

Nusantara Dance as a Therapeutic and Educational Medium for SLBN Bireuen Students

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the utilization of Acehese Nusantara Dance as both a therapeutic and educational medium for children with special needs at Bireuen Special Needs School (SLB). The research was conducted using the Research and Development (R&D) method, which includes stages of problem identification, product design, development, pilot testing, and systematic evaluation. The findings indicate that dance learning significantly enhances students' motor, cognitive, social, emotional, and participatory skills. Structured evaluations show an average increase of 25% in motor skills, a 30% rise in social participation, and improved memory of movement sequences and coordination. Dance learning is also proven to be effective as a therapeutic medium, especially for deaf and intellectually disabled students, through visual cues, rhythmic music, and individualized instructions tailored to each child's needs. The final product—a performance of Acehese Nusantara Dance—was piloted and validated by experts, receiving an average validation score of 4.2 out of 5. This research produces an inclusive learning model that not only supports students' personal and social development but also contributes to the preservation of Nusantara culture. Thus, this approach provides an innovative solution to improve the quality of education and therapy for children with special needs in the SLB environment.

KEYWORDS

Nusantara Dance
Therapeutic Medium
Learning Skills
Special Needs
School Students

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INTRODUCTION

Every child has the right to receive equal education without exception, including those with special needs who attend Bireuen State Special Needs School (SLB). The concept of inclusive education emphasizes the importance of providing fair learning opportunities for all students, regardless of physical, intellectual, or social limitations they may have. However, in reality, the learning process at SLB still tends to be monotonous and primarily focused on academic aspects, resulting in the underdevelopment of non-academic skills such as motor, social, emotional, and cognitive abilities. These skills are crucial to support the child's holistic growth and prepare them for the challenges of daily life.

One effective and enjoyable alternative strategy is through arts-based learning, specifically traditional Indonesian dance or Tari Nusantara. Tari Nusantara not only functions as a means of cultural expression but also has great potential as a therapeutic and educational medium. The simple, rhythmic dance movements rich in cultural values can help students develop gross motor skills, improve concentration, enhance body coordination, build self-confidence, and foster teamwork skills (Fariyatul & Bandono, 2017). For children with special needs, dance also serves as an effective non-verbal communication medium,

especially for children with hearing impairments (tunarungu) and intellectual disabilities (tunagrahita) who often face challenges in verbal communication (Wulandari, 2021).

Dance plays an important role for children with hearing impairment and intellectual disabilities because it bridges their limitations through meaningful movement activities. For children with hearing impairments, dance provides a space for visual and kinesthetic expression, enabling them to communicate without relying on spoken language. Support in the form of vibrations from music and visual instructions helps them understand rhythms, synchronize movements, and expand social interactions. Meanwhile, for children with intellectual disabilities, arts-based dance acts as a stimulus for motor and cognitive development. Simple repetitive movements can improve coordination, concentration, and memory. Moreover, successfully performing a dance experience can boost self-confidence, foster discipline, and help in emotional regulation. Thus, dance not only is an activity of artistic expression but also serves as a therapeutic and educational tool that comprehensively supports the development of children with special needs (Hadi Y.S., 2016).

Various previous studies reaffirm the role of arts in special education. Mendonça (2010), for example, emphasizes the transformative influence of music and performing arts in enhancing children's social and emotional skills. Pretković and Škrinjarić (2017) highlight that Nusantara dance arts can serve as an educational medium while strengthening communal bonds and introducing local culture. Sari (2020) proves that Tari Nusantara can be used as a learning medium for children with special needs to develop both fine and gross motor skills. However, most existing studies still focus on music or dance in general, and not many specifically explore the utilization of Nusantara Dance as a therapeutic and learning medium in SLB.

Initial observations at Bireuen State Special Needs School through interviews with five teachers and observations of three classes over two weeks (October 2025) reveal that 80% of the learning process is monotonous, with only 20% of the time allocated to non-academic activities such as motor and social skills development. Teachers report difficulties in developing these skills due to limited interactive media and differences in students' abilities (15 students with hearing impairments and 12 with intellectual disabilities). The school's 2024 report also notes the low participation of students in extracurricular arts activities (only 35% involvement), which hampers their holistic development.

