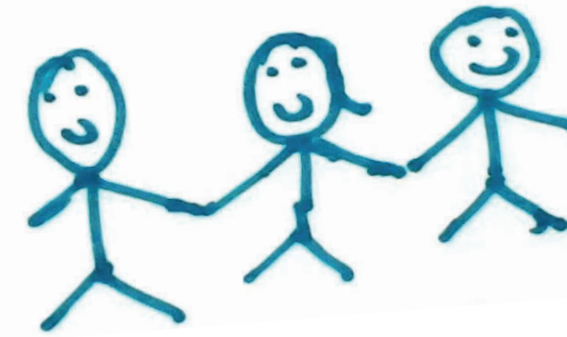
Institute of Education

UCL

CROSS-SECTOR & INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES ON SCHOOL BELONGING & EXCLUSION: A DISCUSSION DOCUMENT

WHAT WE KNOW; WHAT WE NEED TO KNOW; AND WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE



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The Art of Possibilities

OCT 2020

A rapid increase in rates of exclusion, alienation, and a sense of 'not' belonging in school has led to mounting concerns about the mental health, well-being and life chances of children and young people. Covid-19 adds to the complexity and intensity of these challenges, reinforcing the importance of looking at this critical social policy issue afresh.

This discussion document reports on findings from the first phase of a school-focused inquiry on belonging and exclusion. It offers a contemporary account of these issues through the Covid-19 lens, and points to the need for greater policy coherence; a positive articulation of school belonging; and intentional and connected policies and practices within schools and across local and national systems.

The Inquiry began in late 2019 when eight partner Institutions joined an UCL-Institute of Education team in a cross-sector collaborative initiative aimed at generating greater understanding about these issues. The initiative was designed to:

- Draw together the silos of knowledge about the impact of exclusion, disaffection and alienation on children and young people around one broader shared and positive narrative - that of 'belonging';
- Highlight the interventions and practices which appear to be successful in creating schools as places of belonging and inclusion;
- Identify the system wide issues and implications for policy and practice.

Each partner institution involved in the collaboration has brought its own distinctive perspective and expertise to the table, as is illustrated here:

Organisation/ Institution	Focus
The Difference Refugee Support Network	Impact on the ground: The issues for those young people and their families who are excluded or marginalised, or whose situations are tenuous, for example, as recent arrivals to the UK.
Mulberry School for Girls, Tower Hamlets Teach First The National Education Union	Schools: The ways in which schools and their leaders can respond to the challenges in more inclusive ways, and harness the creativity and energy of staff, young people, and families.
Telford and Wrekin Council The Education Policy Institute	Policy and practice at national and local levels: The challenges and opportunities of supporting school systems and the national policy dilemmas which need to be addressed.
Institute of Health Sciences Education – BARTS, and The London, Community Based Medical Education	Health and mental well-being: The health consequences of a sense of exclusion and alienation on children and young people.

In this discussion document we report on three workshops held with partner institutions between March and July 2020: the first face to face, and the other two virtual. Absent from our discussions were the perspectives and voices of young people, as their involvement became inoperable during the Pandemic.

We hope the ideas presented here will be a helpful contribution to the important debate about how to develop more inclusive practices, and create the conditions for school belonging.

The discussion document is organised as follows:

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[1]In the second phase of the Inquiry, we aim to use a series of videos to bring young people's views into the frame.

1. SETTING THE SCENE

The impetus for this Inquiry sprang from concerns about rising rates of exclusion, loneliness, alienation and 'not' belonging, and the impact of this on young people and society. In this introduction, we highlight some of the key contextual factors and data related to these issues, drawing on a range of sources listed in Appendix I.

In framing the Inquiry, we sought to look at the interconnections between what young people experience in their schools and their lives beyond the school gates. Our intention was to find out more about:

(i) The 'unexplained' reasons why pupils exit schools and what can be done to remedy this;

(ii) The impact of alienation and exclusion and a loss of identity on young people on the margins;

(iii) The significance of their relationships with teachers and school staff;

(iv) The ways in which school leaders can use their mediating force to shape the culture of the school, connect to communities and encourage a sense of inclusion and belonging;

(v) The key policy drivers needed to create a climate of inclusion and belonging.

The global context for this Inquiry is one of displacement and upheaval, with more people exiled and homeless than at any time since the end of that 1939-45 War. This global reality reinforces the importance of place and belonging. Covid-19 takes issues of belonging to a new level.

For many children and young people today, home and community are not fixed and schools represent one of the few points of continuity and stability in their lives. Yet across OECD countries, young people's sense of belonging in school is declining, with more than 1 in 4 feeling that they do not belong. Despite the evidence that a positive sense of belonging in school is linked to academic outcomes, student motivation and absenteeism and other positive social outcomes, such as health and well-being, for a growing number of young people, schools are not places where they feel they belong.

Belonging is a relational, cultural, geographic, and dynamic concept. It is that sense of being somewhere where you can be confident that you will fit in and feel safe in your identity: a feeling of being at home in a place and of being valued. Belonging can shift rapidly into 'not belonging', with damaging consequences for individuals and society.

In the UK, young people from socio-economically disadvantaged communities are twice as likely as their more affluent peers to feel that they do not belong and four times more likely to be excluded from school. Young people of Afro-Caribbean heritage and those with special educational needs are also more likely to be excluded. There is growing evidence that young people who experience a feeling of exclusion from school or society seek 'belongingness' elsewhere: finding it through forms of extremism, self-harming, gang membership.

As the Coronavirus crept up us in 2020, the picture which emerged was one of divisions: with families and communities on the margins of society finding themselves most exposed to its impact. Lockdown and the closure of schools have reinforced the centrality of schools in the lives of young people, and the importance of school as a place of belonging and agency.

