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### Theatre as a bridge between cultures: the educational and humanistic potential of theatre in Russia and Bangladesh

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#### *Abstract*

**Background.** The article examines theatre-in-education practices in Russia and Bangladesh as forms of humanistic and socio-cultural educational activity aimed at the development of children and youth. The relevance of the study is determined by the growing attention to intercultural dialogue, ethno-cultural education, and the search for humanistic educational practices in the context of globalization and cultural diversity.

**Purpose.** The purpose of the study is to identify the pedagogical, cultural, and social functions of theatre practices in the educational environments of Russia and Bangladesh and to determine their common and distinctive features.

**Methodology.** The research is based on comparative, socio-cultural, and interdisciplinary approaches. The theoretical framework includes L. S. Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, A. Boal's concept of participatory theatre, and contemporary pedagogical approaches to theatre in education. The research material includes academic publications, educational programmes, analytical studies, and cultural-pedagogical materials related to theatre practices in Russia and Bangladesh.

**Results.** The study demonstrates that theatre practices in both countries contribute to the development of creativity, communication skills, emotional intelligence, empathy, and cultural identity among children and adolescents. Significant differences were identified in organizational models and pedagogical strategies: in Russia, children's and youth theatre is mainly connected with institutional educational systems and supplementary education, whereas in Bangladesh theatre-in-education initiatives are more frequently community-based and socially oriented. The scientific novelty of the study lies in the comparative analysis of theatre-in-education practices in Russia and Bangladesh through the integration of humanistic, socio-cultural, and intercultural approaches.

**Practical implications.** The results of the study may be applied in the development of educational programmes, ethno-cultural and intercultural initiatives, as well as in further research in the fields of theatre pedagogy and humanistic education.

**Keywords:** theatre in education; intercultural dialogue; ethno-cultural education; humanistic pedagogy; Russia; Bangladesh

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## **Театр как мост между культурами: образовательный и гуманистический потенциал театра в России и Бангладеш**

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### **Аннотация**

**Обоснование.** Статья посвящена исследованию театрально-педагогических практик в России и Бангладеш как форм гуманистической и социокультурной образовательной деятельности, направленной на развитие детей и молодежи. Актуальность исследования обусловлена возрастающим вниманием к проблемам межкультурного диалога, этнокультурного образования и поиску гуманистических образовательных практик в условиях глобализации и культурного многообразия.

**Цель.** Цель исследования заключается в выявлении педагогических, культурных и социальных функций театральных практик в образовательной среде России и Бангладеш, а также в определении их общих и отличительных особенностей.

**Методология.** Исследование основано на сравнительном, социокультурном и междисциплинарном подходах. Теоретическую основу составляют социокультурная теория Л. С. Выготского, концепция партисипаторного театра А. Боаля и современные педагогические подходы к theatre in education. Материалом исследования выступают научные публикации, образовательные программы, аналитические и культурно-педагогические материалы, посвященные театральным практикам в России и Бангладеш.

**Результаты.** Установлено, что театральные практики в обеих странах способствуют развитию творческих способностей, коммуникативных навыков, эмоционального интеллекта, эмпатии и культурной идентичности детей и подростков. Выявлены различия в организационных моделях и педагогических стратегиях: в России детский и молодежный театр преимущественно связан с институциональной системой образования и дополнительного образования, тогда как в Бангладеш

театрально-педагогические инициативы чаще реализуются в рамках общественных и community-based практик. Научная новизна исследования заключается в сравнительном анализе театрально-педагогических практик России и Бангладеш через интеграцию гуманистического, социокультурного и интеркультурного подходов.

**Практическая значимость.** Результаты исследования могут быть использованы при разработке образовательных программ, проектов в области этнокультурного образования и межкультурного взаимодействия, а также в дальнейших исследованиях театральной педагогики и гуманистического образования.

