

Cognitive Development of Elementary School Children and its Implications for Humanistic Learning Design

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the cognitive development of elementary school children and its implications for designing humanistic learning. A Systematic Literature Review (SLR) was conducted on publications from 2020–2025 that discuss the cognitive characteristics of children aged 6–12 years and their relevance to instructional practices. The findings indicate that elementary students are in the concrete operational stage, requiring contextual learning, concrete media, and opportunities for exploration. Cognitive development is also significantly influenced by environmental factors, social interaction, and the quality of teaching. This study contributes to the development of humanistic learning design by identifying key principles that align instructional strategies with students' cognitive stages. Specifically, it emphasizes the use of contextual and experience-based learning, the integration of concrete and manipulative media, the provision of active exploration activities, and the creation of a supportive learning environment that fulfills students' psychological needs, such as safety, appreciation, and intrinsic motivation. The literature synthesis reveals that a humanistic learning approach optimizes cognitive growth through empathetic communication, meaningful learning activities, and opportunities for student autonomy. These findings provide a conceptual and practical framework for teachers in designing adaptive, student-centered, and developmentally appropriate learning environments. Such an approach not only enhances students' cognitive development but also strengthens motivation, engagement, and overall learning outcomes.

Keywords: Cognitive development, elementary school children, humanistic learning

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Introduction

Cognitive development in elementary school children constitutes an essential foundation in formal education, as it determines thinking capacity, information processing, and problem-solving abilities that serve as prerequisites for academic success and social adaptation. At this stage, children experience a transformation from the more egocentric and imaginative thinking patterns typical of the preschool period toward more logical, structured, and contextual reasoning. This condition is characteristic of the concrete operational stage proposed by Piaget, in which abstract reasoning still depends heavily on concrete experiences and tangible objects. Findings from the literature indicate that adjusting pedagogical methods to children's cognitive developmental stages increases engagement, conceptual understanding, and learning retention (Musyadad & Sari, 2024). Therefore, instructional design that fails to consider the cognitive characteristics of this age group risks creating a mismatch between curriculum demands and students' comprehension capacities, which ultimately reduces the effectiveness of classroom learning.

However, cognitive development is not merely a process of neurological maturation; rather, it emerges from a complex interaction of biological, environmental, social, and instructional factors. Empirical evidence highlights that learning environments, teaching

quality, parental support, and opportunities for exploration play crucial roles in accelerating or slowing cognitive development among elementary school students (Musyadad & Sari, 2024). Stimulating environments, the use of concrete learning aids, and collaborative interactions can foster reasoning abilities, classification skills, and problem-solving capacities. Conversely, unsupportive environments or teaching practices that do not align with developmental stages may hinder learning processes and widen achievement gaps.

In recent decades, developments in pedagogy have shown a shift from transmission-oriented instructional models toward more learner-centered approaches. One prominent direction is humanistic learning, a pedagogical perspective that positions learners as subjects with cognitive, affective, social, and moral needs. This approach emphasizes respect for individuality, intrinsic motivation, and personally meaningful learning activities (Humaeroh et al., 2021). When associated with the cognitive development of elementary school children, humanistic learning requires instructional designs that not only accommodate cognitive characteristics—such as the use of concrete media and scaffolding—but also incorporate emotional and social dimensions, including a sense of security, appreciation, and opportunities for participation. Previous studies suggest that teachers who apply humanistic principles tend to design contextual and enjoyable learning strategies that enhance student participation and achievement (Ismuwardani et al., 2025; Fahrurnisa & Fisa, 2024).

The digital transformation in education introduces an additional layer of complexity as well as opportunities for pedagogical intervention. Digital learning platforms can provide adaptive, multimedia, and interactive experiences that align with the stimulation needs of cognitive development. However, their implementation requires balanced pedagogical design that integrates digital interaction with real-world experiences, accompanied by teacher supervision to prevent attention-related disruptions. Recent studies indicate that carefully planned technology integration can enhance motivation and enable differentiated learning; however, implementations that are not grounded in developmental theory and humanistic principles may be counterproductive (Aisyah & Bustam, 2024). Therefore, technology integration must remain aligned with humanistic values and the cognitive developmental stages of children.

Despite extensive research on cognitive development and instructional models, a research gap remains regarding the translation of cognitive development findings into operational guidelines for designing humanistic learning that can be practically implemented in elementary classrooms. Many studies focus on the relationship between cognitive development and academic achievement or on the technical aspects of technology use, yet relatively few propose comprehensive frameworks for humanistic instructional design based on cognitive developmental evidence. This gap highlights the need for a synthesis of recent literature from 2020–2025 to formulate practical implications for educators and educational policymakers.

