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Intermedia and interculturalism: practitioners' perspectives on an interactive theatre for young ethnic minority students in Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports findings from a case study of an interactive theatre for young ethnic minority pupils in Hong Kong. Drawing upon Higgins's (1966) notion of 'intermedia' as a configurational principle, this creative project entails collaboratively-designed performances with elements of drama, music, dance, puppetry, and language learning principles. This study explores – from practitioners' perspectives – the pedagogical affordances of this intermedia-inspired collaborative project in early childhood settings targeting culturally diverse groups in Hong Kong. Qualitative findings emerging out of autoethnographic reflections of five practitioners, complemented with nonparticipant observation, have pointed to the emergence of an interculturalist gestalt in dialogue with an intermedial configuration. We argue that this opens up spaces for artistic participation and learning beyond language(s) in the early years through tapping into the pedagogical potentials of this creative project. Qualitative data also suggest that practitioners' abilities to exercise flexibility and openness in response to an intermedial configuration have a mediating effect. Concluding remarks are made of the under-utilisation of intermedia as a boundary-destabilising and configurational principle in arts-based endeavours, and as a pedagogical principle in which multimodal and multisensory learning is embraced as the way forward, with insights drawn from cultural democracy and culturally responsive pedagogy.

KEYWORDS

Intermedia; theatre for early years; arts-based interventions; artistic participation; autoethnography

呢個個案研究借鑒咗 Higgins (1966) 嘅「跨媒介」概念，用合作設計表演，由五位藝術家嘅角度探索跨媒介協作實踐，同埋嘍多元文化幼兒教育嘅啟示。非參與式觀測同自傳式民族誌嘅質性研究顯示跨文化格式塔同跨媒介設定之間存在住對話空間。研究認為呢個對話空間嘍跨越幼兒語言學習障礙度，冇拓展藝術參與嘅潛力，同時亦顯示實踐者嘅靈活性同開放性對跨媒介設定嘅調解作用。研究最後提出多元模式同多元感官嘅跨媒介藝術學科嘅教學應用。

Introduction

In recent years, arts-based interventions have been gaining momentum as a principal form of empirical methodology (see Bradley et al., 2018; Yuen, 2016); therapy (see Jennings, 2010; Sellers, 2013); professional training (see Kohn, 2011; Shapiro & Hunt, 2003; Skye et al., 2014); and learning pedagogy (see Finneran & Anderson, 2019). Such interest in the potentialities of creative modes

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relates in part to the general dissatisfaction with reified essences and boundaries of the existing *modus operandi*, and a broader interest in emancipation and social justice associated with non-essentialist and relationally responsible modes of communication and meaning-making. While existing attention to the application of creative practices for aforementioned purposes has fructified the soil for more innovative synthesis and creative endeavours, we argue that more research efforts remain necessary to further establish and flesh out the theoretical linkages across disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, responding to the common plea for transdisciplinary collaboration. This is particularly true of creative approaches which are actively seeking to destabilise boundaries mechanistically set between genres and bring them into a dialogue in furtherance of ‘open[ing] up new horizons for the artist[s] or [their] viewers, listeners, or readers’ (Higgins, 2001, p. 53). Exploring this body of creative practices not only advances an understanding of the processes involved in these de-essentialising endeavours but also has the advantages of feeding into the onto-epistemological lens through which we conceptualise existing arts-based efforts and, potentially, recognising the vestiges of dialogicality immanent in these efforts.

With these in mind, the central motivation of this study is to explore autoethnographic perspectives – complemented with nonparticipant observation – on a collaboratively-designed interactive theatre targeting language minority children in a world-city setting, problematising it both as a creative intermedium and an intercultural event. Furthermore, we frame the theatre, especially interactive ones for the early years, as a site of ‘explicit’ creative expressions, heeding Wells’s (2018) call to step up research efforts to explore the potentials in these ‘explicit’ creative activities alongside ‘everyday’ counterparts. In what follows, we will briefly review the literature pertaining to the concept of ‘intermedia’, argue for its utility as a sensitising device with which to configure arts-based endeavours, and specifically highlight its onto-epistemological relevance to Theatre for Early Years (TEY). Qualitative findings presented afterwards are concerned with the emergence of a perceived interculturalist gestalt that opens up spaces for communication and understanding, shedding exploratory light on an intermedia-conscious theatre project for ethnic minority groups.