In July 2020, The Children's Society published its 'lockdown' review which indicated that the decline in young people's sense of happiness which they had noted over recent years was continuing. One in five children aged 10-17 in the UK (over one million children) described themselves as being unhappy with their lives during lockdown. They had particular regrets about the ways in which the Pandemic had reduced the choices they could make in their lives.

In the next section of the document we draw on the experiences of partner institutions to reflect on:

- **Why belonging is important today;**
- **Which groups of children and young people seem to be losing out; and**
- **What drives a sense of belonging or exclusion in school?**

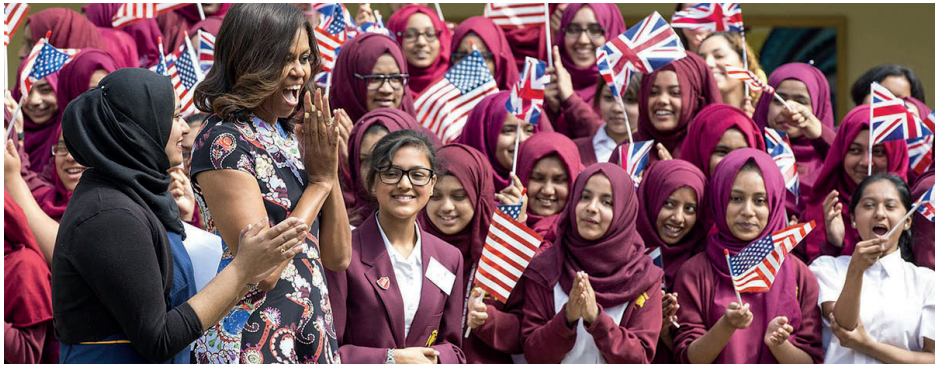
2. BELONGING AND 'NOT' BELONGING

Why is belonging important today and who is losing out?

The March 2020 workshop was hosted by Mulberry School for Girls. Global concerns about the Corona Virus and the first wave of uncertainty generated a unique scenario for this initial workshop. Transportation was beginning to be interrupted, affecting buses, tubes, trains. Symbolically, while the spirit of the workshop was about place, belonging and sharing expertise, the media discourse was about the need for social isolation to reduce the spread of the virus.

Mulberry School itself held its own symbolic significance as a venue. Entering the school, it is impossible to miss the iconic and imaginative 'Tardis', the blue police box, representing the spaceship of the classic BBC series Doctor Who. Around the school, there are the celebrations of important women: the first female doctor, the actress and campaigner Angelina Jolie, the former first lady of the United States Michele Obama , pictured here alongside Mulberry students and staff. The message is both simple and ambitious: the school is a space of powerful learning in which women are highly visible. This message provided us with a good starting point for thinking about schools as places of belonging and possibilities.

Contributors had not met before the Inquiry but all share a passion for improving the health, wellbeing and learning opportunities of all children. We began our time together by exploring the importance of a sense of place and belonging today in our uncertain world. Table I provides a synthesis of the participants' views about the range of social and economic factors related to belonging and exclusion, and the groups who are losing out.



[2]Photo taken from the School website http://www.mulberryschoolforgirls.org/

[3]The accounts take a narrative approach, drawing on the central moments of the workshop. The accounts presented here draw on data, mainly from notetaking during range of social and economic factors related to belonging and exclusion, and the groups who are losing out.

Table I: Why is belonging important today and who is losing out?

Why now?	Who is losing out?
• Increased poverty and austerity	• Families with increased poverty
• Funding cuts in Education – especially the Arts – has served to narrow the curriculum	• Looked after children in social care
• Growing issues around mental health	• Children with special educational needs
• Social media and online influences creating expectations and pressures	• Black and ethnic minority young people
• Rise of knife crime and street gangs (linked to cuts in funding to local authority services and support for young people)	• Young people with mental health issues
• Increasing inequality and poor and limited housing	• Single parent families and young carers
• The most vulnerable students are the most likely to be excluded	• Adolescents going through puberty who are susceptible to grooming
• Very poor school and life outcomes for some students	• Young people who are not exposed to enough diversity and to different perspectives
• Brexit and the language of the 'other' (Immigrant / Refugee/ Windrush generation) which creates divisions	• Gender-fluid groups from within the LGBT communities
	• Children with adverse childhood experiences
	• Children with 'needs' that we neither like nor recognise and therefore don't value
	• Children whose needs are unknown

the workshop, assisted by audio recordings, pictures, video and the analysis of the products created by the participants.

2. BELONGING AND 'NOT' BELONGING

What drives a sense of belonging or exclusion in school?

We used a drawing exercise to explore participants' perceptions about young people's sense of belonging or 'not' belonging in school. Their illustrations are wide-ranging and exemplify social, political, and cultural issues.

Belonging is about acknowledging difference: Illustration I.

When inclusion is treated as an individual experience and responsibility transferred to a specific department or specialist, it can become fragmented, target-oriented and excluding (Right hand column).

Belonging needs to be integrated into the narrative and language of the school. Schools which are places of belonging are characterised by an appreciation of difference and diversity, as is shown by the different colours which come together to make a school community (Left-hand column).