Based on these theoretical considerations and empirical findings, this study aims to conduct a systematic literature review (2020–2025) to:

1. map the characteristics of cognitive development among elementary school children;
2. identify factors influencing this development; and
3. formulate practical implications for designing humanistic learning that is responsive to children's cognitive, social, and affective needs.

The findings of this review are expected to provide both a conceptual foundation and practical recommendations for teachers, curriculum developers, and researchers in elementary education.

Research Method

This study employed a qualitative approach using the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method to synthesize empirical and conceptual evidence concerning the cognitive development of elementary school children and its implications for the design of humanistic learning during the period 2020–2025. The SLR method was chosen because it provides

systematic, transparent, and replicable procedures for identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing relevant literature (Ridwan, 2020).

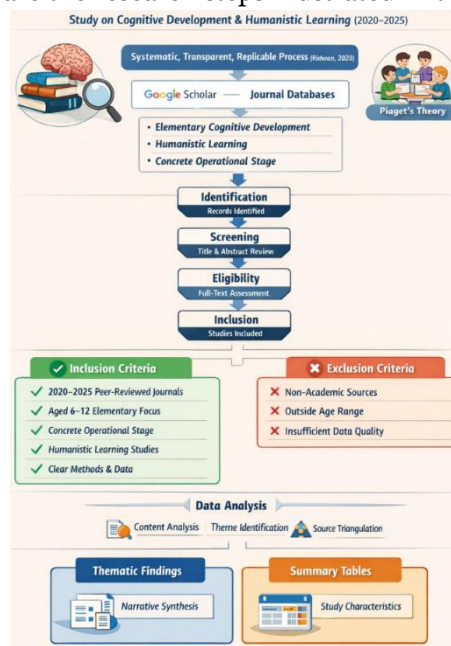
The literature search was conducted through academic databases such as Google Scholar and national journal portals using combinations of the following keywords: elementary school cognitive development, humanistic learning, elementary instructional design, concrete operational stage, and pedagogical implications. The SLR procedure involved several stages, including identification, screening (title and abstract review), eligibility (full-text reading), and final inclusion, which were documented using a flow diagram in accordance with the PRISMA principles (Kurniawan & Setiawati, 2021).

As a reference for SLR practice, previous literature demonstrates that the initial screening process may begin with hundreds of articles and gradually narrow down to a smaller number of highly relevant studies, thereby strengthening the analytical focus (Sari, 2019). The inclusion criteria for this study were:

1. empirical research articles or theoretical review papers published in peer-reviewed journals between 2020 and 2025;
2. studies focusing specifically on elementary school students aged 6–12 years;
3. studies that explicitly examine cognitive development stages, particularly the concrete operational stage, and/or their implications for instructional design;
4. studies that discuss or apply humanistic learning principles in classroom contexts;
5. articles that provide clear methodological descriptions and sufficient data for analysis.

Meanwhile, the exclusion criteria included non-academic publications, studies conducted outside the elementary school age range, and articles lacking sufficient data or analytical rigor (Sugiyono, 2019). Data analysis was conducted using content analysis by identifying major themes, subthemes, and patterns of relationships among themes (Moleong, 2017). To ensure the credibility of the findings, source triangulation and cross-checking among authors were performed during the synthesis stage. Methodological validity was further strengthened through an audit trail, documentation of all article selection decisions, the use of direct citations for key findings, and critical reflection on the limitations of the available literature (Lexy, 2018).

The final results are presented in the form of thematic narratives and summary tables of study characteristics, enabling accessibility for both academic readers and educational practitioners. The following are the research steps illustrated in the figure.



