# PLACE AND BELONGING IN SCHOOL:
## WHY IT MATTERS TODAY
### CASE STUDIES

The Art of Possibilities

Institute of Education

**UCL**

national education union

# Schools matter

Our world is at a turning point, a moment of transformation. Covid 19 has exposed the divisions within and across society. It has also taught us some important lessons:

▌ That wisdom and compassion help build connections and communities.

▌ That our schools matter...... and

▌ That they need to be places of belonging

> Belonging' is that sense of being somewhere you can be confident that you will fit in and be safe in your identity: a feeling of being at home in a place.

## Illustration I: 'I belong here'



In this report we offer findings from a small-scale research inquiry about schools as places of belonging. The Inquiry was commissioned by the National Education Union (NEU) with the aim of bringing to light school-wide approaches that appear to be having positive outcomes for young people, their families and school communities. The context for the Inquiry was one of growing concerns about the rapid increase in rates of exclusion, alienation, and a sense of 'not' belonging in school, and the impact of this on young people's well-being, mental health and life chances.

**The Inquiry involved:**

▌ A series of school-based case-studies: the focus of this report;

▌ A review of some of the relevant literature: this is published separately (1).

We began the Inquiry in late 2019 and were part way through when the Coronavirus took over and 'lockdown' became our contemporary reality. Day-to-day life as we knew it came to a standstill. Evidence slowly emerged that some groups and families had found themselves more exposed to the impact of the Virus than others. As events unfolded, the place called 'school' became recognized as being even more central in the lives of young people.

This report is about the importance of schools as places of belonging. The child's illustration (Illustration I) is a pre-Covid drawing and is taken from the research reported here. The date is February 2020. The caption reads, 'I belong here'. The drawing is a vivid depiction of what it feels like when a young person experiences their school as a place of belonging and enters into the joys of school life with eager anticipation.

In reporting on the research, we offer examples of how intentional whole-school practice can help create a climate of welcome and belonging in school. A purposeful approach which brings everyone on board, enriches the lives of all concerned and sets the school on a positive and upward trajectory. The report illustrates what is possible - even in the most challenging of contexts - and how rewarding and joyful this is.

We hope you find the research and report helpful and enjoyable. We would love to hear what you think about it.

# Starting points

Research has a lot to teach us about the growing problems of exclusion, alienation, and feelings of 'not belonging' in school, as well as the consequences for young people and society. Research studies have also revealed much about the positive benefits and impact of a sense of belonging in school for young people and adults. Table I highlights some of the key research data (2, 3 & 4).

## Table I: The Research Story

### The Belonging Challenge

- 1 in 4 young people feel they do not belong in school: a figure which is rising.

- Children from disadvantaged communities are twice as likely as their more advantaged peers to feel they don't belong and four times more likely to be excluded.

- Black Caribbean and special educational needs children are more likely to be excluded than their peers.

- Young people who experience a sense of exclusion from school or society seek 'belongingness' elsewhere.

### The Belonging Opportunity

A sense of belonging has been linked to:

- ✔ Increased student motivation.

- ✔ Increased staff well-being, motivation and retention.

- ✔ Reductions in student absenteeism.

- ✔ Other positive social outcomes e.g. health and well-being.

- ✔ Improved academic achievement.

- ✔ A growing sense of agency in students and staff: a belief that they can make a difference.

# Starting points

Our broad aim in embarking on this Inquiry was to find out what was working in schools, rather than what was not. We wanted to discover more about how to make the difference.

- What were the leaders doing?

- How did staff view what was happening and their role in it?

- How did the children and young people experience school life?

- What had behaviour policies got to do with this?

- How did the schools bring parents and communities on board and help them feel they belonged?

We used a wide range of networks to identify potential case-study schools and to ensure a geographical spread across England. We came up with a long list of approximately 15 schools and chose 4 primary and 2 secondary schools serving a range of communities, all facing significant challenges. In making our final selection, we looked for **intentional** whole-school practice, as well as **evidence** that the school was on an upward trajectory. Sadly, we missed out on the fieldwork in one of the secondary schools. We interviewed the headteachers from the five remaining schools, worked with 49 teachers and teaching assistants in group sessions, and 79 children and young people, also in group sessions. In total we met with 133 young people and adults: see Table 2.

