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Exploring and Promoting School Belonging Through Youth Participatory Action Research: Children as Co-Researchers and Agents of Change in Primary School Settings.

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I, Jenny Conway, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

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Abstract

The construct of belonging refers to humanity's fundamental need to connect to others, places, and experiences. Research indicates that feeling a strong sense of school belonging correlates with academic success, attendance and a range of outcomes throughout life. Due to its perceived benefits, researchers, school staff and Educational Psychologists are keen to identify ways in which pupils' feelings of belonging can be improved in schools. To support this, this study aims to explore school belonging in two primary school settings using a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) approach.

The project adopts a multi-level case study design. In stage one, children in Year 5 participate as pupil researchers. They conduct their own research around factors which impact school belonging using YPAR and create a plan for change based on this. Their findings indicate that a range of factors impact children's feelings of belonging in school.

Stage two evaluates both the YPAR approach and its findings to determine the opportunities and challenges of carrying out research in this way. The findings suggest that YPAR provides valuable insights into the factors which influence school belonging for pupils, can support schools to create change and leads to benefits for the pupil researchers. However, it further suggests that the successfulness of the approach is influenced by logistical challenges, difficulties with engagement and issues related to power.

This study contributes to the field of Educational Psychology by demonstrating the transformative potential of YPAR in understanding and addressing the needs of primary school students. It provides a framework for educators, Educational Psychologists and policymakers to create more supportive and inclusive school communities, ultimately enhancing students' academic and social outcomes, through the promotion of school belonging and through engaging youth voices.

Impact statement

This thesis explored factors that impacted school belonging in primary school settings using a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) approach and evaluated the usefulness of this approach. Research suggests that feeling a sense of school belonging is crucial for outcomes such as academic performance, social development and general well-being. By employing YPAR, this project empowered students to actively participate in identifying, and, most importantly addressing, the factors that influence their sense of belonging.

Exploring Factors Influencing School Belonging

Research suggests that various factors impact whether children feel a sense of belonging at school. These relate to relationships, the school environment and emotional factors. This project explored these factors by supporting pupil researchers to conduct research, in methods of their choosing, to identify elements that influence belonging for themselves and others. The pupil researchers were also interviewed about what they believed influenced belonging. Together, these findings inform contextually bound factors that influence belonging and provide insight into how belonging can be strengthened. This adds to the small amount of existing research related to belonging for English primary school students.

Evaluating the Usefulness of YPAR

Research suggests that YPAR is a transformative approach, which shifts power dynamics by involving students in designing research, collecting data and analysing and disseminating findings. It is believed to enhance the relevance of research and benefit those who are actively involved. The evaluation of this approach focused on the opportunities and challenges. This included discussing the quality of the data collected by the pupil researchers, analysing the level of both the school and student engagement and considering the impact YPAR has had overall. This showed that pupil led research enabled pupils to have an increased understanding of the concept and created the potential

for change within the settings. The project further demonstrated that, as co-researchers, pupils-built skills in communication, critical thinking and carrying out research which contributed to their overall development and engagement in the school community. These opportunities underscore the usefulness of YPAR as an approach for pupils in primary school settings.

Impact on the School Community

The findings supported the individual school communities to identify factors which influence belonging and could then inform intervention to target difficulties and enhance students' sense of belonging. As the findings largely correspond with the eco-systemic factors previously identified in research, this research provides further evidence for all primary school settings about what may influence school belonging for their pupils. It also provides a clear plan of how schools can conduct their own YPAR projects related to this or other subjects.

Impact For EPs

For Educational Psychologists (EPs), this research provides an enhanced understanding of school belonging from students' perspectives which enables them to better support schools and to tailor interventions to the needs of individual children. This approach aligns with the core values of educational psychology which emphasises the importance of understanding and addressing the needs of all pupils. EPs can further use these findings to advocate for YPAR, for change and for promoting inclusion. For policy makers and researchers, this research provides further evidence related to factors which impact belonging for pupils in primary school and gives an insight into the usefulness of YPAR as a method for gaining children's voices and creating change.

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Chapter 1: Exploring and Promoting School Belonging Through Youth Participatory Action Research:

Children as Co-Researchers and Agents of Change in Primary School Settings.

This study is concerned with investigating how a youth participatory action research (YPAR) approach can be used in primary schools to explore and promote school belonging in individual settings. This introductory chapter outlines the professional rationale and personal motivation for this study and finishes by briefly outlining the thesis structure.

Across the world, young people's sense of belonging in school is declining (Craggs & Kelly, 2018). In 2019, the OECD reported that globally at least 1 in 5 school aged children and young people felt that they did not belong to their school and that this figure has risen sharply since the early 2000's (OECD, 2019). This statistic is likely to have increased even further in recent years, since the Covid-19 pandemic, as research suggests both mental health amongst young people and attendance in school has continued to deteriorate as a result (Hamilton, 2024). In fact, recent PISA data suggests that nearly 40% of 15-year-olds in the UK do not feel as though they belong (DfE, 2023). To help address these issues the government in England has suggested that, as a protective factor which builds resilience for children, feeling a strong sense of school belonging should be actively promoted in schools (DfE, 2024). The benefits of this are supported in research as many studies have suggested that a sense of school belonging is a key protective factor for reducing negative, and promoting positive, outcomes for pupils in schools (e.g. Allen & Kern, 2017; Goodenow, 1993; Osterman, 2000). Due to these benefits, school leaders should be eager to better understand the concept, so they are able to adapt practices and, by doing so, improve outcomes for pupils. The benefits of promoting school belonging are also important for Educational Psychologists (EPs) to consider in their practice as much of the work they do aims to support children and young people (CYP) to improve both mental health and academic outcomes with the aim of ultimately increasing happiness and overall life satisfaction for these individuals (AEP, 2023).

However, belonging is a contextually bound concept, influenced by a range of personal, interpersonal and systemic factors. Therefore, it is difficult for EPs and school leaders in the UK to generalise research findings related to the promotion of belonging for pupils in individual English schools as it is likely that, due to belonging's contextual nature, findings will vary depending on geographic location, school culture/policy and social/emotional factors. It may therefore be useful for schools to be supported to conduct their own research to explore school belonging in their settings. This will provide them with relevant and personalised information about what supports, improves and promotes school belonging for their pupils that they can use to effectively improve outcomes in their settings.

Researcher Background

As a researcher's views are likely to impact the direction of the study, it is important to consider how their experiences and background influence the research carried out (Willig, 2013). To ensure reflexivity, researchers should reflect on their backgrounds (Fox et al., 2007). My background is in primary school teaching. I have taught in several schools over my career, mainly in upper Key Stage two (KS2). Whilst teaching, I became interested in inclusion and inclusive practice, with a focus on making primary schools welcoming and supportive spaces for all children. Through this, I have developed an interest in school belonging as the concepts seem to be mutually reinforcing: schools that prioritise inclusion tend to foster stronger feelings of belonging and vice versa (EEF, 2023). As belonging is such a foundational need, it is important for schools to get this right so that children can thrive, feel truly included, and are happy to come to school, hence it became the focus of my work. As a Year 5/6 teacher, I am particularly interested in the impact feeling a sense of belonging could have at this time.

Now on the Professional Educational, Child and Adolescent Psychology Doctorate at the Institute of Education, I take my teaching experiences and interests with me into my new professional role. In this role, I have noticed that more and more of the children I work with in primary schools do not appear to enjoy coming to school, this only worsens after the transition to secondary school. When

raising this with school staff, it is apparent that many believe issues such as Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA) are a choice children are consciously making and are nothing to do with school practices or the school environment, putting the "blame" as purely within child. As an external professional, I believe that many of the issues faced by children in schools are systemic and may be alterable if school staff recognise this. I am keen to use my strengths and skills as a KS2 teacher to support primary schools to gain an understanding of how children feel about the school and to provide support on how to change and improve this situation for these children to improve outcomes and feelings of belonging in primary school.

Outline of the Research

To support this, this project explores school belonging in individual primary schools using a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) approach, where children take the lead in designing, carrying out and disseminating research (Shamrova & Cummings, 2017). It is hoped that this approach will provide individual school settings with information which is relevant and useful to them in the most ethical way, amplifying children's voices. The research aims to identify factors which influence school belonging for pupils in these primary schools and to support schools to make changes that actively promote or support belonging across the school. This study also identifies the opportunities and challenges of using a YPAR approach to explore this topic in these contexts. To do this it adopts a multi-level case study design where the approach will be evaluated in detail across two settings.

This thesis begins by reviewing the available literature around belonging, school belonging and using Youth Participatory Action Research approaches in schools to promote change before outlining the rationale and aims for the current study. It then moves on to provide a justification of the research design, process and tools used to explore the research questions as well as exploring ethical considerations. Finally, the findings are reported and discussed, whilst also reflecting on the methodology, the strengths and limitations of the research and the implications for professional practice.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The chapter begins by defining belonging and school belonging before discussing what research suggests influences this in school settings. This is followed by a discussion around the benefits of child led research in schools, before focusing on YPAR specifically. This forms the rationale for the study. The aims and research questions are then presented.

Defining Belonging

In psychological theory 'belonging' is considered to be a fundamental need which individuals strive to achieve (Allen et al., 2021; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Maslow, 1954). In Maslow's influential Hierarchy of Needs (1968), a need to belong is ranked in importance for human functioning just below basic physiological and safety requirements such as finding food and shelter, as belonging and fitting in with a group has been considered vital for protection and survival throughout history. Seminal theorists, Baumeister & Leary (1995) take an interpersonal view of belonging and define a sense of belonging as the "pervasive desire to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive and significant interpersonal relationships" (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 497). This definition is useful as by highlighting belonging as a "pervasive desire" they emphasise belonging as something humans continually strive for and aim to maintain, comparable, and as important as, other survival mechanisms such as the need for food (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). However, the "minimum quantity" of social relationships indicated in this definition is problematic as it can be argued that feelings of belonging cannot be measured through the quantity of social relationships: belonging relates to a more abstract interplay between the quality of an individual's relationships and how they feel about those relationships (Allen, 2020).

A need to belong can therefore be defined as an individual's desire to connect with and experience positive regard from those around them (Rogers, 1951), to "fit in" and to be sheltered from perceived harm. Individuals must perceive the bonds that they have to be stable and characterised by mutual affective concern to truly experience a sense of belonging (Baumeister &

Leary, 1995). Failure to satisfy this evolutionary need for acceptance is likely to lead to maladjustment and emotional distress, influencing individuals' ability to access higher level processes, affecting their overall happiness and success in life (Maslow, 1943).

Although considered seminal, definitions of belonging that focus entirely on the interpersonal aspects miss other essential influences such as place, culture, and interactions between systems, and may therefore not provide a full picture of the concept (Allen et al., 2021). To reflect this, modern theorists argue that belonging can be defined as a fluid, ephemeral connection individuals have not only with people but also places and experiences (Allen, 2020) where they feel they are an integral part of the system in which they live (Hegarty et al., 1992). Within this Hegarty and colleagues (1992) believe there to be two dimensions to belonging which are 'valued involvement' (the experience of feeling valued, needed, and accepted) and 'fit' (an individual's perception that their characteristics complement the system or environment they are in). Individuals need to experience both to feel a true sense of belonging within any given social system. Considering the importance of the wider system for an individual's feelings of belonging, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems theory (1979) is a useful lens through which to view it. This argues that individuals belong to an increasingly broad network of groups and systems as their lives progress which are as important as immediate interpersonal relationships for experiencing belonging (Allen, 2020).

Research suggests that currently many people across the globe are struggling to feel a sense of belonging and connectedness to the systems in which they live, as more people than ever are believed to be suffering from social isolation (Anderson & Thayer, 2018), social disconnect (Baumeister & Robson, 2021) and loneliness (Allen, 2020). This is likely to be further influenced by the aftermath of the Covid 19 pandemic which led to changes to the way individuals interact with the systems around them (e.g. Derrer-Merk, 2022). Research aiming to identify factors which promote a sense of belonging within the systems is therefore important in order to address these issues and mitigate some of the negative outcomes individuals experience.

However, the varying emphasis evident in the above definitions highlights the disagreement amongst scholars about how belonging should be conceptualised, assessed and cultivated (Allen et al., 2021). This lack of consistency relates to the idea that belonging is self-explanatory and does not need to be consistently defined, causing definitions to vary widely across disciplines (Antonsich, 2010). This is further complicated by issues in measurement of the concept.

Allen and colleagues (2021) suggest that belonging may in fact be divisible into two distinct categories: trait and state "belongingness". Trait belongingness refers to belonging as a core psychological need which is seen as somewhat fixed and stable throughout life, whereas state belongingness refers to a situation specific sense of belonging which is influenced by individuals' perceptions of situations they encounter and can therefore fluctuate throughout the day and throughout life (Allen et al., 2021). It is often unclear what type of belongingness is being measured or picked up on in research, with short term quantitative studies perhaps more likely to measure state belongingness. This is important because a strong sense of trait belongingness is believed to support wellbeing, mental health, and other positive outcomes whereas state belongingness, as it is in constant flux, is considered unlikely to contribute to any lasting changes (e.g. Allen et al., 2021; Cacioppo et al., 2015; Ezran & Cikrikci, 2018). This confusion and lack of clarity is likely to lead to contradictory and at times misleading findings and is therefore important to bear in mind when considering the strength of findings in research.

Defining School Belonging

The time in life where feeling a sense of belonging becomes most important and is likely to lead to the biggest changes in trait belongingness, is in later childhood and adolescence. This is because these periods are extremely sensitive times for the development of the social brain (Blakemore & Mills, 2014; Frith & Frith, 2007). During this time, children experience increased motivation for peer acceptance and a sensitivity to social exclusion (Sebastian et al., 2010). They begin to move away from their families and derive value and self-worth from their connections and relationships with peers (Rageliene, 2016). The experiences children have during this period will go on to influence how

they interact with others throughout their lives and influence later developmental outcomes such as mental health (Goosby et al., 2013). Considering this, much of the available research around promoting a sense of belonging focuses on young people throughout adolescence (Adbollahi et al., 2020; Arslan et al., 2020). As adolescents spend a significant amount of their time in school much of this fundamental need to belong is enacted in the school setting and it therefore becomes an important system in which they can experience valued involvement, fit and ultimately belonging (Goodenow, 1993).

Feeling like you belong in school is an important part of school engagement (Osterman, 2000), an essential part of psychological functioning and is linked to a range of positive outcomes both in childhood and in later life (Allen et al., 2016). Research suggests that children and young people who experience a sense of belonging in their school environments are more likely to develop positive academic, social and wellbeing outcomes compared to those who feel unsupported and disconnected (Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Juvonen, 2006). This includes academic motivation and success (Gillen-O'Neel & Fuligni, 2013), happiness (Law et al., 2013), less loneliness (Roffey et al., 2019), self-esteem (Roffey et al., 2019) and less absenteeism/better attendance (Demanet & Van Houtte, 2012).

Considering this, school leaders and researchers are keen to establish exactly what leads to an increased sense of school belonging for their pupils. Aiming to improve school belonging, and understanding more about it as a construct, is something that is also important to EPs as their role involves supporting pupils with their mental health, academic success and overall development.

Factors Which Influence School Belonging

As with belonging, school belonging can be further described in ecosystemic terms where school belonging, a student's sense of affiliation to their school, is influenced by individual, relational and organisational factors inside the school community and the broader political and cultural landscape unique to each individual and setting (Allen and Kern, 2017). This is exemplified in Allen and

colleagues' Socio-Ecological Framework of School Belonging (2016) which proposes that school

belonging is a multi-layered socio-ecological phenomenon which can be mapped onto

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model (1979). They argue that this model can be used by

school staff and EPs to intervene at various levels to enhance school belonging and as an organising

framework for researchers in the field to categorise school belonging research (Allen et al., 2016).

The following discussion of research aiming to identify factors which promote school belonging is

divided into subheadings to reflect this.