Pic 1. Steps Systematic Review Research Design's

Result and Discussion

1. Cognitive Development and Humanistic Foundations in Learning

Table 1. Literature Review

No	Author	Year	Method	Findings
1	Wibowo & Salfadilah	2025	Literature study	Humanism in the <i>Merdeka Belajar</i> policy encourages independence and meaningful learning in elementary schools.
2	Treve	2021	Literature review	Humanistic education emphasizes the holistic development of learners and positive teacher–student relationships.
3	Efendi et al.	2020	Qualitative study	Humanistic education effectively shapes the character of scavenger children through empathy and basic-needs approaches.
4	Permatasari et al.	2025	Field study	Humanistic theory develops elementary students' character through experience-based learning.
5	Asmawati & Roikhan	2024	Descriptive study	Technology can strengthen humanistic learning in elementary schools when used personally and meaningfully.
6	Damayanti et al.	2023	Descriptive research	Humanistic approaches in science learning enhance students' creative thinking skills.
7	Putri et al.	2024	Literature study	Humanistic learning theory facilitates learning motivation and the development of students' self-potential.
8	Sulaiman & Neviyarni	2021	Library research	Humanistic learning enhances meaningful learning by valuing students' emotional needs.
9	Susanto & Wulandari	2024	Literature study	Piaget's theory is important for understanding elementary students' thinking processes to align learning with developmental stages.
10	Hidayat et al.	2025	Quantitative research	Humanistic approaches in the Merdeka Curriculum strengthen students' independent character.
11	Jannah & Darim	2025	Qualitative study	Humanistic Islamic education fosters elementary students' social and spiritual attitudes.
12	Kusuma et al.	2025	Development research	Maslow's holistic-humanistic concept helps teachers understand students' self-actualization needs.
13	Azzahra et al.	2024	Quantitative research	Humanistic approaches in thematic learning improve students' creative thinking abilities.
14	Jauhari & Karyono	2022	Literature study	Maslow's theory strengthens teachers' pedagogical competence through understanding students' needs.
15	Syahrizal	2022	Dissertation research	Piaget's theory optimizes <i>tahfiz</i> learning for elementary students according to their cognitive stage.
16	Ismuwardani et al.	2025	Qualitative research	Humanistic education in arts fosters resilience and discipline among elementary students.
17	Aisyah & Bustam	2024	Literature study	Authentic assessment in the Merdeka Curriculum aligns with humanism by evaluating learning processes and student development.
18	Humaeroh et al.	2021	Descriptive study	Critical pedagogy strengthens humanistic education through dialogue and emancipatory learning.
19	Musyadad & Sari	2024	Quantitative research	Portfolio assessment improves elementary students' cognitive development.
20	Fahrurnisa & Fisa	2024	Qualitative study	Humanistic theory in IPAS learning encourages students to be more active, confident, and conceptually understanding.

No	Author	Year	Method	Findings
21	Maulana & Pramudiani	2024	Thematic research	Humanistic approaches in thematic learning enhance students' creativity and motivation.

Albay and Pradana (2025) emphasize that teachers must understand stages of cognitive development so that instructional strategies align with elementary students' concrete thinking abilities. In this context, Piaget's theory explains that children at the elementary level are in the concrete operational stage, meaning they can think logically but still rely on real experiences and concrete media. Therefore, learning strategies involving concrete objects and real-life activities are essential.

Similarly, Pokhrel (2024) found that physical-motor, cognitive, and language development form the fundamental basis for designing adaptive learning. Each developmental aspect must be considered holistically so that instructional processes can be adjusted to children's capacities and abilities.

This comprehensive understanding of cognitive development is reinforced by Fadhil (2025), who argues that cognitive readiness and socio-emotional readiness should serve as the foundation for instructional design to enable students to achieve learning competencies more optimally. This means that effective learning design should consider not only cognitive aspects but also students' socio-emotional conditions.

Arfiani (2021) adds that cognitive development among elementary students in regular schools is not uniform; therefore, different instructional approaches are required for different ability groups. Students with diverse learning capacities need teaching strategies adapted to their specific needs. This highlights the critical role of teachers in designing responsive learning environments.

Anugraheni (2017) introduces a humanistic perspective by emphasizing that learning should respect students' emotional needs to support their cognitive development comprehensively. Humanistic learning stresses the importance of security, appreciation, and emotional attention to students' feelings. Learning that focuses solely on cognitive achievement without considering emotional and social needs may lead to mechanistic learning experiences.

Overall, learning at the elementary level should be designed based on cognitive developmental principles complemented by humanistic approaches. Cognitive learning without humanity leads to mechanistic education, while humanistic approaches without developmental understanding may result in unstructured learning. Integrating both perspectives produces learning designs that are effective, meaningful, and aligned with the developmental characteristics of elementary students.

2. Humanistic Approaches in the Merdeka Curriculum and Educational Technology

Wibowo and Salfadilah (2025) state that the concept of Merdeka Belajar at the elementary level reflects humanistic values such as freedom, self-actualization, and interest-based learning. The Merdeka Curriculum allows students to choose learning pathways according to their interests and potentials, which aligns with humanistic principles emphasizing individual uniqueness.

Treve (2021) supports this view by arguing that humanistic education positions humans as subjects of learning rather than objects controlled by rigid systems. Thus, humanistic education creates space for students to develop their potential without excessive systemic restrictions.

