

**Transformational Educational Leadership:
Disruptive Narratives**

**Leading for Place & belonging in Jamaica
The Art of Possibilities**

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With DancePoet TioMolina**

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Our World

Our Communities

Our Young People & Our schools

Part I: A Framework for Moving Forward

Our Volatile World

I am honoured to contribute to this seminal Conference *Transformational Educational Leadership: Disruptive Narratives* and to have the opportunity to share my thinking with you. In this uncertain and volatile world – where the demands on schools are growing - school leaders find themselves holding the ring between competing truths and realities. How they step into the leadership space will shape the well-being and the future of young people in Jamaica, and elsewhere.

We live in a world of rage and 'untruth' - a world on the move. Half the World's refugees are children.ⁱ Social divisions are widening.ⁱⁱ Yet it's an exciting world - of boundless opportunities and possibilities. And it's also a world in which we all want to feel that we belong. 'Belonging' is that sense of being somewhere where you can be confident that you will fit in and safe in your identity. Schools are one of the few shared social institutions which can create that sense of belonging or exclusion. (*View what young people have to say about belonging in the first video in 'The Art of Possibilities' series, listed at the end of the paper.*)

Over recent years, I have explored the importance of place and belonging: what this means to each of us personally and to schools, particularly those serving diverse communities facing major socio-economic challenges, or high levels of need. In *Leadership of Place* I explored the lives and experiences of young people growing up in disadvantaged communities in the US, UK and South Africa.ⁱⁱⁱ I asked the hundred or so young people who contributed to that research inquiry to respond through drawings to two key questions: 'What's it like living round here?' and 'What's it like being in this school?' Those illustrations showed many stark and competing realities: areas which were safe and welcoming and others which were 'no go' areas. During later work in Jamaica, I asked a group of young people the same two questions. Their responses revealed the challenges and realities of everyday life in Kingston, as well as their hopes and dreams.

Leadership of Place also identified a cohort of 'place leaders' who sought to understand young peoples' lives and experiences and connect to the wider archipelago of surrounding communities. The potential of school leaders to make a difference was inspiring. It sprang from a sense of hope, a sense of possibilities - a belief on their part that things could and should be different – and a recognition of the importance of place and belonging. Working with those leaders led me to reflect on how we think about schools, talk about them and decide what should happen in them. In a global competitive climate, in which the pressure to achieve a narrow range of results seems to have taken over, had we forgotten that our children and young people need to be known and seen for who they are? Yet.....

- When young people feel safe, rooted and that they belong, they become open to learning: they succeed at every level.
- When they know they are listened to, they develop their sense of agency.
- When they become less fearful and recognise their own talents, the world opens out for them.

Our World of Possibilities

Building on this understanding DancePoet TioMolina and I began to think about how to present this world of possibilities through bringing together the best of Education, Culture and Art. We developed the notion of the *Art of Possibilities* - a belief in what young people are capable of being and achieving - and have been working with schools and communities to support them in developing vibrant school communities which foster young people's well-being, agency and sense of belonging.

In 2013 – in partnership with the Ministry and the National College for School Leadership - we had our first opportunity to work with school principals in Jamaica. This is now our fourth visit and the experience has touched us in many ways. This is not just about the nature of the challenges schools and their leaders face but is also about the deep love and care that the leaders we have met feel for Jamaica's young people.

What has struck me every time we have worked with Jamaican principals is that they bring commitment, ideas and an open and loving heart to what they do. However, there is a hesitancy, an uncertainty. The 'lexicon' of problems and barriers creates self-doubt. The prospect of stepping into a new leadership place of possibilities, with staff, students and communities, seems a distant dream. Yet, at the last session in 2016, principals told us:

We need to create a....

- *Space in the school where people can understand each other;*
- *Sense of belonging in our schools;*
- *Sense of ownership.*

We need to recognise....

