

# EMPOWERING YOUNG MINDS: ESSENTIAL ROLE OF ART INTEGRATION AT FOUNDATION STAGE: ALIGNING WITH NEP 2020

Deepika Thakur

Research Scholar, Department of Education, Himachal Pradesh University, Summer-Hill, Shimla, Himachal Pradesh, India



## ABSTRACT

*Art integration is revolutionizing early childhood education, particularly at the foundational stage, as envisioned in India's 2020 Educational Action Plan and India's 2022 School Curriculum Guidelines. Recognizing the pivotal role of formative years (ages 3 to 8) in shaping cognitive, emotional, social, and creative development, the NEP highlights the significance of foundational literacy and skills through experiential, learner-centered approaches. The report looks into the transformative potential of art integration as a dynamic pedagogical approach, advancing originality, critical judgment, and strategic problem resolution indispensable for 21st-century learners. By integrating an array of visual and performing arts—including music, theatre, dance, and narrative arts—into the educational framework, educators can create enriching, inquiry-driven learning environments that holistically support children's developmental milestones while honoring their cultural identities. Additionally, this research addresses challenges in implementing arts-based education and provides actionable strategies for integrating art into early childhood education. The findings highlight how art integration supports a competency-driven, play-based curriculum, facilitating experiential learning and enabling children to express ideas and connect meaningfully with their environment. The study emphasizes that art integration is integral to achieving the objectives outlined in NEP 2020. By promoting innovative, inclusive, and arts-focused methodologies, educators and policymakers can empower young learners, ensuring holistic development and preparing them to thrive in an ever-changing world.*

**Keywords:** Art Integration, Foundational Stage, NEP 2020, Holistic Development, Experiential Learning, Pedagogical Innovation, Inclusive Education, Policy Implementation.

## Introduction

The early educational years are instrumental in cultivating a child's holistic development, forming a solid foundation for lifelong learning and adaptability. The 2020 Educational Strategy of India envisages this phase as a blend of play-based, multidisciplinary, and culturally enriched pedagogies, with art integration serving as a transformative and groundbreaking approach to education in India. Rooted deeply in Indian values, art integration is seen as a catalyst for creating an inclusive educational system that guarantees equity and quality for all students. This is grounded in the fundamental pillars of Inclusivity, Fairness, Excellence, Cost-efficiency, and Responsibility.<sup>1</sup>

Integrating visual arts, music, dance, and drama into the curriculum empowers children to cultivate creativity, critical thinking, and emotional well-being. Globally, art-based education has been celebrated for fostering sustainability, inclusivity, and global citizenship. This research paper discovers the transformative character of art integration within the framework of NEP 2020, examining its alignment with international education trends. It aims to uncover how this approach can reshape pedagogical practices to promote holistic and sustainable development, ensuring a vibrant and inclusive future for young learners.<sup>2</sup>

Through this study, the potential of art integration to transform educational environments is explored, emphasizing the importance of inclusivity, innovation, and cultural relevance. By embedding these practices into the curriculum, educators are equipped to encounter the changing needs of students in an unexpectedly shifting educational.

## Objectives

This research study examines art-based learning at the foundational stage per NEP 2020 and NCF 2022, evaluates its impact on creativity, critical thinking, socio-emotional growth, and cultural understanding, investigates innovative pedagogical approaches, explores alignment with NEP 2020, assesses intellectual, emotional, and interpersonal benefits, identifies challenges, proposes strategies, compares global best practices, and presents effective case studies.

## Methodology

Through a mixed-method approach primarily involving secondary data collection, an extensive review of literature on art integration and holistic development was conducted, including analysis of curriculum documents, textbooks, educational frameworks, and academic resource utilization from databases like ResearchGate, ERIC, eScholarship, and Psychology Today.

## NEP 2020, a Paradigm Shift in Early Education

On July 29, 2020, Bharat introduced the pioneering India's 2020 Educational Action Plan replacing the National Academic Doctrine of 1986, which had been determining the education landscape for over three decades. This blueprint wishes to establish the country as a world power while altering the current education system to meet the diverse needs of modern children. A central aspect of the policy is the prominence of foundational literacy and numeracy, to confirm widespread proficiency in these areas across primary schools by 2025. This initiative reimagines education, providing equitable access and preparing students for the 21st century. It emphasizes well-rounded development, practical learning, cultural integration, and inclusivity for varied educational needs.<sup>3</sup>

## National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stage

October 20, 2022, marked the launch of the NCF-FS, which is a complete and inclusive guide for early childhood education, addressing curriculum design, teaching-learning materials (TLM), teacher training, assessment methods, and pedagogical approaches. It aims to support holistic development during the most formative years of learning. (p. 17)<sup>4</sup> On February 20, 2023, the *Jaadui Pitara* was introduced as a model resource aligned with the Primary Stage Curriculum Guide (2022) it includes toys, puzzles, puppets, posters, flashcards, story cards, activity books, and teacher handbooks. This kit emphasizes experiential learning and fosters creativity through art integration, making education engaging and culturally rich. The National Instructional Framework for Early Education also aligns with the *Panchakoshi Vikas* model focusing on five developmental layers: physical, vital, mental/emotional, intellectual, and blissful where art integration plays an essential role in nurturing these dimensions, ensuring a comprehensive educational experience.<sup>5</sup> Art integration within the framework promotes meaningful learning by blending artistic expression with subject knowledge.

