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A comparative case study of a DiE-inspired music and theatre project for linguistically and culturally diverse pupils in Hong Kong and London

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A COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY OF A DIE-INSPIRED MUSIC AND THEATRE PROJECT FOR LINGUISTICALLY AND CULTURALLY DIVERSE PUPILS IN HONG KONG AND LONDON

Samuel Chun Sum Tsang, Chi Ying Lam and Bonnie Yuen Yan Chan

Introduction

As arguably one of the most visible aspects of globalisation and transnationalism since the end of World War II, increased migration has been a common feature of life in the twenty-first century, especially in low-conflict urban settings (see also Li & Teixeira, 2007; Triandafyllidou, 2018). The resultant cultural and linguistic diversity, which Vertovec (2007, 2010) and others (e.g., Blommaert, 2013; Phillimore, 2015) have further theorised as superdiversity in world cities, forms the backdrop against which governments around the globe are attempting to cater for the needs of minority groups which are markedly different and present a range of public policy crises and ethical dilemmas. In tandem, the wider community also endeavours to respond to the challenges and opportunities such diversity presents, as well as the tensions normative governmental action – or the neglect, in some cases – may bring about. In this chapter, we will capitalise upon our experience of having run a Cantonese-based music and theatre project for minority groups in Hong Kong and London (both world-city settings), while adopting an autoethnographic lens through which we valorise the practitioners’ perspectives and lived experiences as they re-create the project with new anchors. We contend that taking an autoethnographic approach to the manifestation of a DiE pedagogy in two starkly different contexts not just offers important insights into the implementation of an alternative pedagogical mode for diverse learners in the early years but also highlights the emergence of a DiE community of practice committed to serving language-minority groups.

Background

Broadening the pedagogical lens for drama in education

When pedagogy is narrowly defined, misunderstandings of the nature of learning arise. In our study, we viewed pedagogy as constituting a fuller set of social interactions,
anything including the decisions made by the practitioner(s) and participants and the way the teacher(s) and/or facilitator(s) meet(s) the participants at their starting points and take(s) them on a journey, whatever that might be. In other words, pedagogy, when conceptualised broadly, underscores the necessity and flexibility to meet learners at their starting points while acknowledging their individual learning needs (Henley, 2015). This definition enables us to reconceptualise a DiE pedagogy as part of a larger transformative learning process, instead of a unidirectional, narrowly framed approach with a singular pedagogical focus.

It is widely acknowledged that infusing performing arts – which are understood as a multisensory and multimodal endeavour imbued with aural, visual, spatial, and linguistic elements – in formal curricula has been empirically documented to confer various benefits. These include fostering learners’ creativity (Yeh & Li, 2008; Duncan, 2010); boosting motivation to learn (Dicks & Le Blanc, 2009; Darlington, 2010); enhancing perspective-taking and empathic abilities among learners (Yassa, 1999); supporting language learning (Brice Heath, 1993; Wagner, 1998; Cremin, Goouch, Blakemore, Goff & Macdonald, 2006; Chien, 2014); and facilitating the learning of content subjects (Chan, 2009; Kang, 2010). Understandably, there exists a series of reforms, especially for the early years, that requires schools to promote the use of theatre techniques in formal education (Lin, 2010; Hui, Chow, Chan, Chui & Sam, 2014), as well as government-funded research initiatives to probe the potential of harnessing performing arts pedagogically (Education Bureau, 2010).

As touched upon briefly above, a DiE pedagogy champions multimodality and offers a unitary experience that immerses learners, through different senses and semiotic resources. For example, as is especially true of the early years, music intertwined with language often has a constitutive role in a DiE pedagogy. According to Gardner (1993), musical intelligence is the first intelligence to emerge among young learners. It is very common to see children hum naturally and follow along to a tune. Hill-Clarke and Robinson (2003) also state that music can improve listening and oral-language skill development, improve attention and memory, and enhance abstract thinking. Woodall and Ziembroski (2002) suggest that building upon young children’s musical interests can enhance their literacy development. The repeated patterns in songs help children to learn patterned phrases which later become meaningful concepts, forming their communicative repertoires. Some might argue that nursery rhymes, usually repetitive in nature, might distort word order and intonation to satisfy their melodic requirements (York, 2011). However, for tonal languages such as Cantonese, under investigation in this study, pitch variations represent contrasting word meanings. Careful attention to the musicality of the melody can valorise the salience of tones in the lyrics. Moreover, drama can help contextualise the song, which minimises the linguistic demand on young learners to comprehend lyrics.