## Table 2: Our School Visits

|  | Parklands Primary, Leeds | Hargrave Primary, Islington | Flakefleet Primary, Fleetwood | Frederick Bird Primary, Coventry | Helston Community College, Cornwall |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Headteacher | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Staff | 12 | 14 | 8 | 7 | 8 |
| Children & young people | 24 | 18 | 16 | 14 | 17 |

In framing and analysing the case-studies and the literature review, we have drawn on outcomes from previous work on place and belonging and the causes, dynamics and impact of pupil disaffection and exclusion (2, 3 &4). We have also included some additional information from St Anthony's Catholic Primary, Bromley which was part of an extended project on place and belonging reported elsewhere (5). A series of videos about the school is also available (6).

Carrying out the case studies was a joyous undertaking. We were welcomed into the schools and found attitudes and approaches which aim to put children and young people at the heart of the school endeavour. This is not to suggest that the schools we visited are perfect! Each school has its own journey which may at times be rocky. However, we found them to be places of enjoyment, learning – and belonging.

# Our findings

In sharing the findings with you we have organised our thinking around three interconnected themes. Our reason for doing this is to show how different elements of what schools do – and how the people in those schools relate to each other - are linked. This approach helps demonstrate the importance of intentional whole-school practice which everyone understands and signs up to.

The three themes are as follows:

- **Leadership:** Leadership shapes culture.

- **Culture:** Culture shapes learning and behaviour.

- **Culture and leadership:** Culture and leadership shape agency and belonging.

These themes are represented in Diagram I which signals the interconnections between the elements needed to create the conditions for belonging.

**Diagram I: Interlocking Elements in Creating the Conditions for Belonging**

**I**

LEADERSHIP:
Shapes Culture

**III**

LEADERSHIP
& CULTURE:
Shape agency
& belonging

**II**

CULTURE:
Shapes learning
and behaviour

# Theme I: LEADERSHIP shapes culture

School leaders are the mediating force responsible for shaping the culture of the school. Their attitudes and practices help create the conditions needed for school belonging, or send the message to some (adults, young people, families) that they do not belong.

The leaders of the schools we visited all walk or dance their leadership in different ways. Nevertheless, their leadership 'DNA' is infused with some common features.

◼ They are Leaders of Place: Their leadership is contextual and community orientated, finely tuned to the needs of the neighbourhood (7).

◼ They are Authentic: They are who they are. Some may seem idiosyncratic - which is a manifestation of their authenticity – while others appear to be leading from behind. A Y6 child put it like this... "If you're the headteacher, you just have to be who you are."

◼ They are Learning-centred (8): These leaders model what they do, monitor what they do, and talk about what they do – all the time.

◼ They are Relational: Their leadership is highly relational - with their staff, with the young people and with their families - and they are 'caring' leaders (9).

◼ They understand about Agency: They understand their own agency and work to activate the agency of others (10).

Leadership is bound in culture, context and place. The school leaders we met with recognize the importance of contextual and community-oriented leadership. This is illustrated in the example of Flakesfleet Primary School in the North West of England

**Flakesfleet** is in Fleetwood, a one-time major fishing port. Poverty is endemic, with one in three children living below the poverty line. Over a series of decades, Fleetwood has lost its deep-sea fishing role, its ferry service to the Isle of Man and Ireland, and its freight rail link. It has become a town stripped of its economy and identity. The school's central challenge has been how to rebuild this identity and the self-belief of pupils and parents.

The school developed an intentional approach focused on changing learning and teaching, and reshaping expectations and the culture of the school. There was a practical focus on tackling delayed speech and language; safeguarding issues; developing a school-based nursery; supporting families and changing behaviour.