Figure 1

FIGURE 1 SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK OF SCHOOL BELONGING (ALLEN ET AL., 2016)
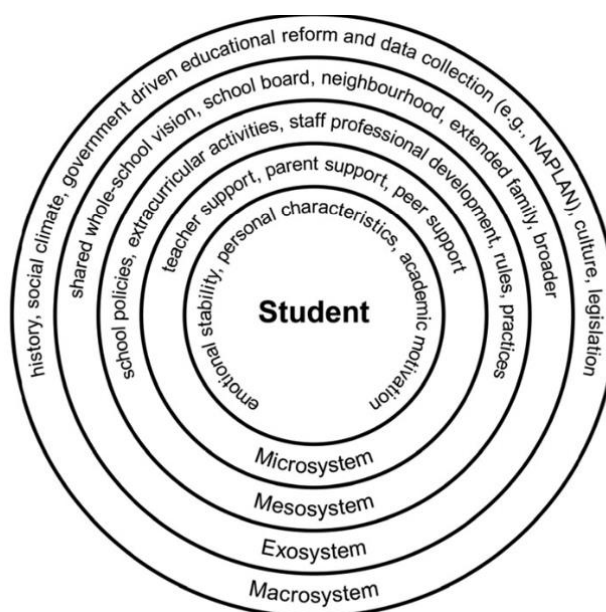
Student level factors

At an individual level, there are various biopsychosocial aspects which are believed to impact

individual's sense of school belonging. Research suggests that there is a positive link between school

belonging and academic achievement (Arslan et al, 2019), self-concept (Gutierrez et al., 2022) and

enhanced wellbeing (Sebokova et al., 2018). Whereas a lack of school belonging is believed to be

linked to behaviours such as bullying, substance abuse (Bond et al., 2007), and even suicide

(Marraccini & Brier, 2017), as well as anxiety, depression and stress (McGraw et al., 2008).

Allen and colleagues found in their influential systematic review that positive personal characteristics are in fact the strongest predictor of school belonging (2018). These include characteristics such as academic engagement, school adjustment, coping skills and self-efficacy (Allen et al., 2016; Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2006). This highlights the potential importance of the promotion of mental health and emotional aspects of the curriculum as schools may be able to improve school belonging by supporting students to develop emotional skills (e.g. Kern et al., 2017). This is particularly important to consider as government guidance suggests that schools have a responsibility to foster wellbeing and mental health through the development of social, emotional learning programmes (DfE, 2021).

Academic engagement, where a student is mentally and emotionally absorbed in their learning tasks, is likely to be the most quantifiable of these outcomes. It is perhaps then not surprising that a large amount of research focuses on this area and promotes the association between school belonging and academic success. Research suggests that when students are engaged in and enjoy their learning, they feel a stronger sense of belonging at school and are likely to experience more academic success (Gillen-O'Neel & Fuligini, 2013; Kuttner, 2023). Additional research indicates that whether students are happy with their attainment further impacts their feelings of belonging (University of Manchester, Anna Freud Centre, & Gregson Family Foundation, 2024).

However, there is less research which supports the association between belonging and other personal characteristics and outcomes (Craggs & Kelly, 2018; Hagenauer, 2020). This may be due to the difficulty in establishing causation in this research as the relationships between many of the variables are likely to be bidirectional and mediated by other factors (Allen et al., 2018). It is therefore important for researchers to be cautious about making generalisations when considering how positive personal characteristics could impact belonging, as many other factors could also contribute to this influence.

Microsystemic Factors

The microsystem refers to the immediate environment children find themselves in such as home and school and the relationships they have within those systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Research argues that as schools are relational communities which are responsible for meeting the social and emotional needs of students, relationships within them are likely to be of high importance for fostering feelings of school belonging (Chhuon & Wallace, 2014).

Teacher Relationships. The quality of relationships between pupils and teachers is believed by many to have the greatest influence on children and young people's sense of school belonging (Chiu et al., 2016; Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2006). Research suggests that positive relationships lead to positive outcomes (Greenwood & Kelly, 2019) whereas negative interactions with teachers can contribute to a lack of belonging in school (Sancho & Cline, 2012). This is further impacted by the feelings of connectedness pupils have to their teacher (Chhuon and Wallace, 2014).

The importance of pupil-teacher relationships is further highlighted in work by Greenwood and Kelly (2018) who collected school staff's perceptions of creating a sense of belonging for their pupils. This study found that teachers believed that pupils' overall sense of belonging in the school settings was most strongly influenced by pupil-teacher relationships and that this relationship was influenced by the support teachers gave to pupils (Greenwood & Kelly, 2018). Teacher support can refer to teachers who promote care, respect, encouragement, friendliness and fairness in their classrooms (Allen et al., 2018) and is believed by many to be a strong predictor for school belonging (Allen et al., 2018; Allen, 2021; Wagle et al., 2021). Individual elements of this shown by teachers, such as respect (Wagle et al., 2021), fairness (Allen et al., 2021), encouragement (Craggs & Kelly, 2018), have also been shown to promote school belonging.

This research highlights the importance of student-teacher relationships for promoting school belonging. However, recent research suggests that teachers feel that they have less time

to build relationships with their students, due to ongoing systemic pressures (Partridge et al., 2020), and this is causing a disconnect between pupils and teachers, leading to negative outcomes.

Peer Relationships. It is important to note that much of the above research does not triangulate findings by asking children and young people themselves for their views and these relationships may not be considered as integral for them. For instance, when asking pupils, Greenwood and Kelly (2018) found that peer relationships were considered more important than relationships with staff for the young people themselves.

In fact, much research suggests that peer relationships are likely to be a direct factor in determining a student's sense of school belonging (Osterman, 2000), particularly related to peer support and peer acceptance (Ahmadi et al., 2020; Slaten, 2016; Wagle et al., 2021). This may be because students who are rejected by their peers are likely to experience stress, anxiety and loneliness (Allen et al., 2018; Porter et al., 2021) and a lack of school belonging is linked to negative peer interactions, peer pressure and bullying (University of Manchester, Anna Freud Centre, & Gregson Family Foundation, 2024). This is supported in a range of research which indicates that having a friendship group significantly influences a sense of school belonging (Allen et al., 2016; Shaw, 2019) and this may be more important for students than other factors such as the school environment (Cemallcilar, 2010).

Interestingly, a study by Bouchard & Berg (2017) found that most pupils and teachers do have similar perceptions of belonging and place similar importance on variables such as teacher and peer support but found that the emphasis placed on these factors differed. For instance, they found that pupils felt that their teachers had an important role to play in supporting their relationships with their peers whereas teachers did not (Bouchard & Berg, 2017). Bouchard and Berg (2017) also found that students are less concerned about fitting in with the whole class and more concerned instead with having a strong friendship group than teachers think they are (Bower et al., 2015; Greenwood and Kelly, 2018) and that this is particularly relevant at the onset of and throughout adolescence (Newman et al., 2007). These differences in views highlight the importance of teacher

attunement and teachers making every effort to understand their pupils' friendships/social relationships as their pupils' views are likely to differ from their own (Bouchard & Berg, 2017). It is likely that these discrepancies between staff and pupil views may cause school staff to underestimate or minimise problems that their students have in terms of belonging (Nichols, 2006) and it is therefore important for school staff to aim to fully understand this nuanced concept from their pupils' point of view to avoid confusion.

Mesosystemic Factors

The meso-system is often considered to be where the other systems interact and therefore, in this case, represents both the school environment, its processes and procedures and relationships between the school and other systems. The importance of the environment is highlighted in Eccles et al.'s Stage, Environment, Fit model (1993) which explains how environments such as school settings can impact upon belonging because the environmental context must fit the developmental needs of the child or young person for them to experience positive outcomes. In school settings, they argue that inappropriate classroom organisation, instruction or climate can contribute to negative changes in student motivation (Eccles et al., 1993) and that this impacts school belonging (Greenwood & Kelly, 2018). Conversely, research suggests that a nurturing and supportive climate leads to increased feelings of school belonging for pupils (Anderman, 2003; Nind et al., 2012).

Some recent work has sought to explore further the impact of environmental factors on school belonging (e.g. Chhuon & Wallace, 2014 & Chiu et al., 2016) so that school environments can be adapted to meet the needs of the pupils (Ellerbrock et al., 2014). For instance, some research has focused on aspects such as break and lunch times and found that when these were unsupervised pupils felt less safe, and this influenced their perceptions of belonging (Porter et al., 2021). Whilst other research suggests that larger schools can increase feelings of belonging as pupils have more opportunity to meet likeminded peers (Shaw, 2019). Other research in this area focuses on the positive benefits of extracurricular activities that schools offer to students in relation to belonging (e.g. Blomfield & Barber, 2010; O'Donnell et al., 2023; Slaten, 2016) as well as research around

school rules and fairness (e.g. Allen et al., 2018; Libbey, 2004). Research further indicates that involving children fully in school life, allowing them to make decisions and be involved in democratic practices which affect them, will enable them to feel like they belong at school (Schall et al., 2016; Torre et al., 2008).

Another aspect of the mesosystem would be the interaction between a child's school and home environments. This is confirmed in Allen et al.'s (2016) meta-analysis which found that parental support was strongly related to school belonging. It is therefore likely that creating strong links between school and home, providing the ability to share information, will further impact on school belonging (Greenwood & Kelly, 2018). These findings suggest that schools should aim to involve parents as part of a whole school approach to school belonging (Allen et al., 2016) and that the development of school policies which prioritise these links are likely to be particularly valuable (Allen et al., 2016).

Although likely that school culture and practices will impact school belonging, it is important to acknowledge that much of the above research has been carried out in secondary school settings and may not be directly transferable to other school contexts. This is particularly relevant when considering the mesosystem as school practices, structure and, therefore, the relationships between stakeholders, are likely to differ significantly in different types of schools.

Exo and Macrosystemic Factors

The exosystem represents the wider community surrounding both the school and the individual young person, whereas the macrosystem represents broader legislation and governmental policies and procedures as well as culture and history (Allen et al., 2016). There is less research which focuses on the effect of these systems on school belonging than around the other systems (Kirschman & Karazsia, 2014). This is likely to be because the influence is somewhat removed and therefore difficult to measure.

Regarding the exosystem, some research suggests that schools may be able to bolster feelings of belonging through engagement with their local communities (e.g. Cemalcilar, 2010) but data in relation to this is difficult to gather. This problem intensifies when considering the macrosystem as it is even further removed. However, as issues like government policy consistently emerge as concerns for teachers in school-based research (Roffey, 2012), it is likely that aspects of educational policy will have some impact on school belonging as it relates to the school culture, practice and the ability of teachers to engage with students. These issues were highlighted in a recent literature review by The National Children's Bureau (2024) which concluded that teacher workload increases, brought about by increasing administration tasks as a result of changes to the OFSTED inspection framework, country wide practices to managing behaviour, such as isolation, as well as extensive testing would likely have a negative impact on pupils' sense of school belonging. Exo and macro systemic factors may be particularly important to consider in the wake of the Covid 19 pandemic as outcomes for children have continued to worsen after this time (e.g. Hamilton, 2024).

Although research may not have directly linked these factors to school belonging, it is always important to consider the time, place, and circumstances in which research has taken place and the influence this will have. This is particularly important to acknowledge when considering structural inequalities such as racism, ableism, sexism and homophobia which are embedded within society, cultural norms and education, implicitly shaping children's school experiences. Some research suggests that because of these inequalities belonging can never be considered a neutral concept, as it means that belonging is more achievable for children who conform to dominant norms such as behaviour, language and identity (Ramos et al., 2024). In fact, research suggests that discourses of belonging can mask, and sustain, systemic inequalities (Vincent, 2021). These critiques call for a more intersectional lens on belonging and critical reflexivity for those working in the system to establish not just whether children belong but to interrogate who is being asked to assimilate and why.

These issues, as well as issues related to how recent initiatives around the promotion of school belonging (e.g. DfE, 2024) have been interpreted by different local authorities are important to critique and acknowledge. For instance, some local authorities and EP services have implemented initiatives to target school belonging, such as South Gloucestershire Educational Psychology Service which has created a toolkit highlighting the importance of school belonging to reduce exclusions and supporting schools to create inclusive environments that foster a sense of belonging (South Gloucestershire Council, 2025), whereas other local authorities have not focused on it in this way. Similarly, some schools and the local authorities they are situated within will have better processes for reflecting on, and dealing with, systemic issues such as racism than others. It is therefore very possible that children in schools across the country will have extremely different experiences in relation to how they experience belonging and what it means to "fit in". This is supported in research which indicates that the biggest difference in feelings of school belonging relate to the school and geographic areas that pupils are in (University of Manchester, Anna Freud Centre, & Gregson Family Foundation, 2024). Considering this, schools would likely benefit from individualised support to explore and promote belonging as it relates to their pupils, their contexts and the inequalities they may be facing. To provide this support, research in this area may be most beneficial when carried out in individual settings to reflect the circumstances and context.

Summary

Research suggests that a wide range of ecosystemic factors influence feelings of school belonging for children and young people. However, these findings should be interpreted with caution as many of these factors are likely to be interlinked. For instance, it could be argued that it is impossible for pupils to be engaged in their learning if they do not feel bonded with their teachers and their peers or if the content and environment of the lesson is not appropriate for their needs. These factors may be particularly important for those working with primary school children to consider as most of this research is carried out with older adolescents in the second half of secondary school or in college. It is therefore unlikely that a full picture of factors which influence

belonging across childhood and adolescence has been gathered and this leaves some substantial gaps in understanding. As research suggests that different factors may influence school belongingness at different year levels, it is important to acknowledge these at each age and stage without presuming that what works in a secondary setting will work in primary (Vaz et al., 2015).

School Belonging in Primary Schools

Until recently, research which focuses on school belongingness in the later years of primary school was limited (Vaz et al., 2015; Wagle et al., 2021). However, in recent years, the interest in school belonging from the point of view of primary school children has increased with studies showing that a sense of school belonging is influenced by and can influence several factors for these children. For instance, Palikara and colleagues (2021) found that school belonging was indirectly related to socio-emotional wellbeing and levels of loneliness for primary school pupils, whilst Vaz and colleagues (2015) found that a variety of personal and school-based factors influenced belonging for primary school students. Sari (2012) found that belonging was also related to academic outcomes for children of this age.

In the English context, a recent comprehensive literature review from the National Children's Bureau (2024) examined the concept of school belonging, how it is measured and its impact on well-being and academic performance. The review found that school belonging in both primary and secondary schools significantly affects academic performance, mental health and overall wellbeing as well as finding effective initiatives to promote belonging include fostering positive relationships within school settings whilst acknowledging the importance of the environment itself, arguing that inclusion and involving the wider community are vital (NCB, 2024).

Further research suggests that promoting school belonging may be particularly beneficial across the primary to secondary transition because transitional periods are believed to be extremely influential for feelings of belonging (Mays et al.,2018) due to the changes and challenges children and young people are likely to experience during this time (Longaretti, 2020). This is important as

poorly managed transition can lead to long term negative effects (Neal & Yelland, 2014), such as anxiety (Evans et al., 2018), poor academic outcomes and social withdrawal (West et al., 2010). Early intervention, prior to transition, could significantly influence feelings of school belonging at this stage (Neil & Christensen, 2009) and ultimately make changes to improve these outcomes which will persist over time. In fact, research indicates that a good sense of school belonging in primary school is likely to persist across the transitional period and contribute to 22% of the variability in secondary school belongingness (Vaz et al., 2015). This association may relate to findings indicating that high belongingness in primary school predicts resilience which enables a more positive attitude to learning and increased emotional wellbeing when transferring to secondary school (Sancho & Cline, 2012). Although there has been a substantial amount of research carried out after the transitional period when pupils have started at secondary school, there is limited research around belonging that takes place prior to this transition.

It is important to note that few of the studies mentioned above were carried out in an English context with findings coming from Australia (e.g. Vaz et al., 2015), Turkey (e.g. Sari, 2012) and the USA (e.g. Wagle et al., 2021), even within the NCB literature review. Due to the likely differences between ecological systems, it is difficult to generalise these findings to schools in England. It is therefore important for more research to be carried out in England (NCB, 2024). In addition, whilst these studies provide interesting starting points, few studies (e.g. Palikara et al., 2021) are longitudinal or monitor school belonging over time. They rely on cross sectional designs and often only use purely quantitative methods, giving little room for in-depth understanding of the complex constructs from the participants' point of view, making it difficult to draw connections between belonging and these factors.