Taken together, as Stinson and Winston (2011) have observed, drama as a form of pedagogy boasts a wide spectrum of dramatic action ranging from text interpretation, role-plays, and improvisation to process drama. Take process drama as an example, the dramatic process aims to ‘create an experience through which students may come to understand human interactions, empathize with other people, and internalize other points of view’ (Wagner, 1998, p. 5), attempting to present an alternative to the highly controlled form of dramatic experience through engaging teachers/practitioners and students/participants into an empathetic and interactive encounter. All in all, the dramatic action becomes an organic process through which interactions and learning happen in a multisensory, multimodal, and even democratic way.
Interfacing between drama in education and second-language acquisition

With respect to the use of drama/theatre with students who are learning a new language, Pross (1986) is among the first to link second-language acquisition theories with drama as pedagogy—it extensively referenced Cummins’s framework of language development, which posits common underlying proficiency for both the first and second languages, as well as a distinction between ‘communicative competence within and outside the academic environment’ (Pross, 1986, p. 35). In Cummins’s (2000) more recent work, a theoretical model (Figure 28.1) recommends collaborative empowerment of language-minority students. He posits that educators play a major role in forming either coercive or collaborative relations with language-minority students—it is only when collaborative relations are formed that academic successes and personal empowerment can be possible for language-minority students. Within the DiE tradition, process drama, as aforementioned, is an ideal candidate for bringing about such collaborative relations: first, intuitively, engaging in drama requires collaboration, and process drama in particular

![Figure 28.1 Cummins’s (2000) intervention of collaborative empowerment](image-url)
promotes deep engagement among learners and the teacher/facilitator; second, the dramatic action usually involves teacher-in-role, which O’Toole (2009) considers a unique feature that presents opportunities to subvert a traditional, built-in infrastructure of teacher authority.

Overall, the theoretical basis of this paper is premised on the potentialities of a DiE project as part of a larger transformative pedagogy targeting language-minority learners and enriching their language-learning experiences. The use of performing arts (e.g., Stern, 1980; Smith, 1984; Pross, 1986; Gill, 1996, 2007) and literature (e.g., Martino & Sabato, 2014) in language education has had a long history, reflected in the ample research briefly highlighted above. Yet, most of this literature pertains to the learning of English as a second language or lingua franca. This, obviously, points to a research gap in the existing literature with regard to how performing arts have been employed from the ground up as a means to empower second/foreign language learners of a language other than English (i.e., Cantonese, a tonal and logographic language). Furthermore, while there has been a consistent stream of empirical work since the 1990s in UK and North American settings (see Cummins, 2005; Anderson, 2008; August & Shanahan, 2017), which has documented the plight of language-minority youth and offered theoretical explanations as to why they consistently lag behind students who speak the majority languages as native languages, more still needs to be done empirically to specify an interculturally responsible and axiologically humanistic pedagogy targeting this particular segment of students in mainstream schooling. In view of this, the current study narrows this knowledge gap by exploring the development and implementation of DiE pedagogy in a music and theatre project for migrant-background learners who wish to learn Cantonese as a majority language and as a heritage language (HL) in the early years.

Research contexts

In the age of increased mobility, migration has become increasingly common not only in industrialised Western countries but also in traditionally homogeneous Asian societies, to which Hong Kong, the locale under investigation, belongs. The description below provides the two contexts selected for the comparative study.