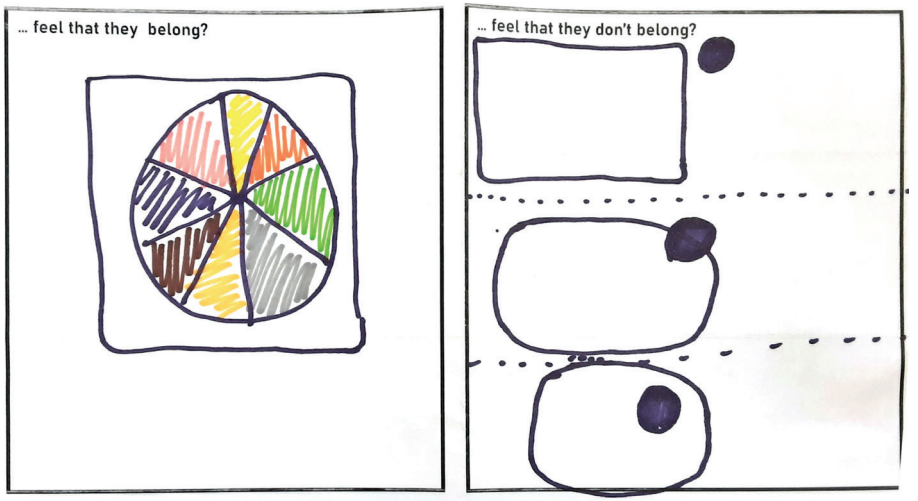


Illustration 1

Schools need to recognise the realities of young people's lives. Children from refugee families, for example, face specific language and cultural barriers and challenges. In some instances, geographical mobility creates difficulties for them in establishing meaningful personal relationship with other students and in being understood and respected by teachers. Young people who live in unsafe environments, homes, and neighbourhoods, need to feel safe in school and safe in their relationships with their staff and peers.

Exclusion happens in many ways: Illustration 2.

Depending on family circumstances, menstruation cycles can lead to a young woman feeling that "I do not belong in school when I am having my period". Schools need to talk about these issues because menstruation has an impact on attendance and absenteeism.

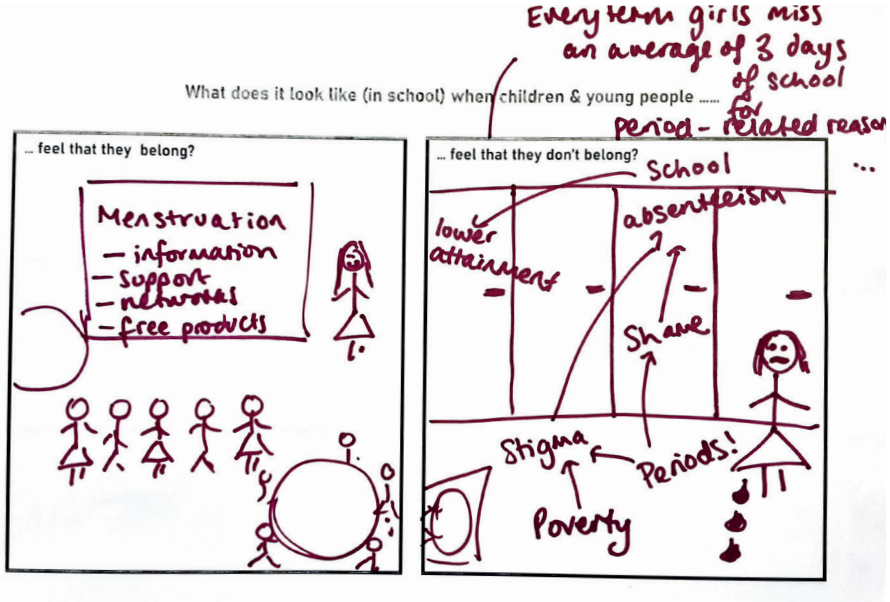


Illustration 2

[4]The prompt for the exercise was: What does it look like (in school) when children & young people... *feel that they belong? / feel that they don't belong?*

2. BELONGING AND 'NOT' BELONGING

What drives a sense of belonging or exclusion in school?

Belonging is about communication: Illustration 3.

Schools need to be more alert and responsive to what is happening to their students and to the potential harm of bullying. Hurtful relationships can lead to feelings of exclusion or isolation or to the development of risky coping strategies, including self-harm and obesity.

Both verbal and non-verbal communication are central in creating a sense of belonging. Optimistic and positive reinforcement increases students' wellbeing, while "branding" can create a sense of negative identity.

Illustration 3

Belonging needs to be embedded in the curriculum: Illustration 4.

The central role of a rich curriculum is to create spaces that respect the interest and capacities of every student. The curriculum needs to be a space of respect.

However, it has become too narrow and needs to be widened. The 'Arts' enables diverse students to find a place, establishing meaningful relationships with other students, and learn and grow.

Illustration 4

[4]The prompt for the exercise was: What does it look like (in school) when children & young people..... feel that they belong? / feel that they don't belong?

3. THE CHANGING REALITY: COVID-19

The challenges of the crisis

Workshops 2 and 3 were held virtually in May and July 2020. The focus was on the challenges of the crisis, as well as the opportunities revealed by the Pandemic. The challenges are summarised in Diagram I.

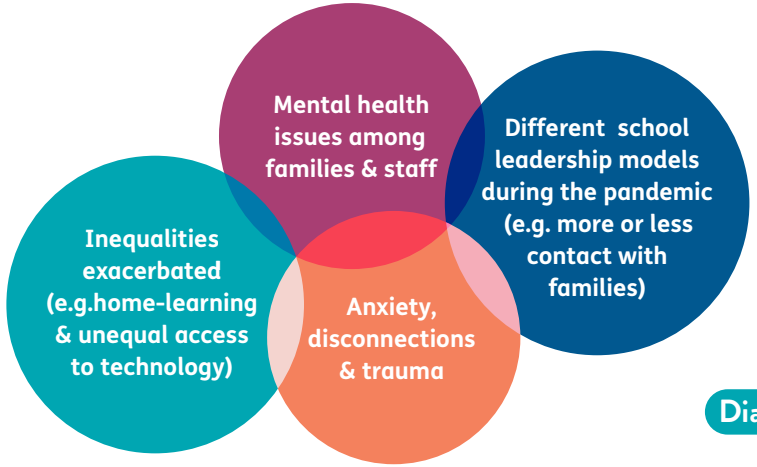


Diagram 1

The challenges for those involved in decision-making could be framed within two powerful sets of emotions: anxiety and connectivity.