Considering these issues, there is still limited understanding around how to improve school belonging practically in individual primary school settings in England where children's experiences and perspectives are fully understood (Allen & Bowles, 2013). To address these issues, research should be conducted in English primary schools and use qualitative measures to provide more detail

and insight that will give schools as much useful information about belonging in their settings as possible. However, it is important to note that due to the level of detail required for qualitative research, findings across qualitative studies may not be directly comparable. Considering this, schools should aim to combine the knowledge gained from existing research, which suggests that many ecosystemic factors influence belonging, with conducting their own research to establish exactly what children in their settings believe impacts belonging so that they can make impactful changes to their environments and practices.

Educational Psychologists Involvement in Promoting Belonging in Schools

Educational Psychologists should be actively involved in promoting school belonging due to their expertise in understanding child development, learning and mental health within school contexts (Boyle & Lauchlan, 2009). Their roles involve working with those in a system to create supportive environments that promote positive outcomes for all pupils. To do this, they often adopt a systemic, evidence-based approach where they focus on fostering positive relationships, supporting with curriculum development and prioritising the voices of individual children (O'Donnell & Kirkner, 2014) to enhance inclusive practice and support wellbeing (Boyle & Lauchlan, 2009). They are therefore well placed to address barriers to belonging (Cameron, 2006).

There is a small amount of research which focuses on EP involvement and belonging. For instance, when investigating belonging in special needs schools, a recent study reported that EPs could support belonging using the "Three C's Framework" (connectivity, compassion and communication), at both a systemic and individual level, to support the building of positive relationships and fostering open communication (Allen & Boyle, 2023). This project provides a useful starting point when considering how EPs can be involved in promoting school belonging but should be interpreted with caution as it was conducted in a specific geographic area and may therefore not reflect the situation in other locations.

Although there are few studies which entirely focus on EPs' impact in promoting belonging, there are several studies which comment on the potential benefit of EP involvement in this work as part of their wider findings. For instance, in their meta-analysis examining the importance of school belonging for positive outcomes, Allen and colleagues (2018) assert that EPs can play a crucial role in designing and implementing policies, practices and training which enhance school belonging when adopting a whole school approach. They further argue that EPs can support relationships between pupils and teachers by providing training and resources, facilitating open communication and promoting inclusive practice (Allen et al., 2021).

Due to their potential usefulness, additional research calls for further exploration into the mechanisms through which EPs can enhance school belonging (Allen & Bowles, 2013). One such way EPs may be particularly useful is through highlighting pupil voices and opinions, as gaining authentic pupil views is the cornerstone of their work.

Involving Students in Research

As mentioned above, much of the research into school belonging in primary schools has been carried out either from adults' perspectives or using purely quantitative methods, where children are seen as data points rather than true participants in research (Shaw et al., 2011). Therefore, children and young people's experiences may not be completely understood and explored in the available research (Kiefer et al., 2015). As children make up most of a school setting, it is concerning that much of the research is not from their perspectives and that they have little say in decisions that impact them (Gillett-Swan & Sargeant, 2018). Children are active and knowledgeable social actors who have unique insights into their own experiences and environment (Flewitt et al., 2005) yet their school experiences and their ability to participate in research are bounded by hierarchical systems (Aziah & Eddy, 2016). Due to their knowledge of the system they are in, exploring a sense of belonging from young people's perspectives and involving them in the research can inform and shape practices relevant to policy, pedagogy, and teacher training

(Longaretti, 2020). Because of this, including children in research conducted in schools is arguably essential for bringing impactful change (Kiefer et al., 2015).

There are two main reasons to involve children as much as possible in research. The first is that it is the right thing to do. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) states that all children have the right to have a say on decisions that affect them, involving them in research allows them to have the most freedom to do so. The second reason is that participating in such research is believed to have positive effects for the child, their wider system, and the research itself (Brett et al., 2014). For researchers, this type of involvement leads to research and outcomes which reflect young people's priorities (Brady et al., 2018). It ensures that tools, methodologies and reporting are relevant and accessible for all children and young people and may add credibility to the research for others (Ansell et al., 2012). For school staff, it offers a chance to understand children's lives at school in a way that would not be possible if this research was conducted by adults (Nassem et al., 2017). For children, some benefits include the development of transferable skills, increased confidence and being able to make an active contribution to their communities (e.g. Anselma et al., 2020).

What it means to involve children in research differs significantly across traditions and epistemologies (Brady et al., 2018) due to the use of varying models which make distinctions between types of involvement in relation to the degree of power which is shared. In Hart's (1992) Ladder of Involvement, involvement is split into three levels of consultation, collaboration, and user-controlled involvement. Consultation is the most frequently used in research involving children as it is often seen as the most appropriate level for their developmental stage (Christensen & James, 2008). Consultation is seen as merely *seeking views* and *listening to* as opposed to genuine participation (Hill et al., 2004). To be truly inclusive, to fully include children in research and give them power and control (Boyden & Ennew, 1997), it is important to seek to be collaborative or to encourage user-controlled research where children have full ownership of the research being carried out (Shaw et al., 2011). This type of child-led research is growing in popularity (Tisdall et al., 2024)

and is defined by Kellett (2010) as any research which children design, carry out and disseminate with adult support rather than management. It is important to note that the term child-led research is often used interchangeably with other terms such as Youth Participatory Action Research (McMellon & Mitchell, 2018) or child-driven research, (Mutch, 2017) leading to slight variations in methodology but shared characteristics and perceived benefits.

Child led, participatory approaches acknowledge that children and young people are experts in their own lives (Christensen & James, 2008). Although generally considered to be a positive and increasingly popular methodology, child-led research is not without criticism. For instance, questions have been raised about whether children have the skills and competency to be able to meet research standards (Hammersley, 2017) due to a potential lack of cognitive, linguistic and analytical skills. Another issue raised relates to tokenism, where children are given titles of "researchers" without any genuine influence (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008) and this may relate to practical constrains, such as time, that limit the depth of children's involvement (Bradbury-Jones & Taylor, 2015). According to Thomas (2021) these are issues which must be contextually considered in relation to the circumstances, the type of research and the children's motivation. Much research in fact has demonstrated that children can engage with child-led research and can create research questions (Gray & Winter, 2011), design the research (Kellett, 2010), choose appropriate methods, collect and interpret data (Lundy et al., 2011) and disseminate findings (Kellett et al., 2004) when they receive appropriate training and support to engage meaningfully and are motivated to do so (Kellett et al., 2004). In relation to tokenism, Lundy (2007) emphasises the need for structured support to ensure that pupil researchers have both an audience and influence. The role of the adult facilitator is crucial in addressing both issues as they must balance the level of support needed (Kellet, 2011).

It is also important to acknowledge the ethical complexity of conducting research such as this relating to informed consent and emotional safety. This will be discussed in greater detail at other stages of the report but researchers stress the importance of ongoing, procedural ethics to

manage such issues in these contexts (Christensen & Prout, 2002). Despite these potential constraints, research illustrates that when these issues are addressed with ethical awareness, reflexivity and an awareness of power, approaches involving children can yield rich insights.

Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR)

Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) is often considered the best way to involve young people in researching issues which affect them as it is flexible and can fit the needs and the nature of the research as it progresses (Robson, 2011). The origins of Participatory Action Research (PAR) can be traced in two directions, north and south (Freire, 1998; Lewin, 1946). The northern tradition, led by Lewin (1946) who coined the term action research, was designed around the premise that most research did not benefit participants. Therefore, Lewin (1946) created a circular research process with three basic steps of planning, acting, and evaluating which would support this. The southern tradition, influenced by Freire (1998) focused on the two concepts of critical consciousness, which encourages the oppressed to be aware of their situation, and praxis, where action and reflection take place simultaneously, to lead to social transformation for oppressed groups (Healy, 2001). The repeated circle of action and reflection, coupled with Lewin's (1946) three steps of action research, forms the foundations of PAR.

YPAR can be defined as a process which involves young people constructing knowledge through identifying, researching, and addressing social problems in partnership with adults (Jacquez et al., 2013; Shamrova & Cummings, 2017) and is based on three key principles as conceptualised by Rodriguez and Brown (2019). It is inquiry based, it is participatory, and it is transformative (Rodriguez & Brown, 2019). It is intended to empower participants and enable them to increase their control over their lives (Baum et al., 2006). However, PAR and YPAR specifically are difficult concepts to define because they can be used as overarching terms for all approaches involving children and young people in collaborative research (Banks et al., 2013). It is therefore important to distinguish YPAR as a process whereby young people share power with adults across the process, are trained in research approaches and are encouraged to apply research methods independently to

create social change (Ozer & Douglas, 2015). It is this element of change that may make this method particularly useful for schools wishing to make changes to their practices to improve school belonging as this will increase the likelihood that changes made will directly benefit the students.

Outcomes of YPAR

Research suggests that participation in YPAR is associated with positive developmental outcomes for children and young people (Shamrova & Cummings, 2017) such as increased engagement, motivation, and sociopolitical awareness (e.g. Ozer & Douglas, 2013; Voight & Velez, 2018). Engaging youth voices appears to support students to develop the skills they need to engage in the governance of their school settings (Lac & Cumings Mansfield, 2018) and enables them to create change both for themselves and the world they inhabit (Cammarota and Fine, 2008). Castro and colleagues (2022) looked at how being involved in a YPAR project led to development for students and found that it resulted in increased optimism, interest in peers, sense of connection, collaboration, and confidence which in turn led to increased inclusion and engagement in school for marginalised pupils. In their review of American research, Anyon and colleagues (2018) found that the most common outcomes associated with YPAR across studies were agency and leadership, followed by academic, social, critical consciousness, interpersonal and cognitive skills. These skills are believed to help young people to develop a sense of social connectedness and improve feelings of belonging (Anyon et al., 2018). This corresponds with research around school belonging which suggests that involving young people in democratic school practices, such as YPAR, is likely to increase feelings of belonging (Schall et al., 2016; Welton, 2018).

As research indicates that participating in YPAR projects at school could not only help schools to understand school belonging from the students' point of view and enable them to make relevant changes but may also improve feelings of school belonging for the pupils involved, a thorough literature search was carried out on 1st August 2025 to identify all significant studies related to YPAR and school belonging in primary schools (Booth et al., 2016). There were no studies

which were found to directly relate to belonging using a participatory approach in the England and no studies at all which used this approach to explore belonging specifically (Appendix A).

However, several international studies did find that students gained skills which could be linked to belonging. For instance, Langhout and colleagues (2014) investigated how participation in YPAR influenced relational empowerment in the US and found that through this process, students' sense of belonging improved. They found that students more actively participated in the school community due to the confidence and collaborative skills they gained (Langhout et al., 2014). This could also be a potential outcome in English settings but is difficult to confirm due to the differing nature of the school systems between countries.

Rationale

Belonging is a systemic construct influenced by the systems within which individuals interact (Allen, 2020). Failure to feel a sense of belonging is linked to a variety of negative outcomes throughout life (Anderson & Thayer, 2018). Although belonging is often considered relatively fixed (Allen et al., 2021), there are times when intervention may improve feelings of belonging for individuals. One such time is in late childhood, at the onset of adolescence, as due to the social development experienced at this time, a sense of belonging is both variable and malleable (Blakemore & Mills 2014). As school is a key system at this stage, a sense of school belonging is considered likely to lead to a range of positive outcomes such as fewer incidences of emotionally based school non-attendance (EBSNA) (e.g. Gulliford & Miller, 2023), higher levels of academic motivation and success (Gillen-O'Neel & Fuligni, 2013) and increased happiness (Law et al., 2013). Considering this, EPs and school leaders are keen to establish exactly what leads to an increased sense of school belonging for their pupils to intervene and promote these factors to ensure an increased sense of belonging across their pupils' lifetimes.

Research suggests that a range of individual factors such as self-efficacy (Allen et al., 2016), microsystemic factors such as relationships with peers and teachers (e.g. Chiu et al., 2016),

mesosystemic factors such as parental support (Allen et al., 2016), exosystemic factors such as involvement in community projects (Cemalcilar, 2010) and macrosystemic factors such as governmental policy, are likely to influence feelings of school belonging (Roffey, 2012). However, as much of the research in this area is conducted in secondary settings, it is difficult for those working with children prior to the secondary transition to know if these factors will influence feelings of belonging for their pupils. There is some limited primary research which suggests that similar factors influence belonging for primary school aged pupils. However, due to issues with methodology (most studies only use quantitative methods), and location (most studies are not carried out in the England), it is still difficult for primary school leaders and EPs in England to infer which factors will influence feelings of school belonging for individual children in their specific schools and settings.

It is therefore likely to be beneficial for primary schools to carry out their own research in their settings to explore factors which influence school belonging for their students so they can make changes to promote this. As the research indicates that the most effective and ethical way to conduct this research with children and young people is to involve them as much as possible, as this will ensure that the concept is better understood from their perspectives (Longaretti, 2020), it is likely that using a child-led research approach will give schools the most accurate idea of the changes that should be made in their settings.

To support this, this study uses a child led research approach known as YPAR to explore school belonging from the point of view of the children in the school and to support the children and school staff to make lasting changes. YPAR can be defined as a process which involves young people constructing knowledge through identifying, researching, and addressing social problems in partnership with adults (Jacquez et al., 2013; Shamrova & Cummings, 2017) and is considered to be inquiry based, participatory, and transformative (Rodriguez & Brown, 2019). It encompasses making changes to practice through allowing children to address social problems (Jacquez et al., 2013; Shamrova & Cummings, 2017) and may therefore lead to some useful changes for the schools involved.

Through participation in this type of research, children and young people are likely to experience a range of positive developmental outcomes (Shamrova & Cummings, 2017). One of which may be feeling an increased sense of school belonging, through increasing links to the community and improving soft skills such as communication (Anyon et al., 2018). Because of this, schools using YPAR to find out more about school belonging may also be able to influence feelings of school belonging for their pupils by allowing them to be involved in such a method.

As YPAR is an under-used method in this subject area and with this age range, research in this way is further likely to provide novel insights into the benefits and challenges of using YPAR in primary school settings. The study therefore aims to explore how a YPAR approach can be used in a primary school context, to identify how this can contribute to understanding of school belonging in the settings, to understand the influence the YPAR approach has on pupil co-researchers and the wider school and to ascertain how a YPAR approach may lead to change in a primary school context.

For the purpose of this study, school belonging will hence forth be defined as "Feeling safe, accepted and important in your school. It is when you feel like you are part of things, like your ideas matter and people care about you." This definition is shared with all participants and has been chosen as it uses simple and accessible language, which is appropriate for a wide range of audiences including children, to convey the key theoretical components of belonging (safety, acceptance, value and connection) which are drawn from the literature (Goodenow, 1993; Allen et al., 2016). It also reflects the socio-ecological perspective as it touches on each domain and is intended to support child led inquiry by framing belonging in a way that allows children to reflect on their own experiences with each system.

Research Questions

RQ 1: What can the use of YPAR tell us about belonging in individual school settings?

RQ 2: Does YPAR lead to perceived change in individual school settings?

RQ 3: What are the opportunities or challenges of using a YPAR approach in a school context to

explore school belonging in primary school settings?

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

To address the research questions, this project adopted a multi-level case study design, where qualitative and quantitative data were collected and analysed across two cases (Halcomb & Andrew, 2009). This chapter begins by discussing the context and philosophical underpinnings of the research which provides an explanation for the chosen research design, methods of data collection, analysis and interpretation. An overview of data collection methods and analysis for each case is then outlined. The chapter also incorporates considerations related to ethics and the quality of the research.

