# Transcript

**Thought Leadership series: Cultural Safety, Competency and Inclusion with Tasneem Chopra**

JUSTINE SMYTH:
Welcome, everyone. Just while we're all coming in and Adela's letting people into the room, I might just go through etiquette for working together today. I'll just introduce myself. I'm Justine Smyth, the Principal in Residence Academy, and I'll be supporting today. And if there's any questions that you have, please make sure you just pop them in the chat and I'll support you to facilitate them through. So before we begin, let's just remember to be present and let's stay focused. If you could have your cameras on, we'd really appreciate that. We love seeing your faces and love the interaction from you. And it's always lovely for the presenter to see faces as well. Can you challenge each other with openness and listen to what people are saying. Please keep your microphone on mute when you're not talking. Otherwise, it gives a lot of background noise for others and can interfere with the day, the session that we're having. We encourage you to have your camera on. As I said before, it's lovely to see your face.

If possible, it's better to use headphones, but that's OK if you haven't got them at this point. Please avoid using your phone or doing other work on your computer and be engaged in the session today. And we just wanted to let everybody know that this session is recorded today. So please let us know if you have a problem with that in the chat and we can work from there. We might just give everybody a couple more minutes. I'm not sure how many more are coming in before we begin. Alright, if I could have the next slide, please, Tasneem. Thank you. I'm gonna share with you... I'm going to do the Acknowledgement of Country. I'm gonna share with you the acknowledgement that we have written at the Academy from the Leadership Excellence Division. We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia and pay our respects to the ongoing living cultures of First Nations people. Traditional Owners are the first educators of their children and have a long and unbroken history of teaching and learning through sharing connections to land, waterways, skies, language and culture.

Through education, we walk towards the creation of an equitable and inclusive community for all learners. And we express our commitment to nurturing the continued growth of educational leaders. We feel optimistic about our future and solemn about the lessons of our past. I'd like to welcome you all today. I'm meeting from the wonderful Wurundjeri lands, which is at 603 in North Melbourne. And I'd like to pay respect to all our First Nations people, past, present and emerging, and any of those who are in the room today. Thank you. OK. I'm just gonna introduce you to Tasneem. Tasneem is a cross-cultural consultant who addresses issues of equity and belonging through an intersectional lens with leadership of the government, corporate arts and community sectors. She assists clients, including schools, to meaningfully undertake the work of inclusion by developing and reviewing diversity and inclusion policies, executing programs, curating exhibitions and delivering presentations. Tasneem is a Text Melbourne presenter and writer, such as strategic advisor to the Victorian Public Service Commission and Fire Rescue Victoria, and is a former director of the Australian Centre for the Moving Image and advisor to the Collingwood Football Club expert panel on anti-racism.

Tasneem is currently a fellower, a fellowship at Victoria University and has featured on numerous platforms, including The Guardian, BBC, SBS, Q&A, The Drum and hosts the podcast, Strengths Untold. She was appointed the inaugural Ambassador for the Women of Colour Australia, is an anti-racism champion for the Australian Human Rights Commission and has received a Medal of the Order of Australia. I'd like to introduce you to Tasneem and welcome the presentation. Thanks, Tasneem.

TASNEEM CHOPRA:
Thanks, Justine. Thank you so much for the invitation to you, to the team from the academy. Can I just confirm that my audio is good to go? Thumbs up from Katie. Yep. Wonderful. Thank you so much. I am speaking to you from the land of the Boon Wurrung people of the Kulin Nation and wanted to acknowledge Elders past, present and emerging and those who are joining us today across the state. It's an absolute privilege to be here to share with you on issues of cultural competency and inclusion in the spirit of bettering the way that we engage with the schooling cohorts and particularly those from culturally diverse backgrounds. So my session is specifically on cultural competency, on understanding how to leverage what that diversity in the class setting means and what kind of potential that it has for you as educators and as leaders in education to actually affect change that will see more, not just better inclusion from those students from diverse backgrounds, but better uptake of what diversity means as a class and as a school in its entirety.

I think there's a lot of potential for there to be leveraged. I will do this presentation and I believe there'll be a Q&A following this as well. If you do have questions as we go, please feel free to add them in the chat. And if they're pertinent to what I'm speaking to, Justine will share them and I'll happily answer them on the spot else we can get to them after the session. So as much as this is a presentation per se, it is not a lecture. And I would very much value the opportunity to interact with you. Although I can't see you all, I sense you're out there and I'm certainly grateful for those of you who've registered and are attending today. Thank you so much. So just for an overview of what my session is going to do, it is to draw a link initially between how do we link education with diversity and inclusion. Diversity and inclusion for better or worse has been co-opted as a very buzz term. There are certainly its detractors. But in my experience, that is usually born of a place of scepticism and a sense that it's about erasure of one group over another.

In my experience, in my practice, it's much more about elevating often minority voices and marginalised voices, bringing them to the fore so that we can actually engage on those issues with a lot more dedication and professionalism. I believe there is a genuine desire from pre-educators in particular to optimise what they can from a classroom setting. Often when we don't know how to engage with a particular cohort, it can be subconsciously placed into a too hard basket. And rather than address those issues, we can discard them or presume and scribe certain presumptions about the capacity and capabilities of one group over another, simply when we lack the knowledge. So this is really about challenging that. And that means barriers and blind spots that we all have, how to see them and how to address them. What is the value and place of cultural safety in a classroom? What does it mean to be culturally safe? Again, has recent years been co-opted as a buzz term, but I really wanna interrogate words that we throw around and see what they actually mean in practice in the doing of them.

Leveraging diversity as an educator is a key issue and component of what I plan to speak to because I think that's almost a massively untapped resource that has the potential to be a game changer in the way class dynamics play out. I'll give some case studies of best practice and worst practice because there are those as well. And I think it's important to be honest about what works and what doesn't. And then of course, the Q&A session after that. So to start from the start, I wanna just put a bit of context. So there has been an increase in cultural diversity across Australian classrooms. I mean, multiculturalism is something we talked about in the 80s and the 90s. It's taken a lot more precedent in classroom in the early 2000s and onward. But in terms of us being able to address it as an accelerating concept to the point where it's necessary to be able to grasp the different dimensions of what multiculturalism means when we're talking about students who have been here for some time versus those who are newly arrived, those arriving with a refugee background, and often the associated psychosocial trauma that comes with that.

How do we make that all work? How do we fit that in to the way that we do education in a way that respects those backgrounds and experiences of those students? Not in a way that amplifies trauma, but certainly in a way that respects that it's there, but also work out how do we marry that experience with the mainstream class experience so that the cohorts can work together. It's a delicate balance and a delicate dance, but I think with the right tools, it can become something that's a bit more automatic, especially when we stop and pause and we address our own particular biases that might be informing that. So, I talk about the intersection of cultural diversity and progressive education. Again, for me, these two terms are essential. It is 2024. Now, classroom settings do not look like they did in 1984 or 1954. And so the way in which we then approach difficulties and new classroom dynamics and contexts does require a pivot from the way things were before, whether it's the language we use, it's the expectations, it's knowing where students are from in terms of their background and what they bring.