Anxiety was in the air for everyone. Those responsible for the wellbeing and education of young people had to manage the anxieties of others and work with entirely new models, in highly charged day-to-day contexts of insecurity, change and trauma.

Connectivity is key to us as human beings. Connections and relationships are usually made when people are in the same 'place' as each other. When this is not possible, as has been the case in the Pandemic, connectivity can be difficult to achieve.

The language of 'vulnerability' or the language of 'belonging'?

There was a shared concern about the emergence of a deficit language. The term 'remedial programmes', for example, were used as an apparent corrective for the loss of learning opportunities. It implied some weakness or fault on the part of young people, as did the term 'lost generation'.

The word *'vulnerable'* was a term that could not be completely avoided. It was being used to express the many ways in which children and young people may have been affected by the impact of the Pandemic and needed to be problematized. It had different meanings in different sectors, and at different times, and was an inadequate tool for identifying children's needs as it implied helplessness or weakness.

The government uses it as a label to identify children who are supposed to have very special needs, and that is the basis for stigma. We need to recognise the universal vulnerability of our children; they are all potentially vulnerable.

As a form of 'labelling' and 'singling out', it separated discreet groups of 'vulnerable students' from their peers, in ways that exposed them and reduced their confidence. As one contributor reflected, children and young people with special educational needs:

...don't want to be called vulnerable and if they are, they tend to feel happier at home than at the school which poses important challenges to schools.

Similarly, young people from refugee families do not want to be reminded of their 'problems':

These are children who have already survived some very difficult experiences. We don't want to label them and make them feel less confident.

These feelings of being afraid, alone, trapped and not belonging are shown in Illustration 5.

'Not' belonging is feeling afraid and alone: Illustration 5:

This discussion about terminology serves as a reminder of the importance of language. If school are to become places of belonging for everybody, they need to build a language that reflects inclusivity, rather than one which labels and separates.

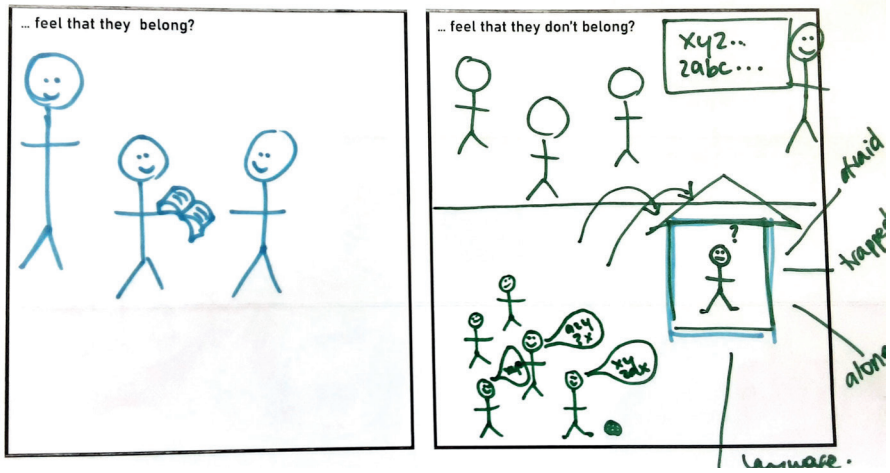


Illustration 5

3. THE CHANGING REALITY: COVID-19

The opportunities revealed by the Pandemic

The Pandemic had also provided opportunities for leaders and decision-makers, as is summarised in Diagram 2, particularly around social relationships and connectivity.

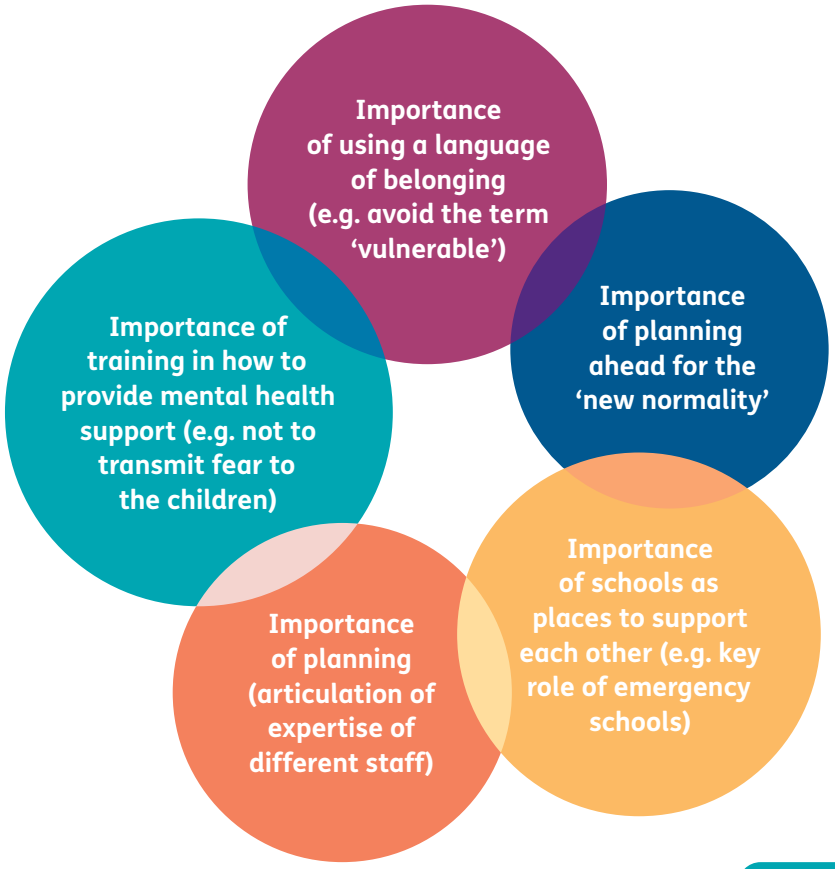


Diagram 2

Social relationships: The first opportunity has been to restore, maintain and build and relationships between adults, adults and children, and between children. This strengthening of relationships was illustrated by the positive experience of one group of students who had attended an emergency school throughout the lockdown period.

