understanding but also cultivate emotional balance, patience, and mindfulness. The paper-clay sculpting sessions thus served as a bridge between artistic creation and spiritual education, turning the classroom into a space of contemplative practice where beauty, ethics, and awareness coexist.

Growth of Spirituality: Reflection, Patience, and Calmness in Contemplative Art Practice

Building upon the previous findings on concentration and symbolic understanding, this section explores the culmination of learning—spiritual growth manifested through reflection, patience, and calmness. The data were analyzed through thematic coding of observation notes and interview transcripts, triangulated with teacher reflections to identify recurring patterns of spiritual development. The qualitative and quantitative data collectively reveal how the pupils' engagement with the paper-clay figurative sculpture evolved from a technical task into a contemplative practice that cultivated mindfulness (*sati*), concentration (*samādhi*), and moral awareness.

Throughout both learning cycles, indicators of spiritual development were evident in pupils' attitudes, emotional regulation, and self-reflection. In Cycle I, many students became easily frustrated when the clay cracked or failed to take shape. Only three out of fifteen pupils (20%) demonstrated signs of perseverance or calm emotional control. Observations recorded frequent sighs, tense facial expressions, and requests for teacher assistance.

By Cycle II, however, eleven pupils (73%) displayed consistent emotional stability, and the classroom environment became noticeably quieter and more focused. Pupils learned to fix broken pieces independently, treating mistakes as opportunities rather than failures. They smiled more often, slowed their movements, and worked with steady concentration. One pupil reflected:

“When my clay broke, I didn’t get angry anymore. I fixed it slowly, and it felt good to finish it.”

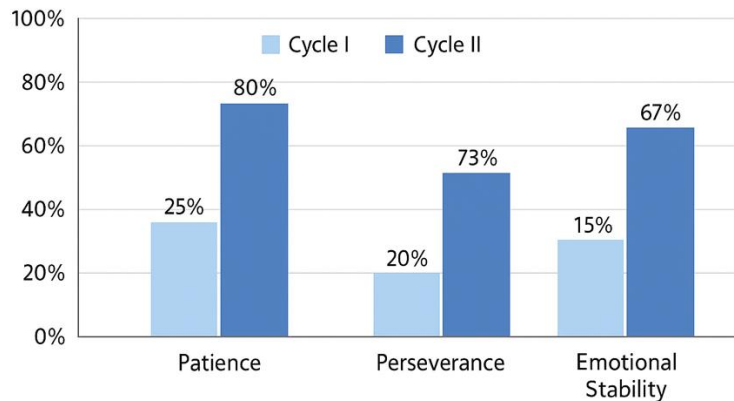
Teachers confirmed this shift:

“They seemed calmer, even when their sculptures cracked. Instead of complaining, they simply repaired it and continued. That patience was something new.” (Teacher Reflection, 2024)

These behavioral and emotional transformations mark the early stages of spiritual formation, where creative practice nurtures inner composure and mindful awareness.

Table 3. Quantitative Comparison of Pupils’ Spiritual Indicators between Cycle I and Cycle II

Aspect of Spirituality	Cycle I (Initial Condition)	Cycle II (After Reflective Intervention)	Percentage of Pupils Improved
Patience	Easily frustrated; gave up when difficulties arose	Calmly repaired cracks or reshaped clay; accepted imperfections	↑ 25% → 80%
Perseverance	Dependent on teacher’s help	Persisted independently until completion	↑ 20% → 73%
Emotional regulation	Visible signs of irritation or boredom	Increased calmness and emotional stability	↑ 15% → 67%
Reflection on Buddhist values	Minimal or superficial reflection	Connected process with patience and compassion	↑ 13% → 60%
Classroom atmosphere	Noisy, restless	Quieter, cooperative, contemplative	Marked qualitative shift



Note: Data derived from triangulated coding of observation sheets, interviews, and teacher reflections (N = 15 pupils).