**Ключевые слова:** театральные практики в образовании; межкультурный диалог; этнокультурное образование; гуманистическая педагогика; Россия; Бангладеш

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## Introduction

In the context of globalization and increasing cultural diversity, contemporary education is increasingly oriented not only toward the transmission of academic knowledge, but also toward the development of learners' ability to engage in dialogue, demonstrate empathy, and respect cultural differences [11; 27]. Under these conditions, the search for humanistic educational practices that support intercultural understanding among children and adolescents becomes especially relevant [28].

One such practice is theatre, which possesses significant educational and formative potential. In this article, "theatre in education (TiE)" is understood as the use of theatrical methods, such as role-taking, improvisation, collective performance, and discussion, within educational contexts to support learning, social development, and value formation, rather than as professional theatre training or theatrical production for purely artistic purposes. The field of TiE has a well-documented history, originating in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and evolving continuously to meet new educational and social needs [19, p. 590]. The Theatre integrates artistic expression, imagination, and social interaction, creating a space in which cultural values are explored through collective creative activity[23]. Through role-taking, ensemble work, and emotionally meaningful engagement with dramatic situations, children are able to reflect on

social roles, ethical choices, and forms of interaction with others [20, p. 20] In this sense, theatre may be regarded as a meaningful resource for ethno-cultural education and intercultural dialogue. Within the framework of this study, ethno-cultural education is understood as educational processes aimed at developing awareness of cultural traditions and values, as well as readiness for respectful interaction with cultural diversity.

The educational significance of theatre is also emphasized in international cultural and educational discourse. UNESCO documents highlight the arts as an important factor in fostering cultural diversity, dialogue between cultures, and the transmission of humanistic values [27]. Theatre-based educational practices can be seen as corresponding to this perspective by combining artistic experience with processes of moral reflection and social learning, thereby contributing to the formation of communicative competence and cultural sensitivity [20; 24].

From a research perspective, particular interest is presented by the comparative analysis of theatre as an educational practice in different cultural contexts. A comparison of Russia and Bangladesh makes it possible to identify how theatre performs humanistic and pedagogical functions under conditions shaped by distinct historical traditions, cultural heritage, and institutional organization of education [8; 12; 14]. Despite significant differences between the two countries, theatre occupies an important place in the education and development of children and youth in both contexts.

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. How are theatre-in-education practices organized in Russia and Bangladesh?
2. What educational and socio-cultural functions do these practices perform?
3. How do institutional and community-based models differ in their pedagogical orientation and forms of participation?

The scientific novelty of the study lies in the comparative analysis of theatre-in-education practices in Russia and Bangladesh through an integrated humanistic framework combining socio-cultural, participatory, and pedagogical approaches, which has not been systematically examined in existing research.

*Literature Review and Theoretical Framework*

The present study conceptualizes theatre as a humanistic educational practice that supports cognitive, emotional, and social development through culturally mediated interaction. The theoretical framework is based on three complementary perspectives: L. S. Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory of development, A. Boal's concept of participatory theatre, and Helen Nicholson's pedagogical interpretation of theatre in education [17; 24; 29]. Recent research has further developed each of these approaches extending them into contemporary educational contexts [4; 21; 23]. Taken together, these approaches make it possible to analyze theatre not only as an artistic activity, but also as a pedagogical space in which imagination, social learning, and intercultural understanding are formed.

From a socio-cultural perspective, Vygotsky's theory emphasizes that learning and development occur through social interaction and are mediated by cultural tools, including language and artistic forms [29, p. 12-17]. Within this framework, theatre may be understood as a complex cultural tool that integrates speech, movement, narrative, and emotion within a shared creative activity. Vygotsky's concept of imagination, closely connected with play and symbolic action, is of particular relevance for educational theatre [4 p.6-7]. Through role-taking and engagement with fictional situations, children are able to experiment with perspectives that extend beyond their immediate experience [29 p.11-12]. Imaginative activity in theatre is not an escape from reality, but a culturally mediated transformation of social experience realized through guided collaboration within the zone of proximal development [9 p.65].

