



Re-creating Schools as Places of Belonging: The Art of Possibilities

In a global context of change and uncertainty, **Kathryn Riley** builds on her pioneering concept of Leadership of Place to pose fundamental challenges to the beliefs, thinking and professional practice of educators and leaders and to ask: How can we create schools that are places of belonging and possibility?



■■■ Global Realities

Taking stock

We live in a world of rage and ‘untruth’ - a world on the move. Half the world’s refugees are children (UNHCR, 2015). Social divisions are widening (Putnam, 2015). 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.

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 the book *Leadership of Place*, I explored the lives and experiences of young people growing up in disadvantaged communities in the US, UK and South Africa (Riley, 2013). I asked the hundred or so young people who contributed to that research inquiry to respond through their 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, as illustration 1 demonstrates.



Illustration 1: My Life - Inside and outside School

This pattern was replicated in later research in Jamaica and also in Chile (Riley, Montecinos and Ahumada (2016). Across all the countries I have worked in, the responses of the young people reveal the challenges and realities of everyday life - as well as their hopes and dreams – and the importance of school to them, as is shown in illustration 2.

Illustration 2: I love my school



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.

Nevertheless, what strikes me when I look at today's educational landscape is that - while so many school leaders, teachers and school staff are deeply committed to the children and young people in their schools - there is a hesitancy, an uncertainty. The 'lexicon' of problems and the climate of uncertainty creates doubt. Weighed down by the ever changing demands of Government and the ongoing prospect of diminishing budgets, the notion of stepping into a new way of thinking which sees schools as places of possibility - for staff, students and communities - seems only to exist on some distant horizon. In a global competitive climate, in which the success of schools is judged increasingly on a narrow range of test results, have we forgotten that our children and young people need to be known and seen for who

they are? : a question which poses significant challenges for policy-makers, as well as for practitioners and school leaders.

Understanding the importance of place and belonging

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.

Simone Weil (1952, p.52).

Over half a century ago, the French philosopher Simone Weil captured the importance of being rooted and connected. Her 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 'places'. 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 by 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. They are one of the few places of stability and belonging for many young people. As educators, we need to recognise the pivotal role that schools play in helping young people develop their sense of personal identity and to focus on the pressing educational challenge:

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

■ ■ ■ A Fresh Perspective

Seeing, thinking, doing

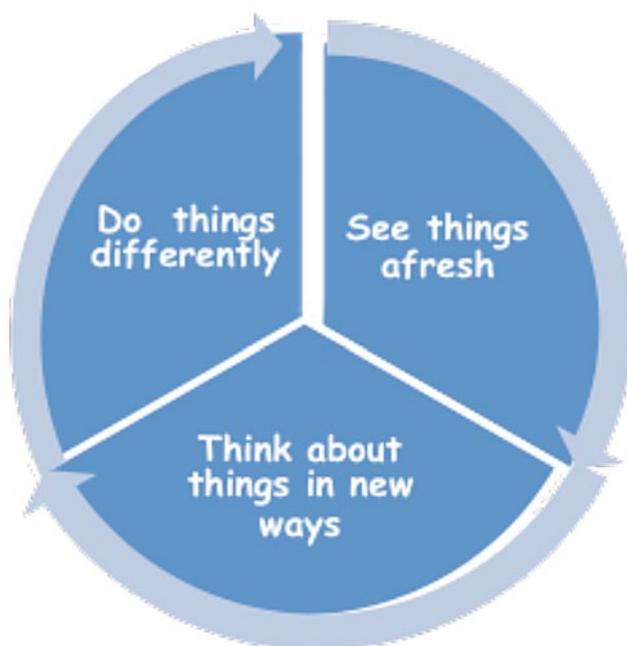
Whatever your role and wherever you are on your professional development journey, let me invite you to look through the Prism of Place and Belonging. This is an experience which will enable you to see things differently, think about things differently and do things differently: see Box 1.

Box 1: Seeing, thinking and doing

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: This 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 cultivating your skills, talents and capacities to make that difference.



For some time, DancePoet TioMolina and I have been exploring ways of presenting this distinctive perspective to schools. We have called it *The Art of Possibilities* which is a belief in what young people are capable of doing and being and achieving, backed up by an approach which aims to develop vibrant school communities which foster young people's well-being, agency and sense of belonging (see: www.theartofpossibilities.org.uk). We bring together Education with Art and use music and poetry to help develop the talents of young people and staff and to free up minds and hearts. It's a way of working which is enjoyable and liberating and which changes perceptions of what is possible.

Through this development work and the research I've been involved in over recent years,¹ I have come to recognise that:

- When young people feel safe, rooted and that they belong, they become open to learning and 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.

It's also concluded that we need to concentrate on three important matters: a **belief** in what is possible; an appreciation of the importance of **place** and **belonging**; and fresh understanding of the nature of **agency**. I have touched upon belief, *The Art of Possibilities*, and on place and belonging, and will return to these later. Agency is our ability to intervene in the world, to have our voice heard (Giddens, 1984). It is also the recognition that what we do makes a difference - see Box 1 – and have the skills to do this and the opportunities to act.

