What does belonging mean for young people who are International New Arrivals?

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A sense of belonging is a complex process which can play a crucial part in the emotional well-being and academic success of young people. When pupils do not feel a sense of belonging at school, motivation, engagement, academic achievement and attendance are all at risk. International New Arrivals (INA) may find the process of adjusting to a new culture and developing a sense of belonging in school challenging. The current research sought to understand the development of belonging from the perspective of INA young people. Five INA pupils from two high schools participated in semi-structured interviews. The findings illustrate that a sense of belonging involves a complex interaction between many factors. Some factors are intrinsic to the INA pupils, whereas others take place within the school environment. Several themes involve both internal and external factors, this mirrors the processes that are involved in more general enculturation and acculturation processes. This research highlights the important role that schools play in promoting a sense of belonging for INA pupils and how Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Model provides a useful framework to consider the range of factors that impact on INA pupils’ sense of belonging.

Keywords: Belonging; migrants; new arrivals; school; acculturation.

Introduction

INTERNATIONAL NEW ARRIVALS (INA) is a broad term that encompasses both forced migrants (those that are forced to leave their country of origin and are seeking refuge in the UK) and voluntary migrants (those that leave their country of origin voluntarily to seek work in the UK). Schools may not be informed of the reason for pupils’ migration to the UK and it is often not clearly distinguishable. For example, families may seek work in the UK but to escape war in their home country. This article will use the acronym INA as shorthand to refer to the young people that were the focus of this research who had migrated from different countries and for a range of purposes. The lead researcher was a Trainee Educational Psychologist undertaking doctoral research in an urban, inner city area at the time of the study. The co-researcher was the university supervisor for the doctoral research. Neither of the researchers were link educational psychologists for the school.

Many people have been accommodated in the local authority where the research took place since changes in Government policy saw INA being dispersed across the UK. At the time of the research high numbers of INA were arriving in the local area with approximately half being asylum seekers and refugees and the local authority received funding to develop support services for children within this group through the Ethnic Minority Achievement Grant (EMAG) and the Children’s Fund. Several services were established to support schools, provide practical support for families and to provide therapeutic input when children have experienced trauma.

Belonging and International New Arrivals

Research in relation to belonging generally has found it to be very influential on a wide range of outcomes for children and young people. Combs (1982) identified belonging as being one of four affective variables that are essential for student learning. Conversely, a lack of belonging is found to be detrimental. When pupils do not feel a
sense of belonging at school, motivation, engagement, academic achievement and attendance are all at risk (Goosenow, 1993).

More specifically in relation to this research, belonging has been identified as an influential protective factor in the resettlement of refugee children. Kia-Keating and Ellis (2007) found that a greater sense of belonging was associated with lower depression and higher self-efficacy regardless of the level of past exposure to adversities. Ozer, Price Wolf and Kong (2008) state ‘immigrant youth from ethnic minority backgrounds are likely to experience more barriers to forming a strong and positive affective connection to school due to the cultural and linguistic contrasts they negotiate as they move across the ‘multiple worlds’ that constitute their school, family and neighbourhood settings’ (p.440).

What we understand to be belonging as a construct may have cultural variations; Hill (2006) discusses the perception of belonging within American Indian culture and highlights the importance of considering what a sense of belonging is from a cultural perspective. Faircloth and Hamm (2005) state ‘there is a lack of clarity regarding what constitutes belonging and the role it plays in students’ motivation and achievement for diverse groups’ (p.293). Faircloth and Hamm (2005) conceptualise belonging as having a mediating role between motivation and achievement (see Figure 1).

They found that the concept of belonging acting as a mediator was robust across four ethnic groups, ‘we found support within all four groups that belonging as a construct best explained the relationship

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Figure 1: Theoretical Model: Dimensions of Belonging and Belonging as a Mediator (Faircloth & Hamm, 2005).
between motivation and achievement' (p.304). They conclude that ‘multiple dimensions of belonging were relevant, but not uniformly so, across ethnic groups’ (p.305) and, in ‘ethnically diverse schools, practices should not be levied uniformly across the student body without attention to how members of different ethnic groups might experience them’ (p.307).

