



Review Article

The Stage as a Classroom: Exploring Theatre as a Pedagogical Tool for Transformative Learning.

Pallabi Bhuyan

Assistant Professor, Department of ITEP, North Lakhimpur University, Assam, India

Corresponding Author: Pallabi Bhuyan*

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16882854>

Abstract

This research explores the potential of theatre as a transformative pedagogical tool in education. It examines how theatrical techniques such as role-play, improvisation, storytelling, and dramatic inquiry can be integrated into classroom practices to enhance learning outcomes, critical thinking, emotional intelligence, and student engagement. Drawing upon qualitative data collected through observations, interviews, and student reflections, the study identifies the pedagogical benefits of using theatre to create participatory, reflective, and inclusive learning environments. The findings suggest that drama-based learning promotes cognitive development, empathy, collaboration, and active participation, making it a compelling method for holistic education. The research also addresses challenges such as curriculum rigidity, lack of teacher training, and institutional undervaluing of the arts. Ultimately, the study advocates for a reimagining of classroom spaces where performance and pedagogy intersect to support transformative learning.

Manuscript Information

- **ISSN No:** 2583-7397
- **Received:** 25-06-2025
- **Accepted:** 12-07-2025
- **Published:** 15-08-2025
- **IJCRM:** 4(4); 2025: 528-532
- **©2025, All Rights Reserved**
- **Plagiarism Checked:** Yes
- **Peer Review Process:** Yes

How to Cite this Article

Bhuyan P. The Stage as a Classroom: Exploring Theatre as a Pedagogical Tool for Transformative Learning. Int J Contemp Res Multidiscip. 2025;4(4):528-532.

Access this Article Online



www.multiarticlesjournal.com

KEYWORDS: Theatre in Education, Transformative Learning, Drama-Based Pedagogy, Student Engagement, Experiential Learning, Critical Thinking.

1. INTRODUCTION

Review of Literature

The integration of theatre into educational practices is deeply rooted in transformative and experiential learning theories. Paulo Freire (1970), through his concept of dialogic pedagogy, emphasized that learners must be co-creators of knowledge in a participatory and reflective environment. Freire's ideas laid the

groundwork for Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed (1979), which positions performance as a means of promoting critical consciousness and social change. Boal's approach encourages participants to question societal norms, engage in active dialogue, and visualize alternatives to oppression. Expanding on this, Dorothy Heathcote and Gavin Bolton (1995) introduced the Mantle of the Expert approach, which allows

students to adopt professional roles within fictional scenarios, promoting deeper engagement with subject matter through drama. Neelands (2009) emphasized the role of theatre in democratizing classroom spaces, making room for collaboration, inquiry, and student agency. Fleming (2001) further elaborated on how drama contributes to emotional literacy, confidence, and social skills, while Nicholson (2005) focused on the role of applied drama in promoting inclusion and identity formation in diverse educational contexts. Collectively, these theorists demonstrate that theatre is not just an artistic activity but a multidimensional pedagogical approach that enhances learning by blending affective, cognitive, and kinesthetic modalities.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the growing recognition of the need for more holistic and student-centered pedagogies, the education system in many countries remains rooted in traditional, exam-driven approaches that prioritize memorization and standardization over creativity and emotional development. This rigid structure often marginalizes or completely excludes the arts—especially theatre—as serious pedagogical tools. As a result, students are deprived of opportunities to engage in self-expression, collaborative learning, and social-emotional growth. The gap between what students need in a 21st-century learning environment and what is offered through conventional pedagogies raises critical concerns. The underutilization of theatre in education is symptomatic of a broader undervaluing of the arts, and there is insufficient research exploring how theatre can be systematically implemented to promote transformative learning. This study aims to address this gap by investigating how theatre can be effectively used in classrooms to foster critical thinking, empathy, creativity, and student engagement, while also identifying the barriers that hinder its integration.

