

ICSEI Dialogic: Problematizing the Relationship between Schools, Families & Communities

My Community or Yours?

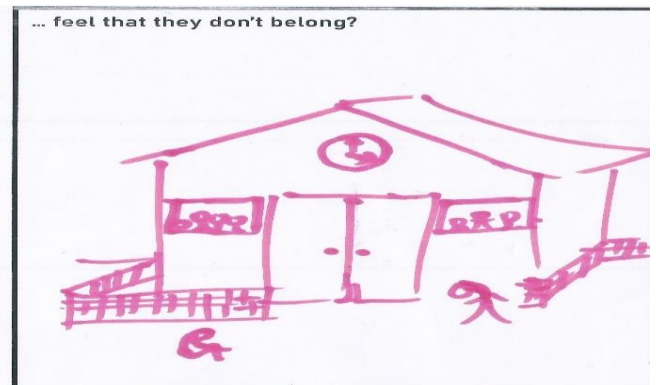
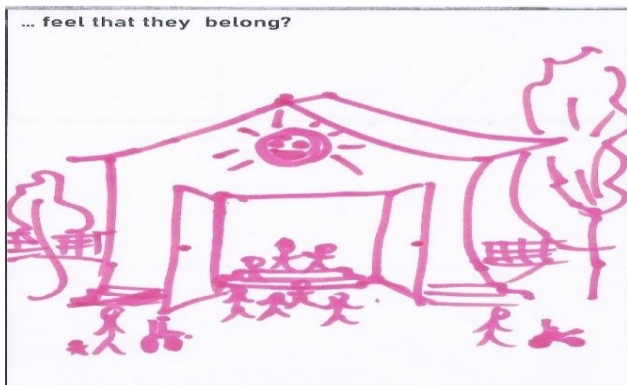
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The notion of 'problematizing' is an issue that has long fascinated me. It's that opportunity to put aside what you *think* you know (what you assume to be true) and to explore what you really know. The 'problematizing' activity for this ICSEI Dialogic revolves around our understanding of the school-community relationship.

Let's start with the school. A school, of course, is just a building. What matters is what goes on in and around that building: the relationships, the connections, the learning. The important questions become: *Who feels part of the school community? Who feels connected and has a sense of belonging?* The images below give a flavour of what it feels like to 'belong' and be welcomed as a community member (the left-hand side), or to 'not belong': the right-hand side.¹



¹ K. Riley (2022) *Compassionate Leadership for School Belonging*, p84.

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In this short input to our dialogic interchange, I want to pose three questions:

- *Why* should schools engage in strengthening school-community relations?
- *Who* are they connecting to: *who* is 'in' and *who* is 'out'?
- *What* helps the process of connection?

Let me touch first on the notion of 'community'. Community is a word that has many meanings and is used widely because it conveys that sense of individuals working together with shared beliefs and goals. The intrinsic value of community membership has become a cliché: something warm and cozy that we all want to be a part of.

It is a truism to say that schools should relate to their community/communities. No one seriously suggests that schools should merely do their best to process the children who come through their gates every morning, while ignoring whatever goes on outside those gates. Truisms have the advantage of being true, but very often – as in this case – they also have the disadvantage of being imprecise generalisations. I hope that these questions will help us to develop more precision about some of the issues.

Q1. Why should schools engage in strengthening school-community relations?

Some years ago, Professor Karen Seashore Louis and I carried out a project on school-community relationships. We wanted to understand more about perceptions, practices and realities. Our exploration included a literature review. Broadly speaking, we concluded that there were five main reasons why schools sought to become more engaged with their communities. These were to:

- Improve student achievement;
- Become more accountable to communities and increase their involvement;
- Build social capital, by encouraging collaborative activities that would, for example, lead to healthier or safer communities;
- Develop the role of the school as a moral agent which had some responsibility for promoting issues for young people, such as social justice;
- Promote the school's self-interest, by developing good public relations.