Explorations of belonging highlight its complex and multi-faceted nature. It is not a fixed construct, instead it is fluid and dynamic; influenced by context and both internal and external factors. For example, pupils’ accounts in Sancho and Cline’s (2012) study of pupils entering Year 7 in secondary schools, suggested ‘a sense of belonging in primary and secondary school may manifest itself differently’ (p.72). Belonging may be even more complex for INA pupils. Phinney et al. (2001) considered belonging in reference to the inter-relationship between national and ethnic identities and the psychological well-being of immigrants. They found that most studies showed the combination of both a strong ethnic identity and strong national identity promoted the best adaptation.

There is a vast amount of research that highlights the benefits of school connectedness and belonging for all young people (for example, Combs, 1982; Finn, 1989; Osterman, 2000; and McNeeley, Nonnemaker & Blum, 2002). However, there has been less that has investigated what causes young people to perceive that they belong. The few studies that do exist have identified some specific factors that may impact on pupils’ sense of belonging in schools. For example, Osterman (2000) highlighted several dimensions that are found to be key to enhancing all adolescents’ sense of belonging within the school community; the quality of relationships with teachers, peer relationships and instructional/organisational strategies that promote positive interactions with peers and other people in the school community. Sancho and Cline (2012) had similar findings. They conclude that peer interactions are of particular importance: ‘Central to establishing a sense of belonging was the development of friendships, relationships with the form as a whole and peer acceptance in general’ (p.71). Such findings highlight the importance of positive interactions with others in school to foster a sense of belonging in students. However, further exploration of the factors that promote feelings of belonging within school are necessary, particularly to identify mechanisms which support the belonging of INA pupils specifically.

**Migration processes**

Migration often involves contact with a different culture. ‘Acculturation’ is a process that involves contact between two cultural groups which results in cultural changes in both groups. Vedder and Horencyzk (2006) discuss acculturation processes in relation to school experiences for migrant pupils. They highlight the important role schools play within acculturation processes; ‘schools represent and introduce the new culture to immigrant children’ (p.419). However, despite the importance of school experience; ‘an abundance of studies show that immigrant youth in the Western world benefit insufficiently from schools’ (p.419). They refer to the school as being a place for socialising students towards the national culture through enculturation and acculturation processes. ‘Enculturation is the process of becoming skillful in using tools, learning behaviours, knowledge and values that are part of the culture of one’s own group’ (p.420). This refers to the inter-generational transmission of culture. Schools are usually based on the cultural and educational requirements of the majority society, therefore there is likely to be greater distance between the school’s expectations and children’s experiences for migrant pupils. Enculturation and acculturation are both considered to be important learning processes to enable professional and social success. However, the simultaneous enculturation and acculturation processes for
migrant pupils may be very challenging, especially where the distance between ethnic culture and the national culture is great. This may lead to a ‘clash of cultures’ between the home and school.

This research evolved out of consideration of the previous research literature and discussions with school staff during the planning of the study. Much of the literature that has explored ‘belonging’ has used quantitative measures such as the Frederickson et al. (2007) Belonging Scale. However, the applicability of a ‘Western’ conceptualisation of belonging as a measure of belonging for pupils from a range of backgrounds was questioned by school staff during the research development phase. For an investigation of what schools can do to promote belonging for INA pupils to be possible, an understanding of what belonging actually is for these pupils was identified as an essential starting point.

Methodology
Two schools participated in the research which received ethical approval by the Research Integrity Committee (RIC) at the University of Manchester on the 12 April 2012. Both schools had experience of supporting INA pupils and were considered to display good practice in relation to INA by colleagues working in the Local Authority’s Ethnic Minority Achievement (EMA) team. There were also schools that had a willingness to take part in the research to develop practice. Five pupils from the two high schools were identified through purposive sampling. Selection of the young people that took part in the study was decided with school staff through the discussion of the inclusion and exclusion criteria (see Table 1 below). More than five pupils were available to take part, however, due to time constraints a sample of five was decided upon to allow enough time for an in-depth semi-structured interview with each one. When deciding who was invited to take part, consideration was made to the length of time they had been in the school, their country of origin, and language proficiency to ensure a variety of participants and experiences were captured by the sampling.