Harnessing the talents within school

If you are a leader, agency is about acknowledging the power and potential for good of your own agency and appreciating the agency of teachers, young people and their families and communities. The leadership challenge is to harness all of these, by making the most of the interconnections which weave through the fabric of the daily life of the school; opening hearts and minds; and bringing young people, staff and communities together in common cause, in mutual agency. The genesis for renewal lies within the gift of every school.

In my new book *Place, Belonging and School Leadership: Researching to make the difference* (Riley, 2017), I write about a project *School – A Place where I belong?* which involved some 70 plus student and teacher-researchers (who were newly qualified teachers) and school leaders in researching about place and belonging. Key benefits from the research are summarised in Box 2.

Box 2: The Benefits of Involving Schools in Researching about Place and Belonging

- *Teachers*: Engaging in research has provided the teacher-researchers (NQTs) with a unique window into the lives of young people. Children in their classroom have become visible to them for who they are. Through their research engagement, the NQTs have come to recognise that creating safety and belonging in the classroom, the playground and the school is the key to unlocking the potential of young people. By becoming involved in a stimulating process of reflective inquiry, they are 'on track' to becoming the outstanding professionals they would wish to be.
- *Young people*: The student-researchers have found their voice. Engagement in research has released their creative potential to explore, reflect, act and change – themselves and their school.² It has developed their talents and self-awareness in ways that undoubtedly promote their personal growth and feelings of well-being. Involving young people in research encourages them to become inquiring learners, it harnesses their creativity, enriches their lives and equips them to play that role in society, for they are tomorrow's citizens.
- *School leaders*: The headteachers and principals involved in this research inquiry have had the opportunity to reflect on their own practice. This has encouraged them to be more explicit about their own lexicon of leadership: the language which mirrors their values and articulates their aspirations. For the school leaders involved in this study, their leadership lexicon reflects a belief in the talents and skills of the children and young people in their schools, as well as the adults.

The conclusion I have reached from this work is that involving teachers and young people in collaborative research inquiry unleashes their energy and creativity³ and develops their skills and capacities. Once teachers and young people help discover what is and what needs to be done, it contributes to the likelihood that this will happen: a process of engagement which helps change the school climate. The impetus for this process of focused inquiry comes when school leaders see themselves as place leaders and place-makers.

■ ■ ■ Next Steps

Stepping into the leadership space – a conceptual map

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.

So how, as a leader, can you help your school 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 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 schools to think 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.

We all bring what we are and who we are to the life of the school (John, 2016) and the process of collaborative inquiry illustrated in *A Guide to Researching for Place and Belonging* generates some important questions for staff

in schools. Ten questions about place and belonging are listed. I would encourage schools to start the process of inquiry by identifying three questions which are particularly relevant to their context.

1. What does belonging mean to the children in our school?
2. What does belonging mean to their families?
3. What do the children experience on a daily basis in the classroom and in the playground?
4. How do they respond to and use different spaces within the school?
5. Where and when are the youngsters confident and happy?
6. Which groups of children or individuals are the insiders or the outsiders?
7. Which groups of families or individuals are the insiders or the outsiders?
8. How good is our school at welcoming newcomers?
9. How good is it at welcoming families and communities?
10. How do we acknowledge and welcome differences?

And *How do I know?*

■ ■ ■ A Guide to Researching for Place and Belonging

Stepping into a world of possibilities

In this uncertain and volatile world – where the demands on schools are growing - leaders find themselves holding the ring between competing truths and realities. To step into a world of possibilities, I would encourage school leaders to see themselves as place leaders and place-makers who help make 'belonging' work for pupils from many different backgrounds, and who bring others into the leadership space.

Place leaders have a theory of action which recognises the power of belonging. They 'walk' their leadership with a strong moral imperative (Sergiovanni, 1992; West-Burnham, 2015) which not only values the children and young people in their care but also sees their possibilities: as rays of sunlight – our future thinkers, enablers, creators. Leadership becomes a celebration of possibilities.





Place leaders are authentic leaders (Goffee and Jones, 2006). They understand their own past and the importance of the heritages and experiences of others. They strive 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 (O'Donoghue, 1998). They choose to leverage the privileges of leadership to build 'trustful' schools: places of belonging for children, young people and communities (Bryk and Schneider 2002; Louis, 2007).

When we were completing the research which became part of Place, Belonging and School Leadership, researching to make the difference (Riley, 2017b), 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. 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 only the 'word' but also the 'world', as Paulo Friere described it (Friere, 1993). 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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Read Kathryn's blog on place and belonging: <https://ioelondonblog.wordpress.com>

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Download the Videos in the Art of Possibilities Series (2016)

Video 1: Place, Belonging and 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 and Belonging <https://youtu.be/pMj1-yEcdOc>

Video 5: Making Belonging Work in a Volatile World <https://youtu.be/wUVOUk83hng>

NOTES

1. Riley & Rustique-Forrester 2002; Riley, 2013a & b; Riley et al, 2016; Riley 2017a & b.

2. These findings reinforce the work of many other writers on student voice and research engagement, such as Mary Kellet (2010), Jean Ruddock (2007) and Michael Fielding (2004).

3. Findings which support the work of Timperley and Earl (2011) who have developed a helpful framework on collaborative inquiry.

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