

THE CROSS-GENDER ROLE OF MAESTRO DIDIK NINI THOWOK IN SHAPING AN INCLUSIVE LEARNING SPACE IN ART AS A FORM OF SELF-EXPRESSION

Rafi Fadhilah Nalendra¹, Amara Primananda², Khoirika Zahro Alfiyyah³, Stefani Lembah Manah⁴, Nur Arif Anandhita⁵

^{1,2,3,4,5}Indonesian Institute of the Arts, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

Email: rafinalendra0505@gmail.com

Abstract

This research aims to examine the role of the cross-gender maestro as an educator in shaping an inclusive learning space in the performing arts, particularly dance. The urgency of this research lies in the importance of creating learning environments that embrace diverse identities and eliminate gender stereotypes that remain prevalent in the world of art. This transformative approach is highly relevant amidst global efforts to foster equality and inclusivity in arts education. This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study on the teaching activities at the art studio of maestro Didik Nini Thowok. Data is collected through participatory observation of cross-gender dance processes and in-depth interviews with the maestro. The data analysis technique used is thematic analysis to identify and interpret the role of cross-gender art in building an inclusive learning space. The discussion highlights how maestro Didik Nini Thowok uses dance as a medium to break down gender boundaries in Indonesian performing arts. His comedic and educational approach not only demonstrates technical expertise but also educates the public about gender equality and the flexibility of social roles. The art studio he founded creates an inclusive space that is open to all, promoting diversity in traditional arts. This initiative removes stigma and prejudice, transforming into an arts education movement that is welcoming and equitable.

Keywords: *Cross-Gender Maestro, Inclusive Learning, Cultural Expression.*

A. INTRODUCTION

Modern education is no longer limited to interactions between teachers, books, and printed media within the classroom. With technological advancements, education has merged with technology, creating a more interactive and efficient learning ecosystem. Technology plays a crucial role in supporting a more dynamic learning experience, allowing for more effective and innovative teaching (Pustikaya et al., 2023:2). However, from some perspectives, art is still not fully understood by society, especially in big cities where there are fewer spaces for art communities to develop. The lack of appreciation for art among urban communities creates a gap in the development of the art ecosystem, even though various forms of art should be an integral part of social and cultural life. Therefore, initiatives to create more inclusive and accessible art spaces are needed so that art can be more accepted and utilized in daily life. The development of inclusive art spaces in cities can help the public better appreciate and understand the importance of art as a means of cultural expression and identity (Setiawan, 2021:45).

Traditional dance serves as a means of cultural communication and is a medium for reconstructing and challenging gender norms within society as civilization progresses (Hendrawan, 2019). This area is often seen as an unshakable cultural heritage, with the primary function of traditional dance being a space where gender norms are formed and preserved. Through the dichotomy of movement, where firmness is associated with men and

grace with women, traditional dance reinforces gender stereotypes that have been ingrained in social structures for centuries. Patriarchal norms often dictate these roles, where the dancer's body is constructed according to gender ideals in certain traditional societies. Today, Tari Persembahan (traditional dance offerings) is not only performed during traditional ceremonies or as a welcome for guests but is also showcased in cultural festivals both nationally and internationally.

This shows that Tari Persembahan remains relevant in modern society. Efforts to preserve this dance are made through cultural education in schools and dance studios, teaching younger generations to appreciate and continue the cultural heritage of their ancestors. Thus, Tari Persembahan becomes not just a spectacle but also an educational tool that introduces Indonesia's cultural richness to the outside world (Febriyanty et al., 2024:118).

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

The term "comparative" comes from the Latin word *comparativus*, which means the ability to use methods to find differences or similarities by simultaneously testing two or more things. A comparative study involves studying the differences and similarities of two or more similar items under a specific variable. In a more everyday context, it's like comparing two products, methods, or conditions to determine which is better or to explore their differences. The theoretical framework used in this study is comparative, examining the changes in teaching practices over time in the art studio of Didik Nini Thowok.