The emphasis was on what children could do, not on what they were not allowed to do. Staff set out to model desired behaviours and attitudes: such as working together, respecting each other. The Senior Leadership Team located themselves in a shared office in a central area of the school. The room is also a thoroughfare for staff and children and the place where the school dog, Mabel, sleeps.

The other key piece of the jigsaw was -and is - 'Dare to Dream': the antidote to low expectations and a lack of self-belief within the community. 'Dare to Dream' is about envisioning the 'impossible' and making it happen - skydiving, achieving a Christmas number one song, winning 'Britain's Got Talent'. The headteacher saw it like this:  it is vital to showcase these forgotten children and change their beliefs about what is possible.

The staff we interviewed are on board with this aspiration. They feel that they belong in the school and are valued: 'part of the place'. They are committed to translating the children's dreams into realities. The children we met found it hard to recall any place or incident within the school where they felt they did not belong.

The school is a joyous place to be. The children are engaged. Results are rising and numbers are growing. The school had a shot at the number one Christmas single; staged a prequel of the Harry and Meghan Royal Wedding; and made it to the TV show for Britain's Got Talent. They did not win but they – and their headteacher - performed spectacularly.

# Theme II: CULTURE shapes learning and behaviour

The schools involved in this study have all faced major issues about behaviour in the past. Recalibrating the school culture has been critical. Today, exclusions are rare. The response to students' challenging behaviour is typically:

**Why did you do that?**

**How do you feel?**

**How do you think other children or your teacher feel?**

**What do you think we should do?**

The behaviour 'agenda' is owned by everyone. Staff and pupils know what it is; have helped shape it; think it's fair. There is a common language and a shared set of practices.

Entering into these schools is a warm and welcoming experience. We found:

- **Little** about 'tough' sanction-based behaviour policies which depend on exclusion and social isolation; and

- **Much** about learning and interventionist and relational approaches based on valuing individuals and aimed at creating a sense of place, belonging and agency.

The spaces around the schools reflect how children and young people learn; showcase their creativity; and highlight contemporary issues, such as climate change and social justice. Values matter. Cooperative values are at the heart of school life at **Helston Community College, Cornwall**: the values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity.

We used a drawing exercise with young people in all of the schools: 'What does it look like (in my school) when…… I feel that I belong? .. I feel I don't belong?' This drawing exercise uncovered a strong sense of belonging. The images of belonging were warm and glowing and heartfelt. The examples of 'not' belonging came from a sense of empathy for how it might be, rather than day-to-day negative encounters, as well as an understanding of the ebb and flow of friendship patterns. There was little about bullying or isolation and a strong sense that if anything was going wrong, you could go to your teacher.

At Helston, the drawing instrument revealed a culture of participation and belonging. These young people had few concerns about bullying or peer harassment.

Moving from Cornwall to the Midlands we visited **Frederick Bird Primary**. The school is several miles from the centre of Coventry and its 800 pupils between them speak 44 different languages. Frederick Bird is surrounded by a 1930s social housing estate which today is an area of high disadvantage and a first location for many migrant families, including people from Somalia and Eastern Europe. The neighbourhood has a significant mix of different cultures and many new arrivals do not have an immediate proficiency in English.

# Theme II: CULTURE shapes learning and behaviour

The school is clear about its values: respect, honesty, responsibility, kindness, creativity, good manners and enjoyment. Expectations about behaviour are made very clear, with much greater weight placed on positive expectations than on negative ones: see Table 3.

**Table 3: Extract from Frederick Bird Primary's Behaviour Policy**

| All are expected to | All are expected not to: |
|---|---|
| Show good manners | Fight or be violent |
| Be honest | Talk whilst others are talking or shout out |
| Accept responsibility | Name call or use unkind words |
| Show kindness/generosity | Swear or be rude |
| Be respectful – for property and all people | Steal |
| Have a positive attitude | Sulk |
| Listen carefully | |
| Be responsible for your own learning | |
| Have a positive work ethic | |
| Walk around school | |
| Not argue back | |
| Think before you speak/act | |
| Treat others how you want to be treated | |
| Be helpful | |
| Work in a variety of groups | |
| Pay compliments | |
| Do what you are asked to do | |

The drawing exercise at Frederick Bird Primary indicated, yet again, that pupils felt valued and safe. They found it easy to portray activities within the classroom and the wider school where they had a sense of belonging but more difficult to recall places or incidents where they felt they did not belong.