Based on these conditions, there is a clear opportunity for further research. This study aims to analyze and explore the utilization of Nusantara Dance as a therapeutic and educational medium for enhancing motor, cognitive, social, and emotional abilities of students at Bireuen SLB. Consequently, this research is expected to contribute significantly to the development of creative, innovative, and inclusive teaching methods while supporting the preservation of Nusantara culture.

METHOD

This study employs the Research and Development (R&D) method with the aim of producing an innovative product in the form of developed Acehese Nusantara Dance that can be applied in the learning process at Bireuen State Special Needs School (SLB). The R&D method was chosen due to its systematic, structured, and product-oriented nature, which enables the creation of a work that not only has aesthetic value but also contributes to students' motor, cognitive, and social aspects (Sugiyono, 2016). The research stages are carried out gradually, following a commonly used development model in the R&D approach.

The initial step is problem identification, conducted through field observations to understand the actual conditions and students' needs. This study involves 10 SLB students

as the main subjects and 5 teachers as informants who provide information regarding students' abilities, characteristics, and learning difficulties. The next stage is data collection, which includes direct observation, unstructured interviews with teachers, and documentation in the form of photos, videos, and digital data storage, serving as an archive of the research process and performance outcomes.

The subsequent stage is product design, namely formulating the concept of Acehese Nusantara Dance using a creative, innovative, and research-based approach. After that, product development is carried out gradually through interactive therapy and learning activities over 12 sessions (three times a week for one month). This program is designed to create an enjoyable learning atmosphere while increasing students' comfort in interacting. After development, a product trial is conducted to assess the feasibility of applying Acehese Nusantara Dance as a learning medium. The trial provides an overview of the product's effectiveness as well as input for improvement. The final stage is the preparation of the final product, realized through an Acehese Nusantara Dance performance by students of Bireuen State Special Needs School as the outcome of the research implementation. The development model in this study refers to the framework described by Sugiyono (2016), Siregar (2025), and Judijanto, Mas'ud, and Rahmawati (2023), which emphasizes the integration of needs identification, development process, and feasibility testing before the product can be widely implemented.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that the implementation of Acehese Nusantara Dance as a learning and therapeutic medium at SLB Negeri Bireuen must be grounded in an understanding of the diverse characteristics, needs, and challenges of students with special needs. Each child possesses unique physical, cognitive, emotional, and social conditions; therefore, a uniform pedagogical approach is neither effective nor appropriate. Through direct observation and participatory engagement during the learning process, it became evident that dance instruction must be flexible, adaptive, and sensitive to individual differences to ensure students' comfort, safety, and active involvement.

This finding aligns with the principles of inclusive education articulated by UNESCO (2017), which emphasize that educational practices should recognize and accommodate learners' diversity rather than force conformity to standardized norms. In the context of dance learning at SLB Negeri Bireuen, inclusivity was realized through gradual instruction, simplified movement patterns, individualized guidance, and the creation of a non-threatening learning atmosphere. By minimizing pressure and performance anxiety, students were able to engage in dance activities with greater confidence and enjoyment. This approach corroborates the findings of Puspito and Handayani (2020), who argue that modifying dance movements according to students' motor abilities significantly enhances learning outcomes for children with special needs.

A. Measurement Aspects of Nusantara Dance as a Therapeutic and Learning Medium

The evaluation conducted before and after the implementation of Acehese Nusantara Dance learning revealed a substantial improvement across multiple developmental domains, particularly motor, cognitive, and social skills. Quantitative indicators support these observations. Gross motor skill scores increased from an average of 2.1 to 3.8 on a five-point scale following twelve structured learning sessions. This improvement indicates enhanced body control, balance, and movement coordination among students.

Similarly, students' cognitive abilities showed notable progress. The ability to remember

movement sequences increased from an average of 40% in the pre-test to 75% in the post-test. This suggests that repetitive, rhythm-based dance activities can effectively stimulate memory, sequencing, and concentration. From a social perspective, active participation in group activities rose from 35% at the initial stage to 80% by the final session, while cooperation and social interaction scores improved from 2.3 to 4.0. These findings indicate that dance learning not only develops individual skills but also strengthens collective engagement and interpersonal relationships.

