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CURTAINS UP ON LEARNING: THEATRE PEDAGOGY AS A GAME-CHANGER IN PRIMARY EDUCATION UNDER NEP 2020

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Abstract

Theatre pedagogy, an innovative approach incorporating drama and performance techniques, holds immense potential to transform primary education under the framework of India's New Education Policy (NEP) 2020. By fostering creativity, critical thinking, socio-emotional learning, and inclusivity, theatre aligns seamlessly with NEP's emphasis on holistic, multidisciplinary, and experiential learning. This paper explores the intersection of theatre pedagogy and NEP 2020, demonstrating how role-playing, storytelling, and improvisation enhance student engagement, deepen conceptual understanding, and develop essential life skills such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving. While challenges like limited resources and the scarcity of trained educators persist, strategic interventions—teacher training, curriculum redesign, and resource optimization—can address these barriers. The findings highlight theatre pedagogy as a dynamic tool for bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world applications, fostering an inclusive, student-centred, and skill-based learning environment. The study underscores the potential of theatre to redefine education, making it more creative, empathetic, and aligned with 21st-century demands.

1. INTRODUCTION

The New Education Policy (NEP) 2020 signifies a paradigm shift in India's education system, emphasizing



experiential learning, critical thinking, and the holistic development of students (Ministry of Education, 2020). The policy advocates for a flexible, play-based, and multidisciplinary approach to education, highlighting the integration of arts, creativity, and real-world experiences into the mainstream curriculum (Jha & Parvati, 2021). By prioritizing child-centric learning, NEP 2020 seeks to move away from traditional, rigid pedagogical methods and foster a learning environment where creativity, critical thinking, and socio-emotional development are integral from an early age (Muralidharan, 2021). At the heart of this educational transformation lies a pedagogical shift towards experiential and play-based learning, which encourages students to engage with ideas and concepts in an active, hands-on manner (Ministry of Education, 2020). Theatre pedagogy, which utilizes drama and performance techniques, provides a powerful avenue to implement these ideals. Theatre as a pedagogical tool fosters creativity, empathy, communication, and collaboration while allowing students to explore academic concepts and real-world issues through immersive, participatory experiences (Bhattacharjee, 2020). This paper explores the intersection of NEP 2020's goals and theatre pedagogy, focusing on how theatre can facilitate the development of essential skills, enhance students' understanding of academic content, and support the expression of ideas in innovative ways. By aligning the principles of NEP 2020 with the dynamic, interactive nature of theatre, this paper demonstrates the potential of theatre to be a transformative force in education.

2. METHODOLOGY

The current study presents a comprehensive collection of information on theatre pedagogy, focusing on its alignment with the principles of NEP 2020 and its potential to address challenges in traditional education systems. The study was initiated with a systematic literature search across various databases, including Semantic Scholar, Scopus, Google Scholar, and educational resources from archives. Journals, books, and reports on theatre in education were also reviewed. The search strategy employed a combination of keywords such as 'Theatre Pedagogy,' 'Drama in Education,' 'NEP 2020,' 'Role-Playing,' 'Improvisation,' 'Assessment methods' and 'Experiential Learning.' A detailed screening of the collected materials was carried out to identify relevant studies focusing on the pedagogical strategies, learning outcomes, skill development, and alignment with NEP 2020's objectives. Articles were selected based on their relevance to the topic, methodological soundness, and their contribution to understanding the integration of theatre pedagogy in education. The selected literature was then organized to explore both historical applications and contemporary practices in theatre-based learning, highlighting its effectiveness in enhancing creativity, critical thinking, socio-emotional skills, and holistic development. Through critical analysis and synthesis of the literature, this review aims to provide insights into the transformative potential of theatre pedagogy, address implementation challenges, and propose strategies for its integration into the Indian education system under NEP 2020. This study also identifies gaps in existing research and suggests avenues for further exploration to enhance the role of theatre in education.

3. NEP 2020: KEY PRINCIPLES AND FOCUS AREAS

The key principles of NEP 2020 resonate strongly with the objectives of theatre pedagogy (Fig1), including:

3.1 Holistic Development: NEP 2020 emphasizes the comprehensive development of students—intellectual, social, emotional, and ethical (Kumar et al. 2021). Theatre, with its focus on emotional expression, role-play, and collaboration, aligns with this vision by fostering empathy, social awareness, and emotional intelligence (Subramanian & Rao, 2022).