Intermediality and creative practices

In a landmark 1966 essay, Dick Higgins popularised the notion of ‘intermedia’ as a referent for inter-disciplinary creative practices that ‘fall between media’ and genres (Higgins, 2001, p. 49). ‘Intermedia’ as a term captures the zeitgeist of the 1960s and 1970s where experimental art performances (e.g. Fluxus artists) proliferated and intermedia-oriented fine arts training programmes mushroomed across North America. Despite its evocation of a fairly recent artistic movement, intermedia is acknowledged as ‘a possibility since the most ancient times’ (Higgins, 2001, p. 52). Higgins (2001) furthermore distinguished between ‘mixed media’ and ‘intermedia’ without privileging either – the former refers to medial combinations and juxtapositions, whereas the latter entails a sort of conceptual fusion and medial transformation. Together, the fleshing out of the concept of ‘intermedia’, as Higgins took pains to point out, serves not to uphold a prescriptive artistic movement, but to make an onto-epistemological point and spotlight the immanency of intermediality in certain types of creative practices that yield new sensitivities. In recent decades, research exploring inter-disciplinary creative practices has been gaining ground especially in English- and German-speaking academic circles, notably the rise of Interarts Studies and Intermediality Studies (see Clüver, 2009).

Given increased attention to the concept of intermedia and medial/generic hybridity across various disciplines and contexts, Rajewsky (2005) contends that the label ‘intermediality’ has acquired definitional nuances that warrant further unpacking, opining:

If the use of intermediality as a category for the description and analysis of particular phenomena is to be productive, we should, therefore, distinguish groups of phenomena, each of which exhibits a distinct intermedial quality. (p.50)

Rajewsky (2005) expounds on intermediality as (i) *medial transposition* which concerns the transformation of a media product (e.g. a book) into another medium (e.g. a film); (ii) *medial combination* in which conventionally distinct medial forms (e.g. dance and music) are combined to ‘contribute to the constitution and signification of the entire product in their specific way’ (p.52), which is closely linked to Higgins’s delimitation between ‘intermedia’ and ‘mixed media’; and (iii) *intermedial references* where cross-medial/generic references are made in one principal form of articulation to others (e.g. references in film to painting). This categorisation helpfully clears up potential terminological confusion, building a solid theoretical substratum for future explorations of intermedial forms of articulation. These sub-categories are not mutually exclusive and can be simultaneously embodied in a single media product. As far as theatrical modes of creative practice are concerned, the ways different medial forms of articulation and engagement are constellated and integrated (i.e. medial combination) have figured prominently as an empirical phenomenon. Particularly, as regards TEY, where different medial/generic forms are put together for an overall multisensory and multimodal experience, understanding the role of media combination in TEY productions proves theoretically significant.

Intermediality as constitutive of an intercultural pedagogy: the case of theatre for early years

TEY is a fairly recent arena of the theatre, first emerging as a European phenomenon in the late 1970s (Fletcher-Watson, 2018; van de Water, 2012) and then ramifying across the globe since the 1990s (Miles & Nicholson, 2019). Despite its coincidence with the experimentalist rise of intermedial art around the same period, the theoretical link between TEY and intermediality is rarely articulated, much less explored. One probable explanation lies in TEY as predominantly practice-led action in the making, where ‘no coherent dramaturgy has yet been described in a genre barely three decades old’ (Fletcher-Watson, 2013, p. 130). Yet, with existing research increasingly spotlighting the interdisciplinarity inherent in TEY (e.g. Hovik, 2019; Kapstein & Goldstein, 2019), and recent theorisation reconceptualising artistic performances as fundamentally pedagogical (e.g. Ellsworth, 2005; Miles & Nicholson, 2019), we contend that the time is ripe for a retrospective recognition of intermediality as a fundamental design element that constitutes TEY’s pedagogical force, and an exploration of intermediality as a potentially illuminating prism through which TEY performances can be rethought.