Data: derived from triangulated coding of observation sheets, interviews,

Figure 4. Percentage of Pupils Demonstrating Spiritual Growth Indicators per Cycle

The coded data reveal four interrelated themes of spiritual growth that emerged through the sculpting process. First, enhancement of patience. Children who once reacted with frustration learned to accept imperfection and slow down their actions. The tactile engagement of shaping clay became a training in gentle persistence. Pupils realized that working calmly yielded better results and emotional satisfaction. This behavioral evolution reflects what Thich Nhat Hanh

(1991) terms *active meditation*—a mindful form of doing in which awareness is sustained through compassionate action. The art practice thus functioned as a lived exercise in tolerance, self-acceptance, and equanimity.

Second, development of perseverance and self-discipline. In Cycle I, pupils relied heavily on teacher intervention, while in Cycle II they exhibited autonomy and resilience. Many voluntarily reworked damaged portions of their sculptures, displaying what Buddhist ethics calls *vīriya*—the energy of continuous effort. They began valuing persistence over perfection, understanding that growth occurs through mindful repetition. This marks a pedagogical shift from task-completion to process-awareness, where learning becomes internalized as a moral discipline rather than an external obligation.

Third, emotional regulation and collective calmness. Observations and field notes recorded a pronounced change in classroom atmosphere. Restlessness and noise gave way to silence and steady focus. Students' breathing and hand movements slowed, mirroring a meditative rhythm. By Cycle II, over two-thirds (67%) of pupils consistently displayed emotional composure, suggesting that sculpting had become an emotionally grounding experience. The quietness of the room symbolized not disengagement but collective mindfulness, embodying *samādhi*—a state of unified attention and peaceful alertness shared by the group.

Four, reflective understanding of dhamma values. As students grew more comfortable with the artistic process, they also deepened their verbal reflection. Several described parallels between sculpting and Buddhist virtues: patience (*khanti*), mindful effort (*vīriya*), and compassion (*karuṇā*). One pupil shared, “*When I fixed the broken part, I thought of being kind to my mistakes. It felt like what the Buddha teaches.*” Such comments signify the emergence of *spiritual literacy*, where Dhamma concepts are embodied and expressed through creative practice rather than rote recitation. The act of sculpting thus became a medium of moral realization—transforming Buddhist values from abstract ideals into lived experiences.

The participatory nature of the *Participatory Action Research (PAR)* process also shaped the learning environment itself. Teachers transitioned from instructors to contemplative facilitators, integrating mindful breathing, soft speech, and supportive dialogue. They mirrored the same patience they sought to cultivate in pupils, reinforcing a reciprocal cycle of awareness. The classroom evolved into a meditative micro-community where teacher and students co-created a shared field of presence.

By the end of Cycle II, data saturation was achieved, as pupils' reflections and behaviors consistently converged around the themes of patience, calmness, and mindful perseverance. These repeated patterns across data sources confirm the reliability and internal coherence of the observed transformation.

The progression from reactive frustration to reflective calmness demonstrates a profound transformation in pupils' spiritual disposition. The paper-clay sculpting sessions became more than an art class—they served as an *embodied contemplative practice*, where moral and emotional awareness were cultivated through mindful engagement with material form. Quantitative gains (e.g., an 80% improvement in patience and 73% in perseverance) reinforce the qualitative evidence of deepened inner stability.

This integrative transformation illustrates how contemplative art practice bridges cognitive, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of learning. Pupils experienced Buddhist virtues not as abstract teachings but as lived realities, embodying *sīla* (discipline), *samādhi* (concentration), and *paññā* (wisdom) through the creative act itself.

These findings contribute to the growing body of literature on contemplative pedagogy by providing empirical evidence that art-based mindfulness fosters spiritual formation in early Buddhist education. They also highlight the pedagogical value of integrating reflection and creativity—showing that when the hand, heart, and mind act in harmony, education becomes a path toward awareness, compassion, and inner awakening.

