

CHILDREN'S NARRATIVES OF BELONGING – A PARTICIPATORY ARTS-BASED STUDY IN DIVERSE SCHOOLS IN ENGLAND

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Abstract

The stories people tell about themselves and others, about who they are and where they belong, remain contentious and ongoing issues in education. Recent shifts towards child-centred pedagogies and inclusive practices highlight the importance of understanding how children themselves make sense of belonging. The value of listening to children's voices has been well established in the past decades. There also remains limited research into the experiences of children from migrant backgrounds in the UK, as most studies have focused on older children or those entering adulthood. Scholarship has centered on theoretical frameworks or school-focused strategies for 'achieving' a sense of belonging. The perspectives and experiences of migrant children remain underexamined. This presentation is based on a participatory, arts-based project exploring children's experiences of belonging and inclusion in school and their wider lives. The aim of the project was to investigate the interconnectivity in discourses on identity, otherness, belonging and inclusion – I am interested in how children experience, perceive, and contest these spaces. The project involved 27 children aged 10-11 in two diverse primary schools in England. A multi-methods approach was utilised, including focus groups, painting/drawing, storyboarding, co-analysis pinboards, and dance/drama performances. The findings indicated that children's narratives on belonging are expressed, defined, and contested in multiple ways, enmeshed in material and symbolic relationships with people, places, and objects. One key aspect I will discuss is how the personal and immediate objects in children's lives formed a part of their understandings of belonging, which raises questions about how children form attachments with classroom spaces. Furthermore, sites of 'differences' sometimes caused a sense of otherness but also formed opportunities for friendships and belonging to emerge. This presentation aims to contribute to the conversations around belonging in childhood, presenting a model of belonging that reflects the embodied, material, affective and political realities of belonging in children's school lives, and suggests implications for school practices.

Keywords: *Belonging, childhood, voice, migration.*

1. Introduction

Belonging is a multidimensional, dynamic process which can be understood through different theoretical lenses. For Antonsich (2010), "to belong means to find a place where an individual can feel 'at home'" (p. 646), which includes the domestic, material spaces associated with family, as well as the symbolic spaces of familiarity and safety. Thus, belonging is often associated with 'rootedness' and a sense of place, which is especially relevant to contexts of migration and the unfinished and multiple forms of children's belonging and self-identification (Ni Laoire, 2010; Moskal, 2015). Belonging is also entangled within political and historical discourses, related to processes of how social locations, identities, and emotional attachments are "assessed and valued by the self and others" (Yuval-Davis, 2011, p. 18). This has been called *the politics of belonging*. Central to my research is also the materiality of belonging and recognising the interactions of people, places and objects in relation to children's experiences (Ros i Solé et al., 2020; Youkhana, 2015). As Youkhana (2015) puts it, belonging is about the "complex relations that individuals have with other people, circulating objects, artefacts, and changing social, political and cultural landscapes, thus mirroring both the material conditions and the underlying power relations" (p. 10).

The stories people tell about themselves and others, about who they are and where they belong, remain contentious and ongoing issues in education. Research from different perspectives and ontologies has explored how young people navigate belonging and their identities in different contexts, for example, studies highlight young people's active engagement in processes of migration, friendships, and performing identities in relation to 'others' (Einarsdottir et al., 2022; Welply, 2022). However, there also remains limited research into the experiences of children from migrant backgrounds in the UK, as most studies have

focused on older children or those entering adulthood. As discussed above, scholarship also centres on conceptual frameworks for understanding belonging or school-focused strategies and measures for ‘achieving’ a sense of belonging (e.g., Goodenow, 1993). The perspectives and experiences of young migrant children and how they make sense of belonging in school and their wider lives remain underexamined.

2. Research approach

The aim of the project was to investigate the interconnectivity in discourses on children’s identities and sense of belonging and inclusion in school and in their wider lives. The project worked with 27 children aged 10-11 in two culturally diverse schools in the North of England. Participants were invited to create artwork about a time they felt lonely, upset or happy at school, choosing from a range of creative methods on offer – painting, collage, drawing, narrative writing. Next, a storyboarding method was used and involved asking participants to ‘tell a story of someone arriving at a new school’. These storyboards could have been based on their lived experiences, or imaginary stories, or a combination of both. During the workshops, participants were also invited to take part in focus groups where they shared their perspectives and experiences of belonging in school and beyond school. Then, participants were invited to interpret, clarify and discuss meanings and emerging themes using visual, interactive pinboards. Participants used coloured pens and post-it notes to add to/amend the data, and they selected some keywords and stories to explore further in the dance and drama workshops. Through these methods, views and experiences were brought to life in collaborative, exploratory, even fictional ways (Harvey, 2020). The data was transcribed and analysed using qualitative software, which was also applied to the visual data, and involved coding by visual content and triangulating with the meanings participants assigned to their artwork.

