

Art-Integrated Pedagogy for Inclusive Classroom: Transforming Learning for Special Needs Students and Teachers: A Bibliometric Cum Review Analysis of the Last 25 Years

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive education is designed to give equal opportunities to quality educational experiences to all learners, regardless of their capabilities. The present study examines the impact of art-based pedagogy as a way of achieving inclusive education for special children. In particular, the study examines the influence of art-based pedagogy on the intellectual, psychological, and social growth of special children as well as the significance of teachers' development in such teaching approaches. The analysis draws on NEP 2020 and other key aspects of the Indian education system to highlight how art-integrated learning (AIL) ensures the establishment of joyful classes that meet diverse learning needs. In particular, NEP 2020 emphasizes the importance of experiential learning in the arts in promoting creativity and empathy among others. The research reviews existing literature to analyse the effect of art-based interventions on students with disabilities like dyslexia, ADHD, autism spectrum disorder, and intellectual disabilities. By examining the AIL on cognitive, emotional, and social development, this paper identifies key trends and emerging themes through a bibliometric analysis of research published over the past 25 years (2000 to 2025). It also analyses teacher readiness and professional development training, like NISHTHA (National Initiative for School Heads' and Teachers' Holistic Advancement), to apply AIL successfully. Based on the experiences of programs such as Saturday Art Class (SArC), BrainArt special programs, and arts-based therapy (ABT), this paper analyses best practices and challenges in applying art in special education. The findings suggest that incorporating art has a noteworthy impact on self-expression, focus, engagement, creativity, emotional well-being, and socialisation of special children, as well as on empowering teachers with fresh tools to handle diverse classroom settings. The research concludes by urging thorough reforms in curriculum design, resource allocation, and teacher education to incorporate art-based teaching as an integral component of inclusive education in India.

Keywords: *Art-Integrated Pedagogy, Inclusive Classroom, Special Needs Students, CWSN & Teachers*

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In recent years, art-integrated pedagogy has come to the forefront as an innovative way to create inclusive learning environments in the classroom. Educators use art from various artistic disciplines (e.g., music, dance, drama, and visual arts) to combine them with elements of traditional curricula, helping create deeper equity across multiple learning modalities for all learners. Inclusive classrooms create a space for all learners — who may come from diverse cultures, have varying abilities, or learn in different ways — to thrive and succeed. Art-integrated pedagogy is an effective way to bridge these differences by encouraging students to be creative, work together, and develop empathy. This research study examines the extent to which art-integrated pedagogy can support cognitive, emotional, and social development while addressing the barriers educators face due to systemic issues in the current educational landscape.

Art Integration within the NEP 2020 Framework

NEP 2020 describes art integration as a key pedagogical element for encouraging an experiential and inclusive learning environment. It clearly states in NEP documents that ‘art-integrated education will be integrated into classroom transactions – to help create joyful classrooms, the integration of Indian art and culture into teaching will help internalisation of Indian ethos in the classroom’ (Central Board of Secondary Education [CBSE], 2020). This vision aligns with India’s rich and diverse culture and, through regional art forms, makes learning relevant and meaningful for all students.

Some examples of how AIL utilizes connections between education and culture include:

- Language instruction can be enhanced by the use of traditional narrative techniques (such as *kathakalakshepam*) or musical styles (such as *baul*).
- Mathematics could incorporate traditional Indian crafts with geometric patterns (like *rangoli* or *kolam*) to teach geometric concepts.
- Science concepts can be taught using models that are based on traditional Indian engineering principles.
- AIL helps students develop cognitive skills and creates pride and awareness for India’s cultural heritage through educational connections.

Development of Cognitive Skills

As AIL encourages students to learn through hands-on, creative experiences with different art forms (visual, performance, etc.), it develops critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. A few examples include:

- Visual arts help students visualize something abstract, such as the mathematical relationships in geometry or biology concepts related to living things.
- Performing arts provide opportunities for students to act out historical events or scientific phenomena to further their understanding of these topics through drama.

There is research that has been conducted using NCERT guidelines. This research indicates that AIL supports students' memory retention and conceptual understanding (National Council of Educational Research and Training, 2019). Additionally, Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences Theory supports the strategy of incorporating the arts into education and recognises the various types of cognitive abilities a student may develop through the arts (such as spatial intelligence through painting and physical/kinesthetic intelligence through dancing) (Sharma & Surbhi, 2021).

