

## Pandemic Recovery: Emotion, Language and Health in Schools

### **Zaahida Nabagereka**

Hi everyone, welcome and thanks for joining.

I'm your chair for this session on Pandemic Recovery: Emotion, Language and Health in Schools.

My name is Dr Zaahida Nabagereka. I'm the Lit in Colour Programme Manager working between Penguin Random House and the Runnymede Trust.

Lit in Colour is a campaign to support schools to make the teaching of English literature more inclusive of writers of colour.

I completed my PhD last year at the School of Oriental and African Studies, focusing on linguistic imperialism in Uganda and how it affects contemporary literature production in indigenous languages.

In 2014 I co-founded AfriKult, a literary organisation seeking to widen access to African literatures through interactive workshops. Since then, AfriKult has devised and facilitated workshops at schools, festivals, and conferences in and around the UK and in Uganda, Ghana, Nigeria and Kenya, working predominantly with young people.

Earlier this year I was Visiting Lecturer on the BA English programme at City University of London.

This Panel today is brought to you by the Institute of Modern Languages Research and Being Human Festival, which is taking place across the UK between the 11th and 20th of November.

Being Human is the only national festival of the humanities, run by the School of Advanced Study at the University of London, in partnership with the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the British Academy. Events are taking place both in person and online this year and you can see the full programme on the Being Human website at [www.beinghumanfestival.org](http://www.beinghumanfestival.org)

The Festival can be found @BeingHumanFest on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook, and the hashtag is #BeingHuman2021.

Today's discussion is being streamed with BSL interpreters, Stacy Green and Laura Miller, who will be spotlighted along with our panelists. You should be able to pin the interpreter if you wish to do so. Automatic closed captions are also available.

This year the theme of the Festival is renewal and today we will speak about renewal in the context of education recovery from the pandemic.

This panel discussion follows several workshops conducted with Gearies Primary School in East London, where pupils in years four and six have been working with theatre maker and writer Neela Doležalová to explore the languages of emotion.

Students have been imagining characters, describing dreams, and free writing about the past, present and the future. The students have been free to write in any language. They have also explored emotions with BSL actor Mia Ward.

The discussion today is a culmination of this work and we will see some videos of the students work that has been performed by actors later in the discussion. The Q&A is open, so do put your questions in as they come to you and we will have about 15 minutes to answer them from the audience just towards the end.

Finally, the discussion today is also being recorded so that we can create an audio and transcript of the event.

I'm now going to introduce the panel.

Jessica Bradley is lecturer in Literacies in the School of Education at the University of Sheffield, where she co-directs the BA Education, Culture and Childhood, and the Literacies research cluster. She is interested in arts-based approaches to language research. Her recent project explored linguistic landscapes through creative and participatory research methods, while her doctoral research focused on translanguaging practices in street arts, production and performance.

Farzana Khan is a writer, director and cultural producer and award-winning arts educator. She is the executive director and co-founder of Healing Justice London. Her practice works on building community health repair and self-transformation rooted in disability justice, survivor work and trauma-informed practice, working with communities of colour and other marginalised and under-represented groups.

She is the former creative and strategic director at Voices that Shake! which she ran while working at Platform London, a climate and social justice organisation. Her own writing often focuses on climate and gender justice, and generational trauma and memory.

Dan Lea is deputy head and Foundation stage lead at Gearies Primary School in Redbridge. He has worked at Gearies for over 20 years and is a former award winner of Teacher of the Year for his focus on creativity and technology in the classroom. A major focus of his work centered on capturing storying learning in early childhood, documenting what happens when children lead participatory curriculum, design, implementation, and assessment. This work became part of a book published in the Global Rethinking Childhood Series. Dan is also a rugby coach at Bancroft RFC and avid volunteer within his community.

So I'd like to start with a question for all panelists.

Why is acknowledging students' multilingualism important to the mental health of all students?

Who'd like to take that one first?

**Dan Lea**

Should I jump in from school?

Hello everybody, welcome. From our school perspective, it's not important, it's essential.

So for example, in our school we have 47% of our community have traveled from abroad to join our community in the Gants Hill area, and within that we've worked out that, at the age of five, our children could have up to 16 different transitions in their lives.

So moving from their home country to two, three, four other countries, into the UK, across the UK, into London, across London, into our school, into a play group, into the nursery and then into what they call big school. So for us, if we don't look at their languages, their multilingualism's, if we don't acknowledge the challenges the families have had in this journey, if we don't then celebrate and validate the language they bring to us in our rich community, we have no chance of meeting the holistic needs of the child, but also the parent who is the number one carer and number one educator of the child. So for us it's not important, it's essential. We can't do our work if we don't acknowledge and celebrate and validate our children's languages, our community's languages.