A sense of belonging is closely linked to learning – and learning is what it's all about, according to staff and young people at **Hargrave Primary, Islington**. The school serves a diverse and evolving neighbourhood which faces significant challenges in a Borough which also has many affluent residents.

As you enter the school you are met by 'The Hargrave Wheel' which reminds everyone about the importance of learning and the key elements in the learning process:

> Create
> Understand
> Analyse
> Remember
> Apply
> Evaluate

# Theme II: CULTURE
## shapes learning and behaviour

Children's learning and their independence are at the heart of the school's intent and staff and pupils share an understanding about what this process means. Diagram II captures the important features of what is happening in Hargrave to help create a climate for independent learners to flourish.

**Diagram II: Hargrave Primary, Islington: Learning and Independence**

**Staff know they matter and have a voice**

**Staff stay in the school which gives a consistency in approach & helps innovation**

**Childen are at the heart of school life & their Independence is fostered**

**Everyone talks about what matters - learning**

**Children understand what is expected of them & have a voice**

Children at Hargrave used the drawing exercise to make the connection between a sense of belonging in school and their own learning. For them, their school is a place of joy and excitement. Illustrations 2 and 3 are examples of this, the first from a Year 5 student and the second from a Year 2 student. The children love their learning and feel they belong in the classroom.

**Illustrations 2 & 3:
'I feel that I belong when I'm learning'
Hargrave Primary**
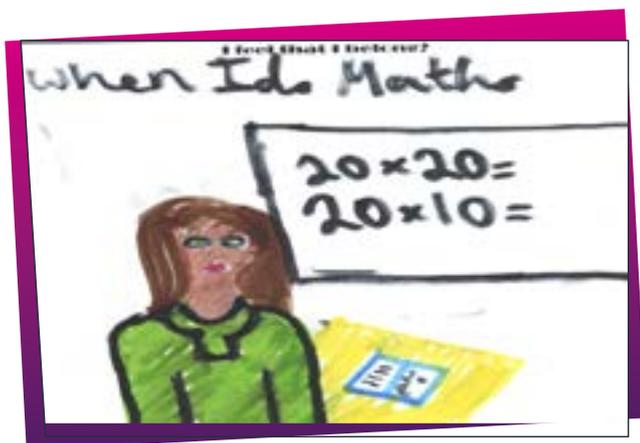
# Theme III: LEADERSHIP AND CULTURE shape agency and belonging

Teachers matter. They are the key influencers for children. Research tells us 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 (4). How staff feel will affect their relationship with their pupils.

Discussions with staff revolved around two matters. The first was what belonging meant to the children and young people in their school. Staff talked about the importance of young people being part of friendship groups, rather than cliques, and having the opportunity to define their own success – through drama, music and art, and not just through more traditional academic routes. Illustration 4 is an example of how one teacher saw the issues. The image suggests that young people feel a sense of belonging when they have the opportunity to articulate their views and develop confidence in themselves. Their 'anger' comes from feeling excluded and alienated and 'not' belonging.

Belonging and behaviour are closely linked. We found a shared language of belonging in the schools we visited, not only for young people but also for staff. The second set of discussions with staff revolved around their own experiences: to what extent did they feel a sense of belonging in the school? We used a card sort exercise with statements about belonging, derived from research, to prompt the discussion. The staff we met with felt respected and accepted. They told us that:

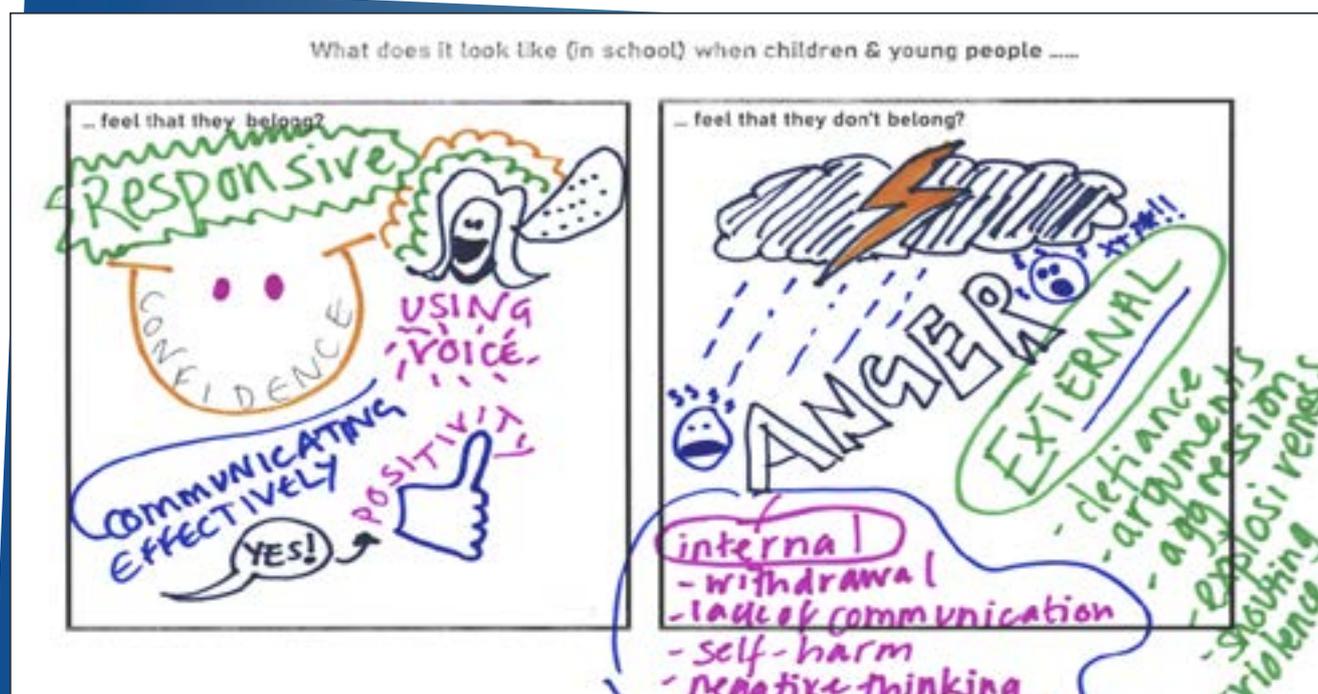| When you feel you belong… |
|---|
| You can be more creative, innovative and confident. |
| You feel respected and accepted. |
| You'll stay longer in an organisation and make more of a contribution. |
| You have a sense of well-being and agency; |
| You feel more involved and committed to your job. |



Illustration 4:
Belonging & 'Not' Belonging: A teacher's view

# Theme III: LEADERSHIP AND CULTURE
## shape agency and belonging

In the schools included in this Inquiry, there are few problems about staff retention. Teachers stay. One teacher summed it up as follows: "you commit and know you have a future and that encourages you to be yourself and to innovate." These teachers know that they can make a difference and they have a strong sense of personal and professional agency in their school. Agency is the belief that what you do makes a difference, and have the skills and opportunity to do it.

As we began the card sort exercise about belonging in one school, a teacher interjected:

"I feel really emotional when I think about this. In this school I feel that I belong. My opinion is heard. I can even say 'I can't cope'. But in my last school, I wasn't trusted. The head was a bit of a bully and told me that I hadn't got what it takes to be a teacher and I nearly quit teaching. Then someone told me to apply (here)………… I can be myself here. I have a personal life and a professional life, and I can make a difference."

## Bringing everyone on board

The leaders of these schools saw their role as enacting the agency of staff and students and bringing parents on board. The last section of our discussion about how leadership and culture shape agency and belonging shines the spotlight on parents and communities.

