

# Blending Art and Translanguaging Pedagogies: Supporting Refugee Children in Elementary Schools to Forge a Path in Education

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## Abstract

Educators in elementary schools around the world that host and receive refugee children often find themselves not only teaching the local language but also smoothing their path into an unfamiliar culture, reducing mental health distress and advocating for social justice among diverse pupils. While these students may be perceived as “silent,” many possess unused multilingual skills and knowledge due to their varied backgrounds. However, the psychological impact of war and displacement may impede their educational and social integration, particularly in the crucial early months following resettlement. This paper examines research on the benefits of blending arts and translanguaging pedagogies to support refugee children in the first year of school as newcomers. The arts are a universal language, comprised of a unique set of symbols and non-verbal expression often rooted in emotion, which offers a therapeutic medium for students to process their traumatic experiences. Self-portraits are particularly helpful in generating a positive “hybrid identity”, or retaining their culture of origin while forging ahead into their new local lives. Teachers, meanwhile, can encourage students to participate in learning vocabulary through images and to practice translanguaging with similar speakers in class. This practice acknowledges and validates students’ “collective heteroglossia”, inviting them to view their multilingualism as an asset, especially within superdiverse educational settings. Through translanguaging, students are supported in developing translingual selves where their language skills serve as bridges between cultures and advance a sense of belonging. By embracing this dual approach, educators can create classroom “spaces” that honor each child’s linguistic and cultural strengths, ultimately promoting self-efficacy, greater confidence, and an expanded identity.

## Keywords:

Refugee Children, Arts Education, Translanguaging

## Introduction

In elementary schools that welcome refugee children from around the world, educators often search with them to locate a path through an unfamiliar culture, mitigate their



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mental health distress and advocate for social justice for disadvantaged and diverse pupils. Teachers cite the main barriers for refugee students with disabilities (abbreviated to RCDs) as trauma, loss of a familiar way of life, overwhelming feelings due to different cultural values and an inability to concentrate due to intrusive memories, which is a signature of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). While it may appear at first that trauma has left a student mute, in reality, many possess unused multilingual skills and knowledge due to their experiences. However, the psychological impact of war and displacement may very well hinder their educational and social integration, motivation and self-confidence, particularly in the crucial early months following resettlement.

On arrival in Canada, families spend months getting settled and learning about services, including education. Children five years and older begin school at a Welcome Centre with translators and gradually begin to attend daily where they are taught basic English. Their teachers assess their familiarity with formal education as well as their readiness to join an elementary school near their housing, and their overall mental health. This is a very challenging time for young children and adjustment takes several months, less if they have attended school in their country of origin. Most often, children enter their permanent classrooms after four to six months, and with their parents, meet Settlement Workers in Schools (SWIS) who act as go-betweens for families, teachers and school staff. Elementary school teachers, mostly in urban areas, have extensive professional development and mostly understand this is a difficult time for the family. In the early months, few academic expectations are put on the children and they are permitted to explore the classroom and take in the array of books, toys, electronics and learning areas in the room. If the teacher is able to pair the newcomer with another child from a similar language and culture, the child may adapt more quickly. As the months pass, the refugee student begins to develop a basic vocabulary, understands prompts to move to new activities and follows the class routine. RCDs continue to acquire the local language, use their own language to learn from their friends, and eventually become “emergent” bilinguals (Li, 2023) where they slowly catch on to academic learning. This is considered the ideal outcome.

