The Belonging Imperative

In today's difficult and uncertain times, schools need to be places of belonging. **Kathryn Riley** shows how—despite the many pressures on schools—teachers can help create that important sense of welcome and belonging for all children and young people.

Children from St Anthony's Catholic Primary School, Bromley. Photo: SpectreCom Films

Belonging means to feel comfortable where you are and just to feel you can be yourself and not have the worry that people might discriminate or not like the way you are. Belonging means you are part of something and you are not just sitting around on the other side … not just left out or lonely.

Student, quoted in: Riley, K. (2017). Place, belonging and school leadership: Researching to make the difference. London: Bloomsbury, p. 57.

Setting the scene

As the 1939–45 war drew to a close, Arnold McNair—an influential Judge and educator—was asked by the wartime government to look at the recruitment and training of teachers. How should future generations of young people be taught? Who should teach them and how? McNair concluded that if Britain was to create a 'wise' democracy, people of the highest calibre needed to be recruited into teaching.[1] Teachers are vital today. This article explores what they can do to help schools become places of welcome and belonging for all children and young people.

We live in a world of boundless promise and possibilities. Yet it's also a world where social divisions are widening,[2] and more people are on the move than at any period since the end of the Second World War—half of them children. The happiness of young people in the UK is at its lowest ebb since 2010.[3] For all these reasons, schools need to be places of belonging. Belonging is that sense of being somewhere you can be confident that you will fit in and feel safe in your identity[4]: a feeling of being at home in a place,[5] and of being valued.[6]

Belonging and 'not' belonging

The majority of children and young people feel a sense of belonging in their schools. However, across OECD countries, young people's sense of belonging is declining, with 1 in 4 feeling that they don't belong in school.[7] Children from socio-economically disadvantaged communities are twice as likely as their more advantaged peers to feel they don't belong in school,[8] and four times more likely to be excluded.[9]

Young people's sense of belonging in school is shaped by what they bring to it—their histories, their day-to-day lived realities—as well as schools' practices and expectations.[10] Relationships, encounters and pedagogical experiences make a difference. A sense of belonging affects academic outcomes, student motivation and absenteeism, and has a strong association with other positive social outcomes, such as health and wellbeing.[11] Belonging can shift into 'not-belonging' rapidly, and with damaging consequences.[12] Young people who experience a sense of exclusion from school or society seek 'belongingness' elsewhere: gangs, forms of extremism, self-harming.

Recent data from PISA indicates that the most significant factor for young people, in terms of whether they experience a sense of belonging or exclusion in school, is how they perceive their relationships with their teachers.[13] Young people want to be seen and valued for who they are, and supported. Most teachers came into teaching to do just that. However, the climate of diminishing resources and high stakes testing can be dispiriting, and adds significant pressures. The following section offers examples, drawn from research and development work, of what teachers can do to look afresh at the children and young people they work with. The ideas are based on collaborative partnerships with colleagues, understanding more about how young people experience school life, and engaging in a process of inquiry which is enjoyable and beneficial to all concerned.

Changing the dynamics of place and belonging

For a number of years, my work has focused on issues about place and belonging, in a range of countries and contexts. This has led me to develop a number of sense-making tools, such as the notion of the *Prism of Place and Belonging*. A prism refracts the light, or breaks it into different parts. The 'big picture' becomes separated out so that we can see the elements that are included within it. Prisms can also do the opposite, taking different wavelengths and condensing them into white light—akin to bringing together the elements of the school and connecting them into one narrative. By looking through the *Prism of Place and Belonging,* schools can come to see who feels included or excluded. For example, schools need to know what's happening to children and young people once they enter the school gates. Children will carry what they have experienced in the playground into the classroom.

Photo of children's work—me in the playground[14]

The following two examples, one derived from research and the other from development work, illustrate the importance of looking through the prism of place and belonging.

Researching for and about place and belonging

The research inquiry published as *School: A place where I belong?* brought together thirty-five primary and secondary school student-researchers and thirty-six teacher-researchers (newly qualified teachers) from thirteen London schools.[15] Drawing on the traditions of collaborative inquiry,[16] teachers, students and leaders asked:

- Is 'our' school a place where everyone feels they belong?
- If not, what are we going to do about it?

