

Embodied Pedagogies in Practice: Enhancing Teacher Capacity and Student Engagement Through Theater in Education

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the transformative potential of Theater in Education (TiE) for enhancing teacher capacity and fostering student-centered learning in secondary schools in Bangladesh. Drawing on embodied pedagogy and performative learning theories, the research positions the body, emotion, and sensory engagement as central to knowledge construction, challenging traditional lecture-based approaches. TiE integrates role-play, improvisation, and dramatization to enable teachers and students to co-construct understanding in culturally and socially situated contexts. Thirty teachers from diverse subject backgrounds participated in a five-day workshop designed to embed drama-based strategies into literature, social sciences, mathematics, and science teaching. Using a mixed-methods action research approach—including surveys, interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations—the study evaluated changes in teacher competence, confidence, and classroom practices, alongside student engagement and learning outcomes. Results indicate that TiE significantly enhanced teachers' ability to design interactive lessons, facilitate participatory learning, and sustain drama-based pedagogy, while students demonstrated increased participation, creativity, collaboration, and comprehension of abstract concepts. The findings highlight the pedagogical, curricular, and policy implications of embedding embodied, theatrical approaches in secondary education to cultivate inclusive, experiential, and transformative learning environments.

Keywords: *embodied pedagogy, theater in education, teachers' professional development, theater and education*

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Introduction

The integration of drama into educational practice has emerged as a compelling strategy for cultivating student engagement, enhancing cognitive development, and fostering social-emotional competencies (Boal, 1979; Bolton, 1985; Winston, 2012). Beyond its

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performative appeal, drama functions as a medium for embodied learning, wherein cognition, affect, and corporeality intersect to generate knowledge that is both experiential and reflective (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Johnson, 1987). Embodied pedagogy challenges traditional Cartesian assumptions that separate mind from body, positioning physical enactment, sensory engagement, and emotional resonance as central mechanisms through which learners construct meaning (Shapiro, 2019; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999).

Theatrical techniques—including role-play, improvisation, and dramatization—provide particularly rich avenues for operationalizing embodied pedagogical principles in classroom contexts. These methods facilitate participatory, dialogic forms of learning in which students enact and interrogate social, historical, or conceptual content (Neelands, 2009, Rohd, 1998). Drawing on Freirean notions of praxis, drama-based learning functions as a form of conscientization, enabling students to reflect critically on lived realities while simultaneously engaging in performative experimentation that cultivates agency and empathy (Freire, 1970; Gallagher, 2020; Taylor, 2019). In doing so, theater becomes both method and metaphor for transformative education, bridging cognition and embodied experience in ways that foster complex understanding, creativity, and collaborative inquiry.

Embodied cognition research further substantiates the pedagogical potential of theatrical engagement, suggesting that physically enacting concepts enhances comprehension, retention, and affective understanding (Gallese & Lakoff, 2005; Glenberg, 2010). In STEM education, for instance, dramatizing scientific phenomena or enacting mathematical relationships allows learners to translate abstract constructs into tangible, kinesthetic representations, thereby strengthening conceptual visualization and problem-solving capacities (Fels & McGivern, 2002; Özdemir & Uzunboylu, 2015). Similarly, in humanities and social sciences, performance-based enactment enables students to internalize narratives, historical perspectives, and ethical dilemmas through embodied reflection, enriching both analytical and empathetic understanding (Boal, 1995; O'Toole, 1992).

Theatre in Education (TiE) represents a practical application of these theoretical premises, functioning as a structured pedagogical model that integrates drama with curriculum content to foster interactive, reflective, and student-centered learning (Jackson, 2013; Neelands, 2009, Ostern, 2021). TiE positions teachers not merely as knowledge transmitters but as facilitators of performative inquiry, guiding learners in co-constructing understanding through experiential engagement and collaborative problem-solving (Nicholson, 2005; Ruitenberg, 2015). By shifting the classroom from a space of passive absorption to one of dynamic participation, TiE supports inclusive pedagogy, encourages dialogic exchanges, and challenges hierarchical teacher-student relationships (Ahmed, 1994).

In the South Asian context, where education systems have historically prioritized rote memorization and high-stakes assessment, embodied and theatrical pedagogies represent a

critical intervention for fostering holistic and experiential learning (Chakroborthy, 2007). This study specifically explored how TiE strategies could strengthen teacher capacity in secondary schools of Nikli Upazila, Kishoreganj District, through a five-day workshop designed to equip 30 educators with the skills, confidence, and reflective practices necessary to implement drama-based, embodied pedagogy across a range of subjects—including literature, social sciences, mathematics, and science.

Grounded in experiential learning and reflective practice, the workshop emphasized teachers' awareness of their own bodily presence, voice, and emotional expressivity as pedagogical tools, enabling them to facilitate meaningful, embodied classroom interactions. By investigating the effects of these interventions on teacher competency, classroom engagement, and student learning outcomes, this study contributes to theoretical and practical discussions on innovative, inclusive education. It also offers actionable insights for integrating TiE and embodied pedagogical strategies into secondary school curricula, with implications for teacher training, curriculum development, and educational policy in Bangladesh.

