

INTERVIEW

“Children Owning the Language”: The Hands Up Project in Palestine

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Abstract

Enabling children to harness their creativity can significantly enhance their ability to communicate in a foreign language and empower them to express their voices. This article, based on an in-depth interview with Nick Bilbrough, founder and artistic coordinator of The Hands Up Project (HUP), explores how the organization’s creative work in Palestine fosters language learning and emotional growth. Founded in 2016, HUP uses storytelling, remote theatre, and creative writing to engage Palestinian children, helping them to build confidence, develop communication skills, and experience a sense of ownership over the English language. Despite the exam-driven educational system in Palestine, HUP offers a valuable outlet for creativity, supporting children’s psychosocial wellbeing and language learning. In light of ongoing violence in Gaza, the project’s work has gained even greater significance, emphasizing the need to amplify the voices of children living in conflict zones. This article highlights HUP’s role in blending creativity, education, and activism to create meaningful opportunities for Palestinian children.

Keywords

creative writing; Palestine; poetry writing; remote theatre; storytelling

INTRODUCTION

The Hands Up Project (HUP) is a charity trust aimed at providing children in Palestine with opportunities to exercise their creativity and interact with the rest of the world. Founded in 2016, the organization “is committed to social justice, global citizenship, and freedom of expression, and upholds the belief that language learning is enhanced through creativity, performance, and collaborative interaction” (HUP, n.d.). The organization’s work is primarily conducted via online platforms like Zoom and Facebook Live because these are relatively accessible to Palestinian children and their teachers. These platforms have provided HUP’s team of international volunteers with the means to co-teach classes in Palestine and refugee camps in Jordan, as well as to regularly meet students, and enable them to tell stories, play games, and interact in English.

Some of HUP’s most important initiatives consist of developing Palestinian children’s ability to engage in storytelling, remote theatre, and creative writing. As part of weekly class linkups, volunteers encourage children to tell different kinds of stories: “Whether it’s students

sharing their traditional stories, or remote volunteers and young people sharing anecdotes from their daily lives, something extraordinary happens every time we meet” (HUP, n.d.). These children are encouraged to collaborate with students from other countries to write and produce short plays through the drama clubs set up by HUP and its annual playwriting competition. These are performed online or in-person and subsequently published. Similarly, children’s poems in English have been published in an anthology and showcased in an exhibition hosted by the Palestine Museum and Cultural Centre in Bristol, the UK.

Based on an interview with HUP’s founder and artistic coordinator, Nick Bilbrough, this article explores his views on the role played by the organization in cultivating children’s creativity. The interview took place in December 2023 via Zoom. The article builds on previous research in which I investigated the work of organizations in different countries geared towards enabling young people to be creative (Xerri, 2016, 2017, 2018).

FOUNDING THE HANDS UP PROJECT

A deep interest in storytelling by teachers in Palestine led to the founding of HUP. Bilbrough explained that in 2016, the British Council invited him to work on storytelling and language teaching with a group of teachers, mostly from Gaza. The course took place in Ramallah, and this was the first time these teachers had visited the West Bank. Bilbrough said:

That was the impetus to start The Hands Up Project. I noticed that there were a lot of teachers who were highly interested in storytelling. A lot of them came up to me and said, “Why don’t you do storytelling with my class in Gaza? Why don’t you tell stories to my students?” So, it really came from their needs and wishes.

Bilbrough started telling stories to children once a week over Skype before quickly realizing that Zoom was far more advantageous. Despite the fact that Palestinian teachers had asked him to do this, his focus was primarily on the learners rather than on the teacher development potential of the activities. Nonetheless, it was the Palestinian teachers’ passion for storytelling and interest in using it in their teaching that provided the initial spark. Bilbrough explained:

Just like in any other culture around the world, storytelling is very much part of Palestinian culture. However, while storytelling is suppressed in many other cultures, in Palestine there is room for its celebration. The Palestinian education system is very much performance-based, that is, inviting people to get up and perform things. For example, there’s a lot of applause that happens in Palestinian classrooms. I was very surprised by that when I first encountered it, but it’s quite common. Even when somebody just says a sentence in English, the whole class will often applaud that person. So, storytelling fits very nicely into that because in Palestine teachers are seen as performers. Besides that, the acts of learning a foreign language and using a foreign language are very much seen as a performance.

