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Collecting stories of identity and culture with young people: the Synallactic Collective Image Technique

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Introduction

The leader of an arts-based workshop, Evangelia, has asked the young people involved to consider a time they translated or interpreted and to think about how they were feeling. One young man named Tariq looks unsure and mumbles, 'I don't got feelings' and then asks the question more loudly: 'do you have feelings when you translate, do you have feelings?'. A couple of his friends smile but no one replies. Throughout the workshop he casts sideways looks at the others' drawings. In the end, with a black pen he draws an oval face, with two round circles for eyes that are blank in the middle. The face has a little bit of hair, a line for a nose and a round circle for the mouth. The only bit of colour is a red tongue in the mouth. It is a stark face, for its lack of detail. For his story Tariq writes: 'don't have any story about translating, mean I do but don't really remember them', and 'don't have any feelings while I am translating', and on the back of his drawing he writes '#Nofeelings' and, a little further down the page, 'Concern'.

This excerpt is drawn from an arts-based workshop which was part of an Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded project, based at the Thomas Coram Research Unit (TCRU) between 2014–17. The project

focused on child language brokers; children and young people who translate and interpret for family members, peers and the local community. We were broadly concerned with exploring how child language brokers acted as both cultural and linguistic mediators of knowledge and what impact this had on their sense of identity and belonging. Methodologically this presented a challenge because cultural knowledge has an intangible quality and can be hard to put into words. One oft-noted feature of child language brokering that is particularly salient for this chapter, is that 'brokering' implies an activity beyond word-for-word translation and interpretation. Rather, young people are said to be the mediators of cultural knowledge, values, systemic and institution knowledge and in some cases, a kind of bridge or link between the home culture and the public world (Orellana, 2009; Jones, Trickett and Birman, 2012; Nash, 2017). Consequently, when we set out on this project, we considered that it might be challenging to capture these aspects of child language brokering through purely talk-based methods. In addition, we were conscious that our child language brokers might still be in the early stages of learning one or more of their languages. Therefore, we sought to provide multiple avenues to our participants to express themselves by using a combination of arts-based methods (drama, podcast and art workshops) alongside more traditional qualitative social-science methods, which included vignette interviews (see Crafter and Iqbal, 2020; 2022; Iqbal and Crafter, 2022).

In this chapter, we focus on one of our arts-based workshops that employed the Synallactic Collective Image Technique (SCIT), a technique used for sharing personal and collective stories, memories and experiences. In this instance, we brought together a group of young language brokers (aged 13–16) who took part in a SCIT workshop. Through sharing individual drawings and narratives of personal experiences of language brokering, interpersonal transactions within the group unfold. Research on language brokering already had a precedence within TCRU. For example, the Transforming Experiences: Re-Conceptualising Identities and 'Non-Normative' Childhoods project, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and led by Professor Ann Phoenix, used narrative and life-story methods with adult brokers to reflect on their past experiences. This, and other work, led to important collaborations and outputs with Professor Marjorie Orellana and Dr Elaine Bauer. The research detailed in this chapter focuses on work with young people who were active language brokers at the time of research. Our use of an arts-based approach for working with children also aligns

with past work at TCRU such as Alison Clark (see Chapter 16) and Veena Meetoo and colleagues in their participatory approach (see Chapter 19).

Methodological approaches to gathering data about child language brokering

The research field of child language brokering has attracted a rich disciplinary and interdisciplinary range of methodological approaches. In the mid-90s, when the study of child language brokering began as a distinct field of research, a key concern was understanding the prevalence, form and intensity of the practice, or what Jones and Trickett (2005: 408) refer to as the 'who, what, where, and how of brokering'. On the whole, data-collection methodologies employed at this time were quantitative measures in the form of language-brokering surveys (Tse, 1996; Buriel et al., 1998), though McQuillan and Tse (1995) also undertook interviews. Several studies have since developed and adapted different versions of the language-brokering experiences and proficiency scales (see Weisskirch and Alva, 2002; Crafter, Cline and Prokopiou, 2017; Morales and Wang, 2018; Rainey et al., 2019). In addition, and at about this time and continuing today, a strong tradition of using quantitative approaches to capture the emotional, relational and behavioural impacts of the practice emerged within the child language-brokering research.