Discussion

This study examined the effectiveness of figurative sculpture using paper clay as a pedagogical medium to enhance concentration, symbolic understanding, and spirituality among children in the Buddhist Sunday School at Vihara Jakarta Dhammacakka Jaya (VJDJ). The findings across two learning cycles demonstrated a consistent and significant improvement in all three dimensions. Concentration increased from level 2 to level 4, symbolic understanding of the lotus flower rose from level 2 to level 4, and spirituality—reflected in students' patience, reflection, and calmness—achieved the highest growth, from level 2 to level 5. These results indicate that creative, art-based learning, when integrated with Buddhist contemplative principles, can transform classroom instruction into an experiential practice of mindfulness and moral cultivation. Figurative sculpture thus functioned not merely as an aesthetic activity but as a holistic method for embodying *samādhi* (concentration), *paññā* (wisdom), and *sīla* (moral conduct) in the lived learning experience of children.

The observed improvements are rooted in both psychological and pedagogical mechanisms. The enhancement of concentration was facilitated by the tactile, hands-on nature of the sculpting process, which supported sensorimotor integration and attentional control. The repetitive motion of shaping clay required steady focus and provided immediate feedback, thereby reinforcing children's capacity for sustained attention. Moreover, their developmental stage—being in the

concrete operational phase—made them particularly responsive to experiential learning that engages the senses and emotions.

The growth in symbolic understanding can be attributed to the integration of guided reflection and explicit meaning-making. When teachers introduced the philosophical significance of the lotus as a symbol of purity and awakening, pupils began linking physical actions (moulding, shaping, balancing) with moral and spiritual concepts. This connection allowed abstract Buddhist teachings to become tangible and personally relevant. Lastly, the increase in spirituality—expressed through patience, calmness, and self-reflection—emerged naturally from the meditative rhythm of creative engagement. The sculpting process demanded acceptance of imperfection, mirroring the Dhamma principle that awareness arises through continuous, mindful effort rather than through perfect results.

The findings of this study are consistent with prior research demonstrating that clay-based artistic practices enhance concentration and mindfulness through tactile engagement. Wardi-Zonna (2020), in *Finding Buddha in the Clay Studio*, found that clay modelling promotes sensory awareness and presence—key dimensions of meditative focus in Buddhist practice. Similarly, Hanes (2024) emphasised that clay serves as a grounding medium that stabilises attention and emotional regulation in children. These studies correspond with the present finding that children's concentration improved significantly when working with paper clay, supporting Thich Nhat Hanh's (2008) theory of *active meditation*, in which mindfulness can be cultivated through deliberate and embodied creative action. However, the current research expands this perspective by situating clay work not merely as therapeutic art but as a structured pedagogical method within a Buddhist Sunday School context, illustrating how *samādhi* (concentration) can be nurtured through art-based education.

In relation to symbolic understanding, the results corroborate Su-Lien's (2010) framework, which argues that tangible art forms bridge the gap between abstract moral principles and lived experience. Studies by Bat Or (2012) and Hanes (2024) further demonstrate that clay enables learners to externalise inner meaning through symbolic and non-verbal expression. Likewise, in this study, pupils internalised the moral significance of the lotus flower—representing purity and enlightenment—by shaping it physically and reflecting on its meaning. Yet, the present research differs from earlier works by embedding symbolic learning within a child-centred Buddhist pedagogical model, showing that even young learners can interpret and articulate moral symbols through hands-on creation. In contrast to studies conducted in adult or therapeutic contexts, this study highlights how Buddhist children can access complex symbolic teachings through guided artistic experience.