And I'm talking in a cultural context, all of that has shifted and changed. So, there is a need now to think, well, OK, I need to be so much more aware and present about the diversity of the student body that I have and the kind of backgrounds that they're bringing. What I don't see is the backgrounds they're bringing from home, from community, from heritage. And in many ways, that's often an unspoken, I wouldn't say heaviness, but an unspoken presence that some students, a lot of actually a lot of multicultural students are constantly navigating. There's this subconscious code switching that so many do. And those of you who are from diverse backgrounds might know what I'm talking about, this idea that when you come to school, you assume a certain need to blend, to small yourself or mute yourself in ways that you wouldn't necessarily when you're at home. And I guess that's true for students generally if we're talking about education and school home balance experience. But when I'm talking about cultural diversity, that can often mean smalling ourselves in terms of how we manifest ourselves with our cultural identity, whether it's changing our names, changing our accents, keeping quiet about issues of religious consideration or cultural nuance.

And this idea that students are having to sometimes without the tools and confidence to share it with you, often having to negotiate this on their own can manifest in all kinds of ways, whether it's withdrawing, whether it's manifesting in bad behaviour in class or perceived difficulty in class. I think this is an opportunity for us to think about how are we actually seeing and identifying what this behaviour is and how can we address it in a way that's much more progressive and forward thinking as opposed to critical? Approaching diversity as an asset and not a liability is key. Both from your position as an educator, but also from the way in which we relay that to students of diverse backgrounds. Because so much of their identity is often, cultural identity is laboured with the idea of difference being a negative. So if you are sounding different, looking different, believing different, that difference somehow is measured as a negative. It has negative connotations, certainly. And if we don't flip the script on what that means and rather reinforce that by not acknowledging it or playing into stereotypes and misconceptions, the consequences of that are, they range from depression, anxiety, tardiness, withdrawal from school system in general as well, and to a large extent, not a sense of belonging because they really can't feel at one at school and then when they return home, they also don't feel one at home because they're rejected from the school.

This constant balance of negotiating the divide between being too brown at school to fit in, but then going home and being too white at home to be accepted is a divide that too many students from diverse backgrounds are having to traverse. And the impact of that in terms of mental health is significant. And there's a definite correlation here between efficacy and school performance and wellbeing. We know that generally for all students, with students coming from cultural diverse backgrounds whose cultural diversity often means that they feel like they're on the outer looking in, the mental health implications are that much greater. So it's something to be aware of as we go. The challenge for us or for you as educators is to lead with diverse intent and respond to the opportunity that multicultural students represent, often with, again, with these assets, dual language and cultural contexts, many of whom have the capacity to enhance the overall learning experience of the entire school.

How do we do that inclusively? Well, first of all, we understand what is diversity. I mean, again, these are basic concepts and I'm not asking you here to, I'm not presuming that you have a basic knowledge, but I want to start from this point so that as I progress, it's a lot more sequential. For context, diversity is the various experiences people have of social identity. We know them to be the obvious factors of age, of gender, culture, disability, indigeneity, sexual orientation and socioeconomic background as well. So there are so many rungs to the diversity divide. Inclusion by extension is the active acceptance of what that diversity is, wherein students feel seen and valued. They feel like they have the same opportunity and access to resources. They feel a sense of inclusion and a conscious recognition of who they are with all that variance, having a place at the table or a place in the classroom, at the classroom table, even at that point. But beyond diversity and inclusion, it's the way you manifest inclusion and that is inequality and equity.

So... Oh, my God. Yes, there we go. So we talk about equality and that is of resources or opportunities. Yes, I mean, all students can come to the school. They'll all get a particular resource, for example. And given they all have that resource, they're all at school, there's an understanding, at least in theory, that they've all got an equal opportunity. However, it's the equity beyond that. So having that resource at school given to them, as well as every other student, for students of culturally diverse background, there might be additional issues which impact their ability for that resource to be optimised. So for instance, they may not have the necessary literacy skills, they may not have the necessary resources and supports at home, where they might have to then go back and use that resource to complete homework or an assignment, for example. So not knowing the context of their background, they may not have family members who might support them sign off or complete a permission slip for an excursion, whatever the reason, whatever the particular extra requirement or ask is, equity would demand that in every capacity and in every opportunity that student's ability to benefit from that resource is the same.

I think the picture is quite powerful in conveying what that means. So if we look at the fence being the metaphor for what opportunity is, simply having a chance, simply getting into school in an event simply having a chance, simply getting into school in and of itself is the crate. Everyone has a crate if I can get to school, but who's gonna see over the fence? Some are gonna need more support than others and that is where understanding of what difference means or what extra support means, respectful support and inclusion, often beyond the realm of just the schooling experience, but it might be broader. One definitive way to, I guess, mitigate against biases that we do have is to understand the notion of the cultural iceberg. So it's a tool usually deployed in sociological context to understand cultural diversity, but I think when we look at it through a lens of education or as an educator, what does it mean for what you are dealing with and what you're contending with in a school sense?

So let's say for argument's sake, you have students from X country in the classroom that are majority there. Your perception of them or your understanding of them might be as far as what you know about that community. It could be the language is different. It could be the geography, where they're from, perhaps a different faith or a predominant faith. And so your understanding of that might be technically correct, but the presumptions that you draw from that might be really inhibiting your ability to engage with them fully. And that is because the perceptions that you have based on either the stereotypes or the knowledge base that may not be very detailed is based on what we call above the line. It's peripheral. I see that you're East African, therefore you must be from presumably maybe Somalia or Eritrea. Maybe you're Christian, maybe you're Muslim. I'm not really sure, but you have a different faith to a lot of the other kids in the class and I guess you speak another language and that's it, right?

But beneath the line, beneath the line of the iceberg, which we know is so much bigger is the nuance. It's the detail. And every student from a different background is going to presumably have a different manifestation beneath the line. And I'm not for a minute supposing that you're all going to be experts in this. You do not have the resource basis. Let's face it, this is education. You've got X limited number of resources, it's the awareness of it. It's being conscious of the fact that there is so much more beneath the line, some of which might be more important to drill down to with certain students, depending on their needs, than others. So knowing that just because a student is from X country doesn't necessarily give you a certainty about what lies beneath. So ideas of etiquette and rules. I'm just reading out some of the topics here underneath. Attitudes towards social status, attitudes towards leadership, respect for authority, respect for education and understanding what educating and educators, where they're located within a cultural context, the role of education, the value of it, and things like importance of diving down here, importance of time right down the bottom.

I've got perceptions, attitudes. The allocation of these words is not in any particular order here. They're just basically thrown together. The point of this being is there's so much more that lies beneath than what is above. Like most things in life, if we presume to only assess them from the surface level, we are actually going to miss out on so much. So knowing that, knowing that when you are dealing and engaging with students from various culturally diverse cohorts, that there is a lot more beneath the line, it then becomes a question of if a student is presenting with a certain issue, what is it that's below the line that you need to interrogate that you might have a certain bias about, that you may not necessarily have even considered before that is causing student X to behave in a certain way or feel a certain way or experience something? So that means to be mindful of, and we all have those biases, not just obviously for culturally diverse people, but for people in general, depending on how they present to us.

So what gets in the way of engaging authentically? When you have students from different diverse cohorts and there's the obvious. There's the I don't wanna say the wrong thing and offend someone, so maybe I'll just say nothing at all. And of course, the damage of that can be often that you make assumptions and those assumptions are incorrect. And if student because of the power dynamic between teacher and student, if a student doesn't have the necessary confidence to be able to correct you on that because they are the student and you are the teacher, it's not true in all cases, but in majority It would be, that can cause a misconception or a stereotype to persist. And that can be problematic because that behaviour or that attitude or stereotype that you have might then become endorsed by the rest of the classroom body, who also then think, oh, that must be the experience. The other reason is that the fear of leaving of a cultural group out. So you don't want to necessarily maybe focus on one individual from one ethnicity.

