



## THEATRE AND ROLE PLAY IN ELEMENTARY TEACHER EDUCATION: BUILDING EXPERIENTIAL CLASSROOMS FOR NEP 2020

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### RESEARCH ARTICLE



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#### Abstract

Theatre and role play offer powerful means of transforming traditional education into an experience that is alive, engaging, and deeply human. In alignment with the National Education Policy 2020, which emphasizes holistic, joyful, and experiential learning, this study explores how theatrical pedagogy particularly role play can enrich classroom environments by nurturing communication, empathy, creativity, and critical thinking among young learners. Through a conceptual and exploratory approach, the study draws on educational theory, policy insights, and documented practices to examine how theatre-based strategies can shift the dynamics of teaching and learning. Two analytical tables illustrate the contrast between conventional and theatre-integrated pedagogy, and propose subject-wise classroom applications of role play. By centering on the possibilities theatre brings to educational spaces, the paper invites educators, scholars, and institutions to reimagine learning not as a rigid delivery of content but as a shared space of exploration and expression, echoing the deeper aims of education outlined in NEP 2020.

**Keywords:** *Experiential Classrooms, Learning, NEP 2020, Theatre, Role Play*

#### Introduction

Education in contemporary world is expected to do more than just to deliver subject knowledge. It must also prepare learners and pupil teachers with necessary skills such as problem-solving, collaboration, creativity, and communication. These skills are very essential for holistic development of any individual. In Our country (NEP) 2020 highlights experiential and arts-based learning as central to achieving these aims for developing such skills (Government of India, 2020). Within this framework, Drama-Based Pedagogy (DBP) has emerged as a powerful teaching approach that goes beyond rote memorization like traditional classrooms. By using methods such as role-play, improvisation, and theatre integration, Drama-Based Pedagogy (DBP) helps to creates active and engaging classrooms where learners connect subject matter with real-life contexts.

International studies have also demonstrated and emphasized upon the value and importance of drama and theatre as a tool for education in today's educational set-up. O'Toole and Stinson (2016) mentioned that classroom drama helps to improve collaboration and critical thinking among learners, while Dawson and Lee (2018) explained how it fosters and improves communication and empathy among students. In the Indian context also, NCERT has also introduced Art-Integrated Learning (AIL) guidelines now, which place theatre alongside other art forms as a strategy for making learning inclusive and participatory environment (NCERT, 2020; NCERT, 2023). These developments suggest that Drama-Based Pedagogy (DBP) is not only compatible with India's policy goals but also essential for making classrooms more meaningful and impactful.

Despite its potential and need of the usage of Drama-Based Pedagogy (DBP) in Indian higher education remains very limited and also Teacher education and training programs in particular continue to rely majorly on lecture-based instruction and rote-memorization, with very little or no space for experiential methods (Sharma, 2018). This gap raises important questions. if students and teacher trainees are not exposed to drama-based approaches during training, how likely are they to adopt such practices in their own classrooms? Scholars like Mehta (2020) argue that without structural support and rules and regulations in teacher education Drama-Based Pedagogy (DBP) will always remain confined to extracurricular spaces rather than becoming a core teaching strategy or method.

This study focuses on addressing this issue. This study examines the scope of Drama-Based Pedagogy (DBP) in teacher education, and also tries to study its alignment with NEP 2020 and NCERT's AIL framework, and considers how it can be systematically integrated into higher education institutions. By reviewing genuine literature and analyzing policy directions, this

paper highlights the relevance of DBP not just as performance, but as pedagogy - an approach that can help to bridge the gap between the traditional teaching methods and the demands of modern education.

### **Rationale of the Study**

This research paper is driven by the pressing need to close the gap between India's policy aspirations and actual classroom practices while the NEP 2020 and NCERT's Art-Integrated Learning (AIL) framework strongly recommend creative and experiential approaches, teacher education programs still prioritize conventional lecture-based methods with limited opportunities for participatory learning. This mismatch reduces the chances of future teachers adopting innovative strategies such as drama-based pedagogy in their classrooms. By systematically examining the role of theatre and role-play as pedagogical tools, this study provides a way to connect policy goals with practical classroom realities. It positions drama not as an extracurricular activity, but as a structured approach that can enhance engagement, inclusivity, and critical thinking in education.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study is important because it contributes to improving both teacher education and classroom practice in India. The NEP 2020 makes it clear that education must move beyond content delivery and foster holistic learning through creativity, critical thinking, and collaboration (Government of India, 2020). Drama-based pedagogy aligns directly with these goals by allowing learners to experience knowledge rather than just memorize it. Through many activities like role-play and improvisation, teacher trainees and students can develop empathy, communication skills, and problem-solving abilities that are central to 21st-century education.