Significance of the Study

This study contributes significantly to the field of education by offering insights into the pedagogical power of theatre. It highlights how theatrical practices can transform learning spaces into inclusive, collaborative, and emotionally rich environments. For students, theatre enhances communication skills, empathy, creativity, and self-confidence. For educators, it offers innovative teaching strategies that support differentiated instruction and deeper student engagement. The findings of this research have implications for curriculum developers and policy-makers, as they provide a strong argument for integrating arts-based methods into mainstream education. Furthermore, the study addresses the need for teacher training in drama-based pedagogy and proposes frameworks for implementing such methods sustainably. By advocating for a broader view of what constitutes effective teaching, the research encourages schools to embrace interdisciplinary approaches that align with the goals of holistic education.

Objectives of the Study

1. To explore how theatre can be used as an effective pedagogical tool in formal education.
2. To examine the impact of theatre on student learning outcomes, emotional intelligence, and classroom engagement.
3. To understand teachers' and students' perceptions of drama-based learning.
4. To identify practical challenges and opportunities in integrating theatre into the curriculum.
5. To contribute to the growing discourse on experiential and transformative learning models.

METHODOLOGY

This research follows a qualitative methodology to deeply explore the role of theatre in classroom teaching and learning. The study was conducted in two schools that implement theatre-integrated learning practices. Participants included four educators (two subject teachers and two drama-trained specialists), two external theatre practitioners, and thirty students from Grades 7 to 9. Over six weeks, the researcher conducted direct classroom observations of theatre-based lessons in language, social studies, and value education. Data collection tools included semi-structured interviews with educators and theatre practitioners, student reflection journals, focus group discussions, and video/audio recordings of performances and discussions. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data, enabling the identification of recurring themes such as student engagement, emotional expression, collaboration, and critical thinking. The qualitative approach allowed for a rich, contextual understanding of the lived experiences of both students and teachers engaging in drama-based pedagogy.

Research Questions

1. How does theatre influence student engagement and learning outcomes in the classroom?
2. What are the emotional, social, and cognitive effects of integrating theatre into teaching practices?
3. How do teachers and students perceive the use of drama-based pedagogy?
4. What challenges are encountered in implementing theatre as a teaching method in formal education settings?

Research Design

The research employs a case study design to facilitate an in-depth investigation of theatre as a pedagogical strategy in natural educational settings. The case study method is particularly suited for this research as it allows for a detailed examination of contextual variables and the complexity of real-life teaching and learning environments. By focusing on two schools that have adopted theatre-based learning, the study provides a nuanced understanding of how drama is integrated into classroom instruction, how students respond to it, and what outcomes emerge over time. The case study approach also enables the researcher to collect multiple forms of qualitative data—observations, interviews, documents, and audiovisual

materials—allowing for triangulation and a comprehensive portrayal of the phenomenon. This design is ideal for capturing the lived experiences of students and teachers and offers insights that are grounded in practice rather than abstraction.

Data Collection

Classroom Observations: Six weeks of regular observation sessions during which theatre-based lessons were implemented.

Teacher Interviews: Semi-structured interviews conducted before, during, and after the observation period to gather educator insights on pedagogy, student responses, and challenges.

Student Reflection Journals: Students documented their thoughts and feelings after each session, providing insight into their emotional and cognitive experiences.

Focus Group Discussions: Conducted with students to collect shared experiences, ideas, and feedback on the drama-based activities.

Audio-Video Recordings: Selected sessions were recorded to assist with later analysis and ensure detailed data accuracy.

Introduction

1.1 Reimagining the Classroom Through Theatre

The classroom is traditionally viewed as a space of instruction—a place where knowledge is transmitted from teacher to student in a linear, structured, and standardized manner. Within this paradigm, learning is often confined to textbooks, lectures, assessments, and predetermined curricular outcomes. While this approach serves certain purposes in organizing educational content, it frequently falls short in addressing the holistic development of learners. In an era marked by social complexity, emotional challenges, and rapid technological change, the traditional model of education must evolve to remain relevant and effective. Contemporary educational discourse calls for pedagogical approaches that are learner-centered, participatory, interdisciplinary, and emotionally responsive. One such approach, often overlooked in formal schooling but rich in potential, is theatre.