While initially Bilbrough thought he could run these storytelling activities alongside his regular teaching job, it became increasingly clear that there was substantial interest from Palestinian teachers, volunteers around the world, and groups like the one based at the Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan. With respect to the latter, it is worth noting that refugee children who are given the opportunity to tell stories are able to produce intense and thick descriptions concerning their wellbeing (Karlsson et al., 2019).

Early enthusiastic support for HUP meant that Bilbrough could gradually shift the organization's focus from his storytelling activities to children's own performances and creative output. This was a significant decision given the role storytelling and other creative forms can play when children are enabled to engage in them. In fact, Kerry-Moran and Aerila (2019) maintain that "Narratives may even be a source of protection for young children unable to articulate their fears directly or needing safe mental spaces to nurture their hopes and dreams" (p. 6). Financial support from patrons like Simon Greenall and Jill Florent enabled Bilbrough to set up HUP as a charity, which he admits to having been "quite difficult". Currently, the organization relies exclusively on donations and its work depends on the contribution of several volunteers, with Bilbrough being the organization's only full-time employee.

HUP's name was intentionally chosen due to its openness to interpretation. Bilbrough admits that he likes "things which have double meanings and can be a little bit confusing and make people think." As a gesture, putting your hands up can mean different things. Some people might associate it with the act of surrender when someone is pointing a gun at you, while others might see it as an act of defiance or protest. Raising your hands could also indicate your wish to be counted. For Bilbrough both the positive and negative connotations of the gesture are important, but he feels that the gesture says a lot about children's wish to participate:

I quite like the fact that it has the idea of hands up in surrender. But of course, it's really the opposite meaning of that that is most valuable. It's about putting your hand up and saying I want to participate, I want to say something, I've got a voice, I have something I want to say. The name came from that in reality. I've always been blown away by the enthusiasm of Palestinian children to participate in the Project's sessions. From the very beginning, their willingness to participate was very clear. If you asked a question, the entire group would be almost bursting through the screen wanting to answer.

These ideas are aligned with Helou's (2010) suggestion that Palestinian children have many stories to tell without necessarily requiring the intervention of teachers and parents; their stories give voice to the struggle for their rights as dispossessed people.

THE HANDS UP PROJECT'S CREATIVE WORK

Both HUP's mission and vision statements underscore the significance of creativity. The organization's work seems to revolve around the idea that creativity drives successful learning, a concept that should occupy a more central role in the classroom (Karwowski, 2023). Bilbrough attributes this focus on creativity to his own desire as an educator to work beyond the limitations imposed by the materials that teachers are typically expected to use in language teaching:

I've always been excited by creativity and I've always been driven by it as a teacher and teacher trainer. I find it very difficult to work within the constraints of a coursebook or to do things in a certain way because of exams. I think many teachers everywhere are driven by a desire to find a way out of a problem in a creative way. Thinking of new ideas for a lesson is something that can keep you up at night.

Moreover, Bilbrough believes that creativity is an intrinsic component of language use and language learning:

Creativity is the driving force behind learning a language. Being a user of a language means having a need to express something in a creative manner rather than merely regurgitating things. Using a language isn't just about repeating things that one has already heard or that have already been expressed, but it's very much about struggling to find the words to express oneself. I think that happens at every level of being a user of a language.

The benefits to children of engaging in creative work are manifold. For instance, one study shows that there exist positive relationships between children's storytelling abilities and language abilities, with more detailed stories enabling them to score more highly in terms of creativity (Holmes et al., 2019). For Bilbrough, creative use of language becomes even more important when one considers the assessment-driven educational system that Palestinian children form part of:

The Palestinian educational system, like many others around the world, is very exam oriented. Certainly, when students get to the age of 16 or 17, they start really focusing on exams. So, creative activities act as an outlet for them; they enable them to express themselves and use language in another way. The Project's activities play a very important role in that regard.

HUP as a creative outlet is important given that the traditional emphasis placed on summative assessment in education does not create a fertile ground for the nurturing of creativity on behalf of teachers and students (Ahmadi et al., 2019).