### **Farzana Khan**

Thanks Dan, I'm happy to pick up and kind of build from what Dan said, really echoing out how instrumental it is.

There's a really beautiful proverb that says to possess a second language is to possess a second soul, and you know, for those of us that are bilingual or multilingual, we're familiar with an interiority, and that isn't always captured in whiteness or the English language.

And I think a lot when, thinking about mental health and holistic needs and range and possibility, we also have to hold the coloniality of the English language. And actually things like, even when I'm in America and I'm speaking English, but the tonalities are very different and what is possible to be said and not said and we've got our stiff upper lip. There are ways in which we engage with language that is very guarded, very protected, which means that we reinforce particular power structures and particular limits. So I think there's something really important when we think about the interiority that each of us are in possession of, and how expansive that can be when we engage with language, but also the particular power dynamics that can be collapsed if we engage with them well or can be reinforced if we don't interrogate them.

So I think that if we want children, adults, all of us, to be well, then to be in possession of our language, which is also in possession of our agency and the ways that we get met and seen and heard are really, really important. So yes, just wanting to bring that in.

### **Zaahida Nabagereka**

Thank you and Jessica, would you like to add on?

### **Jessica Bradley**

Yes, thank you and thank you for this really important question and it's great to hear from Dan in the school and to hear from Farzana and these different perspectives.

So in terms of the question of why it's important to acknowledge multilingualism. Multilingualism is completely normal and unremarkable.

We might even argue that monolingualism is actually the more recent innovation, so acknowledging and actually bringing these languages, and bringing these different multilingualisms, as Dan put it, into the classroom is absolutely essential if students are going to be able to draw from their full communicative repertoires and kind of develop, bringing all of this into the classroom and making that divide between the home and school more porous, I think, so my research is into a way of understanding multilingualism, which is called translanguaging. And this is a way of understanding multilingualism as dynamic, and also the ways in which we each as individuals draw from a really wide repertoire of communicative resources.

And whenever we communicate, a bit like Farzana said, we bring this embodied communicative repertoire into everything we do. So bringing that into school means actually acknowledging and celebrating the different practices, ways of meaning making, and ways of communicating that children bring in these kind of really rich repertoires that can so often be marginalised.

### **Zaahida Nabagereka**

Thank you, yes loads there that I think is really important to think about and I think that leads on quite nicely to this next question, which I'd like to open to all of you as well.

Why is children's multilingualism specifically important to acknowledge right now in this particular moment, given the context of the pandemic?

Who'd like to take that first?

### **Farzana Khan**

I'm happy to kick us off. I think for me, and I'm going to bring in my work at Healing Justice and a lot of the work that we do around grief and bereavement and actually what this time means, not just in terms of pandemic but also multiple apocalypses.

About two years ago I ran a programme for young people at the South Bank around visioning in future futures. And a lot of them said, I can't imagine tomorrow, this is an impossible task for me, it doesn't feel like there is a tomorrow for us.

And so I want to hold the grief both in terms of pandemics and including the pandemics of oppression, racism, and all of those types of things as well as the multiple forms of losses that are occurring that we don't recognise, like loss of a way of life, loss of senses of structure, loss of school and friends, and all of these types of things that are happening.

And when I think about, you know, coming from a background that works in trauma and distress, and particularly when people experience distress, it's really interesting the languages that we use and don't use. Right, and so much of in distress language becomes, you know, just recently I've been supporting someone experiencing quite a lot of distress, and you'll see that they're actually not using language.

They might be screaming. They might be laughing, they might be doing things that are the expression of emotions.

And when we think about young people where they're building the bandwidth to experience their emotions without overwhelming and being able to have a sense of articulation around that, is really, really important. That actually, when you're angry, there's a legitimacy to anger. There's information in anger and that might look like a particular type of expression.

And then only think about, you know for me English as a language feels very constricting, but I know as a Bengali person there are certain words that I have, you know, whether it's swear words or affectionate words that really do the trick, and so there's a comfort. And when we're experiencing distress, the first thing we want to do to be able to kind of start to access regulation is to access comfort, and I think, you know, that the sense of belonging or nativeness or those types of things. And that's not exact, you know, I don't think that, especially for diaspora, especially for children who are displaced, especially for people who are migrants. It's not that comfortable necessarily. Yes, I can speak this language and this language, I think there are nuances to it, but I think that multilingualism expands out the possibility of what language is available to you, which means that the expressions you might give to grief or loss, or harm or hurt, has more place in the world and I think that expansion is something children deserve.