Research findings highlighted the tangible actions schools can take to create safe physical and emotional spaces, to build relationships, and to ensure that children feel that they are known, seen and befriended. Agency is key: your belief—as a teacher or young person—that what you do makes a difference, and that you have the skills and opportunities to do this. Engaging in the research helped create that sense of agency.[17]

The student-researchers developed their skills, found their voice and exercised their agency within their own school. This process encouraged them to recognise how

they could also exert their agency outside the school gates. Student-researchers in one school used a Worldle exercise as a way of gathering data about what belonging meant to all the students in their school.

The school leaders developed greater clarity about their role as place leaders and place-makers.[18] They became more explicit about how they could influence the learning environment, by activating the social and emotional spaces in the school, as well as the agency of staff and young people.

The teacher-researchers gained powerful insights into young people's lives, and drew on their learning to rethink their own professional practices. Through sharing their learning with colleagues, they recognised that they were part of a school, part of a place, and could shape the nature of that place, all of which developed their sense of agency—and belonging.

The benefits of the form of collaborative inquiry which underpinned School: A place where I belong? went far beyond the immediacies of the research project. We concluded, as others, that when teachers engage in this kind of progressive inquiry, they move away from swapping stories to constructing new knowledge about how to solve problems.[19] Teacher-researcher Matthew illustrates this in his story about his involvement in the research.

As a trainee teacher … you get so bogged down, and so involved in the marking which is important, planning for lessons, thinking about displays. But … one of the most important things as a teacher is to think, 'What are the needs of every single child in my classroom?' It's easy to overlook the fact that you've got 30 very different children in your class. … We were encouraged to think about whether the children in our class felt they belonged and to use research to find out who were the insiders and outsiders.

I had a lot of children from different backgrounds, from different parts of the world, who didn't have a very strong grasp of the English language, and a lot of children who were displaying traits of dyslexia. I found from the interviews that some of the children were disheartened about our reading time … So I began to think, what can I do here? What can I do to meet these children's needs, in terms of their comprehension, not just their ability to decode words? I tried a few different things … and eventually, stumbled across graphic novels. I found that the reduced text in the graphic novels allowed children to approach a much more difficult or complex story line than what was originally afforded to them. There was so much less text— and also the pictures managed to fill in the gaps.

Using the graphic novels allowed me to have mixed ability reading groups, in the same way you would have a mixed ability literature group with children learning from each other and explaining difficult concepts to each other. We couldn't have that in reading before. What the graphic novels allowed us to do was to take a book with a very strong, rich storyline, and each child would pick up different things from the storyline they could feed that back to the other children. They could learn from each other and explain things to each other. …

The children…began to investigate books and literature that weren't just within the traditional context that they understood. ***It really created a sense of belonging for them****, a real buzz that they got to read these books. I interviewed the children again. They absolutely loved it all, it had a great effect.*

As a teacher and adult, you can't look through the eyes of a child. You can try to empathise with them, but you're never going to be able to understand exactly what is going on with them, and the way they're thinking. With research, it allows you to ask children some questions that they probably haven't thought about, and that you certainly haven't thought about. That throws so much light onto their feelings.[20]

The Art of Possibilities

St Anthony's Catholic Primary School Bromley serves a diverse community, with a range of socio-economic challenges. Over a period of time, the school has worked to put belonging at the heart of school life, looking at the daily experience of school life through the *Prism of Place and Belonging*. St Anthony's is housed in an unprepossessing building but the school has made extensive use of the many 'spaces', not only to capture the work of pupils but also to display cultural artefacts and share important messages about what it means to belong at St Anthony's. Personal identity is not simply left at the school gate.