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Development of Emotional Skills

Art can also be an effective way to express emotions and build resilience. The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP, 2020) promotes the social/emotional dimensions of AIL by creating "safe spaces" for students to express their different feelings without the fear of being judged (The Times of India, 2022); for example:

- Music therapy has effectively helped to reduce anxiety for students who are preparing for examinations.
- Collaborative art projects like mural painting foster empathy and teamwork.

Studies conducted by CBSE on municipal schools in Delhi indicated that AIL classrooms had higher attendance, greater emotional safety, and confidence than their non-AIL counterparts (CBSE, 2020).

Social Inclusion

The arts in learning, or AIL, provides important opportunities for all students by providing varied approaches to life, including diverse learning styles or abilities. According to the NCERT guidelines, AIL can be particularly beneficial for children with disabilities (Divyang), by providing them with alternate means of communication and/or expression (Sharma & Surbhi, 2021). Some examples include:

- Using clay modelling or puppetry for children with speech problems
- Integrating dance movement for kinaesthetic learners

Group activities, such as theatre performances, will also foster the development of social skills and provide opportunities for children from different backgrounds to interact in an inclusive classroom.

Teacher Empowerment

The success of AIL is also based on teachers' preparedness to teach the arts as part of their curriculum. Programmes such as NISHTHA (National Initiative for School Heads' and teachers' Holistic Advancement) are designed to provide teachers with the professional development they need to integrate the arts into their daily teaching practice successfully (Government of India, n.d.). However, many teachers face some common challenges in their use of AIL:

- Many teachers do not have any exposure to the interdisciplinary approach.
- Some teachers do not have enough resources to incorporate creative projects into their lessons.

As a solution to this problem, NCERT has provided some guidelines on how best to incorporate the arts into teaching across subjects, such as language, science, mathematics, and social sciences (NCERT, 2023). These guidelines are meant to be used by teachers who want to create an inspiring AIL learning atmosphere.

- **Policy Support:** Indian educational policies have increasingly recognized the value of AIL in achieving holistic education.
- **NEP 2020:** Advocates embedding AIL at all levels of education to strengthen linkages between culture and curriculum.
- The CBSE guidelines include an art-integrated project program for grades 1-10 to support experiential learning (CBSE, 2020).
- There are NCERT frameworks with multiple strategies for implementation of AIL at each of the foundational, preparatory, middle, and secondary stages (NCERT, 2023).

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These policy directions show a need for systemic reform to include AIL into mainstream education.

METHOD

An examination of published scholarly literature was performed by searching open-access databases such as Google Scholar, PubMed, and ERIC (Education Resources Information Centre) for peer-reviewed and scholarly articles and books published between January 2000 and December 2025 using the following keywords: "art-based learning", "inclusive education", "students with special needs", and "teacher professional development and the arts." A total of 293 articles were shortlisted based on the relevance and quality of the papers.

RESULTS

An individual study focused the majority of its attention on five different analyses:

- (1) Publication trends over time.
- (2) Geographical distribution of research.
- (3) Impact of Art-based Pedagogy on Students and Teachers
- (4) Key themes of interdisciplinary learning, inclusivity through art, creativity and critical thinking, emotional development, teacher preparation and continuing training, and technological integration.
- (5) Art-based learning for special needs students.

1. Trends in Research:

Over the past two decades, there has been a noticeable increase in research on art-integrated pedagogy. The number of publications grew exponentially after 2010, driven by global initiatives such as UNESCO's focus on Inclusive Education and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Peaks in publication activity were observed between 1016 and 2020 (with overlapping data representing 2013-2023), reflecting heightened interest in interdisciplinary learning and inclusive classroom practices.

Table 1: Number of Publications over time

Year	Number of Publications
2000-2005	10
2006-2010	25
2011-2015	60
2016-2020	120
2021-2025*	78

2. Geographical Representation of Research on Art-Integrated Pedagogy:

Based on the data collected from various studies, the geographical distribution of research on art-integrated pedagogy highlights regional trends and focus areas. Below are a chart and explanation of the findings:

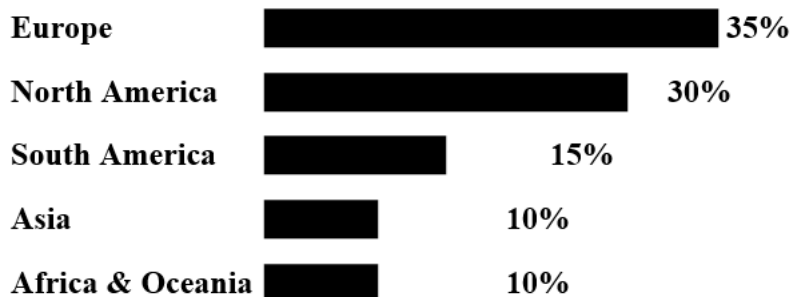
Table 2: Geographical Representation of Research Contributions

Region	Percentage of Total Research
Europe	35%
North America	30%
South America	15%

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Region	Percentage of Total Research
Asia	10%
Africa & Oceania	10%

Fig 1: Geographical Representation of Research Contributions



Geographical Insights

A. Europe: Countries such as Germany, Finland and the United Kingdom have been leading in research on arts education. There is an emphasis within these countries on integrating the arts into formal education systems to help develop creativity and inclusivity. For example, the Tate Modern's Learning Programme in England provides an illustration of how art can be used as pedagogy in both school and gallery context. (Pringle, 2009)

B. North America: In North America, there is plenty of research found related to arts-based learning, particularly in the United States and Canada. The literature primarily examines the impact of arts-based learning on academic outcomes, creativity and community-building initiatives (Feen-Calligan et al., 2018; Schneider et al., 2021). Community-based programs such as the ArtsCorps program in the United States highlight the role of art as a form of therapy and service learning as a means to develop inclusivity (Feen-Calligan et al., 2018).

C. South America: Chile has also emerged as a leader in promoting integration of the arts through programs such as the Acciona Program (AP). The AP demonstrates that the integration of the arts can produce measurable improvements in creativity, academic achievement and social inclusion among high school students (Egana-delSol, 2023).

D. Asia: Some Asian countries, such as India and China, are beginning to introduce art integration into their current educational reforms, but there is certainly much less research available from these areas compared to Europe and North America (Shukla et al., 2022).

E. Other Regions of the World: Africa and Oceania have a limited presence within academic literature related to art-integrated pedagogy, therefore illustrating the need for additional investigation in these areas.

3. Impact of Art-based Pedagogy on Students and Teachers

A. Impact on Students:

Cognitive Development:

The impact of the Arts Integration Learning (AIL) process on student development, both cognitively and emotionally, as well as providing for social inclusion, is tremendous. Integration of the arts provides students with opportunities to develop critical thinking and problem solving through creative processes such as painting geometric designs or dramatizing historical events (NCERT, 2023).

During this creative art-based learning approach, students can use visual arts to represent and/or create representations of abstract mathematical and biological concepts, or explore and/or act out how they viewed different points in history through drama-based activities in the role of another person as they acted out their roles.

Demonstrating multiple intelligences (Gardner, 2020) through arts integration programs that highlight the diversity of students' cognitive strengths, such as spatial intelligence (through painting) or bodily-kinesthetic intelligence (through dance), as well as support the teaching of these strengths through arts integration (Heiman, 2020; Sharma & Surbhi, 2021):

Emotional Development

The arts provide therapeutic outlets for self-expression, helping students build resilience (Silverstein & Layne, 2020). NEP 2020 emphasizes the socio-emotional benefits of AIL by creating safe spaces where students can explore their feelings without fear of judgment (CBSE, 2020; Rege, 2022) For Example:

- Activities such as creating room journals or working collaboratively to create a mural develop empathy among students and build teamwork among students of differing backgrounds.

A study conducted by the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) in India on student attendance and confidence when implementing AIL across all schools in the New Delhi municipality yielded significant results (CBSE Circular No.: Acad-33/2020; NCERT, 2023).

Social Inclusion

AIL meets the needs of numerous learners and therefore provides for social inclusion by using a variety of learning styles. The NCERT guidelines stress that AIL is particularly beneficial for children with disabilities (*Divyang*), as it provides alternative modes of communication and expression (NCERT, 2023). For example:

- Using puppetry allows students with speech impairments to communicate through expressive arts.
- Using movement in dance allows older students with different types of learning to participate.

Collaborative projects create opportunities for students from different cultural or socioeconomic backgrounds to build social interaction (LaJevic, 2013).