The language under focus: Cantonese

Cantonese, the focus language in the present study, forms the linguistic backbone through which comprehension of the plot and interaction throughout the dramatic action can be achieved. Cantonese is a prestige variety of Chinese commonly used in southern and south-eastern China. In Hong Kong, the official language policy of ‘two written languages and three spoken codes’ (Yip & Matthews, 2010) has valorised Cantonese as one of the spoken varieties that local students should master by the time they graduate from secondary education. As mentioned above, linguistically, Cantonese is a tonal language – there are nine tones in total. The non-entering tones include two level tones, two rising tones, and two falling tones. As well, there are three entering tones which are also tones that occur in shortened form in syllables that end with voiceless stops; these are sometimes referred to as leading tones (Lee, Ching, Chan, Cheng & Mak, 1995). For example, the Cantonese syllable /oi/ means ‘sadness’ when spoken in a high-level and high-falling tone, and ‘love’ when spoken in a medium-level tone. Another example is the Cantonese syllable /si/, which means ‘poetry’ when spoken in a high-level and high-falling tone and ‘history’ when spoken in a
medium-rising tone. Researchers have shown the complex tonal system in Cantonese may pose difficulties for non-tonal language speakers to perceive and reproduce.

**Hong Kong**

Although Hong Kong shares similar socioeconomic make-up with an industrialised, Western metropolis such as London and is reputed for its status as an international financial hub and 'Asia’s World City', post-1997 Hong Kong remains a predominantly Chinese society with a sizable Cantonese-speaking population (Loper, 2004; Kennedy, 2006; Law & Lee, 2012). With colonial legacy and a recent increase in immigration, Hong Kong is experiencing a rapid growth in ethnic minority populations. Over the past decade, there has been a surge of 70% in the population of ethnic minorities, from 342,195 in 2006 to 584,383 in 2016 (Census and Statistics Department, 2017). In total, according to the latest population by-census, this fastest-growing population of ethnic minorities accounts for 8% of the overall population of Hong Kong. It should also be noted that this group is tremendously diverse, mostly of south and southeast Asian origin, representing various languages, ethnicities, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Notably, language-minority students from this population are plagued by piecemeal Chinese-language provision and segregated schooling, as widely reported by the press (*New York Times*, 2013; *South China Morning Post*, 2014, 2015a, 2015b; *BBC*, 2015), statutory bodies (Legislative Council, 2015, 2016; Equal Opportunities Commission, 2017), academia (Loper, 2004; Kennedy & Hue, 2011), and non-governmental organisations (Yang Memorial Methodist Social Service, 2000; Save the Children Hong Kong, 2003; Hong Kong Unison, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2017). In order to fully participate in Hong Kong society, language-minority students need to acquire spoken Cantonese and written Chinese literacy for higher education and future employment.

**London**

HL proficiency confers developmental benefits. However, the onset of HL loss is observed among many young children from immigrant families (Park, Tsai, Liu & Lau, 2012). In the 1950s, agricultural workers from the New Territories of Hong Kong emigrated to the United Kingdom, and there was a further wave of immigration after the handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997 (Li, 1994). Li (1994) shows that a shift in language use can be seen over three generations. The older generation has remained monolingual (non-English-speaking), the middle generation has Cantonese as a first language but uses English in various circumstances, and English is the dominant language of the younger generation. Chinese children spend most of their time with English speakers, and their main language of communication is English. One possible reason for this phenomenon might be immigrant parents feeling compelled to discourage their children’s use of HL in the home domain because of fears that their children will be at a scholastic or economic disadvantage if they are not fluent in English (Vongs, 2006). Yet, the importance of retaining or developing HL proficiency has been shown to help with positive developmental outcomes, such as third identity, which, in turn, has benefits for emotional adjustment. Furthermore, the value of HL proficiency is increasingly recognised in multicultural societies and the globalised marketplace, where bilingualism and multilingualism are important assets. In London, many choose to attend London Chinese complementary schools (Wang, 2014). In these somewhat non-formal and informal settings, pupils are usually grouped according to ability, not age (Mau et al., 2009).
Methodology

The project

The project was first piloted in London in the autumn of 2018, aiming to serve young children (aged from three to six years) from Cantonese-speaking families. They are classed as Cantonese-as-a-heritage-language learners, officially referred to as Chinese-as-additional-language learners in Britain. The pilot study provided some preliminary directions with regards to how future programmes could be structured and presented to young children. The prototypical design revealed some potential constraints of the project including tiredness, overstimulation, too much adult control, and the incomprehensibility of certain activities for young children. Based on the pilot programme, modifications were made which included re-designing interactive elements, minimising the number of songs, and incorporating non-verbal activities such as free dance moves and drama games into the show.