- *The complexity of our multi-cultural society;*
- *What our children see and experience;*
- *What we can do.*

As an outsider looking in, I have come to think that the leadership challenges in Jamaica are about **belief** (in what is possible), **belonging** and **agency**. Belonging I have touched upon and will return to. Agency is our ability to intervene in the world, to have our voice heard.^{iv} Agency is the belief that what we do makes a difference. It's also having the skills to do this and the opportunities to act. If you are a leader, this is about recognising the power and potential for good of your own agency, *and* that of teachers, young people and their families and communities. The leadership challenge is to harness all of these.

In a relatively small educational system – where interconnections weave through the fabric of daily life - opening hearts and minds and bringing people together in common cause, in mutual agency, is not on some distant horizon but within your grasp.

The genesis for change and renewal is all here in Jamaica.

Part II: Place, Belonging and Agency

If belonging makes you feel more confident, and confidence makes you a better learner, students need to feel like they belong in school in order to learn most effectively. (Nusrat Student-researcher)

Place and belonging matter

Over half a century ago, French philosopher Simone Weil captured the importance of being rooted and connected.

To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognised need of the human soul uprootedness is by far the most dangerous malady to which human societies are exposed.^v

Simone Weil's prescient message echoes down the decades and in today's volatile world, there is an immediacy and an urgency to the issues she raised about roots and belonging for all of us today which has implications for schools as a place. The notion of place is a powerful one: the place where we are from, the place where we live, the place we would like to be. It signifies issues about identity and belonging (or the lack of it) and about roots and connections (or the lack of them). It's about being the insider or the outsider.

Our personal sense of belonging is shaped by our own lives and histories, as well as the daily encounters we face. Schools come into their own when they recognise that each child, each young person, each adult who passes through the school gates brings their own story into the life of the school. Schools are ever-changing kaleidoscopes of people, ideas and attitudes which have the potential to coalesce around shared beliefs and understandings. Schools need to help young people understand their own realities and develop their sense of personal identity. Schools are one of the few places of stability and belonging for many young people.

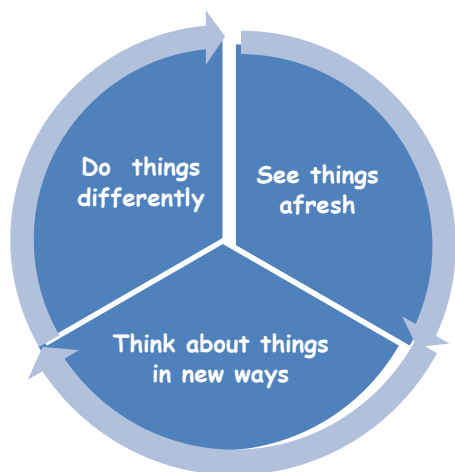
With all this in mind, the pressing educational issue becomes:

- How can we create the kinds of social spaces in our schools where everybody feels that they belong?

Stepping into the leadership space

School leaders set the framework for belonging or exclusion, influencing how young people view society and their place within it. How leaders think, decide, act and reflect – and draw on their knowledge to create a road-map of possibilities – is critical to the well-being of children and adults, and to their sense of belonging. Leaders' aspirations and practices shape young people's beliefs about themselves and send messages to communities about how they are viewed. Their expectations set the professional agenda.

Let me invite you look through the *Prism of Place and Belonging* to see things differently, to think about things differently and to do things differently.



Seeing: When you look through a Prism, the light changes, you see things afresh. When you look at schools through the *Prism of Place and Belonging* you begin to understand how school life is experienced – who feels included; who feels an outsider – and what can be done to increase engagement and reduce disaffection.

Thinking: The shift in how we see things enables us to recognise the importance of *beliefs, values and possibilities*. It encourages us to think differently and to make explicit what is important to us and to talk about what matters in our schools: the relationships, our aspirations for young people: and their aspirations for themselves, their schools and for the future.

Doing: Is about *agency*. This is a *belief* that if you act, what you do – on your own and with others - makes a difference. Agency is more than belief. It's also having the '*tools*' to act through developing your skills, talents and capacities to make that difference.

In *Place, Belonging and School Leadership: Researching to make the difference*^{vi} - which draws on recent research undertaken with student and teacher-researchers, and school leaders - I make the case for engaging in, and with, research about place and belonging. It's an approach which unleashes the energy and creativity of staff and students alike. It provides young people with the opportunity to voice their experiences and develop their skills and sense of agency. It gives teachers powerful insights into young people's lives and encourages them to explore, reflect, act and change, and to become outstanding professionals: See *Videos 2 and 3* in '*The Art of Possibilities*' series.