Boal's concept of participatory theatre provides an additional theoretical perspective focused on agency and dialogue [17 p. 120]. Rejecting the rigid division between performer and spectator, Boal introduced the notion of the "spect-actor," emphasizing participation as a central condition of meaning-making [21 p.156-157]. In educational contexts, participatory theatre encourages children and youth to engage in dialogue, explore social roles, and reflect on lived experience through embodied action. This approach can be associated with humanistic educational principles that prioritize learner involvement, ethical reflection, and the

co-construction of meaning [17 p 134-15]. Boal's framework is particularly relevant for the analysis of community-based theatre-in-education practices, while its emphasis on participation also informs institutional educational theatre.

Helen Nicholson's approach to theatre in education foregrounds empathy, relational learning, and the formation of learning communities [23; 24]. According to Nicholson, educational theatre functions as a relational space in which meaning emerges through interaction rather than transmission. Empathy is understood not as passive identification, but as an active process of engaging with perspectives different from one's own. Through collective theatrical activity, participants take part in shared emotional and ethical exploration, which supports the development of communicative competence and intercultural sensitivity [24]. In this way, theatre contributes to the formation of educational communities grounded in dialogue, cooperation, and mutual responsibility.

Taken together, the perspectives of Vygotsky, Boal, and Nicholson form a coherent theoretical basis for the analysis of theatre as a pedagogical practice oriented toward humanistic and ethno-cultural aims [8; 10]. The scientific novelty of the present study lies in the integrative application of these theoretical approaches to a comparative analysis of theatre-in-education practices in Russia and Bangladesh. This theoretical synthesis provides the analytical criteria for interpreting theatre as a culturally mediated educational process that supports intercultural dialogue and ethno-cultural education in diverse social contexts.

### **Materials and methods**

The study is based on a qualitative comparative analysis of theatre-in-education practices in Russia and Bangladesh. The research focuses on theatre as a humanistic and socio-cultural educational phenomenon and examines how similar educational aims, such as the development of empathy, communicative competence, and intercultural sensitivity, are realized in different cultural and pedagogical contexts.

The research material includes academic publications on theatre pedagogy, theatre in education, ethno-cultural and arts education, policy

documents related to intercultural dialogue and cultural diversity, as well as materials published by educational and cultural organizations in both countries. Examples of community-based theatre initiatives in Bangladesh and institutional children's and youth theatre practices in Russia are used as illustrative cases representing broader pedagogical models.

The interpretation of the material is based on L. S. Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, A. Boal's concept of participatory theatre, and Helen Nicholson's pedagogical approaches to theatre in education. These perspectives make it possible to examine theatre as a culturally mediated educational practice combining artistic activity, social interaction, and value formation. The study does not aim to provide an exhaustive overview of all theatre practices in either country, but rather offers a comparative theoretical interpretation within the framework of humanities and pedagogical research.

## **Results and discussions**

### *Results*

The comparative analysis made it possible to identify both shared and distinctive features of theatre-in-education practices in Russia and Bangladesh. The findings are presented through the examination of organizational models, pedagogical approaches, forms of participation, and socio-cultural educational functions characteristic of each context.

### *Theatre-in-education in Bangladesh*

The analysis shows that theatre-in-education practices in Bangladesh are predominantly realized as community-oriented and socially engaged forms of educational activity. These practices demonstrate a strong emphasis on participation, dialogue, and accessibility within local socio-cultural contexts. These practices are rooted in long-standing performative traditions. Bangladeshi theatre has historically served as a collective medium for storytelling, moral reflection, and social communication, particularly in community settings. Folk and ritual forms such as Jatra, Pala gaan, Gambhira, and various puppetry traditions have played an important role in transmitting cultural values and social norms across generations [13; 15]. These traditions continue to inform contemporary theatrical practices, including those addressed to children and youth.