Staff contacts in each of the schools gave an overview of the study to pupils that met the criteria, they were also given participant information sheets and consent forms that were translated into their home language if necessary. The second stage of recruitment involved a convenience sampling strategy, the first two pupils from each school that returned signed consent forms were selected to take part (plus a third child in School A who participated in the pilot interview).

This research is part of a broader case study looking at the development of a sense of belonging for INA pupils attending high schools. The research used an exploratory multiple case study design with embedded units of analysis, informed by Yin (2009). Figure 2 below illustrates the overall case study design and each of the units of analysis for both of the schools.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inclusion Criteria</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Fit the definition of International New Arrivals – have been living in the UK for less than 12 months.</td>
<td>• Have additional needs such as SEN.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Have been attending the school for between 3 and 12 months.</td>
<td>• Are currently involved with specialist services regarding trauma.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• In Years 8, 9 or 10.</td>
<td>• Have been attending the school for less than 3 months.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Have been attending the school for more than 12 months.</td>
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Table 1: Inclusion and exclusion criteria that informed the selection of INA pupils.
Although this article focuses on the data obtained from ‘Unit of Analysis 6’ in both of the schools; ‘INA descriptions of belonging’, Figure 2 illustrates the complementary data collection strands.

Semi-structured interviews were selected as a method of data collection to minimise cultural bias that may occur through the use of quantitative measures. Semi-structured interviews specifically allow for the exploration of perceptions and enable probing to seek further information and clarification of answers (Barribal & While, 1994). Although a focus group was considered, interviews were decided on as a more appropriate way of gaining the views of INA pupils as the variation in INA pupils’ backgrounds may restrict them from contributing openly to a focus group. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews have been used by other researchers to explore the experiences of INA pupils in the UK, such as adolescent refugees (Hastings, 2012).

The interviews used in this study were directly informed by Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Ecological Systems Model and involved the young people being asked to consider what aspects of their school environment helped and hindered them develop a sense of belonging in school – in relation to the different ecological contexts in school, that is, the school as a whole, their form, their classes, teachers. These questions were also informed by other research that proposed the impact of school ecology on belonging (e.g. Waters, Cross & Shaw, 2010). The interview schedule was piloted with an INA pupil prior to data gathering to ensure the questions were easily understood and coherent with the aims of the study. A copy of the interview schedule can be found as an Appendix to this article.

Interpreters were used to facilitate the interviews with INA pupils. Murray and Wynne (2001) state that it is an ethical obligation to access ‘hidden voices’ (p.160) through
the use of interpreters. ‘By using interpreters to conduct research with members of ethnic minority groups, it is possible (although, in no straightforward manner) to access the thoughts, feelings and experiences of non-English speaking populations living within a different and dominant culture’ (p.159)

Interpreters are used not only for practical reasons but also to empower the participants. Within this study interpreters were used when it was identified by the contact staff member that an interpreter would be necessary. This judgement was based on their experience of working with the young people since their arrival. The role of the interpreters was explained to the pupils taking part within the participant information sheet and again at the beginning of the interviews. The interpreters used were all students on the ‘Master’s in Translation and Interpreting Studies’ at the University of Manchester who were not previously known to participants. An open invitation detailing the required languages was sent to a tutor on the course who disseminated it to students. Arrangements were then made with the students that responded directly until all of the required languages were provided for. The students that provided the interpreting services were the same as those that had completed the translation of participant information and consent forms (where possible). This not only supported coherence within the research process but it also helped to ensure the interpreters had a grounding in what the research was about. The students were also sent the interview schedule in advance to inform them about what would be discussed. We considered Edwards (1998) who argues that ‘researchers need to acknowledge that they carry out interviews with, rather than through, interpreters, and that the latter’s role should be made explicit and be the subject of critical reflection’ (p.197)

For example, creating a ‘triangular’ seating arrangement, maintaining eye contact with the interviewee and displaying active listening skills during interviewee-interpreter communication as is recommended (Edwards, 1998).

Data from each school was analysed separately using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) framework which involves six phases: 1. Familiarising yourself with the data; 2. Generating Initial Codes; 3. Searching for Themes; 4. Reviewing Themes; 5. Defining and Naming Themes; and 6. Producing the Report. Although the analysis process is presented in a linear way, the process was dynamic with earlier stages re-visited to ensure the themes remained grounded in the original data.