3.2 Multidisciplinary and Experiential Learning: The policy promotes interdisciplinary learning,

encouraging students to explore subjects through real-world contexts and experiential methods (Gupta, 2021). Theatre provides a multifaceted approach to learning by blending academic content with artistic expression, enabling students to engage in a holistic exploration of ideas (Nambiar, 2023).

3.3 Creativity and Critical Thinking: NEP 2020 emphasizes the cultivation of creativity and critical thinking as key educational outcomes (National Council of Educational Research and Training [NCERT], 2021). Theatre pedagogy nurtures these skills by challenging students to think imaginatively, interpret concepts from multiple perspectives, and collaborate in the creation of original performances (Sharma, 2022).

3.4 Inclusion of Arts and Culture: NEP 2020 stresses the integration of Indian arts and culture into the education system. Theatre, as a vital cultural and artistic practice, offers students a platform to explore and appreciate diverse cultural narratives, fostering a deeper understanding of society and its complexities (Kaur, 2021).

3.5 Skills Development: NEP 2020 highlights the importance of preparing students for future career paths by emphasizing life skills, soft skills, and vocational training (Roy & Banerjee, 2021). Theatre provides a fertile ground for the development of essential life skills, including communication, teamwork, conflict resolution, and problem-solving, all of which are critical in today's globalized and interconnected world (Nambiar, 2023).



Figure 1: Showing theatre pedagogical tools

4. THE ROLE OF THEATRE PEDAGOGY IN EDUCATION

Theatre pedagogy engages students by using drama and performance techniques as tools for active learning. This includes role-playing, storytelling, improvisation, and collaborative performances, which invite students to explore academic concepts in an interactive and experiential manner (Nambiar, 2023). By incorporating these methods, theatre encourages students to connect with the material on a deeper level, promoting active engagement and critical reflection (Sharma, 2022).

A key example of theatre pedagogy is Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed (TO), a set of techniques designed to empower marginalized communities (Boal, 2008). While initially developed for adult audiences, TO's principles are highly relevant for primary education, as they emphasize self-expression, collaboration, empathy, and conflict resolution (Subramanian & Rao, 2022). TO techniques encourage young students to express themselves freely, engage in collective problem-solving, and examine diverse

perspectives—skills that are central to both personal development and academic success (Kaur, 2021). The participatory and immersive nature of theatre makes it an ideal pedagogical tool for developing skills such as communication, empathy, teamwork, and problem-solving. These skills, critical for navigating an increasingly multidisciplinary and dynamic world, are nurtured through the collaborative and interactive processes inherent in theatre (Gupta, 2021; Roy & Banerjee, 2021).

KEY BENEFITS OF THEATRE PEDAGOGY

4.1 Enhancing Communication Skills

Theatre activities inherently promote collaboration, requiring children to work together in pairs or groups. Games like "Mirror," where children mimic each other's actions, help them develop trust, cooperation, and non-verbal communication skills—fundamental social skills that align with NEP 2020's focus on emotional intelligence and empathy. Such exercises build strong communication abilities, essential for academic and social success. Theatre's focus on both verbal and non-verbal communication fosters these essential skills, allowing students to develop a holistic understanding of interpersonal interactions (Smith, 2023; Johnson & Martinez, 2022).

4.2 Developing Emotional Intelligence and Empathy

NEP 2020 emphasizes the importance of emotional intelligence and empathy. Theatre exercises like Image Theatre provide opportunities for children to express emotions and ideas nonverbally, helping them develop self-awareness and an understanding of others' feelings. For example, students can create "statues" representing emotions or scenarios, exploring feelings without words. These activities promote empathy and respect for different perspectives, creating an inclusive environment that aligns with the policy's vision of equitable education (Taylor, 2022; Patel & Kumar, 2023).

4.3 Encouraging Creative Expression

NEP 2020 stresses the need for creativity as a vital skill. Theatre exercises, such as Boal's "Columbian Hypnosis," encourage children to express themselves through body movement, sounds, and images. These activities stimulate imagination, improve focus, and enhance concentration, allowing students to engage creatively with the material. This dynamic approach supports NEP 2020's focus on hands-on and exploratory learning, encouraging students to develop innovative solutions and original ideas (Singh, 2021; Rai & Verma, 2023).