However, placement in schools is fairly random and many staff are astonished by the number of resources necessary to support RCDs. Approximately 25% of all children in the USA, not just refugees, have experienced trauma, which affects brain development, causes cognitive problems, lowers ability to self-regulate and reduces interest in forming relationships (Puchner & Markowitz, 2023). As more refugees arrive, educators attempt to “spread them

around” to reduce the extra work that accompanies them in the early stages. As the years pass, elementary school educators understand that they have limited time in which to ensure all students feel capable of success. This is especially important in terms of developing self-efficacy and resilience, before they advance to more difficult academic subjects and possibly negative political environments in secondary school. The main psycho-social development goals of teachers are to facilitate their students’ experiences of achievement and integrate them into the social fabric of school which allows them to persevere and develop a sense of belonging. In terms of trauma, children will continue to question what has happened to them, and gradually change some of the details so they remember these experiences in more profound and meaningful ways. Through creating a “healing narrative”, students are able to move forward in their lives, and no longer see migration as the end of their journey, but instead, as one more stage of their remarkable lives (Adnams Jones, 2018; St. Thomas & Johnson, 2007)). In the meantime, professional development programs for teachers, such as trauma-informed pedagogy, culturally-sensitive schools, and inclusive theories, offer support but there must be “buy-in”. School-wide trauma-informed practices are difficult. They require focusing on why children misbehave and why establishing stability, safety, self-regulation awareness and relationships skills are essential, but some teachers feel it is asking too much (Puchner & Markowitz, 2023). All the same, most educators are aware of how the environment helps or hinders learning; compassionate and caring staff who make the effort to form authentic and trusting relationships with students can make a significant difference (Barber, 2022, 2025). Clearly, for the reasons above, elementary education has a significant role to play for RCDs.

In recent years, the concept of translanguaging has emerged as a powerful framework for understanding and supporting multilingual learners. Coined by Ofelia García, translanguaging recognizes that multilingual individuals do not simply use separate languages in distinct contexts; instead, they draw upon their entire linguistic repertoire, that is, all languages, dialects, and modes of communication, to create meaning and navigate the world (García, 2009). This perspective challenges the traditional view of language as compartmentalized, and advocates for embracing and leveraging the full linguistic resources of each student. By valuing and incorporating students’ full linguistic repertoire, educators can create more equitable and inclusive learning environments that foster both academic success and a strong sense of belonging.

This qualitative research project thus examines the benefits of blending arts with translanguaging

pedagogies to support refugee children in the first year of school as newcomers. This study is based on previous arts-based research by Author 1 that shows promising results for RCDs. Art is not new in schools, nor is it ignored as a way of encouraging students to creatively explore their identities and place in the world. In terms of adapting to “superdiversity” (Vertovec, 2023) in schools and developing respect for all cultures and religions, art plays a part in helping children better understand themselves and others (Barone & Eisner, 2012). In the original study, in-class art workshops offered deep insights to teachers and advancing their understanding about how to better support RCDs. The current research project, on which Author 2 collaborated, aimed to expand findings, and explore how translanguaging might “create a space” (García & Johnson, 2017) during art-making that could further energize other complex areas in a child’s integration and growth, such as in their well-being and sense of belonging, all the while advancing their languages that contribute to their identity, maintaining their standing within their communities and enhancing their academic skills.

## Literature Review

### Art and trauma

The arts are another form of communication that is comprised of a set of symbols and non-verbal expression that relies strongly on emotion, which provides a therapeutic medium for students to process their traumatic experiences. This internal exploration of personal memories during art-making may afford more distance from disturbing events, and move bad memories where they are “stuck” in the amygdala and hippocampus (Kolk, 2003) to the prefrontal cortex where they can be examined more rationally. This results in greater control over meaning-making which the child can shape into a healthier and more resilient self-image.

Over one third of people with PTSD do not improve with evidence-based treatments, such as Trauma-focused Cognitive Behavior Therapy (TF-CBT) or Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) (Schouten et al., 2019); in addition, the longer a patient goes without treatment, the less chance of a full recovery. We are not suggesting that teachers become art therapists, but much of what they already do in their art classes can be considered therapeutic. All the same, making art can be a suitable approach for children with trauma due to the non-verbal and experimental aspects of art as well as the wordless and visual nature of intrusive memories that feel as though they are happening in the moment (Schouten et al., 2019).