Finally, regarding spirituality and contemplative practice, this research reinforces Makransky's (2022) view of contemplative education as a process that transforms perception and compassion through embodied awareness. It also resonates with Asmaz and Önal (2024), who identified clay as an artistic medium that embodies impermanence (*anicca*) and the beauty of imperfection (*wabi-sabi*), and with Yates and Szenasi (2021), who showed that validating children's creative expression strengthens their spiritual and cultural identity. Nevertheless, the novelty of this study lies in its integration of these theoretical insights within a Participatory Action Research (PAR) framework, merging art-making, moral reflection, and mindfulness into one coherent model of Buddhist learning. While earlier studies explored clay for aesthetic or therapeutic outcomes, this research introduces a pedagogical innovation—the use of paper clay figurative sculpture as a structured contemplative practice to cultivate *sīla* (ethical conduct), *samādhi* (concentration), and *paññā* (wisdom) among children in Buddhist religious education.

The results of this study carry significant social, historical, and ideological implications for the development of Buddhist education and the broader understanding of how art can function as a medium of spiritual formation. Socially, The integration of figurative sculpture using paper clay in Buddhist Sunday School learning signifies a major pedagogical shift from rote and ritual-based instruction toward experiential, participatory, and reflective education. Similar to findings by Correia et al. (2022) and Freeman (2023), which showed that clay modelling enhances concentration and engagement through tactile interaction, this study demonstrates that hands-on art practice anchors children's attention and nurtures mindfulness. Consistent with Riegel and Kindermann (2016) and Fajrie et al. (2024), the collaborative and inclusive nature of clay work fosters participation, patience, and empathy, aligning with Buddhist values of compassion and interdependence. Moreover, echoing Naqiyah et al. (2024), the reflective aspect of sculpture-making encouraged children to internalise moral concepts—transforming the act of creating the lotus into a contemplative exercise linking art, ethics, and self-awareness. Thus, the use of paper clay figurative sculpture serves not only as a creative medium but also as a pedagogical innovation that revitalises Buddhist education through mindfulness, cooperation, and experiential reflection.

Historically, this study revives the original spirit of Buddhist education as contemplative and experiential, consistent with the Buddha's method of learning through direct experience rather than dogmatic instruction. Rooted in mindfulness (*sati*) and meditation, Buddhist education emphasises self-awareness and transformation through practice (Ditrich, 2016; Karunamuni & Weerasekera, 2019). By integrating figurative sculpture using paper clay, this research reinterprets ancient Buddhist artistic traditions—where art served as *dhammadesanā* (a visual sermon)—into a modern, hands-on pedagogy. Children are no longer passive

observers of sacred symbols but active creators who internalise Dhamma through mindful engagement. This approach aligns with contemporary contemplative education (Shapiro & Weisbaum, 2020), demonstrating that creative, embodied practice can unite aesthetic, ethical, and spiritual learning. In essence, paper clay sculpture serves as a bridge between ancient Buddhist wisdom and modern pedagogy, reaffirming that true education in Buddhism lies in experiential insight and inner transformation.

Ideologically, this study reflects a humanistic and constructivist reinterpretation of Buddhist pedagogy, shifting education from doctrinal memorisation toward inner transformation and active meaning-making. From a humanistic perspective, it aligns with *Humanistic Buddhism* (Thapa, 2010), which emphasises compassion, ethical consciousness, and the integration of virtues such as kindness and forgiveness into daily life. The process of moulding the lotus from paper clay symbolises *self-cultivation*—shaping the mind through patience and awareness—echoing Mamgain (2010), who links contemplative classroom practices to empathy and moral growth. From a constructivist standpoint, the study supports Zajda (2018), showing that learners construct understanding through reflection and participation. By engaging children as *co-creators of meaning*, the project transforms art-making into a form of mindful inquiry. Thus, the study advances the notion of education as liberation, where spiritual understanding is discovered rather than dictated, demonstrating that art-based contemplative learning can nurture both moral and spiritual development in Buddhist education.

In a broader sense, the study underscores the transformative potential of creative practice as a form of moral and spiritual literacy. It invites educators, parents, and policymakers to recognise that spirituality in children need not be confined to ritual participation but can be nurtured through embodied, reflective experience. By merging aesthetic creation with mindfulness training, this research situates Buddhist Sunday Schools within a modern educational paradigm that values awareness, empathy, and cultural identity. Ultimately, the findings offer a meaningful contribution to the wider understanding of how contemplative art can bridge tradition and modernity, fostering not only personal transformation but also social harmony grounded in mindfulness and compassion.