Very different starting points, assumptions and end goals are embedded within these five drivers. Yet, schools rarely articulate their intentions and expectations about

school-community engagement. To hear the views of one exemplary school leader, Jo Dibb, until recently head of Elizabeth Garrett Anderson School (EGA) about school-community engagement follow the links below.² EGA is a great favourite of Michele Obama who visited the London School and wrote about it in her book 'Becoming'.

Q2. Who are schools connecting to: who is 'in' and 'out'?

This second 'problematizing' question raises a raft of issues about who is 'in' and 'out': who makes up the student community/ the local community. These issues include:

Access: Is this school open to everyone? Is there a selection process (governed by ability to pay or to pass a test)? Is it a specialist school of some sort, drawing on a wide circle of young people from several localities? Is the school set up to serve a particular gender or community (e.g., a faith community)?

Locality: What's the school's catchment area? Does it serve a local population, or do the young people come from some distance? Is the community which the school serves relatively homogeneous or are there diverse and multiple communities? What are the social and contextual challenges within the neighbourhood?

Insiders and outsiders: Once entry to the school has been determined – what happens next? Schools can be places where students feel welcomed, or places of rejection and exclusion. Across OECD countries, young people's sense of belonging is declining, with nearly 1 in 3 now feeling they don't belong in school:

Whose voices are listened to and whose ignored? Some – and arguably those with the greatest needs – may find themselves being handed the ultimate 'red card' of exclusion. The excluded often become the exploited.

And what about the families of these young people and the communities in which they live? Many researchers have argued that the ways in which schools engage with their communities frequently exclude particular groups, such as refugee and migrant families. UK organisations report that a number of young people from refugee families experience a sense of being 'the other': not being wanted in their school.³

² <https://www.theartofpossibilities.org.uk/explore/videos/S1V2>, 'Student researchers show the way'

³ <https://www.theartofpossibilities.org.uk> Home Page, Podcast I: Shut up and leave me alone
<https://open.spotify.com/episode/3No1oVKIL0TWhxvUTKIfwe?si=80151cd4fca84df2>

Q3. What helps the process of connection?

We know that for school–community engagement to be effective, it needs to be authentic and based on mutuality, connectivity, and trust. Trust is the super glue that binds schools and communities together. Trust does not appear out of the ether. It cannot be assumed. It has to be created, and it has to be earned.

When trust flourishes, it is manifested in relationships at all levels: *between* school leaders and classroom teachers; *between* teachers and young people; *between* school staff, families, and communities. To find out more about how headteacher Dave McPartlin, Flakefleet Primary school England, built trust and community, follow the links below. These will even take you to Britain’s got Talent! ⁴

Endnote: When schools are attuned to young people and take account of families and communities, they succeed in creating a sense of school belonging. In schools where belonging works, young people tend to be happier, more confident and perform better academically. The staff feel professionally recognised and their families welcomed.

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She began her work in education as a volunteer teacher in Eritrea, later teaching in inner-city schools, before holding political office as an elected member of the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) and becoming a local authority chief officer.

As an international scholar whose work bridges policy and practice, Kathryn has been engaged in research, policy and development work on educational reform and school leadership, partnering with many organisations and colleagues. Her international work has included heading up the World Bank’s Effective Schools and Teachers Group. Over recent years, Kathryn’s focus has been on place and belonging, community collaboration and partnership, and new forms of leadership.

Kathryn has published widely. Her most recent book, *Compassionate Leadership for School Belonging* was published by UCL Press and is available online [here](#).

⁴ (i) For the school’s strategy go to K. Riley 2022 (reference: footnote 1), p.64. ‘Seascape’ school is Flakefleet Primary.
(ii) To hear Headteachers’ Jo Dibb and Dave McPartlin in conversation go to the Podcast series: <https://www.theartofpossibilities.org.uk> > Home Page, Podcast 4: Zero Tolerance or a Sense of Us or <https://open.spotify.com/episode/2ra427O5aFXScUzYeUHih?si=f881feab335e4ef4>
(iii) To see Flakefleet perform go to Britain’s got Talent 2020, flakefleet primary