### Educational Benefits of Making Art

WHO (n.d.) describes how art can steer children towards seeing things differently:

*Artistic expression grew lockstep with human cultural development and has long played an integral part in how we teach, learn, communicate and heal. Since our earliest ancestors began telling stories to make sense of the world, we have evolved to learn from narrative, be it through visual media, song or performance. The arts are uniquely suited to help us understand and communicate concepts and emotions by drawing on all our senses and a capacity for empathy... Art can help us to...process difficult emotions in times of emergency and challenging events. The creation and enjoyment of the arts help promote holistic wellness and can be a motivating factor in recovery.*

Furthermore, Jindal-Snape et al. (2018) define the ‘impact’ of the arts in terms of academic achievement, through “having contributed to some discernible change in an aspect of students’ cognitive or emotional processes” (p. 60). Moreover, the arts may have two different types of impact: first, as creative processes within the student, and second, as creative thinking skills that are easily employed outside of making art. Both impacts are considered difficult to measure due to their subjective nature, but engaging in the arts may facilitate intrinsic, and highly desirable, personal development in children, namely their improved self-confidence, self-awareness, positive emotions and greater attention to meaning-making, all in addition to creativity and imagination (Hallam et al, 2014).

### Translanguaging

Originally, translanguaging was described as a pedagogical approach in which students who were learning the local or dominant language could use alternate languages to clarify meaning in the new language (Williams, 1994). This seemed to be a more equitable way of stating that students might be at many different levels of learning a language; they would eventually achieve fluency and no longer need to ask for translations into their stronger language. García and Kleifgen (2018) advanced the idea that “emergent bilingualism” might offer a more positive way to label a language learner, namely as someone who has more options for learning, including continuing to use their home language as a way of grasping the nuances of meaning in a new language.

Recently, language has been recognized more clearly to be a carrier of certain politics, history, economics and ideologies that continue to prioritize the status quo (Otheguy et al., 2015). Seen through this lens, educators began to notice that bilingual/multilingual students whose first languages were unnamed (minoritized) languages put them in danger of falling behind, either because there was no one in the school to support their learning through their original languages, or, the

policy of the school was “English Only”. Gradually, the discovery that students who relied more on social uses of language rather than academic rules for language practices put these students on a very different, and more equitable, footing. Educators who accepted this greater complexity within translanguaging moved away from focusing on named languages and took up the linguistic system of words, sounds and constructions that make up speakers’ energetic and more colorful means of expression that today suggests a different way of teaching.

Some examples of how these concepts are put into action are:

1. Using instructional strategies that bridge everyday language practices with the formal language that is usually required in educational settings (Flores & Schissel, 2014),
2. Encouraging students to deploy their entire linguistic repertoire, rather than being restricted to the language(s) officially designated for instruction (García et al., 2017),
3. Offering students opportunities to make space for students’ bilingualism and ways of knowing as they move into more complex academic content and texts (García & Kleifgen, 2018),
4. Supporting students’ socio-emotional development and bilingual identities (García et al., 2017).

This approach is applicable across a range of educational contexts, including English-medium classrooms (e.g., ESL programs), bilingual or dual-language classrooms, and heritage or world language classrooms (García et al., 2017). These classrooms offer openings for students to move more fluidly between languages, transcending monolingual norms to affirm their multilingual identities.

### ***Educational Benefits of Translanguaging***

Extensive research has amassed a body of evidence that highlights the advantages for children who are bilingual. García and Kleifgen (2020) affirm how ten-year olds excel at concept formation and mental flexibility. According to Bialystok’s (2004, 2007, 2017; Bialystok et al., 2009; Bialystok, & Barac, 2012), myriad research projects, we know that children who speak one or more languages are able to select features from their linguistic repertoire while inhibiting others, via the executive function in the prefrontal cortex. This results in more plasticity of the brain, developing a more efficient network that coordinates with auditory abilities and managing control over the two languages. In general, bilingual children have an understanding of language itself, referred to as “metalinguistic awareness” (Axelrod & Cole, 2018). Not least, bilingualism is found to have