Around the summer of 2019, the project was then adjusted and re-run in Hong Kong with a group of ethnic minority children (also aged three to six) from families of South and Southeast Asian heritage. In the spring of 2020, we undertook a series of similar performances in London as part of an arts festival. The language level of the student participants in both contexts varied, ranging from native-speaking children to those with very limited oracy. In both contexts, the target student participants was invited to attend a 45-minute theatre performance combining a range of musical, interactive, linguistic, and extra-linguistic elements, the totality of which formed the main intervention this study explored (Figure 28.2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elements</th>
<th>Musical</th>
<th>Interactive</th>
<th>Linguistic</th>
<th>Extra-linguistic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Welcoming</td>
<td>Background music was played throughout this session</td>
<td>Greetings from the actors and the puppet</td>
<td>1) Chinese lyrics sheet with Jyutping symbols and English translation</td>
<td>1) Puppetry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The main programme</td>
<td>Themed songs embedded with special sound effects for additional sensory cues</td>
<td>The puppet as a leading character with a family interactive game* (i.e., choreographed dance moves coupled with freemoves)</td>
<td>2) Story-telling</td>
<td>2) Total Physical Response (Asher, 1966, 1969, 1996), which requires learners to form Chinese characters using movement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ending</td>
<td>Light music for curtain call</td>
<td>Revision with the puppet</td>
<td>3) Singalong</td>
<td>3) Facial expression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tea and Coffee</td>
<td>Light background music</td>
<td>Photo/chatting time with the puppet</td>
<td>4) Tonal exaggeration</td>
<td>5) Gestures</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Family Interactive Game: Mirror

Children face their family members/carers. One is the leader, the other, the ‘mirror’. The leader begins to make simple gestures or movements. The ‘mirror’ duplicates the leader’s movements the way a mirror would. The central objective of the game is for the players to feel in sync with one another. The leader is coached to make his/her movements slow and deliberate. The follower is coached to let his/her body do the following without thinking too much. After a time, the players switch roles (Spolin, 1983; Boal, 2002).
Data collection and analysis

This present study focuses on the data we collected from the summer of 2019 to spring 2020 in a bid to explore the manifestation of a DiE pedagogy targeting linguistic-minority children situated in different sociolinguistic contexts, learning Cantonese for different purposes.

Considering the inchoate nature of this music and theatre programme, the team settled on the use of autoethnography as an overarching source of data from which to problematise and explore the project with young language-minority students in mind, as well as to enable practitioners as researchers to focus on personal experiences and enact political, moral, and socially conscious action (Adams & Holman Jones, 2008). With autoethnography, we did not aim to offer a definitive account of effective procedures or ‘good DiE practices’ for language-minority students, nor did we aspire to investigate what benefits this pedagogy might confer in an experimental sense or how variables might dynamically interact. Instead, we aimed to be reflexive, so sufficiently thick descriptions could be generated through the eyes of practitioners with regard to (a) the inception of pedagogical action targeting language-minority students in different settings, (b) how such a pedagogy took shape, and (c) other unexpected elements emerging from implementing such a pedagogical endeavour. To provide various vantage points and ‘slices of data’ for triangulation purposes (Taber, 2000, p. 470), nonparticipant observation and document analysis were adopted within an overall comparative approach. Although this study does not align explicitly with Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) grounded theory, it is greatly inspired by the broad utility of the grounded theory strategy for qualitative research (see also Charmaz, 1995; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), contending that emerging findings can then provide testable hypotheses for future research.