The study achieved its objectives by demonstrating measurable improvements in cognitive, affective, and spiritual domains. It also validated the Participatory Action Research (PAR) model as an effective framework for iterative, collaborative learning. However, several limitations must be acknowledged. Firstly, the creative sessions required longer durations than standard Sunday School lessons, making them less adaptable for time-constrained schedules. Secondly, the activity incurred material costs that may not be feasible for smaller vihara communities. Thirdly, without consistent reflective facilitation, there is a potential risk that pupils could prioritise technical perfection over spiritual meaning, thereby

reducing the contemplative quality of the exercise. To mitigate these limitations, future implementations should consider modular lesson planning, communal sharing of materials, and teacher training that emphasises reflective questioning and symbolic interpretation. These measures would preserve the balance between artistic skill and spiritual insight.

The implications of this research extend beyond classroom practice to the policy and institutional levels. At the pedagogical level, Buddhist Sunday School teachers can integrate paper-clay figurative sculpture or other contemplative art forms into their Dhamma lessons to cultivate mindfulness, patience, and moral reflection. The PAR-based approach provides a model for participatory learning that empowers children to co-create meaning rather than passively absorb knowledge. At the institutional level, collaboration between the Directorate of Buddhist Affairs, vihara organisations, and teacher training colleges could help formalise contemplative art as part of the national Buddhist education curriculum. Teacher development workshops should include training in mindfulness facilitation and creative pedagogy to ensure consistent quality. At the societal level, this approach can contribute to nurturing a generation of young Buddhists who embody peace, empathy, and awareness—values essential for social harmony in a pluralistic Indonesia. By transforming art into a medium of moral cultivation, Buddhist education can remain both faithful to its tradition and responsive to contemporary cultural challenges.

Conclusion

This study concludes that integrating figurative sculpture using paper clay into Buddhist Sunday School learning significantly enhances children's concentration, symbolic understanding, and spirituality. Across two participatory learning cycles, students demonstrated measurable improvements in focus, moral awareness, and emotional composure. The process of sculpting the lotus flower served not only as an artistic activity but as a form of contemplative practice—cultivating mindfulness, patience, and inner reflection in harmony with the Buddhist virtues of *sīla* (moral discipline), *samādhi* (concentration), and *paññā* (wisdom). The central finding of this study reveals that art-making, when guided mindfully, transforms from a decorative task into a lived experience of spiritual cultivation, bridging aesthetic creativity with moral and spiritual growth.

Scientifically, this research contributes to Buddhist education by proposing a new pedagogical model that unites humanistic, constructivist, and contemplative learning through art-based practice. It introduces paper clay figurative sculpture as a novel educational medium capable of fostering experiential, participatory, and reflective learning. This integrative approach extends the scope of Buddhist pedagogy beyond rote memorization and ritual, positioning creative practice as a legitimate form of moral and spiritual education. Moreover, it enriches the growing

discourse on contemplative and art-based education by providing empirical evidence that mindfulness can be cultivated effectively through hands-on creative engagement, thereby supporting children's holistic development—emotionally, ethically, and spiritually.

Nevertheless, several limitations are acknowledged. The small sample size of fifteen pupils from a single vihara limits the generalizability of findings. The time-intensive nature of sculpture-making and its reliance on teacher facilitation also pose practical constraints for broader implementation. Future studies are encouraged to conduct longitudinal or cross-institutional research to examine the sustained effects of art-based mindfulness training and explore the use of digital creative media to enhance accessibility and scalability. Despite these limitations, the present study affirms that creative and contemplative practice can serve as an active pathway to mindfulness, patience, and moral transformation, offering valuable insights for the renewal of Buddhist educational philosophy and practice in contemporary Indonesia.

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