

TRANSFORMING A LITERARY WORK INTO A DRAMATIC PERFORMANCE: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY OF THE EXPERIENCES OF SELECTED INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL STUDENTS IN THAILAND AND MYANMAR

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Abstract: This is a qualitative case study of how selected middle and high school students at two international schools, one in Thailand and another in Myanmar, took literary texts and transformed them into dramatic performances. From 2010-2015, I directed my students in three stage plays and three films. Ten student performers from those plays and films became participants in this study. I interviewed these students about their experiences. My objective was to explore how each participant had reflected on their own personalities, characteristics, and experiences while developing their performance, whether the students, in retrospect, viewed their ultimate portrayal as being the character or themselves, and what benefits were accrued to each student through engaging in the dramatic performance. The resulting data confirmed that developing the dramatic performances had been a meaningful experience for the students. Indeed, they *had* explored their own personalities and emotions. The participants reported powerful vicarious experiences, emotional catharsis, inward contemplation, self-analysis, and self-realization. Many of the participants had overcome shyness, increased their level of self-confidence, developed close social relationships with their fellow actors, and achieved a deeper understanding of literature. The study includes the background of the research, including an anecdote from the filming of 2012's *Romeo and Juliet* which served as the impetus for the study, a review of related literature, an explanation of the study's methodology, a narrative description of the data along with conclusions drawn from that data, and a discussion and recommendations for further research.

Keywords: Dramatic Performance, Drama in Secondary School Curriculum, Acting, Stage Plays, Film, Filmmaking, Theater, Drama, Case Study, Qualitative Research.

Introduction

This is a qualitative case study of how selected high school students at two international schools, New Sathorn International School (NSIS) in Thailand and Myanmar International School (MIS) in Myanmar, took literary works and turned

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those works into stage or film performances. In particular, my interest was how the students portrayed characters. I wanted to know whether the students examined their own personalities, characteristics, and experiences and used that reflection in their portrayal. I further wanted to know how years later, in retrospect, the students' value that experience.

From 2010 to 2015, I directed my students in three stage plays and three films, as shown in the following table.

Table 1: Films and Plays Directed by Robert Ceisler in the Period 2010-2015

Production title	Year	School	Genre	Original author
<i>Romeo and Juliet</i>	2010	NSIS	Play	William Shakespeare
<i>Sorry, Right Number</i>	2011	NSIS	Film	Stephen King
<i>Romeo and Juliet</i>	2012	NSIS	Film	William Shakespeare
<i>The Leader</i>	2013	NSIS	Play	Eugene Ionesco
<i>The Tempest</i>	2014	MIS	Film	William Shakespeare
<i>An Inspector Calls</i>	2015	MIS	Play	J.B. Priestley

Ten of the students who performed in these productions became participants in this study. I interviewed the students about their experiences in creating character portrayals and I asked them to reflect on the value of going through that process. My purpose was to build general themes based on the ideas shared by the participants.

The idea for the study came from an incident that happened during the filming of *Romeo and Juliet* in 2012. My Grade 9 students and I decided to create a full-length film adaptation of the play, set in modern Thailand, but using Shakespeare's original language.

One pivotal scene involved the titular characters meeting and kissing. Romeo and Juliet, of course, meet towards the beginning of Shakespeare's story, but we had delayed this scene as we sensitively discussed how our two students would kiss, or perhaps appear to kiss.

We set up a shooting location in the school. The student playing Romeo was to speak first, taking Juliet's hand and saying, "If I profane with my unworthiest hand this holy shrine, the gentle fine is this: My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand to smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss." He would then kiss her hand, they would then both speak and then kiss twice more. The problem was that every time the camera rolled, the two students would just look at each other. They would not speak, and then they would start giggling. This same reaction and interaction were repeated for six takes. Finally, I told the two to relax and that I would just turn on the camera and whenever they were ready to do the scene as we had planned, the scene would be captured and we would all be happy.

After twenty minutes waiting, the words came out. Then, the first kiss was accomplished. And then the rest of the scene was done.