links to creativity due to overall increased cognitive activity and thereby potential. Five aspects found in bilingual creative minds are: flexible thinking, problem-solving, a metalinguistic mind, learning abilities and interpersonal skills (Baetens Beardsmore, 2008). Furthermore, there are many advantages for students who continue to learn vocabulary in their home language. For instance, Cummins (2000) cites how knowing the meaning of a word in their home language makes learning the word in English much easier. On the other hand, lacking an understanding of the concept and the word puts the child at a much greater disadvantage. As a result, school programs can be most effective for bilingual children if home language practices are accompanied by English in the learning process (García & Kleifgen, 2020).

Translanguaging also redefines notions of language proficiency and communicative competence. Rather than measuring proficiency in terms of mastery of a single language, translanguaging recognizes the ability to navigate and collaborate across multiple languages as a marker of linguistic competence. Traditional terms such as “non-native,” “interference,” and “negative transfer” reflect a monolingual bias (Miao & Yang, 2022). Canagarajah (2011) argues that, “the tendency to adopt binary and hierarchical orientations to language has distorted the integrated nature of multilingual competence and communication” (p. 3). Translanguaging, by contrast, celebrates the creativity and functionality of multilingual practices, offering a more inclusive and accurate understanding of language use. This provides valuable insights to the complex, multidimensional trajectories of identity construction among multilingual individuals. In an increasingly globalized world, multilinguals often navigate transnational settings that transcend traditional linguistic, ethnic, and national boundaries (Miao & Yang, 2022). The concept of translingual identity describes this phenomenon, emphasizing the hybrid linguistic repertoires and socio-cultural backgrounds that shape a sense of self. Translingual identities are inherently translocal and cosmopolitan, reflecting the interconnectedness of homeland and host land experiences. By embracing this perspective, educators and researchers can better understand and support the diverse identities of multilingual learners, fostering a sense of belonging and agency in an ever-changing world.

### **The Study**

Previous research through arts-based methods resulted in promising directions for further study, especially in the area of joining art with literacy and learning in English as RCDs absorbed concepts from other subject areas (Barber, 2025). Our current research questions were mostly aimed at the relationship between art and translanguaging, through the following:

--Does making art naturally stimulate translanguaging between students who share similar (non-English) languages?

--In what ways might translanguaging boost a newcomer's ability to learn English?

--Do refugees with disabilities who combine art and translanguaging show signs of increased cognitive development and well-being over time?

This qualitative approach (led by Author 1) used arts-based research (ABR) methods to direct the students' attention toward their art-making with little-to-no instructions to allow for maximum creativity and personal expression. As one theoretical framework, we prioritized arts education and its core theories. Barone and Eisner (2012), esteem ABR as a valuable epistemology for learning about self and others. The arts operate both on the inside and outside of persons. For instance, through art-making, we awaken to different aspects of ourselves that seem fresh and we imagine ourselves differently, amenable to change if we wish. In particular, the arts provide a window into children's feelings that are not always forthcoming if, for example, a researcher wanted to interview them. It may also be impossible to encourage children to speak about events in their lives, mainly because they do not yet have the cognitive development to make sense of their experiences. However, children are sensitive to what they see in art, and they can identify what is evoked there. They know more than they can say, yet they understand art because they can feel it (Barber, 2025). Ultimately, the artistic expression that holds emotions and their responses to others' art may enable RCDs to experience improved mental health and well-being, thereby freeing more of their mental energy and concentration towards learning English and taking greater interest in the academic tasks before them.

A second framework that anchors this project is Wei's (2018) translanguaging theory of language that proposes how students and teachers engage in a "translanguaging instinct" and seek to create "translanguaging spaces" in their classrooms in order to support student learning (Viegen, 2020). Teachers may be able to plan, act, observe and reflect on how best to support their students' learning needs (Flores & Schissel, 2014), and employ efforts as simple as creating a corner of the classroom with a comfy couch, pillows and blankets, arranging moveable dividers that afford some privacy for those who choose to go there.

