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## INTEGRATING ARTS AND HUMANITIES INTO THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CURRICULUM: FOSTERING SOCIAL AND CULTURAL AWARENESS THROUGH CREATIVE EXPRESSION

Sofyan Mustoip<sup>1\*</sup>, Somantri<sup>2</sup>, Sulkhah<sup>3</sup>, Diana Lestari<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1,2,3,4</sup> Islamic University of Bunga Bangsa Cirebon, Indonesia

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**\*Corresponding author:** Sofyan Mustoip  
Islamic University of Bunga Bangsa Cirebon, Indonesia

### Abstract

*This study aims to explore the impact of integrating arts (visual arts, music, drama) and humanities (literature, history, ethics) in the elementary school curriculum on students' social, emotional, and cultural awareness. This study also analyses how creative expression through arts and humanities can improve students' critical thinking and empathy skills, as well as their influence in forming an inclusive and socially conscious school environment. The research method used is qualitative with a phenomenological approach. Data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. The number of respondents consisted of 20 students and 5 teachers in three elementary schools in Cirebon City that have integrated arts and humanities in their learning. The results showed that the integration of arts and humanities significantly improved students' social, emotional, and cultural awareness. Students who were involved in creative activities such as painting, playing music, drama, and literature discussions showed improvements in critical thinking and empathy skills. Teachers also reported increased student engagement in learning and more positive interactions between students from diverse cultural backgrounds. In conclusion, the integration of arts and humanities into the elementary school curriculum has a positive impact on students' social and emotional development. The implication is that schools need to encourage more opportunities for creative expression in learning to help shape students with better social and cultural awareness, as well as sharper critical thinking skills in facing global challenges.*

**Keywords:** arts integration, humanities, social awareness, critical thinking, elementary school

## INTRODUCTION

Elementary school education plays an important role in shaping students' character and social and emotional awareness. One effective way to achieve this goal is through the integration of arts and humanities into the educational curriculum. Arts, such as visual arts, music, and drama, as well as humanities including literature, history, and ethics, provide opportunities for students to express themselves and develop a deeper understanding of the social and cultural values that exist in society. This study aims to explore how the integration of arts and humanities into elementary school learning can increase students' social, emotional, and cultural awareness, as well as strengthen their critical thinking and empathy skills. According to Brown (2021), art is not only a tool for expressing emotions, but also a means to understand social life more deeply. Art helps individuals to see the world from a different perspective, which can ultimately broaden their social perspective. In the context of elementary education, art is a bridge to teach the values of diversity, inclusivity, and empathy through creative and fun methods. Research by Smith (2023) also shows that art integration in learning can improve students' critical and analytical thinking skills, especially in understanding complex social and cultural issues.

In Indonesia, arts and humanities education is often still seen as a complementary subject that does not receive serious attention in the formal curriculum. In fact, several recent studies have shown significant benefits from art integration in learning. For example, research by Prasetyo (2022) revealed that art-based learning in elementary schools can increase student engagement in the learning process, develop creativity, and enrich their emotional experiences. However, although there are several studies that examine the integration of arts in education, there is still a gap regarding its specific impact on the development of students' social, emotional, and cultural awareness.

This research is important because in the current era of globalization and digitalization, students are faced with the challenge of interacting with a society that is increasingly socially and culturally diverse. Therefore, it is important to equip students with critical thinking skills, empathy, and social awareness from an early age so that they can participate actively and constructively in the global society. One way to achieve this is through the integration of arts and humanities in elementary education, which can encourage students to better understand differences and appreciate human values. While there have been several studies examining the benefits of arts in education, this study seeks to fill a gap in the literature by exploring how the integration of arts and humanities holistically can impact students' social, emotional, and cultural development. Unlike previous research that has focused on one particular aspect of the arts, this study examines how multiple art forms—such as visual arts, music, and drama—along with humanities such as literature and history, can create a more inclusive and socially conscious school environment.

The urgency of this research is also based on the need to find educational methods that are more relevant to the challenges of the 21st century. Currently, education is not only aimed at improving students' cognitive abilities, but also developing non-cognitive skills such as empathy, cooperation, and creative problem solving. According to Goleman (2020), emotional skills such as empathy are key to success in one's social and professional life. Thus, the integration of arts and humanities in education can be one way to develop these skills among elementary school students.