(The students) have been treated by members of staff as colleagues. We have analysed the impact of this on their sense of belonging, and they are happy because they feel that they are contributing and that are valued because of that. There is a girl who usually makes a lot of trouble ... and now she looks in a very different state of mind, she looks very healthy. This has had an effect on the psychology of the group: they are not seen as outsiders ... and have particularly benefited from their experience in the emergency school.

Connectivity: The second set of possibilities lay in the opportunity which schools and policymakers had to understand wider issues, such as the importance of schools as places of (mental) security.

Mental health issues during the pandemic are seen as disconnected from social conditions (e.g. lack of funding, domestic violence, etc). There is a medicalisation of the diagnosis by a model that pretends objectivity. If someone is not coping as you think they should do, you just medicalise the diagnosis. We need a space of security, and this is not necessarily at home, it might be the school

Some schools had taken the opportunity to expand their understanding about the nature and impact of trauma on the wider community. However, addressing trauma was a significant and ongoing issue.

Covid is a universally shared experience but is lived differently by each individual. For example, how to think about big losses? There are different ways of grieving, but there are common emotional responses to loss and grief: shock, disbelief, burdening oneself (I could have done better). It is an emotional cluster. Schools need to know how to deal with trauma. They need to learn how to say: 'you will always feel this if you have loss someone'.

4. RETURNING TO SCHOOL

What are the challenges of returning to school?

As schools return in a climate of continuing uncertainty and ever-changing directives about practice, our contributors recognised that they must also contend with a range of additional uncertainties and challenges. These include:

- **How pupils thought their school had responded to the pandemic**

Schools have made varying degrees of effort to keep in contact with their students and have had different perspectives on managing connections. Some have been very engaged (holding conversations, setting and marking work, keeping connections and relationships flowing), while others have had more limited contact with their students. When young people return to school, some might feel disappointed in the commitment of their schools towards them, while others will feel acknowledged and recognised.

- **The 'transition' gap**

Lockdown has created challenges for the significant points of transition in young people's lives. For example, children leaving primary school have not had the time to say goodbye to their friends before moving on to secondary school, creating issues about closure and connections.

- **Mental health issues**

Although some adults and young people have benefited from staying at home during lockdown, there are others for whom existing mental health issues have become exacerbated, especially among children with dysfunctional families. Not having choices or a private space in which to be with people from their age has been particularly problematic for many young people. Lockdown has posed specific mental health issues for refugee children and young people, mirroring experiences they had already encountered.

- **Inequalities**

Lockdown has also widened inequalities. The experiences of young people from refugee families illustrate this point. Some have faced difficulties in continuing their learning in their homes. For example, they are unlikely to have had the technology to learn remotely (e.g. a laptop and/or internet connection), or their carers may not have the necessary skills to support them in English.

What is the 'new' normality?

There was also a recognition that schools have to contend with the pressure to conform to a national message of 'business as usual'. This was seen by contributors as a return to a state of unacceptable levels of exclusion and alienation:

... things won't be normal

... we need a different kind of normal

... something of that word 'normalising', seems wrong.

Contributors emphasised the importance of looking through 'the lens of the coronavirus' to create a 'new normality'.

We think that there will be a lot of behaviour issues when schools open again. In this scenario, all the parts need to act together.

The role of headteachers was critical: they needed to curate the space to which the students were returning. While the logistics of social distancing and structuring the learning were vital, equally important was preparing the school as a space of support (which acknowledged the mental and emotional issues): a place for a new sense of togetherness.

There will be an adjustment again, after having been isolated, and there will be fear as well to catch Covid-19. The first-time schools come together will be not be so much about learning as about resettlement and recovering. The students need to be in a good state of mind to learn. We don't need Ofsted inspectors at school. Schools will be working with children to get back to the moment they were, to be happy and ready to learn. Re-settle will be the priority in the autumn term.

Reassurance was important, as much for staff and families, as children and young people. If staff did not feel safe and secure, they would transmit their fears to the children. If children did not feel safe and secure, and had experienced significant pressures during lockdown, a negative narrative would continue.

Children and young people needed to experience school as a place of welcome, safety, and belonging where diversity is valued and celebrated and the 'language of belonging' is an everyday reality.

4. RETURNING TO SCHOOL

A ‘place of belonging’ is populated by various ideas and people, as is shown in Illustration 6. Belonging is mostly about people and the place where your friends are.

School as a place, needs to be consciously created, supported, and maintained by systems that allow honest and dynamic communication.

This communication is characterised by the capacity to listen. A central characteristic of a school where you do not belong is the lack of listening skills, where (as the drawing perfectly captures) students just want to run away.