They deserve curiosity in order to build that bandwidth, because, you know, I look at myself now and I think oh thank God I'm able to access these types of emotions right now that never felt safe before. You know, as a brown Muslim woman, being raging or being angry, I didn't want to be labeled a particular way or seen as problematic. But what does it mean for me to now be assertive or name a need or be seen as very firm and clear, or occupy my power?

And so I think that there's something really, really generous but all dignifying at the heart of it when we expand out language, especially when grief and loss of such a central part of our lives and distress is such a central part of our lives.

### **Zaahida Nabagereka**

Thank you for Farzana. Dan and Jessica, would you like to answer that question?

### **Dan Lea**

I think building on from those comments there, for us in school I think a lot of my time spent in the nursery with our two, three, four year olds and having that multilingualism, acceptance, celebration validation, means that we can talk to primary carers, first teachers, first educators. We can build in with our staff.

I mean, I'm privileged enough to be here talking, I must emphasise, on behalf of Gearies Primary School. We have a wonderful team here of hugely dedicated teachers, practitioners, support staff who show we have an ethos of unconditional professional love for our families and part of that unconditional professional love is we want to make sure you can communicate how you're feeling and that your needs are met and if we need to do that through a range of languages, if we don't have the expertise ourself,

we'll go and find it so we can bring that expertise in so we can build language, we can build communication between us, families and home and in our last project we did with Neela was 'At Home I Speak', which was a play that was then presented at the Rich Mix theatre.

We felt very nervous as a staff to start with, with the older children in year six spending time with Neela, not because they're spending time with Neela, but spending time with Neela, some actors, some playwrights, talking about their experiences in the pandemic and talking in both home language and in English.

And then holding that into a script and giving it to some actors to then present back to us as the adults watching. It was really nervous, but then it was really warm and sort of soul replenished because you've heard what the children were saying in home languages about how important it was that they could talk in home languages, they could talk in their emerging English. Their mums and dads could come into school and talk to members of staff, have those coffee mornings and share what was worrying them, talk through what was worrying them and then celebrate how strong we've become together.

### **Zaahida Nabagereka**

Thank you, that's brilliant.

### **Jessica Bradley**

Thank you, I think following on from what Farzana and Dan have said, I'd just go back to the point about enabling languages to be heard and audible. I think if we let languages be, you know, if we don't acknowledge multilingualism, and then we don't build spaces for pupils to bring all their languages into the school or the educational space or whatever it is we're doing, we're risking kind of real damage in terms of what we're understanding and what we're hearing about all these experiences over the last 20 months. And actually these experiences that continue that aren't finished, I think each one of us has experienced the pandemic differently, you know, and it's been very kind of enclosed into homes as well.

So obviously, you know with some schooling going into homes. Obviously schools were open all the way through, and so being able to kind of explore what's happened and the kind of ongoing implications of that for children, and being able to draw from multiple languages in doing this and actually going beyond language to a little bit like we will see with the poetry is really, really important and probably more important than ever right now.

### **Zaahida Nabagereka**

I couldn't agree more.

Dan, I'd like to ask you a question now about Gearies because I mean, it's fascinating what you're saying about the culture that your school has created. But how does Gearies Primary School work with students' multilingualism in practice? Can you give us a bit more of an idea of what that looks like maybe day to day, and how this actually started, and what support you've got for it?

## Dan Lea

Yeah, brilliant – so, again, I really want to make it clear I'm privileged enough to represent our school. This is a huge amount of work delivered by a huge number of people who are ridiculously dedicated. So I feel privileged to do this. We start with what sounds like an unhappy story, because I think at the moment there's a narrative out there of... since we're seeing a 70% cut in support for children centers, playgroups, youth centers, there seems to be a narrative around... instead of discussing why that's happened, there seems to be a narrative around... so in our early years, for example, we hear this narrative of: if you speak an additional language, you'll be between 4.6 and 8.3 months behind before the age of four, and that could be terrifying. And then you hear the narrative that that will double by the time they're seven, and that will double by the time they're 10 and it will double again when these children get into secondary schools. What we pride ourselves on is being brave enough to challenge that narrative and look at the child and the family behind the statistics. And what we say is: we have this unconditional professional love attitude that we're going to break that narrative and we're going to replace that narrative with success... That by the time you leave our nursery, you will be above standard and expectation. And then you'll continue that to the age of seven, you'll continue that into school.

What we noticed during the pandemic is we did get into that issue of comparing our children to other schools and how well our children are doing compared to national children. And we found out that actually we always tend to do significantly better. So we've stopped doing that now [comparing], because we felt we were falling into the trap of that negative narrative. What we do now is we look at our capacity to improve. And our capacity to improve involves bringing in people like Neela – bringing in experts to support our work.