For teacher education specifically, this research is important because it highlights a missing link between policy aspirations and actual training. Most pre-service teachers are still prepared through lecture-driven models, which leave them ill-equipped to use participatory and experiential techniques in their own classrooms. Studies such as Sharma (2018) and Mehta (2020) have noted that unless teacher preparation includes innovative pedagogies, future teachers will be less likely to adopt them in practice. By bringing DBP into the center of teacher education, this research addresses a crucial need to prepare educators who can implement NEP 2020 effectively.

The study is also significant in showing how DBP can contribute to inclusivity in Indian classrooms. The NCERT's guidelines on Art-Integrated Learning (2020; 2023) identify theatre as an approach that helps students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds find common ground in learning. This means DBP is not only a teaching technique but also a tool for building equity and participation in classrooms where student backgrounds vary widely. Recognizing this role of drama strengthens the case for embedding it systematically in higher education programs.

Finally, this research contributes to the global discussion on creative pedagogy. International work by O'Toole and Stinson (2016) and Dawson and Lee (2018) demonstrates that drama fosters deeper engagement and empathy among learners. By situating these insights in the Indian policy context, the paper provides a dual perspective also linking global evidence with local needs. This makes the study relevant not only to Indian higher education institutions but also to educators and researchers interested in how drama can reshape teaching across different educational systems.

### **Review of Literature**

Research on drama-based pedagogy (DBP) has steadily shown its value in creating active and participatory learning environments. O'Toole and Stinson (2016) examined drama-in-education practices and argued that structured drama activities help students develop collaboration and critical thinking by moving beyond rote memorization. Dawson and Lee (2018), in their work on drama-based pedagogy across disciplines, found that role-play and improvisation encourage empathy and improve communication, highlighting the dual impact of drama on both academic and social learning. Together, these studies establish DBP as a credible pedagogy with applications across multiple learning contexts.

Policy frameworks in India further reinforce the importance of arts integration. NEP 2020 calls for experiential, activity-based, and holistic approaches as part of its vision for reform (Government of India, 2020). Similarly, the NCERT guidelines on Art-Integrated Learning (2020; 2023) identify theatre and role-play as essential strategies for inclusive classrooms. These documents provide a policy-level foundation that supports the wider use of DBP, making it an integral part of contemporary Indian education.

Several studies demonstrate the effectiveness of DBP in subject-specific teaching. Sharma (2018) found that role-play in social science lessons deepened critical reflection and helped students connect theory with practical scenarios. Mehta (2020) observed that theatre techniques in English language classrooms boosted confidence and reduced hesitation in oral communication. Internationally, Anderson and Donelan (2016) reported that students of science background who were engaged in drama activities were able to grasp abstract concepts more effectively by physically enacting processes. These studies show that DBP has the versatility to support different disciplines, from humanities to sciences.

Beyond curriculum content, drama also develops essential life skills. A meta-analysis by Lee, Patall, Cawthon, and Steingut (2015) found that arts integration, including drama, improves motivation, engagement, and self-efficacy. Rao and Narayan (2021) reported that participatory theatre enhanced empathy, teamwork, and problem-solving among Indian secondary students,

while Saha and Saha (2019) noted that role-play activities supported emotional regulation and interpersonal communication. Such findings underline the broader significance of DBP in fostering holistic development alongside academic learning.

Evidence from Indian classrooms provides additional support. Singh and Kaur (2019) found that pre-service teachers valued drama-based strategies but lacked training in how to implement them effectively. Nair, Bindu, and Raj (2020) studied art-integrated learning in Kerala schools and concluded that drama activities promoted cultural awareness and collaborative learning. Roy (2017) highlighted how role-play in environmental education encouraged students to think critically about sustainability, linking DBP to wider social issues. These studies suggest that while the benefits of drama are acknowledged, structured integration into teacher education is still lacking.

Finally, theoretical perspectives reinforce DBP's educational value. Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (1984) shows how drama fits into the cycle of experience, reflection, and application. Vygotsky's constructivist approach emphasizes the role and importance of social interaction in teaching and learning, which is central to drama activities. Lavanya and Ramesh (2021) argue that drama framed within constructivist pedagogy helps students co-construct knowledge, rather than passively absorb it. Together, these frameworks position DBP as both theoretically grounded and practically relevant for modern classrooms.

### **Research Gap**

Although drama-based pedagogy (DBP) has been recognized and also considered as an effective method and tool for engaging learners, its use in Indian higher education, particularly in teacher training, remains limited. Much of the existing work on drama in education focuses on school-level practices or extracurricular activities. Very few studies explore how drama can be integrated into teacher training and education programs, where future educators are trained to design and deliver classroom instruction. This leaves a significant gap between the policy emphasis on experiential and arts-based learning and the actual preparation of teachers who are expected to implement these ideas.