Study objectives

This research aims to investigate how embodied pedagogical practices—specifically through the use of Theatre in Education (TiE) techniques—can strengthen teachers' capacity to create participatory, engaging, and meaningful learning experiences in secondary classrooms. The study explores the intersections of embodiment, pedagogy, and creative practice to understand how theatrical approaches reshape both teaching and learning.

The specific objectives of the study are as follows:

To examine how teachers understand and apply embodied pedagogical principles through theatrical techniques in classroom settings.

This objective focuses on investigating teachers' conceptual and practical engagement with embodiment in pedagogy—how physical expression, movement, and dramatic interaction contribute to classroom communication, student engagement, and co-construction of knowledge.

To analyze the ways in which dramatization enhances teachers' instructional approaches in humanities and social science subjects.

The study seeks to explore how dramatization of literary texts, historical narratives, and social issues deepens students' critical thinking, empathy, and reflective understanding. It assesses how teachers reinterpret curriculum content through performance-based pedagogy.

To explore the potential of drama-based strategies for facilitating conceptual understanding in mathematics and science education.

This objective investigates how theatrical enactment, embodied simulations, and performative metaphors can make abstract or technical concepts more accessible and relatable. The study aims to identify innovative strategies that bridge cognitive and embodied modes of learning in STEM contexts.

To evaluate the impact of embodied, theater-based pedagogy on teacher practice and student learning outcomes.

Using mixed methods—such as classroom observation, reflective journals, focus group discussions, and pre/post-intervention assessments—the research aims to evaluate changes in teachers’ pedagogical confidence, creativity, and classroom dynamics, as well as in students’ participation, comprehension, and motivation.

By pursuing these objectives, the study seeks to generate empirical and theoretical insights into how embodied pedagogies can transform teacher practice in Bangladesh’s secondary schools. The findings aim to inform policy, curriculum design, and teacher education frameworks that support creative, participatory, and human-centered learning environments.

Literature Review

Embodied learning: Theoretical foundations and philosophical perspectives

The concept of embodied learning challenges the Cartesian dualism that separates mind and body, proposing instead that cognition is fundamentally shaped by sensorimotor experiences and bodily interactions with the world (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Shapiro, 2019). Within this epistemological shift, learning is not solely a cognitive or linguistic process but an embodied act of meaning-making (Anttila, 2013). Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) *Phenomenology of Perception* provides the philosophical foundation for this orientation, arguing that perception and knowledge emerge through bodily engagement. Similarly, Bresler (2004) frames the arts and bodily movement as “cultural tools of cognition,” suggesting that aesthetic, sensory, and affective dimensions play an integral role in meaning construction.

Empirical studies in cognitive science further reinforce this embodied perspective. Nemirovsky et al. (2013) demonstrated that gestures and movement are not peripheral to thought but actively facilitate abstract reasoning and memory retention. In educational contexts, Dolan, Nichols, and Pease (2017) have shown that bodily engagement in learning processes—such as through dramatization or kinesthetic exploration—enhances both conceptual understanding and learner motivation. These insights underscore the potential of embodied pedagogies to transform classrooms into spaces where cognition and physicalness combine in meaningful ways.

In South Asian contexts, however, embodied learning remains underexplored. Traditional education systems in countries like Bangladesh, India, and Nepal are predominantly structured around rote memorization and exam-oriented instruction (Nath, 2016). This leaves limited space for experiential or embodied learning processes that value creativity, physical engagement, and affective knowledge (Pramanik, 2008). Integrating embodied pedagogies thus represents not only a methodological innovation but also an epistemic decolonization of learning, reclaiming the body as a site of knowing within the postcolonial classroom (Freire, 1970).

Theatre in Education (TiE): Pedagogical roots and transformations

Theatre in Education (TiE) emerged in the United Kingdom in the 1960s as a response to the limitations of traditional schooling, positioning drama as a dialogic and participatory learning tool (Bolton, 1998; O'Toole, 1992). Influenced by Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy and Heathcote's mantle of the expert approach (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995), TiE sought to cultivate critical thinking, empathy, and social awareness through dramatic enactment. Scholars such as Nicholson (2005) and Prentki & Preston (2009) emphasize that TiE is not merely performative but transformative—it situates learners as co-creators of knowledge, engaging them emotionally, intellectually, and ethically in the learning process.

Fleming (2016) argues that TiE facilitates “reflective action” by enabling learners to explore complex social and moral issues through dramatic representation. Neelands (2009) similarly conceives of drama as a democratic process that fosters ensemble-based collaboration, mirroring participatory civic engagement. These perspectives position TiE as a pedagogical praxis that integrates the aesthetic with the ethical, aligning with Freire's notion of education as the practice of freedom. Moreover, TiE aligns with embodied learning principles by privileging bodily participation, spatial awareness, and emotional literacy as core components of cognition (Gallagher, 2020; Winston, 2012).

While TiE has been extensively studied in the Global North, its adaptation in postcolonial and Global South contexts remains comparatively sparse. Ahmed (1994) highlights how applied theatre in Bangladesh has been used to promote social transformation, particularly in rural education and community mobilization. However, most such interventions remain NGO-driven and extra-curricular, rarely integrated into the formal education system (Nath, 2016). The present study thus contributes to this gap by examining how teachers in Bangladesh can be capacitated to employ theatrical and embodied techniques within formal classroom settings, moving beyond extracurricular or advocacy models toward systemic pedagogical innovation.