## Foundational Stage (ages 3-8): Building a Strong Educational Foundation

The Foundational Stage is a critical phase for fostering holistic development, focusing on the fine-tuning of essential skills such as intellectual, verbal, and socio-emotional abilities. These early years provide a strong foundation for academic success, particularly in reading, writing, and numeracy. According to the 2020 National Educational Blueprint, every child develops uniquely and benefits from play-based, experiential learning environments. Children are deeply with their environments through hands-on activities, sensory exploration, and collaborative experiences. According to NEP 2020, it consists of two parts under New Curricular and Pedagogical Structure:

Anganwadi/pre-school (3 years): For ages 3-6, children attend centers focusing on play-based learning for developing early cognitive, social, and emotional skills.

Primary school (Grades 1-2, 2 years): For ages 6-8, children transition to formal schooling, focusing on reading, writing, arithmetic, and holistic development.<sup>6</sup>

## Holistic Development: Fostering Comprehensive Growth

Holistic development focuses on cherishing various dimensions of a child's growing needs beyond academic knowledge. It integrates cognitive, social, emotional, physical, and moral development, fostering a well-rounded personality. Curriculum reforms aim to move beyond rote learning, emphasizing deep understanding, self-directed learning, and the cultivation of essential 21st-century skills<sup>7</sup>. India's 2022 Curriculum Development Plan has incorporated specific skills and values at each educational stage, ensuring comprehensive growth for early childhood education.<sup>8</sup>

## Experiential Learning

Experiential learning at the foundational stage focuses on practical, student-centered approaches that embed arts, sports, and storytelling into the learning process. This method aims to address gaps in learning outcomes through competency-based education, with assessments that closely aligned with learning goals and skills for each subject. For Example:

- **Art Integration:** Bringing diverse forms of art and culture into education fosters a more engaging and holistic approach to learning. This helps students connect theory with real-world applications while respecting Indian philosophy and cultural heritage.
- **Sports Integration:** Incorporating physical activities and native sports to build collaboration, self-discipline, and citizenship. This approach promotes holistic development, supporting both physical fitness and cognitive abilities<sup>9</sup> aligned with the Fit India Movement.<sup>10</sup>

## Art Integration, a Dynamic, and Interdisciplinary Pedagogy

A Holistic Approach to Education Art integration is a dynamic, interdisciplinary instructional style that connects art practices with subject learning<sup>11</sup> to deepen students' understanding<sup>12</sup> and engagement. It enables learners to construct and demonstrate knowledge creatively through artistic processes.<sup>13</sup> Art integration bridges the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, transforming learning into an engaging, inclusive, impactful experience and enhancing a better understanding of sustainability issues.<sup>14</sup> It has multiple benefits<sup>15</sup>:

- **Cognitive Benefit:** Art-based methodologies enhance memory retention, spatial reasoning, and problem-solving. For example, using visual art to teach geometric concepts aids<sup>16</sup> comprehension and recall.
- **Emotional Development:** Art provides a therapeutic outlet, enabling young learners to navigate emotions, build resilience, and develop self-awareness. Drama and role-playing, for instance, help children express and manage feelings constructively.
- **Social Skills:** Collaborative art projects, such as group murals or team performances, foster communication, empathy, and teamwork. These experiences cultivate a sense of community and mutual respect.
- **Cultural Literacy<sup>17</sup>:** Integrating traditional art forms like Madhubani painting or Kathak dance celebrates cultural heritage and fosters pride in local traditions while introducing learners to global artistic expressions.<sup>18</sup>

## Strategies for Effective Art Integration

To effectively integrate art into foundational education, various strategies can be employed:

- **Play-Based Art Activities:** Integrating art into play, such as constructing toys from natural materials, nurtures creativity and environmental awareness.
- **Multisensory Learning:** By combining visual, auditory, and kinesthetic experiences, activities like storytelling with music or clay modeling ensure engagement across varied learning styles.
- **Technology Integration:** Digital tools such as interactive art applications and virtual museums provide new avenues for creative exploration and cultural education.<sup>19</sup>
- **Inclusive Practices:** Designing activities that accommodate diverse abilities, such as adaptive art tools or simplified steps for learners with special needs, ensures equity in learning. Further, harnessing the power of the arts enhances educational outcomes across various subjects:
- **Visual Arts:** Encourages creative expression, critical thinking, and fine motor skills. For instance, students engaging in painting or sculpture develop an understanding of perspective and spatial relationships. This integration can enrich subjects like Mathematics<sup>20</sup> (through geometric concepts) and Science (by illustrating scientific phenomena).