Alongside traditional forms, Bangladesh has developed institutional frameworks that support children's and youth engagement with theatre. Theatre departments within universities, as well as national cultural institutions such as the Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy and the Bangladesh Shishu Academy, provide opportunities for theatrical education and artistic development [15]. In these contexts, theatrical activities often emphasize performance skills, cultural heritage, and participation in festivals and public events, reflecting a broader recognition of theatre as a meaningful component of educational and cultural life [14].

A distinctive feature of the Bangladeshi context is the prominent role of applied theatre and theatre-in-education initiatives operating within community-based and non-formal educational settings [12; 22]. Many of these initiatives have emerged in response to social challenges such as unequal access to education, social stratification, and the need for dialogic approaches to learning [25]. While not all such projects explicitly identify themselves as theatre-in-education, they employ theatrical methods with educational aims, including the development of communication skills, social awareness, and ethical reflection among children and adolescents [26].

One of the most visible characteristics of Bangladeshi theatre-in-education practices is their participatory orientation [18]. Drawing on principles articulated in participatory and applied theatre theory, these initiatives seek to minimize hierarchical distinctions between performers and audiences and to position children as active participants in the learning process [17 p.97]. Participation is understood not merely as audience engagement, but as a pedagogical strategy that supports dialogue, reflection, and collective meaning-making. This approach may be interpreted in light of socio-cultural theories of learning, particularly Vygotsky's understanding of imaginative activity as a means through which children transform social experience in a culturally mediated environment [29 p.11].

An illustrative example of this model can be found in the theatre-in-education programmes implemented by the Bangladesh Institute of Theatre Arts (BITA), a non-governmental cultural organization engaged in



arts-based educational initiatives for children and youth. BITA develops structured theatrical interventions designed specifically for classroom contexts in collaboration with schools, organizing sessions during school hours that combine short performances with interactive activities rather than replacing regular lessons [16 p.32; 18]. Performances addressing culturally meaningful themes, such as the six seasons of Bangladesh or the language movement - are followed by games, competitions, and facilitated discussions in which students are invited to comment on the situations presented, articulate their own viewpoints, and propose alternative actions [18]. Through this dialogic structure, children temporarily assume the role of “spect-actors,” thereby actively shaping the educational process through embodied participation and discussion [16 p.44]. Similar dialogic models are documented in other Bangladeshi programmes, where post-performance interaction is designed to foster critical reflection and empower children to articulate their perspectives on issues affecting their lives [25].

From an educational perspective, such practices illustrate how theatre can function as a space of dialogic learning that integrates emotional engagement with cognitive reflection. The emphasis on interaction, improvisation, and collective discussion contributes to the development of empathy, communicative competence, and critical thinking [20 p.19, 24]. At the same time, the use of culturally familiar narrative forms and performative elements reinforces children’s sense of cultural identity and belonging, which is particularly significant in the context of ethno-cultural education [18]. This dual focus on empowering individual voice and strengthening cultural identity is a noted feature of community-based theatre projects in Bangladesh, which often report outcomes related to both personal development and increased cultural pride among participants from minority communities [25].

Overall, theatre-in-education in Bangladesh may be described as a flexible and culturally embedded pedagogical practice that remains responsive to local social contexts. Its community-based orientation and participatory logic allow theatre to address educational aims related to value formation, social responsibility, and intercultural openness, posi-

tioning it as an important humanistic resource within the broader field of ethno-cultural education.

*Children's and Youth Theatre in Russia*

While theatre-in-education practices in Bangladesh are largely community-based and participatory, the Russian model demonstrates a more institutionalized and mentorship-oriented approach to children's theatrical education. The comparison of these models reveals different pedagogical strategies through which theatre contributes to children's social, emotional, and cultural development.