Despite the events that have been taking place in Gaza since October 7th, 2023, and even much before that, Bilbrough believes that there is still value in enabling Palestinian children to focus on creativity. In spite of the hardships and traumatic circumstances they have had to

endure over the years, participating in creative activities provides them with meaning. According to Bilbrough, the fact that they are expected to use English to do so does not detract from the experience:

Everybody wants to be able to express themselves, everybody wants to be able to tell their story. It's a huge release for children to be able to share something that they've created with somebody in some other context around the world. That's a huge therapeutic thing for children to do. And to do it in another language is somehow even more powerful. I think there's a kind of safety in expressing yourself creatively in another language in that you can somehow distance yourself from it. It's like this is the English side of me and I'm going to do something creative in that language. It brings huge benefits to children to be able to create something in a foreign language. To go to Palestine and give children a book containing a play or poem that they've created is such a meaningful experience for them.

Each publication is the culmination of a creative process that plays an instrumental role in these children's development. Research shows that the final product of an arts-based collaborative learning activity is only one facet of the process in which young people engage (Pierroux et al., 2022).

Bilbrough referred to one of HUP's 2023 publications as an example of how children's creative use of English is not adulterated by a concern with accuracy:

The poetry anthology we published recently consists of poems written by children in Gaza. These poems contain lots of what we might call mistakes or errors in English, but the children bring something new to the language in producing these poems. The fact that it's not their first language didn't stop them from expressing themselves creatively. Even the book's title – *Moon Tell Me Truth* – shows this. When some people talk about the book or ask to buy it, they refer to it by saying 'moon, tell me the truth'. That really jars with me it because it's not the book's title. 'Moon, tell me truth' is one of the lines from a poem in the book. For me that line suggests a new meaning. 'Moon, tell me truth' is quite different from 'Moon, tell me the truth'.

Like other publications by HUP, the intention behind compiling children's poems and publishing them as a book was that of enabling the young poets to experience a sense of accomplishment upon being given a copy of the book. Moreover, the act of constructing an anthology of student poems "provides them with the opportunity to draw on and deepen their understanding of experiences, values, and identities all too often left at the classroom door" (Almond, 2021, p. 260). The poems featured in a museum exhibition in Bristol, are being translated into other languages, and are featured in online events in which people read these translated poems live. Copies of the book are also being sold to raise funds for charity.

Part of HUP's creative work with Palestinian children involves drama, which is vital given that when children are allowed to co-construct their learning via drama-based activities,

they can develop their creative thinking (Celume et al., 2019). By means of remote theatre, the organization enables children to write, produce and perform their own plays. Remote theatre can either be performance-oriented (i.e., focusing on the final show) or education-oriented (i.e., focusing on the learning process that students follow while working on their play) (Bilbrough, 2021). Bilbrough explained that the competition HUP has been organizing for many years serves the purpose of providing children with a platform through which to share their work:

When we launched the play competition in 2017, the idea was for children to create a five-minute play in English. Each play had to have a maximum of five actors and we were to be sent the script of the play as well as a video of it being performed. When we ran the competition for the first time, we had something like 80 or 90 entries. We had some very highly edited videos, ones that were really impressive. However, we realized afterwards that it wasn't actually so great as a language learning tool since the kids had possibly just practiced the lines that they'd been given lots of times until they got them right. Then they'd had somebody edit the video and put in extra sound effects. Nonetheless, it was an interesting experience. The winning play was called *Inner Thoughts* and hadn't been edited in any way whatsoever. It was performed through Zoom. After watching it we thought, "Wow! We're on to something here."

What impressed Bilbrough about this particular play was the authenticity of the children's performance and its potential for language learning. Performance in a dramatic production enables children to develop their creativity, emotional skills, and executive functions, all vital to communication in a foreign language (Eschenauer et al., 2023).

To enhance the performative aspect, HUP subsequently decided that plays taking part in the competition had to be performed live on Zoom. Bilbrough said:

So, the following year we made it a rule that children had to produce a play that could be performed live. The play couldn't have any external editing and the camera had to be fixed. If students chose to add music, the sound had to be shared during the live performance. This improved the quality of the students' performances. Of course, we know that certain children still receive a lot of support from their teachers in writing and performing the lines. While there are plays where you feel that the work has been totally produced by the students, there are others where you know there's a lot more teacher involvement.