Later that month we were editing the entire movie. We had some 500 clips in all. As we were editing the above *kissing* scene, I realized I had inadvertently kept the *giggling* clips – clips I had thought of as merely unusable outtakes. Although laughter and nervousness were not supposed to be how Romeo and Juliet met, spoke,

and fell in love, there was something fascinating about the clips. It was not immediately clear to me why.

We tried various ways of splicing the scene together. As we watched the clips and discussed their meaning, we ultimately decided to start the scene with those just-looking-at-each-other false start shots. So, in the final version of the movie, the two students, Romeo and Juliet, sit next to each other, stare at each other, look at each other, then struggle to muster the confidence to speak, break down in giggles, before ultimately speaking and kissing. The final shooting and the editing were completed in May 2012.

As I have continued teaching, directing, and studying education over the last four years, the way the aforementioned scene evolved stuck with me. I pondered over its meaning. Had we seen Romeo and Juliet looking at each other in anticipation and nervousness -- or was that my two students? And as I have reflected on *that* question, I came to ask myself many more, particularly as I recalled similar situations occurring in each of the productions – this melding of the students’ own reality with the reality of the characters in the original literary works. And so, I wondered -- what are the artistic implications of melding students’ own reality with a writer’s fictional creation? Do students examine their own personalities when portraying a character? Years after the performance, do students value the experience? This is what I explored in this study.

Objectives

The main research objective was to explore how students took a literary work and turned it into a dramatic performance.

The sub-objectives were:

1. To explore how students reflected on their own personalities and emotions while developing their performance.
2. To explore whether the students, in retrospect, view their ultimate portrayal as being the character or themselves.
3. To explore any benefits to the students of engaging in the process of taking a literary work and turning it into a dramatic performance.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 is a visual representation of the conceptual framework for this qualitative case study. I focus on a central phenomenon, collect data in order to better understand that phenomenon, and then analyze the data, building themes, patterns, and explanations.

(See Figure 1 on the next page)

Literature Review

English Class Curricula, Syllabi, and Standards in the Selected International Schools MIS uses a British curriculum, designed by Cambridge International Examinations (CIE). When I arrived at MIS in 2013, the only “English” subject Year 10 and Year 11 students were studying was IGCSE Second Language English. Believing many of

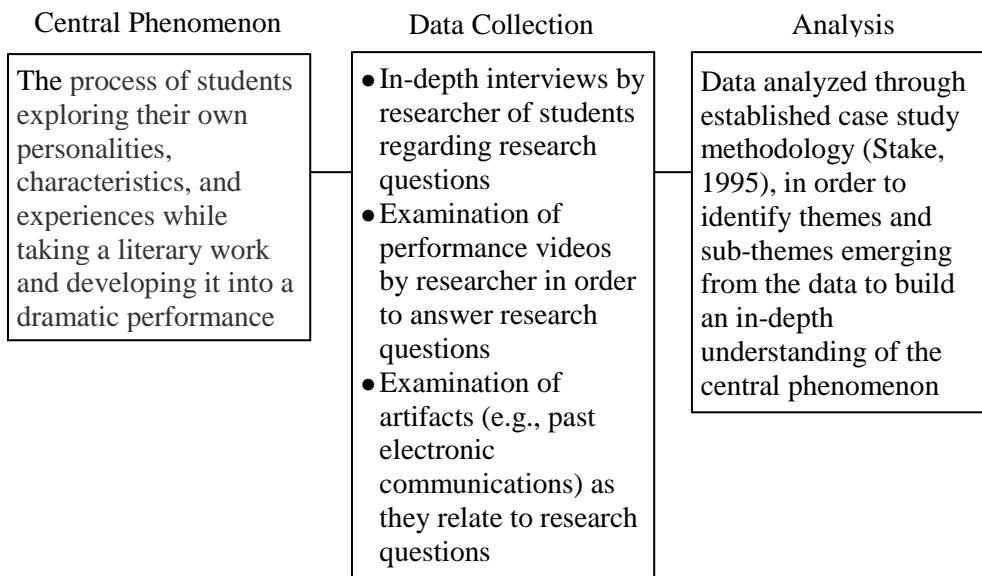


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of This Study

the students could be studying a much more challenging curriculum, I switched about half of the students to IGCSE First Language English, and additionally offered IGCSE Literature as an additional elective course. The students from *The Tempest* in 2014 and *An Inspector Calls* in 2015 were in that literature class.