### **Ethics, Context, Setting and Participants**

The first step was to secure consent and approval from our university's office of ethics in research. Every person in the school, including all minors, had to be guaranteed anonymity, as well as the site. Author 1 agreed never to photograph a child's face, nor give

any identifying information. The goal was mainly to photograph their art, observe, listen and record in field notes. Author 1 also interviewed both teachers about the students to elicit what the teachers noticed. Prior to the art workshops, the school had prepared consent forms in various languages for the parents of each child, and told them the research would involve "only doing things that the students would normally do in an art class" (in conversation with the school principal, 2023, October). Based on these guarantees, all parents agreed for their child to participate, and the office of ethics at the university deemed the study as "low risk".

The research took place in a highly diverse elementary school in a city on Canada's West Coast. The principal estimated that there were over 50 different languages spoken within the student body of 450, but it was possible that over 80 languages were present if all the minority languages were tallied. SWIS workers who spoke major languages remained at the school to work with families and staff, but the school district could also request SWIS from other nearby schools who were adequate speakers of lesser-known languages and could spend time with new arrivals. Major groups had come to this elementary school from the Middle East, East Africa, Afghanistan, Central and South America, and most recently, Ukraine. Author 1 was given permission to enter the classrooms of two teachers who allowed 10 one-hour art workshops. In the older group, only four students were considered L1 English speakers. The younger class had 20 students aged 7-8 years old; the older class was aged 8-9 with 29 students ( $n = 49$ ). Both teachers had received professional development in trauma-informed teaching, English language teaching methods and cultural-sensitivity training. All names of people and places are pseudonyms.

### **Methods**

The first author led art workshops, showing a model or two of what students would do, while allowing great latitude for individual creativity. How to use the materials were discussed and then students began working on their own. Students were closely observed, especially their behavior and interest levels. The teachers were interviewed after the workshops and these were further developed in field notes. When the workshops ended, both authors met and familiarized themselves with all data. Our main focus was to notice what kind of role translanguaging played during art-making.

### **Data Sources and Data Analysis**

The three main data sources were: the art the children made over the ten weeks, Author 1's field notes written after the workshops and feedback from the teachers, especially the more in-depth recorded interviews that

took place after they had done report cards. During the workshops, the children engaged in different types of art-making. The first hurdle was to observe how they would find a way to get started without too much direction. A majority of students who had some schooling came from highly structured educational systems, with little to no choice or personal expression. Also, those students with little or no time in classrooms often waited until the others began their work, and then began exploring the materials. The second unknown factor was, if, over time, they would become more comfortable and manage their starting points on their own, or remain with others, work in groups, preferring more independent work as they adjusted to having choices. Workshops were intentionally scaffolded so each one led from a simple activity to more complex tasks that were more dependent on language. For example,

*--To bring them into the concept of "identity" in the first workshop, I read a story, handed out a sheet with dozens of emojis with different facial expressions from which they might choose to reflect their current mood, and then they worked up to their self-portrait.*

*--In the next workshop, I read, *The very hungry caterpillar* (Carle, 1965/1981), stopping often to discuss the illustrations; afterwards, students made caterpillars with strips of paper, pipe cleaners for antennae and googly eyes. We discussed physicality, mobility and concepts related to the life cycle of the caterpillar before constructing them with braided strips of paper that would allow them to move.*

*--The next few workshops involved creating paper bag puppets that would be their characters in the short stories that we would film as "digital stories". They needed to learn their lines, time their actions and work together.*

*--Finally, the last workshop revisited the self-portrait to determine if there were any substantial differences between the first and last ones.*

Both authors collaborated on locating themes (Braun & Clark, 2019; Creswell & Pugh, 2007) from the data. After identifying key words and categorizing which seemed strongly in line with the field notes and teachers' interviews in light of the three research questions, we then independently cross-listed words that most strongly described the thoughts and/or emotions in the children's art. Noting patterns, we then narrowed the words to the major themes. We then compared our lists and adjusted them to reduce as much bias as possible.