Psychologically oriented research has been interested in focusing on the relationships between child language brokering and emotional traits, by using scales that are designed to measure, for example, depression, mood and anxiety (Rainey et al., 2014; Kim, Hou and Gonzalez, 2017; Arellano et al., 2018) as well as more general psychological wellbeing (Tomasi and Narchal, 2020). Studies linking emotions to behaviours have tended to focus on the link between the negative stressors of language brokering and any ensuing unhealthy coping behaviours, such as substance misuse (Kam, 2011; Kam and Lazarevic, 2014). Within this, framing parent–child relationships have linked traits such as depression, anxiety and distress, with concepts like parental bonds or feelings of attachment (Kim, Hou and Gonzalez, 2017; Arellano et al., 2018). While these approaches have provided the field with important information, many of these studies have taken a negatively oriented approach to child language brokering, which in part was operationalised through the choice of methodology (Mier-Chairez et al., 2019; Crafter, 2023). There are exceptions, such as studies by Kam, Guntzviller and Pines (2017), Guan and Shen (2015) and Guan, Greenfield and Orellana (2014), who

include positive features such as prosocial capacities, parental praise and empathetic concern.

Nevertheless, the ways in which child language brokering is framed and studied depends on the theoretical and epistemological stance taken. Sociological and critical-psychological orientations towards child language brokering adopt an approach that views child language brokering as a socioculturally and historically embedded practice within the family. This is a framing that is strongly shared by all the child language brokering work that has taken place within TCRU. These critical and socioculturally located bodies of work seek to employ methodologies that tap into the relationship between dynamic personal experiences that may change across time and context and be influenced by immigration regimes, and structural and institutional inequalities (Orellana and Phoenix, 2016; Crafter and Iqbal, 2020; 2022; Phoenix and Orellana, 2021; Iqbal and Crafter, 2022). In line with this, the methodological approaches employed have tended to be qualitative or combine both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Examples include ethnographic-style studies inclusive of in-depth observations, recordings of naturally occurring conversations, journal entries and interviews (see Ceccoli, 2022; García-Sánchez, 2014; Orellana, 2009); and narrative, biographical or episodic interviewing which sought to explore 'non-normative' stories (Orellana and Phoenix, 2016; Crafter, Cline and Prokopiou, 2017; Sherman and Homoláč, 2017; Phoenix and Orellana, 2021). Beyond standard semi-structured interviewing, vignette interviewing in the form of presenting short story scenarios have arguably captured complex and multifaceted identity positions (O'Dell et al., 2012; Crafter et al., 2015; Crafter and Iqbal, 2020). More unusual in the field are arts-based approaches that may be used as a stimulus to capture stories through participatory artwork elicitation (Toressi, 2017; Crafter and Iqbal, 2019).

The research study and using SCIT

Who took part in this workshop

We write elsewhere about the wider project which sought to investigate child language brokers' own understandings of how cultural knowledge is mediated during brokering encounters (Crafter and Iqbal, 2020; 2022; Iqbal and Crafter, 2022). For the purposes of this chapter, we draw on data from an arts-based workshop led by the third author, Evangelia

Prokopiou. We chose to write about this particular method here due to its effectiveness in eliciting group discussions amongst young people on often sensitive social topics (aligning with other work at TCRU). Furthermore, very little has been written about it from an academic perspective, since the approach was initially developed as a therapeutic tool (see Prokopiou, 2007).