If you feel the others are going to be left out, you don't want to, or also you don't want to make an individual student feel targeted because of their difference in a way that's negative. So again, it's about finding a respectful way to promote that cultural difference. That doesn't diminish an individual's sense of agency, but also doesn't make any assumptions about their cultural background either. And this can come from learning and educating yourself about a culture, or receiving training in it, or using language that is much more empowering towards that individual, and giving them the license to be able to speak about their cultural position or their cultural identity. So it's being uncomfortable and seeing someone in pain or difficulty because they lack the words and tools to articulate. That is, I think, is a flag for you to intervene. If you can clearly see students experiencing racism in class. And again, this has come from experience that I've had, you can choose to then make that a classroom exercise and project to acknowledge in a way that's very positive.

And that doesn't amplify that student's experience of negativity as well. This happened to Fatima in class. So we're going to talk about why it's bad. Fatima is gonna feel so much worse if that happens, but rather knowing that it has happened to her. Make a class, task or assessment or project based on that experience for the whole class to benefit from. So it's a very tactful way of dealing with a complicated issue in a classroom setting that doesn't locate the person or the victim of racism and marginalisation or ostracisation at the centre of it. So yeah, (UNKNOWN), a very strategic about how you do this. I think it's important also as a teacher, to be able to acknowledge that you don't know what to say or how to support someone specifically. So you need to learn that. And I think as even, and I think the ability for an adult or a teacher in the room to have that vulnerability and honesty with the student isn't something that we should shy away from. I think that's an important lesson in and of itself, of vulnerability, of saying, I want to be able to do better on this, can you guide me towards how I could do that?

Not necessarily the student, it could be the parents of the student or community representatives from that cohort. I would argue the importance of being present and listening without judgment, or the need to fix things all the time. Often relationships in classroom and classroom dynamics can fray as is the natural inclination of students to clash at times. But there has to be obviously a red line. And if the red line is going to be, you know, racism and students feeling marginalised and unsafe, that is a very clear indicator for you to obviously step in. But I think encouraging healthy conversation, respectful conversation the way we do with respectful relationships and talking about consent in school, for example, is one way in which we can learn to actually encourage conversation that is mutually beneficial for students. Also, validate how a person or student is feeling and normalise them seeking help. So if a young student from a particular diverse background is unsure of how to pronounce a word or navigate a particular issue that is culturally loaded for them, or contrary to the way they understand something in a cultural context, and it could be in a passage from a novel.

It could be, you know, a scene from a play. It could be a some comprehension issue that is a sharp contrast to their set of religious values for example. I would say support them through it, acknowledge what their difference might be, and then work through that with them in a way that is respectful of their position. But also equipping them with the tools that they need in order to complete a task so not to pass judgment but support someone through it. So that way they learn the art of both diplomacy of compromise and also self-respect. I am conscious I am talking a heck of a lot, and I just want to make sure I have some sort of proof of life from the audience online. I can see Justine. Are you still good to go? How are we going for time?

JUSTINE SMYTH:
How about another five minutes? Maybe.

TASNEEM CHOPRA:
Yep. OK. Alright, then we'll just speed things along a little bit. This is a brilliant quote that I saw online not too long ago. And it's about the idea of rethinking the status quo that pits cultural deficit, cultural differences, a deficit. It's a little bit sassy, but I think to me it drives home the point that often students from diverse backgrounds do possess a lot of cultural collateral that we don't necessarily value. And so the quote here was coming from a student presumably maybe to an educator that was giving them some issue with an accent. And the response was to the teacher, you speak English because it's the only language, you know, and I speak English because it's the only language you know as well. So I think that the point of this is, besides being something that I remember is there is a value add, there is a value and a certain cultural power to being bilingual or even being bicultural that so many students actually possess in a classroom setting that we don't necessarily leverage enough.

So how do we do that? What are some creative ways of acknowledging that cultural variance, not at the expense of one cohort over another? It's not about that, but about allowing students from diverse cultural backgrounds in a school setting to know that it is OK to turn up and be present with your cultural variance and still belong because that is who we are. The make-up of Australia as a nation is one in two of us are either born overseas or have a parent born overseas. And that's certainly a lot higher in certain schools than in others like knowledge. But if we know that's the case, why not then look at cultural diversity in a way that's forward and not in a way that's negative? I mean, I would like to think the days have gone where we're teachers when they're doing a roll call, get to a student's name and find there's just far too many syllables and difficulties in it. And I'm just gonna call, you know, Fernandez, you know Francis. No. I think the idea of getting out of our comfort zone.

And being bold enough to take on the challenge of embracing diverse variants as a positive, as a way of we are all living in a globalised world, that these students with two languages are going to be able to thrive in the future in a global economy where having that extra cultural collateral is an absolute asset, the fact that many of these students will be speaking a second language if not two or three languages when they turn up at school, that the rest of us and I put us with the mainstream would need to go to university and spend seven years learning. Let's look at these and let's repivot them in a way that makes students feel proud about that cultural identity, so that when they come into a school setting, they don't have to park that, you know, in the playground, they can actually bring it into the space. A lot of creative ways of doing that. There's a brief video I had here on Blind Spots, but I'm going to pass it through because I want to get through this...

JUSTINE SMYTH:
I think we we'v got time, though. I think if you want to show them, let's put them through. Because even if we go a little bit longer, I think it's important that you share the things that you have there if that's OK with you.

TASNEEM CHOPRA:
I'm more than happy to. OK. So I'm gonna attempt to play this video on blind spots. Now just for context, it's not about school settings, it is about corporate America. I apologise, but it's very clever at capturing how we often undermine ourselves because of the biases that we have. So I'll just put it on. (VIDEO PLAYS).

SPEAKER:
Are you seriously considering her as a candidate? She's a woman this is a man's job. You speak English? That's not me. I'm not like that. You call it an honest mistake, science calls it a blind spot. Our unconscious mind is a mysterious and powerful thing. It makes 90% of our decisions without us even knowing it. Our brains are overloaded with 11 million pieces of information every second. Yet we can only process about 40 of them. So we're wired to make cognitive shortcuts, using past experiences to make assumptions. And you know what happens when we assume. Our unconscious mind can put us on autopilot, determining where we sit, who we eat lunch with, who we turn to for advice, and who we choose to offer a helping hand. Living our lives with blind spots can put us in a tunnel. Same point of view, same decisions, same outcomes. We can find ourselves trapped in the land of snap judgments and misconceptions. We've all been on both the giving and receiving end of blind spots. Think about it.

Most talented, most abled. Who can I trust? Belongs. We've all been there. Blind spots are part of the human condition. Our choices have consequences for us and the people we interact with. By accepting that blind spots exist, we can stop. Imagine what possibilities exist if we could do it all over again. Different perspectives inclusive relationships, diverse networks. Better outcomes. Seeing people for who they really are. People like you. Unlimited potential. We all have blind spots. Once you accept that you have them, you can choose to do something about it. It's time to check your blind spots and focus on what's possible. (VIDEO ENDS).