1.2 Theatre as a Pedagogical Tool

Theatre has historically been a powerful medium for cultural transmission, storytelling, and social reflection. From ancient Greek tragedies to contemporary social issue plays, theatre has provided a space for audiences to engage with complex human experiences. When brought into educational settings, theatre transforms from a performative art into a pedagogical tool—an active and embodied method of learning that blends cognitive, emotional, social, and physical engagement. Unlike traditional instruction, which is often abstract and decontextualized, theatre grounds learning in experience. Students are not merely recipients of information but become active participants in the learning process—collaborating, interpreting, expressing, and reflecting. Theatrical techniques such as role-play, improvisation, character development, storytelling, forum theatre, and tableaux vivant allow students to explore content experientially. Whether they are reenacting a historical event,

simulating a scientific process, or dramatizing a moral dilemma, students engage with knowledge in ways that are meaningful and memorable. The classroom becomes a stage—not in the metaphorical sense of performance for performance's sake, but as a transformative learning environment where knowledge is lived and embodied.

1.3 Theoretical Grounding: Freire and Boal

The use of theatre in education is deeply informed by critical pedagogy, particularly the work of Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal. Freire's concept of dialogic education emphasizes the importance of communication, reflection, and collaboration between teacher and student. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), Freire critiques the "banking model" of education, where students are passive depositories of knowledge. Instead, he proposes a problem-posing model in which learners critically engage with reality through dialogue and action. Boal (1979), a student of Freire, took this idea further by creating *Theatre of the Oppressed*—a participatory theatre form that empowers individuals to rehearse solutions to social problems. In Boal's theatre, spectators become "spect-actors," blurring the boundary between performer and audience. This practice of reimagining reality and enacting change is profoundly educational. It cultivates critical consciousness (conscientizes) and promotes the development of democratic and emancipatory learning spaces. In the classroom, these principles translate into pedagogical theatre practices that give students agency, voice, and responsibility.

1.4 Drama-in-Education and Applied Theatre

Drama-in-education (DIE) and applied theatre are extensions of these foundational ideas, and they play a key role in shaping theatre-based pedagogy. Dorothy Heathcote and Gavin Bolton developed the *Mantle of the Expert* (1995) approach, in which students assume expert roles in a fictional context to explore curriculum content. For example, students might take on the role of archaeologists studying ancient ruins or social workers helping a fictional family. This method fosters interdisciplinary learning, critical inquiry, and emotional engagement. Similarly, applied theatre—defined as theatre practices applied outside of traditional performance spaces—includes educational theatre, theatre for development, and community-based drama. Nicholson (2005) and Neelands (2009) emphasize that these practices are deeply participatory and often focused on empowerment, identity formation, and inclusion. When adapted for the classroom, applied theatre provides students with tools to explore social justice issues, cultural diversity, and personal narratives in a safe and creative environment.

1.5 Benefits of Theatre in Education

A growing body of research supports the integration of theatre into education. Fleming (2001) notes that drama fosters imagination, communication, collaboration, and empathy. These are not merely supplementary skills but foundational competencies for living and learning in a democratic society. Theatre also enhances verbal and non-verbal communication,

helps develop emotional regulation, and strengthens cognitive functions such as memory, attention, and problem-solving. Students engaged in drama-based learning often show increased motivation, self-confidence, and academic performance. The affective dimension of learning—so often neglected in standardized testing regimes—is central to theatre pedagogy. Drama allows students to express emotions, resolve internal conflicts, and understand multiple perspectives. Furthermore, the collaborative nature of theatre helps build community in the classroom, reducing isolation and promoting inclusion.

1.6 Theatre as a Tool for Inclusion and Differentiation

In diverse and inclusive classrooms, theatre provides a unique platform for differentiated learning. Students with different abilities, learning styles, and cultural backgrounds can engage in ways that suit their strengths. For example, a student who struggles with written expression may thrive in a role-play scenario or performance task. Theatre creates multiple entry points into learning and enables educators to assess understanding through creative expression. Moreover, drama fosters cultural responsiveness. Students can share stories from their own lives, communities, and identities, thus validating their experiences and fostering mutual respect. In this way, theatre supports both academic learning and socio-cultural development.