The argument for approaching TEY as an intermedium is twofold. First, intermediality is increasingly recognised as an ontological condition of any cultural production. As Rajewsky (2005) observes, research emerging from the 1970s through the 1990s tended to conceptualise the construct of intermediality as a fundamental feature of a given medial event or product. Notably, Mitchell’s (2005, p. 260) proclamation that ‘all media are mixed media’ exemplifies such a theoretical standpoint, denoting an ontological departure from Higgins’s (2001) bifurcation into ‘mixed media’ and ‘intermedia’. Rooted to this relational conception of medial constellation is Bakhtinian dialogism which argues that things do not exist in isolation, but always in some form of relations with something else. In the case of TEY, where a range of artistic forms are usually purposefully brought together, the case for recognising intermediality as an underlying design element is apparent. Second, intermediality can also be understood as an epistemological means of giving materiality to a mode of learning that ‘can be found in relation, sensation and somatic knowledge’ (Miles & Nicholson, 2019, p. 276), paving the way for what Ellsworth (2005) theorises as ‘the experience of the learning self as a newness in the making’ (p. 36). This theoretical reconfiguration – grounded in Ellsworth’s (2005) synthesis of theoretical perspectives from Winnicott (1989), de Bolla (2001), and Massumi (2002) – does not deprecate a cognitivist, linguistic mode of learning traditionally found in the formal curriculum, but argues for an augmentation of the experiential repertoire accessible to the participants through alternative means of engagement. To promote this mode of sensational and somatic knowledge, Ellsworth (2005) advises, *inter alia*, attending

to ‘how an environment holds stabilising dynamics such as habit, foundations, and already-achieved “knowledge” with *flexibility* [emphasis in original]’ (p. 32). This standpoint undoubtedly dovetails with the potentiality of intermedial configuration in a given artistic event/product.

Taken together, this onto-epistemological recognition of intermediality endows TEY researchers with the basic vocabulary to acknowledge its unique pedagogical force, while building upon Fletcher-Watson’s (2013) attempt to theorise the praxis behind TEY productions. Furthermore, this attempt to connect intermediality to TEY draws strength from a burgeoning strand of trans-languaging studies that argue for a fluid conception of meaning construction (see Blackledge & Creese, 2017; Bradley et al., 2018; Garcia & Otheguy, 2020; Li, 2018; Lou, 2020); and the established artistic traditions of collage and bricolage, Bakhtinian thoughts on dialogism and polyphony, as well as the general gravitation towards ‘inter-’ as the preferred prefixation of research constructs (e.g. intertextuality). Especially in culturally and linguistically diverse, early-childhood settings, ecological configurations that allow for flexible emergence of meaning-making and experience constitute an intercultural axiology that is also pedagogical (see also Huertas-Abril & Gómez-Parra, 2018). Affordances of interactivity and multimodality through an intermedia-conscious approach to TEY are a mainstay of the interculturally responsible formation of the learning self.

The study

Research context

The present study was carried out in post-1997 Hong Kong. What with colonial legacy and global migrancy, and in keeping with other low-conflict urban settings such as London (see Li & Teixeira, 2007 for a fuller discussion), Hong Kong is experiencing what Vertovec (2007, 2010) and others (e.g. Blommaert, 2013; Phillimore, 2015) have theorised as superdiversity. Over the past decade, there has been an increase of roughly 70% in ethnic minority populations (Census and Statistics Department, 2017). Coincidental with this demographic change, an official language policy of ‘Biliteracy and Trilingualism’ /loeng5 man4 saam1 jyu5/ (兩文三語) has been pursued, valorising the statuses of Cantonese, English, and Putonghua (i.e. trilingualism) and the written codes (i.e. English and Chinese, biliteracy). The increased emphasis on the Chinese language, which breaks with pre-handover Hong Kong’s policy of diglossic bilingualism (Gao, 2011), corresponds to postcolonial Hong Kong being a predominantly Chinese society with a sizable Cantonese-speaking population (Census and Statistics Department, 2017; Law & Lee, 2012; Loper, 2004). Yet one unexpected consequence, *inter alia*, is that this city’s linguistically and culturally diverse groups are struggling to acquire to learn Chinese – i.e. Cantonese paired with traditional Chinese characters in the context of Hong Kong – as an additional language (CAL) (see Tsang, 2020). It is against this backdrop that various efforts, both governmental (e.g. Education Bureau, 2017) and non-governmental (e.g. advocacy work by Hong Kong Unison; a cross-institutional early childhood initiative, *C-for-Chinese@JC*, funded by The Hong Kong Jockey Club Charitable Trust), are directed towards the problem of CAL, particularly the missions of early integration and intervening in the early years. Taken together, postcolonial Hong Kong is an ideal testing ground for the intersection between creative practices and intercultural communication in the early years, especially the ethical and relationally responsible learning of Chinese/Cantonese as a majority language. We also argue that the context of Hong Kong contributes to existing scholarship with a non-Anglophone perspective.