In the Russian context, children's and youth theatre is predominantly realized within institutional frameworks closely connected to the formal education system and state-supported cultural infrastructure. Historically, Russian theatrical culture has attributed significant educational and formative value to theatre, viewing it not only as an artistic form, but also as a means of moral reflection, social education, and personal development within pedagogical discourse [8]. The traditions of psychological realism, ensemble work, and ethical engagement associated with figures such as K. S. Stanislavski and E. B. Vakhtangov have contributed to a pedagogical understanding of theatre as a space for exploring human character, values, and social responsibility [5].

In contemporary Russia, children's and youth theatre functions within a wide range of institutional settings, including general education schools, children's art schools, cultural centers, Palaces of Creativity, state-supported theatres, and extracurricular theatre studios. These institutions provide organizational stability, continuity of training, and access to professional pedagogical expertise, enabling theatre to operate as a long-term educational environment rather than as a short-term intervention. Such institutionalization reflects a pedagogical tradition in which artistic education is closely linked to structured guidance and sustained developmental processes [3, 6].

One of the central features of the Russian model is the mentorship-based organization of theatrical education. Theatre studios and school theatre collectives are typically led by trained drama teachers, directors, or professional actors who structure the educational process through regular

rehearsals, staged productions, and progressive mastery of theatrical skills [1 p.8-10]. Participation in theatrical activity is therefore characterized by guided involvement rather than spontaneous or purely horizontal interaction. This pedagogical logic can be interpreted in relation to socio-cultural theories of learning, particularly L. S. Vygotsky's emphasis on cultural mediation, adult guidance, and the zone of proximal development as key mechanisms of child development [29 P.31].

Within this framework, theatre education in Russia integrates aesthetic, social, and moral dimensions. Alongside the development of expressive speech, movement, rhythm, and ensemble coordination, children are encouraged to cultivate discipline, responsibility, attentiveness to others, and ethical awareness. Engagement with dramatic texts and character interpretation serves as a means of emotional and moral reflection, allowing young participants to explore complex human situations within an artistic and reflective form [7].

An illustrative example of this institutional–aesthetic model can be found in children's theatre studios operating within regional cultural centers and Palaces of Creativity. Such studios function as stable educational communities in which children participate in long-term rehearsal processes and public performances based on folk tales, classical literature or contemporary plays for young audiences, under professional guidance. Educators involved in these practices note that sustained theatrical engagement contributes not only to artistic development, but also to the formation of self-confidence, empathy, and social responsibility among children and adolescents [1 p.8-9, 2].

From the perspective of ethno-cultural education, Russian children's and youth theatre also plays an important role in transmitting cultural narratives, literary heritage, and collective values [3]. At the same time, participation in theatre festivals, touring activities and interinstitutional collaborations increasingly exposes young performers to diverse cultural traditions and performative styles [1p.15-17, 27-19]. Through such encounters, theatre becomes a medium for developing openness to cultural difference and readiness for dialogue within a structured pedagogical environment.

Thus, theatre education in Russia may be characterized as an institutionalized and mentor-guided pedagogical practice with a strong aesthetic orientation. Its emphasis on continuity, artistic discipline, and collective responsibility allows theatre to function as a humanistic educational resource that supports children's emotional development, social learning, and ethno-cultural awareness.

### *Discussions*

A comparative analysis of theatre-based educational practices in Russia and Bangladesh points to two culturally distinct yet pedagogically complementary models of theatre as a humanistic educational practice. While these models differ in institutional organization, pedagogical logic, and modes of participation, both contexts conceptualize theatre as a space for social learning, emotional development, and the formation of intercultural sensitivity among children and youth.

One of the key points of divergence concerns the institutional conditions within which theatre-in-education is organized. In the Russian context, children's and youth theatre is predominantly embedded within formal and semi-formal educational institutions, including schools, cultural centers, state-supported theatres, and extracurricular studios. These structures ensure continuity, professional pedagogical guidance, and sustained engagement with theatrical practice. In contrast, theatre-in-education in Bangladesh has developed primarily within community-based and non-formal educational environments, often implemented by non-governmental and cultural organizations. This model tends to demonstrate greater flexibility and accessibility, particularly in socially diverse or resource-limited contexts, but is less dependent on stable institutional frameworks.