- **Music:** Improves auditory processing, memory, and emotional well-being. Learning to play an instrument or participate in a choir can enhance teamwork and discipline. Music can complement subjects such as Language Arts (through lyrical analysis) and Mathematics (with rhythms and patterns).
- **Drama:** Builds social skills, empathy, and self-confidence. Role-playing and theater activities help students improve their communication and interpretive abilities. Drama can be integrated into History (through reenactments) and Literature (by performing plays and analyzing characters).
- **Dance:** Promotes physical health, coordination, and self-discipline. Participation in dance classes or performances cultivates an appreciation for cultural diversity and physical expression. Dance can be linked to Physical Education (by enhancing fitness) and Social Studies (through cultural dances).<sup>21</sup>

Incorporating these artistic disciplines creates a vibrant and comprehensive educational environment, preparing learners with the skills to excel in a constantly evolving environment and preparing learners with the skills to excel in a constantly evolving environment.

### Aligning Art Integration with Global Educational Goals

- **SDG 4 & 4.7:** Art education enhances quality education, cultivating original ideas, and solution-finding skills by integrating with core subjects. It fosters inclusivity, allowing students to express unique talents and cultivating cultural awareness and empathy through exposure to diverse traditions. It also emphasizes sustainable practices, encouraging eco-conscious habits.<sup>22</sup> Henceforth, art education enriches learning, making it dynamic, and comprehensive, and equips students with the skills and values needed to contribute to a sustainable and inclusive world.
- **Comparative Analysis:** Countries like Finland and Singapore serve as exemplars where art is central to curricula. These systems highlight the role of art in fostering innovation, creativity, and cultural competence, aligning closely with NEP 2020's vision.

### Implementation Challenges and Solutions:

#### Challenges

- **Teacher Training Deficits:** Many educators lack the skills and understanding necessary to implement arts-based pedagogies effectively.
- **Resource Constraints:** Limited access to quality art supplies, infrastructure, and funding impedes seamless integration.
- **Curricular Rigidities:** Resistance to non-traditional, arts-centered teaching methods remains prevalent in many educational settings.<sup>23</sup>

#### Solutions

- **Capacity Building:** Introducing regular, targeted proficiency enhancement programs to equip teachers with skills in arts-based teaching methodologies.
- **Policy Advocacy:** Advocating for policies that mandate and incentivize art integration, ensuring alignment with NEP 2020 objectives.
- **Collaborative Partnerships:** Engaging with artists, NGOs, and cultural institutions to share resources, expertise, and best practices for effective art integration.<sup>24</sup>

### Case Studies and Best Practices:

#### Himachal Pradesh's Art-Based Textbooks

The Himachal Pradesh Board of School Education has pioneered art-integrated textbooks like *Joyful Mathematics*<sup>25</sup>, *Mrindang*<sup>26</sup> and *Sarangit*<sup>27</sup> successfully blending traditional Indian cultural elements with contemporary, experiential learning methods. These textbooks emphasize the importance of creativity, storytelling, and visual arts to enhance student engagement and holistic development.<sup>28</sup>

## International Practices

- **Finland:** Renowned for its creativity-driven curriculum, Finland integrates arts across subjects to foster innovation and critical thinking from an early age.<sup>29</sup>
- **Reggio Emilia Approach (Italy):** This method, focused on child-led, arts-centered learning, prioritizes self-expression, collaboration, and exploration through various art forms, making it a global benchmark for arts-integrated education.<sup>30</sup>

## Findings of the Study

This study highlights the transformative potential of art integration in education, particularly in fostering creativity, logical thinking, and holistic development in students, aligning seamlessly with the vision of NEP 2020. By synthesizing contributions from various educators and researchers, the study reveals the following key insights:

- **Fostering Engagement and Emotional Bonds in the Classroom:** *Gijubhai Badheka's Divaswapna* (1989) highlights the value of a free and natural learning environment through the usage of the Montessori Method and storytelling. These approaches emphasize hands-on learning and building teacher-student rapport, enhancing attention, respect, and emotional bonds while eliminating the need for strict discipline, and fostering a more engaging and harmonious classroom experience.<sup>31</sup>
- **Cultural Relevance and Diversity in Arts Integration:** Incorporating culturally relevant stories fosters inclusivity, emotional security, and an appreciation for diversity, creating supportive learning environments. (Purnell et al., 2007)<sup>32</sup> Building on this foundation, NEP 2020 emphasizes the critical role of art education in enhancing skills such as critical thinking, creativity, and emotional awareness, while also establishing a meaningful connection to the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) (Anupama, 2024)<sup>33</sup>
- **Impact of Arts Integration on Academic Outcomes:** Arts integration nurtures literacy, numeracy, critical thinking, and social interaction while promoting inclusive classrooms. (Reif & Grant, 2010)<sup>34</sup>. Activities like dramatization, visual modeling, and musical performances reinforce concepts, ensuring retention beyond immediate assessments. These practices surpass repetitive drill methods by embedding knowledge more deeply. (Rinne et al., 2011)<sup>35</sup> Hence, Arts integration plays a crucial role in creating meaningful, long-lasting learning experiences.
- **Practical Observations from Educators and Researchers:** *Elementary Teacher Sunie Caballero* found that integrating arts into the curriculum engages diverse learning styles, reduces behavioral issues (Donovan and Pascale, 2012)<sup>36</sup> Arts integration enriches learning experiences for students of all abilities and backgrounds. These practical observations underscore how arts integration enhances both academic and socio-emotional development.
- **Cognitive and Creative Development through Arts Integration:** Arts integration supports cognitive and character development through multi-layered, thematic instruction. This interconnected approach fosters intellectual growth and creativity. (Pilot Study by Baker, 2013).<sup>37</sup> ABL emphasizes artistic expression while encouraging critical engagement. This dual focus promotes a deeper understanding of the world and validates self-knowledge, enabling multiple interpretive perspectives. (Marshall, 2014)<sup>38</sup> These findings highlight how arts integration stimulates deeper understanding and creative expression, enriching the learning experience.
- **Enhancement of Mathematical and Linguistic Skills through Art:** Long-term engagement in fine arts enhances mathematical reasoning by cultivating intrinsic motivation, visual imagination, and creative ideation, making abstract concepts more accessible and engaging. (Brezovnik, 2015)<sup>39</sup>. Arts integration enhances linguistic cognition by employing visual, auditory, and kinesthetic cues, enabling students to grasp concepts that may be difficult through conventional methods. (Anderson, 2017)<sup>40</sup>. These insights show how arts integration supports both academic and cognitive development, creating a well-rounded learning experience.

- **21st-Century Skills and Collaborative Learning:** Arts integration fosters key 21st-century skills such as collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity. Partnerships between educators and cultural organizations enhance student achievement and engagement. (Reeder et al., 2021)<sup>41</sup>
- **Inclusive Education and Holistic Development:** Arts integration creates inclusive classrooms, significantly benefiting disadvantaged and hard-to-reach students. (Dacey & Donovan, 2022)<sup>42</sup>
- Art-based activities improve communication, creativity, and social skills, preparing students for future employment and independent living. (Halder et al., 2023)<sup>43</sup>. These findings emphasize the essential role of arts integration in fostering inclusive education and supporting holistic development.

## Conclusion

Art Integrated Learning, as delineated in both the 2020 National Education Blueprint and the 2022 Initial Learning Stage Framework, stands out as a game-changer in early childhood education. This investigation sheds light on the relevance of Art-Infused Learning in fostering holistic development, blending academic rigor with creativity, cultural awareness, and experiential learning, not merely an auxiliary tool but a core component of a comprehensive, student-centered educational approach. The findings of this study affirm that Art-Enhanced Teaching not only enhances cognitive and emotional growth but also promotes social competence and inclusivity. Through hands-on, play-based, and interdisciplinary methodologies, Art-Incorporated Education effectively bridges learning gaps, nurturing 21st-century skills. Furthermore, the integration of art-based activities and real-life applications has been shown to deepen students' educational experiences, making learning more engaging and meaningful.

This research highlights the alignment of Art-Driven Education with global educational trends and sustainable development goals (SDGs) 4.2 and 4.7. By promoting inclusive and accessible education, Art-Based Instruction supports the broader objective of fostering an impartial learning environment that caters to the varied needs of all learners.

In addition to academic success, Art-Enriched Education contributes to the creation of an innovative educational ecosystem, wherein interdisciplinary approaches are encouraged, and cultural heritage is seamlessly interwoven into contemporary learning practices. The study demonstrates that this style not only enhances academic outcomes but also prepares students for lifelong adaptability and social responsibility. As educational frameworks continue to evolve, the integration of present Art-Incorporated Education is a valuable opportunity to shape dynamic, inclusive, and sustainable learning environments. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of how Art-Focused Learning can be leveraged to meet the diverse needs of learners, ensuring that future educational systems are equipped to foster creativity, empathy, and critical thinking in a rapidly changing world.

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