Teachers' professional development and embodied pedagogies

Teacher professional development (TPD) is widely recognized as a critical determinant of educational quality, yet conventional TPD models often fail to equip educators with embodied

or arts-based pedagogical skills (Pramanik, 2008). Traditional teacher education programs in Bangladesh and similar low- and middle-income countries emphasize theoretical coursework and standardized assessment over reflective and experiential practice (Nath, 2016). As a result, teachers often reproduce lecture-based pedagogies that privilege cognitive recall over experiential understanding.

Globally, several studies have demonstrated the efficacy of integrating drama and embodiment into teacher training. For instance, Neelands & Goode (2015) show that structuring drama work enhances teachers' classroom management, empathy, and engagement strategies. Similarly, Anttila (2013) found that movement-based teacher education improved teachers' ability to recognize multiple modalities of learning among students. Gallagher (2020) and Fleming (2016) further argue that embodied teacher training nurtures reflective practitioners capable of addressing the emotional and social dimensions of learning, which are crucial in trauma-affected or marginalized learning environments.

Within the Bangladeshi context, the potential for embodied and theatrical pedagogies to strengthen teacher capacity remains largely unexplored. Nath (2016) observes that arts integration in schools is constrained by rigid curricula and examination pressures, yet teachers who engage in drama workshops report higher classroom engagement and learner motivation. This suggests a latent potential for embedding Theatre in Education methodologies within teacher professional development frameworks—aligning with both the Competency-Based Education system advocated by the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB, 2021) and the broader goals of learner-centered education reform.

The intersection of embodiment, critical pedagogy, and educational equity

Embodied pedagogies intersect powerfully with critical pedagogy by centering lived experience, social justice, and dialogic engagement in the learning process (Freire, 1970; Neelands, 2009). Through the body, learners confront and negotiate structures of power, identity, and agency that traditional classrooms often obscure. In this sense, embodied learning becomes not merely a method but a form of epistemological resistance—challenging the hierarchy of abstract knowledge over experiential understanding (Chakroborthy, 2007).

For teachers, adopting embodied approaches means reorienting classroom relationships toward shared inquiry and collective meaning-making. This aligns with global educational priorities emphasizing inclusive, equitable, and learner-centered pedagogies (UNESCO, 2015). In Bangladesh, where disparities in learning outcomes persist across gender, socioeconomic, and geographic lines (Nath, 2016), embodied pedagogies may serve as a transformative tool to foster empathy, participation, and agency among marginalized learners. Thus, the integration of theatrical techniques within teacher practice is both a pedagogical and ethical endeavor—one that connects the cognitive, emotional, and political dimensions of learning.

Theoretical framing of embodied pedagogy and theatrical learning

Embodied pedagogy, as conceptualized within critical educational discourse, emphasizes the integral role of the body in processes of cognition, meaning-making, and social interaction (Freire, 1970; Shapiro, 1999). Moving beyond Cartesian dualisms that have historically separated mind and body, this framework repositions bodily experience as a central medium of learning rather than a peripheral or supplementary tool (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Within this paradigm, learning is not a purely cognitive act but rather an embodied engagement through which learners negotiate, internalize, and perform knowledge in culturally situated contexts (Johnson, 1987; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999).

The infusion of theatrical techniques within educational settings aligns closely with the epistemological premises of embodied pedagogy. Scholars such as Boal (1979) and Bolton (1998) have long argued that theater-based methods—particularly those emphasizing improvisation, role-play, and physical expressivity—facilitate dialogic forms of learning wherein students critically reflect upon social realities while enacting them. Theater thus becomes both method and metaphor for transformative learning: a space where cognition, emotion, and bodily practice converge to construct participatory knowledge (Neelands, 2009).

Moreover, the pedagogical integration of theatrical practices engages with Freirean notions of conscientization, wherein learning emerges through praxis—reflection and action upon the world to transform it (Freire, 1970). Drama and theater, in this sense, operate as embodied modalities of critical pedagogy, offering students opportunities to reimagine and reconstruct lived experiences through performative encounters (Taylor, 2003; Gallagher, 2020). These processes resonate with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which posits learning as a socially mediated activity situated within zones of proximal development, suggesting that drama provides a scaffolded environment for dialogic interaction and collaborative meaning-making (Bruner, 1976).

From an embodied cognition perspective, theatrical engagement activates sensorimotor processes that enhance conceptual understanding (Gallese & Lakoff, 2005; Glenberg, 2010). By enacting ideas physically, learners construct multimodal representations that integrate affective, cognitive, and kinesthetic dimensions of learning. Empirical studies indicate that such embodied practices deepen retention, empathy, and critical awareness (Fels & McGivern, 2002; Ruitenberg, 2015). In particular, the teacher's role as a facilitator of embodied inquiry—rather than a transmitter of static knowledge—requires a reconfiguration of classroom dynamics toward relational, performative, and co-creative pedagogies (Nicholson, 2005; Prentki & Preston, 2009).