Many years ago, a long time ago, when we started this journey – I've got it down as 15 years ago (making me feel a bit old) – we started a journey of looking at community cohesion by bringing our community together, through celebrating languages and we had this project called The One Mile Radius where we would celebrate every language spoken within one mile of our school, through bedtime stories and traditional lullabies. And to start with we brought in a retired blues guitarist, and we sat in one of those condemned kind of porter cabins and no one turned up... and after a week, someone turned up. One mum turned up, a dad turned up, a granddad turned up, and then suddenly people started sharing. We ended up with over 147 different languages recorded as bedtime stories and lullabies from languages that at the time, I'll say naively, I hadn't even heard of.

So Luganda, Oraon... families coming in and sharing these languages with us, recording them on an archive which we've kept on SoundCloud, and 15 years later they're still played around the school. You can hear them. You can use them as part of your classroom, either just as part of the environment, part of the atmosphere, part of the learning.

Since then, we continue to look at the importance of meeting the needs of our families. As we said, 47% come from outside the UK. For 98% English is an additional language, but we don't want to get into that negative narrative. In the early years, we see on a day-to-day basis and through research, that that's the space where we can make the biggest difference to children's lives. So we're looking at things like the World Health Organization's review of what makes a difference to our most vulnerable families. So if families are at home in Sub-letted flats and houses, and there's more than three siblings and two families in one room, language development – not just English language development, but language development in total – is going to be challenging. So we're looking at opening up pop-up kindergartens

to give time for families to come in. Nicole, Symma, Seema and Tabs<sup>1</sup> – our team – do beautiful coffee mornings and book clubs where families can just come early to find that space, quietness, coffee, a friendly face. We've gone outside of the borough because we're not getting the support we feel we need for financially. We've gone to fund our own speech and language therapists, our own play therapists so we can bring these experts into our nursery at a very early age to ensure children overcome any anxieties. We found anxiety is the key thing from the pandemic for us. Overcoming anxiety and learning how to play again with other children [are key challenges]. So our big effort goes into the early years because that's the space where we feel we can do the most work.

Then, as we go up through the school, we're proud to say we've kept hold of what we call our EMA team, our Ethnic Minority Achievement team, who are a ridiculously dedicated group of expert professionals who track our children's progress, who, when needed, work with the children on a one-to-one basis, or group basis, to make sure they continue breaking that negative narrative that's out there.

And then when we get up into where we feel our children are more mature, when they've been with us, understand and have seen their languages validated, that's when we bring in people like Neela and our artists; that's when we can really celebrate and then throw them the agenda. You know, what would you like to tell us? You tell us how we could improve better. You tell us what you want to celebrate about our school, and we'll do that. And we'll also listen to your challenges as well. So in a sort of nutshell, it's working with the families from day one to break that narrative to get them the access to the support they need. Keeping and tracking progress throughout years 1,2, 3 and 4 to make sure we're breaking that negative narrative that's out there; and then, in 5 and 6, developing that kind of ownership of what comes next for the children; and then really looking at the arts and the creative play with language and that advocacy of needs and celebration.

### **Zaahida Nabagereka**

Wow, that's amazing. You're doing such fantastic education and community work there, and it's wonderful that you're able to talk about it and share. And I'm just wondering if Jessica or Farzana would like to come in and comment on everything you just said.

### **Farzana Khan**

Just wonderful and mega props to you all. This is just incredible work and so necessary. Thank you.

### **Dan Lea**

Thank you.

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<sup>1</sup> Nadine is also a member of this team.

### **Jessica Bradley**

I would just add to that: it sounds like you're doing an incredible amount to really explore the different languages within the school and to find ways of bringing those into the school day in really innovative ways.

### **Farzana Khan**

I also wanted to uplift and recognize how long this work takes. You know, 10-15 years, and then iteration, and no one turns up and you're on your own for a decade and you know you're trying every different angle from artists to everything to see where there's a bridge or an entry point, and I really resonate and see that kind of deep meaningful access and participation. And, you know, meeting one another, it's such a labor of love and you've mentioned love so many times and it's such deep work, and so I just want to recognize that because I see it and I really appreciate it.

### **Zaahida Nabagereka**

I think there's also a really important aspect here. It's kind of making me think a bit about my own research in terms of linguistic imperialism. In Uganda, the average Ugandan speaks about 7 languages; there are over 40 languages in Uganda – that's just a rough estimate: there's believed to be more – but in terms of what happens when you come here [to the UK], which is what my dad did, he did not speak his mother tongue Luganda to me or my sisters and it was because of everything you've just said in terms of the children's understanding [and the idea that] they're not going to be able to keep up. And I think that's a really hard message to continue to communicate to parents. And I'm just wondering if you could speak a bit more about that because, you know, traveling to this country, wanting your children to do well, language is often seen as the main way to do that... so I'm just wondering if you could speak a bit more about that? ...because that's really interesting and important... and difficult when everything else outside of the school and outside of the home is in English.