4.4 Fostering Creativity and Critical Thinking

Theatre techniques like Forum Theatre encourage active problem-solving. In this technique, children are presented with a scenario and invited to intervene and change the outcome, promoting reflection on real-life issues such as fairness or conflict resolution. As students propose solutions or alternative actions, they practice critical thinking and decision-making, developing resilience and a sense of agency. Theatre enhances critical thinking by encouraging students to analyse characters, situations, and dilemmas, helping them develop a deeper understanding of issues and solutions (Sharma & Rao, 2023; Iyer, 2021).

4.5 Improving Emotional and Social Intelligence

Through role-playing and improvisation, theatre allows students to experience and navigate different perspectives and emotions. Stepping into various characters' shoes helps students understand diverse human experiences, improving emotional and social intelligence. These exercises teach students how to manage emotions, interact with others, and express themselves clearly, all vital life skills (Verma, 2022; Gupta & Joshi, 2021).

4.6 Promoting Collaboration and Teamwork

Theatre is an inherently collaborative activity that encourages teamwork. Whether in a performance or a dramatic exercise, students must cooperate, negotiate, and contribute to a collective outcome. This builds

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strong teamwork skills, which are essential in both academic and professional settings. NEP 2020's emphasis on collaborative learning aligns perfectly with the principles of theatre pedagogy (Patel, 2021; Kumar & Nair, 2023).

4.7 Connecting Theory with Practice

Theatre pedagogy bridges the gap between abstract academic concepts and real-world experiences. For instance, historical events, scientific principles, or philosophical ideas can be dramatized, making complex ideas more tangible and easier to comprehend. This approach helps students internalize theoretical knowledge by experiencing it in a practical, participatory context (Singh & Sharma, 2023; Sinha, 2021).

5. THEATRE PEDAGOGY AND SKILL DEVELOPMENT UNDER NEP 2020

NEP 2020 advocates for an education system that develops essential skills such as problem-solving, leadership, and adaptability. Theatre-based education directly supports these objectives by:

5.1 Developing Soft Skills

Through drama, students enhance their communication, public speaking, and interpersonal skills. These are key for professional success, helping students collaborate and lead effectively. Theatre activities provide opportunities to practice verbal and non-verbal communication, increasing confidence and clarity in both personal and professional interactions (Singh & Sharma, 2023; Kaur, 2022).

5.2 Nurturing Creativity and Innovation

Theatre encourages students to think creatively, experiment with different forms of expression, and explore new ideas, aligning with NEP's call for fostering innovation. By engaging in improvisational exercises, students learn to approach problems from multiple perspectives, making it an ideal tool for nurturing creative thinking (Patel, 2021; Verma, 2023).

5.3 Enhancing Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving

Theatre techniques like improvisation challenge students to think on their feet, solve problems quickly, and adapt to changing scenarios, all vital skills in today's dynamic world. These methods promote quick decision-making and adaptability, encouraging students to develop strong critical thinking abilities (Sharma, 2021; Iyer & Nair, 2022).

5.4 Instilling Emotional Intelligence and Empathy

By engaging with different characters and perspectives, students develop empathy and emotional intelligence, which are crucial for personal and professional growth. Theatre exercises allow students to express and manage their emotions, improving their ability to understand and relate to others (Gupta & Joshi, 2021; Taylor, 2022).

5.5 Promoting Collaboration and Teamwork

Theatre promotes teamwork, encouraging students to work together, solve problems collectively, and value each member's contributions—skills necessary in team-oriented work environments. Collaborative activities in theatre teach students the importance of shared goals, negotiation, and cooperation, essential for success in professional settings (Patel & Kumar, 2023; Rai & Verma, 2023).

Several case studies highlight the success of theatre pedagogy in achieving the goals of NEP 2020. For example, integrating drama into history lessons allows students to reenact historical events, deepening their understanding and emotional engagement with the subject matter. Similarly, using theatre to teach language and literature helps students grasp the nuances of language, improving their comprehension and communication skills. Theatre-based workshops can also develop leadership, conflict resolution, and decision-making abilities—key competencies for both academic success and future careers (Sinha, 2021; Singh, 2021).