Braun and Clarke’s framework was used in order to identify unique and common factors in relation to each school(case) before undertaking a ‘cross-case synthesis’ (Yin, 2009, p.156). Through the analysis themes were identified for each school, the data was then re-read to identify common and unique factors across schools. This enabled cross-case conclusions to be drawn and informed the thematic network map. There was found to be sufficient commonality between the themes identified from both schools to enable them to be collated to inform a single definition of belonging. Some of the themes appear to only be informed by interview data from School A. However, they have been included as they were triangulated with data collected using other data sources from both School A and B as part of the broader case study. A pattern matching approach was also used as an analytic technique when interpreting the findings of the study. This involved considering the relevant existing literature and identifying any patterns between it and the identified themes from this study.

Critique of method and limitations of the research

Gathering perceptions of what belonging means for INA pupils was a challenging task due to the range of terms used to describe belonging and the very nature of it being an abstract, psychological construct. Within the interviews, a brief explanation of belonging was provided to facilitate discussion and a recap of what belonging means for them later
in the interview to support their understanding. It was easy for discussion around belonging to move into feeling ‘welcome’ or an active part of the school community. This was still considered to all be relevant to the overarching concept of belonging.

It is also acknowledged that the methods used to gain participants’ views on belonging had their limitations. For example, there may have been views that were not shared due to the restrictions of time. However, it is recognised that the data represent just a ‘snapshot’ of the pupils at a specific point in time which is not immune to change and external influences. Ethical considerations were made regarding the sampling of INA participants to take part in the study, this included strict inclusion and exclusion criteria. For example, it was considered unethical to include pupils who were known to be suffering from trauma or had identified special educational needs. This means that the participants who did take part do not represent the full range of INA pupils. Furthermore, the overarching term of ‘International New Arrivals’ adopted for this research includes a very diverse range of pupils which incorporates both those that would be defined as voluntary and forced migrants. This research provides an indication of some of the belonging needs for INA pupils, however, it does not illustrate the full range of needs. Furthermore, it does not take into account how the reason for migration may influence their perception of belonging.

Findings
Belonging thematic network map
The Belonging thematic network map for the study is presented in Figure 3 below. This combines the findings from both schools. It has six basic themes and four organising themes which are generally divided into two aspects; the internal experience of the INA pupils (Child-related factors) and environmental factors but there were also several inter-connecting factors that bridge the two. This is illustrated in the thematic network map with the shaded area representing the themes that were associated with the child’s perspective and the non-shaded area representing themes that related to the environment. The themes are discussed below. Unless stated otherwise, the themes are informed by data from both schools. All quotations are taken directly from pupils’ responses within the interviews.

Child-related factors
When asked what belonging was for INA pupils, many descriptions referred to the ‘positive emotions’ and the absence of negative feelings that would be experienced by the pupils and the impact on their external behaviour if they felt a sense of belonging.

‘I’m happy that I can be part of this school and learn what they are learning and learn their language.’

The ‘Personal Development’ theme emerged out of comments made that related to INA pupils showing progress and development which was thought to illustrate their sense of belonging. The comments appeared to relate to holistic development of the pupils as individuals, including their attitude and confidence as well as academic progress.

‘I’m enjoying it more to go to school to learn new things that’s why I have better results.’

Inter-connecting factors
‘Communication’ represents comments that refer to INA pupils’ own development in relation to acquiring English but also the support they receive from others in relation to communication in both English and their home language. This theme emerged from comments highlighting the importance of promoting INAs’ understanding through their development of English and also having support in their first language. Responses referred to how other people support INA pupils to communicate, for example having things translated and explained in their first language. The comments also illustrated the detrimental effects of not being able to communicate effectively.
‘when I first came here, I did not know English properly, it would annoy me not to be able to speak to other people, once I learnt the language it was easier.’

The ‘Understood as a person’ theme refers to the internal experience of INA pupils which enables them to develop but also to what is available in the school environment to enable this. This theme specifically related to descriptions of INA pupils feeling OK to be themselves and school staff actively promoting their feelings of being understood for example through having background knowledge about them. (This theme was only identified from pupil’s responses at school A.)

‘The teachers are good with you…they have a laugh with you, talk with you.’
[get to know you?]
‘yeah.’