The Project and its programmes

The Project was developed in homage to the long lineage of TEY productions in western contexts (see Finneran & Anderson, 2019). Core to the Project are five practitioners who assume various roles in delivering the programmes (see Table 1).

Table 1. Practitioners.

Practitioners	Sex	Age	Ethnicities	Native languages	Educational backgrounds	Roles in the project	Years of experience
Practitioner A	F	30–35	Chinese	Cantonese	M.A. and B.Ed. in Music Education	Music Director	10+
Practitioner B	F	30–35	Chinese	Cantonese	M.A. in Dramaturgy	Actress; Artistic Director	10+
Practitioner C	F	25–30	Canadian	English	M.A. in Dramaturgy	Puppeteer	5+
Practitioner D	F	25–30	Chinese	Cantonese	Certificate in Stage Management	Stage Manager	5+
Practitioner E	F	20–25	Chinese	Cantonese and English	B.A. in Acting	Actress; Choreographer	5+

Practitioners A and B have been working together to devise theatre shows for years. During their postgraduate studies in London, they met practitioner C and together they identified the need to introduce an engaging platform ethnic minority students with language learning in mind. These three practitioners first piloted the Project in London in the autumn of 2018, aiming to serving young English-as-an-Additional-Language learners (aged between three and six) from Cantonese-speaking families. From the pilot run, preliminary insights regarding how the future programmes could be structured and presented to young children were garnered, with modifications accordingly made vis-à-vis collective reflections. Prominent themes that arose from these early evaluations included: (i) practitioners' openness towards a plurimedial approach to the design of the programmes for young ethnic minority learners; (ii) their keenness to actively acknowledge the intermediality therein with the incorporation of various relational and semiotic elements. Around the summer of 2019, practitioners D and E who have extensive experience in dance-related and technical arts joined the crew and refined the project further. The Project was run for roughly two weeks in Hong Kong with groups of ethnic minorities children from families of South and Southeast Asian heritage (i.e. CAL learners) across the city. Since then, the Project participated in a series of similar performances in both milieux, including but not limited to Chinese Arts Now 2019 and 2020, West Kowloon Young Fellows Scheme. The programmes are run in a range of local venues (e.g. school halls, community centres, kindergartens, and theatrical spaces) and usually last around 45 mins with the encouragement of parents and/or caretakers as chaperones. Regarding a comparative account of the Project vis-à-vis its implementation in two world-city settings, please refer to Tsang et al. (*in press*).

The debut programme designed revolved around a central character called *Boh Boh*, which is a puppet operated by a professional puppeteer (i.e. Practitioner C). *Boh Boh* is an extraterrestrial being who goes on an adventure in the galaxy. Two actresses in costumes are positioned as fellow adventurers with *Boh Boh*, while facilitating interactive and somatic experiences throughout the programme. The narrative-driven arc of *Boh Boh* visiting a planet (i.e. the theatre) where everyone looks the same, finding his uniqueness as the plot unfolds, and realising the uniqueness of everybody observes a classical dramaturgical structure. The programme is such plurimedially configured that a series of somatic (i.e. dancing; Total Physical Response, Asher, 1966, 1969, 1996), interactive (i.e. participatory mode of theatre, cf. reception-based; see also Gattenhof & Irvine, 2019), musical (i.e. sound effects and singing), pedagogical (i.e. related the learning of Cantonese sounds and words), and affective (i.e. interacting with the puppet and other participants) experiences are planned throughout the entire programme. The programme is delivered in the medium of Cantonese, while respecting the fluidity of the multilingual realities in both Hong Kong and London. In sum, the design of the programme is purposeful, taking into consideration the available expertise of practitioners, needs and backgrounds of young children and their chaperones, intermedial configurations of TEY, and ecological features of the performing venues.

Data collection and analysis

This present study focuses on the data collected from the summer of 2019 up until the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic around spring 2020. Given the emergent nature of a TEY start-up, the team

settled on the use of autoethnography as a fitting methodology of reflecting on and documenting the creative journeys involved in the development of a series of TEY programmes. With autoethnography, we did not aspire to offer an in-depth account of effective TEY procedures and strategies in diverse settings, nor did we attempt to examine the impact of TEY on certain learning outcomes in an experimental sense. Instead, we are interested in exploring the creative process through a grounded approach, or a ‘wide-angle lens’ as Ellis (2008, p. 48) phrases it, that allows an emic and reflexive perspective on creative work in intercultural contexts. This autoethnographic approach enables the team to fluidly home in on various aspects lived by the practitioners (i.e. full insiders), honouring creative praxis as it dynamically emerges out of an action-reflection-action loop within an indeterminate zone (see Schön, 1983). Autoethnographic data were collected in the form of open-ended written entries and performance diaries on various aspects of the TEY production, including not but limited to intermediality. For triangulation purposes, autoethnographic data were further complemented by nonparticipant observation. In this regard, reflexive entries made during – and systematised after – observational sessions were admitted as part of the analysable data.