The workshop took place in a secondary school in Greater London on a Saturday morning. Ten young people who were aged between 13 and 16 years attended the workshop. Five workshop participants had been interviewed by us previously for the study, while five others responded to a general invitation from the English as an Additional Language coordinator in the school. Most of the young people in the group had undertaken transnational journeys before arriving in the UK and spoke at least two other languages in addition to English. Some of the young people belonged to an informal 'young interpreters club' set up by a teaching assistant at their school, which they chose to be a part of, and all of them were active language brokers for their families at the time of the workshop. Some young people also helped with interpreting activities at school, such as supporting new students who did not speak English. Given this, the topic of language brokering was one they were familiar with.

Table 14.1 on the following page shows the details of our participants as they were provided to us by the young people themselves. While the sample is varied in terms of country of origin, the young people were of similar ages, attended the same school and shared the commonality of being a member of the 'young interpreters club'. They also all knew each other. This was the first time the children had engaged with the SCIT activity.

The SCIT approach

The Synallactic Collective Image Technique (SCIT) was developed in the Greek context to be used within systemic psychotherapy by Vassiliou and Vassiliou (1981). The term synallactic roughly translates into 'transactional' and denotes a 'free multilateral transaction of all the participants taking part in the group; each participant is in process with all other participants' (Prokopiou, 2017: 72). A modified version of this technique was used to fit within the wider study's objectives, around understanding child language brokering and cultural mediation. The young people are asked to bring their own perspectives, memories and emotions of their experiences. Evangelia, the third author, was invited by the research team to deliver the SCIT workshop which was titled 'Let ME

Name	Country of origin	Age arrived in England	Family languages other than English
Kukomo	Nigerian origin but born in Italy	14 years	Italian and Igbo
Estera	Polish	13 years	Polish
Marta	Polish	Unknown	Polish
Hristo	Bulgarian	14 years	Bulgarian
Sadir	Bengali origin but born in Italy	Unknown	Italian and Bengali
Tariq	Bengali origin but born in Italy	Unknown	Italian and Bengali
Makin	Origin unknown, came to the UK via Italy	Unknown	Unknown
Samadhi	Sri Lankan origin but born in Italy	15 years	Italian and Singhalese
Elijah	Bengali origin but born in Italy	14 years	Italian
Ellora	Mauritian and Indian but born in Italy	13 years	Italian, Creole, Hindi and French

Table 14.1 Participant details.

tell you OUR Story ...'. She has previously used this method in different research projects (Prokopiou, 2007). The procedure is as follows:

1. Each young person is given a sheet of white paper and a set of coloured pens. They were given the following instructions: 'Think about a specific occasion where you translated for someone else in a specific setting (school, GP surgery, bank, market, etc.) and try to identify within yourself how you feel. When you feel ready, choose whatever colours you want and try to express this feeling on the paper with a drawing that will depict this occasion'.
2. Following this, on a separate piece of paper, they were asked to describe what was depicted in the drawing, how they felt when they had this experience, how they were feeling whilst drawing it and to give the drawing a title.
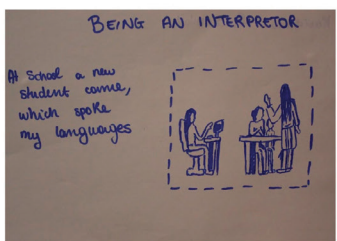3. The young people were then invited to sit in a circle and to bring together their individual drawings.
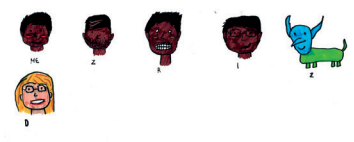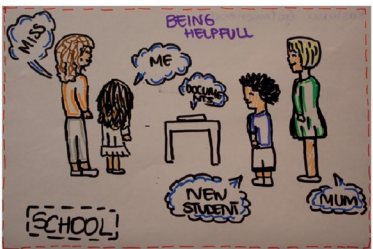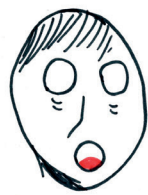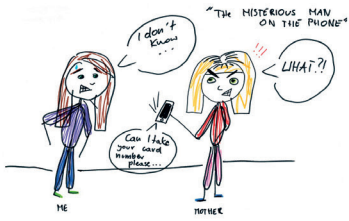
Figure 14.1 The collection of images laid out in order (left to right, top row to bottom, like the illustrations in a comic.). Source: Authors.