Qualitative data were analysed on a whole–part–whole basis within a broad thematic-analytical tradition. We read through the autoethnographic accounts by practitioners Jess, Gigi, and Bonnie holistically, noting and underlining recurring keywords that emerged from the initial reading, engaged in an iterative process of coding and categorising, and re-situated emerging themes to the phenomenon under exploration. After the broad patterns were identified, we were able to cross-reference across cases and to articulate the prominent themes. By having multiple layers of data coding and analysis, the credibility of the research was assured, with triangulation from other data sources (e.g., nonparticipant observation) which allowed a different frame of reference within the context under exploration. By the end of the process, four themes – ‘making use of puppetry’, ‘balancing verbal and non-verbal elements’, ‘promoting parental involvement’, and ‘shaping the development of multilingual identities’ – were found to be germane to the main investigative focus of the present study.

Results

Making use of puppetry

Puppetry has emerged as a powerful dramatic feature in both settings. The puppet ‘Boh Boh’ is designed as a character that interacts with children as a friend, not as a tutor or teacher. Such companionship and interaction with an imaginary friend may bring enjoyment and ease children’s frustration with speaking and/or anxieties related to a foreign ‘alien’ language (Satchwell & De Silva, 1995; Chang & Winston, 2012) (Figures 28.3 and 28.4).
At one of the shows in Hong Kong, a little girl who had been very resistant to speaking/learning Cantonese was singing along to all of the songs and loved Boh Boh so much that she cried when it was time for him to leave...

(Jess’s autoethnographic account, October 2019)

According to Trionfi and Reese (2009), children who have imaginary companions have been found to have better narrative skills than children without any. In the project, presented as an non-verbal, the imaginary companion ‘Boh Boh’ was felt to hold immense pedagogical potential across early childhood settings targeting language-minority learners, with benefits including, but not limited to, enabling young children to form an emotional attachment with the plot, building rapport between participants and practitioners, and strengthening a participatory form of drama-based pedagogy, as noted in field notes:
As simple and rudimentary as ‘Boh Boh’ looks, it holds a very special place in young learners’ hearts. Their attention was fixated on it during the performance and they lingered around it after the show. They clearly wanted to communicate with ‘Boh Boh’ and treated it as a confidant, and a fellow adventurer.

(Field notes, summer 2019)

Balancing verbal and non-verbal elements

Another prominent aspect across both settings is the potentiality of enhanced comprehensibility through balancing verbal and non-verbal elements. Existing research (e.g., Addessi, 2009) indicates that excessive verbal involvement, such as corrective feedback from adults, may interrupt the creative process because adults might be too involved and explicit, therefore unconsciously taking control away from young children and depriving them of learning opportunities. These very often happen in traditional language-learning settings. However, in the project, with the presence of a central storyline and practitioners leading, accompanying adults need not provide too much instruction and their involvement might often be in the form of eye contact, which seemed the right amount of involvement for children to continue their journey and learning exploration.

The same also applied to practitioners. Reflecting upon an interactive game included in the revised programme, practitioners highlighted the importance of minimising instructions, of standing back and observing and not interrupting participants as they explored:

Silence is an important element here. It is a condition for and evidence of participants’ immersion in an open-ended enquiry, whereas talk can be an anxious response to uncertainty. Moments of silence take away the tension of having to acquire a new language and show both children and adults themselves are exploring together. Of course, it takes away the possibilities for judgement.

(Jess’s autoethnographic account, March 2020)

Yet, it should be noted that silence here does not denote the relinquishment of all efforts to promote meaning-making, as observed in field notes (summer, 2019):

It was generally noticeable that the pedagogical process leading to meaning-making entails a context-sensitive (i.e., rather spontaneous) adjustment of the ratio of verbal and non-verbal cues/elements, and longer wait time for the young participants to construe and construct meaning themselves.

(Field notes, summer 2019)

Overall, through infusing more non-verbal elements and extra wait time into an interactive theatre, young participants were observed to respond better and engage in constant meaning-making. However, the proportion of verbal cues to non-verbal ones hinges upon contextual elements such as proficiency level, age, and the availability of parental guidance.