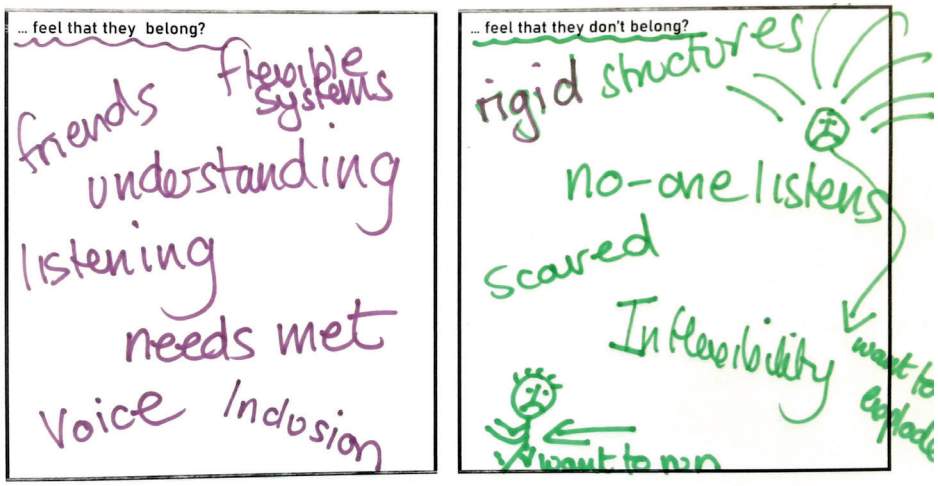


Illustration 6

Schools which are places of belonging are at the centre of their community, as Diagram 3 illustrates.

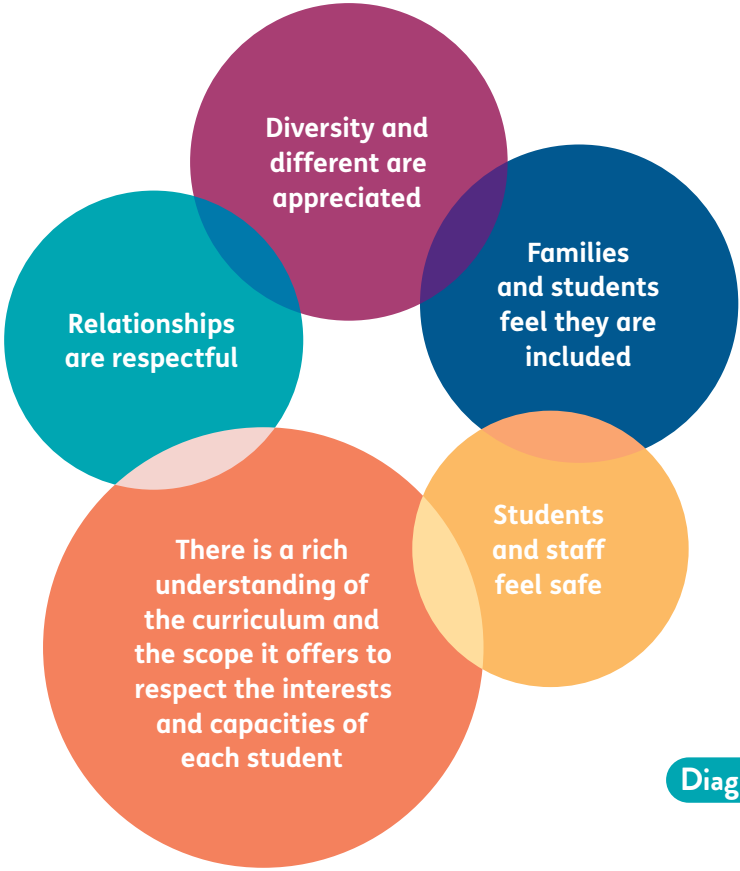


Diagram 3

5. RECONFIGURING WHAT IS TO WHAT MIGHT BE

> ***"We have to be careful to manage children's return to school and never underestimate again the role of schools in children's lives"***

Much has changed for all of us during the Pandemic. Looking through the Covid-19 lens in the collaborative endeavour which has been part of the inquiry has sharpened our perspective on belonging and exclusion, reminding us of the urgency and centrality of these issues in the lives of young people. We begin this final section with two broad observations about past realities and future possibilities before moving on to join the dots.

Observation I: Past Realities

Despite the wealth of evidence about the scale and impact of disaffection, national government's response to growing levels of exclusion and alienation has been worryingly weak. There has been little recognition of the impact of exclusion and a sense of 'not' belonging on individuals and their families, and on society. 'Joined up' government–led policy discussions about these issues have been sporadic: acknowledgement of societal impact rare. The broader picture of exclusion and alienation has not fitted into a political narrative which has reified individualism and competition.

Observation II: Future

The experience of Covid-19 has thrown a spotlight on the lives of children and young people. It provides the spur needed for a joined-up approach which focuses on the power and potential of schools to help generate possibilities, and the role of school systems in creating the conditions for this to happen. As one of our contributors observed, we must *"never underestimate again the role of schools in children's lives".*

Joining the dots

Joining the dots is not a set of recommendations for policy and practice but something of a road map which has two elements:

- **The Cycle of Connectivity':** A conceptual framework about the ingredients needed to create schools as places of belonging;
- **A System Circle:** A way of identifying the potential points of intervention at the different levels of the system (national, local, and school) and the aspirations.

The 'Cycle of Connectivity'

The notion of the 'Cycle of Connectivity' (Diagram 4) emerges not only from this Inquiry but also from research undertaken with the National Education Union (Riley, Coates & Allen, 2020); and a collaborative partnership of local authorities and headteachers (Riley & Mendoza, 2020). The Cycle is about an intentional and consistent approach that connects policy and practice. Such an approach needs to be underpinned by compassion and a language of belonging and possibilities.

A sense of belonging is at the heart of the Cycle and is manifested in relationships at all levels. Within schools, this can be seen in the ways in which staff and students talk to, and about, each other. Staff and students feel they belong. They are heard and seen for who they are. They have a sense of agency.