TASNEEM CHOPRA:
OK. Now, as I mentioned, that was obviously a corporate advertisement on the benefits of breaking down our blind spots and addressing what they are so that we can see much more and embrace more. And I hope you can extrapolate from that and understand within a classroom setting how we can limit ourselves when you make assumptions of others. So the next point that I want to, which is, I guess, a continuation from where this goes is on how does cultural safety then play into these relationships and what is it? Why is it important? So fostering an inclusive space for cultural diversity. And for culturally diverse students and teachers is, and I've added teachers here as well because I think I need to also acknowledge that a diverse student body is one aspect that requires attention and drawing from in order to, you know, to learn and do better. But so is acknowledging that teaching cohorts themselves increasingly should and need to reflect the student bodies that you're teaching. I have, as I've gone into schools through the work that I do in so many ways, to speak to students on diversity and identity and belonging and overcoming obstacles.

And the schools that I've spoken to over the last decade have ranged from obviously private and and state through regional and urban. And I have lost count of the number of times I've been in schools with quite significant, diverse cohorts of students where I go in and I speak to them about my life story or something motivational, and the number of students who will then come up to me at the end of a session, either in person, or who will track me down online 'cause they know how to do that and send you a message and say, miss it was so great for you to come and speak to us at school. We've never had a guest speaker who looks like us. Or we've never had a speaker who comes from a different background, or I've never heard a speaker who tells our story. And I'm like, wow, this is 2020 something, right? This is even in the last four years, forget the years prior, it's still happening. And I'm not saying that you need to hire more diverse speakers, I'm saying that there needs to be a greater acknowledgement of having teaching bodies where it's possible.

And again, this is a whole area of conversation which is in the recruitment practices of schools where there are student body who is from a diverse, you know, that one in two of us are born overseas cohort clearly represented. Yet the trajectory of recruitment within that school tends to still be very monocultural. And I challenge to why is it that way still. How can we do better? What is the importance of doing better? I have a colleague, a young colleague, a grad teacher. She's not a grad now. She's been working in early childhood and then primary schooling for the last four years. She's of a Sri Lankan Australian background. So, you know, schooled here, grown up here, university here, entered the school system and (UNKNOWN) is working in a school which is, you know, got a significant diversity cohort though it's was a private school. And she tells me that frequently she has the little kids in prep one two who'll come up to her and tug at her and say, miss, we love it when you come to school.

She was an (UNKNOWN) for some time. We love it when you come to school because you know us, you see us. And it's not to say that the other teachers do not. But there's something quintessentially powerful about a connection that students feel and a sense of ease that they experience when they see themselves reflected in a teacher around them. And it's something that you don't realise is missing until you see it. And the only parallel I can draw to that is myself is a student growing up in country Victoria. Let's just say last century, it was a while ago, but every book I ever picked up, every novel that was ever assigned, every film that I ever had to review for English or literature, everything that I ever absorbed and consumed as a student in this schooling system here at that time was devoid of anything reflecting me or representing me. It literally wasn't until I probably picked up a book in my 20s written by an Australian author of a Palestinian background or Egyptian background that I went, oh my God, that's my story, and how exciting it was.

And then the same way Alice Pung's impact has been. And now, of course, we have, you know, writers like Maxine Beneba Clarke, Randa Abdel-Fattah and so many others entering the literary space within our school system. The whole coming of age anthologies of Asian, of you know, gay, lesbian, of Muslim, of Indian, of African, all these stories increasingly infiltrating the school and education system, telling young people stories that they can connect to is a powerful call for they need to see that representation. And so, speaking then, to the importance of having teachers, educators, also from those diverse backgrounds at school is something that I can't emphasise enough. Yeah. OK.

JUSTINE SMYTH:
There's a couple of questions that relate to blind spots. Would you like me to to read it out now?

TASNEEM CHOPRA:
Yeah. Sure.

JUSTINE SMYTH:
Yeah. What do common blind spots look like, sound like in education?

TASNEEM CHOPRA:
Maybe perceptions about students or certain students ' families' capacity to understand English. This idea. And I'll just use the South Asian community as a classic example. And this idea that parents from South Asian students weren't necessarily maybe be able to support or understand what a student might be going through because they presumed lack of English language or skills. And if that translates to even putting a student into English as a second language class, for example, because the idea is that they don't necessarily speak English or have English skills, that can be problematic because countries like India and Bangladesh, for example. Or Sri Lanka, all do teach English as a primary medium. And so the parents would frequently as not the exception, but the rule would actually speak English. So this idea that they won't have that and then therefore the associated assumptions about a student's capacity is problematic. That's one. Another one might also then be making assumptions about a student's thought or belief system, say, for example, and I'll just use the Muslim student case as an example, that if you're dealing with, say, young Muslim girls from a particular school, this idea that they may not, and I've seen it and I've heard it, they may not necessarily aspire for greater educational outcomes in the long term.

So we may not select them for a particular program because that wouldn't be in sync with their cultural values. Lot of presumptions there. A lot of assumptions. But it happens. It does happen. And I'm not saying that you know, there are certain cultural groups that may or may not have cultural norms that can be quite conservative across a lot of different faiths, but the idea that we bring that bias to the way that we approach and manage a student's behaviour and potential is problematic. So mitigating that with education and understanding that the biases that we have can actually do more harm than good for a student's potential. Yeah, it really needs to be said. Is that OK?

JUSTINE SMYTH:
Thank you. That's wonderful. Melissa, I hope that that answered your question.

TASNEEM CHOPRA:
OK. We'll get back to it. So back to your practicing cultural safety. Cultural safety enables CD, culturally diverse students to feel entirely accepted, valued and comfortable. I can go to school, I can be who I am. I can, you know, fast during Ramadan, or I can observe Lent or, you know, celebrate Hanukkah if I need to. And students won't be weird or strange, or teachers won't judge me. There will be no microaggressions, no micro racisms that are uttered. If anything, what I've gone through or experienced might actually be a shared experience of education and learning for a classroom setting. Being proactive and forward, thinking about these events and maybe having you could have cultural diversity days on your calendar, or faith events on your school calendar. There might be some that are easier and more obvious to acknowledge because of sheer numbers in a classroom. But this idea that then, as a diverse and globalised schooling body, we take these issues seriously. In the spirit of inclusion, in the spirit of education, and in the spirit of connecting students in a globalised world to give them a greater sense.

And by the same token, I'll use my experience 'cause that's what I have. Often being called into schools which are in maybe regional parts of Victoria where there are highly very Anglo majority. ...student body, we're talking about 95%. And the 5% that, that is, the 5% might pollute a few East Asians and indigenous Australians, that makes up the student body. These kids are in Year 11 and 12. And we're not even talking primary. And often the approach to me is, can you come out and speak to these students about your experience growing up as a diverse Australian in this country, and what that's meant for you? Because we need to prepare these kids for university. They are going to get a culture shock. And I'm like, that's a lot of pressure on me to fix that in a session, but I hear what you're saying. And this idea, again, of having to prepare and educate and open up ideas and possibilities to what diversity really means, what cultural breath means, should be something that as educators we try to do consistently throughout the schooling experience and not necessarily wait till Year 12 to just like, oh, by the way, there's a world out there.