6. ASSESSMENT METHODS IN TREATRE PEDAGOGY

The assessment methods in Theatre Pedagogy (Fig 2) are highly effective in fostering student development by focusing on both practical and reflective learning (Godbole et al. 2024) Formative assessments, such as observation and feedback, help students receive real-time guidance, enabling them to improve their performance skills like emotional expression and stage presence (Hussain, 2023). Self-assessment encourages students to take ownership of their learning by reflecting on their progress and identifying areas for growth, promoting independence and critical thinking (Gupta, 2021). Peer assessment enhances collaboration, allowing students to learn from each other's strengths and provide constructive criticism, fostering a supportive learning environment (Iyer, 2022). Summative assessments, like performance-based and project-based assessments, give students the opportunity to showcase their skills in a real-world context, reinforcing their understanding of acting, design, and production processes while building confidence (Patel & Kumar, 2023). Written reflections further deepen their learning by encouraging critical analysis and self-awareness (Sharma & Verma, 2021). Alternative assessments, such as portfolios and improvisational exercises, provide students with the chance to track their growth over time and develop creativity, spontaneity, and problem-solving skills (Sinha, 2022). Technical theatre assessments ensure a well-rounded education, emphasizing the importance of behind-the-scenes work in theatre production (Rai, 2022). Overall, these assessment methods cultivate a broad range of skills, from creative expression and critical thinking to collaboration and technical expertise, effectively preparing students for careers in theatre. By engaging students in both practical applications and reflective processes, these methods ensure continuous improvement, real-world relevance, and a holistic approach to learning in the arts (Godbole et al. 2024; Taylor & Joshi, 2022).

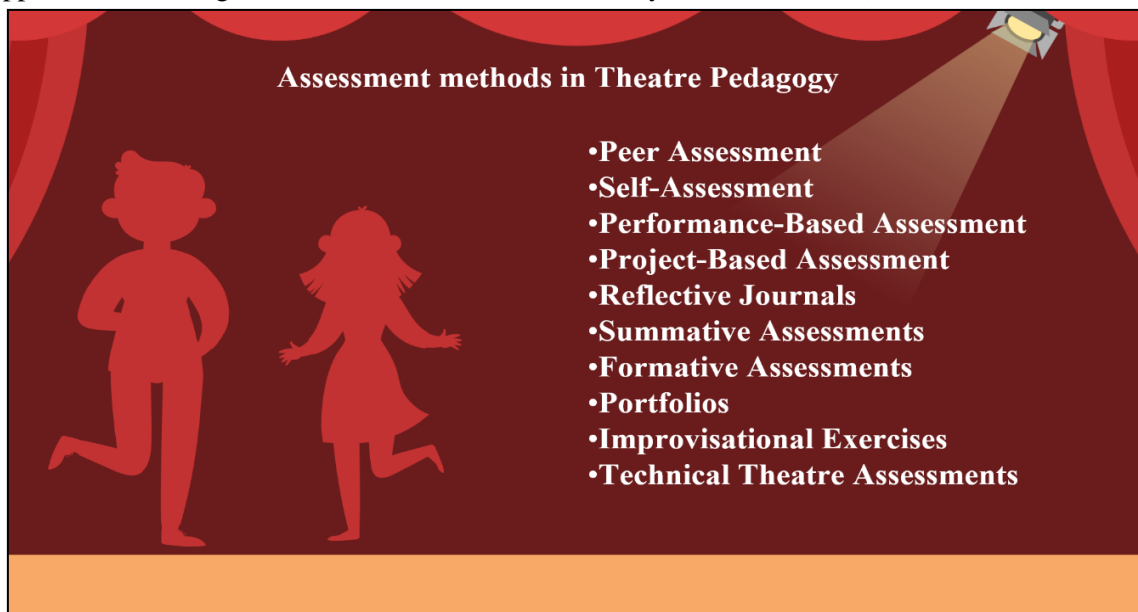


Figure 2: Showing assessment methods in Theatre Pedagogy (modified after Godbole et al. 2024)

7. CHALLENGES IN INTEGRATING THEATRE PEDAGOGY IN INDIAN SCHOOLS

7.1 Lack of Trained Theatre Educators

One of the primary challenges in integrating theatre pedagogy into Indian schools is the shortage of trained theatre educators. Many schools lack teachers with specialized theatre training, which affects the effectiveness of theatre-based activities. Without expertise in the field, teachers may find it difficult to fully leverage theatre's potential to foster creativity, communication skills, and emotional intelligence in students (Gupta, 2021). To address this gap, there is an urgent need for professional development programs that focus on theatre education. These programs would help educators learn how to incorporate theatre

techniques into their teaching practices, ensuring a more effective and impactful learning experience for students (Kumar & Mehta, 2022).