Efendi et al. (2020) provide empirical evidence showing that humanistic education can significantly change the learning motivation of marginalized children working as scavengers. This approach highlights the power of education grounded in basic needs fulfillment, such as safety and appreciation.

Permatasari et al. (2025) further explain that humanistic theory can be systematically applied to character education in elementary schools. Such implementation encourages independence, responsibility, and self-confidence among students.

Asmawati and Roikhan (2024) argue that technological advancement can actually strengthen humanistic education when used to facilitate meaningful learning rather than merely transferring information. When technology is integrated with humanistic principles, students become more active, creative, and personally engaged in the learning process.

Thus, the Merdeka Curriculum is highly compatible with humanistic education because both emphasize flexibility, individuality, freedom, and meaningful learning experiences. Technology, in this context, should not be viewed as a threat but as a tool for expanding students' opportunities for self-actualization.

3. Humanistic Education in Character, Creativity, and Pedagogical Competence Development

Damayanti et al. (2023) highlight that humanistic-based science learning enhances students' creativity and higher-order thinking skills. Learning environments that encourage idea exploration improve students' critical thinking and problem-solving abilities.

Putri et al. (2024) also emphasize that humanistic learning theory, particularly Carl Rogers' ideas, promotes students' self-confidence, self-awareness, and independent learning abilities.

Sulaiman and Neviyarni (2021) stress that humanistic theory strongly influences teaching strategies, especially in fostering positive teacher–student relationships, which are prerequisites for effective learning environments.

Susanto and Wulandari (2024) integrate Piaget's developmental theory with humanistic learning, arguing that understanding developmental stages must be combined with opportunities for self-actualization. Meanwhile, Jauhari and Karyono (2022) link Maslow's humanistic theory with teachers' pedagogical competence, stating that teachers must achieve their own self-actualization to help students reach theirs.

Ultimately, the goal of humanistic education extends beyond academic knowledge to include character development, self-awareness, creativity, and interpersonal skills. Teachers must understand students' basic needs (Maslow) and facilitate meaningful learning experiences (Rogers).

4. Humanistic Approaches in Assessment, Tahfiz Learning, and Thematic Instruction

Syahrizal (2022) highlights the importance of combining Piagetian cognitive theory and humanistic approaches in tahfiz learning to develop students' internal motivation.

This aligns with Azzahra et al. (2023), who found that humanistic thematic learning enhances creative thinking through integrative learning experiences connecting knowledge with real-life contexts.

Hidayat et al. (2025) report that humanistic approaches within the Merdeka Curriculum strengthen students' independent character, while Jannah and Darim (2025) demonstrate that humanistic Islamic education fosters social and spiritual attitudes more effectively than conventional methods.

Musyadad and Sari (2024) further show that portfolio-based assessment, influenced by humanistic theory, enhances both cognitive development and students' sense of learning ownership.

Humanistic approaches are therefore highly flexible and applicable across subjects. They emphasize reflection, personal experience, and authentic assessment, enabling students not only to understand knowledge but also to internalize its meaning and values.

5. Humanistic Learning in Teacher Development and Learning Discipline

Kusuma et al. (2025) expand the discussion by highlighting holistic learning concepts based on Maslow's humanistic psychology for elementary school teachers. Their study shows that teachers who understand students' hierarchy of needs and view self-actualization as the ultimate goal tend to create more effective, empathetic, and humane learning environments.

Holistic learning encompasses not only cognitive aspects but also social, emotional, moral, and spiritual dimensions. This perspective underscores that the success of humanistic education largely depends on teacher readiness and competence. Teachers who have not developed humanistic awareness themselves may struggle to guide students toward self-actualization.

Overall, humanistic approaches in elementary education significantly influence students' cognitive and socio-emotional development. Integrating the Merdeka Curriculum, educational technology, and humanistic principles enriches learning experiences and creates more authentic and relevant education.

Conclusion

This study reveals that elementary school students are generally in the concrete operational stage of cognitive development, which requires contextual, experience-based learning supported by concrete media and opportunities for active exploration. Effective instruction at this level must align with students' cognitive characteristics while also addressing their emotional and social needs. In this context, humanistic learning plays a crucial role by enhancing motivation and participation through the fulfillment of students' basic psychological needs, such as safety, appreciation, and belonging. Within the framework of the Merdeka Curriculum, humanistic learning further promotes student autonomy, creativity, and self-actualization. The integration of technology, when applied through humanistic principles, can strengthen learning experiences while maintaining meaningful social and emotional interactions. Therefore, the combination of cognitive development principles and humanistic learning approaches can create a more effective, meaningful, and adaptive learning environment for elementary school students.

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