In the South Asian context, where educational systems have traditionally emphasized rote memorization and textual authority, the incorporation of embodied and theatrical approaches represents a paradigm shift toward more holistic and experiential forms of learning

(Chakroborthy, 2007). Theater in Education (TiE) practices within such settings not only foster creativity and critical engagement but also challenge hierarchical teacher–student relations, promoting inclusivity and dialogic exchange (Pramanik, 2008). Thus, embodied pedagogy, when operationalized through theatrical techniques, emerges as a potent framework for reimagining classroom practice—integrating affect, cognition, and corporeality to generate transformative educational experiences.

Rationale of the Study

In contemporary educational research, the body has re-emerged as a critical site of knowing, challenging the Cartesian dualism that has long separated cognition from corporeality (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Shapiro, 2019). Within this reorientation, embodied pedagogy has gained prominence as an approach that recognizes learning as a holistic process involving mind, body, emotion, and environment (Anttila, 2013; Bresler, 2004). Theatrical and performative techniques, long associated with arts-based education, have been shown to engage this embodied dimension of learning, offering learners experiential, affective, and participatory pathways to knowledge construction (Neelands, 2009; Nicholson, 2005; Winston, 2012). However, despite an expanding global literature demonstrating the pedagogical efficacy of drama-based and embodied learning, the application of such approaches within teacher education and classroom practice remains marginal in many Global South contexts, including Bangladesh.

The dominance of transmission-based, exam-oriented teaching in Bangladesh reflects a persistent legacy of colonial education systems that privilege rote memorization over critical or creative inquiry (Education Watch, 2019). This pedagogical model perpetuates a disembodied view of learning—where students’ bodies are positioned as passive recipients rather than active participants in meaning-making (Freire, 1970). Within such contexts, teachers often face structural and epistemological constraints that limit experimentation with participatory or performative methods. The existing teacher education frameworks, while emphasizing content mastery, rarely integrate embodied or arts-based strategies for fostering critical thinking, empathy, or socio-emotional learning (Ahmed, 1994).

This study is thus motivated by the need to interrogate and transform these entrenched pedagogical paradigms by exploring how embodied pedagogies, specifically through Theatre in Education (TiE), can serve as a means of empowering teachers to animate the curriculum and humanize the learning process. TiE offers a form of praxis that bridges cognitive and affective learning domains by engaging students in performative exploration, dialogue, and reflection (O’Toole & Dunn, 2002; Bolton, 1998). It redefines the role of the teacher as a facilitator of inquiry and co-creator of meaning rather than as an authoritative transmitter of facts (Heathcote & Herbert, 1985).

Despite its transformative potential, there remains a notable paucity of empirical research on how teachers in developing country contexts conceptualize, adapt, and operationalize embodied learning strategies. Existing literature from Western settings has well-documented the benefits of drama-based pedagogy for enhancing student engagement, empathy, and critical understanding (Neelands & Goode, 2015; Fleming, 2016). However, studies in the Global South have largely focused on applied theatre or community-based performance for social awareness rather than on the integration of drama within formal education systems (Ahmed, 1994; Prentki & Preston, 2009). Consequently, the systematic development of teacher capacity to use theatrical techniques within formal classrooms remains underexplored both empirically and conceptually.

Research Gaps

Empirical Gap: Absence of localized studies on embodied pedagogies in formal education.

Research on embodied learning in the Bangladeshi context remains disconnected and largely evocative. While studies from Europe and Australia (Nicholson, 2005; Winston, 2012; Gallagher, 2020) have established strong evidence for drama-based pedagogies, there is little empirical data exploring how such approaches function within the socio-cultural and institutional realities of Bangladesh. The few available studies on arts integration in education tend to focus on extracurricular activities rather than pedagogical practices within the classroom (Chakroborthy, 2007; Ostern, 2021). This study addresses that gap by producing grounded evidence on teachers' lived experiences and professional transformations through embodied practice.

Pedagogical Gap: Limited focus on teacher capacity-building for drama-based learning.

Teacher education in Bangladesh continues to privilege didactic instruction over experiential learning (Education Watch, 2019). Even in programs where arts or creative methods are introduced, these are often treated as peripheral rather than core pedagogical tools (Ahmed, 1994). There is, therefore, an urgent need to conceptualize and evaluate structured professional development models that enhance teachers' ability to use embodied, participatory methods to engage learners cognitively and emotionally.

Disciplinary Gap: Underexplored intersections of embodied pedagogy and STEM education.

Global scholarship has primarily examined embodied learning in the humanities, language arts, and social sciences (Dolan et al., 2017; Gallagher, 2020). Yet recent research in cognitive

science suggests that bodily engagement enhances conceptual understanding in abstract domains, including mathematics and science (Nemirovsky et al., 2013). There is, however, almost no documentation of how drama-based or embodied techniques can be applied across STEM subjects in resource-constrained classrooms in Bangladesh—a gap this study aims to address.

Contextual Gap: Lack of alignment between embodied pedagogies and national curriculum frameworks.

Although Bangladesh's National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) emphasizes competencies such as critical thinking, communication, and collaboration (NCTB, 2021), the pedagogical tools to achieve these outcomes remain largely conventional. The introduction of Theatre in Education as a structured, context-responsive pedagogical model offers a potential means to operationalize these competencies. However, there is no existing framework for integrating TiE practices within the secondary school curriculum—a vacuum that this study seeks to fill through empirical and theoretical innovation.