Promoting parental involvement

Given the centrality of parental engagement in young children’s language development, parental involvement has emerged as a central theme across both settings. Autoethnographic
accounts of practitioners shed light on parental support as a source of non-economic capital that contributes to language learning (Bourdieu, 1973; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

Having the experience from the pilot study, we decided to add some more family-based interactive elements so the parents/carers can be involved in the show instead of just playing with their cell phones.

(Gigi’s autoethnographic account, October 2019)

In the modified programme, the movement activity provided plenty of opportunities for adults to engage in the theatre. Combined with the previous point, adults’ interaction was most successful when it occurred naturally and indirectly, such as modelling playful behaviour and engaging in play with the child.

One child copied the movement of Chinese character ‘big’ when his mother was also doing it…

(Bonnie’s autoethnographic account, November 2019)

However, the availability of parental involvement is contextually dependent. Bonnie’s reflection of the pilot study highlights the plight facing language-minority students in Hong Kong, revolving around the weakened role played by South Asian parents in helping their children learn Cantonese as a majority language.

It’s quite challenging – we have parental support in the London show but in most settings in Hong Kong, the parents of non-Chinese-speaking pupils do not understand Cantonese and they don’t really have the motivation to learn Cantonese themselves, although they encourage their kids to interact and learn.

(Bonnie’s autoethnographic account, October 2018)

In fact, literature has repeatedly suggested the importance of ethnic capital, a combination of social and cultural capital provided by the ethnic community in influencing the next generation’s educational attainment (Borjas, 1992; Zhou & Bankston, 1994, 1998; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Parents in Hong Kong are observed to understand the importance of learning Cantonese for future employment and societal participation, but their motivations are broadly instrumental, which can be contrasted with the intrinsic motivation exhibited by their counterparts in London.

Shaping the development of multilingual identities

The reflexive stance inherent in autoethnography has enabled practitioners to rethink the relationship between a drama-based approach and learner-internal variables. Notably, learners in both settings, despite being linguistic minorities, do have different language-learning needs which cause multilingual identities to manifest differently. In the context of London, learners were mostly children of Cantonese-speaking professionals who emigrated to Britain from Hong Kong. Although Cantonese is seldom used in academic and work-related settings, Cantonese-speaking parents who joined the shows in London actively engage their children to learn Cantonese as a HL.

Parents in London show a strong desire for Cantonese-speaking activities for their children. The learning of Cantonese seems important to them because it reflects their cultural roots. The fact that the parents are native Cantonese speakers actually helps the running of the show.

(Gigi’s autoethnographic account, October 2019)
DiE-inspired music and theatre

Evidently, the successful learning of Cantonese is indexically linked to the Hong Kong identity. Fishman (2001) and Van Deusen-Scholl (2003) contend that HL learners are people who are raised with a strong sense of cultural and familial bond to their HL. From practitioners’ observations, it is clear that this DiE pedagogy presents a humanistic way forward for young HL learners in the early years. It shows them that fun and age-appropriate activities – embedding elements of music, drama, interaction, and language learning – are a possibility. Bonnie’s account further affirms the positive effect the programme had on young participants in London:

*Parents are sending feedback back to us and saying their kids sing our songs after the show. They might not know much Cantonese, but they are literally singing the song and doing the movements after they have been to our production.*

*(Bonnie’s autoethnographic account, October 2019)*

In the context of Hong Kong, the student participants were mostly children of South Asian workers whose struggles to adapt to postcolonial Hong Kong are well documented. Given Cantonese is necessary for higher education and employment, parents are eager for activities that promote their children’s development in Cantonese. Yet, in a majority-language environment, most early-childhood programmes may not be designed with language-minority students in mind and may overemphasise rote memorisation in keeping with Confucian heritage traditions.