Philosophical Position

This study was primarily underpinned by an interpretivist paradigm, drawing on a relativist ontology and constructionist epistemology. Interpretivism is concerned with understanding actions and social phenomena through exploring beliefs, motivations and interpretations. This position reflects the belief that reality is shaped by experience and context and is not something that is objective and fixed (Schwandt, 2000). As such, it is likely that several realities or interpretations of a phenomenon could be constructed (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). This paradigm is appropriate here because the research was interested in how participants experience and interpreted the YPAR process and the concept of school belonging, rather than seeking an absolute truth. Both school belonging as a concept and YPAR projects in general are context dependent, co-constructed phenomena which could be interpreted differently depending on the subjective experiences of those involved and the context. For instance, in this study the pupil researchers and I interpreted the data we collected through the lens of our inherent subjectivity (Braun & Clarke, 2014) and, as such, interpretations could vary significantly compared to other projects.

To reflect this, this study further primarily adopts a relativist ontological position, believing that multiple realities can coexist and that there is no one single objective truth, but rather multiple

socially constructed realities shaped by experiences, relationships, and context (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln et al., 2011). Epistemologically, the study is grounded in constructivism, which argues that knowledge is co-constructed through interaction and engagement in the world, is context dependent and shaped through relationships (Lincoln et al., 2011; Schwandt, 2000). This particularly aligns with the context of this project as the participants were also the co-researchers and were therefore actively involved in shaping both the process of data collection and its content (McCarthey et al., 2021). Meaning was developed collaboratively through this process (Charmaz, 2006).

Whilst the study is rooted primarily in a social constructionist ontology and interpretivist epistemology, emphasising subjectivity, voice and meaning making, there will be a small amount of quantitative methodology used which raises questions of philosophical alignment. Further complicating this, due to YPAR's critical nature outlined in more detail below, many projects such as this are often adopt a critical stance. To incorporate these conflicting world views, this project could have adopted a pragmatist paradigm. This would have allowed for the combination of perspectives as pragmatism does not see methodologies or approaches as separate but as combinable elements to understand a research problem (Schoonenboom, 2019). It focuses on what works. This would enable the combination of a constructed social reality, objective realities, and critical world views which may be relevant for a YPAR project (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). However, pragmatism can be criticised as it does little to explain how different world views can be combined and coexist and instead focuses on getting the job done which can lead to tension and the prioritisation of objective facts (Biesta, 2010). It is also considered to provide little space for research reflexivity in relation to power within the research process (Mertens, 2009).

To overcome this, rather than adopting a pragmatist stance, which I felt might de-emphasise the interpretive and participatory nature of the work, I drew instead on dialectical pluralism (Johnson, 2017). Dialectical Pluralism allows for the integration of multiple epistemologies, acknowledging that knowledge is always partial and situated and that both qualitative and quantitative data can contribute to a richer understanding when used reflexively (Shan, 2021). It

allows for the brief use of quantitative tools to help to summarise patterns and validate findings without promoting them as complete generalisable truths which should be prioritised over qualitative data. This data supports meaning making within a socially constructed framework and ensures that a variety of perspectives are represented (Mertens, 2003). This philosophical framing retains the study's interpretivist core whilst acknowledging the practical value of methodological flexibility (Shan, 2021).

YPAR was used in this study as a method for data collection within the broader case study rather than as a paradigm. To reflect this, this study did not adopt a critical perspective as this was not the focus. However, although not grounded in critical traditions, the use of YPAR within the project overall does create space for critical reflection regarding voice, agency and inclusion (Kellett, 2010; Lundy, 2007). This is appropriate as YPAR is fundamentally a flexible approach than can be used in many research paradigms depending on aims (Cahill, 2007; Torre, 2009). As a framework it emphasises collaboration, participation and the co-construction of knowledge which fits well with the research paradigm outlined above (Cahill, 2007; Cammarota & Fine, 2008).

This philosophical position underpinned the primarily qualitative case study design, where quantitative data added context, to allow for an in-depth contextual exploration of perceptions regarding school belonging and the usefulness of YPAR in these settings. The aim was not to generalise but to develop a rich understanding, focused on highlighting children's voices, reflecting their lived experiences in specific contexts (Yin, 2018).

Research Design

This project explored the contribution using a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) approach would have towards the understanding and promotion of school belonging in primary school contexts. To do this, in a way that reflected the philosophical position, this research project adopted a multi-level, multiple case study design involving two separate cases or strands. The project was then divided into two concurrent levels.

Level one in each strand refers to the pupil led YPAR project. This explored school belonging in each setting and demonstrated how primary aged children could participate in a YPAR project which contributes meaningfully to the school community in ways that align with key aspects of school belonging. Level two of each strand refers to the evaluation of the YPAR project and explored what impact taking part had on the pupil researchers and the wider school community in relation to belonging and other systemic outcomes. Both strands were combined to identify overarching themes which addressed the research questions. The cases and strands can be exemplified below and will be discussed in turn to maintain clarity.

Figure 2

FIGURE 2 LEVELS AND STRANDS OF THE RESEARCH
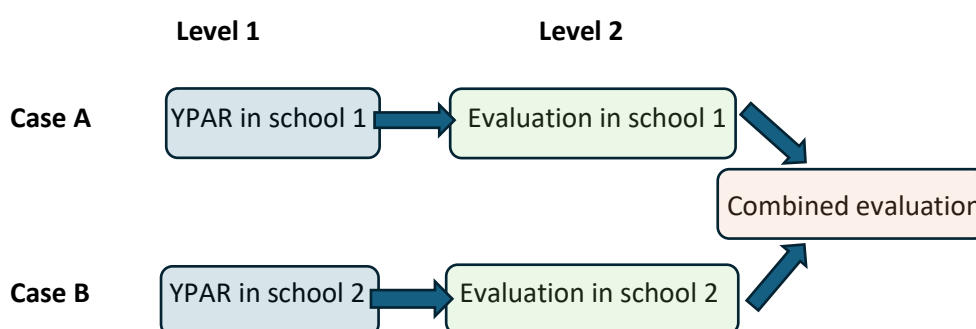
A case study framework was chosen as case studies allow for in-depth exploration into specific contexts and perceptions within that context (Yin, 2018), providing rich and detailed insights which align with the paradigm outlined above (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). In this project, it allowed for deeper exploration into a complex and multifaceted issue, school belonging, which is influenced by many factors.

Case studies can be criticised for their reliance on inherently subjective qualitative methods, where the researchers' biases may impact the data. Some critics further suggest that case study research is not trustworthy and lacks generalisability because it focuses too heavily on specific contexts. Nevertheless, as case studies create a rich and nuanced picture (Simons, 2009) they can

offer some transferable insights because of this, even if these are not statistically generalisable (Yin, 2018). These criticisms can therefore be mitigated through the triangulation of data, ensuring the researcher is explicit about their positionality (Stake, 1995) and by analysing multiple cases to identify common themes or patterns which may enable further application of the data and the method (Yin, 2018). Within the case study, the following sources of data were used to answer each research question:

Table 1

TABLE 1 DATA SOURCES FOR EACH RESEARCH QUESTION

Research Question	Data Source 1	Data Source 2	Data Source 3
RQ1: What can YPAR in primary schools tell us about school belonging?	Data gathered by the pupil researchers as part of the YPAR project.	Themes identified from pre and post interviews with pupil researchers.	
RQ2: Does YPAR lead to perceived change in individual school settings?	Action plans generated by the pupil researchers as part of the YPAR project.	Quantitative data from the pupil Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale (PSSM) (Goodenow, 1993).	Themes identified from post interviews with pupil researchers and key staff members.
RQ3: What are the opportunities and challenges of using a YPAR approach in a primary school context to explore school belonging?	Themes identified from post interviews with pupil researchers and key staff members.	Background data from the staff completion of the adapted PSSM.	

Radio Model

Both cases (A and B) and levels (1 and 2) of the project were combined through the Research and Development in Organisations (RADIO) model to structure the design as it encompasses "real world research" and aims to develop skills through capacity building (Timmins et al., 2003). It provides a clear structure for research of this kind which is useful to share with schools and other stakeholders. The model aligns with participatory and constructivist principles of the research as it embeds agency and reflection whilst allowing for a shared structure between adults and pupils and guiding the actual research activity.

However, the model can be criticised for being relatively linear which could be considered to conflict with the cyclical nature of participatory work (Nind et al., 2012) and leads to the need to break out of the model at times to adapt as needed. Nonetheless, given the context and timescale of the research, the RADIO model provided an accessible scaffold that gave clarity and was adaptable, which made it more appropriate than more complex models such as the "YPAR Cycles" (Cammarota & Fine, 2008) which is often used with older young people and would have been too complex for this research. The table below shows how the model was applied in this study to combine all elements of the project. Each element will be discussed in more detail throughout the body of the text.

Table 2

TABLE 2 RADIO MODEL

The RADIO phases	Specific activities and outcomes	
1. Awareness of need	• Through my work as a trainee EP in a local authority, I identified a need for research around school belonging.	
2. Invitation to act	• Senior leaders were contacted by email (Appendix B).	
3. Clarifying organisational and cultural issues	• Initial meetings were held between facilitator and school leaders to outline the project, the RADIO model and plan dates going forward. • Information and consent sheets were shared at this time (Appendix C)	
4. Identifying stakeholders in areas of need and conducting initial data collection.	Kingstown • I spoke to Year 5 about the project. • 6 children were chosen to be pupil researchers; they were asked to give informed consent (Appendix D) and were interviewed about school belonging (Appendix E). • They completed the Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale. • Staff members were asked to complete an adapted PSSM scale (Appendix F).	Wellington • All Year 5 pupils were asked to participate and gave consent (Appendix D) • They completed the Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale. • 6 pupils were chosen to be interviewed at the start of the project (Appendix E). • Staff members were asked to complete an adapted PSSM scale (Appendix F).
5. Agreeing focus of concern (research aims)	• The pupil-researchers and the facilitator met to decide on the research focus. (The children have had a research training session in preparation for this, see appendix G for session plan and resources).	
6. Negotiating framework for information gathering	• The pupil-researchers had another research training session on research methods and decided on an appropriate methodology.	
7. Gathering information	• The pupil-researchers used their research method to gather data from other children, with supervision from the facilitator (Appendix H and I). All children	

		involved had opt out consent forms sent home before participation (Appendix J).
		• The children then analysed their data to share with school leaders.
8.	Processing information with stakeholders and agreeing areas for future action.	• The facilitator and pupil-researchers shared their findings with school leaders. They then collectively identified areas for development.
9.	Action planning and implementation.	• The stakeholder group (school staff and pupil-researchers) planned actions and put this into practice. • This represents the end of stage 1.
10.	Evaluating action and the project.	• The pupil researchers took part in follow up interviews and revisited the three houses. • The pupil researchers completed the Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale (Goodenow, 1993) again to compare to pretest conditions. • Key school staff were interviewed about their perceptions of the project and asked for follow up information 3 months after the project's completion (Appendix K). • This concludes stage 2. • Once both levels of the project were completed, the overall findings were shared with the school. • All participants were debriefed (Appendix L).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this research was granted by the UCL Institute of Education Research

Ethics Committee, and the project was registered with the UCL Data Protection Office. The British

Psychological Society codes of ethical research practice were followed (BPS, 2021).

As with all research involving children, keeping children safe whilst completing the research

was of high priority. As an individual, I have had comprehensive safeguarding training as part of my

job roles so felt equipped to identify, prevent and address any potential issues that may have come

up. I made sure to be aware of, and to follow, the school safeguarding procedures in both settings.

In YPAR research, it is important to balance safeguarding children and ensuring their active

participation, overprotection can limit a child's agency whilst insufficient protection could expose

them to harm (Loveridge et al., 2024). Ethical research should empower and not limit involvement

(Loveridge et al., 2024). Therefore, as I did not expect there to be issues related to emotional

distress or exploitation in interviews with the pupil researchers or in their work, I made sure to

balance protection with meaningful participation by creating an environment where the children felt safe to express their views whilst also enabling them to participate fully.

All data handling adhered to the UK General Data Protection Regulations (UK GDPR) and institutional ethics protocols. Data was anonymised at the point of transcription, with all names, locations and identifiable references removed. Electronic data was stored in a secure, encrypted, password protected One-Drive folder and physical notes were locked in a secure cabinet. Only the researcher had access to the raw data. This data will be stored for 10 years, in line with university policy and then destroyed.

To ensure the research was ethical, consideration to consent and transparency was also given. These considerations are discussed where relevant in the following sections to reflect that YPAR necessitates an ethically embedded approach.

Participants/Sample

This research took place in two primary schools in the Midlands in England. These schools will henceforth be known by the pseudonyms of Kingstown and Wellington Primaries. Both schools are small, one form entry, village primary schools set in rural communities. These schools were chosen on a purposive basis based on their perceptions of needing support with negative outcomes associated with school belonging such as EBSNA, loneliness, peer issues or academic motivation of students. They were recruited through existing professional relationships I had with the schools as part of my role as a Trainee Educational Psychologist. Whilst this facilitated access and trust, it is important to acknowledge that this could also have led to bias as the schools were already receptive to support in these areas. The findings should therefore be understood within the context of schools which were open to this type of work, and that had a pre-existing relationship with the facilitator, rather than being representative of all primary schools.

In both schools, Year 5 students (aged 9-10) were chosen to act as pupil researchers. Upper KS2 pupils were chosen due to their potential ability to engage with the research process which may

not have been possible with younger children due to developmental factors such as a lack of maturity, literacy skills and interest in others. This age group was also chosen because research suggests that a sense of belonging may be malleable during late childhood, at the onset of adolescence, due to the social development experienced at this time (Blakemore & Mills, 2014). Year 6 pupils were not chosen due to the issues around scheduling that would have been present.

In Kingstown Primary, I went into the school and presented the research project to Year 5 children, asking for volunteers. The children were then selected at random from the pool of volunteers. Six pupil researchers were chosen, although only five completed the pre and post measures. In Wellington Primary, the whole class took part in the YPAR project split into four groups. From the whole class, five children also participated in pre and post interviews. In both settings, the children were then asked to give their own informed consent.

Due to the participatory nature of the research, gaining informed consent from all parties involved was a priority. An information sheet and opt-in consent form were sent to parents of all children in Year 5 in both schools to give consent for the children to be pupil researchers (Appendix C). The pupil researchers were then shown a child friendly information sheet and asked to give their consent before any work began (Appendix D). Further opt-out consent forms were sent to the parents of any child who would be participating in the YPAR project as participants e.g. children in other year groups who were interviewed by the pupil researchers (Appendix J). This type of consent was chosen here as YPAR research suggests that consent can be difficult to gain from some groups of parents and this can lead to young people missing out on participating (Teixeira & Richards-Schuster, 2024). This was negotiated and agreed with the schools on the basis that pupil data would be anonymous from the point of collection.

Level One - YPAR

Level one adopted a YPAR approach to explore the concept of school belonging from students' perspectives and provided an example of how YPAR can be used by primary school

children to explore this. Pupil researchers, with the support of the facilitator, designed, carried out and evaluated a research project related to school belonging. They then shared their findings with school staff and created an action plan with agreed changes to implement. This level aimed to provide information about school belonging in the setting (RQ1) and create change (RQ2).

Participatory Action Research was chosen as a method of gaining children's voice because it opens space for different forms of knowledge generation through innovation and social action (Kindon et al., 2007). It is an orientation to inquiry (Reason, 2006) which adopts an innovative methodological approach to respond to the needs of contexts and the relationship between researcher and participants (Kindon et al., 2007). It is an approach which is guided by a series of epistemological principles. 1. It is critical in nature, 2. It takes an inquiry stance, 3. It is situated in the lives of young people, 4. It draws on their unique knowledge and experience, 5. It features youth participation at every stage, 6. It is designed to create change (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Valenzuela, 2016). Because of this, YPAR is considered to belong to a critical research tradition where power, oppression and resistance are at the centre of the inquiry-based research process (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Mirra et al., 2015). With this method, power was given to the pupils in the schools enabling them to create change through inquiry to overcome issues in a way that was child led.

To engage effectively with YPAR, pupil researchers should be taught skills to conduct the research (Kellet et al., 2004), however, there is little information in literature around how to teach these skills. Therefore, I used my experience as a primary teacher to design research methods training to deliver to the pupil researchers. A plan and a detailed outline of sessions including resources can be found in the appendices (Appendix G).