The plays produced by children as part of the remote theatre competition have been performed at schools, literature festivals, and conferences worldwide. Broadcasting these children's stories in such a way seems to confirm the findings of a study that found that "drama pedagogy was seen to *open up* important sites for actively listening to the voices, feelings, and concerns of children through collective creativity" (Stephenson, 2023, p. 13). Just before the events of October 7th, 2023, HUP was planning to launch a new initiative consisting of intercultural remote theatre linkups. This involved children in different

countries collaborating with those in Gaza to create and perform plays. HUP's work is also beneficial for the children's teachers because it convinces them that remote theatre works, especially since some of them might be unfamiliar with the concept of enabling learners to perform English language plays for an audience watching through a webcam (Giebert, 2023).

CREATIVE LANGUAGE LEARNING

Despite HUP's strong focus on children's creative work, English language learning remains one of the key outcomes the organization seeks to enable them to attain. In line with research showing that producing creative texts can help learners develop skills related to communication, writing, speaking, and listening (Fang & Tsvetkova, 2023), HUP ensures that the two foci are interdependent. According to Bilbrough, this is done in such a manner that language learning still harnesses children's creativity:

What does language learning mean? We are providing children with an opportunity to use the language that they're learning in their classes. I think it's really important that our activities aren't just seen as something fun for children to do; they're not just extracurricular activities for children to have fun with. Where is the learning? It's in using the language; that is one of the main points of learning a foreign language. It's quite interesting how in some of the activities that we do with children we ask them to prepare something to talk about in one of the online linkups. We do a lot of sessions where we link classes in Palestine to a remote volunteer somewhere around the world. For example, some children might tell us about how to make Palestinian food. We do sometimes get a case where somebody comes with a text that they've basically copied from the internet or that they just read out. That always frustrates me because there's very little learning or creativity happening there. However, at other times you might get something really beautiful happening. Perhaps somebody's talking about how they helped their grandmother make maqluba or something. They might be struggling with the language, struggling to find the words, but they're feeling it, and making an effort to use English to talk about something in a personalized and creative way.

The activities the students do during the linkup sessions enable them to activate the language they might be learning through the coursebook used in class. This personalized and creative activation of language is advantageous to them, but a few teachers still resist involving their students in the linkup sessions because these are seen as a distraction from exam preparation. Verde (2022) argues that the creative potential of second language learners can only be enhanced within the classroom if teachers have opportunities to identify creativity in themselves and their learners and become aware of practices that nurture it.

According to Bilbrough, the assessment-driven culture prevalent in the Palestinian education system is one of the biggest challenges faced by HUP in its efforts to enable children to learn language in creative ways:

When children insist on reading things out, it's a kind of display culture. There's this belief that knowing a language or being a user of a language means being able to read something out loud and using big, long words to do so. But we know that reading aloud doesn't necessarily mean that a child owns that language. It's one of the struggles we face at The Hands Up Project, and we understand that things are like this because of the influence of exams. Children's exams don't test their ability to use language creatively; exams only test their ability to remember language.

In spite of the limitations created by Palestine's assessment-driven culture though, Bilbrough conceded that teachers and students are constantly in search of opportunities for communication and creative expression:

Despite all the myths that exist about the Palestinian education system, I would say it's an extremely outward looking system. Schools in Gaza typically have 50 students in a class, very few resources, a strong focus on exams, and a massive emphasis placed on coursebooks. Everyone is doing the same unit of the coursebook at the same time throughout both Ministry of Education and UNRWA schools. And yet, despite all that, teachers, school principals and students are really looking for opportunities to reach out and use the language to connect to people on the outside. If someone gives children the opportunity to create a play or write a poem in English, they make sure to take it.

Thanks to HUP's activities, teachers and students see the inextricable link between producing creative work and connecting with the outside world in English. As pointed out by Asthana (2017), young people in Palestine use storytelling and creative work "to give an account of themselves, their quotidian lives, combining the autobiographical with the historical, personal experiences and memories with cultural traditions" (p. 697).

In those activities focusing on creative writing, HUP volunteers seek to facilitate children's self-expression without the constraints typical of the assessment regime. For Bilbrough, the objective is not that of teaching them creative writing, so much as enabling it to occur:

We try to provide the conditions for creative writing to happen. We avoid anything that might suppress it. It's a conscious decision not to suppress it given that there are lots of forces in education which suppress creative expression. To some extent suppression comes down to those teachers who are eager to get their red pen out and immediately correct every single mistake that a student makes in their writing. It happens in spoken language too. Sometimes we connect to a class and while a student is talking the teacher in the room is correcting every single word that child is saying. The child immediately loses confidence.