According to Cambridge International Examinations' IGCSE Literature syllabus (2014), the course has exactly six syllabus aims and four assessment objectives (p. 8). The syllabus aims are to enjoy the experience of reading literature, to understand and respond to literary texts in different forms and from different periods and cultures, to communicate an informed personal response appropriately and effectively, to appreciate different ways in which writers achieve their effects, to experience literature's contribution to aesthetic, imaginative, and intellectual growth, and to explore the contribution of literature to an understanding of areas of human concern. These syllabus aims seem to be directed at the very cognitive and affective activities mentioned in my research questions. The verbs: "enjoy," "understand," "communicate," "appreciate," "experience," "explore" were right there at the forefront of my mind as I worked with my students in producing each of the plays and films. The syllabus then lists drama, poetry, and prose texts for teachers/students to choose to study, presumably to meet the syllabus aims and assessment objectives. And then finally, the syllabus sets forth the prescribed testing components.

The only way Cambridge assesses Literature students is via traditional paper and pen essays (p. 13). The aim in studying Shakespeare or Priestley is to "enjoy the experience," "communicate an informed personal response," and experience the works' "contribution to aesthetic, imaginative, and intellectual growth," but the only method Cambridge has to measure student achievement in these areas is by having students write an essay. The students are not assessed on doing what Shakespeare imagined they would do – performing his plays. Surely my students accomplished

the course aims by transforming what they had read into a dramatic performance. Some ended up writing their essays well, some did not. But all had in their own way, in my judgment, met the course aims through the performances.

NSIS teachers use Common Core Standards in writing lesson plans. Common Core Standards in math and language arts/literacy are used today by 42 states in the United States to set “what a student should know and be able to do at the end of each grade” (Common Core Standards Initiative, 2016). Common Core Standards are different from the Cambridge aims in content, but also in that the Common Core Standards do not mean adherence to specific assessments, as it does with Cambridge. There are separate standards for elements of language study (reading, speaking, listening, and writing). There are three “key ideas and details” reading standards for literature for Grade 9 and Grade 10 students: to cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, to determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text, and to analyze how complex characters develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010, p. 38). I believed that having my students transform *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Leader* into a dramatic performance was an effective and powerful way of reaching the above standards.

Benefits of Including Dramatic Performance in Education

Butterworth’s (2013) dissertation begins with a wonderful anecdote. After nine years teaching drama at a high school in the U.S., he leaves for another teaching opportunity, but is invited back to the first school to witness the first post-him stage production. Sitting in the audience, he experiences the play’s utter horribleness. The performances, the sets, the staging – all dreadful. He wonders how and why the program he built had been destroyed. As the play ends and the curtain falls, the audience rises in this thunderous ovation, obvious delight, and overwhelming approval. Butterworth is stunned. He questions his own role as a teacher and director. He wonders about the high school play. What is it? And he ponders the value that students place in participating in developing characters and building performances. Ultimately, he sets out to do his research and write his dissertation.

Butterworth asked two research questions (p. 6): the value of the school play for former student actors and how the participants had incorporated what they experienced into their present lives. Butterworth interviewed six former students who were at the time of the interviews all in their thirties. Butterworth also subjected himself to heuristic inquiry – a self-study of his own life-long involvement in school plays.

Butterworth found the “intensely personal relationships the former student actors said they developed with their characters are so immediate that they can still feel those connections today.” (p. 227). This may be a result of the same exploration of emotions (between themselves and the characters) that I explore in my third research objective. And surely, for Butterworth and his students, retrospection,

brought out by his very inquiry, has brought forth long-held, deep-felt emotions about the plays.

Butterworth reported that role playing skills developed while performing on stage had benefited the students later in life. Butterworth found his students had affective learning growth from the acting experiences. One of his students said the school plays helped him “become an adult” (p. 229). The participants greatly valued the social interactions that were part of the school play experience. Butterworth discusses in detail the concept of “narrative memory” – the attachment that the student actors felt to the characters they portrayed, even fifteen years later, reported by his former students. Clearly, Butterworth’s students “valued” having participated in school plays. I have asked in this study what value my former students place on being involved in our plays and films.