Both strands of qualitative data were first explored holistically through attention to recurring keywords and phrases from initial reading, then coded and categorised within an iterative process of identifying patterns from practitioners’ autoethnographic reflection, and finally thematised so as to present an integrated perspective on the phenomenon under exploration. Recognising that data analysis is an intersubjective process, the authors pursued the aforementioned analytical steps independently and discussed over interpretative discrepancies. This article presents a sub-section of the findings that relate the TEY feature of intermediality as an intrinsic quality in a dynamic relationship with both human and nonhuman variables, highlighting the role of plurimedial configuration in the enablement of relational variables (e.g. interactivity and translanguaging) giving materiality to an immersive TEY experience, and a dialogic gestalt that accentuates values of co-construction and reciprocity.

Findings

Intermediality and the enablement of a dialogic platform

First and foremost, findings point to TEY’s unquestionable status as an overall intermedium in the making, with TEY practitioners in this study characterising intermediality as an intrinsic feature woven into the TEY genre. What is worth noting is that practitioners are less inclined to ponder on the onto-epistemological nature of the extent to which medial forms are integrated. Instead, they tend to approach intermediality from a pragmatist standpoint, interpreting its utility vis-à-vis audience engagement and as a form of branding. For example, Practitioner E opines that the adoption of a hybridised approach to TEY productions has gained momentum recently:

Extract 1

It is quite common for theatre work to go into the interdisciplinary or mixed-genre approach during recent years - we hardly see a pure, straight theatre piece for children and I reckon this interdisciplinary/mixed-genre approach helps us to be more competitive in the market as we can cater [to] more kinds of audiences (parents and children) who have different expectations. (Practitioner E)

Here, the consciousness of the utility of the hybridised approach shapes the theatre group’s agency of reaching a wider audience. In particular, Practitioner E deems a theatrical production with a cocktail of disciplinary provenances and genres as more appealing in the marketplace. This line of thought is undergirded by the desire to cater to the diverse needs of children and their caretakers, which has also been echoed by Practitioners A and D:

Extract 2

I think a mixed approach provides a wider platform for interaction. There are different learning modalities. Having a mixed genres approach can ensure we address the diversified needs of the audiences. (Practitioner A)

Extract 3

[A] mixed genres approach [is] more attractive to children. Children pay more attention during the performance. Even if the children are only to be attracted [to] one of art forms, the performance still attracts them due to its diversity in form. (Practitioner D)

From both extracts, the TEY feature of bringing together different medial forms of articulation and engagement is perceived as a constituent part of a platform for interaction, for honouring different learning modalities, and for catering to learner diversity. Practitioners' agentic adoption of medial hybridisation can be understood as a de-essentialising endeavour that integrates medial forms and disciplinary traditions, tapping into specific learning modalities and semiotic resources. In doing so, this endeavour caters to diverse learning preferences and needs, rather than privileging a dominant mode of preference. Taken together, the net effect of weaving the fabric of intermediality into the TEY genre is a tapestry of intercultural possibilities and rich dialogicality:

Extract 4

For our workshops with ethnic minority kids in Hong Kong, we have invited some ethnic Chinese kids as ambassadors. Seeing them playing and dancing together sharing food, teaching each other their mother tongues is the most beautiful thing ever. (Practitioner A)

In Extract 4, Practitioner A remarks on the potentiality of intermediality in enabling learners of both majority and minority backgrounds to participate in an artistic experience. They interact with one another through playing, dancing, food-sharing, and chatting. The interaction between both groups – by way of a dialogic, participatory space mediated by such TEY features as an intermedial configuration and the fall of a fourth wall – promotes intercultural understanding through co-participation in and co-construction of an artistic experience.