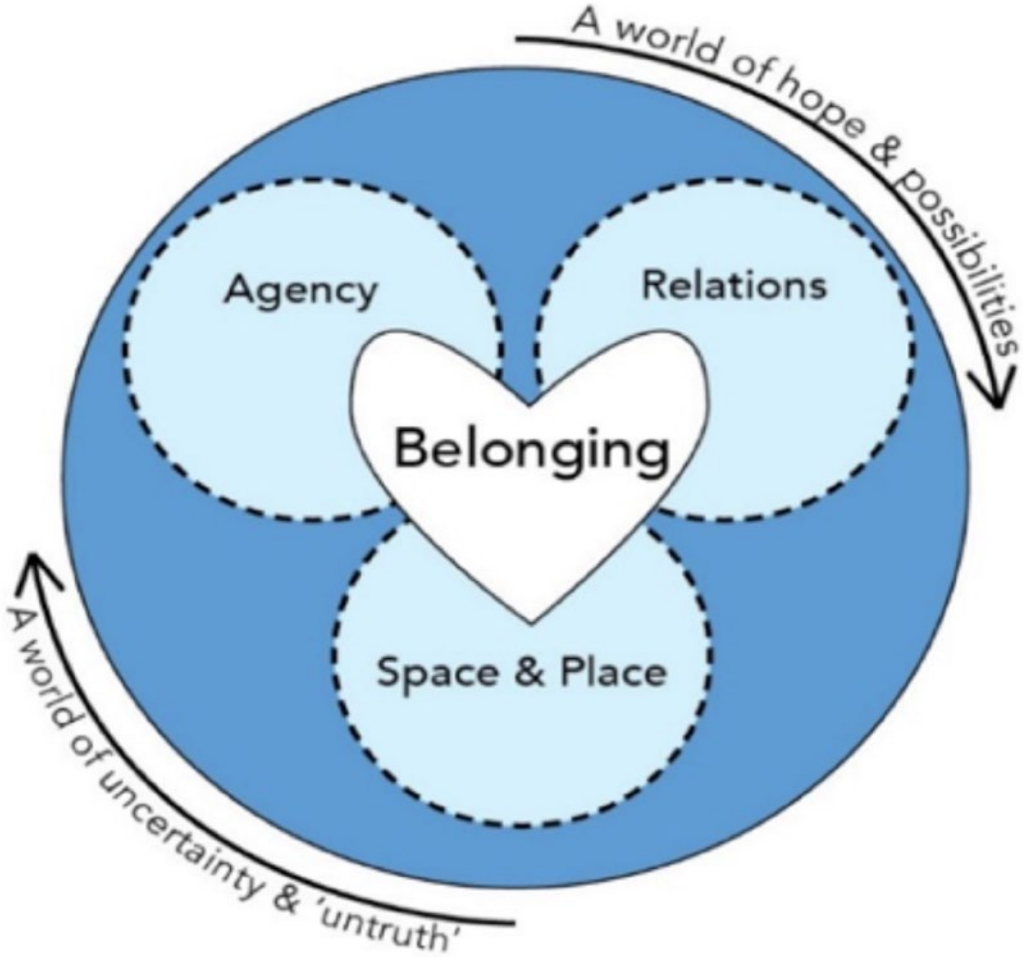
The school was supported in their journey through a two-year development project, The Art of Possibilities, and is featured in Video Series II, The Art of Possibilities.[21] The videos offer pupils' accounts of their experience of 'belonging', and they demonstrate how the leaders exercised their agency as place-leaders to activate the spaces in the school and help create a sense of belonging. Staff wellbeing is high, with a significant increase in applications for new appointments. Performance data indicates that children's learning outcomes are improving. In 2017, for example, KS1 standards increased and attainment in all subjects was above the national average. In KS2, progress in writing was above the national average and in the top 20 per cent nationally. There were no fixed exclusions.

Putting Belonging at the Heart of School Life

In this article I have tried to give a flavour of the power of belonging, and the benefits of looking at schools through the *Prism of Place and Belonging*. As the research inquiry *School: A place where I belong?* demonstrated, research engagement is an effective

place-making tool. Asking the questions—Is our school a place where everyone feels they belong?—And if not what are we going to do about it? (the St Anthony's example)—can help kick start a creative process of inquiry involving staff, students and families.

In a world of uncertainty and untruth, hope and possibilities, belonging can and should be at the heart of school-life. It's the relationships within the schools that make the difference, and the sense of agency which staff and students have to shape what is happening, as well as how the spaces and places are activated.



Belonging—The Heart of School Life

Schools which are places of belonging are great places to be—for adults and young people. They foster the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of children and young people. Staff who work there know they can make a difference.

Kathryn Riley is Professor of Urban Education, UCL, Institute of Education and an international scholar whose work bridges policy and practice. Her international experience includes heading up the World Bank's Effective Schools and Teachers Group, and projects with UNICEF and the OECD.

Kathryn's current research and development work focuses on leadership of place and the importance of creating a sense of place and belonging for young people. With DancePoet TioMolina, she is co-founder of *the Art of Possibilities* and is developing new forms of community collaboration around place and belonging, designed to harness the creativity and energy of stakeholders around common purpose.