Although different in each setting, each YPAR project included the following three elements:

1. The pupil-researchers had a part to play in decision making at all stages of the research.

2. The pupil-researchers received training to support them in identifying issues of concern and carrying out research.

3. The pupil-researchers led and conducted research to better understand their issue of concern.

(Ozer & Douglas, 2015).

As the research was conducted in school settings, where power dynamics are built in and non-negotiable, it was important to ensure that power was addressed transparently. This was discussed with the pupil researchers and an environment where they felt comfortable to express dissent was established (Khawaja & Bagley, 2023). To support this, I introduced myself to the pupils by my first name and made it clear I did not work for their school and that we would be working together to complete this project. I also made sure to adopt methods which empowered them to reduce hierarchical barriers (Gallagher, 2008).

Due to the issues of power, research suggests that true consent can be challenging to gain in schools and in YPAR. There is an inherent power imbalance between adult and youth researchers which can influence consent as youth may feel pressured to agree (Khawaja et al., 2023). To address this, pupil researchers' consent was checked at the start and end of each session, and it was made clear that they could withdraw at any time and there would be no consequences of this. This was regularly revisited to ensure continued understanding and willingness to engage (Loveridge et al., 2024).

Data Collection

To begin the YPAR project, the pupil researchers in each school first developed a research question which sought to address a particular question they had about school belonging. They then decided how they were going to answer this question and what methods they were going to choose. Due to the lack of fixed methods YPAR could perhaps be considered less scientifically rigorous than other traditional methods (Jason et al., 2003). However, allowing children and young people to choose their methods is an important part of the approach and often leads to the use of creative

research approaches such as the use of photos or performance (Wilson et al., 2007) which are more relevant to the young people themselves. The results gathered by the pupil researchers were incorporated into the overall findings of the project and support in answering RQ 1.

In the first school, Kingstown, the group of pupil researchers decided that they wanted to use multiple methods to explore the concept of belonging in their school. Their main goal was to find out if children were "happy" and establish what could make them happier. To do this they decided to create a questionnaire, conduct focus group interviews and participate in their own photo voice project (Appendix H).

- The questionnaire they created was based on the Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale (PSSM) (Goodenow, 1993). They used this as a template and adapted it to suit their needs. The questionnaire had 10 items and children could choose whether they agreed (Yes!), Disagreed (No), or were somewhere in the middle (Maybe). The pupil researchers gave out the questionnaires to children in years 3, 4 and 6 and then collated the results. They had 38 respondents in total.

- They then conducted two separate focus groups. The questions for these focus groups were based on what they wanted to know more about. One focus group was with years 3 and 4 and the other was with year 6. There were around 15 participants in each group. The pupil researchers read out their questions and recorded the answers using school iPads.

- Finally, they created their own photovoice. Using a polaroid camera, they took photos of things in school which they personally felt helped them to belong. Each pupil researcher took at least 2 photos. They then wrote a short explanation beside each photo.

In the second school, Wellington, the whole class participated as pupil researchers and were divided into 4 groups of 6 at random. Each group decided what they wanted to find out, who they wanted to collect data from and what they were going to do. Group 1 decided to interview year 1, group 2 interviewed reception, group 3 interviewed year 3, and group 4 interviewed some teachers

(Appendix I). Each group interviewed at least four participants and recorded their interviews on iPads.

To ensure that all the research conducted was ethical, including the youth led elements, pupil researchers were given extensive training around ethical practice and procedures and were asked to make sure they sought and established consent from their participants (Kontak et al., 2023). It was important to make sure this training was accessible and comprehensible to the pupils (Teixeira et al., 2023) and for them to recognise that this was an ongoing process which could change at any time as the research progressed (Bradbury-Jones & Taylor, 2015).

Data Analysis

The sources of data were analysed by the pupil researchers using an approach appropriate for their chosen method. All data collected corresponds with GDPR (2018). Due to the high number of overall participants, it was important to sensitively manage and protect all data collected as part of the project and to ensure participant confidentiality (Busher & James, 2022). Therefore, the pupil researchers were instructed to collect data anonymously. Since it was anonymised at the point of collection, it was not possible for participants to opt out once data was submitted. This anonymised data will be stored on the secure UCL OneDrive for 10 years.

For qualitative data the pupil researchers used a simplified thematic analysis and a basic statistical analysis if quantitative data was collected. Although there are examples of child led data analysis in YPAR research (e.g. Foster-Fishman et al., 2010), it is relatively uncommon for children to be involved in the analysis process and, therefore, it was unclear how they would engage with this. Thorough training was provided on both analytical methods. Children in both settings had the opportunity to practise and to check each other's work, overseen by the research facilitator.

The thematic analysis portion of the research, although simplified, followed the structure set out in Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phase framework for doing thematic analysis. In Kingstown, there was also the need for a basic form of statistical analysis. The

pupils collated the results of their questionnaire using a tally chart and then used basic

fractions to interpret, the denominator being the number of responses e.g. "12/38

respondents felt that…".

The results in both schools were presented via a computer presentation format using

PowerPoint, as chosen by the pupil researchers. They independently created their slides and then

presented their findings. They then worked with school staff to create an action plan to enact

change.

Level Two - Evaluation

This part of the research consisted of an in-depth exploration into the pupil researchers'

perceptions around school belonging and the YPAR project, using semi-structured interviews, as well

as a broad look at the perceptions of belonging of children and staff in the school setting, through

quantitative methods. This part of the project aimed to identify opportunities and challenges of

using the YPAR approach (RQ3), provide schools with additional information about belonging in their

settings (RQ1), and to identify whether participation leads to any change for pupil researchers or for

the school settings (RQ2).

Data Collection

Qualitative Data. The main qualitative element of this level explored pupil researchers'

perceptions around school belonging and their thoughts about participating in YPAR (Appendix E).

Pupil researchers were also asked whether they perceived any changes after the project was

completed. I used semi structured interviews to provide a rich and detailed understanding of the

phenomena being studied from the perspective of the group being studied (Lincoln & Guba, 2016).

Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they allow for lengthy responses, enabling for

views to be fully expressed, and allowing perspectives to be captured in more detail than other less

thorough methods such as focus groups (Nathan et al., 2019). Due to their flexible nature, semi-

structured interviews also allowed for the use of the "Three Houses" resource (Weld & Greening,

2004). This resource was used as it enables children to participate more actively in the interview

process, reducing the need for spoken language whilst also promoting their voice (Winter, 2009), and enables them to organise their thoughts and reflect on their experiences (Luckock & Lefevre, 2008).

Six children from each setting were chosen to be interviewed, but only 5 from each school completed both sets of interviews which gave 10 participants. Braun and Clarke (2014) argue that 10-15 participants are appropriate for research involving semi-structured interviews. Although this sample size is at the lower end of that number, it is considered appropriate due to the interpretivist nature of the project as the focus is on gaining a deep understanding of participants individual experiences (Hennink et al., 2017). In addition, it is common for sample sizes to vary in studies involving YPAR which reflects their diverse contexts and goals (Ozer & Douglas, 2015).

The teacher or SENCo in charge in each setting was also interviewed using semi-structured interviews, after the project had taken place to seek their views and triangulate findings. They were then asked for further feedback two months after the project had ended to identify any ongoing change (Appendix K).

The qualitative data collected from pupil researchers through interviews was pseudonymised. The interviews were recorded through Microsoft TEAMs and immediately added to a secure One Drive. The recordings were deleted once transcribed. The researcher listened to each recording multiple times to ensure transcription was thorough. The transcripts will be stored electronically for 10 years.

Quantitative Data. To complement this in-depth perspective, a broader view of the wider school population was sought through an anonymous questionnaire given to all children in Year 5. The Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale (PSSM) (Goodenow, 1993 was used for this because it has a good internal consistency, is considered unidimensional and is widely used in research around belonging with children aged 10 and above (Wagle et al., 2021). The questions were read aloud for all students so those under 10

(aged 9) should have been able to engage with the content with adult support. The use of

this scale, rather than the adapted scale for younger children created by Wagle and

colleagues (2021), ensures that findings are comparable to other research around school

belonging. This scale was used as a pre- and post- measure with all pupil researchers.

As YPAR is a relatively under-used method, it was important to collect as much data as

possible around its effectiveness and possible benefits. Therefore, data from staff were also

collected before the project began to attempt to understand their perceptions of school belonging

and to give a sense of the school climate. I adapted the Psychological Sense of School Membership

scale (Appendix F) for use with adults. This is a scale which is regularly adapted in research and

ensures that teachers' responses were directly comparable to their students. The teacher and pupils'

data gave an overall picture of how belonging is seen and prioritised in the setting. The following

table shows the mean scores for the pupils and their teachers.

Table 3

TABLE 3 BACKGROUND MEAN SCORES

Kingstown	PSSM mean score	Adapted PSSM mean score	Wellington	PSSM mean score	Adapted PSSM mean score
Number	Pupil Sense of Belonging	Teacher Sense of Belonging	Number	Pupil Sense of Belonging	Teacher Sense of Belonging
1	4.6	4.4	1	3.2*	4.8
2	4	5	2	4.6	4.5
3	4.6	4.3	3	3.9	4.6
4	3.2*	4.1	4	4.6	4.5
5	4.7	4.6	5	3.7*	4.4
6	4.1	5	6	4.6	4.7
7	4.1	4.4	7	4.7	
8	4.5	4.1	8	3.9	
9	4.6	4.6	9	4.2	
10	4.1	4.3	10	4.3	
11	4.2		11	4.1	
12	4.3		12	3.5*	
13	4		13	4.2	
14	3.7*		14	3.9	
			15	4.3	
			16	3.4*	
			17	3.9	
Total Mean	4.2	4.5		4.1	4.6

Notes:

Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) (Goodenow, 1993)

*Below 3.84 mean score indicated a negative sense of belonging

In Goodenow's (1993) original research, the mean score for all participants was 3.84 (SD=0.72). They suggest that any score below this indicates a low sense of school belonging. It is interesting to note that teachers in both settings had higher mean scores (4.5 and 4.6) than the pupils (4.2 and 4.1) suggesting that they perceive pupils' perceptions of belonging to be higher than they are. However, scores for both schools indicate that in general, pupils feel as though they belong in their schools.

Data Analysis

Qualitative Data. The qualitative interview data was subjected to reflexive thematic analysis, as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Braun and Clarke's six phase approach (2006) was followed using NVivo software (Appendix N). This approach analyses and reports important patterns and themes from the data in relation to the research questions and therefore provides a coherent interpretation of the views of the group being studied (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2014; 2019). It was chosen due to its capacity to capture the nuanced and subjective experiences of participants, making it suitable for the chosen paradigm. It also allowed me, as the researcher and research facilitator, to be involved in the knowledge production which enabled the construction of a rich, detailed understanding of the views of those being studied (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2019).

It was unclear from the available research what the children in primary schools would think about belonging or taking part in YPAR, therefore, a hybrid approach, between deductive and inductive reasoning was adopted (Appendix N). Reflexive thematic analysis allows for codes to be created both a priori and a posteriori and is therefore more appropriate than other thematic approaches which do not allow this, such as coding reliability TA, which may be better suited to a positivist epistemology (Braun et al., 2019).

Quantitative Data. The quantitative questionnaire data were inputted into SPSS (Version 29). An initial exploratory data analysis was carried out to examine descriptive statistics so that

normality, outliers, and patterns in the data could be established. When considering the pre and post data for pupil researchers, due to the low number of participants, the data were then subjected to non-parametric tests to establish whether there had been any change between time one and time two. This data supports findings related to RQ2 as it allowed for the exploration into whether being involved in YPAR led to any statistical differences in belonging for the pupil researchers.

Quality of the Research

To ensure the quality of this project, as the case study features mostly qualitative data, I explored the criteria originally proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) related to establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability and authenticity in qualitative research (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Credibility

To ensure credibility, the accuracy and truthfulness of my findings from the perspective of participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), I made sure to build rapport with the pupil researchers to allow them to feel comfortable and able to fully share their perspectives. This was also built into the pupil researcher training to encourage them to gather credible data through YPAR. I triangulated data, where possible, using multiple sources of data, methods and investigators. For instance, interview findings with pupil researchers are compared with the findings from the YPAR projects and with teacher interviews. This triangulation contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of experiences. I then provided a summary of the findings for participating schools to allow for member checking. This ensured that the findings reflected their understanding. Findings were also discussed with colleagues engaging in similar projects to obtain external perspectives (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Transferability and Dependability

To ensure transferability, I ensured that I provided a rich description of the research context and processes so that the research can be replicated and findings applied, where appropriate, to other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To establish dependability, I maintained comprehensive

records of all aspects of the research process, much of which is included in the appendices. I engaged in reflexive journalling throughout the study to enhance transparency. This process ensures that the research is traceable and thoroughly documented.

Confirmability and Authenticity

To ensure that findings were shaped by participants rather than my biases or interests (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), I provided a clear explanation of how the data was analysed, collected and interpreted. I also engaged in an ongoing process of reflexivity to examine my own assumptions, beliefs and influence and, as mentioned above, engaged in the triangulation of findings, using multiple sources and methods to reduce bias.

Authenticity refers to the extent the research represents different views whilst also allowing for opportunities for empowerment and change (Guba & Lincoln,1989). To ensure fair representation, I chose children at random to participate in the YPAR and evaluation in school A and included all children in the class in school B. I also ensured that the YPAR process itself allowed for the empowerment of pupil researchers and participants as they were given opportunities to shape the research process and contribute to change, leading to catalytic validity (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Positionality of the Researcher

To correspond with the ontological and epistemological positions, my involvement in the research was not objective. The construction of knowledge was complicated by the fact that I was part of the YPAR process and at the same time I was carrying out my own research into the usefulness of this approach. I facilitated the YPAR projects and supported the pupil researchers in the gathering and interpreting of data as an active action researcher rather than as a detached observer. The pupil researchers and I shaped meaning together (Schwandt, 2000). I then also gathered data to evaluate this approach. This required ongoing reflexivity as it was important to acknowledge how my own experiences and personal beliefs would impact my work and interpretation of the project.

For context, I was a primary school teacher for eight years so had some preconceptions about how children would engage with the process and interpret belonging. Reflexivity helped me to consider how my assumptions, power and positionality might impact contributions and co-construct meaning (Finlay, 2002) and this is something I reflected on after every session in my reflexive journal. A reflexive journal/field notes are believed to be an essential part of rigorous qualitative research (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018) and as such are used to enhance data and provide richer context for analysis to increase trustworthiness (Creswel & Creswell, 2022).

This ongoing self-assessment ensured that ethical considerations remained at the heart of the project (Phelan & Kinsella, 2013) and enabled the research to be conscious of inherent power dynamics, putting in place strategies to mitigate this, whilst critically addressing my own authority and ensuring that children's voices were heard and valued (Gallagher, 2008). I was particularly mindful of this at the start of the project as I needed to provide a lot of information and resources to set up the project and as such held most of the power (Kellett, 2010; Lundy, 2007). To counteract this, I explicitly discussed power with the pupil researchers and emphasised their ownership.

Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction

This chapter begins with a description of each case study and an outline of the YPAR sessions in each setting. Next, to maintain clarity, and integrate the multiple sources of data collected across the project, findings are discussed in relation to the three research questions.

Kingstown Overview

In this school, five pupil researchers worked with me (the research facilitator) to conduct their YPAR project as an intervention during lesson time. The pupil researchers names have been pseudonymised as Adam, Serena, Ezra, Jasmine and Millie. Staff members were not directly involved in the facilitation of the project although they did complete an adapted version of the PSSM to establish their views about belonging in the setting. The Head Teacher and SENDCo were involved in co-creating the action plan with the pupil researchers at the end of the project. Six sessions were held over a period of three months across May, June and July 2024. The final session was held in early September 2024.

Kingstown Pupil Researcher Findings

The pupil researchers from Kingstown collected data using a questionnaire, two focus group interviews and photovoice.