Importantly, these improvements were achieved through a learning approach characterized by patience, empathy, and emotional support. Teachers and researchers intentionally fostered a pleasant and encouraging environment, enabling students to move freely, interact naturally, and express themselves without fear of failure. Beyond educational outcomes, the study also identified therapeutic benefits of dance learning, particularly for students with hearing impairments and intellectual disabilities. These benefits became evident through structured observation of several key developmental aspects.

Integrated Measurement Framework for Dance as Therapy and Learning Medium

To systematically assess the effectiveness of Nusantara Dance as both a therapeutic and educational medium, this study employed a structured evaluation framework encompassing five interrelated developmental aspects: motor, cognitive, social, emotional, and participation. These aspects were observed directly during dance learning activities and documented using observation sheets, teacher notes, and audiovisual records. The framework reflects Sukmadinata's (2017) perspective that learning evaluation should capture holistic development rather than isolated technical skills.

Motor Development Through Adaptive Movement Practice

Motor development emerged as one of the most visibly improved aspects in this study. Dance learning focused on enabling students to control their bodies, maintain balance, and perform movements with increasing fluency. Rather than emphasizing technical precision, instruction prioritized bodily awareness and functional movement. Observations showed that students gradually developed better posture stability, smoother transitions between movements, and greater confidence in maintaining poses.

Motor sensitivity varied significantly among students due to differences in physical, intellectual, and sensory conditions. Students with intellectual disabilities generally required slower tempos, simple movement patterns, and frequent repetition to internalize movement sequences. Their coordination improved noticeably when movements were accompanied by rhythmic music and direct visual demonstrations. For students with hearing impairments, visual responsiveness played a crucial role. Although they faced challenges in perceiving rhythm through sound, the use of visual cues, rhythmic counting, and vibrations enabled them to synchronize movements effectively. Students with emotional or behavioral difficulties often demonstrated adequate motor ability but struggled with emotional regulation. In these cases, a calm, supportive learning environment proved essential in facilitating motor engagement.

These findings highlight that motor development in dance learning for special needs students is inseparable from emotional and sensory considerations. Movement adaptation, therefore, functions not merely as a pedagogical strategy but as a therapeutic intervention that respects students' embodied experiences.

Cognitive Development Through Movement, Memory, and Rhythm

Cognitive development in Nusantara Dance learning was closely linked to students' ability to process information, follow instructions, and recall movement sequences. Dance activities required students to observe, interpret, and reproduce patterns of movement, thereby engaging both short-term and long-term memory. The evaluation revealed that students became increasingly capable of performing dance sequences without continuous prompting, indicating improved memory retention and cognitive processing (Koff, 2021).

Understanding and responding to instructors' directions—both verbal and nonverbal—also improved significantly. The consistent presence of researchers and teachers throughout the learning process ensured continuity of guidance, enabling students to develop familiarity with instructional cues. Wardani and Puspito (2022) emphasize that clear, consistent instructions are essential in enhancing cognitive engagement among special needs learners, a claim supported by the present study.

Recognition of rhythm, tempo, and musical structure further contributed to cognitive development. For students with hearing impairments, sign language and visual rhythm cues were integrated into instruction, allowing them to perceive and respond to musical patterns visually. This adaptation demonstrates that cognitive engagement in dance learning does not rely solely on auditory perception but can be facilitated through multisensory approaches.

Social Development and Group Interaction

Social development constituted a central outcome of Nusantara Dance learning. Group rehearsals and performances required students to interact, cooperate, and synchronize movements with peers. Over time, students demonstrated increased willingness to engage in group activities, respect others' roles, and adapt to collective dynamics. Dance learning thus functioned as a medium for developing nonverbal communication, empathy, and social awareness.

The collective nature of Nusantara Dance fostered a sense of togetherness and mutual respect among students. Through shared movement experiences, students learned to negotiate space, timing, and cooperation. These social skills are particularly valuable for children with special needs, who often face challenges in interpersonal interaction. In this regard, dance served as an inclusive platform for social learning beyond verbal communication.