We need to be so much more progressive than that and forward thinking about that because the reality is this, the world that we live in is not 1954. It really is 2024. And we have an obligation, I think, as educators to make students world ready, life ready. And that means diversity ready as well. Practising cultural safety demands, representation reflected in the environment around them. And that would be really students and teachers coming from diverse backgrounds, being seen and celebrated for who they are through education and through respectful inclusion. Now, I think, the last sentence there, which is, oops, really important is meeting culturally diverse students, where they are at. This is, if you take nothing else away from today's session, it is that this idea that particularly with newly arrived students or students who may not be coming from an English speaking background, this idea then that, oh, well, their experience is going to be limited because of English, therefore, I'll put them in this particular box.

It's problematic because there is, we can do better on that. Schools can do better with resourcing and support, and educators can also do better specifically in engaging those students and their families and communities by not expecting them to meet me, and the schooling system and the schooling process, where I'm delivering it, because they don't necessarily have all the different tools in order to get them to that point, they don't have that life experience. They may have been out of the education system due to displacement, due to war, due to the settlement process. And so, the expectation is they might be, they might be put into your class, but certainly at a different level. And therefore, rather than just leave them at that because that's how we deal with things when students aren't at the right level, meet them where they're at, embrace students, their communities and their families who might be at a much more earlier stage of being school ready to the standard that you're teaching.

And again, I know this is a resource dependent issue, but it's also a mindset issue here as well. The idea that you need to perhaps engage where students are coming at by being more respectful of where they have been, shows that a schooling is not going to be a challenging and daunting experience because educators actually, they actually understand where I'm coming from, they're actually acknowledging that my journey and my trajectory here has not been linear. It has been very zigzag. And there are necessary supports and requirements that you're going to need in order to make this work. And thirdly, the idea that it won't be a simple situation. And I did also note there was a popup about how much further we've got to go. Look, I'm not, I'm going to probably five more minutes, and then we can go to Q&A 'cause I think we still have half an hour then.

JUSTINE SMYTH:
Tasneem, yeah, well, we've got till 5:30. So, if we went till five, you've got half an hour of questions, if that's what you prefer.

TASNEEM CHOPRA:
OK. Yeah, sure. Between now and five, we'll wind up. How's that?

JUSTINE SMYTH:
Fantastic. I'll keep, I'll keep it a note for you. OK.

TASNEEM CHOPRA:
Thank you. Please do, please do. So, this is an image that was sent to me. Well, rather, I discovered online some time ago. And it's a micro version of what cultural safety looks like. And I love this image because it's a student led intervention on making a colleague feel safe. So, some time ago, there was a young girl playing football, aka soccer with a group of friends in, I think it was New South Wales. So, these were under twelves or maybe 12 year olds. So, they're quite young. And one of the girls in the team, Samah, was a of a Muslim background, and she would wear a hijab or a headscarf when she played soccer. There was never an issue until one day before a game, a ref from outside of the club turned up to ref the game. And he refused to ref the game because Samah's hijab was not considered protocol soccer uniform. And the students and the parents of the students were saying, what are you talking about? She always plays it. It doesn't impact the game. It's got nothing to do with it.

You have to just stop being difficult about it, just ref the game. And the ref refused to ref until she came off the field or took off her scarf. So, she didn't take off her scarf. She came off the field and the ref took over the game much to the disdain and the disappointment of her team. Following week, though, when the ref turns up, all the girls put on a hijab in solidarity with Samah to say, you're not reffing her, you're not reffing us, because they wanted her to feel and know that she was seen and respected and valued, and that she didn't require to change herself in order to fit in. And it's not that they all started wearing hijab. This is not what I'm advocating for here. But it was more a sign to say to the ref that your attitude is a problem here, not her scarf, not the colleague's scarf. And I think that was a classic case again, of how as younger students, they can take the lead. And often these decisions and actions are student led when it comes to... when they feel supported enough because the schooling environment, or in this case, the soccer environment was nurturing and safe enough for them to be able to say, this is what we want to do and this is the right thing for us to do, this is how we feel we want to express ourselves.

So, I thought it was a beautiful example of how cultural safety manifests in ways that are surprising, but definitely involving young people. The next slide is ten things that are truly inclusive for leaders to do. And by leaders, I do mean educators. I'm just going to run through the topics and note that as a learning resource, this PowerPoint will be accessible. So, please don't... I'm not going to, I'm not going to break this down in much more than just simply read the headings here, but value what the differences are that you have within your midst. Create psychologically or culturally safe spaces for students, so they can bring their entire cultural selves to school without fear of judgment or ridicule. Would you share your intent? So, be very clear about what your view is of cultural diversity in this, in a classroom setting, so that you can make students feel that they're in a safe place to be able to articulate what their needs are. Think about your thinking. I think that's pretty obvious.

I'll just read through a couple more, value, value demonstrable actions. So, for example, what the girls did at soccer was, I think, a classic example of seeing something student led for the benefit of others. Not to cause harm, but to cause inclusion. Build trust with communities and individuals that you've not necessarily had caused to form trust or even relationships with. But moving forward build rapport. And rapport building with certain communities that have not necessarily been involved in the schooling system for the longest time. Building that rapport takes a while. It does take a while to build the trust of maybe parents and wider communities of cohorts of students from new communities, because it's all new, new country, new language, new people, new systems, new education, new teachers. There's a lot of new there. And so, understandably, there'll be a reticence to suddenly grasp the system and grasp the processes because there's so much to learn and so much to unpack whilst also negotiating, settling down in a new place.

So, just be mindful of that. I know that people's experience to learning and understanding school systems is going to take some time. I'm going to jump to the next slide 'cause I'm weary of time. Leveraging diversity as an asset. Now, as an educator, again, I know I've sort of harped on about this, but it's so important to me. Promote, promote broader multicultural learning and opportunities. Whether that means taking students to museums or bringing in guest speakers or starting a particular unit from culture of the student in your class, for example, without making that student the ambassador for all things to explain 'cause that's a lot for a student to take on. And depending on their own levels of confidence and personality, it might even naturally do more harm than good. So, I think approaching this from a scholastic point of view, where we're going to learn about Egypt, you know, next month, or we're going to learn about Cambodia or we're going to learn about Sudan or whatever. And so, make that part of the way that you approach education in a way that's gentle, but also respectful and inclusive, you know, resources permitting and curriculum permitting.

So, that's probably another conversation. Harness the breadth of cultural diversity as a school strength. The more diversity you have, the more networks you have, buy-in representation, ticks on, you know, runs on the board and ticks that you can say, this is who we are. We are a mini United Nations, or we're a partial United Nations, or we're an aspiring United Nations. However, which way you want to do it, pit that as a strength and as an asset because it's an enormous wealth of heritage and history. And whether it's language or food or music or the peripheral above iceberg things, it's also a heck of a lot of below iceberg things as well, that can be seen as a positive. Encourage expression and ownership of cultural identity for individual students. So, share with them or allow students to share their cultural diversity in a way that's celebrated and not criminalised or not demonised in a way that makes them feel uncomfortable. Promote anti-racism education, which there are numerous sources available now online.