Figure 3

FIGURE 3 PUPIL RESEARCHER QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS

Questions	Yes ☺	Sometimes	No! ☹
1. Do you feel like a part of this school?	29	8	1
2. Do you think you can be yourself at school?	20	14	4
3. Are you proud to be at this school?	34	5	0
4. Do you feel safe at school?	28	2	2
5. Do teachers recognise your hard work?	11	25	0

Questions	Yes ☺	Sometimes	No! ☹
6. Do you think people are friendly at this school?	13	20	2
7. Do you take part in lots of activities at school?	19	12	5
8. Do you want to make more friends?	18	8	12
9. Do you have friends to play with at break?	22	11	5
10. Do things worry you at school?	10	17	9

The pupil researchers felt that overall, the results were very positive. They were particularly interested in the results from question 5 (Do teachers recognise your hard work?), because 25 of the

children surveyed felt that teachers only sometimes recognised their hard work, and question 8 (Do you want to make more friends?) as 18 of the children surveyed wanted to make more friends. They focused on these findings when considering potential changes for their action plan.

Focus Group Interview Findings. The pupil researchers then conducted two focus groups, one with Year 3 and 4 children and one with Year 6 children to explore some of these questions in more detail. The pupil researchers identified that what children said about their school was very positive. Most children seemed to like the school and feel like they belonged.

The children in the focus groups were able to identify a range of things they liked about school, such as friendly people, the teachers, the school being small and people being different. They also discussed factors which enabled them to feel that they belonged such as the school being welcoming and feeling like a family, being around diverse groups of people and feeling like they fit in. Additionally, they mentioned factors which caused them to feel worried such as being shouted at and people being mean. They further talked about things they might like to change, such as making football fairer, keeping the environment cleaner and children being less mean, as well as things that would help other children to feel happier such as being friends with everyone, caring about each other, and listening.

From this, using a basic form of thematic analysis, the pupil researchers identified the following themes which they felt were most important. They then focused on these themes when creating their action plan:

- being a good friend

- helping each other

- people being mean

Photovoice findings. The pupil researchers then went around their school and took photos of things that made them personally feel as though they belonged at school. They explained their choices as follows:

- Signs around the school that ask children how they feel, explain how to keep yourself safe and encourage people to be friends

- Areas in the school help children to be together and play

- Worry boxes help children to seek advice

- Resources such as toys are important to help children play together

- Work displays demonstrate pupil's hard work

- Religious artefacts help children connect to their religion and school values

Summary. From these findings and results, it appears as though a range of personal, interpersonal and environmental factors are important for children in this setting to experience a sense of belonging. When reflecting on the successfulness of these sessions, it seemed that the goal, for children in year 5 to conduct a research project and decide on some changes related to this, had been achieved. However, there were issues related to scheduling of the sessions as well as understanding of the concept and session content that limited successfulness overall. I aimed to use these reflections to improve upon the logistics and facilitation for the next case study.

Wellington Overview

The second school is also a small, rural, one form entry primary school in the Midlands in England, but in a more affluent area than Kingstown. The project was commissioned with the school SENDCo, but facilitation was supported by the class teacher. Other staff members were not directly involved in facilitation although they did also complete an adapted version of PSSM. The senior leadership team were not involved in this project. In this school, the whole class worked with me (the research facilitator) to conduct their YPAR project. Five children were then interviewed as part of the evaluation component. These children have been pseudonymised as Bina, Eden, Dora, Jimmy and

Nathan. The seven sessions were held over seven consecutive days (excluding weekends) based on feedback from the previous case study. All sessions were held in October 2024.

Wellington Pupil Researcher Findings

As all children in the class at Wellington were involved, they were split into four groups of six to complete their research. Each group decided to interview a different group of children or staff using questions they decided upon as a group. Each group conducted their interviews, transcribed audio recordings, used a simple version of thematic analysis and then presented their findings via PowerPoint slides. As a whole class, the children were then supported to create a summary of results and to develop a joint action plan. Summaries of each group's findings, written by the children, are included below.

Group 1 - Interviewing Year 1.

"Our group found that all children in year one liked being in the school. They like playing with their friends but some of the children found it hard to make friends. All the children like the teachers and feel happy and safe at school. They love to learn, and nobody wanted to be in a different school. Our group decided to focus on helping all children to make friends, so we want to set up the rainbow bench again and have assemblies about being yourself."

Group 2 - Interviewing Reception.

"We found that all children in Reception liked being in school. They liked school lunches, had lots of friends and felt happy and safe. They said they liked English and Maths. Most children said some people were being rude to them. We want to focus on giving children a space they can go when people are being rude to them and give them more learning equipment to help them enjoy their favourite subjects."

Group 3 - Interviewing Year 3.

"All of the children we asked like school. They do not think school is challenging and they like their teachers. All the children feel a part of the school and feel safe. However, some of the children said they had worries and found some lessons hard. To help with this, we think that teachers should try to make more lessons fun or challenging, and the school should buy more resources to help with learning."

Group 4 - Interviewing the Teachers.

"Teachers said the school was small, nice and friendly. They said there were lots of ways behaviour was dealt with and that it is important to understand what is going on beneath the surface. Positive behaviour is rewarded with stickers and reward points. Teachers think that it can be upsetting when children do not represent the school well and think there should be more tournaments and residentials as these are a good way to get out of school. We think it would be good to have more tournaments and residentials but also more break and lunch time, and sensory circuits to improve behaviour. We think that more 1:1 teachers could help to talk to children about why they were upset."

Summary. The children at Wellington Primary identified a range of issues that affected whether children in the school felt like they belonged. The focus of this differed between groups which likely reflects the specific research questions that were used and considered to be important by each group. From these findings, the children were supported by the research facilitator to identify what they felt was most important. They collectively decided on the following:

- Lots of children feel happy and safe at school

- Lots of children feel like they have friends although some people find it hard to make friends and some friends can be rude

- Most children like their teachers and their lessons, but some find the lessons hard

Again, when reflecting on the successfulness of these sessions, it seemed that the goal, for children in Year 5 to conduct a research project and decide on some changes related to this, had been achieved. However, I was concerned about the buy-in from senior leaders in this school and unsure whether change would happen in the long term.

What Can YPAR In Primary Schools Tell Us About School Belonging?

The section presents key findings related to research question one: What can YPAR in primary schools tell us about school belonging? The section briefly summarises the data gathered in the pupil-led YPAR project and is supported and triangulated by interview quotes from both pre- and post- interviews with pupil researchers. This section is divided into three key themes "Individual Factors", "Interpersonal factors" and "Environmental Factors", and associated subthemes, as illustrated below in a thematic map:

Figure 4

FIGURE 4 RQ1 THEMATIC MAP
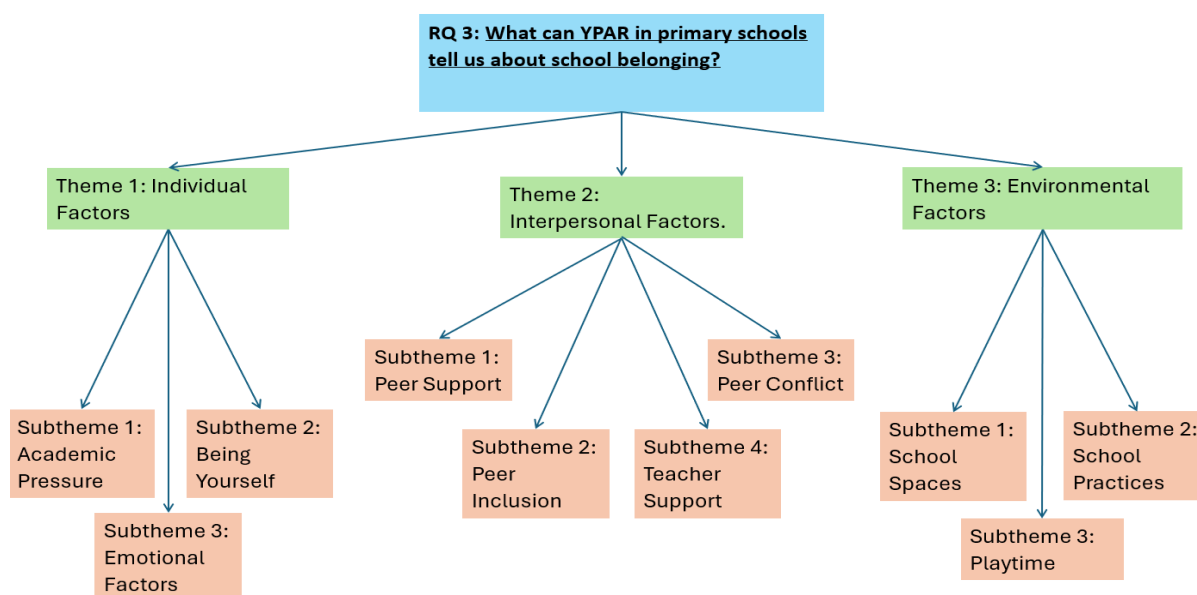
Theme 1: Individual Factors

Across both YPAR case studies, children reported a range of individual factors which they felt influenced whether they belonged at school. These factors were reflected during the pre and post

interviews. They included emotional factors such as feeling happy, academic factors such as worry about getting things wrong, as well as the importance of being yourself.

Emotional Factors. In both YPAR projects, the pupil researchers found that children generally felt "happy" and "safe" at their schools and asserted that these factors were important aspects for belonging. In the Kingstown YPAR project, it was further identified that "worry boxes" were supportive factors which helped children to navigate their emotions and feel a sense of belonging.

This was mirrored in the evaluation interviews where pupil researchers in both settings indicated that their emotions influenced whether they felt like they belonged at school. They particularly felt that feeling happy was a key factor which determined belonging. For instance, Eden stated, "Probably like you're happy at school," (Eden) when asked what helped children to belong. The children also felt that being unhappy would lead them to lose a sense of belonging. For example, Adam reported that being, "lonely and sad" would stop children from feeling like they belonged.

Academic Pressure. In both school settings, the pupil researchers' findings suggested that children's enjoyment of learning and the academic pressure they felt influenced whether they were happy at school and experienced a sense of belonging there, with children indicating that "worry" about work would cause them to experience difficulties.

This finding was also supported in the evaluation interviews. For instance, pupil researchers at Kingstown commented that they thought that children's worry about the work they had to do and "getting things wrong," (Adam) in class would be a reason why they would feel that they did not belong at school. When asked what would help children Millie stated that she wanted, "Not for them to worry about school," and further explained this worry as, "If they worry about like this one piece of work and they can't get it out of their head and then like they keep on and they keep on like remembering it and remembering it and it never comes out." This seemingly suggests that worry about work would play on children's minds and cause them to be unable to concentrate on anything

else, possibly leading to them missing key learning and social time, as well as damaging their self-esteem.

However, the children in both settings also felt that learning and doing well at school related to strong feelings of belonging. For instance, Serena said, "Topic is going really well," when asked about what helped her to feel that she belonged at school.

Being yourself. In the YPAR project at Kingstown, pupil researchers found that children in their setting mostly felt that they could be themselves at school and that it was positive to be different to other children. This was something they also expressed in their evaluation interviews. For instance, at Kingstown, Millie felt it was important "To be who you are and don't change." Whilst Jasmine reported that she felt she belonged at her school because she was allowed to be herself and do things in a different way to others, stating:

You can be yourself instead of like following others, and all of that. Like say you were doing like urm maths or something and it like you you figured it out a different way to everybody else. Like they they can take your like opinions seriously. (Jasmine)

Although most children at Wellington also felt positively about being themselves and being different from their peers, some expressed that sometimes being yourself could make you appear different from others in a negative way. For instance, Bina reported, "I am different because I have ADHD and it makes me feel a bit left out sometimes," suggesting that being herself did not always lead to positive outcomes for her. This perhaps suggests that children perceive this differently dependant on their personal experiences.

Theme 2: Interpersonal Factors

In the YPAR project, children also identified several interpersonal factors that influenced feelings of belonging and these related to relationships with peers and teachers. Peer relationships,

particularly support from, inclusion, and conflict with peers, seemed to have the greatest impact with children in both settings talking at length about the impact of their peers.

Feeling Supported by Peers. In both settings, it was felt that having a lot of friends was beneficial because your friends could support you. In the Kingstown YPAR project, pupil researchers found out that peers being friendly, welcoming and caring were important factors for experiencing feelings of belonging at school. At Wellington, they found that most children felt that they had friends and that this was important, but this was not explored further as to exactly why this was beneficial.

Peer relationships were also discussed in detail in the evaluation interviews. For instance, Millie stated: "So I've got, like a lot of friends to play with and then like, whenever I'm stuck and then they help me and then when I'm a bit sad, they cheer me up," *s*uggesting that friends could support with emotional, social and academic issues. The idea that it was important for friends to comfort you if you were upset, was something which many others agreed with in both settings. In Wellington Primary, pupil researchers also felt that friends could also support you academically in lessons. For instance, Dora reported that, "Sometimes they are helpful with group work in maths," suggesting that friends work together and help each other in class.

Feeling Included by Peers. Findings further suggest that not having friends would be detrimental to a sense of belonging and lead to negative outcomes. In both settings' YPAR findings, it was expressed that to promote belonging, children themselves should aim to include everyone and to not leave people out.

This idea of inclusion was reflected in the evaluation interviews. For instance, Jasmine identified that at her school: "Lots of people sit by themselves at break and like some of them like they like, sit there for quite a while and no one checks in," suggesting that children who did not have friends were often "left out" and left on their own. The pupil researchers suggested that they needed to feel "accepted" by peers to "fit in" and ultimately feel a sense of school belonging. For instance,

Nathan felt that he belonged because, "I like fit in with everyone." Whilst Ezra mentioned that he sometimes felt he did not belong because, "Sometimes no one accepts me in their games". Whilst Dora stated, "If you like ask someone to play and if they say no to you it would make you upset," indicating that not being accepted by peers negatively impacts mental health outcomes.

The children identified that it may be particularly difficult for new children to fit in, to be accepted, and to feel a sense of belonging because they were less likely to have friends. For instance, Dora asserted: "If you like you're the new kid, you might not have any friends. People might be rude. Maybe you don't fit in at the moment, yeah." Whilst others suggested that they belonged to their school because they were not new to the school, "Because I've been here since reception. I've been here longer than other people," (Ezra) and this meant they were part of the school.

Conflict with Peers. As well as being supported and included by peers, children felt that it was important for peers to be kind to each other. The YPAR projects findings suggested that some children in both settings felt that children were often "rude" to them, and this impacted their ability to belong at school. This was particularly apparent in the findings from Kingstown where children talked about bullies and people being mean to them as reasons why they would not belong.

 In the evaluation interviews, pupil researchers in Kingstown argued that although most children are kind to each other in their school, some children are less kind, and this influences their ability to feel as though they belong. For instance, Jasmine shared that: "Some people are disrespectful kind of cause like sometimes they they don't respect others and like they just make people feel horrible," indicating that when children don't respect each other this can lead to negative outcomes.

In Wellington most pupil researchers also reported that everyone in their school was kind, and this supported their feelings of school belonging. For instance, Dora reported that "Everyone's like being kind and caring to you." However, they also had examples of when children were not so kind at school with Dora further arguing that, "They're not really kind when they're playing

sometimes in a competition," when talking about other children. She felt that this would influence her ability to both belong and learn saying:

If someone says something rude to you and the bell rings and you come straight back into class you're not going to be able to really learn or to concentrate because you don't feel good about something. (Dora)

Other pupil researchers had similar examples of when children had been unkind to them, and this had made them feel as though they did not belong. In both settings, children also identified "bullying" as a potential reason that children would not feel as though they belonged to their school.

Feeling Supported by Teachers. As well as factors associated with their peers, children felt that the support of their teachers was important when thinking about belonging at school. The importance of teacher support was reported in both YPAR projects. For instance, the survey results at Kingstown suggested that the children do not always believe that their teachers are interested in them which may lower their overall feelings of belonging.

In the evaluation interviews in both schools, pupil researchers reported that they felt that, "The teachers are really kind," (Dora) and that, "They help you if you are struggling and they help you work out the question," (Ezra), and this supported their feelings of belonging e.g. "Because all the teachers are nice to me, they like to help me. So I think I would belong here," (Adam).