Extract 5

The programme is clearly marked by an eclectic admixture of music, dance, drama, puppetry, and mini language learning episodes. This intrinsic aspect of the programme is dialogic in manifestation, and goes beyond learning as a kind of compliance. Participants are no longer demanded to abide by some sort of theatre etiquette or to sit passively, but are invited to take on an exploratory journey with the central plot, their voice, their movement, the performers, their parents, and the neighbouring children. (Fieldnotes)

Overall, as revealed by fieldnotes in Extract 5, taking a hybridised approach to the medial composition of the TEY production is intrinsic in nature and is dialogic in manifestation, while allowing learning as a form of non-compliance (versus compliance; see also Ellsworth, 2005). As such, the metaphor of intermediality as a fabric is deemed apt here and recognises its dynamic relationship with other fabrics (e.g. the absence of the fourth wall) in the eventuation of a dialogic space that reaps the benefits of different learning modalities and semiotic resources, promotes intercultural communication, and celebrates young learners' exploratory instincts (rather than demanding compliance with rules and etiquettes).

Intermediality and the facilitation of learning besides and beyond language(s)

Furthermore, an intermedial configuration of TEY is connected to a form of learning besides and beyond the linguistic realm, celebrating what Ellsworth (2005, p. 27) theorises as a pedagogy of sensation which 'do[es] not address us as having bodies but rather address[es] us as bodies whose movement and sensations are crucial to our understandings'. This shift towards somatic and

sensational media and modalities valorises alternative modes of learning, tapping into young children's full meaning-making repertoires. For example, the presence of various medial forms mediates the cultivation of the body:

Extract 6

The show was about to start, and parents asked their children to sit properly. Yet, when music started, children simply couldn't resist moving along with the music. A moving body in drama show is typically regarded as disruptive and not respecting the performers. However, during our show, children were being invited to move along with music. The body is cultivated towards movement for expressive purposes. They have also been able to associate the movement with the Cantonese word during the show. (Practitioner A)

Practitioner A reveals that including music and dancing as part of the interactive theatre constitutes an invitation to cultivate somatic self-expression. Here, different medial forms of engagement enable pedagogical praxis that would have been otherwise restrained in its manifestation. In particular, bodily responses via dancing are no longer deemed disruptive and disciplinable, but they are respected as a possibility of self-expression and even language learning. Practitioner E makes a similar observation in somatic terms:

Extract 7

My movement skills can make the show more dynamic. My physical theatre/dance training background enables me to go through the story/entertain the audiences with our bodies and the relationship between human bodies and space. (Practitioner E)

In Extract 7, Practitioner E underscores the inclusion of bodily movements as a powerful medial form of articulation and engagement, suggesting that dance as a constituent medium in TEY has offered a source of body-mediated information that communicates the plot and expresses human emotions (see Sakata et al., 2010), while rendering the TEY production more dynamic in terms of modalities. This invitation to venture beyond 'learning as the acquisition of knowledge driven by cognitive functions' (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 28) holds potential for 'the "becoming pedagogical" of "expressive materials" distributed across' the TEY performance, as well as the actors therein (Rajchman, 2000, p. 121; as cited in Ellsworth, 2005). Accepting this invitation, as autoethnographic findings have revealed, is an experience imbued with affective and bodily meanings, as revealed by Extracts 8.1, 8.2, and 8.3:

Extract 8.1

I remember this girl from a special school in Hong Kong who cried because she didn't want *Boh Boh* to leave ... (Practitioner B)

Extract 8.2

Children readied their position for the dance when I played rocket song. I [could] feel their excitement. (Practitioner D)

Extract 8.3

One moving moment for me was ... being pregnant ... carrying my own baby in the womb and seeing all the parent-child interaction during the show ... (Practitioner A)

In Extract 8.1, Practitioner B recalls her encounter with a young child who turned emotional when it was time for *Boh Boh* the puppet to leave the stage. This episode offers anecdotal evidence of the extent to which young children can become emotionally invested in an artistic experience. In Extract 8.2, Practitioner D is a stage manager who chiefly handles sound effects and takes on a range of backstage duties. Children's visceral excitement at dancing – when the 'rocket song' was played – was palpable even from the backstage. In Extract 8.3, Practitioner A revealed the somatic experience of being pregnant while running the shows as a particularly moving moment for her, linking her bodily

transformation, as well as a body in the making, to the experience of bearing witness to meaning-making, both linguistic and non-linguistic (e.g. gestural use and emotional attunement), between parents and children. All these episodic instances suggest that the honouring of diverse learning modalities, mediated through an intermedial configuration, opens up a space where fluid meaning-making is encouraged, as the following observation from the field has touched upon:

Extract 9

Different genres were ever so carefully combined and crafted together that different means of expression – modalities! – are given equal opportunities to ‘shine through’ and create meaningful moments for both participants and practitioners. And with my training in applied linguistics where translanguaging is all the rage, I must say that what I have seen so far has captured the essence of this theoretical position. This coming together to artistic forms – enabling a melding of different sensory resources and modalities in one single artistic event – makes possible a space in which fluid meaning-making instincts are not ignored or held back, but are given the freedom to ‘go wild’ in a carnivalesque manner! (Fieldnotes)

In sum, this intermedia-mediated invitation to engage learning besides and beyond language(s) can be construed as an attempt to honour ‘the natural tendency to combine all available cognitive, semiotic, sensory, and modality resources’ in their meaning-making attempts (Li, 2016, p. 541), which takes on added significance in culturally and linguistically diverse, early-childhood settings (see also Garcia & Li, 2014). In this regard, an intermedial configuration has an intrinsic role to play in the opening up and celebration of a transitional space – material, experiential, and relational – where learning is extended and supported through diverse means of engagement.

Intermediality and the qualities of flexibility and openness

Last but not least, autoethnographic findings highlight the challenges posed by the adoption of an intermedial approach. These challenges require finesse on the part of the practitioner. In particular, practitioners’ abilities to stay flexible and open are essential to the extent to which the pedagogical benefits (e.g. opportunities for dialogism) of an intermedial approach to TEY.

Extract 10

Clearly, this approach has promises and perils. From what I observed, one peril concerns the destabilisation of boundaries between art forms, between performers and the audience, and even between cultures. This means the lack of a structure where control can be exerted, the lack of determinateness, and the lack of demand for compliance. These, from I can see, demand the performers to take a more fluid approach to performance. (Fieldnotes)

As the observation from field has revealed, the blurring of medial boundaries, as well as the fall of the fourth wall and cultural de-reification, is a challenge in the sense that performers relinquish certain control associated with traditional theatrical performances to engage the audience. This ceding of control is a prerequisite for the initiation of a bi-directional creative process co-constructed by the practitioners and young participants (and their chaperones). In order for this to happen, a more ‘fluid’ approach is required to serve as a *bridge* to access the learning opportunities immanent in an intermedial approach.

Instances of how taking a highly intermedial approach to TEY can be challenging abound in autoethnographic reflections. For example, in one of the programmes performed – *Boh Boh’s New Friends* – which revolves around *Boh Boh’s* journey around the universe, a group of young children took issue with the way *Boh Boh* was rejected by the King on a planet:

Extract 11

I remember the rebellious kids in one of our shows of *Boh Boh’s New Friends* in Hong Kong. They thought the King was too bad because he didn’t accept *Boh Boh* on his planet and they decided to have a revolution and

took away his crown. It was a challenge for me as a performer as I had to improvise to their action but it was very powerful for me to see the children were so involved in the show and had their own critical thinking. (Practitioner B)

In the face of these unexpected moments as part of a larger co-constructive process, Practitioner B touches on the idea of improvisation which can be construed as a multidimensional act of desisting from a predetermined medial sequence, understanding what the audience is adding to the scene, and making an appropriate response that upholds the general dialogic principle. Core to improvisation is the willingness to be flexible and stay open to detours and other possibilities in the emergence of the theatrical sequence, as suggested by Practitioner C:

Extract 12

I think that this mixed-genres approach is important to our style as a company. Not only does it allow all of us to utilize the training that we have, and to better ourselves in areas that we might not be as confident in, but it also helps us to engage our audiences in a variety of ways. *There is a sense of being open to working in all kinds of performance. There is also a potential for the experimentation with form to take us away from the company's initial credo ...* or that a show which does not use multiple genres will feel like an outlier to a cohesive body of work. I imagine it is something that will need to be considered as time goes on and more work is made. [emphasis added] (Practitioner C)

In the above extract, apart from highlighting the benefits of taking a mixed-genres approach to TEY, Practitioner C hints that practitioners' abilities to be open are essential to the full manifestation of an intermedial configuration. In other words, the pedagogical impact of incorporating intermediality in TEY is dependent on the extent to which practitioners can flexibly rise to the challenges posed by medial destabilisation. A similar observation has also been explicitly made from the field:

Extract 13

The curation of various art forms does not suffice on its own. It has to be 'activated' by some performer-internal (or performance-external) factors, like reflexivity, willingness to respond to the learners, a spirit of experimentation and improvisation, etc. All these require openness to a less determined and determinate mode of engagement. And this sense of openness constitutes the strength of this kind of early theatre pedagogy for young learners. (Fieldnotes)

From Extract 13, it is observed that the total strength of an intermedial approach to TEY consists in the synergy between an intermedial configuration and the presence of such performer-internal qualities as reflexivity and openness to experimentation. This perception recognises the importance of the practitioners' artistic repertoire (of which improvisation and reflexivity are part) in dialogue with an intermedial configuration as a tool, while acknowledging the fact that TEY is in essence an artistic experience dialogically constructed by both practitioners and young participants.