4. Group members then voted on which drawing should start the 'collective story' and it was placed on the floor where everyone could see it. The young people described their story.
5. In turn, a vote was cast for the next drawing to be placed in the sequence and represented a 'chapter' in the story. The last young person writes the final 'chapter' by laying down their drawing and telling the group about it.
6. Finally, this was followed by a facilitated group discussion whereby a group theme is established, highlighting how their personal stories are similar and different and how a personal story can be a collective story for young people sharing the same experience. Figure 14.1 shows how the final drawings were placed in an order.

The final collective story was made into a book and given to the young people. For dissemination purposes it was eventually re-illustrated in the form of a comic book.

Examining the individual and collective accounts of the language brokers

Reflecting the steps taken in the workshop, we divide our findings into two sections. The first focuses on key themes reflected in individual accounts from the young people's drawings and short narratives of language brokering. The second focuses on the wider collective discussion around brokering shared by the group once all the drawings had been laid out and the young people voted for the order they would take, in the form of a book. It is important to reiterate here that the children were active brokers for their families and in using this method our intention was to give them a space to reflect on this practice, be it positive, negative or neutral. Some teenagers actively identified as being child language brokers, while for others, this was not an important part of their sense of self.

Individual accounts of brokering

The young people's drawings and stories included the discussion of: (1) language brokering as (un)belonging; (2) language brokering as a means to provide support; and lastly, (3) language brokering in situations of conflict.

Language brokering as un(belonging)

While most of the group members depicted a drawing involving the interactions between adults and young people, Sadir focuses on a 'language club' within the school (see Figure 14.2). The club was run during the school day by a teaching assistant within the English as an Additional Language department and was very highly attended. There is an interesting dialogical relationship between his drawing and his narrative because he individually named his friends in the drawing of the club and yet the narrative writeup takes a storytelling approach by describing them in the third person, 'All the character[1] present in the drawing are in a language club'. This opening line suggests a shared social identity and sense of belonging. Equally, Sadir's story points to the diversity within the group when he says that 'Each of them speak a different languages' while stating that 'English is the language in common'. For Sadir, membership of the club legitimised their linguistic repertoire of English, the non-native language for all here, although he positions the 'secondary languages' of the club as Bengali, Polish and Italian.

Thereafter, Sadir begins to write his story in the first person. He writes about how when he started in the language club he 'felt very confident'. Over time, this has not changed but he finds value as 'we are also enjoying in group'.

To Sadir the club seems to represent more than a space to practice English language. Sadir's narrative suggests it was a realm in which migrant youth could come together in a friendly space. This is important as child brokers can often find themselves in asymmetrical power relations and spaces dominated by adults (Iqbal and Crafter, 2022).

We began our chapter with the example of a young person in the arts workshop group named Tariq, who appeared to struggle to foreground his language-brokering practice as an element of his identity. In his drawing he depicts a self-portrait which is actively minimalist. In his story he writes: 'don't have any story about translating, mean I do but don't really remember them', and 'don't have any feelings while I am translating'. As other members of the workshop begin their drawings, he looks somewhat lost and asks Evangelia the generic question: 'Do you have feelings when you translate?'. Underneath his story text he writes the hashtag #Nofeelings and a little further down the page he has added 'Concern'. He didn't want to tell a story about his drawing and he exercised his right to not do so. Consequently, we cannot say why he chose to do a fairly stark drawing (see Figure 14.3). The

reason for this could be that Tariq does not foreground his translating as part of his self-identity, or because he didn't feel confident/proud about the practice. It could also be a mode of resistance and reclaiming power, through self-exclusion.