We know from previous work that welcoming families and communities into school is a key aspect of creating a sense of place and belonging. Staff at St Anthony's Primary School in Bromley, involved in extensive work on place and belonging, used an international day to re-enforce their relationships with the parents and strengthen their sense of belonging in the life of the school.

**St Anthony's Catholic Primary School** in South London serves a diverse and transnational population. The school decided to use its International Day Event to reinforce its connections with local families. Drawing on a programme of work on place and belonging, led by the author, student-researchers carried out research on belonging which they presented on the day. As the parents entered the school gate, the student-researchers asked them, 'What does belonging mean to you?' Year 3 children performed 'We Refugees' by Benjamin Zephaniah which includes the line, 'we can all be refugees….'.

The power of both sets of presentations at the International Day, a celebration of cultures, beliefs (symbolised in food and national dress), signified the school's appreciation of its community and embraced the beliefs and experiences of families and their children. It contributed to the trustful relationships that characterise the interactions between the school and the community, and to the process of creating a shared sense of belonging (adapted from 4).

# Theme III: LEADERSHIP AND CULTURE shape agency and belonging

In this small scale study we were not able to interview parents. However, we were able to observe what was going on. Parents come in and out of the five schools we visited with confidence and ease. Take **Parklands Primary Leeds**, as an example.

It is a Friday afternoon in Leeds and it is pouring down. Parents and grandparents pick their way through the puddles to reach **Parklands Primary School**, pushing buggies and clutching umbrellas. Their homes are mainly located in Seacroft, a large 1950's post-war Council Estate which today is an area of high unemployment and deprivation. The school is hosting its weekly 'bestseatsinthehouse' assembly which celebrates the achievements of their children. Children compete to show how great they are - at spelling and tables, geography and science…any aspect of their school life. One of the 'Stars' of the week is 'Miya' who is introduced by her teacher in the following terms:

" 'Miya' where do I start? She's a lovely girl, caring and hard-working.

She has a positive attitude to everything that she does. She is hungry to learn.

She's a credit to her parents and herself."

Winners from the 'bestseatsinthehouse' assembly spill out into the hallway, eager to spend their awards on the new Vending Machine. However, it's a Vending Machine with a difference, not fizzy drinks or crisps but books: the classics, 'The Three Musketeers'; mysteries of the past, 'The Totally Dead Dinosaurs'; and the chocolate fix, 'Charlie and the Chocolate Factory'.

For children at Parklands, belonging is about love, respect, being part of a family.

Here's a 'Star' from another week, cheered on by friends and feeling a sense of belonging.

**Illustration 5: 'Star' of the Week**
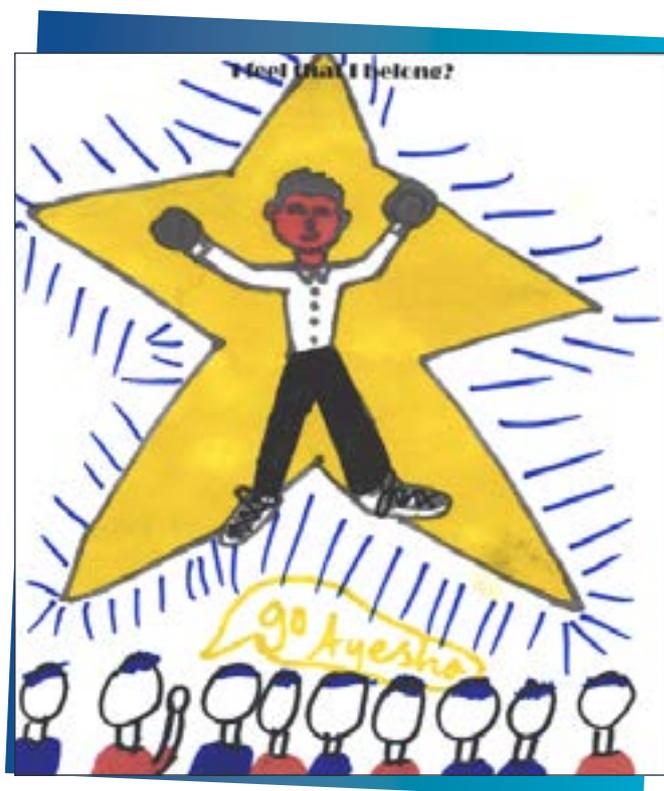
# Links between case studies and literature review