B. Impact on Teachers

Arts-Based Approach to Teaching:

Educating for the Future Through Interdisciplinary Learning:

Professional development programs such as NISHTHA enhance teachers' knowledge and skill set in integrating the arts throughout the curriculum, greatly contributing to an

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improved educational experience for children. However, there are two major difficulties teachers are facing:

- Many teachers have a lack of exposure to interdisciplinary learning
- Implementation of artistic projects is impacted by limited funding/resources

Training workshops have shown that teachers who adopt AIL experience reduced burnout due to increased classroom engagement (Kennedy Center, 2020).

4. Recurring Themes in Art-Integrated Pedagogy:

The themes discussed below support research indicating about how art can cross existing disciplinary boundaries and create an environment where students creatively develop their abilities as they also engage in critical thinking and holistic learning. A narrative explaining the three most common recurring themes in the research follows:

a. Interdisciplinary Learning:

One of the major themes in art-based education is its ability to connect learning across different disciplines (area of study). Interdisciplinary learning allows students to view and explore concepts from multiple angles; this enriches their ability to understand the concept being taught and expands their creative thinking skills. For example, there has been evidence that the inclusion of arts in science has positively impacted students' science literacy and engagement. One study asked students to create agar art while they learned the scientific technique of how to identify bacteria using a microscope. Not only did this require the students to develop their technical skills in science and the artistic skills needed to develop their artistic work, but it also required the students to develop creative thinking skills relative to the scientific concepts being taught (Torruellas Garcia et al., 2022). Similarly, combining history with drama—such as reenacting historical events—helps students internalize abstract concepts by making them tangible and relatable (Atlas, 2018).

In addition, interdisciplinary projects correspond to the focus of the STEM movement, which emphasises the importance of creative thinking and innovation in solving complex problems. By incorporating the arts into the teaching of STEM subjects, teachers provide students with a more comprehensive learning approach that mirrors real-world applications (Goodman, 2016).

b. Inclusivity and Art

Using an arts-based approach to teaching and learning in class has been seen as a way to create greater levels of inclusion in the classroom. Because arts-based activities do not rely only on language or other traditional academic skills, they can be especially helpful for students with diverse learning needs.

For example, visual arts can help students with disabilities find ways to better express themselves and collaborative art projects allow students to work together and promote social inclusion by developing empathy and teamwork between peers. Studies show that art-based approaches to teaching and learning create opportunities for all students to become engaged with the content and demonstrate their understanding of the material in ways beyond traditional classroom methods (Stephens & Walkup, 1999).

Some examples of how art integration creates a safe space for all students to feel valued are found in students who have been historically marginalized from traditional educational

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environments. When students are provided with opportunities for emotional expression and creativity, it assists students in developing a sense of belonging and confidence.

c. Creativity and Critical Thinking

To promote creativity, art integration can encourage students to think outside the box and view a problem from different perspectives. Arts-based activities allow students to actively explore and experiment rather than just memorizing facts and information, as with traditional rote-learning techniques.

For example, visual arts projects often require students to make decisions about colour, composition, and symbolism—skills that translate into critical thinking abilities applicable across disciplines. Similarly, the performing arts, such as drama or music, challenge students to interpret abstract ideas and communicate them effectively (Goodman, 2016).

Art also promotes critical thinking by allowing students to question societal norms and explore complex issues through art as a form of inquiry. For example, when students participate in interdisciplinary art projects on environmental sustainability or social justice, they can create original analyses of real-world problems while gaining a deeper understanding of each subject (Templeton World Charity Foundation, n.d.).

d. Emotional Development

The second commonality among these themes is that art supports students emotionally. Art provides students with an avenue to express their emotions and create coping mechanisms. Artistic means of expression create safe, nurturing, and nonjudgmental environments for students.

For example, when students engage in journaling through creative writing or artwork, they can process their emotions without fear of being judged. This can be especially beneficial to children who may be coping with stress or traumatic experiences. Studies have shown that when children engage in artistic activities, they experience lower anxiety and higher self-worth and emotional intelligence (Goodman, 2016).

In addition to building emotional awareness, collaborative art activities promote understanding and empathy for others by helping people see life from different point of view. Group performance (e.g., theatre) and collaborative community mural-making (e.g., public art) require individuals to collaborate and reach consensus to fulfil their performance or create the public art piece. This collaborative process builds trust and teamwork, which are important skills in all areas of life, not just within the four walls of a traditional learning environment.

e. Educator Preparation and Continuing Education

For art-integrated pedagogy to be successfully executed through creative instructional approaches, a well-prepared and comfortable educator must implement each approach. Much of the literature continues to call for ongoing professional development in creative instructional strategies for teachers to develop their instructional skills in the arts and to implement these strategies in their instructional approach to teaching.