In addition, this study also brings novelty by combining a multidisciplinary approach in learning arts and humanities. This study not only evaluates the impact of arts integration on students individually, but also how this approach affects classroom dynamics and social interactions in schools. In this regard, this study offers new insights into how creative expression can shape inclusive mindsets among students and create a more harmonious school environment.

Based on initial findings from previous studies, creative expression through art can help students better understand social issues, such as justice, equality, and diversity. For example, a study conducted by Nguyen (2022) showed that students involved in collaborative art projects were more likely to demonstrate empathy and tolerance for cultural differences. This suggests that art has the potential to be an effective learning tool in instilling social values in students.

This study also emphasizes the importance of humanities in teaching ethical and historical values to students. According to Nussbaum (2021), humanities education helps students understand the cultural and historical heritage that shapes their identity, as well as strengthens their ability to think critically about the past and its implications for the future. In this context, the integration of humanities into the elementary school curriculum can be an effective way to build cultural and historical awareness among students.

With this background, this study will use a qualitative approach to analyse the impact of the integration of arts and humanities on elementary school students in several schools in Cirebon City. This study involves in-depth interviews with teachers and students, classroom observations, and analysis of curriculum documents and student work. This data is expected to provide a comprehensive picture of how arts and humanities can improve students' social, emotional, and cultural awareness.

Research related to the integration of arts and humanities in the elementary school curriculum not only provides benefits for students' cognitive development, but also strengthens their social and emotional skills. These findings are expected to contribute to the development of more holistic education policies, which recognize the importance of arts and humanities in shaping students' critical, inclusive, and empathetic characters. Thus, this study has significant implications for the development of elementary school curriculum in Indonesia. The results of this study are expected to be used as a basis for encouraging the implementation of broader and more systematic arts and humanities learning programs in elementary schools, as well as a guide for teachers in designing learning activities that focus on developing students' social and cultural awareness.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach. This method was chosen because phenomenology focuses on the subjective experiences of individuals and the meanings they give to a phenomenon (Creswell, 2021). In the context of this study, the phenomenological approach aims to understand in depth how students and teachers experience the integration of arts and humanities in learning, and how it affects students' social, emotional, and cultural awareness. As stated by Vagle (2020), the phenomenological method is effective for exploring individual experiences and explaining complex phenomena that involve interactions between educational, cultural, and personal contexts. This study involved 25 respondents

consisting of 20 students and 5 teachers from three elementary schools in Cirebon City who have integrated arts and humanities in their learning. The selection of this number of respondents was based on the need to obtain various perspectives from students and teachers who are directly involved in the learning process. As explained by Marshall and Rossman (2022), in qualitative research, the focus is not on the large number of samples, but on the depth of data obtained from subjects who have relevant experiences. Respondents were selected purposively, with the criteria that they must be actively involved in learning that integrates arts and humanities. Data collection techniques used in this study include semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they provide flexibility for researchers to explore respondents' answers in more depth, while still guiding the conversation with a list of prepared questions. According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2020), semi-structured interviews allow researchers to adjust questions according to the dynamics of the conversation, so that the data obtained is richer and in accordance with the research context.

Classroom observations were conducted to see first-hand how arts and humanities were integrated into the learning process. Observations allowed researchers to record interactions between teachers and students, as well as classroom dynamics that may not have been revealed in interviews (Angrosino, 2021). Observations also helped researchers understand the physical and social environment in which learning took place, which is an important element in the phenomenological approach, because the setting and context also influence individual experiences.

In addition, document analysis was also conducted on learning materials, syllabi, and student artwork. This document analysis aims to see how arts and humanities are positioned in the curriculum and how it is reflected in student work. According to Bowen (2021), document analysis is an effective method to complement data obtained from interviews and observations, because documents often present more structured and formal information about certain policies or practices.

Data obtained from interviews, observations, and document analysis were then analysed using thematic analysis techniques. This technique was chosen because it allows researchers to identify, analyse, and report patterns or themes in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The thematic analysis process begins with the transcription of interview and observation data, then continues with data coding to find the main themes related to the research objectives, such as students' social, emotional, and cultural awareness.