Theoretical Gap: Inadequate synthesis of embodied, constructivist, and critical pedagogies within the Global South.

Much of the scholarship on embodied learning is anchored in Western epistemological traditions such as phenomenology and cognitive linguistics (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). There is limited engagement with how embodied pedagogy aligns with Freirean notions of critical consciousness and dialogical learning (Freire, 1970), or with indigenous and collectivist pedagogical paradigms of the Global South (Ahmed, 1994). This study contributes to this theoretical synthesis by situating embodied learning within the socio-cultural and linguistic realities of Bangladeshi classrooms, thereby extending the conceptual boundaries of embodied education beyond Euro-American frames.

Contribution of the Study

By addressing these interrelated gaps, this study seeks to make three distinct contributions to the field of educational research and practice.

Empirical contribution: It provides context-specific evidence on teachers' engagement with embodied pedagogical methods in Bangladesh, thereby enriching the limited body of Global South research on drama-based learning.

Pedagogical contribution: It develops and tests a professional development model that integrates Theatre in Education (TiE) as a tool for transforming classroom practice, offering practical implications for teacher training institutes and policy frameworks.

Theoretical contribution: It advances a hybrid framework connecting embodied cognition, constructivist pedagogy, and critical educational theory, thereby expanding the epistemic scope of embodied pedagogy in culturally diverse contexts.

In sum, the rationale for this study rests on the recognition that education, if it is to be transformative, must engage the full humanity of both teacher and learner. By foregrounding the body as a site of knowing, and theatre as a medium of relational pedagogy, this research seeks to reimagine the classroom as a dynamic space of participation, reflection, and co-creation—where teachers are empowered not merely to instruct, but to inspire transformation through embodied practice.

Methodology

Research design

This study employed a **workshop-based action research design** to examine the pedagogical implications of Theater in Education (TiE) within Bangladeshi secondary school contexts. Action research was chosen for its participatory and iterative character, allowing teachers to act simultaneously as practitioners and co-researchers (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995). This approach aligns with the emancipatory ethos of Freirean praxis, where reflection and action merge to produce transformative learning experiences (Freire, 1970).

The research adopted a **mixed-methods framework** (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), integrating both quantitative and qualitative techniques to generate a comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of TiE techniques in enhancing pedagogical practices. Quantitative data, derived from pre- and post-intervention surveys, measured shifts in teachers' knowledge, confidence, and attitudinal orientations toward theater-based teaching. Qualitative data, gathered through interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), reflective journals, and classroom observations, provided deeper interpretive insights into teachers' experiences, challenges, and the evolving nature of classroom interaction after the intervention.

This methodological triangulation ensured **both breadth and depth** in data interpretation, thereby enhancing the validity and reliability of findings (Bryman, 2016).

Participants

The study engaged two primary participant groups: secondary school teachers and expert facilitators.

Teachers (N = 30): Thirty secondary school teachers were selected from different institutions across Nikli Upazila, Kishoreganj District, representing diverse subject areas including literature, social sciences, mathematics, and science. Participants were recruited through voluntary nominations and open calls, based on their demonstrated interest in innovative and participatory pedagogies. Such purposive sampling (Patton, 2002) ensured diversity in

disciplinary background while maintaining a manageable cohort size conducive to participatory action research.

Expert facilitators: A multidisciplinary team comprising theater practitioners, drama educators, and pedagogical specialists served as workshop facilitators. Their role was to co-design and deliver the training modules, mentor participants, and provide iterative feedback throughout the workshop process. The integration of both local educators and expert facilitators established a dialogic and contextually grounded learning environment, bridging theory and practice (Bolton, 1998).

Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant institutional management body. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was secured from all participants.

Workshop structure

The **five-day TiE workshop** was designed as an experiential professional development intervention, structured to progressively build participants' conceptual understanding and practical competencies in integrating theatrical techniques into subject teaching.

Day 1: Introduction to Theater in Education (TiE): Participants were introduced to the theoretical underpinnings of TiE, including its evolution from applied theater traditions (Boal, 1979; Heathcote & Bolton, 1995). Interactive sessions introduced core techniques such as role-play, improvisation, storytelling, and movement-based learning, emphasizing their pedagogical potential to foster engagement and critical reflection.

Day 2: Dramatizing Literature and Social Sciences: This session explored the dramatization of texts and historical events as tools for cultivating empathy and critical interpretation. Techniques such as tableaux, monologues, and forum theater (Boal, 1995) were practiced, allowing teachers to translate abstract or narrative content into performative experiences.

Day 3: Drama in Mathematics and Science: Participants experimented with using performance to represent abstract STEM concepts—such as simulating planetary orbits or dramatizing chemical reactions—thus activating embodied cognition processes (Gallese & Lakoff, 2005; Glenberg, 2010).

Day 4: Lesson Planning and Practice: Teachers collaboratively designed subject-specific lesson plans integrating TiE strategies, followed by peer review and micro-teaching sessions. Facilitators provided reflective feedback focused on classroom adaptation, assessment alignment, and learner inclusion.

