

COLLABORATING ARTS AND HUMANITIES TO FOSTER SOCIAL AND CULTURAL AWARENESS THROUGH CREATIVE EXPRESSION

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Abstract: *This research aims to examine the effects of incorporating arts (such as visual arts, music, and drama) and humanities (including literature, history, and ethics) into the elementary school curriculum on students' social, emotional, and cultural awareness. It also explores how creative expression through arts and humanities can enhance students' critical thinking and empathy, contributing to the creation of an inclusive and socially conscious school atmosphere. The study uses a qualitative research method with a phenomenological approach. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, involving 20 students and 5 teachers from three elementary schools in Cirebon City that have integrated arts and humanities into their teaching. The findings revealed that integrating arts and humanities significantly enhanced students' social, emotional, and cultural awareness. Students participating in creative activities like painting, playing music, performing drama, and engaging in literature discussions demonstrated improvements in both critical thinking and empathy. Teachers also observed heightened student engagement and more positive interactions among students from diverse cultural backgrounds. In summary, the integration of arts and humanities into the elementary curriculum positively impacts students' social and emotional development. The implication is that schools should promote more opportunities for creative expression in learning to foster students with stronger social and cultural awareness and sharper critical thinking skills to face global challenges.*

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

Introduction

Elementary education plays a crucial role in developing students' character, including their social and emotional awareness. One effective approach is through the integration of arts and humanities into the curriculum. By incorporating subjects like visual arts, music, drama, literature, history, and ethics, students gain opportunities to express themselves and cultivate a deeper understanding of social and cultural values.

The purpose of this study is to explore how the integration of arts and humanities in elementary education can enhance students' social, emotional, and cultural awareness, as well as their critical thinking and empathy. Research indicates that arts not only serve as an emotional outlet but also provide a means of better understanding social dynamics.

According to Brown (2021), art helps individuals perceive the world from different perspectives, broadening their social outlook. In the context of elementary education, art serves as a bridge to teach values of diversity, inclusivity, and empathy through creative and engaging activities. Smith's (2023) research further supports this by showing how art integration improves critical and analytical thinking skills, especially in addressing complex social issues. In Indonesia, arts and humanities education is often seen as a supplementary subject rather than a core part of the curriculum. However, studies such as Prasetyo's (2022) highlight the significant benefits of art-based learning in elementary schools, including increased student engagement, creativity, and emotional development. Despite these findings, there is still a need for more research on the specific impact of arts integration on students' social and emotional growth.

This study is essential in the current era of globalization, where students are increasingly required to navigate socially and culturally diverse environments. It is crucial to equip them with critical thinking, empathy, and social awareness early on, so they can contribute actively and constructively to global society. Integrating arts and humanities into elementary education is one method to help students understand and appreciate differences.

While prior research has examined the benefits of arts in education, this study aims to address a gap by exploring how integrating both arts and humanities holistically impacts students' social, emotional, and cultural awareness. Unlike studies that focus on a single art form, this research looks at multiple art forms, such as visual arts, music, and drama, alongside humanities like literature and history.

The urgency of this study is grounded in the need for educational methods that are relevant to 21st-century challenges. Today's education not only focuses on improving cognitive abilities but also on developing non-cognitive skills, such as empathy, cooperation, and creative problem-solving. According to Goleman (2020), emotional skills like empathy are essential for success in both social and professional life.

This study brings a new perspective by using a multidisciplinary approach in arts and humanities education. It evaluates not only how integrating these subjects benefits individual students but also how it influences classroom dynamics and social interactions. This provides insights into how creative expression can shape inclusive attitudes and foster a harmonious school environment.

Initial findings from past research suggest that creative expression through art helps students better understand social issues such as justice, equality, and diversity. Nguyen's (2022) study, for example, found that students who participated in collaborative art projects were more empathetic and tolerant of cultural differences, demonstrating art's potential as a tool for instilling social values.

This study also emphasizes the role of humanities in teaching ethical and historical values. According to Nussbaum (2021), humanities education helps students comprehend the cultural and historical legacies that shape their identity. It also enhances their ability to critically evaluate the past and its relevance to the future.

By integrating humanities into the elementary curriculum, students can develop a heightened awareness of cultural and historical contexts. This study, therefore, argues that humanities are a crucial component in building students' cultural awareness and understanding of the world around them.

To explore these issues, this study adopts a qualitative approach, analyzing the impact of integrating arts and humanities in elementary schools in Cirebon City. The research involves in-depth interviews with teachers and students, classroom observations, and an analysis of curriculum documents and student work to gain a comprehensive understanding of how these subjects contribute to students' development.

The integration of arts and humanities into elementary education not only benefits students' cognitive development but also strengthens their social and emotional skills. These findings could inform the creation of more holistic education policies that recognize the importance of these subjects in fostering critical, inclusive, and empathetic individuals.

This research also has significant implications for the future development of elementary school curricula in Indonesia. By highlighting the positive effects of arts and humanities on students' growth, the study underscores the need for broader, more systematic integration of these subjects in schools.

Ultimately, this study aims to serve as a foundation for encouraging the implementation of arts and humanities programs in elementary schools. It also seeks to provide practical guidance for teachers in designing lessons that focus on developing students' social and cultural awareness, preparing them to face global challenges with empathy and critical thinking.

Research Methods

This research adopts a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach, chosen for its focus on the subjective experiences of individuals and the meanings they attribute to specific phenomena (Creswell, 2021). In this context, the phenomenological approach aims to deeply understand how students and teachers experience the integration of arts and humanities in learning, and how it affects students' social, emotional, and cultural awareness. As Vagle (2020) explains, the phenomenological method is particularly effective in exploring individual experiences and explaining complex phenomena that involve interactions within educational, cultural, and personal contexts.