3. Findings and discussion

The findings indicated that children’s narratives on belonging are expressed, defined, and contested in multiple ways, enmeshed in material and symbolic relationships with people, places, and objects. In particular, the ordinary and immediate objects in children’s lives formed a part of their understandings of belonging (‘my toys’, ‘my pocket money’), and possessions and objects as markers of belonging symbolised individuality – distinguishing between what is ‘mine’ and ‘yours’. One participant, Fakhri, stated, “I belong to my football books”. Asman also commented, “I belong to my paper and pencils”, and Teresa responded, “true, ‘cos you’re an artist”. These comments indicate social-material investments and highlight the potential agency of objects in the construction of identity.

The ‘agentic capacities’ (Martin, 2019) of seemingly ordinary classroom objects raise important questions about how children form attachments in classroom spaces. Juutinen et al. (2023) explored how very young children’s belonging is constructed through material relations. Their work shows that objects, movement, touch, and play are key sites through which belonging is produced in early childhood settings. Like Martin (2019), my research found that ordinary classroom objects functioned in ways beyond their intended purpose, for example, to demonstrate status among peers (participants spoke about their pocket money) or playing with water bottles in the school toilets formed new friendships and social insiderness. Some participants spoke about how the objects and spaces in school remind them of home – for example, Imram reflected that the “high ceilings in school” remind him of his “house in Pakistan”.

Children also shared experiences of struggling to belong at school, and this was often mediated through material and embodied spaces, for example, some storyboards depicted feeling overwhelmed at the size of the school as a newly arrived learner. Yeva, who had recently arrived in England from Iran, represented in her artwork the challenges she experienced during lunchtime:

Researcher: could you tell me about what you are drawing?

Yeva: I feel sad because when I just came to this school, I think it was my first day, I lost my [lunch]band and I didn’t know how to say. ...the dinner lady said you have to have a band to get lunch so I went outside.

Yeva’s account suggests how material objects are entangled with emotional experiences of belonging, particularly for newly arrived children navigating unfamiliar linguistic, spatial and social contexts. It can be suggested that inclusion and belonging within research and policy tend to focus on the cultural values of an institution, teachers’ practices, and the allocation of funding, however, “less attention has been given to how interactions with material contexts, tools or resources can also contribute towards such a purpose” (Martin, 2019, p. 86). My research shows that listening to children’s definitions and lived experiences of belonging highlights the significance of their relationships with classroom objects and school spaces. As such, these social-material dimensions of belonging are relevant to wider discourses on promoting inclusive school spaces.

Furthermore, children's narratives highlighted how belonging was constructed through multiple symbolic lines of 'difference'. Children's perspectives and experiences of linguistic, ethnic and religious identities involved a positive centring of differences to form a sense of belonging and friendships. Participants positioned themselves and others as multilingual speakers, positively framing their different migratory experiences, for example, "she [Yeva] can speak like five thousand languages!" (Rose). Like Welply (2022), language functioned as a marker of status within peer groups, and participants spoke about how they teach each other their different languages. However, belonging through difference was not always conceptualised positively. For instance, Izzy associated belonging with "fitting in" and was concerned about stories she had heard about secondary school, where older children were bullied or othered on the basis of racial differences. During the art workshops, participants had to navigate disagreements over perceived anti-Muslim utterances, and some children were othered by their peers on the basis of having limited language knowledge or religious identity. For example, Daayan was questioned by his peers if he was Muslim because he did not know Arabic. Therefore, for some, friendships and belonging at school were at odds with boundary maintenance and perceived religious and linguistic differences.

4. Conclusions

This paper is based on a study which explored children's experiences of belonging and inclusion at school. Everyday classroom objects and personal possessions emerged as agentic resources through which children navigated identity, belonging, and friendships. Children's narratives also revealed how 'sameness' and 'difference' – especially language, religion, and migration – can be sites of belonging and exclusion. My research presents a model of belonging that reflects the material, affective, and political realities of belonging in children's school lives, interlinking with notions of inclusion and perceived sameness and difference. The pedagogical implications are that schools should be attentive to material relations, the classroom spaces and ordinary objects, and how this interacts with children's experiences of belonging and self-identification. Additionally, the study highlights the need for schools to continue thinking about the necessary tools and language to celebrate differences and navigate discourses of difference, including stereotypes, otherness, and stories children hear from others. In summary, the importance of listening to the voices of younger children, including those from migrant backgrounds, cannot be overlooked in gaining novel and nuanced perspectives on belonging and understanding their experiences of schooling and living in a global world.

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