The pupil researchers felt it was important for teachers to help with their work e.g. "They help, they support me when sometimes when I'm doing work," (Bina) and this was something they liked and valued. However, they also felt it was important for teachers to support them emotionally. For instance, Nathan reported, "They help you when you are sad," whilst Dora stated that they "Listen to us," when asked what teachers do to help them to belong at school. Adam reported how it was important for, "Teachers to talk to children about their worries," suggesting that teachers have a role to play in supporting emotional outcomes.

Some pupil researchers felt that sometimes their teachers did not support them enough and this led to issues related to belonging. For instance, Nathan reported that sometimes children don't feel like they belong because, "The teachers shout and scare them." Whilst Bina stated, "I ask something and they don't realise," and "They tell me to stop wriggling," as reasons why teachers negatively impacted her feelings of belonging, indicating that not being listened to or understood by teachers was detrimental. Similarly, Serena reported that some children, "Don't get the support what they need," and this makes them feel as though they don't belong. Her responses indicate that the different levels of teacher support may be related to the relationship children have with their teacher, stating: "The teachers like to help me, and I just like to talk to all the teachers saying about the things that we did," indicating that due to her positive relationship with the teachers, she often receives the help and support she needs.

Theme 3: Systemic Factors

Both stages of the research identified several systemic factors which influenced pupils' feelings of school belonging. These included aspects of the schools practice and culture such as break times as well as issues related to the physical spaces and resources available to the children. These factors differed depending on the setting.

School Practices. At Kingstown, The YPAR project found that children valued feeling welcome at school and the family atmosphere it provides, suggesting that the ethos of the school was important for feelings of belonging. In the evaluation interviews, the pupil researchers in Kingstown also spoke about the atmosphere and ethos in their school when describing school practices. For instance, Jasmine described it as a "Calm and caring" school and others spoke about how welcoming the school was. Serena stated, "Everyone in my school is really welcoming and so are all my teachers." Serena further felt it was important that everyone at school was, "Kind, caring and showing the school values."

The pupil researchers in this setting appeared to be particularly concerned about having "fun" lessons and spoke about this as a reason as to why children might feel they belong. For instance, Jasmine said, "Doing some of the lessons which are quite fun," helped her to feel as though she belonged. Adam felt it was important for children to actively engage in these lessons saying lessons were, "Good, because people are bringing a lot of stuff the the boards are covered in posters," which he felt indicated that the children were enjoying the lessons. Adam also felt that the intervention group he was in was important saying, "There's a there's a group what I'm in and it's called the Fantastic Four," when asked what helped him to belong at school, suggesting that school's providing personalised support was important.

Pupil researchers at Wellington Primary seemed to be particularly concerned with resources and felt that having access to equipment to support play and learning improved their feelings of belonging. This was reflected in their suggested changes as part of their YPAR project, where they chose to prioritise learning equipment, and in the evaluation interviews where the importance of equipment was discussed by multiple children. For instance, Dora stated: "Like if you struggle on something and you need something to help you don't get it like a piece of equipment could help you". Whilst Eden commented that, "Some school equipment like basketball and sports stuff and base 10. And like working out stuff," would help children with their work and play and therefore influence their feelings of belonging.

Playtime. In Wellington Primary, the children further argued that the most important institutional practices for belonging was break time. This was reflected in some of the suggested changes in their YPAR project, they felt additional break time and more opportunities to do fun things would help children to belong. It was also discussed in the evaluation interviews with Eden stating, "Playtime. Because you just get to run around and play but talk to your friends and play," indicating the importance of the physical and social aspects of play. The pupil researchers further felt that belonging could in fact be improved through play, for instance when asked what would improve

a sense of belonging for her Bina stated, "Key stage 2 could do more break because key stage one get more break."

The pupil researchers in this setting further identified that it was important for them to have things to play with. For instance, when asked how playtimes could be improved, Bina suggested, "Maybe more toys like more things to play with," and Eden stated that resources such as "Trampolines to have lots of fun," would be helpful.

School Spaces. In their evaluation interviews, pupil researchers at Wellington Primary further mentioned the importance of the physical space of the playground to promote belonging. For instance, Jimmy commented: "The playground, obviously that's like a big part of school. Like you don't have a playground, or nobody will sign up for school because you have to let off something like steam, yeah." This suggests that the playground is key to encouraging children to attend the school and to feel a sense of belonging there.

Pupil researchers in both schools talked about the importance of "calming" spaces around their school. At Wellington, they talked about the existence of calm spaces with Jimmy stating, "They do like special areas, like if you can like take 5 minutes to play with PlayDoh or Century Club." Whilst Bina said, "This room is like relatively calm where you can calm yourself," indicating that the school already prioritised this space. In Kingstown the pupil researchers did not talk about existing spaces but their desire to have these spaces. For instance, Adam said he wanted, "Like, a room for people to be calm. To reduce stress If they have like an area where they can just talk to someone." Whilst Serena talked about having space to go and be quiet, talk to others and do some colouring, stating; "Can make a room with like colouring and chatting to each other. Maybe maybe going and going and having some peace and quiet if they've fallen out with someone." This suggests that these spaces would have important emotional and social functions. In the Photovoice element of their YPAR project, the spaces were also highlighted as important.

The desire to have more of these spaces was also expressed in the evaluation interviews at Wellington where Jimmy suggested, "An area where you can like go and sit and you can like, relax and there's always like a teacher in there and you can read, you can like do some like work. You can like colouring," would help children to feel as though they belonged at school. This is also reflected in their YPAR project findings where they suggested that an area to support children with friendships and emotions, such as a friendship bench, would be beneficial.

An additional finding was identified in the follow up interviews relating to both schools being small schools, which pupil researchers in both settings felt was influential for belonging. For instance, in Kingstown, Jasmine stated, "I belong to this school because it's such a small school I don't think it's hard to be accepted at the school because it's it's it's a small school." She continued, "This school is quite small so you can kind of like you know everybody, and you know like and everybody knows you." This was not explicitly commented on in either YPAR project.

Summary

The above findings indicate that there are a range of personal, interpersonal and systemic factors which children in these primary schools believe affect their ability to belong at school. These are related to their feelings of happiness, confidence and successfulness, to their relationships with others and factors related to the school environment itself. The personal and interpersonal factors were similar across both settings, but there were differences related to systemic factors which reflects the differing environments of both school settings.

This section further highlights the similarities between the findings from the YPAR project and the findings from the evaluation interviews, suggesting that both methods provide similar results for school settings.

Does YPAR lead to perceived change in individual school settings?

This section presents key findings related to research question two: Does YPAR lead to perceived change in individual school settings? The data comes from pre and post interviews with

pupil researchers, interviews with key staff after the project and the pre and post PSSM completed by the pupil researchers. The changes proposed by the YPAR project will also be presented. This section is divided into three key themes "change for the school setting", "change for the children" and "sustaining change". These themes are exemplified below.

Figure 5

FIGURE 5 RQ2 THEMATIC MAP 1
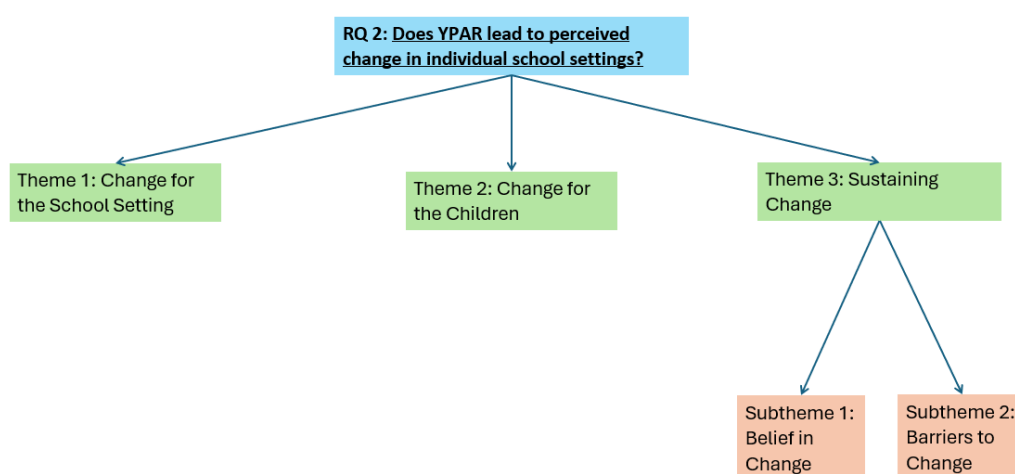
Theme 1: Change for the School Setting

During the YPAR process, the pupil researchers were able to suggest several changes, based on their findings, which they felt would improve school belonging for the children in their settings. At Kingstown they found that the main issues for children were around friendship and feeling valued. As such, they decided to suggest the following changes:

To help children make friends:

- There should be more games at break times (not just football)

- Teachers should help children to join in with games

- Play leaders could be re-introduced

- Classes could be asked what could help them to make friends

- There could be lessons on how to be a better friend.

To help children feel valued:

- There should be more worry boxes in the classrooms

- Teachers should try to be honest with pupils about their work and give lots of praise

- There should be a raffle reward system with prizes.

When asked about these changes in post interviews, the pupil researchers argued that changes related to friendship were probably the most important ones. For instance, Serena stated: "If we make like a friendship place, maybe they'll go in there and they'll see if they can find some new friends." This indicates that environmental factors such as school spaces and practices could support children to form a sense of school belonging through interpersonal connections.

Their teacher suggested that participating in the project has led to useful change reporting that:

Overall, I think the project has been really useful for us as a school to know how we can change and just little tweaks we can do that will make them feel even more grown up responsible, feel more a part of it. So more like they belong. (Teacher Kingstown)

She further commented:

I also think it's great that they came back with things that we do need to work on and they're things that are manageable for us to work on a bit like the part of praise one of their sections was that and more rewards.

Indicating that the changes were manageable for the school setting to implement.

When asked for follow up information two months after the project, the teacher indicated that they now had more worry boxes, the school has developed a system to praise the children more

and had implemented Zones of Regulation across the school based on the findings of this project. This suggests that there were some lasting changes because of the YPAR project in this setting.

At Wellington Primary, the pupil researchers came up with the following suggestions with a focus on helping children to make more friends, providing children with calm spaces and equipment as well as making learning fun:

- Reinstating a "rainbow" bench in the playground that children could go to if they needed support to make friends

- More support with maths and more equipment to help with learning

- A calm room for children to access with teachers available to talk to them

- Make lessons more fun

- More break and lunch times/longer break and lunch times

- More 1:1 teachers for support in class

- Having more residentials and tournaments

From this list, they chose the rainbow bench, because some people might be shy and need more help to make friends, more Maths equipment, because having access to resources might help people to calm down and be less upset in Maths, and having some more residentials and tournaments, because not everyone always gets to go, to take forward and discuss with the head teacher. Their teacher expressed enthusiasm for renewing the friendship bench stating:

I think it is something that you could generally as a school have a look at like Rainbow Bench, I said. I said to the head, yeah. What's the crack with that? There is one. If you go outside at break time and the coats are on it and it's like an easy thing Yeah, yeah, a a little friendship bench is is easy. (Teacher Wellington)

Indicating it would be an easy change to make to reinstate it. Teachers from both schools commented on the potential for future change with the teacher from Kingstown saying, "Absolutely, I

would definitely do another research project again," when asked whether this was something that could be continued in the future. The teacher from Wellington stated, "It would go massively well to geography, doesn't it? The kind of field work side of geography we've just been talking about, what you what you can do in, in the local area," when thinking about how YPAR could be used in the future to create further change and also stated, "To do it in in class is a really good idea. I like. I like the idea a lot of. How could we improve certain areas of school, run some more stuff? Look at with that?" suggesting that the school would take forward the idea of children leading change across the setting.

Theme 2: Change for the Children

When asked whether they felt any changes towards their sense of belonging at school, all children replied no or that they felt the same. However, quantitative results suggest that there may have been some change as median scores in the PSSM were raised in both settings, and this was found to be statistically significant for the children at Kingstown.

All pupil researchers completed the PSSM scale (Goodenow, 1993) before and after involvement in the YPAR project to establish whether participation in the project had any impact on their feelings of school belonging. Due to the low numbers of participants, non-parametric tests were performed to establish whether the difference in median scores was significant (Field, 2013). The following table provides descriptive statistics:

Table 4

TABLE 4 MEAN AND MEDIAN SCORES FOR PSSM

	PSSM S1 1	PSSM S1 T2	PSSM S2 T1	PSSM S2 T2F
Mean	75.2	81.4	69.6	74.4
Median	74	82	71	74
Minimum	58	77	61	65
Maximum	84	85	77	82

At Time 1 at Kingstown the overall median score for the group was 74. At time 2 it had risen to 82. A Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test revealed that there was a statistically significant increase in the

total scores of the group between time 1 (Md = 74, n = 5) and time 2 (Md = 82, n = 5), z = 2.032, n = 5, p <.0.05 with a large effect size (r =.91). This suggests that the pupil researchers' overall sense of school belonging increased over the course of the intervention.

I also noticed an increase in median scores for questions 4,5,12 and 15 in this setting. A Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test revealed a significant difference in the scores for question 5 of the group at time 1 (Md = 3, n = 5) and time 2 (Md = 5, n = 5), z = 2.07, n = 5, p <.0.05 with a large effect size (r =.92). The item was "Most teachers in my school are interested in me". This indicates that children in this setting believed that teachers were more interested in them after completing the YPAR project. No other items were found to have a statistically significant difference.

At Wellington, Wilcoxon Signed Rank Tests revealed no significant differences in the scores for the total or for any individual item suggesting that pupils' feelings of belonging did not change throughout the course of the intervention. However, the descriptive statistics indicate differences in mean scores between time one and time two for many of the children in both settings which may indicate that belonging did improve for individual children but, due to the small sample size and limited power, statistical analysis could not detect this difference (Cohen, 1992).

Qualitatively, some small changes were noticed by the pupil researchers in both settings. In Kingstown, Adam said that, "People are playing with each other more," and Jasmine said, "It definitely helped because some people are believing in themselves a bit more," when asked what changes they had noticed since the project had begun. In Wellington, Bina reported that, "I have a wobble cushion now," when asked about changes since the project began where Nathan said, "Yeah I have changed," when asked what changes he had noticed but could not provide any further detail on this change.

There were also changes which were not explicitly stated but more inferred from the level of information participants were able to offer between the first and second interviews. The most obvious of these being the difference in understanding what belonging was. At Wellington many children were able to expand their definitions of belonging to include thoughts about happiness and

safety after completing the project. For instance, during the pre-interviews Bina expressed that belonging is: "Being part of stuff, different activities in school. Like being part of the class and what everybody's doing in the class." During the post interviews she was able to expand on this by saying: "It basically means do you feel like you're part of the school and I am happy, I feel safe so I enjoy school."

Similarly, Jimmy and Nathan were able to gain a deeper understanding of the concept. Jimmy initially thought that belonging meant, "Basically like the like the classroom I'm in," but was able to gain a deeper understanding at time two saying, "And you belong to the school. I'd feel Happy. Yeah. Happy. Yeah. It's kind of about being that happy and part of the thing at school." Nathan initially reported belonging was, "Like you go there, and you stay there," but refined this after the project and argued that belonging instead meant, "You fit in and are happy and safe."

This was similar in Kingstown. When asked about school belonging Adam was initially not sure what it meant and said, "It's like just stay and learn. For a little bit." But was able to reflect on this in the post interviews and say that it meant, "Being kind, respectful and showing our values."

Theme 3: Sustaining change

The pupil researchers were actively involved in both settings in creating changes for the school based on the findings of their YPAR projects. However, they appeared to have a certain level of scepticism about the likelihood of these changes, with some children being unsure if these changes would happen.

Belief in change. At Wellington, the pupil researchers were mostly positive about the changes due to their beliefs that the teachers were, "Kind and they will support you." (Dora) However, they also commented that perhaps only some of the changes were likely to happen because changes, "Are hard to do" (Nathan).