But certainly, the tools that you can actually implement through classroom settings and educational, you know, educational modules where students can learn and they're targeted for, I think, upper high school and also upper, so upper primary school and through high school as well. There are so many opportunities and there are student led ones. I don't know if I have time for my favourite story. I don't think I do. Maybe during question time, I'll bring it up if I get a chance about a student led anti-racism initiative, which was brilliant. And eliminating the power dynamic, perpetuated by majority versus minority. So again, this is really important for minority students who when they feel that they look different and sound different, that they are always going to be different to the point where they're not valued the same, they're not given the same opportunities and chances because they don't look like the mainstream. So, much of that is internalised and manifests in all kinds of negative, you know, mental health issues, withdrawal from school, withdrawal from home, not knowing where I fit in.

So, let's mitigate that by acknowledging that, seeing it and bringing it up as, you know, what you can share with us about, or what we can learn about your cultural background will benefit us all. You can share it or we can learn about it, but do it in a way that's respectful. I've got a case study here of learning opportunity, which leveraged diversity. So, the Islamic Museum of Australia based in Thornbury has been doing a longstanding program, where, you know, school tours, where students come in and learn about the history of Islam, but also the contributions of Islamic heritage to modernity, everything from architecture and chess to coffee and music and arts and different components of it. But it's done in a way that's gentle, inclusive, immersive and very, very positive. It develops students'ability to become, I guess, responsible local and global citizens by preparing them to engage in all these interactions in a way that's very well supported. So, it's an award-winning program.

They've also partnered with the SBS to create online learning tools, which are designed specifically for school. So, if you haven't gotten onto that, do, it's all free. The tools aren't, but the learning tools online, I believe are free. So, I mean, it's a great way of embodying learning opportunities for a community that crosses over a lot of different cultural cohorts in one hit. So, more ideas of what some practical strategies to put into place. So, having cultural acknowledgement events is important. Truth telling. So, misconceptions that people have about a certain group can be instantly, well, hopefully instantly mitigated through classroom presentations, student led conversations, include key cultural, diverse languages in the comms that come out from your school, whether it's newsletters online or paper ones. I don't know if you saw your paper newsletters, I'm not sure. But your communications that you're doing, make sure that you are targeting key community groups that are part of your school community in that, and make yourself available of conversations with culturally diverse leaders from communities in your, around your school.

Whether it's some, whether it's a faith leader or whether it's a senior community active member who has a lot of influence with students from your school who are from a particular ethnic background. That can be, that can be great. Not just for relationship building, but also in terms of getting to understand your community better, knowing to keep your radar open about events that are upcoming that could be beneficial and build that into the way as a school generally. And I guess this is a call to principals more so than anyone else, is to ensure that your school is on the pulse of the cultural breadth of the communities that you are located in the geography of where you are. Relationships with community leaders is so important. And developing a framework towards more culturally safe schools means highlighting inclusion proactively in the messaging that you send out. Targeting diverse communities and giving them a platform within the student body. So, seek it out, amplify it, normalise, normalise promotion of cultural diversity in what you do, not as the exception, but as the rule.

Use inclusive languages as we know that it is necessary when we address gender. But also, in the same tone, using inclusive language tools to make sure that your comms are going out, as I mentioned earlier, to all communities. Don't dismiss concerns of exclusion, marginalisation, or racism that do come to you from students. Quite often the importance of believing with them, believing young students about what they've gone through is the first step in them. Then building in trust with authority to know that they can make a complaint about something or raise an issue of concern with them and have it heard. I think it's quite easy to want to dismiss it and say, look, I think you misread it. I think you hope you heard it wrong or they didn't mean it. It was a joke. Very problematic. And we know that because it's the same kind of attitude towards sexism and micro sexisms that have been problematic and lead to all kinds of issues, you know, further on down the track. The same is true for the way we negotiate microaggressions and racism as well.

And I sort of mentioned that one, but I'm going to just end with this a principled tone. So, this idea that principles create boundaries, they have the potential to just demonstrate and set the tone of what is and is not acceptable in a school setting. What passes, what flies, what do we stand for? Embody trust, build bridges with culturally diverse students and the communities that they are, and the families that they come from. This idea that the teacher behind the desk or the principal behind the desk, keeping a very arm's length association from the student body builds a very different sense of rapport building compared to the principal that comes out from behind the desk and who meets the students as they're coming into school, reach the parents, for example. I don't know whether that's still old school, but I've certainly heard that, that when it's practised in certain schools, in urban, in urban schools here in Victoria, has a really positive effect on the parents'attitudes towards engaging with the school.

The principal is someone we can approach. Here's someone we can trust. We know who they are, they want to know who we are. They don't create all these boundaries and barriers between parents and the school establishment. It's a very direct conduit. So again, that changes the culture of the school and the vibe. And I think, look, you know what? I'm going to say, look, let's, this is my final slide really is ask yourself, have you engaged with culturally diverse students in the past? And where would you like to be in 12 months time? On a separate issue, if you were to undertake a cultural audit of your teaching body in terms of language capacities and cultural backgrounds of where teachers are from, what would that look like if you undertook that one today? And how does that rank against the student body that you have? Is there a correlation? If not, why not? What are some drivers you might invest in changing that outcome? And why should you invest in that outcome? And of course, preemptively, don't wait for a crisis in schools when it comes to cultural engagement.

Preempt it. Be forward thinking, be on the front foot with embracing cultural diversity because it is an enormously untapped asset. That is the end of my Ted talk. And I'll stop sharing my screen. There we go.

JUSTINE SMYTH:
Thank, Tasneem, thank you. It was very, very enlightening and I found it very powerful to listen to and I hope the rest of the participants did as well. There are a couple of questions that I've got in the chat if you'd like us, me to read them out now.

TASNEEM CHOPRA:
Sure.

JUSTINE SMYTH:
OK. One of them is,"How can I measure the effectiveness of efforts to promote cultural diversity inclusivity within the school community?"

TASNEEM CHOPRA:
I guess by asking the question of students and parents, you know, you might undertake exercises during the year. It could be event days, it could be content that is delivered through syllabus. And you could undertake that survey, whether it's a monkey survey, SurveyMonkey, sorry, or some sort of tool where you can actually do an assessment of have you tried it? How did you find it? And compare, compare with 12 months. So, you need to, you know, you can't change what you don't measure. So, beginning of the year, make a plan of what you want to implement. At the end of a 12 month period, or maybe even two quarters of two terms of the school, test it. You know, whether it's the student body or whether it's the parenting community, did you, did you see this? Did you attend this day? Did you find it useful? What could we do better? So, often asking the difficult question is important in being able to gauge where you are at. Often we don't ask the question because we don't want to know the answer 'cause it may not be good news.

But then how do we ask, how else do we change if we don't acknowledge there is room for growth because we are perhaps lagging in that particular area? I think it's one of the bravest, but one of the most useful exercises you can undertake. So, ask the difficult question.

JUSTINE SMYTH:
Fantastic. I love the idea of having a plan and then checking it and seeing the actual plan and what's happening with that plan, is it working? And that touch base and having that courage to have those conversations is really important, Tasneem. One of the other questions we had earlier before we started was, how can we celebrate the cultural contributions of students or staff from diverse backgrounds all year, not just on the days we set or the awareness months?

TASNEEM CHOPRA:
Again, I would be mindful of what that diversity looks like in a class. So, there are some schools where I've been in the outer west part of Melbourne where the student body of that school, it might literally include like 50 ethnicities, maybe 60. A lot. It's not feasible logistically to celebrate diversity days for 60 ethnicities in a schooling year when you have existing curriculum perhaps, though. By the same token, it's not adequate to only acknowledge diversity on Harmony Week. Very problematic, this idea that we value this one week in 8 March, after that, just blend in. That's not how it works. It's about creating opportunities, aligning the content that you have in a school system, whether it's through social studies. So, yeah, through the social sciences, whether through English, which tends to be a lot of breadth, where you can actually play with things there and see how can we locate opportunities in the curriculum that will give platform to voices from diverse communities? Are you using books from authors that represent cultural diversity in this country?