A second axis of comparison relates to pedagogical orientation and participation. In Bangladeshi theatre-in-education practices, participation functions as a core pedagogical principle. Children are positioned as active contributors to the learning process through dialogue, improvisation, and collective meaning-making. This horizontal pedagogical logic can be associated with participatory theatre theory and emphasizes agency, reflection, and social engagement. In the Russian model, participation

is structured and mentor-guided. Children actively engage in rehearsal processes, ensemble work, and performance, but within a pedagogical framework shaped by professional leadership and clearly defined artistic objectives. Participation thus unfolds as a gradual process of cultural transmission and mastery supported by adult guidance.

Despite these differences, both models show convergence at the level of educational outcomes. In both Russia and Bangladesh, theatre contributes to the formation of empathy, communicative competence, cooperation, and ethical awareness. These outcomes emerge through embodied participation, role-taking, and collective creative activity, which allow children to encounter perspectives different from their own within a shared symbolic space. From the perspective of socio-cultural theory, such processes may be understood as forms of culturally mediated learning that emerge through social interaction and imagination.

Differences are also evident in the relationship between aesthetic and social priorities. Russian educational theatre places strong emphasis on artistic form, discipline, and engagement with dramatic texts, viewing aesthetic education as a pathway to moral and emotional development. In Bangladesh, theatre-in-education tends to prioritize social relevance, accessibility, and responsiveness to community needs, often adapting artistic form to address socially meaningful themes in culturally familiar ways. At the same time, in both contexts artistic expression remains essential for sustaining emotional engagement and imaginative exploration, preventing theatre from being reduced to a purely instrumental educational tool.

From the standpoint of ethno-cultural education, the comparison highlights theatre's capacity to function as a culturally adaptive pedagogical medium. Rather than requiring a unified organizational model, theatre appears capable of supporting intercultural dialogue through practices that are sensitive to local cultural traditions while oriented toward shared humanistic values. The Russian and Bangladeshi cases illustrate that ethno-cultural learning is fostered not through the erasure of cultural differences, but through pedagogical practices that create spaces for dialogue, cooperation, and mutual recognition.

Thus, the comparative analysis suggests not opposition between the two models, but their complementarity. The Russian model demonstrates the pedagogical value of institutional support, sustained artistic training, and aesthetic depth, while the Bangladeshi model illustrates the educational potential of participation, flexibility, and community engagement. Together, these approaches expand the understanding of theatre as a humanistic educational practice capable of supporting ethno-cultural education and intercultural dialogue in diverse socio-cultural environments.

### **Conclusion**

1. The comparative analysis demonstrates that theatre functions as a stable humanistic and educational resource in both Russian and Bangladeshi socio-cultural contexts, contributing to the development of children and youth through creative, communicative, and emotionally oriented practices.
2. Educational theatre in Russia is predominantly implemented within institutional frameworks connected with schools and systems of supplementary education, while theatre-in-education practices in Bangladesh are mainly community-based, participatory, and socially oriented.
3. Despite differences in organizational models and pedagogical strategies, theatre practices in both countries perform similar educational functions related to social learning, emotional development, communicative competence, ethical reflection, and collaborative interaction among children and adolescents.
4. The application of socio-cultural and pedagogical approaches makes it possible to interpret theatre as a culturally mediated educational process based on imagination, dialogue, participation, and collective creative activity.
5. The study shows that theatre possesses significant potential for ethno-cultural education and intercultural dialogue, supporting the development of intercultural sensitivity and mutual understanding in diverse educational environments.
6. The results of the research may be applied in the development of educational programmes, intercultural initiatives, and further theoretical studies in the field of arts and ethno-cultural education.

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