Day 5: Reflection and Sustainability Planning: The final day was devoted to critical reflection, evaluation, and planning for sustainability. Teachers discussed implementation challenges, shared success stories, and co-developed an action plan for embedding TiE practices within school routines and teacher training programs.

The progressive structure combined theory, practice, and reflection—core principles of action research and adult learning (Kolb, 1984)—ensuring that participants internalized both conceptual and procedural knowledge of TiE.

Data collection methods

A **convergent mixed-methods** strategy (Creswell & Plano, 2018) was adopted to capture both measurable and interpretive outcomes of the TiE intervention. Four complementary data collection tools were employed: (1) pre- and post-workshop surveys; (2) semi-structured interviews; (3) focus group discussions (FGDs); and (4) classroom observations.

Pre- and post-workshop surveys

Baseline (pre-workshop) and endline (post-workshop) surveys were administered to assess changes in teachers' confidence, pedagogical knowledge, and attitudes toward TiE. The instruments combined Likert-scale items with open-ended questions to elicit both quantitative data and narrative reflections (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018).

The **pre-workshop survey** established participants' prior familiarity with drama-based pedagogy, current classroom practices, and perceived barriers to integrating TiE. The **post-workshop survey** assessed perceived skill acquisition, self-efficacy, and readiness to implement TiE strategies. Comparative analysis between pre- and post-data provided quantifiable measures of professional growth and attitudinal shifts.

Semi-structured interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

To generate richer qualitative insights, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposively selected subset of ten teachers across disciplines. The interviews focused on teachers' perceptions of TiE, the pedagogical transformations they experienced, and the contextual constraints influencing implementation.

Complementary FGDs, involving groups of six participants, facilitated collective reflection and dialogic knowledge exchange. These discussions illuminated shared challenges, emergent strategies, and peer learning processes that could not be captured through individual interviews alone. All interviews and FGDs were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and thematically analyzed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model of thematic analysis.

Classroom observations

Classroom observations were conducted over a three-month post-intervention period to document the sustained application of TiE techniques. A structured observation protocol captured data on teaching behaviors, student engagement, and the contextual adaptability of

theatrical methods.

Each observation session (40–60 minutes) assessed variables such as:

- the frequency and quality of theatrical strategies employed;
- student participation and collaboration;
- the clarity and depth of conceptual understanding; and
- the responsiveness of teaching to classroom dynamics.

Post-observation reflective dialogues were conducted with teachers to encourage self-assessment and critical reflection—a key element of the action research cycle (Carr & Kemmis, 1986).

Data analysis

Quantitative data from surveys were analyzed using descriptive statistics to measure changes in mean confidence and knowledge levels. Qualitative data from interviews, FGDs, reflective journal, and observations were coded inductively to identify recurring themes related to pedagogical transformation, learner engagement, and institutional support structures. Triangulation across data sources ensured interpretive validity and contextual coherence.

This methodological design, combining the cyclical logic of action research with the analytical power of mixed methods, allowed for a nuanced examination of how embodied, theatrical pedagogies can reshape teaching practice. It situated TiE not merely as an instructional technique, but as a transformative mode of professional learning that bridges cognition, affect, and performance within the sociocultural realities of Bangladeshi classrooms.

Findings

This section presents the empirical results of the study, aligned with its four core objectives. Findings reveal the transformative effects of Theatre in Education (TiE) on teachers' professional practices and students' engagement, illustrating how embodied pedagogy reshapes classroom culture and learning outcomes.

Teachers' understanding and application of embodied pedagogy

Prior to the intervention, 85% of participating teachers had minimal or no exposure to drama-based instruction and relied heavily on didactic methods characteristic of the banking model of education (Freire, 1970). Following the workshop, 92% reported enhanced understanding of embodied pedagogical principles and their practical application in classroom contexts. Teachers demonstrated the ability to integrate techniques such as role-play, tableaux, and improvisation, with 95% designing TiE-informed lesson plans post-training. This shift

reflects a transition from cognitive transmission to embodied, participatory learning (Shapiro, 2019; Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

Table 1. Summary of findings on teacher competency and confidence.

Indicator	Pre-Workshop (%)	Post-Workshop (%)	Key Observations
Teachers with prior TiE experience	15%	92%	Majority had no prior exposure to theater-based pedagogy
Confidence in using TiE	25%	88%	Marked improvement in pedagogical self-efficacy
Ability to design TiE-based lessons	30%	95%	Teachers effectively integrated drama across subjects
Willingness to sustain TiE practices	—	80%	High motivation for continued application

Dramatization and instructional approaches in humanities and social sciences

Teachers in literature, history, and social studies reported that dramatization enabled students to inhabit multiple perspectives and engage emotionally with complex themes. Lesson observations confirmed that dramatic reenactments of historical events and social dilemmas encouraged critical discussion and empathy, aligning with Boal's (1979) concept of critical performativity and Freire's (1970) notion of conscientization. Students displayed heightened reflective capacity and social awareness, suggesting that dramatization fosters both cognitive and affective dimensions of learning (O'Toole & Dunn, 2015; Neelands, 2009).