## How these case study findings relate to some of the wider messages from the Belonging, Behaviour and Inclusion in Schools literature review (UCL/NEU 2020)

The school is a key site for fostering belonging. However, this requires a sense of intention, purpose and a commitment to connectedness.

Belonging as an integrated strategy for comprehensive and system-level change is being developed in a number of localities, as a connected and broad approach: a shared agenda.

There are 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.

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.

It is as important for staff as for young people, to experience a sense of belonging in school.

Schools where behaviour is challenging, and where responses to behaviour are punitive, have an impact on staff as well as student well-being.
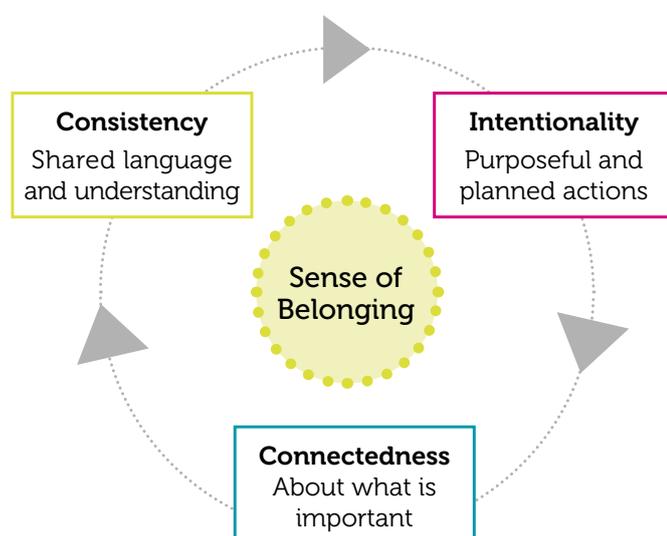
# Making sense of it all

In this final section we draw out some of the broader implications of our findings. Based on what we have seen in the case study schools, and on earlier work on place and belonging. We have developed a conceptual framework, 'The Cycle of Connectivity' to help us think about the ingredients needed to create schools as places of belonging. This is shown in Diagram III. The elements of the framework include:

▮ **Intentionality:** This means purposeful and positive interventions (not one off reactions) that are understood across the school or the school system.

▮ **Connectedness:** When 'connectedness' is working, 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 and a shared language. Children and staff speak about what goes on in the same way.

**Sense of Belonging:** A sense of belonging is at the heart of the cycle of connectivity. It is manifested in relationships and 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.

Young people's sense of 'not belonging' in schools is growing. In July 2020, The Children's Society reported yet a further increase in children's sense of unhappiness. Their 'lockdown' review also revealed that nearly 1 in 5 children aged 10-17 in the UK (over one million children) had described themselves as being unhappy with their lives during lockdown. They had particular regrets about the way the Pandemic had reduced the choices they could make in their lives (10).

These findings reinforce the centrality of schools in the lives of young people, and the importance of school as a place of belonging and agency. Our children and young people are at the heart of what schools should be about. 'Belonging' needs to be the message that runs through the 'Blackpool rock' of school life.

The ideas which have emerged from this Inquiry reflect the commitment and creativity of the schools featured in this research. The research shows not only what is possible but also the ways in which schools which are places of belonging are great places to be for staff and students alike. Whether young people feel they belong in school influences how they think about themselves today, and how they see their future on our planet as global citizens.

## Diagram III: The Cycle of Connectivity



**Consistency**
Shared language and understanding

**Intentionality**
Purposeful and planned actions

**Sense of Belonging**

**Connectedness**
About what is important

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- Helston Community College, Cornwall
- Parklands Primary, Leeds

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