The following section presents the themes that most strongly illuminated the interconnectedness of the RCDs, their art, translanguaging and any changes in the children themselves, supported by examples.

## Findings

**Theme One: Participating in art stimulates making art and translanguaging**

From the first art workshop to the last, translanguaging was occurring, mainly for the purposes of finding out what the students with less English needed to know, ideally to connect with someone from their home language whom they could trust. For example, in the first case, Author 1 did not know what an Afghan student was saying, but could tell by his tone of voice, gestures, body language and pointing at the other boy's paper that he was asking for help. Another strategy by students who were more bilingual and understood the goal, but did not know how to draw a self-portrait, instead of asking another person, they procrastinated until the other students had started their work, then got up and walked around, taking in all the different ways everyone was sketching themselves and then started to draw.

These are two examples of how students overcame the first hurdle: how to get started on a new and unfamiliar task, in this case, when a student had never made a self-portrait. There are overlaps here with Cummins (2000), who believes there can be bilingual students who after learning the meaning of the word in their first language can then understand what it is and proceed; this can be compared to the student who knows what "self-portrait" means, but is unsure because they have never drawn their self-portrait before. Exploring this situation more deeply, more English-fluent students who had exactly the same difficulties but for different reasons, pointed at cultural beliefs at the heart of the difficulty. In their country of origin, or in some refugee camps, many of these students were fearful of making mistakes, which could possibly lead to physical punishment or humiliation. Without knowing this prior to introducing this activity, Author 1 quickly grasped that a child being able to fall back on translanguaging was extremely important to the person with less fluency. Clearly, this was a trusted person who understood the necessity of avoiding punishment, even though none of these students had been physically or emotionally punished by Canadian teachers. Yet, the first thought in the student's mind was that this was a situation that could escalate. The conversation in their home language was, thus, a consultation; both students came to an agreement that there would be no punishment. Translanguaging, therefore, plays an important role in deciphering potentially negative outcomes, calms any triggers to mental health and dispels other fears carried over from their home country.

Fast forward ten weeks, and the students were asked to repeat their self-portraits. Partly because they knew Author 1 much better at that point, and that their creativity had been steadily encouraged, all students drew themselves in radically different presentations (See Appendix 1). Translanguaging in this case had not been about the correct way to do self-portraits. It was much more deeply reflected upon, making decisions about how they wanted to present themselves as how

they saw themselves now. Children who are moving quickly through developmental stages bring a keen awareness of what values and personal characteristics they should keep in their minds when being constantly challenged to adapt to the mainstream culture. They are questioning who they are and what direction they want to go, all the while wondering how to maintain a balance between who they were and who they want to be. Therefore, self-portraits are particularly helpful in generating a positive “hybrid identity”, and successfully maintaining their cultural roots while forging ahead into their new local lives. This snapshot of the interactions between the self-portrait workshops and students translanguaging accurately represents the themes of knowledge of self and others (Barone & Eisner, 2012), cultural identities, pushing back at trauma and staying in reality.

Theme Two: Art and translanguaging contribute to an RCD’s efforts at meaning-making

Both art and translanguaging helped to support a child’s understanding their experiences and discovering the new world and culture in which they now live. Through art, the child may push around a few ideas, letting their feelings arise and take over. What is expressed in the end may be quite different compared to how the art began. Translanguaging can also be a group effort, where several students with the same home language will join forces and discuss choices (Cano & Ruiz, 2020). Often the receiver of information may attempt to return the favor later, and want to share their knowledge with their same-language peers.