### **Dan Lea**

We definitely found that as well. So, for us, I think the space is the early years... over the long period of time we've been doing this work and trying to find out the best ways to support our families, we've found that, within that early years moment of the children at three, four and five, working with the families [is most effective]; what's got to come first is the trust, so for example I had a young boy in my class in year two who spoke Luganda and dad would come in and – exactly what you've just explained – 'why? ...he must speak English! I want him to speak English. He must learn English. He needs to succeed at the end of the year.'

And I said to the dad: every day he's crying; I said: we need him to be happy first; we need him to want to come to school and we were searching everywhere and found a student who spoke Luganda and they sat together, and they shared stories, and we've got this beautiful recording of wincey spider where they're singing together; and from that moment on, the young boy came in smiling, happy. Every day we

played the track in the classroom. Dad came in and we had tears with Dad. There was that moment of: 'was I doing that to my son?' and we said, no, you weren't... there's no blame culture here, it's just we've got to work together. So I think for us we find we work really hard for our earliest families to give them the best start possible. And then our EMA team and our teachers... I can say, I can hand on heart say that I'm so proud of how dedicated they are and that never drops. Our head teacher drives that vision; it doesn't drop. It's unconditional professional love throughout the school. You get it in nursery on day one; you get it when you come into reception on day one; you get it when you go to year one; you get it when you go to year two... so by the time you're in year two, and those national SATs appear, then our narrative's been embedded into our families that challenges that negative narrative; our narrative is that we're celebrating your language; it's that having lots of various languages is actually going to strengthen your child's overall understanding of what language is, I think the number one thing we've done is in response to... so a few years ago the government did a research piece called 'bold beginnings' and in the very first paragraph it said that 75% of reception classes were failing their children; that 75% of the children weren't achieving what they should, and that the sole purpose of the early years is to prepare the children ready for year one and reading. And that destroyed us in terms of: 'really, that's what you think early years is about?!' So we've rewritten our curriculum and one bit we've built into our curriculum is called chronology. And it's the idea that, as teachers and parents and families, we work with the children at a very young age to understand their life journey. So where have you come from? Where do Nan and Granddad come from? Where does mum, Uncle, Aunt, brother, sister come from? We share – I'm a Peterborough lad and my family is in Leicester and now I'm down in London, so I've got my own chronology. How did I end up here? ...and we're not afraid to do that with our real young children; so we don't think they're too young for these big ideas. No, they're not! They know where they've come from. They need to understand their own personal chronology, and if they develop these skills at a young age, they can take them on as they grow older. So I think that's our answer to it: it's making sure we set the tone, the voice, right at the first part of the school and then we must stick to it so that the families believe it and see that we mean what we say.

### **Zaahida Nabagereka**

No, that's great. Thank you. I think we're now actually I'm going to watch some of the videos; Neela please could you explain for us the context of the videos that we're about to see?

### **Neela Doležalová**

Hi everyone and thank you for having me on and I just want to say that as a writer I actually found Gearies School through that SoundCloud that they made 15 years ago, and probably sitting in this kitchen like I am now listening to the lullabies that family members sung 15 years ago, and I was like: who is this school and I need to go and find them! So thanks to the Institute of Modern Languages Research, we've got some funding to work with Gearies now in the pandemic recovery curriculum.

And me and Dan had a chat and we wanted to do a project with Years Four and Six around this language of emotion. And how we could build up the students' words and ability to express things about their emotions, but from a multilingual perspective as well, and as part of that the actor Mia Ward came in on

zoom and did a whole session on exploring the language of emotion in British Sign Language. The students have been writing their own poems and stories, and they've been filmed by actors over zoom and the students saw all of this.

Today I went into the school and they had popcorn and they've seen the films of their own work, and the hope is that this experience for them validates both their language use and their creativity. What you're about to see is just a 5-minute example of four of the students' work, and some of these examples are multilingual because the students were encouraged to write in whatever language they wanted to, and then I would go away and find actors that could speak those languages too. And Mia Ward is in one of the videos and she's in translated one of the poems into British Sign Language as well. I'm hopefully going to be able to share my screen with you and my internet will hold out to show you this. So, it's a 5-minute video. Hope you enjoy.

**Actor 1 (Mayura U., English and Tamil – only English is transcribed below)**

The Animal Search.

Once upon a time lived a hunter. His name was Siva. He only knew Tamil.

One day he was going to the forest to hunt down a deer.

A girl named Lakshmi – she also knew Tamil...

So, the girl Lakshmi said [speaks in Tamil].