Drama-based learning in STEM education

One of the study's most significant findings was the creative application of TiE in mathematics and science education—domains typically resistant to performative pedagogy. Teachers who dramatized concepts such as the water cycle, planetary motion, or geometric theorems found that embodied enactments enhanced students' conceptual grasp and long-term retention. These outcomes substantiate embodied cognition theories, which posit that sensorimotor engagement reinforces abstract reasoning and symbolic processing (Gallese & Lakoff, 2005). Students' post-lesson reflections indicated increased clarity, enjoyment, and collaborative engagement.

Impact on teacher practice and student outcomes

Across all subjects, the workshop significantly enhanced teachers' pedagogical confidence and

creativity. Post-intervention surveys revealed a 60–70% increase in teachers’ perceived ability to design and facilitate participatory lessons, while classroom observations recorded a 40% increase in student participation and active dialogue. The emergence of intra-school peer learning groups signaled a sustainable, community-driven approach to professional growth (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995). Furthermore, teachers’ reflective journals revealed growing awareness of embodied teaching as both epistemological and ethical practice—affirming that learning is co-constructed through bodily, emotional, and intellectual engagement (Nicholson, 2005; Gallagher, 2020).

Table 2. Summary of findings on classroom engagement and student participation

Classroom Engagement Indicator	Pre-TiE Implementation	Post-TiE Implementation	Key Observations
Student participation rate	Low (~40%)	High (~70%)	Broader inclusion and active engagement
Student enthusiasm and motivation	Moderate	High	Increased curiosity and enjoyment in learning
Creativity and expression	Limited	Strong	Students demonstrated storytelling and improvisation skills
Collaborative learning	Moderate	High	Enhanced teamwork and peer learning
Understanding of difficult subjects	Challenging	Improved	Drama clarified abstract concepts in STEM

Discussion

The findings collectively demonstrate that TiE functions as a transformative pedagogical model that bridges theory and practice, cognition and emotion, and teacher development with student empowerment. The workshop facilitated a paradigm shift from transmissive to performative teaching—repositioning the teacher as a facilitator of embodied inquiry rather than a conveyor of fixed knowledge (Prentki & Preston, 2009).

First, the study confirms that embodied pedagogies cultivate reflexive and situated knowledge production, consistent with Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) phenomenology of perception, wherein the body serves as the primary site of knowing and acting. Teachers’ reorientation toward physical expressivity and dialogic participation aligns with Freire’s (1970) call for education as praxis—reflection and action upon the world. The performative and collaborative nature of TiE

thus transforms the classroom into a rehearsal space for democracy (Boal, 1979), where knowledge is enacted, negotiated, and shared.

Second, the application of TiE across disciplinary boundaries demonstrates that embodied learning transcends traditional subject demarcations. By dramatizing abstract STEM concepts and humanistic narratives alike, teachers bridged cognitive and kinesthetic modalities of understanding—offering empirical support to embodied cognition scholarship (Gallese & Lakoff, 2005; Glenberg, 2010). This convergence validates the potential of TiE as an interdisciplinary pedagogical framework capable of enhancing conceptual understanding, empathy, and creativity.

Third, the participatory ethos of TiE disrupted entrenched classroom hierarchies and encouraged inclusive learning environments. In the Bangladeshi context—where educational traditions often privilege textual authority and rote memorization (Nath, 2016)—this embodied turn represents both pedagogical innovation and social critique. Students previously marginalized by linguistic or confidence barriers found new modes of participation through gesture, movement, and performance, reinforcing TiE’s role as a democratizing force in education (Ahmed, 1994).

Finally, sustained teacher motivation and the emergence of collaborative peer-learning networks underscore TiE’s potential for scalability and systemic impact. The practice of co-designing lessons and reflecting collectively embodies the principle of teacher agency in professional learning (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995). This aligns with global movements toward teacher-led innovation and contextually grounded pedagogical reform in the Global South (Neelands, 2009).

In essence, the study advances embodied pedagogy as both theoretical construct and actionable framework for educational transformation. By situating learning in the lived, performed, and relational experiences of teachers and students, TiE redefines education as a holistic, participatory, and human-centered endeavor—one that integrates cognition, affect, and corporeality to produce deeper, more equitable forms of knowing.

Recommendations

The findings of this study confirm the efficacy of Theater in Education (TiE) as a transformative pedagogical model capable of enhancing teacher competency, student engagement, and classroom interaction across diverse disciplines. The TiE workshop exemplified how embodied, performative, and participatory practices can revitalize pedagogical cultures long dominated by rote learning and textual reproduction. Sustaining this momentum requires systemic alignment—linking teacher development, institutional policy, and curricular frameworks—to embed TiE within Bangladesh’s broader education reform agenda.