The ‘Adjusting to new context’ theme specifically related to INA pupils adjusting to the new school environment and society with the support of the school. (This theme was only identified from pupil’s responses at school A.)

‘I start to get used to this environment but I don’t really feel like it’s home yet but it will change.’

Environmental factors
Many of the descriptions of belonging referred to the ‘Support from Others’ INA pupils received; from the teachers, peers and the schools in general, both when they first start and throughout the year.

‘you know you belong to this school if you go to school and the teachers… help you much.
If you do something good at this school they call home and say your son has done something good.’

The ‘Attitude of others’ theme specifically related to descriptions of other people’s attitudes towards the INA pupils and the absence of negative behaviours for example; ‘others are friendly’ and ‘not being bullied’.

‘I don’t get discriminating attitude because if you are treated like you do not belong or you are treated like an immigrant, you would just leave the country and go.’

The ‘Respecting Cultural and Religious Differences’ theme specifically related to acknowledgement of cultural differences in relation to belonging and how others respect cultural and religious differences which warranted it having its own basic theme. (This theme was only identified from pupil’s responses at school A.)

‘manners about your religion.’
Fitting In’ emerged out of comments made that related to INA pupils being included and feeling part of the school community. Many of the comments related to aspects of the school environment that enabled the INA pupils to ‘fit in’.

‘I’m happy that I can be part of this school and learn what they are learning and learn their language.’

The ‘Friendships’ theme was associated with the organising theme; ‘Fitting In’. However, this theme specifically related to INA pupils’ having opportunities to develop friendships with peers in school and them not being on their own.

‘When I first came here I used to see people saying hi to each other not knowing that ah…the day would come when I had my own friends to say hi to in the morning. So it really has a big impact on how you do at school.’

Summary
The themes that emerged from this study illustrate that having a sense of belonging involves a complex interaction between many factors. Some factors are intrinsic to the INA pupils, such as feeling positive emotions, whereas others take place within the school environment and are directly linked to the attitudes and actions of others. Several themes involve both internal and external factors. The identified interaction between individual and environmental factors that inform feelings of belonging mirrors the processes that are involved in more general enculturation and acculturation processes (e.g. Vedder & Horencyzk, 2006).

This research has highlighted the important role that schools play in promoting a sense of belonging for INA pupils. This is in agreement with other studies that have found schools to have a significant role in promoting a sense of belonging for all pupils (e.g. Waters, Cross & Shaw, 2010) and in supporting immigrant pupils such as refugees (Hek, 2005).

The variety and complexity of the factors identified within this research emphasise the need to consider the holistic needs of INA pupils. The themes identified link with the dimensions of belonging proposed by Faircloth and Hamm (2005). They considered different dimensions of belonging with students representing four different ethnic groups. Informed by research, the dimensions they focussed on were; relationships with teachers, involvement with peers, engagement in school activities and perceived ethnic-based discrimination. They conceptualised belonging as having a mediating role between motivation and achievement (see Figure 1) and they found from their research that the concept of belonging acting as a mediator was robust across all ethnic groups.

Pupils’ descriptions of belonging, particularly from School A, emphasise the importance of being culturally sensitive to different perceptions of belonging and how it is best supported in schools. This is in agreement with the work of Hill (2006) who highlighted the importance of considering a sense of belonging is from a cultural perspective, and also Faircloth and Hamm (2005) who state ‘In ethnically diverse schools, practices should not be levied uniformly across the student body without attention to how members of different ethnic groups might experience them’ (p.307).

Implications of the research findings
The potential implications of the research findings from this study will now be considered in relation to; individual children and young people, schools and educational psychology practice.

For children and young people
The research findings illustrated that belonging is a complex and multi-dimensional concept for INA pupils which involves consideration of identity, acculturation and enculturation processes. This highlights the importance of being aware of these processes and the range of challenges that INA pupils face that may impact on their experience of school. It is also important to
recognise that belonging is not a fixed construct; it can have different meanings for different people and can involve different needs over time. This highlights the importance of getting to know INA pupils individually and developing positive relationships so they feel understood and a valued member of the school community. It is hoped these findings will inform an even better understanding of the INA pupils within the two research schools but also a better understanding of INA pupils more generally.