[Speaks in Tamil] the hunter said.

[Speaks in Tamil] Lakshmi said.

[Speaks in Tamil] the hunter said.

Lakshmi was panicked. [in Tamil] Lakshmi screamed.

The hunter said 'fine, I won't kill it. I'll help you find him.'

They found the deer and they made it happy.

But then an elephant came and ate the deer!

Lakshmi cried and cried.

The hunter said, 'it's okay', and he brought Lakshmi a dog [word in Tamil].

She loved it very much and the hunter got married to Lakshmi and they lived happily ever after.

**Actor 2 (Andrei Zayats, Russian and English– only English is transcribed below)**

[Poem read in Russian]

The sun

The sun is shining clearly  
The sun  
The sun is so good  
The sun is shining hotly in the sea  
Just right in the sea  
In the sea good, good, good, good  
In the sea  
In the sea there is no grief.

**Actor 3 (Mia Ward in BSL, with voiceover by Neela Doležalová)**

Feelings and emotions  
that will never last  
we should put them behind us,  
back in the past.

We shouldn't dwell on them too much  
this is only going to cause pain  
those feelings shouldn't be touched  
as this will only lead to rain.

A light bulb one shone  
will always come to an end  
but it will never be alone.  
it will always be accompanied with a friend.

Feelings and emotions,  
what a peculiar question to think about,  
like expressions mixed into an ocean,  
which has its own route.

They could go up and down,  
left and right  
could leave into a big frown  
or a staggering fright!

Oh, how it can be baffling at times,  
nearly as if you're in a roller coaster,  
But it's never a crime  
to be different from others.

Feelings and emotions  
some should be forgotten  
as ripe as it is,  
should be left to rotten.

#### **Actor 4 (Mohana Rajagopal, in English and Telegu)**

Exams finally!

[Speaks in Telegu]

Completely free [speaks in Telegu]... drawing... TV.... or I am with friends.

I just love this. Now I can enjoy every moment of my life without stressing and being overburdened or overwhelmed with work.

I am at liberty to be myself and not change me for others.

The next day when I went to school, it was so instantaneous. I just fainted in the middle of class!

[Speaks in Telugu]

I was so elated and relieved two weeks ago, now look at me. This happened!

[Speaks in Telugu]... and that I had always been wanting more instead of being grateful for what I have, instead of taking everything for granted.

[Speaks in Telugu]... have a roof over their heads... [Speaks in Telugu].... grateful.

**Zaahida Nabagereka**

Wow, thank you Neela for introducing the videos and for sharing them with us here. It's so important to give young people a voice and let them express themselves. I'd actually like to ask a question to Jessica now.

What are the benefits of multilingual arts informed practices in schools?

**Jessica Bradley**

Thank you and it's a real privilege to be able to hear those poems.

I think to some extent what the example that we that we've just seen really speaks for itself. You know, in terms of what these children in Year Four and Year Six of primary school (so aged 7 and 8; 10 and 11) have produced. In terms of creative outputs, in terms of these poems – and the way that they've drawn drawn from their linguistic repertoires. And each of them has done it in such different ways as well. So it's fascinating to see – we had the one that was in Russian, and then the translation, but also within the two [videos], where there are different languages within the poems, the kind of translanguaging aspect of what the pupils have done, and so I think, really, what it gives space to is new perspectives and different expanded perspectives on experiences, on emotions, and creating spaces for children to be able to express themselves and to be creators and to create something that they can be really proud of as well. And I think these poems, particularly the way that I don't share the language repertoires of the children who produce these poems, of these young poets... But this aspect I don't understand is really, kind of evocative; it gives a kind of a dimension to these poems: I'm hearing the words I can feel the emotion, and I can hear what the actor's saying but I don't understand the words. So there's a kind of disorientation there which I think is really important and that comes through being multilingual in terms of the poems. So I think what's really the main thing I would say is that they do offer these broader spaces for students to explore their experiences and explore their emotions.

**Zaahida Nabagereka**

Thank you. I'm going to ask one more question to all the panelists before we open it up to the Q&A, so all attendees do get your questions ready, if you'd like to ask one.

Is a focus on languages and the arts a luxury in the pandemic recovery, given students have been missing out on so called 'core' subjects such as math's and literacy?

Quite a big question. Who'd like to take that first?

**Dan Lea**

I think for us the answer is no, they are not a luxury. Again, it comes back to [the point] that it's essential. So while we talked about challenging that negative narrative, we equally as a school pride

ourselves on being research-informed – so looking at the research that's out there at the moment and using that with our professional expertise to find what hopefully we think is the best practice for our children.