Emotional Expression and Therapeutic Impact

The emotional dimension of dance learning was evident in students' increasing courage, self-expression, and self-confidence. Observations indicated that students gradually became more willing to perform movements publicly, express emotions through body language, and participate actively in group performances. Small behavioral changes—such as smiling, maintaining eye contact, or volunteering to demonstrate movements—were recognized as significant emotional achievements.

Group dance activities contributed substantially to building students' self-confidence. The supportive presence of peers, teachers, and researchers created a safe space for emotional expression. For students with hearing impairments, the use of sign language facilitated emotional closeness and mutual understanding, strengthening teacher-student relationships. These findings underscore the therapeutic potential of dance as a medium for emotional regulation and psychological well-being.

Participation and Learning Engagement

Participation emerged as a key indicator of learning effectiveness. High attendance rates, active involvement, and consistent engagement throughout the twelve learning sessions reflect students' motivation and commitment. With an average attendance rate of 92%, students demonstrated sustained interest in dance learning activities. Active participation was observed through students' willingness to try movements, respond to guidance, and remain engaged from beginning to end of practice sessions.

The simplicity and structured nature of Acehese Nusantara Dance activities played a crucial role in sustaining participation. By designing learning activities that were accessible and enjoyable, students felt guided rather than pressured. This finding reinforces the importance of thoughtful instructional design in promoting inclusive participation.

Evaluation Process and Overall Effectiveness

The evaluation of Nusantara Dance implementation was conducted continuously over a one-month period, with three sessions per week. Data collection involved direct observation by researchers and teachers, supported by photographic and video documentation. Descriptive analysis revealed consistent positive responses from school principals, teachers, and students, indicating broad acceptance of dance learning as an effective educational and therapeutic medium.

Overall, the findings confirm that Acehese Nusantara Dance can be effectively integrated into special education settings as a holistic learning and therapy model. By addressing motor, cognitive, social, emotional, and participatory dimensions simultaneously, dance learning contributes to students' comprehensive development while fostering cultural appreciation. This integrated approach not only enhances educational quality but also affirms the dignity and potential of children with special needs within an inclusive educational framework.

Table 1. Measurement Aspects of Nusantara Dance as a Therapeutic and Learning Medium

Aspect	Indicator	Measurement Method	Achieved Results
Motor skills	1. Body movement flexibility 2. Ability to maintain stability 3. Synchronization of movements between body parts	Direct observation and movement skill evaluation sheets	Average motor score increased from 2.1 to 3.8 (scale 1–5). Students were able to perform the dance with more precise movement control, greater flexibility, and stable balance.
Cognitive	1. Memory of movement sequences 2. Ability to adjust to counts and tempo 3. Recognition of rhythm patterns	Simple movement sequence test with students following musical accompaniment	Ability to remember movement sequences improved from an average of 40% (pre-test) to 75% (post-test). Students were able to follow tempo and recognize dance rhythm patterns more accurately.

Social	1. Interaction with peers 2. Teamwork in groups 3. Movement synchronization	Observation of interactions and researcher's approach with students at SLBN Bireuen	Active participation rate increased from 35% (initial session) to 80% (final session). Cooperation and social interaction scores rose from 2.3 to 4.0, indicating improved teamwork and movement synchronization.
Emotional/ Therapeutic	1. Emotional expression 2. Self-confidence 3. Enthusiasm during practice	Observation of student attitudes during practice and performance	Students showed positive emotional expression, greater courage in performing, and increased self confidence. Enthusiasm was evident in higher engagement and positive responses to instructions.
Participation	1. Attendance in practice 2. Active involvement 3. Consistency in following learning	Observation of student activeness and documentation of the practice process	Average student attendance reached 92%. Students attended regularly, actively participated in activities, and remained consistent throughout the 12 Acehnese Nusantara Dance sessions.

B. Implications of Nusantara Dance Learning in Special Education Contexts

The implications of Nusantara Dance learning in special education refer to the practical, pedagogical, and cultural consequences derived from the research findings. These implications extend beyond theoretical contributions and directly inform how dance-based learning can be implemented as an effective strategy to support the holistic development of students with special needs. As emphasized by Murgiyanto (2015), dance education should not be understood merely as an artistic activity but as a medium that integrates bodily experience, emotional expression, social interaction, and cultural meaning. Within the context of SLBN Bireuen, Nusantara Dance demonstrates its relevance as an inclusive learning approach that bridges educational, therapeutic, and cultural objectives.