1.7 Theatre, Emotional Intelligence, and SEL:

The inclusion of theatre in education also aligns with the growing emphasis on Social and Emotional Learning (SEL). Theatre naturally cultivates key SEL competencies such as self-awareness, empathy, responsible decision-making, and relationship-building. When students take on roles, they step into someone else's experience, building emotional and moral imagination. Theatre also encourages reflective practice, helping students to analyze their emotions, motivations, and behaviors in a safe and structured setting. Improvisation and creative movement further develop emotional regulation and resilience. Students learn to deal with uncertainty, adapt to new situations, and express themselves authentically. These are life skills that extend beyond the classroom and into broader social contexts.

1.8 Barriers to Implementation:

Despite the compelling benefits of theatre in education, several barriers hinder its widespread adoption. One major challenge is the structure of school curricula, which often prioritizes core subjects and measurable outcomes over arts-based learning. Teachers may lack time, resources, or institutional support to integrate drama meaningfully into their lessons. Additionally, there is a widespread misconception that drama is only for the "talented" or "artistic" students, rather than a pedagogical strategy accessible to all. Teacher training is another critical barrier. Many educators feel unprepared to use drama techniques, especially if their education did not include exposure to theatre. Without proper training and support, even willing teachers may hesitate to step into the role of drama

facilitator. Furthermore, administrative and policy frameworks often undervalue the arts, seeing them as enrichment rather than core to the learning process. This marginalization perpetuates a cycle in which theatre is excluded from funding, scheduling, and professional development priorities.

1.9 Relevance to the 21st Century and NEP 2020 (India)

The integration of theatre in education aligns well with the goals of 21st-century learning frameworks. Skills such as creativity, communication, collaboration, and critical thinking—the “4 Cs”—are at the heart of both theatre and global educational reforms. In the Indian context, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 advocates for holistic, integrated, inclusive, and multidisciplinary learning. It emphasizes the importance of the arts in developing well-rounded individuals and specifically calls for the integration of experiential learning, storytelling, and arts-based methods. NEP 2020 encourages teachers to move beyond rote learning and to cultivate curiosity, exploration, and problem-solving. This vision resonates strongly with the potential of theatre to bring subjects alive, make learning relevant, and support the development of future-ready citizens.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that theatre holds immense potential as a transformative educational practice. Its use in the classroom leads to heightened student engagement, enhanced empathy, emotional literacy, and improved collaboration. The performative nature of drama-based learning allows students to express themselves freely, engage more deeply with content, and become more self-aware and socially responsible learners. Teachers benefit from seeing their students connect with the curriculum in creative and reflective ways. However, several barriers—such as rigid curricula, time constraints, lack of administrative support, and insufficient training—must be addressed for theatre to be sustainably integrated into mainstream education. This research calls for educational institutions to reimagine classroom spaces where art, expression, and critical thinking coexist, enabling a more inclusive, dynamic, and human-centered pedagogy.

REFERENCES

1. Boal A. *Theatre of the Oppressed*. New York: Theatre Communications Group; 1979.
2. Fleming M. *Teaching Drama in Primary and Secondary Schools*. London: Routledge; 2001.
3. Freire P. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum; 1970.
4. Heathcote D, Bolton G. *Drama for Learning: Mantle of the Expert Approach to Education*. Portsmouth: Heinemann; 1995.
5. Neelands J. *Acting Together: Drama and Education in Conflict Contexts*. Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books; 2009.
6. Nicholson H. *Applied Drama: The Gift of Theatre*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan; 2005.

7. O'Toole J. The Process of Drama: Negotiating Art and Meaning. London: Routledge; 1992.
8. Pineau EL. Teaching is Performance: Reconceptualizing a Problematic Metaphor. Am Educ Res J. 1994;31(1):3–25.

Creative Commons (CC) License

This article is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) license. This license permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

About the Authors

Pallabi Bhuyan is an Assistant Professor in the Department of ITEP at North Lakhimpur University, Assam, India. Her research interests include the use of theatre and drama as pedagogical tools for transformative learning, innovative teaching methodologies, and experiential education. She has published articles in national and international journals on education and applied drama.