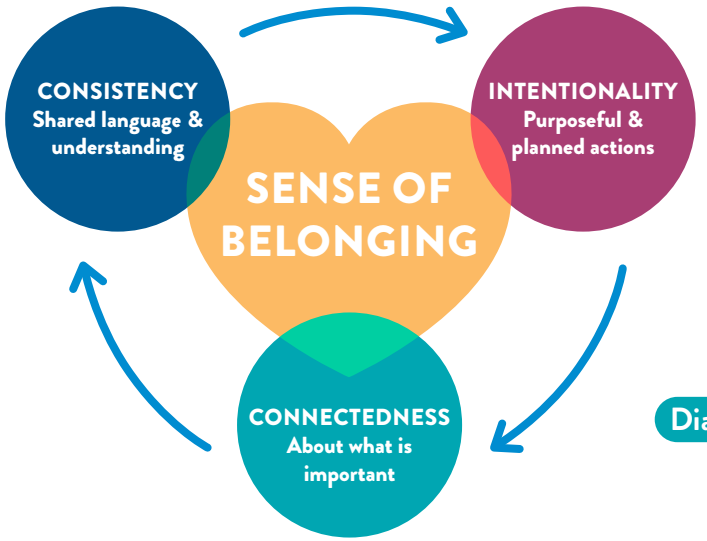


Diagram 4

5. RECONFIGURING WHAT IS TO WHAT MIGHT BE

- **Intentionality:**
  This means purposeful and positive interventions (not one-off reactions) that are understood across schools and school systems.
- **Connectedness:**
  Connectedness is about ensuring that the actions taken are understood and valued. When 'connectedness' is working, local school systems understand their role in the national framework. Within schools, staff, children, and young people perceive the school, and what goes on there, as being meaningful and important to them.
- **Consistency:**
  There is a mutual understanding of what matters at all levels of the system and a shared language and understanding for policymakers and practitioners. School leaders, staff, children, and families speak about what goes on in the same way.

A System Circle:

Diagram 5: 'A System Circle – Place & Belonging as a Connected Approach' identifies the potential points of intervention at national, local, and school system levels.

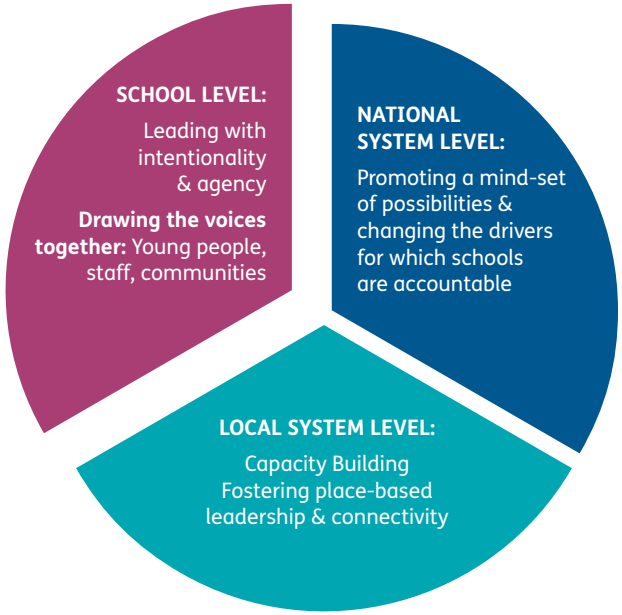


Diagram 5

Table 2: What Matters

	Actions needed	What research tells us
National system level	Promoting a mind-set of possibilities and changing the drivers for which schools are accountable from the transactional (here are the results your students need to get) to the aspirational (here is how your students can fulfil themselves and contribute to society).	• Creating belonging as an intentional and purposeful practice from individual to system level has promise of a robust approach. • Fostering belonging for otherwise invisible children prone to prolonged absences can be improved through technological advances.
Local system level	Developing the capacity of local leaders, staff in schools and local agencies, and fostering forms of place-based leadership which recognise the distinctiveness of localities, connect schools and communities, and enable young people to have their voice heard.	• Belonging as an integrated strategy for comprehensive and system-level change is being developed in several localities, as a connected and broad approach: a shared agenda. • There is a growing number of examples of increasing a sense of belonging through targeted group interventions and changes of culture and practice at school and system level.
School level	Recognizing the importance of place-based, compassionate, and intentional leadership aimed at enacting the agency of staff and young people, and drawing the voices of young people, staff, and communities together.	• The school is a key site for fostering belonging. However, this requires a sense of intention, purpose, and a commitment to connectedness. • It is as important for staff as young people to experience a sense of belonging in school. • Schools where behaviour is poor, and where responses to behaviour are punitive, have an impact on staff as well as student well-being.

5. RECONFIGURING WHAT IS TO WHAT MIGHT BE

We live in difficult and uncertain times. Looking back, too many young people have felt alienated from school life. There have been disconnections between national policies and assumptions and schools' practices and beliefs. Looking to the future, schools can and should be places of welcome and possibility

We live in difficult and uncertain times. Looking back, too many young people have felt alienated from school life. There have been disconnections between national policies and assumptions and schools' practices and beliefs. Looking to the future, schools can and should be places of welcome and possibility, as is shown in Illustration 7.

The changes in policy and practice needed to make this happen are far from insurmountable. The potential gains are incalculable. This discussion document is presented as a contribution to understanding how this can happen.