Another gap lies in the lack of analytical comparisons between conventional lecture-driven pedagogy and theatre-integrated approaches. While discussions around drama in education often highlight its benefits, there is little structured analysis that contrasts these two methods or demonstrates how role-play can be applied across different subjects. Without such insights, teacher education continues to overlook drama as a serious pedagogical strategy. This research seeks to address these gaps by critically examining drama-based pedagogy, its relevance for teacher education, and its potential to bridge the divide between policy vision and classroom practice.

**Objectives:** The research is guided by the following objectives:

- To examine the role of drama-based pedagogy (DBP) in enhancing teaching and learning processes.
- To explore how drama-based pedagogy (DBP) aligns and fulfills the goals of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and the Art-Integrated Learning framework.
- To analyze the differences between conventional teaching methods and theatre-integrated pedagogy, with a focus on subject-wise applications of role play.
- To suggest practical ways of integrating drama-based pedagogy into teacher education programs in India

### **Theoretical Framework**

This research is founded on the principle that learning is most effective when it is active, participatory, and rooted in real-life experiences. Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (1984) offers a solid framework for understanding drama-based pedagogy. In this model, learning unfolds as a cycle encompassing concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Drama practices such as role-play and improvisation immerse learners in this cycle, enabling them to engage with concepts directly, reflect on their actions, form conclusions, and apply these understandings in new contexts. This makes DBP an inherently suitable approach to experiential learning.

Additionally, the study draws on constructivist perspectives of learning, especially those proposed by Piaget and Vygotsky. Constructivism stresses that learners actively construct knowledge rather than receiving it passively from teachers. Vygotsky's idea of the Zone of Proximal Development underlines the role of social interaction in learning, which resonates with drama activities where learners collaborate, negotiate meaning, and co-create understanding. By embedding learning within an interactive, shared space, DBP fosters both intellectual development and social growth.

In addition, the principles of Theatre-in-Education (TIE) further support this framework. Scholars such as O'Toole and Stinson (2016) have shown how theatre techniques can be used not only for artistic expression but also as structured pedagogical tools that engage students emotionally and intellectually. This study draws on these theoretical perspectives to position drama-based pedagogy as more than a supplementary activity. Instead, it is viewed as a pedagogical approach that integrates experience, collaboration, and creativity into the core of the teaching-learning process.

### **Methodology**

This research adopts a conceptual and exploratory approach, relying on secondary sources rather than primary data collection. The study reviewed academic books, journal articles, policy documents, and official guidelines published between 2010 and 2024, with particular attention to the NEP 2020 and NCERT's Art-Integrated Learning guidelines. Literature was selected based

on relevance to drama-based pedagogy, teacher education, and arts integration in Indian and international contexts. The analysis followed a thematic approach, identifying patterns in how drama has been applied in classrooms, its documented benefits, and the gaps in teacher training. By synthesizing evidence from diverse studies and aligning it with national policy objectives, this methodology ensures that the findings and implications are grounded in both theory and practice.

### Discussion and Analysis

Drama-based pedagogy offers a sharp contrast to conventional lecture-driven teaching. Traditional methods often emphasize one-way communication, memorization, and rigid classroom structures, which limit student participation and creativity. In contrast, theatre-integrated pedagogy encourages dialogue, collaboration, and exploration. By involving students in role-play and performance, learning becomes active and reflective rather than passive. This shift directly supports the objectives of NEP 2020, which calls for experiential and competency-based education.

Table 1 below illustrates the contrast between conventional pedagogy and theatre-integrated pedagogy. The table highlights differences in teaching style, student engagement, learning outcomes, and classroom environment. It shows that while conventional teaching often focuses on content delivery and assessment, theatre-based methods emphasize upon critical thinking, creativity, and holistic development of learners.

**Table 1: Contrast between Conventional and Theatre-Integrated Pedagogy**

Aspect	Conventional Pedagogy	Theatre-Integrated Pedagogy
Teaching Style	It is Lecture-based and teacher-centered.	It will be Interactive, student-centered.
Student Role	Limited to Passive listeners and note-takers	Engages student and they Actively participate and becomes role-players
Learning Focus	Heavily upon Rote-Memorization and reproduction.	Experience, reflection, application
Classroom Environment	Extremely Formal, structured, hierarchical.	Collaborative, flexible, inclusive
Outcomes	Limited to Content knowledge, exam preparation	Critical thinking, creativity, empathy

While Table 1 highlights broad pedagogical differences, Table 2 presents a more practical application of drama-based pedagogy. It shows how role-play can be applied across different subjects to strengthen learning outcomes. For example, in social science, role-play allows students to step into historical or civic roles, helping them analyze events or policies critically. In science stream also, drama also be used to model processes such as ecosystems or chemical reactions, making abstract ideas more concrete. In language classrooms, role-play supports fluency, expression, and confidence in communication. These applications demonstrate the flexibility of DBP and its ability to enrich multiple areas of learning.