Initially, dance practices were rigid and followed traditional gender roles. However, over time, the practices at the studio became more open and flexible, allowing anyone to perform any role, free from gender constraints. This change reflects a shift toward more inclusive practices, where students not only learn dance techniques but also learn the courage to express themselves and respect differences. Through this comparison, it's clear that the teaching methods at the studio have evolved, bringing more modern and humanistic values into the learning space.

C. METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study design to understand the phenomenon holistically and contextually. This approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to delve into the meanings, experiences, and dynamics that occur within a specific context. According to Creswell (2018), qualitative research with a case study design enables the researcher to explore a phenomenon in detail within a specific setting. The subject of this study is maestro Didik Nini Thowok as a representative cross-gender artist in dance education, showing how art practices contribute to the formation and interpretation of gender identity. Primary data is collected through in-depth interviews and observations of the dance practice and performances, aiming to provide a comprehensive description of the artist's role in transforming gender concepts within educational spaces and art practices. Additionally, the study considers the social, cultural, and pedagogical context that underlies these art practices, making the results not only descriptive but also interpretive.

D. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Education is an essential aspect of shaping human quality, not only intellectually but also emotionally, socially, and culturally. In this context, arts education serves as a medium that bridges these various aspects through meaningful aesthetic experiences. Art provides space for individuals to express themselves, understand others, and build awareness of their social and cultural environment. Therefore, arts education cannot be viewed merely as a complement but as an integral part of the process of character and identity formation for

students.

Arts education plays a strategic role in developing students' aesthetic sensitivity, character, and social attitudes. Art is not only understood as mastering technical skills but also as an educational tool that fosters self-awareness, empathy, and respect for diversity (Rondi, 2017:13). In today's world, art has developed rapidly and can be accessed through various media, including technology. Technology plays an important role in supporting dynamic learning experiences and allowing more effective and innovative teaching processes (Pustikaya et al., 2023:2).



Figure 1. Tari Bedhaya Hagoromo 2014

Source: Indonesian Dance Festival (2014)

However, from some perspectives, art is still not fully understood by society, particularly in large cities where spaces for art communities are scarce. In the context of Indonesian society, which is rich in cultural heritage, dance is not merely entertainment but also a medium for transmitting values, history, and collective identity. However, with the advancement of technology, children's interest in traditional arts has begun to decline, as they are more familiar with gadgets and the digital world, which, while informative, often fail to develop creativity actively (Wulandari, 2021). In such circumstances, the role of dance studios becomes crucial.



Figure 2. Student Sanggar LKP Tari Natya Lakshita Didik Nini Thowok

Source: Didik Nini Thowok, 2024, Post *Instagram*

Dance studios provide informal learning spaces that are flexible, participatory, and community-based. They not only serve as academic learning spaces but also play a socio-cultural role as a place for children to grow, share life values, and develop their character (Dewantara, 2025). On Saturday, February 2, 1980, Didik Nini Thowok established the Natya Lakshita dance studio. The name is derived from the Sanskrit language, where “Natya” means dance and “Lakshita” means goal or direction, reflecting the hope that the studio would develop unique and distinctive dances. Through the commitment of the studio's management to advance Natya Lakshita, the studio's activities are designed in two directions: creating works to serve the entertainment needs of the community and offering dance courses for the public (Wahyuni, 2023).

The discussion shows that the learning space created is not exclusive but is open and safe for students. The learning environment is designed in such a way that students do not fear being judged when exploring movements that might contradict their biological identities. The teaching method used is dialogical, accompanied by humor and empathy to ease tension, especially when addressing sensitive issues like gender. The cross-gender approach applied in the dance practices highlights the importance of diversity in artistic expression involving the body and emotions (Putri, 2023). In this context, Didik Nini Thowok positions himself not as a rigid authority but as a facilitator who values the uniqueness of each student's body and expression.

This strategy in combating stigma is also evident in the emphasis on technical quality and achievement. International recognition serves as validation that cross-gender practices are part of artistic and intellectual accomplishments, not deviations. Additionally, this inclusive learning space extends to the public through performances and discussion forums, slowly changing the public's perception of gender diversity in art. From a psychological and social perspective, the impact on students is significant. They feel more accepted, confident, and have a space to freely express themselves. This learning process also fosters high empathy, which is fundamental in building an inclusive society.