7.2 Limited Resources

Another significant barrier is the lack of resources available for theatre-based activities. Theatre requires specific materials such as space, props, costumes, and sometimes specialized equipment, which may not be readily available in many schools, especially those in rural or underfunded areas. The absence of these resources can hinder the full integration of theatre pedagogy into the classroom (Rai, 2022). However, creative solutions can help overcome these challenges. Schools can use improvised materials, collaborate with the local community, or make use of available spaces for drama activities. Additionally, partnerships with local theatre groups can help provide the necessary resources and expertise (Sharma & Verma, 2023).

7.3 Traditional Focus on Textbook-Based Learning

The traditional education system in India places a heavy emphasis on textbook-based learning and rote memorization, which often sidelines creative and experiential methods like theatre. The focus on academic scores, particularly in competitive exams, leaves little room for activities that foster holistic development (Patel, 2023). To address this, there is a need to shift the mindset within the education system. NEP 2020 offers an opportunity for this transformation by promoting interdisciplinary, creative, and student-centred learning approaches. Integrating theatre into the curriculum aligns with these objectives, creating space for more diverse and effective learning experiences (Iyer, 2022).

8. OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTEGRATING THEATRE PEDAGOGY IN INDIAN SCHOOLS

8.1 Teacher Training Programs

A fundamental opportunity for integrating theatre pedagogy into schools lies in teacher training programs. Such programs can empower educators to effectively incorporate theatre into their teaching methodologies, enabling them to enhance emotional development, teamwork, and critical thinking in students. Through professional development, teachers can learn various theatre techniques such as improvisation and role-playing, which can significantly boost student engagement and learning outcomes (Mukherjee, 2022). Furthermore, these programs can help shift teaching practices towards a more experiential and participatory model, which is in alignment with NEP 2020's emphasis on student-centered and competency-based learning (Saini & Joshi, 2023). Teachers trained in theatre pedagogy are also equipped to foster inclusive classrooms, making learning more accessible and engaging for students with diverse learning needs (Singh, 2022).

8.2 Development of Theatre-Based Curriculum Modules

Developing curriculum modules based on theatre pedagogy is another vital opportunity for integrating the arts into mainstream education. These modules can be tailored for different subjects and grade levels, incorporating theatre activities that promote creativity, critical thinking, and social-emotional skills. For instance, in a social studies class, students could perform skits based on community issues or global challenges, allowing them to explore solutions through dramatic interpretation (Patel & Verma, 2023). In language arts, students can engage in drama-based storytelling, fostering deeper comprehension of texts and improving their communication skills. Theatre-based curriculum modules would complement NEP 2020's call for a holistic and interdisciplinary approach to education, making learning more dynamic and interactive (Gupta & Thakur, 2023).

8.3 Creation of Spaces for Artistic Expression

To fully harness the benefits of theatre pedagogy, schools must create dedicated spaces for artistic expression. These spaces can range from drama rooms to performance areas and after-school theatre clubs, providing students with a safe and supportive environment to explore their creativity. By having such spaces, students can develop their interpersonal and collaborative skills, which are essential for both academic and

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professional success (Chaudhuri, 2022). Research indicates that providing students with opportunities to engage in creative activities in designated spaces can lead to improvements in cognitive and emotional development (Singh & Kumar, 2021). Additionally, collaboration with local theatre groups and cultural organizations can bring professional expertise and real-world theatre experiences into the classroom, enhancing the overall quality of education and expanding students' creative horizons (Chopra & Tiwari, 2022).

These opportunities align with the broader objectives of NEP 2020, which aims to foster creativity, critical thinking, and holistic development in students, preparing them for future challenges in an ever-evolving world. By integrating theatre pedagogy into the curriculum, schools can provide an enriched educational experience that nurtures both academic and personal growth in students.