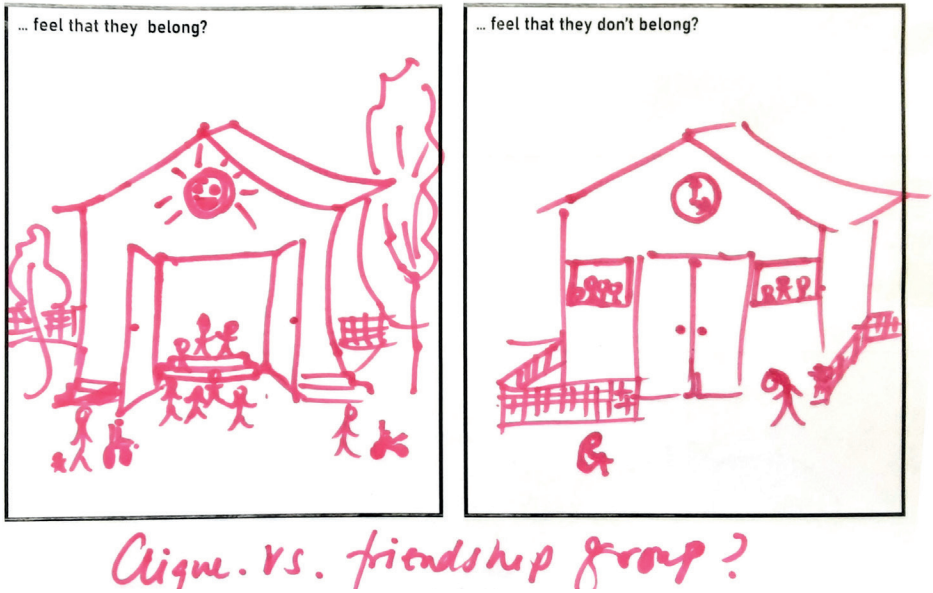


Illustration 7

APPENDIX 1: KEY SOURCES & REVIEWS

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THE RESEARCH TEAM

Professor Kathryn Riley, Professor of Urban Education, UCL, Institute of Education is an international scholar whose work bridges policy and practice. With DancePoet TioMolina, she is co-founder of the Art of Possibilities, working with schools and communities to develop new forms of collaboration and to help create schools as place of belonging. Kathryn began in education as a volunteer teacher in Eritrea, before teaching in inner-city schools and holding political office - as an elected member of the Inner London Education Authority (the ILEA) - and working as a local authority Chief Officer. Her international experience has included heading up the World Bank's Effective Schools and Teachers Group in Washington and projects with UNICEF and the OECD.

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Dr Manuela Mendoza did her PhD in Sociology of Education at UCL, Institute of Education. In her thesis she explored the views of families, headteachers, and teachers in relation to the potentialities and challenges for socially diverse schools to become places of belonging for all. She is also a researcher at the Centre for the Study of Educational Policies and Practices (CEPPE), in Chile, and has conducted research in schools for more than ten years. She is currently supporting a UCL Innovation Project on inclusion and belonging.

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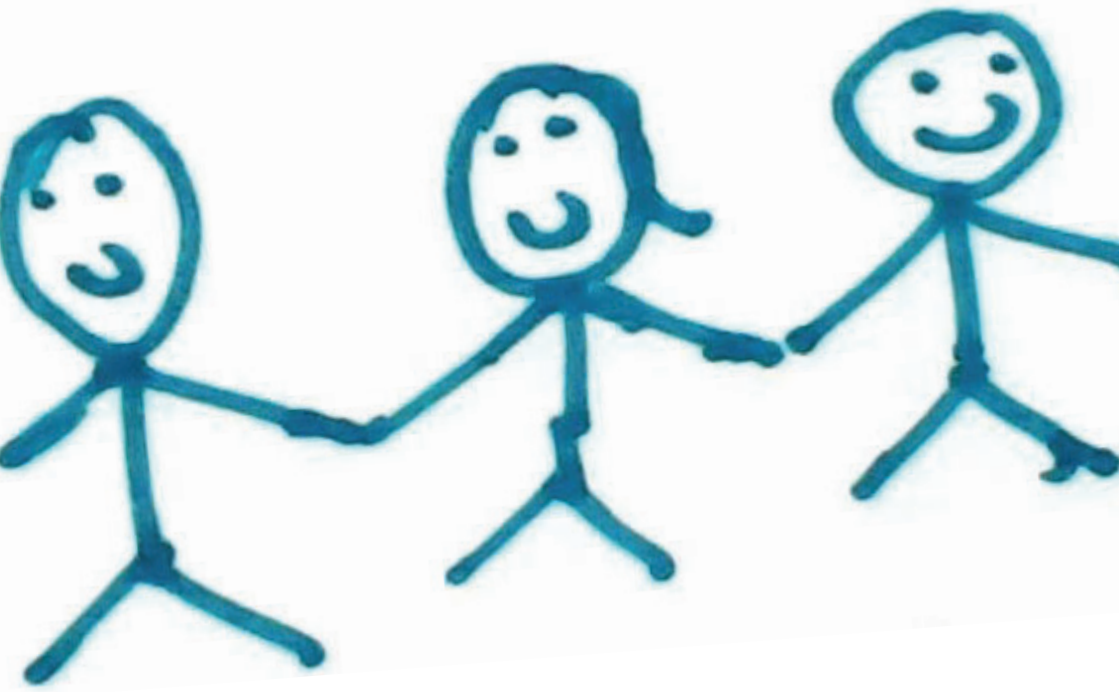
Dr Sergio Galdames did his PhD in Education at UCL, Institute of education. Sergio's work has explored the professional and personal journey of school leaders. His particular focus has been on how millennial leaders make sense of their role as headteachers in creating learning opportunities to all children. He is currently a researcher at the Leadership Centre "Lideres Educativos PUCV" in Chile and an academic advisor for the Aconcagua Research Centre.



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