One example occurred in the art workshop where a table of boys had just settled into their self-portraits. Two new non-English speaking students, one from Ukraine and the other from Japan, both attempted to do the work. The teachers understood that the Ukrainian boy, Peter, was not adapting well; his father had stayed behind to fight and the boy did not want to go to Canada. No doubt drawing pictures seemed fairly trivial to him compared to the place where he had just come, but he suddenly sat down and drew a picture. Not three minutes later, he showed us his “self-portrait”: an image of a striking match. The meaning could not have been clearer. Peter went to the window, obviously frustrated, and the other boys, in Arabic, called him to come over, come back and sit with them. They understood how difficult it was for him; they had all been through it. Five minutes later, Peter was uncovering a small electric organ at the back of the room, and began to play. This was his “translanguaging space” (Wei, 2010). What was interesting, on a cultural level, the other boys at the table got up, and formed a circle, urging the Japanese boy to join them. The Arab boys slowly started dancing to the music in their style which even surprised Peter. It

was an exceptional multicultural moment with much translanguaging through the art of dance. Peter, in his own way, was repaying the kindness and compassion of the other boys at his table through their love of music. It had an obvious power for all of them that words could not really capture, but the feeling was there with much meaning on an existential level.

Theme Three: There are many ways translanguaging boosts English Language Learning

When preparing for the caterpillar literacy and art workshop, visuals would be essential. Some students had seen the book before but were not able to explain complex science vocabulary like “cocoon”, “metamorphosis”, and “pupa”. Some students were not familiar with caterpillars due to the region they came from, and others could not identify which images matched the vocabulary. Students were encouraged to talk to anyone about what they were learning and decide what meanings of the words and pictures they could find. Author 1 was experimenting with “intentional” translanguaging and learning through understanding conceptual knowledge, especially those with languages that shared root words close to English (Henderson & Ingram, 2018). Several speakers imitated a caterpillar inching across a desk, and others hooking their thumbs together to resemble a butterfly. That did the trick. Creating a game using visual representations and manually mimicking new vocabulary guided students to the right answer that is also easier to remember. Having visual support, introducing the vocabulary, matching the visual aids with the images in the book, and finally, making caterpillars that they could manipulate, was a very strong combination and allowed them lots of practice with peers who spoke their language.

Theme Four: Both art and translanguaging are extremely inclusive, transformational and useful in engaging all students creatively in learning.

Art is often framed as capable of transforming the artist as well as the viewer, to the extent that the audience may be overwhelmed by an aesthetic experience (Collingwood, 1938/1958). Think of having read a novel, seen a performance or viewed a film that had a life-changing impact – one feels as though they will never return to the way they previously understood something. An aesthetic experience also has the power to silence the search for meaning when it is clear that there is no way to capture the full meaning of this experience, or to do so, would diminish the complexity of it.

Theme Five: Finding a Place to Belong

After the caterpillars were completed, the teacher lined them all up on the window sill, arranged in rows, like the children sitting at their desks. The students

came over to appreciate them, and we talked about how caterpillars change as they grow, and metamorphosis is a transformation, just like caterpillars turning into butterflies. Author 1 added that people have changes inside themselves too; just like children, who are becoming amazing people. The girl standing next near to the caterpillars remarked that each caterpillar is the same, with accordion bodies, antennae and googly eyes, but they are also each unique. "They are just like us!" she said. This sense of belonging seemed to wash over the students and they looked around at each other and smiled, thinking about this wisdom delivered by an eight-year-old.

The people who knew these students best had just finished their report cards, including comments on the specific ways that students had made progress this first term. As a baseline in September, the higher-grade teacher said that two RCDs were described as "not yet literate", but now in December were assessed as "comprehending oral texts at grade level". Another child who the teacher was concerned about in September as "having difficulties interacting with peers", was now in December considered as "demonstrating leadership during group work" (Teacher report cards in field notes, 2023, December).

## Discussion

### *The Intersection of Arts and Translanguaging in the Classroom*

This study has endeavored to confirm that RCDs who show a willingness to make art and engage in translanguaging, often together, have a stronger chance of benefiting from the strengths of each, and make strides in cognitive development and increased well-being over time.