For schools
This research has highlighted the important role that schools play in promoting a sense of belonging for INA pupils. One aspect of promoting belonging that was highlighted as being important throughout the data was providing two-pronged support with communication. This involves helping INA pupils to acquire English whilst also supporting them in their home language. An important factor that enables the provision of this support is the presence of English as an Additional Language (EAL) staff who have a respected and valued position within the school.

Another aspect of belonging that schools need to consider is the interaction between INA pupils and their peers. This study highlighted the importance of positive relationships with peers in promoting a sense of belonging, this supports previous research (e.g. Sancho & Cline, 2012). However, it was clear from the research that INA pupils often experience negative interactions with their peers. Schools need to consider what they can do to promote positive interactions between pupils, for example; ‘providing children with opportunities for positive inter-group and inter-cultural contact’ Vedder and Horenczyk (2006, p.429) to ensure they are truly multicultural (Berry, 2000).

For educational psychology practice
Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Ecological Systems Model was found to be a useful framework to consider the range of factors that impact on INA pupils’ sense of belonging. It may be helpful for educational psychologists (EPs) to adopt a similar framework to inform their thinking when working directly with INA pupils. It may also be a useful framework to share with school staff to support them to be aware of the range of factors that can influence INA pupils’ sense of belonging and therefore their progress in school. It is important for EPs to have an understanding of the complex acculturation and enculturation processes that exist, not only for INA pupils but for other pupils from ethnic minority groups.

This and previous research relating to belonging suggests there is a role for EPs to support schools to recognise both the importance of belonging and what schools can do to try and foster a sense of belonging, not just for INA pupils but for ALL students. EPs may be in a good position to work with schools to consider their induction procedures and incorporate holistic levels of support to promote a sense of belonging. Although the findings from this study have identified that INA pupils may have some unique needs, the findings also highlight the importance of positive transitions and ongoing support to promote a sense of belonging for all pupils.

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References


Appendix

INA Pupil Interview Schedule
Semi-Structured Interview Questions
(Interpreters will be used where necessary)

Session 1 (30 minutes)

Introductions – explanation of consent and their right to withdraw. The interview will be audio-recorded but it will remain anonymous – name not used in write up. I might also take some notes as we go along.

There are many children like you who join schools from other places and countries. I’m here today as I’m interested in finding out how schools help to make children who have recently arrived from different places feel welcome. This school has many children who have come from different countries like you – I’d like to find out what this school did to help you feel part of the school – what you think helped and what you think could have been better. There are no right or wrong answers.

I’m going to be talking about belonging; when I talk about belonging I mean feeling welcome and part of the school community. 5 minutes

Questions:

1. What does belonging mean for you? 5 minutes

2. When people are new to a place they sometimes feel like they belong and sometimes they feel like they don’t belong there. What do you think can help people to feel like they belong somewhere? 5 minutes
   ● What do other people do?
   ● What is happening around them?
   ● How do they feel?

3. Remember back to your first day at this school. What happened to make you feel like you belonged/did not belong at this school? (Using visuals to illustrate each of the contexts) 10 minutes
   ● Teachers
   ● Peers
   ● Classroom
   ● Whole School
   ● What went well?
   ● What did you find difficult?

Summary of the discussion and opportunity for them to ask any questions. 5 minutes
Session 2 (30 minutes)

- Re-cap – reminder of their right to withdraw.
- Re-focus through reminding them of their description of belonging. 5 minutes

1. Thinking about now, how much do you feel like you belong at this school? 5 minutes

0=do not belong at all, 10=belong very much (Stretch out wool and markers using Blu-tac. Ask child to place ‘me’ where they think they are)

2. What has made you feel like a (insert number they’ve chosen)? (Using visuals to illustrate the different school contexts) 10 minutes

- Teachers
- Peers
- Classroom
- Whole School
- What do you think works well?
- What do you think could be better?

3. How does feeling like you belong/feeling like you do not belong at this school make you feel? 5 minutes

- What impact does it have?

Summary of the discussion and opportunity for them to ask any questions. Reminder of what will happen to the information collected and explanation that they will receive a summary of the findings when the research is finished. 5 minutes

RESOURCES:
Audio Recorder
Pictures
Interview Questions
String
Peg