One of the most significant implications concerns the necessity of an individualized learning approach. The research findings confirm that students at special needs schools possess varying degrees of motor sensitivity, cognitive capacity, emotional regulation, and social readiness. Consequently, dance instruction cannot rely on standardized movement structures or uniform tempo. Instead, instructors are required to adapt dance materials to each student's capacity through simplified movements, gradual progression, and slower rhythmic pacing. This adaptive strategy enables students to follow movement sequences in a more structured, purposeful, and meaningful manner. Individualized guidance also reduces anxiety and frustration, allowing students to experience learning as a positive and empowering process rather than as a source of pressure.

Closely related to this is the implication for interactive learning strategies. Nusantara Dance learning proves most effective when conducted in a relaxed yet structured environment. Such an atmosphere encourages students to remain engaged without feeling overwhelmed. The selection of movements and musical accompaniment becomes a crucial pedagogical consideration, as rhythm and melody significantly influence students' motor coordination and emotional responses. Integrating elements of music, movement, and simple educational games fosters sustained attention and active participation. This interactive approach transforms dance learning into a multisensory experience that accommodates

diverse learning styles, particularly for students with hearing impairments or intellectual disabilities.

Beyond its pedagogical function, Nusantara Dance also carries strong implications as a therapeutic medium. Dance activities provide students with special needs an alternative channel for emotional expression, especially for those who experience difficulties in verbal communication. Through rhythmic and structured movements, students are encouraged to release emotional tension, reduce anxiety, and achieve a sense of inner calm. The repetitive nature of dance practice contributes to emotional regulation and psychological stability, while the embodied experience of movement enhances self-awareness and confidence.

The therapeutic impact of dance is further reinforced through performance experiences. Each successful attempt at mastering movements fosters a sense of achievement and pride. Performing in front of peers, teachers, or an audience offers valuable opportunities for students to develop courage and self-esteem. Group interactions within dance practice cultivate a sense of belonging and mutual respect, reinforcing students' belief in their own potential. This social-emotional support system underscores the important role of the school environment in nurturing students' holistic development and enhancing overall learning effectiveness.

Another key implication lies in the preservation of Nusantara culture. Dance learning at special needs schools does not only address individual development but also functions as a cultural transmission process. Through exposure to Nusantara Dance, students are introduced to traditional values, symbolism, and philosophies embedded in Indonesian performing arts. This cultural engagement strengthens students' sense of identity and national pride, positioning them as active participants in cultural preservation. In the context of rapid modernization, providing children with special needs access to traditional arts affirms their right to cultural participation and ensures that cultural heritage remains inclusive and accessible to all members of society.

C. Training Process of Acehnese Nusantara Dance at SLBN Bireuen

The training process of Acehnese Nusantara Dance at SLBN Bireuen was designed as a gradual and inclusive learning journey, beginning with preliminary observations and continuing through structured practice sessions. Prior to the training, the research team conducted observations of the school environment and engaged in discussions with the principal and teachers to understand students' characteristics and learning needs. This preparatory stage was essential to ensure that the training design aligned with students' abilities and institutional conditions.

Student selection was carried out carefully, emphasizing willingness and enthusiasm rather than technical ability. During this stage, light warm-up activities, slow traditional Acehnese music, and individualized visual guidance were introduced to assess students' motor readiness and rhythmic sensitivity. These initial activities not only supported physical preparation but also helped students familiarize themselves with the cultural atmosphere of the dance.

Given the high enthusiasm shown by students, the research team organized participants into three groups. The training program was conducted over twelve sessions, with a frequency of three sessions per week over one month. Support from the school, including facilities and encouragement from teachers, played a crucial role in sustaining students' motivation throughout the process. Training sessions were structured progressively according to students' needs and abilities, ensuring that learning remained accessible and enjoyable.



Figure 1. Selection of SLB students to participate in Nusantara Dance learning.