It is interesting to contrast Sadir's image with Tariq's, as Tariq, unlike Sadir, depicts his language brokering as something singular and individual, rather than being a social activity or as something which fostered a sense of belonging with other young people at school. He struggles to situate anyone else except himself in the frame of practice.

Figure 14.2 'The young interpreter club' by Sadir.[2] Source: Authors.

Figure 14.3 '#Nofeelings' by Tariq. Source: Authors.

The helpful mediators

From other images (such as those of Samadhi and Ellora), we find aspects of sharing and providing support as common themes associated with language brokering. In her image, Figure 14.4a, 'being helpfull', Samadhi is acting as the mediator between a new pupil, their parent and the school, through her interpreting work. She is in a complex interactional language-brokering dynamic with Samadhi, two adults (the parent and her teacher) as well as the new student. Ellora's work, Figure 14.4b, titled 'being an interpretor', shows a picture of a young interpreter in discussion

Figure 14.4 (a) 'Being helpfull' by Samadhi; (b) 'Being an interpretor' by Ellora. Source: Authors.

with other students. Ellora explained that it was the role of language brokers to offer advice, knowledge and help to new students with shared home languages.

In both depictions, the parents and new students are recent arrivals to the country.

In these images, we get a sense of the advocacy work and cultural mediation that child language brokers can perform. We see their ability to link between two cultures: the home and the institution (here, the school). For example, Ellora's work shows her ability to explain 'the rules' or in essence, describe a new school system. Samadhi similarly understands that her role is to 'translate information about the school, uniform and paperwork'. Here, she is speaking as the dominating voice of the 'white public space' (Reynolds and Orellana, 2009).

For Samadhi and Ellora, their narratives reflect on both the past and the present. Samadhi, for example, continues to help introduce new pupils in the school, to the point that: 'Now it become usual to help other students'. Ellora's activities are written up in the past tense and therefore framed as something that she used to do. She enjoyed feeling 'helpful' but finishes her narrative by saying: 'I don't know how I feel about it now'. The doubts that surfaced at the end of Ellora's narratives are also evident in Hristo's story, see Figure 14.5, about helping to register his sister into primary school on behalf of his parents. He wrote in his story that: 'I felt very nervous from the fact that I will make mistake or I would be
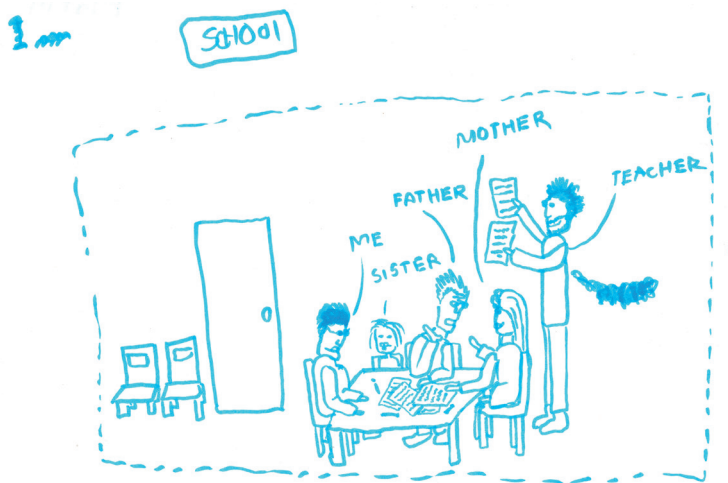

Figure 14.5 Drawing showing Hristo brokering for his parents, in order to get his sister registered at school. Source: Authors.

confused to translate something'. While his nervousness is very understandable, he framed it as 'very bad' and suggested instead that: 'You must be calm and don't worry about anything'.