Because unlike when I grew up, there are now lots of authors that schools can draw upon in order to often bring experiences of diversity into the school syllabus and classroom conversations that didn't exist before. And that can be really useful, particularly in classes and cohorts where there are mainstream students who've never gone to school with someone of a Chinese Australian background or Indigenous background or a Sudanese background or a Lebanese background, for example. So, if there are authors out there with that content, bring it in. So, days are great. I think resources are better because they're embedded in what you do. All the kids have to read the book. Sometimes they don't. But they do technically have to read the book, and they have to discuss the stuff and it becomes part of the learning opportunity, and where possible, draw in cultural experts from those backgrounds to come to the school and speak to that. I think it's very, very powerful to do that. And we shouldn't shy away from students discussing books that have got critical content and challenging content, not just beyond stereotypes, but that are written with a very first-hand account from Australians of an ethnic background who've grown up here.

There's so much resonance in that.

JUSTINE SMYTH:
Thanks, Tasneem. I love the idea of locating it in the curriculum. We know that in schools the curriculum is so loaded, there is so much that we need to teach and fit in. So, let's value add to that and use the resources and the tools that you've talked about and find the context to put it in and make that authentic.

TASNEEM CHOPRA:
Can I also just add to that, Justine, while it's in my head? While we add to curriculum and we make it responsive and reflective, I would argue that if you have got a teaching cohort, that is, one of those schools that does have a culturally diverse student-teacher cohort, utilise that. And please cross-reference or verify sometimes the content that might be coming through curriculum to see that it does have the right tone and that does in fact represent the lived experience or something that's similar. As an example, a literature from, let's say, Asians in America, for example. There might be a novel about the experience of an Asian. Something like maybe even an Asian in UK Zadie Smith, for example, bringing up her book in the class to talk about it as the experience of growing up Asian in UK or in the West can be problematic if it's not necessarily similar experience to growing up in Australia. So, if you have teachers from backgrounds that can cross-check and verify the content to say, yeah, this is actually on point, this is actually very similar or I can endorse this, or this speaks to my reality or it speaks to the reality of those that I know, that's fantastic.

'Cause I can tell you far too often, and this is coming from a lot of work I've done in government, that often calling upon external peoples to necessarily translate documents, for example, which then aren't cross-checked by people in-house and it go out to the masses with massive typos - not even typos but syntax problems - becomes very problematic. So, people's inability to just use the skills that you have in-house to say, yeah, this is good, this is not on point I think it's an enormous... Resource it's not being leveraged enough and it should be 'cause it would save you time and money, but more importantly, it will ensure the content that you have speaks to the community that you're trying to represent.

JUSTINE SMYTH:
And, Tasneem, would it be appropriate to even reach out to your community, your parent community, to help and do the checks on those things if you haven't got the diversity on staff?

TASNEEM CHOPRA:
I don't know if that's an ethical thing. It might be. I think when you start involving parents and things to that extent, they might have opinions which are different, like, oh no, read this book by my friend's uncle's brother. And it's like, whoa. No, we just wanna make sure that the stuff that we're teaching is consistently useful and valuable. But I would say go with educational professionals with skills. There is a lot of them.

JUSTINE SMYTH:
Thanks, Tasneem. One of the other questions that we had is, how can we, as school leaders, ensure that our policies and practices are inclusive and equitable for students from diverse cultural backgrounds?

TASNEEM CHOPRA:
Again, ensure that when those policies are devised and compiled, they're devised by individuals with brain. So, ideally you wanna have content about cultural diverse engagement designed by people from cultural diverse backgrounds. The same way we wouldn't want a gender equity policy defined purely by a table full of men, for example, or medical issues developed by engineers. Not that there's anything wrong with those things, but I think it's so important to honour expertise where it's at. And be quite genuine in our intent that if we are trying to develop a set issue, logic would dictate, especially as educators, that you get experts from that field to develop that content. And I would stress again with emphasis here, there's not a lack of expertise in educators who could design content on cultural diversity. It's simply seeking it out and investing in it because you believe it's important. And we do it. We get historians to discover history. We get artists to talk about art. We get scientists to talk about science.

We get numeric experts to do the maths. By the same token, if we're doing cultural diversity engagement, get the experts who can do that. So, yeah, be consistent in what we apply because it's just as important as everything else.

JUSTINE SMYTH:
Thanks, Tasneem. And I had a question back in the chat earlier and maybe you can just elaborate on it. Catherine asked, could you elaborate on the importance of parent-family-community partnerships in supporting cultural diversity and social cohesion in our school communities?

TASNEEM CHOPRA:
That's a big one. And, Catherine, I would simply say that parents... Again, I don't wanna generalise, but for the sake of brevity, I'll just try and keep it as simple as I can. Parents, I think desire for the well-being of their students and performance at school is high across all communities and cultures. Their ability to be able to contribute to that as much as they like might be dependent on their life experiences and circumstances and socio-economic background. So, for example, parents that are working maybe one or two jobs or working shift work may not have the resource capacity or wherewithal to contribute to the same capacity as maybe parents were at home or in a position to not have to work but contribute so much more time to school and culture. The problem with that dynamic then is that you're going to get an overrepresentation or privilege one side of experiences and perceptions over another, not because one is more valuable, but simply on account of life and account of equity, which comes back to one of the earlier graphics that I spoke of.

So, my response to that would be for those parents who do want to make a much more substantive contribution but lack the resources, what are some other ways that you could do that? Could you engage them through soft communications, which is emails with a survey, with a follow-up phone call once a month, through a text base, through WhatsApp group? I don't know what the resource rules are with schools and engagement of parents, but I think I would work around communities and parents. So, you meet them where they are at than necessarily expect them to submit a response by a deadline which suits maybe the 20 or 30% of moms or dads who got the time to be able to attend to it that way because it's certainly not a reflection in any way of their lack of interest and wanting the optimum for their kids. It's simply burnout. So, being more creative about fitting into that schedule. And yeah, meet parents where they're at, meet communities where they're at, not where you're at. Hard and difficult but again, this is about pivoting in ways that recognises students' experiences of learning.

And the schooling system they're not linear. They are so not linear. And by the same token, being nonlinear in your ability to gauge that support.

JUSTINE SMYTH:
Thanks, Tasneem, I think you were gonna share another story around student leadership, and I think this question relates to that, so you might be able to throw your story in here from before. What role can student-led initiatives play in promoting cultural diversity and inclusivity within the school?

TASNEEM CHOPRA:
Oh, I think students... I mean, if the world stage is anything to go by right now, students seem to have a pretty decent grasp of what's going on in the world. It's just about whether they're given the platform and support to do that or how much resources schools have to enable that to happen drilling down to specifically issues of representation and experiences of discrimination in classroom settings. So, I've come across private and public state schools, where they do encourage their students to have like anti-racism clubs or diversity clubs, which was something all entirely new to anything that I was familiar with even five years ago or maybe ten years ago. But it's been evolved and it's come about because students wanna do that the same way they set up climate action groups, for example. So, I think if students are demonstrating a collective need or voice to want to be able to congregate and meet to represent an issue, for me, it's supported even so much as explaining them how do you develop a plan, what is the terms of reference, what is a group vision?