Mackey (2012) explored how individuals remember participation in school plays. She analyzed her own direction of a play, years before, and the mementos left from it. She called the storage of these artifacts “sites of memory,” lasting, tangible treasures in an increasingly virtual world (p. 49). My students who worked on film projects have the actual video of their performances – maybe sites of memory *directly* in a virtual world.

Drege’s (2000) dissertation described the inclusion of drama in an English classroom as a pedagogical method of instruction. Her dissertation purpose was to “address the limited use of drama in the classroom by providing concrete drama activities that can be used at the high school English level” (p. 1). Drege described students involved in dramatic activities in the English classroom as active learners, engaged in part because of the group nature of the work. Students engaged in drama are intrinsically motivated to learn. Their self-confidence increases. Students involved in drama accrue both cognitive and affective benefits.

Methodology/Procedure

The purpose of my study was to examine how students explore their own personalities, characteristics, and experiences while transforming a literary work into a dramatic performance. I employed a qualitative case study approach to explore this main research objective and its three sub-objectives. Specifically, this study is a single instrumental case design with multiple units of analysis (Yin, 2009). The primary methodology in the study was interviews with former students and a review of artifacts from the students’ performances.

Ten students were chosen as participants through a purposeful sampling strategy. While all the students who participated in the productions might have been of some value in addressing the central phenomenon, I prioritized the students according to a purposeful sampling strategy. Under this approach, the main criterion for selecting a student was my view that he or she would be able to inform a meaningful understanding of the central phenomenon and research questions. At the heart of this strategy was the hope that the students chosen to be participants would be ones who would most likely afford me the “opportunity to learn” (Stake, 2005, p. 451). The following table shows the study’s participants, the production in which each performed, whether the production was a play or film, the year of the performance, the interview method and date.

Table 2: Study Participants

Name	Production Title	Play or Film	Character Played	Year	Interview Method	Interview Month
PY	<i>The Tempest</i>	Film	Caliban	2014	In person	Oct. 2016
JG	<i>An Inspector Calls</i>	Play	Gerald	2015	In person	Oct. 2016
ST	<i>Romeo and Juliet</i>	Play	Juliet	2010	Facebook Messenger	Dec. 2016- April 2017
PC	<i>An Inspector Calls</i>	Play	Sheila	2015	In person	Oct. 2016
PS	<i>Sorry Right Number/ Romeo and Juliet</i>	Film/ Film	Babysitter/ The Nurse	2011/ 2012	Facebook Messenger	March 2017
JC	<i>Romeo and Juliet</i>	Play	The Nurse	2010	Facebook Messenger	April 2017
PKK	<i>The Tempest</i>	Film	Prospero	2014	In person	Oct. 2016
AZ	<i>An Inspector Calls</i>	Play	Mr. Birling	2015	In person	Oct. 2016
PU	<i>Sorry Right Number</i>	Film	Mourning girl	2011	In person	April 2017
LN	<i>Romeo and Juliet</i>	Film	Romeo	2012	Instagram Chat	April 2017

Findings

The following table includes the themes that emerged from the data. The first column of the table contains the three themes: how the participants explored their own personality and emotions while transforming a literary work into a dramatic performance (research sub-objective 1), how the participants viewed their ultimate performance (research sub-objective 2), and the reported benefits derived from the dramatic performance (research sub-objective 3). The second column contains a total of 12 sub-themes, under the three main themes. In some cases, these themes and sub-themes emerged from just one participant. In other cases, multiple participants contributed to the theme/sub-theme.

Table 3: Themes and Sub-Themes Which Emerged from the Data

Theme	Sub-Theme
Participants' exploration of personality and emotion	Vicarious experience and emotional catharsis
	Self-realization
	Inward contemplation
	Character/personality comparison
Participants' view of ultimate performance	As the character
	As themselves
	As a combination of character/themselves
Benefits of participating in the process	Emotional growth
	Development of performance technique
	Increase in confidence/overcoming shyness
	Intense camaraderie
	Deeper understanding of the literature

Participants' Exploration of Personality and Emotions

The first research sub-objective in this study was to explore how students reflected on their own personalities and emotions while developing their performance. Indeed, each of the participants *had* explored their personality and emotions as part of their performance. The participants' responses in this regard have been categorized into sub-themes, as follows.