An overzealous focus on accuracy can undermine a child's ability to produce creative work. In fact, research indicates that second language learners who are made to feel less anxious about their creative writing are likely to perform better (Wang, 2021). It is thus vital that creative spaces are emotional safe spaces for language learners (Coffey & De Costa, 2023).

The reason why many of HUP's language learning activities seek to harness children's creativity is that using English for creative expression is seen as a powerful means of giving them ownership of the language. Bilbrough maintained:

I believe that by enabling them to write creatively, these children are owning the language. If you can write a poem or a play in English, if you can feel like something has come from you, then that's a step toward owning that language and not being an outsider on it. You're not just repeating somebody else's words; you've expressed something original. That's a strong impetus towards owning the language. I think you can own the language even as a complete beginner. If you feel like you've expressed something meaningful in the language, then you do feel like you own the language. If you can express something that means something to you, and somebody else can understand it, then that's a powerful thing.

Part of the significance of Bilbrough's views here is related to the role played by English, which seems to transcend self-expression. English can be seen both as a language that serves as a mediator in a context characterized by conflict, as well as a language that cannot be neutral since "its history in the region and the contexts in which it operates along with the meanings and the values it expresses, have an influence on the ways it is used" (Khawaja et al., 2021, p. 226).

One of the most valuable outcomes of HUP's work is the confidence the children gain as users of a foreign language; however, it is interwoven with other equally significant outcomes. Bilbrough claimed:

In the beginning there's often a certain reticence and we get a lot of shyness. The children want to participate, but when they get in front of the camera there's suddenly a bit of stage fright. Of course, for them there's a double kind of performance to it. They're performing in front of the whole class but they're also performing in front of a stranger in another country while using a foreign language. Prior to the first linkup, most of these children have never had an opportunity to use the English that they're learning in class for a real communicative purpose. They've never left Gaza; something like 95% of young people have never left the Gaza Strip. So, normally they've never had an opportunity to use English for real purposes. I think we've filled a gap because there is a need for these children to use language to talk to people in another context. Initially, there's also a certain fear about being corrected; they feel we're just going to correct every word that they say. However, all that changes very quickly when we see children start to have fun and to become more confident. Sometimes remote volunteers plan a session that they'd like to do, but they never get through any of it. It's because the kids are saying, "I've got this poem I want to read to you" or "I want to sing a song." There's a lot of enthusiasm. Students and teachers quickly start to realize that the creative activities we do with them are fun and can help children in different ways. They help them in a psychosocial manner, they help them with learning English, and they help them express themselves creatively.

Bilbrough gave several examples of students for whom this confidence also translated into an increased motivation to nurture their creativity, so much so that they continued writing poetry

and participating in theatre productions long after they stopped being involved in the organization's activities. This seems to be aligned with the idea that nurturing children's creative self-beliefs through appropriate interventions shapes their creativity and creative achievement across their lifespan (Ginns et al., 2023).

TRAGIC CURTAILMENT

Bilbrough explained that ever since October 7th, 2023, his work as HUP's artistic coordinator has changed. While his efforts were previously exclusively directed at running the organization's creative projects with schools, teachers and children in Palestine, he has now stepped into the role of an activist who is channeling all his energy into ending the conflict. He is doing this because the children he previously worked with are not only being deprived of schooling and the opportunity to benefit from HUP's work; in many cases, they are ending up dead. Bilbrough said:

What's happening now is tragic. I've worked with these kids, I've seen them growing up, I've seen them developing, I've seen them feeling that they've achieved something massive. We've taken kids from Gaza to the UK to perform their plays. We've taken them to Jerusalem and to Jenin and to various places in the West Bank to perform their plays. We've seen the confidence that they get from doing that kind of thing. Just yesterday, I received some truly shocking news. One of the main schools that we worked with has been completely destroyed. Beit Hanoun Preparatory School was acting as a shelter in the north of Gaza before it was flattened. So many kids went through that school, and we did so many linkups with it. When I think of all the teachers and students who worked in that school, the creative work that they did, and how much it has benefited the lives of the children who grew and developed as individuals, I feel devastated to see that kind of destruction.