We have a high percentage of our teachers who are trained in masters level and that have got Masters level academic achievement as well, so we use that in our school to track the impacts of what we're doing. We need to know if what we're doing works – and what we found [is tha]t if you were to draw a graph, it would almost be a straight 45-degree line of: the more you engage with arts, the more your language develops at an accelerated rate and the higher you achieve in your reading and writing.

And that for us is really interesting with the new research coming out around music and mathematics as well. So for us it's not just saying we think it's important because it's the arts. We also have that rigor and valor behind what we do of tracking, researching and seeing the impacts of what we do. And for us, there's a direct correlation that: the more our children engage with these kinds of artistic experiences, the higher they perform in English reading and writing.

### **Zaahida Nabagereka**

Jessica, Farzana... Would you like to go next?

### **Jessica Bradley**

I would say it's absolutely crucial to be thinking about the arts and thinking about multilingualism at this time – now more than ever in many ways, for the reasons that Dan said, obviously, but also in terms of challenging some of the discourse around 'catch up' and this idea of 'lost learning', and this idea that somehow this experience [of the pandemic] means that everybody is behind and we need to catch up.

And, actually, I think what the arts do is... They slow us down; they get us to stop and think and reflect on what we're doing. So the creation of these poems has given an amazing space for these pupils to pause, to think slowly, to then reflect and explore their experiences and their emotions, and then think about the what they've created as well. And I think that's super important at the moment because you know, we need to challenge this idea that we've got to catch everybody back up to where they would have been if this hadn't happened. Because it *did* happen and it's affected everybody in all kinds of different ways.

### **Farzana Khan**

Yeah, to really echo Jessica and Dan. I think it is an absolute necessity, not only because the arts is actually a thinking space, it's actually a space where we exercise and strengthen muscles – and often we look at the arts or emotions and we see these as soft things... But when you know someone who works in trauma, it's one of the most courageous and brave things to be working in, to work with trauma, to work with emotions. Those things take a lot of courage and a lot of bravery, and they're actually really hard things to do, and not things that we readily are doing or practiced in doing. And what they also allow us to do is become skillful in how we approach lots of other things, including the sciences.

And I think, right now, the world we're living in is a result of a failure of imagination in so many ways. And if there's any way that we're going to move beyond it, or process beyond it, or have a never again, we're going to require a rigor of imagination that we don't have in collective consciousness right now, because we still reproduce the same things. And, actually, to be able to invest in young people as people who will live that world and endure that world, not as a tomorrow, but as a today, as in their living, and everything that's happening in their most formative years and in their early childhood developmental years which you know essentially map out how you respond, or [what] your stress responses are, how you engage with power, how you reproduce power... all of those kinds of behavioral attributes. To support young people to have access, to be able to be curious about those things, to have an emotional bandwidth to navigate some of those things will mean that we're building the capacities for that imagination to exist. Because imagination, on its own, is not the thing that just happens and suddenly you've got great idea. It's actually this thing that is a muscle, that is exercised, that is exposed to and is constantly and rigorously being engaged with.

### **Zaahida Nabagereka**

Thank you. We're going to wait for a few more questions to come in, but I had a question for Dan: in terms of the students earlier today, what was their reaction to seeing their work and how was that taken on by them?

### **Dan Lea**

It was amazing to watch their reactions. There was a real mixture of reactions – so there was the most obvious was a child who was saying: 'that's not my story... That's not my story'. And then halfway through they were like: 'that is my story!' And then he sort of sat up, physically grew a foot, and then was looking at everyone going 'That's my story! That's my story!', which was just beautiful to watch, because, from knowing the child, he would be a child who maybe was thinking that writing's not my strength. He often talked about: 'Why am I in the writing project with you?' And so to have that moment was beautiful. There were beautiful moments where the children suddenly got very self-conscious because we were in a room that Neela had done a fantastic job at making it dark like a cinema and suddenly that was their story and they were anxious and nervous about that being their story and how people would listen to it and whether it would be celebrated. And then I think one of the children said: 'I was really nervous. But then I got really excited 'cause it was really good'; and finally (we were laughing about this before) some of the children were very critical, [saying] 'the actor read it too slowly' and 'it wasn't meant to be read like that!' and that moment was wonderful as well... Wonderful in terms of that sense of power and ownership to also celebrate, but then what was great is that, when we finished, Neela had a conversation with one of the children over the fact that they hadn't handed in writing, because they didn't have paper at home. And that was something I completely overlooked. So at the end of the session we had some writing journals and we were like: 'who would like to take one home'; and they were very, very excited about this idea of: I'm taking that home and I'm bringing the stories back and we want someone to read them again to know it was fantastic.

## **Zaahida Nabagereka**

Brilliant! Thank you for letting us know; that's really important in terms of building confidence, communication, you know critical thinking, all of it. It's there; the arts can do that for young people!