Vicarious experience and emotional catharsis. The sub-theme of vicarious experience and emotional catharsis deals with a student actor encountering a situation within their performance from which they themselves derived emotional meaning and knowledge because that situation was related to their own life. For some of the participants, this vicarious experience was profound and resulted in an emotional catharsis, a purgation of feeling not otherwise experienced.

JG provided a good example of this. JG (as Gerald) knelt on the stage floor and asked a girl to marry him. As he (JG) saw himself do this, he realized that he too could speak and act that way, without the cover of Gerald. This vicarious experience has stayed with JG even after the play was over. As JG told me, the way he acted in the play is the way he is now.

PY delved deeply into his character (and himself). He identified to such an extent with his character, Caliban, in *The Tempest* that he felt liberated by the chance to confront his master in the film. To PY, his performance meant that finally he was "standing up for" himself. He told me that, after doing the film, he was not "just a kid" anymore. In PY's own words, "because of the role we play we change ourselves." This vicarious experience was for PY an emotional catharsis and a life changing experience.

Self-realization. Self-realization refers to a participant reporting a new understanding of the possibilities of their own lives as a result of their performance in a play or film.

For ST, performing as Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet* was a profound experience. She told me she had to "transform" herself into Juliet on stage. ST said she never could have imagined herself expressing powerful emotions in front of others. But under the guise of Juliet, she did exactly that. ST re-assessed herself and her own capabilities. The moment *Romeo and Juliet* ended and the lights of the auditorium were dimmed, ST said she then finally knew exactly who ST was and what she had to do to make her come to life, just like she had with Juliet.

Inward contemplation. This sub-theme refers to a participant reporting having thought deeply about their own emotions and feelings while developing their performance.

PC contemplated her character, Sheila, being "dramatic" and "sensitive" and that she was that way too. PC explained that Sheila was the one character in *An Inspector Calls* who felt guilt for what had happened to Daisy Renton and that she identified with this quality because she often felt guilt about things she had done in the past.

PKK told me that, to have successfully performed Prospero in *The Tempest* film, he had to consider himself what it meant to be angry. The experience of performing in the movie overall made PKK more confident and changed him. PKK re-assessed his own capabilities because of the dramatic performance. PU too

explained how she was thinking about what it would be like to lose someone as she portrayed a girl at her friend's funeral in *Sorry Right Number*. And she pointed out that someone as young as she was when she played the role may not otherwise have had to face such complex feelings.

Character/personality comparison. This sub-theme refers to student actors engaging in meaningful comparisons of the character they were portraying and themselves, as a result of their performance.

There were many examples of this from the interviews. AZ had some of the most interesting responses in this regard. He compared himself to his character, Arthur Birling. Both are "commanding," "selfish," and "emotionless," AZ determined. However, I might take some issue with AZ's assessment. I think he is right that his creation of Mr. Birling was with these qualities and that AZ is this way too. But what AZ discounted is that he had affirmatively melded his own personality with Mr. Birling. In other words, he (or he and I, as the director) had made creative choices to have Mr. Birling be this way. Mr. Birling sounded commanding the night of the performance because it was actually AZ on stage. A less commanding or more emotional performer might have portrayed Mr. Birling differently.

The Participants' View of Their Ultimate Performance

The most thought-provoking question I asked each of the participants was whether what we saw on stage or film was the character or the student. Some said it was the character, some said it was him or herself. Some said it was a combination.

As the character. PY was decisive and adamant that what we saw in *The Tempest* was Caliban, not himself. PY could not confront his master (his father), but Caliban could rebel against Prospero. Like PY, ST told me that it was Juliet she was watching as she reviewed her performance because back then ST "would never be able to express herself like Juliet."

As themselves. Petra, Ploy, and Pet told me that, at the time of the performances, they felt like it was the character, but in retrospect, it felt like they were watching what they had done, not the character.