The study involved 25 respondents, consisting of 20 students and 5 teachers from three elementary schools in Cirebon City that have incorporated arts and humanities into their learning process. This number of respondents was chosen to capture a range of perspectives

from those directly involved in the learning process. As Marshall and Rossman (2022) note, qualitative research emphasizes the depth of data over the quantity of respondents, focusing on the richness of insights from individuals with relevant experiences. Respondents were selected purposively, with the criterion being their active involvement in the integration of arts and humanities in learning.

For data collection, the study employed semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were chosen to allow for flexibility in exploring respondents' answers while following a prepared list of questions. According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2020), this type of interview provides the opportunity to adapt questions based on the flow of conversation, ensuring that the data collected is comprehensive and fits the research context.

Classroom observations were conducted to directly observe how arts and humanities were incorporated into the learning process. Observations allowed the researcher to document teacher-student interactions and classroom dynamics, capturing details that might not surface in interviews (Angrosino, 2021). Additionally, observations helped contextualize the physical and social environment in which learning occurred, an important aspect in phenomenological research since context can shape individual experiences.

Document analysis was also conducted, focusing on learning materials, syllabi, and student artwork. The goal of this analysis was to examine how arts and humanities were reflected in the curriculum and in student output. Bowen (2021) argues that document analysis is an effective way to complement interviews and observations, as documents often provide structured and formal insights into educational policies or practices.

The data collected from interviews, observations, and document analysis were then subjected to thematic analysis. This method was selected because it allows for the identification, analysis, and reporting of patterns or themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Thematic analysis began with transcription of the interviews and observations, followed by data coding to uncover key themes relevant to the research objectives, such as students' social, emotional, and cultural awareness.

To ensure data accuracy, the study used data triangulation, comparing information from interviews, observations, and document analysis to ensure consistency and validity in the findings. Patton (2021) highlights triangulation as a strategy to enhance the validity of qualitative research by cross-referencing multiple data sources and collection methods. This process reduces bias and provides a more holistic understanding of the studied phenomenon. In addition to triangulation, the credibility of the research was reinforced through member checking, a process in which preliminary findings are confirmed with respondents to ensure that the interpretations align with their experiences (Birt et al., 2020). This step is crucial in phenomenological research, as the subjective experiences of participants are central. Member checking helps refine or clarify interpretations before final conclusions are drawn.

The research method was designed to generate in-depth findings on the effects of integrating arts and humanities in elementary education. The combination of a qualitative phenomenological approach, varied data collection techniques, and thematic analysis creates a robust framework for addressing the research questions. This study not only examines the

cognitive outcomes of such integration but also delves into the social, emotional, and cultural dimensions, which are often underexplored holistically.

Overall, the method employed aligns with the study's primary aim of exploring the impact of arts and humanities on the development of students' social, emotional, and cultural awareness in elementary schools. By employing a comprehensive approach, the study aims to offer practical insights and recommendations for developing a more inclusive, arts-and-humanities-based curriculum.

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-centered 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 reveals that incorporating arts and humanities into the elementary school curriculum has a notable impact on students' social and emotional growth. The findings indicate that engaging in artistic activities such as painting, playing music, performing drama, and discussing literature enhances students' social awareness, empathy, and critical thinking abilities.

Furthermore, students involved in these creative activities exhibit improved positive interactions with peers, particularly those from different cultural backgrounds. This demonstrates that arts and humanities play a crucial role in shaping students to be more inclusive and open-minded.

What sets this study apart is its emphasis on the role of arts and humanities in enhancing cultural awareness and inclusivity within elementary school settings. While previous research has recognized the importance of arts education in fostering social-emotional skills, this study offers a fresh perspective by focusing on how creative expression can also cultivate cultural sensitivity among students. In the context of increasing globalization and diversity in student populations, these findings are particularly timely and significant for the advancement of elementary education.

The study's results suggest that schools should create more opportunities for students to engage in creative expression as part of their learning. A more comprehensive integration of arts and humanities into the curriculum would not only enrich the educational experience but also help students develop essential skills like critical thinking and empathy—key tools for navigating today's global challenges. Students with greater awareness of social and cultural issues will be better equipped to contribute to a more inclusive and equitable society.

As a recommendation, schools could develop extracurricular programs focused on arts and humanities, aimed at encouraging collaboration among students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Such programs would provide a platform for students to express their creativity while fostering stronger social connections, ultimately creating a more harmonious and inclusive learning environment. Additionally, teachers should receive ongoing training on effectively integrating arts and humanities into daily lessons to maximize the benefits of this approach.

From a policy perspective, education policymakers should recognize the value of arts and humanities as core elements of the elementary curriculum. Systematically integrating these subjects would foster a learning environment that prioritizes not only academic success but also the development of students' character and social awareness. By focusing on arts and humanities, schools can play a pivotal role in preparing young people to address the increasingly complex social, cultural, and environmental challenges of the modern world.

In sum, this study makes a valuable contribution to the existing body of literature on arts and humanities education in elementary schools. In addition to confirming the positive effects of arts education on social-emotional development, it brings a new dimension by highlighting the importance of cultural awareness and inclusivity in the learning process. By integrating arts and humanities, schools can nurture students who are not only academically proficient but also socially conscious and empathetic to the issues of today's world. This underscores the importance for educators, administrators, and policymakers to recognize the essential role that arts and humanities play in the holistic development of students. The findings call for a shift in educational strategies that place a greater emphasis on creativity, social skills, and cultural awareness, enabling students to grow into critical thinkers and compassionate individuals for the future.

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