When staff and students are involved in research in this way, not only does it help them develop their skills and capacities but the process of helping discover what is and what needs to be done also contributes to the likelihood that it will happen. This approach also encourages school leaders to see themselves as place leaders and place-makers.

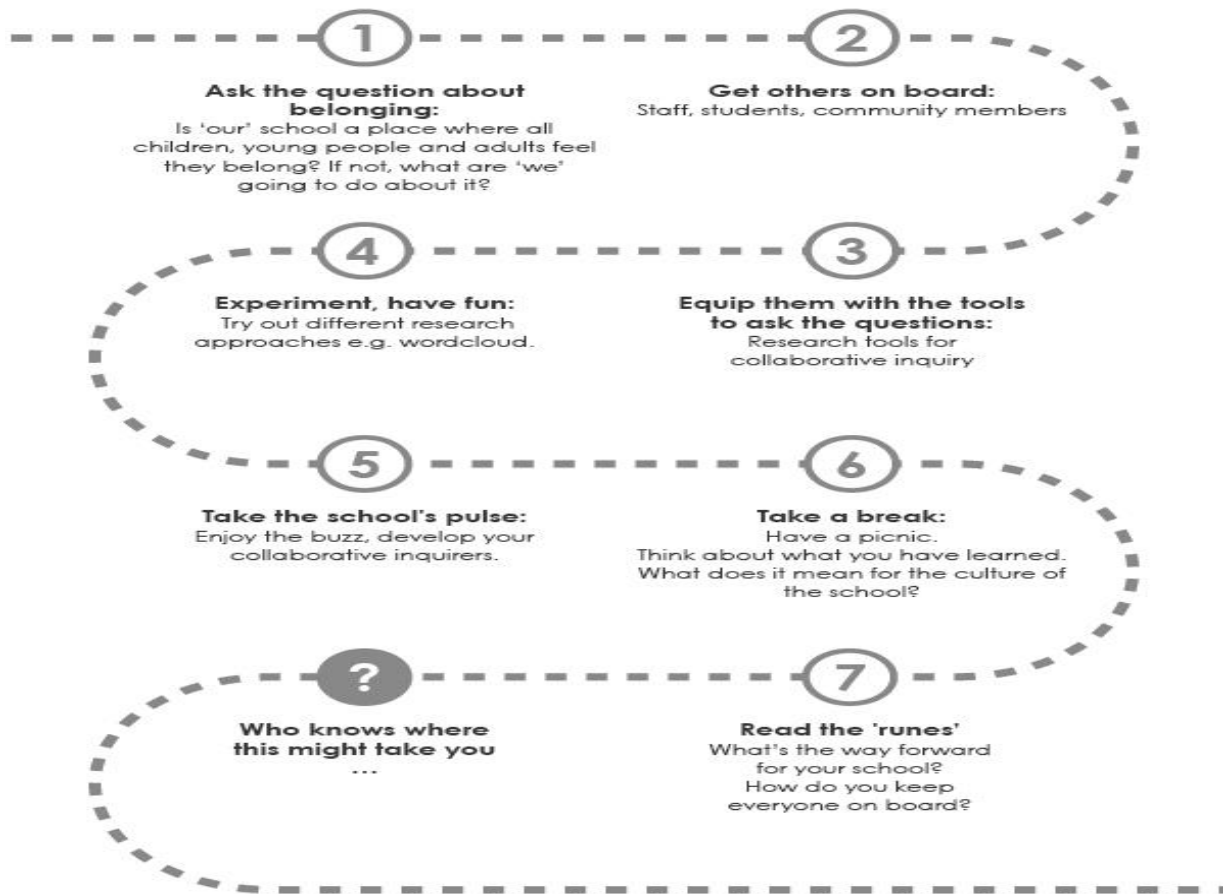
Making it happen

So how, as a leader, can you find the answers to the number one question:

- Is 'our' school a place where all children, young people and adults feel they belong? If not, what are 'we' going to do about it?

