

We're a long way from a sense of belonging

For pupils, a feeling of belonging in school is vital for their wellbeing and academic outcomes. But children are increasingly feeling like outsiders in their own classrooms – and this is because of three spectacular failures by policymakers, writes **Kathryn Riley** ▶



DAVID PARKINS

The world we live in is one of boundless promise and possibilities. Yet it's also a divided world in which more people, half of them children, are displaced – exiled and homeless – than at any time since the end of the Second World War. Across the globe, divisions are widening and the language of exclusion is in the air. For many 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 schools are not always places where they feel they belong. Belonging is that sense of being somewhere where you can be confident that you will fit in and be safe in your identity; a feeling of being at home in a place.

My interest in these issues goes back some time. I began by asking: why is it that most children start school with enthusiasm and curiosity and yet many lose interest, or find themselves dismissed, rejected or excluded? The illustration below is from my early research. It's a drawing by a child on the margins of school life that vibrates with a feeling of loneliness and isolation. The captions written by the child read: "You're thick... You're stupid... You don't belong here... Get out of my school."



I showed this image earlier this year at a conference at the University of Strathclyde (part of a Scotland-wide initiative, coordinated by the Scottish Universities Insight Institute) about poverty, attainment and young people's sense of wellbeing. I asked the audience whether they recognised the "story" behind the picture. They did – and yet that research was carried out as long ago as 2000.

Today, the outlook is bleak. Across Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development countries, young people's sense of belonging in school is declining, with one in four feeling that they don't belong. Children from socioeconomically

disadvantaged communities are twice as likely as their more advantaged peers to feel that they don't belong, and four times more likely to be excluded. I've come to the conclusion that many of our children and young people have been let down by policymakers – in three spectacular ways.

Spectacular failure one: Evidence about the benefits to young people of feeling a sense of belonging in school has been largely ignored

The research evidence – from many parts of the globe – shows that a sense of belonging in school leads to improved academic outcomes, and has a strong association with other positive social outcomes, such as health and wellbeing, increased student motivation and reductions in absenteeism. Recent evidence from the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (Timss), published in 2019, shows a strong link between children's sense of physical and emotional "safety" in school – a key aspect of belonging – and their academic performance in maths and science. Schools that are places of belonging are great places to be. They foster the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of children and young people. Both staff and children feel that they are seen for who they are and know that they can make a difference.

Spectacular failure two: The impact of exclusion and a sense of not belonging on individuals and society has not been recognised

Policymakers are locked in their separate silos, rarely seeing the bigger picture, which is that young people who see themselves as "outsiders" – the ones who don't belong – or who are excluded from school are vulnerable to exploitation. Their access to education is limited and they are also more likely to become caught up in crime. The disaffected or the excluded search for "belongingness" elsewhere, finding it in many ways, including extremism, self-harming and gang membership. Take a look at *The Ballad of the Blade* (written by Somali-British poet Momtaza Mehri, the Young People's Poet Laureate for London), which is about the hunger to succeed, the yearning to belong. A gang member tells his story about what drew him into the gang, and what kept him there:

"I found belongingness and a family and affection. I was being lifted up. I was getting all these things I wasn't getting from society. Society was bringing me down, saying, 'You're a black boy, you're a thug'. It was always looking down on me."

Spectacular failure three: In a climate of shrinking funding and increasing demands, teachers and school leaders are being driven by performance targets, not by the needs of young people

Schools' practices and expectations influence young people's sense of belonging. Recent Programme for International Student Assessment (Pisa) data 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. Leaders set the scene. How leaders think and act and draw on their knowledge is critical to the wellbeing of children and adults, and to their sense of belonging – and of agency: that belief that what you do can make a difference, and that you have the skills and opportunities to do it.

Young people want to be seen and valued for who they are. Most teachers and leaders aspire to do just that. However, the current climate of diminishing resources, growing demands and high-stakes testing is narrowing children's experience of education and pushing schools to their limits: pressurising leaders, teachers and young people alike.

Schools can – and should be – places of wonder, excitement and joy, places that bring young people together, places where they feel a sense of welcome and inclusion.

Schools are communities, "political entities" in which children and young people learn how to become part of society. Whether they feel at home in that place called "school" will influence how they think about themselves and the world around them. Schools are also one of the few shared social institutions that can create a sense of belonging or exclusion. Yet a school is just a building. What matters are the people in it and the relationships. Schools become places of belonging when the rich mosaic of society comes together around shared goals.

A radically different political narrative is needed for this to happen. It's a narrative about wellbeing, belonging, agency, hope and aspirations. If they are to tackle the spectacular failures of the past, policymakers need to listen to the voices of those at the cutting edge – and that includes young people. They know the score about education. They're increasingly taking the lead on climate change.

The young people I have worked with have helped me to understand the importance of having a sense of belonging in school, telling me: if children don't belong in school, they don't belong anywhere. But if belonging makes you feel more confident, and confidence makes you a better learner,



it is clear that students need to feel that they belong in school in order to learn more effectively. Belonging means that you're a part of something – you're not just sitting around on the other side, you're not just left out and lonely.

In March, artist Emma Smith, curator Rachel Fleming-Mulford and the Freud Museum London took the opportunity of their Wunderblock exhibition to explore issues about the mental health and the rights of children and young people with a group of teenagers, who chose to reflect on their experiences of school (see @Wunderblock19 on Twitter and freud.org.uk). I was invited to hear what they had to say.

The young people, aged 14-18, had numerous positive comments to make about their teachers, yet they also recognised that school life can be a dispiriting or dislocating experience for many. The Children's Society has presented this story in the following terms: the happiness of young people in the UK is at its lowest ebb since 2010, with almost one in five children having seven or

more serious problems in their lives, a number of which are school-related. The results of a survey of 8,000 teachers, carried out by the NEU teaching union, make sober reading: two out of five teachers plan to quit the profession within five years, because of the pressures and mental health issues for young people have now reached "crisis" point (see bit.ly/NEUsurvey).

A major concern of the teenagers I met at the Freud Museum was that the education system had now become the exam system. They questioned the domination of the "testing" regime. Was it equipping young people for the collaboration and teamwork needed in future working environments?

And they listed the casualties: young people whose levels of stress have led them to think about suicide; those whose mental health and wellbeing have been badly affected by the pressures; those who have become drop-outs or who have been pushed out – "evicted" – from school; those who have felt they don't belong. Building on their experience in the Wunderblock project, these teenagers have

now begun a campaign to question the current examination system. Their questions are "Who are exams for?" and "What could they be?"

As one headteacher involved in the research on place and belonging put it: "It all begins with the great umbrella of belonging... those whom globalisation affects the most are the most qualified to determine what it is that makes them feel like they belong." In short, it is time to listen to young people. ■

Kathryn Riley is professor of urban education at UCL Institute of Education and co-founder of The Art of Possibilities. She has been a teacher, local authority chief officer, London politician and head of the World Bank's Effective Schools and Teachers Group, and has worked with Unicef and the OECD. Her publications include: Place, Belonging and School Leadership: researching to make the difference (2017) and Leadership of Place: stories from schools in the US, UK and South Africa (2013). Further details and materials relating to the research in this article can be found at 2020.icsei.net, bit.ly/placebelong and theartofpossibilities.org.uk