As a combination of character/themselves. LN, whose mix of actually being himself and being Romeo served as the impetus for the study, said that the apprehensive, unsure boy staring at a girl and struggling to express his thoughts and then kiss her – that was LN; but the boy who yelled in anger and ultimately killed his enemy – that was Romeo. JG responded that it was "50-50" between Gerald and himself.

Benefits of Participating in The Process

Aside from the exploration of the character's and their own personality – a benefit in and of itself -- the participants reported other benefits as well. This sub-theme refers to what the student-participants viewed as having gained, either in the short-term or long-term, from having transformed a literary work into a dramatic performance.

Emotional growth. Emotional growth here refers to participants becoming more mature in their feelings and emotions as a result of their performance. Certainly, PY, JG, and ST reported life-changing experiences. For each, a deeper understanding of their own emotional capabilities as experienced vicariously through their character.

Development of performance technique. Part of the learning process in developing a play or film is of course having the students learn how to perform – how to learn lines, how to react as the character, how to emote in front of an audience or camera. This sub-theme refers to developing such techniques. PKK, in particular, confided that he learned how to “act” through his assignment of portraying Prospero in *The Tempest*. He researched the character and acting techniques as he was developing his performance.

Increase in confidence/overcoming shyness. This refers to participants reporting (and in some cases, me recognizing, that they became more comfortable asserting themselves after participating in the dramatic performance. JG reported that he had overcome shyness through performing in *An Inspector Calls*. By seeing Gerald being bold and assertive and then realizing that he had given voice and body to that very character, JG no longer felt afraid to speak up and express his feelings.

Similarly, ST described how shy and timid she had been. But she ultimately realized that as she had made Juliet come to life, she had to do that same with herself. ST reported an increase in “confidence” and “courage.” PKK, too, reported that he was no longer shy after making the *Tempest* film. He spoke of increased confidence.

Intense camaraderie. This sub-theme refers to the closeness in relationships that developed among the students who had performed in one of the plays or films. Several participants told me of the closeness they felt with their classmates. PC recalled that during the months of practicing for *An Inspector Calls* the students had come to call each other their characters’ names, around the school campus and even outside school. They “became” those people, she told me. Further, she recalled the feeling of sadness when the play ended, as that closeness would no longer be the same.

PS and JC reported a deep sense of responsibility in learning lines and performing well. JC specifically used the term “synchronize” – in that each of the cast members depended on the others. They could not do it alone. LN too reported that he developed close relationships with his classmates and fellow performers.

Deeper understanding of literature. Each of the plays and films was an extension of the study of the original literary work. As such, this sub-theme refers to participants reporting a more in-depth understanding of the literature as a result of having transformed it into a dramatic performance. JC, PC, and PU each commented that performing in the plays and films had brought to life the characters and stories they had read in class. Likewise, LN commented on how he had learned Shakespearean English. He referred to performing as Romeo in *Romeo and Juliet* as a “priceless experience.”

Recommendations

For Teachers

This study demonstrates the powerful effect upon students of transforming literature read in English class into a dramatic performance. While the results of the study are not generalizable to middle and high school students as a whole, I believe much can be learned from the words and ideas expressed by the study participants. Teachers

would be well advised to consider opening up the study of English and of literature to include dramatic performance as part of the curriculum.

For teachers already engaging their students in stage or film productions, I would encourage them to consider the *Romeo and Juliet* anecdote in the background of this study. I believe that powerful (albeit accidental) inclusion of the students' own reality into the final version of the film has much to offer today's educators. Teachers should explore how to incorporate their students' own personalities and experiences into the characters and stories they are portraying – because it is artistically beneficial, but also because of the value to students as they discover themselves through dramatic performance.

For Students

Students should consider the opportunities for personal growth and artistic achievement that come from transforming literature into a dramatic performance. While the words and ideas expressed by this study's participants are not generalizable to everyone, I believe the study demonstrates the opportunity for personal growth and a keen sense of achievement that at least potentially can be a life changing experience for young people.

For Future Researchers

I would recommend that researchers explore whether the *Romeo and Juliet* incident at the heart of this study can be purposely replicated. In other words, can plays or films be constructed such that students' own personalities, emotions, and experiences, are purposely incorporated into the final results. Along the same lines, researchers should further investigate the value, both artistically and pedagogically, to such a practice.

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