Language brokering in situations of conflict

Estera and Marta both discussed instances of brokering in situations of conflict or unequal power relations. Estera's story is titled 'the misterious man on the phone'(see Figure 14.6) and depicts a real-life situation where Estera was acting as an interpreter for her mother and a bank employee who was on the phone. Interpreting phone conversations is one type of practice that brokers have reported as doing frequently (Antonini, 2010). The bank employee was asking Estera's mother for financial details and Estera, who was 13 years old at the time, found the questions challenging and difficult to interpret. Estera's confusion and hesitation was also causing her mother to feel frustrated. Estera further explains her feelings in her story:

> 'Usually, my mum needs to phone someone very important like the bank and she asks me to translate it to her in Polish. Previously I couldn't understand most of it which was always making my mum angry and me very nervous. I felt that the pressure that made me feel stressed.'
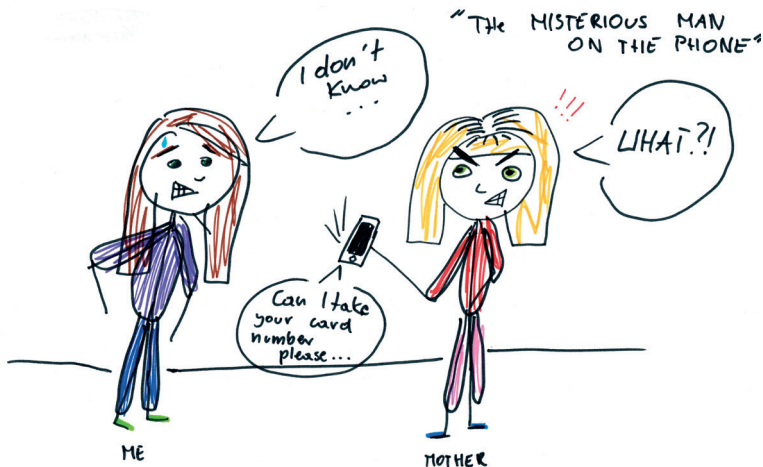

Figure 14.6 'The misterious man on the phone' by Estera. Source: Authors.

Like Samadhi and Ellora, Estera's narrative weaves together her feelings of brokering from the past with the present. It is also of note that Estera's story involves a financial institution where arguably the stakes are higher. The coalescing of her mother's anger and her own nervousness leads her to then write: 'I hate that feeling when I can't translate something. Because of that I had to learn more and more of both languages'. Over time these feelings have improved: 'Now, I feel more confident but still quite unsure of some phrases'. However, that feeling of conflict and uncertainty remains present as she writes: 'I am avoiding translating or interpreting to my parents. I hate it'.

Similar to Estera's account, Marta discusses the tensions and difficulties she experienced while brokering, in her drawing titled 'A witch at the Bank'. In this drawing, shown in Figure 14.7, Marta depicts her and her mother going to the bank. Clearly, interpreting in a financial setting has the potential to be difficult and stressful. Marta depicts this situation being made worse by the two key adults in the situation, her mother and the bank assistant. She feels that: 'I usually can't understand it and makes my mum angry'. Equally, there is a hostile bank assistant or as Marta describes it: 'There's the monster lady who is waiting for us'.

In the end, Marta blames herself for the adults' responses, saying: 'In a situation like this I feel confused because I am not sure if I am good translating ... and that's it'.

Figure 14.7 'A witch at the Bank' by Marta. Source: Authors.

Let ME tell you OUR Story: the collective narrative

Following the creation of individual accounts, the young people came together to share their stories with one another, with space to debate, share stories and express emotion. It was agreed that the collective story would follow the experiences of a group of young people who were part of a language club, with Sadir's image starting the book. During the discussion, Estera reflected on the challenges she felt the group members faced which made their situation shared and unique:

> 'I think most of us came here without speaking English language so we didn't speak English at first and it was hard for us because people didn't really understand us, especially the British people who live here forever they don't understand the struggle we have had.'

Estera's comment resonates with Sadir's depiction of the young interpreters club where the shared sense of belonging centres around speaking multiple languages or having English as an additional language. Estera goes a step further by highlighting the shared hardship associated with migration when you can't speak the local language. Later in the discussion, Evangelia probed this point further with Estera, and Kukomo joins the discussion:

Estera: We are kind of similar, like everyone who is coming here is kind of new, has the same story. We all come from different background and stuff but we are all kind of similar.