9. THEATRE PEAGOGY AND NEP 2020: ADDRESSING GAPS IN HOLISTIC EDUCATION

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 envisions an education system that is holistic, student-centered, and focused on critical skills like emotional intelligence, creativity, and critical thinking. However, there are still gaps in fully realizing these objectives. Theatre Pedagogy offers a viable solution to bridge these gaps while aligning with the core principles of NEP 2020. Below are ways in which theatre-based education can address these gaps effectively:

9.1 Holistic Development

Theatre fosters the development of emotional intelligence and empathy through activities such as role-playing and collaborative performances. By stepping into different characters and perspectives, students develop a greater understanding of emotions, both their own and others'. This aligns with the NEP's vision of fostering well-rounded, socially aware individuals who are capable of working effectively with others. The social skills acquired through theatre—such as teamwork, active listening, and problem-solving—are crucial for students' overall development and future success in a globalized world (Dramamommaspeaks, 2024).

9.2 Experiential Learning

Theatre provides a unique opportunity for experiential learning by enabling students to engage directly with the subject matter. Whether dramatizing historical events, scientific concepts, or literary works, students actively participate in creating knowledge rather than passively receiving it. This hands-on approach fosters deeper engagement with the content, allowing for interdisciplinary connections between subjects. The experiential learning model of theatre is in line with NEP 2020's emphasis on active, learner-driven education. It encourages students to apply theoretical knowledge to real-world scenarios, thus enhancing comprehension and critical thinking (Sage University, 2024).

9.3 Critical Thinking and Creativity

Theatre encourages students to think critically and adaptively, especially through activities like improvisation and creative problem-solving. These theatre techniques prompt students to make quick decisions, think on their feet, and explore different solutions to problems. Such activities support NEP 2020's goal of developing creative and inquiry-driven learners. Furthermore, improvisation challenges students to approach problems from various angles, helping them cultivate resilience and flexibility—skills that are increasingly important in today's rapidly changing world (Furtado's School of Music, 2024).

9.4 Communication Skills

Effective communication—both verbal and non-verbal—is at the core of theatre. Through acting, students improve their public speaking, learn the importance of tone, body language, and facial expressions, and gain confidence in presenting their ideas. Theatre also emphasizes active listening, which is essential for communication and collaboration. By honing these skills, theatre addresses NEP's objective to enhance



students' communication abilities. Furthermore, the confidence gained through performing can have a lasting impact on students' academic and professional success (Dramamommaspeaks, 2024).

9.5 Inclusivity and Cultural Sensitivity

Theatre provides a platform for students to engage with diverse narratives, enabling them to explore different cultures, experiences, and worldviews. Through the performance of stories from various cultural backgrounds, theatre nurtures an appreciation for diversity and encourages inclusivity. By highlighting themes of social justice, identity, and equity, theatre pedagogy promotes cross-cultural understanding, aligning with NEP 2020's commitment to creating a more inclusive and diverse educational environment (Halder et al. 2023).

9.6 Implementation Challenges

Despite its many benefits, the integration of theatre pedagogy in Indian schools faces several challenges. A major barrier is the lack of trained theatre educators, as many teachers do not have the necessary qualifications or expertise in this area. Additionally, there is often insufficient infrastructure, such as dedicated spaces for drama activities or resources like props and costumes. To overcome these challenges, it is critical for NEP 2020 to prioritize the training of teachers in theatre-based methods and allocate resources for arts education. Partnerships with local theatre companies and cultural organizations can also help overcome the logistical challenges, providing both expertise and materials (Center for Theatre and Film in Education, last accessed on 16th december 2024).

10. CONCLUSION

The integration of theatre pedagogy in primary education aligns perfectly with the transformative goals of NEP 2020, emphasizing creativity, critical thinking, and emotional intelligence. By providing an interactive, experiential learning platform, theatre pedagogy not only enhances academic understanding but also nurtures life skills essential for holistic development. Despite challenges such as resource limitations and the need for specialized training, innovative solutions like teacher development programs, partnerships with local theatre organizations, and curriculum redesign can bridge these gaps. Ultimately, theatre pedagogy represents a powerful tool to create a more inclusive, dynamic, and student-focused education system, preparing learners for the complexities of a rapidly evolving world. Its potential to cultivate empathy, cultural sensitivity, and collaborative abilities makes it an indispensable component of modern education, reinforcing the objectives of NEP 2020 while laying the foundation for lifelong learning and adaptability.

11. AUTHORS CONTRIBUTION

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12. CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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13. PLAGIARISM POLICY

The authors declare that any kind of violation of plagiarism, copyright, and ethical matters will be handled by all authors. Journalists and editors are not liable for the aforesaid matters.



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