Discussion and conclusion

In the present study, five practitioners' autoethnographic reflections on intermediality as an inherent part of the configuration of a TEY production and its relations to other TEY features are explored in broad strokes, complemented by non-participant observation. Findings point to the utility of medial constellation as a *configurational feature* in the TEY genre, allowing a glimpse into the lived experiences of a team effort to actualise intermediality through specific medial arrangement. This curation of form is an attempt to destabilise established boundaries among forms of articulation and engagement distributed across the performance. Findings suggest that this formal feature has helped set up a dialogic platform for such functional features as cross-cultural exploration, artistic participation, and the engagement of alternative modes of learning. Findings also indicate that these functions can manifest themselves inasmuch as practitioners can

exercise openness and flexibility in a structurally fluid, intermedial space. Viewed together, the use of multiple art forms in TEY may set the scene for an interculturalist gestalt where participants from both majority and minority cultures are brought into contact with a non-assimilationist, de-essentialising ‘formula for coexistence in the context of diversity’ (Bouchard, 2011, p. 437). In this specific TEY programme for ethnic minorities in Hong Kong, such contact is promoted through (i) installing opportunities for interaction and co-construction, (ii) including various learning modalities for a fuller meaning-making experience, and (iii) heeding the role of flexibility and openness in an intermedially configured TEY programme.

Although this study is primarily intended as a small-scale exploratory study of a single TEY case over an extended period, it has implication for theory building (see Eisehardt & Graebner, 2007), or illuminating a potential TEY ‘dramaturgy’ as Fletcher-Watson (2013, 2018) puts it. We contend that medial configuration is a crucial design element of the TEY genre, and further argue that this intrinsic feature has usually been taken for granted in what many agree as a highly practice-led discipline. Given these, the present study contributes to the field of TEY by spotlighting the relevance of Higgins’s (1966) notion of ‘intermedia’ as an aesthetic principle where intermedial experimentation leads to greater artistic expressions, as a configurational principle where its affordances of dialogicality warrant further theorisation, and as a pedagogical principle where various learning modalities are embraced as means of engagement. Such principles pertaining to ‘intermedia’, when applied in diverse settings, hold great potential for an intercultural axiology: for example, they align with the idea of cultural democracy because an intermedial approach works against a monocultural framing of what is aesthetically and pedagogically acceptable, and invites active participation (see Adams & Goldbard, 1993; Arts Council England, 2018); for another example, they join forces with an established line of scholarly work on culturally responsive pedagogy (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Gay, 2002, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1994/2009; Rychly & Graves, 2012), where values of recognition and reciprocity can be structurally embedded in intermedially configured TEY.

Future research efforts can be directed towards two TEY areas. First, more focused research can be carried out in understanding the manifestation of intermediality in a moment-by-moment manner, highlighting how the potentialities of multimodal and multisensory resources are embedded in relation to the medial specificity of a certain TEY programme. Emic methods, such as conversation analysis, will be of use in this avenue. Second, empirical light can also be shone on how participants may benefit from participating in highly intermedially configured conditions and, by extension, how TEY can be further optimised in its configuration and implementation to cater more effectively to young learners’ interests and needs. In view of the urgent need to rethink existing early education (Christakis, 2016, 2020; Golinkoff & Hirsh-Pasek, 2016), as well as the UNESCO enshrinement of cultural entitlement and participation (Article 31, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child), increasing research attention to TEY can be construed as supplying a promising piece of the puzzle, allowing the field of TEY to move beyond a profusion of fragmented accounts of TEY know-how (Fletcher-Watson, 2013), endowing the field with the common vocabulary to articulate the knowledge and ethics that define it as a genre and pedagogy, and systematising the field’s rich repertoire of intermedial possibilities in furtherance of ethical and developmentally appropriate early education.

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