Evangelia: And do you think it is important to share stories about experiences?

Estera: I think it is about support. We support each other in some way.

Evangelia: How do you do this?

Kukomo: By telling each other our problems and situations we have passed through and seeing if one of us have passed through it as well.

Evangelia: And how can this be supportive?

Estera: Cause you don't feel alone.

All of these young people were active brokers for their families, and as we see from individual accounts, sometimes taking on much responsibility in adult spaces. We see from the above discussion the importance of the school and the young interpreters club in providing a space for support, company and safety for our young participants.

Concluding reflections

In this chapter we have shared our experiences of using a modified version of the Synallactic Collective Image Technique (SCIT), an arts-based method used for understanding individual and shared stories of language brokering. We focused on the nuances depicted in the individual drawings and stories of the young language brokers, as well as the collective transactional story created as a group. While the SCIT approach was just one part of a wider set of qualitative social science and arts-based approaches we utilised, we found it particularly useful when working with young people discussing potentially complex and socially sensitive issues. Perhaps this in part is due to its therapeutic groundings, in that it enables participants to think deeply about their personal experiences whilst also creating a shared collective story as a group. The individual stories can gain a new significance when they become part of a collective narrative which can empower and create new spaces of belonging.

The drawings largely depicted two major contexts in which the brokering took place: either at school or at the bank. The young people's responses to these situations reflected varying degrees of feelings mediated by the complexity of the situation and the ensuing impact on key relationships, alongside a reflection on how they felt both in the past and the present. On the point about brokering in a variety of contexts, Orellana, Dorner and Pulido (2003) make a distinction between 'specialised encounters' and 'everyday ways'. They note that 'specialised encounters' that include heightened or dramatic experiences are often experienced as burdensome. Interactions with financial institutions would fit this description and were shown through Estera's and Marta's difficult experiences on the phone and at the bank respectively. Additionally, as we have reported from our interview data, these kinds of encounters can heighten tensions between parents and children, particularly when faced with a hostile adult in a position of authority, as reflected in the drawings (Crafter and Iqbal, 2020; 2022; Iqbal and Crafter, 2022).

School is a complex context to unpick. On the one hand school is shown through Sadir's narrative as a setting that celebrates multilingualism and creates a sense of shared belonging through their interpreters club. Language brokers are clearly used to support 'everyday' normal encounters between teachers, parents and children. Samadhi and Ellora, for example, seem to have been regularly recruited to help newly arrived pupils and their parents communicate with the school. They enjoyed being 'helpful' and seemed to gain pleasure in demonstrating their knowledge about the 'rules' of the system. Yet, there was a noted ambiguity of feeling when reflecting on the past: 'I don't know how I feel about it now'.

There are limitations to the approach. Like many arts-based techniques, they do not suit all members of a group. Whilst most of the young people took the opportunity to reflect and share a personal memory of language brokering, Tariq struggled with the task. As we described at the beginning of this chapter, he appeared discomfited by the idea that he could not (or did not want to) put to paper a memory of language brokering and held '#Nofeelings' about it. It is not possible to disentangle whether this was because language brokering was not an important part of his life or whether the methodological approach did not sit well with him. Regardless, the approach revealed sometimes subtle ambiguities in the young people's reflections of past encounters. In the end, the collective story paved the way for a shared sense of understanding, that in experiences of some of the challenges of language brokering, the young people were not alone.

Further reading and listening

A detailed description of the study can be found in *Child Language Brokering*, our final project report, available at https:// languagebrokeringidentities.wordpress.com/. Further, in the BBC Radio 4 documentary titled *Translating for Mum and Dad* and based on our research, you can hear directly about the experiences of being a child language broker: https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0005mg0.

Notes

1 Throughout there are grammatical errors in the quoted text but these reflect how the young people wrote themselves.
2 All names in this chapter have been changed, including the names shown in drawings and the school's name.

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