Untreated trauma is considered to be the greatest barrier to a student's success in school, and shortly behind that, is a lack of the local language where they settle, which may be enough to derail a child's education, depending on other disadvantages. Moreover, trauma interferes with concentration in language learning, reading and writing, and often intrusive memories can impact a child's behavior, which many teachers can interpret incorrectly. Art creates a space where children can enter themselves, become calm, choose what to focus on and notice what is meaningful for them. They also have greater space to think about other people, and carefully consider their bad experiences by moving memories from the amygdala to the prefrontal cortex where they have more distance from the sudden and unwanted memories. Here, they can be better be controlled and rationalized, and possibly altered to a more preferable "healing narrative" that better suits their understanding of traumatic events (Adnams Jones, 2018; St. Thomas & Johnson, 2007).

What is happening socially for the children as they absorb meaning is that art and translanguaging reflect a world view and culture of each viewer or participant. Translanguaging, importantly, is a tool for teachers to encourage inclusion, no matter their skill level with any languages spoken in the classroom (Paré, 2015). Creativity flows through both art and translanguaging (García & Kleifgen, 2018; Kharkhurin, 2015).

This paper has focused exclusively on children in elementary school where teachers have the best chance at changing the course many RCDs are on. However, as they move into adolescence, students will discover that translanguaging classrooms are not merely spaces where students' linguistic repertoires are used as scaffolds to acquire a dominant language. Rather, they are transformative environments that empower students to become agents of their semiotic repertoires, enabling them to create, communicate, and exist freely within and beyond linguistic boundaries. By leveraging students' translanguaging practices, educators can unlock the creative potential of young people, particularly those who have been marginalized racially and linguistically. Translanguaging challenges the ways in which language has historically been used to restrict imagination and creativity, offering instead a framework that celebrates linguistic diversity and fosters critical engagement with the world (García & Kleifgen, 2018). Translanguaging is not only a political act but also enables students to reclaim their voices and identities in educational spaces (Wright, 2014).

Wei (2010) further elaborates on the transformative potential of translanguaging by using the concept of translanguaging space, a dynamic and fluid environment where linguistic structures and systems intersect. This space serves as a bridge between cultural traditions, fostering a sense of connectedness and enabling multilingual individuals to engage in creative and critical practices. This approach not only validates students' existing knowledge and experiences but also cultivates a deeper understanding of language as a lived, evolving practice.

## Limitations

As with most qualitative research, due to its subjective nature, the context, participants, teachers, schools and even researchers, results will not be identical, and therefore, unable to be replicated. Each class in the school where the research occurred was unique. Even in the class next door, the demographics were very different. In the particular setting where the workshops were completed, there were eight students who were from Afghanistan, titling the class heavily in their direction; on the other hand, these students revealed how natural it is to slip into translanguaging when needed. For other students, there were six

Spanish speakers, but from different Spanish-speaking countries. There were also several pairs for different countries, and the rest were singles who were unable to engage in translanguaging. A possible remedy would be for scholars to take on larger studies.

### Conclusion

These translanguaging practices acknowledge and validate students' "collective heteroglossia", inviting them to view their multilingualism as an asset, especially within superdiverse educational settings (Vertovec, 2023). Ideally, students will be free to blend translanguaging with art, encouraging creativity from within language and other activities. Thus, these students are supported in developing translingual selves where their language skills serve as bridges between cultures, establish caring multicultural relationships and advance a sense of belonging. By embracing this approach, educators can design classroom spaces that honor each child's linguistic and cultural strengths, ultimately promoting self-efficacy, greater confidence, and an expanded identity.

### Disclaimer

General ideas from this research were presented on April 9, 2025 at the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan's conference, entitled, "Inclusive Education and Society: Methodology, Research and Practice" at the University of Atyrau. A five-page summary of this study will be published as conference proceedings on the University's website.

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