So I've got two questions [from the audience]...

'Interesting to hear, one panelist saying that we don't just have a COVID pandemic but a pandemic of mental health and racism etc. The creative arts can bridge these concepts in a way that is slightly distant and easier to approach the distress. Can the panel expand on how to help young people and their agency?'

So I'll read them both and then we can discuss them [together] because we've not got a huge amount of time left.

'Very powerful presentations with massive potential for sharing ideas and experiences. How can we encourage joined up thinking across the education sector around the issues that you have talked about?'

So those questions are actually related. Who'd like to jump in? ...Jessica please...

## **Jessica Bradley**

I just want to pick up on the second question actually because I was thinking about that when Dan was talking about all the things that you're doing in the school around multilingualism, and around creativity.

And I was thinking: when does that when does that kind of pause? What happens at the different transitions you talked about? What happens at high school? What happens in year nine, when GCSE choices are made? What happens, obviously, beyond that? What space is there for schools to be able to keep these threads going and not let them just kind stop at these different points?

I work closely with a school for a project I've been doing where they've obviously tried extremely hard to make sure that they can offer qualifications across the languages that are spoken within the school and then encourage take up [of languages qualifications] beyond those language communities as well. There are things that can be done, but it does seem harder and harder to find the cracks where these creative possibilities might grow.

## **Zaahida Nabagereka**

So Farzana or Dan would you like to comment on how we can encourage young people to expand and give them more agency and also pick up on the second question, which was about thinking across the education sector around the issues that we've been talking about to join up thinking a bit more?

## **Farzana Khan**

I think for the for the first question around agency, it's something we explore a lot, and particularly from a trauma perspective and a mental health perspective. And I think that we have to accept that the pandemic is traumatizing, because we're not having that conversation, full stop. Oppression is traumatizing. And the first thing that we think about is really what will resource a person to regulate. So, in simple terms, when we talk about it in our work, we use two anchoring principles. The first is consent: what are the ways that we can be super consensual with ourselves? You know: what do we need in our body; how does our body feel; is this something we choose; is it's something we don't choose? Working in a way that creates opportunity to practice consent is a key way of restoring agency, especially for folks who come from communities where they've been collectively disempowered.

There's something really important about signifying you are consequential and that when you articulate a need that is consequential. So consent, and building a consensual practice, is a key part of that.

Sometimes though, and we could all of us on the call see in different ways how we're disconnected, numb, disassociated, fatigued. It's really hard to know what your body needs. It's really hard to know or identify what is it, especially when you're in a school and your teachers might say to you: 'pee at break time'.... so you're overriding your body, you know, [a teacher might say] 'don't cry'; we have these kind of these mannerisms that encourage us culturally to override our body, to override our instinct... and actually it's really hard to know what you need. And so then we say, well, let's go to comfort: what would bring you a pause; what would bring you and comfort? This particular framework comes from Nkem Ndefo who is a brilliant resilience specialist and particularly around trauma-informed practice.

So I think comfort and consent are two key anchors that help us know what it is we need and to be able to track and start to articulate that. But impact matters. If you consistently go unheard when you articulate a need or an expression, then you're going to go into self-censoring, shaming internalizing and we see this happen in family settings and we see this happening in schools settings so there has to be a consequence around the practice of agency.

I think more broadly, I ran 'Voices that Shake' with an incredible team of arts educators and activists. And we've just published over a 300-page cultural anthology, which specifically speaks to youth education; it's also a research report, and a practical guide and that's available to schools and everywhere. And it's 'Voices that Shake'. And maybe Neela can put the link in the chat and you could access it and it very rigorously talks about some of those connections and the need and also the ways that we might do that.

## **Zaahida Nabagereka**

Thank you. Dan, we've got about 40 seconds for you to answer those two questions before we have to end.

**Dan Lea**

First on the point of agency, it's really echoing what's been said already. (1), in our school, building and protecting space for the arts to happen; and slowing down the world as it flies around us.

And (2) the idea of consistency: so we have a an approach we call 'Caring and Daring', where there's time where we'll really challenge the children to do things that they wouldn't normally do, and there's time where we'll stop and just be caring and supportive and slow right down.

And it's the consistency of that approach across the school that's really, really important for us. So the children know whatever you do, there's times where they're going to be challenged and times when they're supported. And going back to what we said earlier, just building it from the very first day – and even before the children join our school community. We try and meet them at the age of two; [we] meet the families and build up those relationships in the early years. Because that's the space to do it.

**Zaahida Nabagereka**

Well, thank you so much panelists. I feel like we could continue talking for ages, but unfortunately we have to end.

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Thanks again everyone and I hope you've enjoyed this event.