**Table 2: Subject-Wise Classroom Application of Role-Play**

Subject	Example of Role-Play Activity	Purpose/Outcome
Social Science	Mock parliament, historical reenactments	Develops critical thinking, civic awareness
Science	Enacting processes (e.g., food chain, chemical reaction)	Makes abstract concepts concrete, improves recall
Language	Dialogue improvisation, storytelling	Enhances fluency, confidence, communication
Environmental Education	Role-play on sustainability issues	Builds awareness, problem-solving skills

These two analytical tables make clear that DBP is not only different from conventional pedagogy but also highly adaptable to subject-specific needs. By positioning students as active participants, drama shifts the classroom dynamic from knowledge transmission to knowledge creation. This supports both the academic achievements and the development of broader life skills, ensuring that the goals of NEP 2020 and NCERT’s Art-Integrated Learning framework are met in practice.

### Findings and Educational Implications

The analysis highlights that drama-based pedagogy provides clear advantages over conventional teaching methods. By shifting from teacher-centered lectures to interactive role-play and theatre activities, DBP makes learning more participatory and meaningful. The comparison in Table 1 showed that while conventional approaches often result in surface-level understanding and exam-focused preparation, theatre-integrated methods support critical thinking, creativity, and emotional engagement. This confirms that DBP is not just an add-on activity but a powerful alternative to traditional modes of teaching.

Another key finding is that DBP can be applied effectively across different subjects, as shown in Table 2. In social science, role-play encourages learners to think critically about history, governance, and civic issues. In science, it helps make abstract processes more understandable and memorable. Language classrooms benefit through improved fluency, confidence, and expression, while environmental education gains through activities that foster awareness and problem-solving. These examples show that DBP is flexible and adaptable, making it a valuable method for diverse disciplines.

The educational implications of these findings are significant. First, DBP aligns directly with the goals of NEP 2020, which stresses experiential learning, skill development, and holistic education. If systematically integrated into teacher education,

drama-based methods can equip future teachers to create inclusive and engaging classrooms. Second, DBP contributes to building essential life skills such as empathy, communication, and teamwork: which are as important as academic knowledge in preparing students for real-world challenges. Finally, the study implies that policy frameworks like NCERT's Art-Integrated Learning guidelines can only be fully realized if higher education institutions provide structured training in drama-based pedagogy for pre-service teachers.

### **Recommendations**

It is recommended that teacher education programs should include structured training in drama-based pedagogy. Workshops, micro-teaching sessions, and practicum components can expose teachers who are in their training period to the use of role-play and theatre in real classroom settings. This will ensure that future educators are not only aware of DBP but are also confident in applying it as part of their regular teaching practice.

Higher education institutions should also embed interdisciplinary models of drama integration within their curricula. Drama should not be restricted to language or arts education but extended to subjects such as science, social studies, and environmental education, where it can support conceptual understanding and critical thinking. Institutions can encourage faculty development program (FDPs) to equip teacher educators with skills to model and mentor DBP effectively.

At the policy level, it is recommended that national frameworks like NEP 2020 and NCERT's Art-Integrated Learning guidelines be operationalized through practical guidelines, funding support, and resource development. Teacher training institutes could collaborate with theatre practitioners and educational experts to design role-play modules tailored for different subjects. Such initiatives will make drama-based pedagogy a sustainable part of classroom practice, bridging the gap between policy vision and everyday teaching.

### **Conclusion**

This research set out to examine and analyze the role of drama-based pedagogy in teacher education and its alignment with the goals of NEP 2020 and NCERT's Art-Integrated Learning guidelines. The analysis showed that DBP is more than an extracurricular activity; it is a structured and effective teaching approach that enhances engagement, creativity, and critical thinking. The two analytical tables illustrated both the contrast between conventional and theatre-integrated pedagogy and the subject-wise potential of role-play in classroom applications. Together, these findings confirm that DBP can make learning more participatory and meaningful.

The study finds that when drama-based pedagogy is systematically incorporated into teacher education, it can cultivate educators who are better prepared to address the challenges of 21st-century classrooms. By narrowing the gap between policy goals and classroom realities, DBP promotes not only academic learning but also essential life skills such as communication, empathy, and collaboration. The research underscores the importance of higher education institutions, policymakers, and teacher training programs acknowledging drama as a core pedagogical approach rather than merely an add-on, ensuring that education in India becomes genuinely holistic and inclusive.

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