Key takeaways

This study has demonstrated that embodied pedagogical practices, particularly those operationalized through Theatre in Education (TiE), can substantially enhance teachers' professional competencies, foster student engagement, and transform classroom cultures in secondary education. By positioning the body as an epistemic site of learning, TiE transcends conventional didactic modes and redefines the pedagogical relationship as a dialogic, performative, and co-constructive process. The findings affirm that when teachers engage in embodied reflection and performative experimentation, they not only acquire new instructional techniques but also reconceptualize teaching itself as a dynamic practice of relational knowing and social imagination (Freire, 1970; Boal, 1995; Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

At the conceptual level, the research contributes to the growing corpus of literature on embodied pedagogy by grounding its theoretical insights in empirical practice within the Global South. The results illustrate how embodied and theatrical methods serve as catalysts for bridging cognitive and affective dimensions of learning—aligning with embodied cognition theories that emphasize the integration of sensorimotor experience and conceptual understanding (Gallese & Lakoff, 2005; Shapiro, 2019). Within Bangladesh's education system, where pedagogical traditions have long privileged rote memorization and textual authority (Nath, 2016), TiE offers a counter-hegemonic practice that reinstates creativity, agency, and empathy as central to knowledge formation.

From a professional development standpoint, the study underscores the necessity of re-envisioning teacher training as an embodied, iterative, and collaborative endeavor. The TiE workshop demonstrated that sustained practice, peer dialogue, and reflective inquiry can generate durable shifts in teachers' pedagogical identities. As teachers moved from performative hesitation to creative confidence, they exemplified what Bresler (2004) describes as the “reflective practitioner”—a professional who learns through cycles of doing, observing, and transforming. Such processes of embodied professional learning resonate with contemporary global frameworks on teacher agency and self-efficacy (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995), suggesting that policy must move beyond instrumental models of training to embrace pedagogies of praxis.

Strategic recommendations

Institutionalize TiE within teacher education curricula: Teacher training institutions should integrate TiE modules into pre-service and in-service programs, aligning with international trends in arts-based education and UNESCO's (2015) recommendations for pedagogical innovation. The National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) in collaboration with the National Academy for Educational Management (NAEM) and the Directorate of Secondary & Higher Education (DSHE) could pilot TiE-based frameworks within selected teacher training colleges, establishing TiE as a core pedagogical competence.

Establish continuous professional learning and peer networks: Sustained change requires communities of practice where teachers refine TiE applications through reflection and collaboration (Dolan et al., 2017). Periodic refresher workshops and online learning hubs could facilitate peer exchange, mentorship, and resource sharing. Linking TiE practitioners to regional and global networks would further strengthen capacity and cross-cultural learning.

Develop a national resource repository and certification system: Creating a repository of TiE lesson plans, scripts, and facilitation guides supports scalability and coherence. A formal TiE certification or micro-credentialing program, endorsed by the Ministry of Education, could standardize competencies and incentivize teacher participation, ensuring recognition and accountability for TiE-trained educators.

Embed TiE principles in curriculum reform and policy discourse: Curriculum reform efforts under the National Education Policy (2010) and subsequent competency-based initiatives should explicitly incorporate embodied and creative pedagogies as cross-cutting competencies. TiE's alignment with 21st-century skills—communication, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking—positions it as a strategic tool for achieving the goals of Education 2030 and SDG 4 on quality education.

Curriculum and Assessment Innovation: National curriculum frameworks should adopt more flexible pedagogical guidelines that recognize performance, collaboration, and creativity as legitimate forms of learning and assessment. Assessment models must move beyond purely summative measures toward formative, process-oriented evaluations that value participation, reflection, and co-created meaning (Nath, 2016). TiE-based learning can thus complement competency-based education initiatives currently under reform in Bangladesh.

Conduct longitudinal and comparative research: Future research should explore the long-term cognitive, emotional, and social impacts of TiE on teachers and students. Comparative studies between TiE-trained and conventionally trained educators can yield evidence for policy advocacy. Additionally, expanding research to early childhood and higher secondary levels could demonstrate TiE's adaptability across developmental stages and subjects.

Concluding remarks

This study affirms Theater in Education (TiE) as a dynamic form of embodied pedagogy that redefines learning as a multisensory, affective, and relational process. By engaging the body, imagination, and emotion, TiE bridges the gap between cognition and experience, transforming the classroom into a site of lived inquiry. Teachers who participated in the workshop not only acquired new methods but also underwent what Mezirow (1997) terms transformative learning—a shift in perspective that reorients how educators understand teaching itself.

Through performance and reflection, TiE fosters dialogic spaces where teachers and students

co-construct meaning, echoing Freire's (1970) vision of education as a practice of freedom. The findings also resonate with Boal's (1979) conception of theater as a rehearsal for real life, in which learning is an embodied rehearsal for agency, empathy, and social transformation. The enthusiasm expressed by participating teachers underscores the readiness of Bangladesh's educators to embrace pedagogical renewal if provided institutional support and recognition.

For TiE to move beyond isolated innovation, it must be formally embedded in policy, curriculum, and teacher education. This requires a shift from rigid, exam-oriented schooling toward learning environments that foster creativity, collaboration, and critical reflection. Embedding performative and embodied practices within schooling systems not only enhances academic outcomes but also contributes to holistic human development (Jackson, 1993).

Investing in TiE is therefore a strategic imperative for Bangladesh's education system. By legitimizing embodied pedagogies at the institutional level, educators are empowered to teach with mind and body, and students are positioned to learn through lived experience. Such a paradigm honors Freire's (1970) vision of education as a humanizing practice, fostering learners who are not merely knowledgeable but fully capable of acting thoughtfully, creatively, and empathetically in the world.

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