I've illustrated this approach in *A Leader's Guide to Researching for Place and Belonging*. It's a conceptual map: an example of how to go about the enjoyable and creative process of collaborative inquiry about place and belonging in ways that will involve school communities. It's offered here as a guide for school leaders about how to step into the messy but enjoyable process of research engagement as a tool for learning. This approach generates a refreshing climate for changing school cultures.

A Leader's Guide to Researching for Place and Belonging



Becoming a place leader

TioMolina and I have now worked with school leaders in many parts of the globe on what it means to be place leader and a place-maker: a leader who helps make 'belonging' work for pupils from many different backgrounds. We use music and poetry to encourage the process and to free up minds and hearts. It's a way of thinking which is enjoyable and liberating - and helps make the difference.

Place leaders have a theory of action which recognises the power of belonging. They 'walk' their leadership with a strong moral imperative^{vii} which not only values the children and young people in their care but sees their possibilities: as rays of sunlight – our future thinkers, enablers, creators. Leadership becomes a celebration of possibilities, as is shown in one of the wonderful poems we use, *Everybody's Doing it*, by Benjamin Zephaniah: See *Videos 4 and 5* in 'The Art of Possibilities' series.

Place leaders are authentic leaders. As Rosemary Campbell-Stephens has argued for some time, authentic leaders match what they say with what they do.^{viii} They understand their own past and the importance of the heritages and experiences of others. The 'disruptive' leadership 'narrative' she is encouraging here in Jamaica seems designed to check the flow of what is and to encourage leaders and policy-makers to reach beneath the surface to envisage what might and can be.

Understanding the roots and stories of others requires a process of purposeful engagement and open enquiry, as well as a passion and a commitment to create spaces where people can feel comfortable to be themselves. Place leaders appreciate that each person stands on common, yet different ground.^{ix} They choose to leverage the privileges of leadership to build 'trustful' schools: places of belonging for children, young people and communities.^x

When we were completing the research for *Place, Belonging and School Leadership*, Rhoda Furniss, a member of the research team, commented:

I was thinking about all the people that are actually involved in a school - the pupils, the teachers, the teaching assistants, all of these people. If they all thought about their school in a different way....

- a place where I go,
- a place where I feel like I belong,
- where I feel like I can contribute,
- where I feel like what I say is heard.....

.....what a dynamic, wonderful place that would be.

Rhoda is right.... and you can meet her in Video 5 of *The Art of Possibilities* series. We need to start 'retelling' the story of our schools: the story of what is possible here in this beautiful island and elsewhere. It's time to reclaim the notion of schools as places of hope and possibility. This is **The Art of Possibilities**: creating vibrant school communities: joyful and enquiring places in which children and young people feel rooted and can be and become their best possible selves.

There is an urgency to the retelling and the reclaiming. What we say and do today, as educators, will help shape the future. The now is about creating schools that are dynamic and wonderful places to be, places of belonging where young people are encouraged to think and question and challenge. The fight back against bigotry - now a vital imperative across the Globe - is about enabling young people to read not just the 'word' but also the 'world'.^{xi} This is what will help keep our children safe. And this is what will enable our young people to recreate a world of possibilities in which truth and social justice, care of our planet and for the well-being of others will prevail. Leaders can shine a light on the road ahead.

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Kathryn's blog on place and belonging: <https://ioelondonblog.wordpress.com>

Note and References

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Download the Videos in the Art of Possibilities Series

- **Video 1:** Place, Belonging & Schools in our Global World
<https://youtu.be/wjzdwIHSBRA>
- **Video 2:** A Place to Be: Student-Researchers Show the Way
https://youtu.be/pSPXX_ReRUQ
- **Video 3:** Rethinking Classrooms Teacher-Researchers Learn from their Students
<https://youtu.be/HHLTKYF6tU>
- **Video 4:** Using Poetry Performance to Create Place & Belonging
<https://youtu.be/pMj1-yEcdOc>
- **Video 5:** Making Belonging Work in a Volatile World
<https://youtu.be/wUVOUk83hng>

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