When asked whether HUP's objectives have always been political, Bilbrough replied that the organization initially sought to focus exclusively on children's creativity without an overtly political agenda. However, contextual circumstances pushed it to change. He declared:

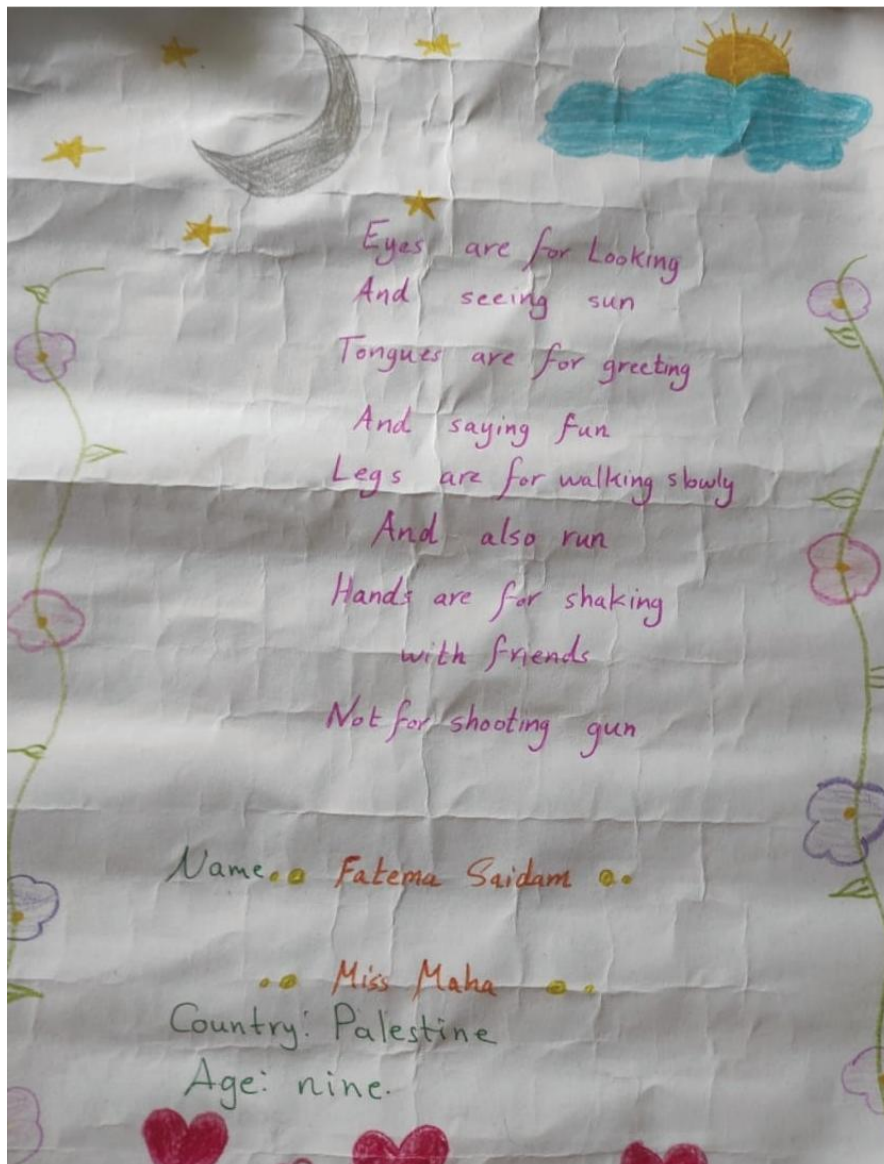
It wasn't how the organization started. We started by thinking that we'd just give people an outlet. We'd give children opportunities to hear English being used and give them opportunities to use the language. We want people to read the plays that are written by kids. We want people to understand their stories and we also want people to re-perform these stories. I mean some of the plays in these books have been performed by learners of English in Peru, by university students in the UK, and by students in so many other countries. That gives us such a big lift. I don't think anyone else is doing this kind of thing for children in Palestine. But, of course, the organization gradually had to become much more than that. I think that the voices of Palestinian teachers and children need to be heard. Currently, they're not being heard.

Bilbrough conceded that a political stance is inevitable for an organization working with children in such a war-torn context:

There's always a political objective with everything that our teachers do. Enabling a young Palestinian child to share a poem with people in another part of the world is political. We live in a weirdly awful time in which children are portrayed as numbers on most of the mainstream media. We keep hearing about the number of children who have been killed. Of course, we do need to know about that. However, we also need to know that those dead children were creative human beings capable of producing beautiful things. We know that two of the children who wrote poems for The Hands Up Project book have been killed. One of them was a nine-year-old girl killed with her entire family in an airstrike. Her poem is stunning. It contains lots of language mistakes but it's a stunning piece of work.