Data accuracy is also considered through data triangulation, where information obtained from interviews, observations, and documents is compared to ensure consistency and validity of the findings. According to Patton (2021), triangulation is one of the strategies in qualitative research to increase data validity by comparing various data sources and data collection methods. By conducting triangulation, researchers can reduce bias and get a more holistic picture of the phenomenon being studied.

In addition to triangulation, the credibility of the research is also strengthened through member checking, which is the process of confirming temporary findings with respondents to ensure that the researcher's interpretation is in accordance with their experiences (Birt et al., 2020). This step is important in phenomenological research because the subjective experiences of respondents are the

main focus of the research. With member checking, researchers can improve or clarify data interpretations before drawing final conclusions.

This research method is designed to produce in-depth findings on how the integration of arts and humanities in elementary education affects students. A qualitative phenomenological approach, with diverse data collection techniques and thematic analysis, provides a solid framework for answering the research questions. This study focuses not only on cognitive impacts, but also on social, emotional, and cultural dimensions that are rarely studied holistically. The overall method used supports the main objective of this study, which is to explore the impact of arts and humanities on the development of students' social, emotional, and cultural awareness in elementary schools. With a comprehensive approach, this study is expected to provide in-depth and practical insights for the development of a more inclusive curriculum based on arts and humanities.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate that the integration of arts (visual arts, music, drama) and humanities (literature, history, ethics) in the elementary school curriculum has a significant impact on students' social, emotional, and cultural awareness. From the observation data, it can be seen that students who are involved in creative activities such as painting, playing music, and participating in drama are better able to understand the perspectives of their friends who come from different cultural backgrounds. For example, in art classes, students not only learn about painting techniques but also about how art can be a medium for expressing cultural identity (Hargreaves & North, 2021).

The results of interviews with teachers support this finding, where most teachers reported increased student engagement in learning. Teacher A, for example, revealed that students who were usually passive in math or science classes became more active when arts and humanities were integrated into the lesson. They felt more motivated because learning became more relevant to their daily lives and emotions (Taylor, 2022). The teacher also noted that students collaborated more often with classmates from different cultural backgrounds, thereby increasing positive interactions between students.

The documentation results also revealed an increase in critical thinking and empathy skills in students. This can be seen from the students' artworks analysed during the study. For example, some students depicted themes related to social issues such as gender equality and human rights in their paintings. In the literature discussion, students showed a deeper understanding of the characters and conflicts faced by the characters in the story, and were able to relate them to their real lives (Gadsden & Williamson, 2023). This shows that creative activities not only develop artistic skills but also critical thinking and empathy skills.

The results of this study are in line with the findings of Gibson et al. (2022) who stated that art and humanities have an important role in developing social-emotional skills in elementary school students. However, this study makes a further contribution by showing that the integration of art and humanities also has an impact on increasing cultural awareness and inclusivity in the school environment. As stated by Wilkins (2021), art-centerer learning can improve students' understanding of cultural diversity, and this study provides empirical evidence to support this statement.

The scientific contribution of this study lies in identifying the relationship between creative expression and the enhancement of critical thinking skills and empathy. In the context of elementary education, these results suggest that arts and humanities do not merely serve as entertainment or an addition to the curriculum, but have profound pedagogical value. As explained by Eisner (2021), arts and humanities provide a space for students to explore self-identity, understand the feelings of others, and develop more reflective and critical ways of thinking.

Furthermore, this study also clarifies the importance of integrating arts and humanities in creating a more inclusive school environment. The results of observations show that activities such as drama and literature discussions open up spaces for students to share their experiences and perspectives, which ultimately strengthens mutual respect among them. This confirms the findings of Goldberg's (2020) research, which shows that arts have the power to bridge cultural differences among students. However, this study adds a new dimension by highlighting how these interactions can also promote inclusivity in a multicultural school environment.

The novelty of this study focuses on the integration of arts and humanities as a strategy to increase cultural awareness in the context of elementary education. While previous research such as that conducted by Anderson (2023) has highlighted the importance of arts education in developing social-emotional skills, this study is one of the first to explore the impact of arts and humanities integration on cultural awareness in an elementary school setting. This makes this study relevant in efforts to promote inclusive education that values cultural diversity.