A considerable number of teachers express hesitancy to implement arts-based learning approaches due to a lack of preparation or confidence in the arts. By attending professional development workshops or training sessions focused on interdisciplinary strategies, teachers

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can develop a collection of practical approaches to using the arts in their classroom instruction (Stephens & Walkup, 1999). In addition, by using creative instructional methods in the classroom, teachers gain personal fulfilment as they apply them in their own lives.

Several empirical findings suggest that implementing creative techniques into the teaching process helps prevent teacher burnout by providing engaging, enjoyable teaching sessions (Goodman, 2016).

f. Technology Integration

Technology integration into arts education is another theme that continues to receive increasing attention. Some digital tools (e.g., VR, AR, AI) create opportunities to enhance arts education by enabling students to explore the arts in innovative ways. An example of how students use technology to explore their art is through VR, where they can engage in a variety of artistic experiences across galleries and immersive environments. AI-based platforms can give students feedback specific to their artistic creations or projects in both creative writing and visual arts.

Digital media tools provide students with opportunities for experimenting with animation, video editing, and graphic design (Tung, 2023, in Product of design, 2025). These technologies not only expand the possibilities for artistic expression but also prepare students for careers in creative industries where digital literacy is essential.

Table 3: Recurring Themes in Art-Integrated Pedagogy

Theme	Key Features	Examples
Interdisciplinary Learning	Bridges disciplines and fosters a holistic understanding.	Agar art blending microbiology with the visual arts; drama reenacting historical events
Inclusivity Through Art	Promotes accessibility and supports diverse learning needs	Visual arts for learners with special needs: collaborative mural projects that foster social inclusion.
Creativity & Critical Thinking	Encourages innovation and develops problem-solving skills	Symbolic painting; performing arts that explore abstract ideas.
Emotional Development	Provides therapeutic outlets and builds resilience	Journaling for self-expression; group performances that promote empathy.
Teacher Training	Focus on professional development and 0 educators with creative tools.	Workshops on interdisciplinary teaching strategies are designed to reduce teacher burnout.
Technological Integration	Leverages digital tools for enhanced artistic expression	VR gallery tours; AI feedback on creative writing; animation projects using digital media

5. Art-Based Learning for Special Needs Students: Cognitive and Academic Benefits:

The use of art as a learning method has many advantages, including the development of cognitive skills such as memory, problem-solving, and critical thinking (Hallam & Creech, 2010). It has been demonstrated that structured art programming benefits children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) by improving focus and reinforcing the learning process (Evans & Dubowski, 2001). Likewise, the visual and performing arts provide

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avenues for supporting literacy and numeracy skills in children diagnosed with learning disorders, such as dyslexia and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (Warren, 2008).

Emotional and Social Development:

Art can be used as a means of communication that helps reduce anxiety and boost the child's overall well-being (Malley & Silverstein, 2014). Drama therapy increases self-confidence and social communication among children with special needs (Goldstein, 2017). It is important to note that music therapy is highly effective in developing social communication among children with ASD (Geretsegger et al., 2014).

Developing Motor & Sensory Skills:

Many art activities will enhance fine motor skills in young children with physical disabilities (Oreck, 2004). Examples of such activities include painting and sculpting; dance and movement therapy develop coordination and enhance spatial awareness in young children with cerebral palsy (Dunphy et al., 2019). Additionally, sensory-based art activities will assist students with sensory processing disorder by helping them regulate their responses to sensory stimuli (Case-Smith & Arbesman, 2008).

CONCLUSION

The benefits of art-integrated learning (AIL) as a means of promoting inclusivity in classrooms include improvement in students' cognitive skills (writing, critical thinking, etc.), emotional resilience (Self-regulation, self-esteem), and social skills (teamwork, cooperation). Furthermore, AIL empowers teachers through new and inventive approaches to teaching. Grounded in India's rich and diverse cultural heritage and informed by policy reforms such as NEP 2020, AIL has the potential to transform education throughout India.

Achieving this vision will require a long-term commitment to investing in teacher professional development, adequate resources (e.g. space, supplies, equipment), and engaging communities. Through the adoption of AIL as one of their primary pedagogical methods, educators can develop positive, inclusive, culturally responsive classroom environments that value and respect diversity and build the skills necessary for success in an ever-evolving global society.

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Conflict of Interest

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