It might be that initial support that you do. But I think for me when you provide that support for a student body who is seeking to have that representation, it acknowledges to them that you see value in their proposition. And I think when a teacher or a principal rubber stamps that and says, yeah, this is a great idea, it gives them a great sense of feeling that I can work with authority, I can work with insistence. My voice, although a minority voice, is still respected. So, I think there's a lesson there on both ends because I think they will surprise you with the way that they collect and what they come up with because it's lived experience that they're bringing, which you may not have on that particular issue, but it's certainly driving them. And increasingly we're seeing that's becoming a trend now that Gen... What are the new gen? Is it Gen X? No, no, we're Gen X. I'm Gen X. But it's the Gen Z's. It's the Gen Z's that are just leading the charge on self-representation and manifestation.

And some might argue it's a bit cuckoo, others would argue this is amazing. But I think either way, when it's student-led and student-owned, it's a learning curve for them. And look, my story with that was more of a funny anecdote. But we could almost end on it really 'cause it's just quite hilarious but I'll just share it now that I've dropped it there. But I was contacted by email by a student body from a school in Melbourne's west a few years ago. A group of students, that was about five of them, they sent me an email. Dear Ms Chopra, we'd like to speak to you about our proposal to start students fighting racism at school. And I thought, sure, I don't know what this is about, but young kids wanting to fight racism, happy to hear what they have to say. They joined me. This was during Covid. But they're doing online learning. And then I had a meeting with the leader of the group, this Somali Australian young girl was leading the charge with... And the screen had like five children and then there was me.

And they're all from different demographics. There was, I think, Turkish and Somali, Lebanese, Greek and I think there was, I forget, maybe one Australian. No, she wasn't Australian background, it was another East African background. So, I let them run with their agenda. They had an agenda. They were in grade five or grade six. They had an agenda. They wanted to list what they was important to them, why they were doing this, then they proceeded to show me surveys that they had conducted where they had asked students around the school, have you ever experienced racism and what happened? And then they showed me the results, and they'd made pie charts and they had and this happened to these students, and this happened to these students, so we're very concerned. And we just want to know if you will support us. But I think they used the word patron or champion. Would you be a champion for us? And I was just like really impressed with their efforts. And I'm like, sure, I will be happy to be a champion.

But I think this is an amazing effort. They collected and it got the school's attention. So, obviously the principal had given them permission to email me into a format that was going to allow me to be a champion of their issues. But I tell the story because the punch line is they emailed me about a week later to thank me, but the subject heading in the email was, 'Thank you, Tasneem Chopra.' And they'd call themselves the Students Tackling Discrimination Group. But they said you have become our STD champion. And I just thought, right, I won't be able to put that on my CV, but thank you for making me their STD champion. Anyway, so for me, it was an enormous acknowledgement of young people having the confidence and support from their school to be able to take on an issue that was really, really powerful and important to them and running with it. So, yeah, kudos to them.

JUSTINE SMYTH:
What a great story. And we know that when we give students opportunities, they blow us away. I know in my time in schools as a teacher and a principal, when I've given opportunity and allowed students to have a voice and take action, they absolutely outstand you and the things that they do and the way they go about it. And I think we sometimes underestimate the value of that. Don't you in the power of it as well, Tasneem?

TASNEEM CHOPRA:
I would love to hear more stories like that, I mean, from other students because I think it buoys me. You feel like this... Especially as an educator, this must be worth it. And I have to say, of all the work that I do in cross-cultural education engagement from governments and corporates and businesses and everything from the rotaries to the fire services, it's working in schools. For me, that has, by far, been the most gratifying because students will tell you how it is. They don't really have to filter, which is good and bad. And I just feel that they come at you with incredible that they're candid and honest and they feel it's true to some extent. So, I just think that's so refreshing and there's no sort of saturation. Their sense of hope isn't diluted. So, it's very encouraging.

JUSTINE SMYTH:
I think it's an important thing for all of us as adults in education is to remember that stance that children come with, that inquiry approach, that open-mindedness and the way of inquiring into things and finding out. You said it beautifully, meet students where they're at and families where they're at. I think that's such a powerful thing and really gonna resonate with me as I move back into schools and work in education. I just wanted to put it out it's a small group left now. Is there anybody that would like to have a question or ask something now in this opportunity before we finish up?

TASNEEM CHOPRA:
It is the end of a long working day (INAUDIBLE).

JUSTINE SMYTH:
But on the good note, Tasneem, you've probably answered a lot of questions as well. I think we've been through the chat and the questions that were put online before. And I know for me, I have learned so much from this opportunity to talk with you and listen to your expertise and your experience in this field. I really enjoyed the stories that you've told, and a lot of them have resonated with me, and it's really made me think about what I do and how I behave in the important role I play in making change in our communities. So, I really thank you for that and the opportunity to listen to you.

TASNEEM CHOPRA:
I have enormous respect for the teachers and the efforts that you're undertaking in this space that for many of you, it is challenging engaging with new cultural cohorts, knowing what to do and how to even start and where to start. And is it the wrong thing to say and I don't wanna offend anyone? It can be a bit of a minefield but I think it's stepping out there well intended and allowing a student-led response can actually take some of that heat out because as we've demonstrated, they have the answers in many cases not all.

JUSTINE SMYTH:
Yeah. And a key part of that you touched on, it was us being vulnerable. We've actually got to be open to it and vulnerable to it and say, I'm not actually sure here. I need to learn a little bit more. I'm a bit afraid if I do something wrong, but I need to get into that space of finding out more and inquiring into it. And I think that takes huge vulnerability on our part but we need to display that and we need to role model it moving forward. I think people are saying thank you. I just wonder if you could share the last couple of slides for me just so I can talk about what's up and coming.

TASNEEM CHOPRA:
Sure.

JUSTINE SMYTH:
Thank you.

TASNEEM CHOPRA:
(INAUDIBLE)

JUSTINE SMYTH:
So, I'll just gonna share with you the up-and-coming leadership series that we've got. We've got Dr Helen Kelly coming on Wednesday, 12th June, and she's gonna discuss teacher burnout, which is a really hot topic at the moment. So, these are things that you've asked for and responding to the things that you've asked for in a survey. We're gonna have Ron, too. Ron's coming to talk about the future of education. He is on the Thursday, 25th July. Beghetto, I think I'm saying that right. And then on Wednesday the 28th August, we've got Bruce Armstrong and he's gonna talk about leading schools during times of disruption. So, these are fantastic opportunities to listen to the experts talk about things to support us in our schools as educators and leaders. And I know that you'll get as much from these speakers as you have today from Tasneem. I just wanna say big thank you, Tasneem again. It's been an absolute pleasure to sit in this today and listen to you speak. And it has grown my circle of confidence, as well as growing my circle of knowledge.

And on behalf of everybody here, I'd like to say a warm thank you and thanks for your time.

TASNEEM CHOPRA:
Thank you very much, Justine, and thank you everybody for joining and appreciate the comments as well. It's been lovely.

JUSTINE SMYTH:
Peter, is that a question that you had there? No, I think he's waving goodbye to us. (LAUGHS)