Videos: The Videos in the Art of Possibilities Series and the booklet Place and Belonging in Schools: Unlocking Possibilities can be accessed on:

http://www.theartofpossibilities.org.uk
www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe-place-and-belonging-in-schools

Thanks and Acknowledgments: With many thanks to my research colleagues at the UCL Institute of Education, Dr Max Coates, Sol Perez Martinez, Dr Dina Mehmedbegovic, and Rhoda Furniss for their ideas and energy. Warm thanks to the school leaders, school staff and young people I have worked with for their openness and collaboration; to DancePoet Tio Molina, my creative partner in The Art of Possibilities, and Professor Karen Seashore Louis, University of Minnesota, a constant source of inspiration.

NOTES

1 McNair, A. (1944). *The report of the committee to consider the supply, recruitment and training of teachers and youth workers.* London: HMSO, p. 233.
2 Putnam, R. D. (2015). *Our kids: The American dream in crisis.* New York: Simon & Schuster.
3 The Children's Society (2017). *The Good Childhood Report.* https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/the-good-childhood-report
4 Riley, K. (2017). *Place, belonging and school leadership: Researching to make the difference.* London: Bloomsbury.
5 Yuval-Davis, N. (2006). Belonging and the politics of belonging, *Patterns of Prejudice,* 40(3), 197–214. https://doi.org/10.1080/00313220600769331
6 Flewitt, R.S. (2017). Equity and diversity through story: A multimodal perspective, in T. Cremin., R. S. Flewitt, B. Mardell & J. Swann, (Eds). *Storytelling in early childhood: enriching language, literacy, and classroom culture.* Routledge, London & New York: pp150-168.
7 OECD (2017). *PISA Results 2015* (Volume III). https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/pisa-2015-results-volume-iii_9789264273856-en
8 OECD (2013). *PISA 2012 Results in focus. What 15-year-olds know and what they can do with what they know.* Paris, France: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.
9 The Fair Education Alliance (2017). *Report Card 2016–2017.* http://www.faireducation.org.uk/report-card/ accessed 27/10/2017.
10 Ma, X. (2003). Sense of belonging to school: Can schools make a difference? *The Journal of Education Research*, 96(6), 340-349. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00220670309596617
11 Goodenow, C., & Grady, K. E. (1993). The relationship of school belonging and friends' values to academic motivation among adolescent students. *Journal of Experimental Education*, 62(1), 60–71. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220973.1993.994383; Louis, K. S., Smylie, M., & Murphy, J. (2016). Caring leadership for schools: Findings from exploratory analyses. *Education Administration Quarterly*, 52(2), 310-348. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X15627678
12 Riley, K., & Rustique-Forrester, E. (2002). *Why children lose interest in school and what we can do about it.* London: Chapman Sage.
13 OECD (2017). *PISA Results 2015* (Volume III). This analysis is supported by a review of the research evidence about 'belonging' in schools which was a meta-analysis of some 51 studies, involving 67,000 plus secondary school students: Allen, K., Kern, P., Vella-Brodrick, D., & Hattie, J. & Waters, L. (2018). What schools need to know about belonging: A meta-analysis. *Educational Psychology Review*, 30 (1), 1-34. doi: 10.1007/s10684-016-9389-8
14 Riley, 2017, p. 95.
15 Riley, 2017.
16 Timperley, H., & Earl, L. (2011, January 4-7). Professional learning in State of the Art—Teacher Effectiveness and Professional Learning. Paper presented at the 24th International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement, Limassol, Cyprus. http://www.icsei.net/icsei2011/State_of_the_art/State_of_the_art_Session_B.pdf.
17 Riley, 2017; Riley, K., Coates, M., & Martinez, S. P. (2018). *Place and belonging in schools: Unlocking possibilities.* London: UCL Institute of Education. www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/departments-centres/centres/london-centre-for-leadership-in-learning
18 Riley, K. (2013). *Leadership of place: Stories from the US, UK & South Africa.* London, Bloomsbury.
19 Timperley & Earl 2011, p. 23
20 Riley, 2017, pp. 83-84.
21 The Art of Possibilities is co-led by Professor Kathryn Riley and DancePoet TioMolina. Activities at St Anthony's included workshops with staff, training children to be researchers, using poetry and music to help create a sense of belonging. http://www.theartofpossibilities.org.uk

Knowledge trails

1. **Re-Creating Schools as Places of Belonging: The Art of Possibilities**
   https://library.teachingtimes.com/articles/pdt192-schools-as-places-of-belonging
   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?

2. **Circle of Friends**
   http://library.teachingtimes.com/articles/circle-friends-ttc4
   Children with emotional and behavioural difficulties can be helped to think and feel in a different way through a 'circle of friends'. Bob Burden and Gill Taylor report on some illuminating research.