The poem he referred to (see Figure 1) underscores the value of the idea that creative texts can enable young Palestinian people to critically question their surroundings and conceive of a better future rather than merely repeat traditional narratives of hardship and opposition (Marshall, 2023).

Figure 1. Poem by Fatema Saidam



HUP's renewed demands for the cessation of violence in Gaza have not received adequate support from large international organizations like IATEFL and the British Council. Bilbrough believes that such organizations should be "standing up for Palestinian teachers and children, standing up for the Palestinian education system rather than doing a cop-out." Despite HUP's limitations and lack of support, he hopes that it can still contribute to bring about change:

With the events that are now taking place in Gaza, it's very difficult. I mean, let's face it, we're a tiny organization. We barely have enough money to pay my salary. But we are achieving things; even the conversations that we have with different people show this. Last week I went to a secondary school here in the UK and spoke about the Project to about 80 young people, 16- to 17-year-olds. It was nothing political. I just showed them a few plays, read a poem, and spoke about some of the creative things that are happening in classrooms in Palestine. What I'm hoping to achieve by doing that kind of thing is that a few people will read these plays and poems and realize that children in Palestine are not just numbers. Children and teachers are not just numbers. They're people, and they've got the same hopes and fears that we have. If someone picks up this book and has a look and is inspired by a play or a poem written by a child in Palestine and can understand a tiny part of what it is to be a young person in Palestine, I think we would have achieved something huge. I hope it leads people to realize that while the education system in Palestine might not be perfect, it's doing its best in very challenging circumstances. It's producing some brilliant people, creative people. That's what I hope to achieve. That would be a big achievement.

Even though he affiliates himself with the Palestinian struggle and is an activist on its behalf, in expressing his hopes for the impact of HUP's work, Bilbrough adopts a somewhat different tack. Rather than expecting the organization's work to persuade people to commit themselves politically to one side or the other, he seems to believe that it is far more effective if it were to succeed in creating empathy and humanitarian feeling (Bernard, 2014).

CONCLUSION

The interview with Bilbrough highlights the role of creativity in supporting Palestinian children's English language learning and emotional wellbeing. After suggesting that HUP was founded because he was inspired by Palestinian teachers' interest in storytelling, Bilbrough explained that the organization focuses on storytelling, remote theatre, and creative writing as a means of enabling children to express themselves in English. HUP's work with Palestinian children seeks to maximize opportunities for creativity and uses this to support their English language learning. HUP believes that creativity is central to language learning, as it encourages children to express their thoughts and emotions rather than merely memorize language structures. This helps children to "own" the English language, even if they might not be fluent in it. Since the Palestinian education system is highly exam-focused and limits

opportunities for creative expression, HUP's work is particularly significant. It provides an outlet for children to engage in creative activities, which is especially important given the trauma and conflict they experience. Through HUP's activities, children build confidence in using English and develop communication, emotional, and creative skills.


What the organization is seeking to achieve is to enable Palestinian children to use a foreign language to activate their voice and interact with the world beyond their conflict-ridden context. In doing so, HUP is not just equipping them with a range of creative and communicative competencies; it is also enabling them to make themselves heard as they aspire for peace and change. HUP's initiatives, such as playwriting competitions and poetry publications, give children a platform to share their stories with the world, fostering a sense of accomplishment and ownership over their work. While HUP originally started with a focus on language and creativity, the ongoing conflict in Palestine has added a political dimension to its work.

The organization now also aims to highlight the voices of Palestinian children, who are often reduced to mere statistics in the media. Since the escalation of violence in Gaza on October 7th, 2023, Bilbrough's role has shifted toward activism. Ever since that date, Burwell's (2003) idea that "Palestinian children – their activities, their lives, their bodies – have become contested ground" (p. 34) resonates even more powerfully. In fact, many children HUP has worked with over the years have been killed or displaced, making the organization's mission even more urgent. Given the violence and dispossession that Palestinian children are experiencing, projects that help to restore sources of child agency are not just a necessity but a moral duty as well (Veronese et al., 2022).

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