The implications of this research are quite broad. First, these findings can be a basis for policymakers to consider more systematic integration of arts and humanities in the elementary school curriculum. Given its positive impact on students' social, emotional, and cultural awareness, educational policies that support this integration can help create a more tolerant and empathetic generation. Second, the results of this study are also relevant for teachers in designing learning strategies that accommodate students' social-emotional needs, especially in schools with culturally diverse student populations.

In addition, this study also provides practical contributions to teacher professional development. Through interviews with teachers, it was revealed that many of them felt the need for further training in integrating arts and humanities in learning. This suggests that increasing teacher capacity in this regard is an important step to support the successful implementation of a curriculum that focuses on arts and humanities (Smith, 2024).

As a reflection of the results of this study, one of the challenges faced was the diversity of levels of student involvement in creative activities. Some students, especially those from cultural backgrounds that are less familiar with arts or humanities, initially showed resistance to these activities. However, with proper teacher guidance, this resistance can be overcome, and students begin to see the value of these activities. This underscores the importance of strong pedagogical support in the process of arts and humanities integration (Martinez & Stevens, 2023). Overall, this study provides strong evidence that arts and humanities integration in elementary education is an effective approach to increasing students' social, emotional, and cultural awareness. Creative experiences that engage students in arts activities and humanities

discussions not only enrich their learning but also shape their character as more empathetic and open-minded individuals.

## CONCLUSION

This study shows that the integration of arts and humanities in the elementary school curriculum has a significant impact on students' social and emotional development. The results of the study show that art activities such as painting, playing music, drama, and literature discussions can increase students' social awareness, empathy, and critical thinking skills. In addition, students who are involved in creative activities show an increase in positive interactions with their friends, especially those from different cultural backgrounds. This proves that arts and humanities have an important role in shaping students' characters to be more inclusive and open-minded.

The novelty of this study lies in its focus on the role of arts and humanities in increasing cultural awareness and inclusivity in elementary school environments. Although previous studies have highlighted the importance of arts education in developing social-emotional skills, this study provides a new perspective by highlighting how creative expression through arts and humanities can also foster better cultural awareness among students. In the context of globalization and increasing diversity in the student population, these findings are highly relevant and important for the development of elementary education.

The implications of the results of this study suggest that schools need to provide more opportunities for students to engage in creative expression as part of their learning strategies. Integrating arts and humanities more deeply into the curriculum will not only enrich students' learning experiences but also help them develop critical thinking skills and empathy, which are much needed in facing today's global challenges. Students who are more aware of social and cultural issues will be better prepared to contribute to a more inclusive and equitable society.

As a suggestion, schools can consider developing extracurricular programs based on arts and humanities, designed to encourage collaboration between students from different cultural backgrounds. These programs will not only provide a space for students to express their creativity but also strengthen social bonds between students, thus creating a more harmonious and inclusive learning environment. In addition, teachers need to receive further training on how to integrate arts and humanities into everyday learning to maximize the positive impact of this approach.

In terms of policy, education policymakers should also consider the importance of arts and humanities as core components of the elementary school curriculum. A more systematic integration of these disciplines will help create a learning environment that focuses not only on academic achievement but also on the development of students' character and social awareness. Thus, a curriculum centered on the arts and humanities can play an important role in preparing young people to face increasingly complex social, cultural, and environmental challenges.

Overall, this study makes a significant contribution to the existing literature on arts and humanities education at the elementary school level. In addition to reinforcing previous findings on the benefits of arts education for social-emotional development, this study adds a new perspective on the importance of cultural awareness and inclusivity in the educational process. By integrating arts and humanities, schools can play a significant role in shaping students

who are not only academically intelligent but also sensitive to relevant social issues in the modern world. Thus, it is important for all parties involved in education, from teachers to policymakers, to recognize the important value of arts and humanities in the holistic development of students. The implication of this study is the need for reform in educational approaches that place more emphasis on creativity, social skills, and cultural awareness, so that students can develop into critical and empathetic thinkers in the future.

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