The research findings show that the dance education practices carried out by Didik Nini Thowok are student-centered. In the teaching process, gender is not a limitation in exploring movements, characters, or dance roles. Students are given the freedom to explore their bodies and expressions reflectively in a safe and inclusive environment. The

pedagogical approach applied emphasizes the meaning of movement and body awareness as part of character education. Through cross-gender practices, students understand that dance is an open space for expression, unconstrained by certain social norms. This encourages the development of empathy, tolerance, and appreciation for identity diversity.

In the context of arts education, this practice contributes to the creation of a dialogical and humanistic learning space. Dance serves not only as a medium for cultural preservation but also as a value-based educational tool that supports inclusive learning. Therefore, the role of cross-gender maestros is significant in developing an arts education model relevant to contemporary social and cultural contexts. This course also includes a curriculum that must be followed by students, ensuring fairness in learning. Based on the thinking of Wijayanto et al. (2023), the Natya Lakshita studio focuses on education and training, with the responsibility of preserving and developing dance arts while maintaining standards. The Natya Lakshita studio has received various awards at the national and international levels.

E. CONCLUSION

Cultural arts are an invaluable asset of the nation. Through efforts to preserve cultural heritage, especially in the field of dance, it is hoped that citizens will feel prouder of their own culture. Maestro Didik Nini Thowok plays a crucial role in introducing values of inclusivity and providing equal opportunities for participation, creation, and self-expression without being bound by discriminatory norms. The importance of dance in Indonesia cannot be underestimated. Dance is more than just entertainment; it plays a significant role in various aspects of social life. With the concept of gender equality as a fundamental foundation in various fields of art, particularly dance, it is clear that men can also perform female roles in dance education, integrating rhythm, emotion, and movement into dance performance.

These values can be introduced to society, teaching humanistic values that are relevant to society, depicting social relations between men and women, and delivering a message that every individual has an equal standing in society, thus changing the mindset and unfair practices in the era of globalization. The cross-gender maestro plays a strategic role in shaping inclusive arts education. Through artistic practice and humanistic pedagogy, Didik Nini Thowok not only transmits dance skills but also instills values of openness, empathy, and respect for diversity. The integration of creativity and cultural hybridity makes arts education more meaningful and holistic. This finding emphasizes the potential of art as a means of educational and social transformation.

Dance, as an important part of a nation's cultural identity, needs to continuously evolve through approaches that are more inclusive, humanistic, and responsive to the dynamics of contemporary society. In the context of education, dance learning should go beyond the mastery of technical skills and choreography. It should also function as a medium to cultivate critical awareness, empathy, mutual respect, and an appreciation for diversity—whether in terms of gender, cultural background, or personal identity. By doing so, dance education can contribute to shaping individuals who are not only artistically skilled but also socially conscious and open-minded.

The role of influential figures such as Didik Nini Thowok remains highly significant in this process. His work demonstrates how dance can transcend rigid boundaries, particularly those related to gender expression and traditional norms. His approach to performance and teaching offers a model for developing creative, flexible, and inclusive pedagogies that encourage freedom of expression while still honoring cultural roots. Such figures should continue to be appreciated, studied, and used as sources of inspiration for both educators and young artists.

Moreover, strengthening collaboration between artists, educators, cultural institutions, and local communities is essential. These collaborations can foster innovative artistic practices that are grounded in local wisdom yet adaptable to global and modern contexts. Community-based projects, interdisciplinary works, and the integration of technology in dance are some examples of how tradition and innovation can coexist productively.

In a broader sense, dance should be positioned not merely as a form of entertainment, but as a powerful medium for social reflection and transformation. Through inclusive practices and meaningful engagement, dance has the potential to challenge stereotypes, bridge social divides, and promote a more just and equitable society. Therefore, continuous support, open dialogue, and progressive educational frameworks are necessary to ensure that dance remains relevant, transformative, and deeply connected to the cultural life of the community.

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