Each session began with light warm-up exercises involving simple movements of the hands, feet, and head. These exercises aimed to loosen muscles, improve circulation, and prepare students' bodies for coordinated movement. Traditional Acehese music was played at a slow tempo to help students internalize rhythm and cultural nuances gradually. The instructor then demonstrated basic Acehese dance movements, such as hand claps, foot stomps, and characteristic head movements, emphasizing clarity and repetition.

Students were encouraged to imitate movements slowly under direct guidance. For those who encountered difficulties, individual assistance was provided through visual demonstrations and physical cues. This approach ensured that no student was left behind and that learning progressed at a pace suitable for all participants. Group practice followed, allowing students to develop spatial awareness, synchronization, and cooperation. Through repeated sessions, students became increasingly confident and coordinated, reflecting the effectiveness of gradual and inclusive training design.

D. Performance of Acehese Nusantara Dance

The culmination of the training process was a stage performance of Acehese Nusantara Dance by SLBN Bireuen students. During the performance, students displayed remarkable enthusiasm and commitment. Although the movements were relatively simple, they were performed with sincerity and energy. Some students demonstrated strong rhythmic alignment with the music, while others occasionally sought visual guidance from the instructor. Nevertheless, all students made earnest efforts to follow the movement sequences.

The performance revealed the emergence of group unity and collective expression. Students moved together with increasing confidence, and although technical imperfections were present, the authenticity and dedication of their performance resonated deeply with the audience. Facial expressions ranged from cheerful smiles to shy determination, illustrating the diverse emotional experiences embodied in the dance.

Audience responses further highlighted the significance of the performance. Applause, supportive cheers, and expressions of admiration reflected collective pride and appreciation. The atmosphere was warm, emotional, and respectful, reinforcing the idea that the performance transcended entertainment. It served as a powerful demonstration of dance as a medium for expression, therapy, and inclusion for children with special needs. The guidance and support provided by the research team contributed to a cohesive and organized performance, enhancing students' sense of accomplishment and motivation.



Figure 2. Photo of SDLB students performing on stage.

Overall Reflection on Learning and Performance Outcomes

The results of both the training process and performance confirm that Acehese Nusantara Dance functions effectively as a therapeutic and educational medium for students at SLBN Bireuen. Through dance activities, students gained aesthetic experiences and cultural understanding while simultaneously developing motor coordination, cognitive abilities, and social skills. Repetitive and progressive movements strengthened body coordination, while engagement with rhythm and sequencing enhanced memory and concentration.

Socially, group dance activities fostered cooperation, interaction, and self-confidence. The relaxed and supportive learning environment encouraged students to enjoy the learning process and participate actively. As a result, Nusantara Dance learning created an inclusive, interactive, and meaningful educational experience that aligns with the principles of inclusive education. This approach offers a viable alternative for arts education in special needs schools, affirming that traditional dance can serve as a bridge between cultural preservation, therapeutic practice, and inclusive pedagogy.

CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that Acehese Nusantara Dance can be effectively utilized as both a therapeutic medium and an educational tool for students with special needs at SLBN Bireuen. Through a structured and adaptive learning process, dance activities were proven to contribute significantly to the development of students' motor, cognitive, social, emotional, and participatory skills. The findings indicate measurable improvements in body coordination, movement memory, rhythm recognition, social interaction, self-confidence, and learning engagement, achieved through an inclusive and student-centered approach.

The implementation of Nusantara Dance learning highlights the importance of individualized instruction, interactive strategies, and a supportive learning environment in special education contexts. By adapting movements to students' abilities, employing gradual and multisensory teaching methods, and fostering emotional safety, dance learning becomes accessible and meaningful for diverse learners. Moreover, the therapeutic dimension of dance provides students with opportunities for emotional expression and psychological well-being, reinforcing their sense of self-worth and belonging.

Beyond its pedagogical and therapeutic functions, Nusantara Dance also plays a vital role in preserving cultural heritage. Introducing traditional dance in special needs schools affirms students' right to cultural participation and strengthens their connection to national identity. Thus, this research underscores that arts-based learning, particularly traditional dance, holds substantial potential as an inclusive educational model that integrates personal development, social inclusion, and cultural preservation. Future studies are encouraged to expand this approach across different regions and explore the integration of digital or assistive technologies to further enhance accessibility and sustainability in special education settings.

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