*Parents and young participants seemed to be grateful that there is an alternative to the dominant mode of early childhood programmes which are obsessed with memorisation and discipline, rather culturally normative values that may not appeal to SA [South Asian] parents who may probably also think that those programmes can be demotivating to their children. Loss of interest in the early years is a case of starting off on the wrong foot…*

*(Field notes, summer 2019)*

The present DiE approach, founded on principles of age-appropriateness and collaborative empowerment, has resonated with language-minority learners who need to acquire Cantonese as a majority language in as humanistic a manner possible, enabling them to develop interest through participating in interactive games and sing-along sessions, and catering to their needs as second-language learners. It should, however, be noted that although this pedagogy does not subscribe to the normative logic inherent in a Confucian heritage culture, it remains authentic. For example, nursery rhymes whose repetitive nature facilitates automaticity among young learners are often considered an authentic means of teaching Cantonese to young learners (Li & Chuk, 2015).

**Discussion and conclusion**

This comparative study presents autoethnographic findings on the potential of interactive musical theatre as a form of language enrichment contributing to the learning of heritage and majority languages by young migrant-background children in multilingual settings. Emerging findings, in addition to affirming existing benefits associated with the DiE approach being adopted, revealed two notable characteristics of this drama-based pedagogy.
First, this kind of DiE pedagogy allows for a ‘translanguaging space’ (for a discussion see Li, 2010) where multilinguals engage in translingular practices and draw upon their full linguistic and semiotic repertoires to make meaning. It is evident that a unitary stance towards both linguistic and non-linguistic elements, courtesy of the non-essentialist (i.e., destabilising boundaries across genres and modalities) and constructivist (i.e., encouraging exploratory and participatory learning) principles this programme upholds, forms a core part of the dramatic process contributing to better understanding, ‘cultural translation’ where different identities and practices may interact to occasion new identities and practices (Bhabha, 1994), and ‘cultural democracy’ where liberatory pedagogies give rise to learner agency (Darder, 2012), to name but a few. Of course, future research is needed to further specify the mechanism of how transformation takes shape and can be tracked in qualitative and quantitative terms over a sustained period of time.

Second, with its nod to Cummins’s (2000) recommendations for collaborative empowerment, findings revealed the potentiality of humanism within a DiE approach. As UNESCO (2015; see also UNESCO, 1953) has long advocated, a humanistic approach counters the utilitarian logic (i.e., commodifying learners) hidden in dominant competence-oriented pedagogical approaches, champions a holistic pedagogy ‘sustaining and enhancing the dignity, capacity and welfare’ of young learners (p. 36), and gravitates towards networked, fluid forms of learning where non-formal and informal learning spaces interact with formal learning. There is prima facie autoethnographic evidence which has revealed that this DiE pedagogy being explored presented an alternative to early childhood pedagogies that are culturally contingent (e.g., CHC) and competence-based (e.g., approaches obsessed with word recognition and decoding skills), and united learning spaces by incorporating elements of formal curriculum with informal, fun, and interactive language-learning experiences.

In the project, through destabilising the often-reified boundaries across genres and media, and encouraging young children and their parents/carers to immerse in a unitary dramatic environment, this programme points towards the potentialities of a socially just, culturally responsive, and transformative pedagogy for language-minority students in the early years. Despite vastly different language-learning needs and contextual factors, young children in both settings responded positively to such an experience. Through autoethnographic reflections and collaboration, which present us with an avenue to carve open a relational-ethical space where knowledge production intersects with DiE engagement (see Adams, 2006; Ellis, 2007), we are forming a community of practice (see Lave & Wenger, 1991) with a common mission of reimagining a pedagogical alternative to marginalised groups in urban, world-city settings, and creating language-learning experiences from the ground up that are congruent with the axiology of collaborative empowerment (Cummins, 2000), social justice and emancipation (Freire, 1970; see also Morgan & Guilherme, 2014), and humanism (UNESCO, 2015). As it stands, autoethnographic findings that have emerged remain largely exploratory, yet they lay the necessary groundwork for good DiE practices and future research towards a more mature pedagogy – which is scalable and can be sustained across learning stages – serving young learners in culturally and linguistically diverse contexts.

Note

1 Three practitioners were involved in the present study: Jess is the puppeteer, whereas Bonnie and Gigi are the performers.
DiE-inspired music and theatre

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