Some pupil researchers found the change component of the YPAR process hard to engage with. In Wellington this appeared to relate to the power hierarchy they perceived to exist within their school, with children stating that things would only change if they, "Managed to get through the Head," (Bina) while others appeared unable to criticise or find fault with their school settings saying things like, "I can't really say," (Jimmy) and "Not sure really because it is none of my business," (Bina) when asked about changes they would make.

In Kingstown, many of the children believed that the changes in school would happen. For instance, Adam reported that, "I think the bamboo and the, you know, the giant trees in the playground, I think those two will happen." Ezra stated, "Yeah because he is a very kind man who will do anything for you," when talking about what changes he felt his headteacher would implement. Millie felt the changes would happen because, "We're talking about it and like and then we could like, know, more stuff about it as we go along," suggesting that change was likely to happen as it was now something which was actively being discussed. However, other children were less sure and thought that some changes may not happen for instance, Jasmine argued, "I think they'll make quite a few some of them. Some of them Not so much. Yeah."

Barriers to Change. The reasons given by the pupil researchers and their teachers for lack of change were related to conflicting priorities and a lack of resources. For instance, at Wellington Adam stated, "The ones with games and the mechanical ones, no. The team leaders will happen because they are no money," suggesting that only changes which were free and did not require many resources would be implemented. This was reflected in Kingstown where the teacher stated, "So I think the worry box is the is one of the simple things we've got one or two dotted around if that's something that they think is actually really useful, or a friendship box. They're really easy. They're quick." When asked for follow up information after the project, the teacher expressed that there had been some difficulty in setting up some of the changes due to staffing issues stating:

Unfortunately play leaders has been delayed in starting due to staffing. We had recruited to start in September but this fell through, then recruited again but again they pulled out we also lost a member of support staff to another school and another has been off sick since October so we are very thinly stretched. (Teacher Kingstown)

This indicates that a lack of resources, in this case staff, was impacting their ability to make change. At Wellington, the pupil researchers also reported this to be an issue as change, "Could happen but sometimes we don't have enough staff," (Bina). Their teacher further expressed that the resource of time was a factor in whether changes could happen stating, "I can't really, but I'd love it too. But when you've only got an hour session in that middle session you can't give up any more time. It's. Yeah, it's so hard." This may further indicate that the teacher did not prioritise this change.

Regarding conflicting priorities, in Kingstown, Serena felt that change might not happen because, "Sometimes we have a lot already going on," indicating that their ideas would not be prioritised. Similarly, at Wellington, children felt that change could be, "Hard to do." (Nathan). Bina commented on the head teacher acting as a gate keeper saying, "If they managed to get through the head," change would happen, indicating a lack of belief that their changes would be prioritised by school leadership. The teacher here expressed that certain changes would not happen due to the pupil researchers lack of understanding arguing:

The sports residentials. I don't think they understand the ins and outs of that and they went on the trip last year. And I know they went on the trip last year because I was the one that did it. But it's. That's just a lack of understanding. Well, this sounds fun. We want to do this rather than that. (Teacher Wellington)

This further suggests that school staff do not share pupils' priorities and indicates that pupils' views are not taken seriously. When asked for follow up information, about a month after the project, the teacher at Wellington did not reply to requests. This could suggest a lack of change and gives an indication of the longevity of the project in this setting.

A lack of belief in children's views was also expressed at Kingstown where the teacher expressed some scepticism around the children's feelings using the phrase, "If that is something they genuinely don't feel," when talking about issues children have with staff believing in them, suggesting they do not believe the children's viewpoint to be true which may impact the likelihood of change. However, she did go on to talk about plans to put further change in place stating, "So I think that's something that again is easy to implement, looking at resourcing it, we can look at how we can maybe fund it, maybe request from our parent, you know. PTA parents," and appeared committed to making further changes.

What Are the Opportunities and Challenges of Using a YPAR Approach in a Primary School Context to Explore School Belonging?

This section presents key findings related to research question three: what are the opportunities and challenges of using a YPAR approach in a primary school context to explore school belonging? It includes findings from post intervention interviews with both pupil researchers and school staff, as well as the results from the school staff PSSM, and aims to present additional opportunities, other than those outlined above, and to highlight some of the challenges which impacted the project. It introduces three key themes and related sub themes. The themes are "benefits for participants", "understanding of belonging" and "access". These themes are exemplified in the following table:

Figure 6

FIGURE 6 RQ3 THEMATIC MAP
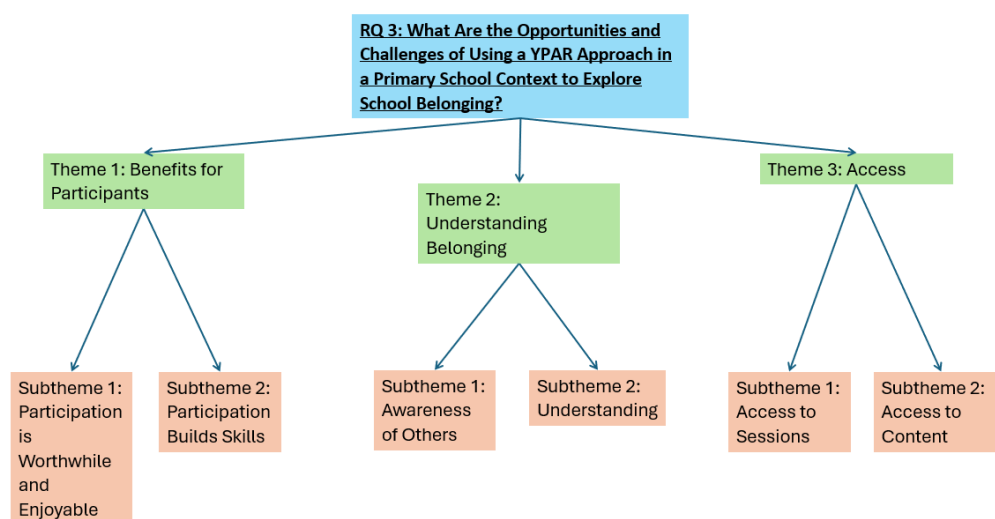
Theme 1: Benefits for Participants

In both settings participants indicated that actively engaging in YPAR led to benefits as it was a positive experience that they found enjoyable, and this allowed them to gain new skills. This is something I actively observed when facilitating the sessions as the pupil researchers were excited to be involved and looked forward to participating.

Participation is Worthwhile and Enjoyable. Many of the pupil researchers in both schools expressed that participating in the project was fun and therefore they were happy to have been involved. For instance, Bina asserted, "I feel happy about the project. It's been really fun doing it." Whilst Eden expressed, "It was really good, I liked it. It was really fun; I don't think you should change any of it."

At Wellington Primary, some students indicated that they had particularly enjoyed certain aspects of the research project which they felt were different from their day-to-day lessons. For instance, Jimmy said, "I like doing like not school subjects but doing something else." Whilst other children expressed that they particularly enjoyed learning about how other children felt and developing a greater understanding of school belonging. For example, **"**It was fun and good to listen about how the other ones felt about the school," (Nathan) and "It was really fun to like, understand what it is to about school belonging," (Bina) suggesting that novelty and gaining knowledge of their peers were key factors to enjoyment.

Pupil researchers at Kingstown Primary also particularly enjoyed the fact that they would be able to help others by doing this project. For instance, Adam said, "I like that we were finding out things that would help children be OK in, like later on and making sure that all the school is like, safe and secure and we have enough things for everyone to do." The teacher at Kingstown commented that it was clear that the children "Were so engaged and involved in it," when talking about the project and suggested that:

Obviously it shows it had meaning as a project and I think if we can see it through to fruition that these things have changed, I think it will show that doing these things makes a difference and will encourage them in the future to care about others.

This suggests that the meaning behind the project and pupils being able to make change were factors which influenced success.

Participation Builds Skills. Participants identified that YPAR had additional benefits for pupil researchers in relation to the practical, personal and interpersonal skills it allowed them to build. The pupil researchers noted improvements particularly in their technology skills, with many commenting that they found it useful to practise creating presentations using PowerPoint and then presenting their work. For instance, Bina commented that they enjoyed learning "How to make a PowerPoint,". This suggests that they enjoyed the novelty of using technology which enhanced their engagement.

The teacher at Wellington commented: "I think the skills they've learned from doing that will take them forwards in their education anyway," when talking about the ability to use technology to present findings as the children had not had much opportunity to use this technology before. The pupil researchers further identified that they enjoyed gaining skills in research specifically. Ezra identified that he gained skills in, "Writing down things as people said them," whilst Bina stated, "It's really fun to learn about how to interview people." They further identified that they gained independence through "Being allowed to do our own thing," and communication through, "Talking to the little ones." Their teacher also felt that it had helped to improve independence stating: "Things that went well, I'm really hot on independence. I think that these ones can really need help and they kind of let themselves go and do what they need to do, which is lovely."

Pupil researchers in Kingstown identified feelings of personal accomplishment after taking part. For instance, Millie stated, "I feel great from being involved in the project because it's an opportunity to take part in activities." Whilst Ezra said, "Wow, I've just did that," suggesting that taking part was something they could be proud of.

School staff in both settings noticed improvements in personal and social skills. For instance, when talking about the overall success of the project in Kingstown the teacher reported that the pupil researchers had gained confidence in both presenting their ideas, engaging with activities and doing things which were outside of their comfort zone:

I think they were amazing. I think the confidence to stand there and do it first off before you even go into the content of what they said, I think like I said before, we've got children there that have got additional needs, they've got barriers to their learning and they have been involved in this project from start to finish and they are and they've run with it, which is great. (Teacher Kingstown)

This further suggests the inclusiveness of YPAR projects when run this way. The teacher at Wellington further commented that he felt the project was, "On the whole, really nice. I really like I really like that child's Special question do you want to be somewhere else? I was like hang on you've really really encapsulated the whole idea of the project in in one," expressing that the children had understood the concept and engaged well with the project.

Theme 2: Understanding of Belonging

In both settings, pupil researcher's interview responses indicated that through engaging in YPAR they gained a better understanding of the concept of belonging as well as a greater awareness of how others in their settings felt about their schools. This provides information for schools to be able to better understand how their pupils perceive belonging.

Pupil Researcher's Awareness of Others. Children in both settings reported feeling as though they were now aware of how other children felt. For instance, In Kingstown Jasmine reported "We got to like, see what people think about, like, what like on the surveys," and that it was positive, "That, like you, you can kind of see their own opinion instead of like the same ones," suggesting that gaining voices from many children had been important. Adam reported "I like that we were finding out things that would help children be OK in, like later on and making sure that all the school is like, safe and secure," indicating that the findings have helped him to understand what other children

need to belong and would go on to have an impact for the school. This sentiment was mirrored by the SENDCo at Kingstown who suggested that they gained information through the project from a range of children which they would not otherwise have been able to get:

It is really valuable for our school because we know we've now got a view of what children's opinions are of our school. Ohh yeah, we surveyed the whole of KS2. But we can ask children, and you don't necessarily get that, but they've done it with somebody independently. They've got those voices and then they've presented them into data. (Teacher Kingstown)

This was also reported at Wellington. For instance, Bina reported "I found out that a lot of the children enjoy school," and "It was fun to learn about what the other people are feeling like." From these positive reports, some children drew positive conclusions about their school e.g. Jimmy who expressed, "The School is basically perfect," after hearing the children he interviewed talking positively. However, some pupil researchers took any negative comments personally and felt that it was their responsibility to sort out these problems. For example, when hearing negative feedback, Dora stated: "The only thing that I just didn't like, that that they said that people were being mean to them. I really wanted to sort that situation out." This indicates that the importance and focus each child puts on the findings is likely to differ.

Pupil Researchers' Understanding. Through the YPAR project and the pre and post interviews , schools gained valuable insights into how belonging was perceived in their settings by large groups of pupils. It also provided information around how the pupil researchers perceived and defined belonging through their responses. This differed between school settings.

In Kingstown, it appears as though most children understood "belonging" to relate to "ownership" with children commenting how it was like owning objects. For example, Jasmine asserted, "It's like your computer belongs to you like it it belongs to you like it's it's a part of you." Whilst other children felt that it was related to being a part of something. For example Serena stated:

"Belonging like you're a part of the school. Like you're not someone that's doesn't want to be in in activities. You like. You want to be included in everything."

These responses indicate that children understood belonging as a personal process which is developed through being included and feeling a sense of ownership. However, some responses from children in Kingstown also suggested that they initially had limited understanding of the concept of belonging, as well as related terms such as "to be included" as some children described belonging by reusing the terms given to them e.g. Ezra who described belonging as, "It means that you like means to belong to your school," and Millie who stated, "And like probably to belong is like to stay where you are really and like, don't change or anything." These responses suggest that "belonging" as a term was not something the children had heard of before and could point to difficulties they may have had with understanding the concept throughout the project.

Pupil researchers in Wellington had a much clearer idea of the concept of belonging. They also expressed that it related to being part of something but felt that it was also linked to feelings of safety and happiness. For example, "Belonging to school means like you're safe there and fit in." (Eden). The clearer definitions given in this setting, perhaps reflect increased focus on this kind of concept within the school or could reflect the way the concept was introduced to them.

This project has also provided schools with a direct comparison between children and staff members' views and understanding of belonging. From the PSSM completed by staff, staff members in both settings appear to view belonging more positively than the children do as mean scores are generally higher. Their views around what belonging was also differed slightly from their pupils. For instance, in Wellington, staff expressed that belonging was feeling part of a "team" for them and would relate to feeling accepted and looked after for their students rather than the focus on feeling safe exemplified by pupils. However, in Kingstown, staff expressed that belonging was related to safety, feeling welcomed and part of a family, all things which were mentioned by their pupils as being important.

Theme 3: Access

Although there are some clear opportunities to using a YPAR approach, these did not come without challenges. The main challenges related to the implementation of the approach due to systemic difficulties within the school systems including a limited amount of time to complete the work, difficulties with logistics and accessing the resources.

Access to Sessions. In Kingstown Primary, participants felt there were challenges in relation to the organisation of the sessions which caused difficulties regarding their ability to access and actively participate. The sessions at Kingstown were conducted sporadically on Friday afternoons across multiple months due to issues with scheduling and the children being unavailable. The issues the children identified therefore related to inconsistent session times and the need to miss preferred subjects to access the sessions. Millie stated that it would be beneficial for the sessions to run more regularly arguing, "You could probably come in I don't know every like few days like yeah, more regularly," as a way in which sessions could be improved, whilst Adam explained "I didn't really like the fact that I had to do less time on my PE, OK, because I like PE," and that because of this, "I think we should do it in the mornings instead of the afternoon." This theme was echoed by their teacher who expressed that perhaps the reason the sessions were sporadic and could only be held at specific times was because the time of year was problematic, stating: "I think that would be the only thing would be maybe thinking about what time of year you're doing it so that it's more fluid for everybody. So then you don't have to recap as much maybe yeah." However, she also stated "But that being said, you saw them today and they haven't seen you for six weeks and they remembered a lot of what they've done," indicating that difficulties in organising the session did not influence the findings overall.

The teacher also felt that the longevity of the sessions, running across many months, was in fact beneficial for the pupils stating:

I think the longevity was quite useful cause you said yourself about the fact that the ratings from the beginning to the end have changed. Your group have changed now. Has that changed because of time? And they've been in with that classroom for a lot longer period of time. So they feel more embedded within that classroom, which then it goes to your sense of belonging or is it because was talking about it, as we said, making you think more about it? (Teacher Kingstown)

In Wellington Primary there were no logistical challenges identified as, due to feedback from the sessions at Kingstown, the sessions ran every day for a week which they felt was beneficial.

Access to Content. The sessions at Wellington Primary, as well as being run every day for a week, were run with the whole class and included all children. Whilst this meant that all children could physically access the sessions and there were no logistical issues in terms of arranging them, it was not without its challenges. In fact, participants at Wellington identified that there were issues with children being able to access the content of the sessions. For instance, Dora pointed out that the structure of her group was problematic saying, "I kind of didn't like how my group was set up because it was always two particular people who were not learning and this wasted time," and continued, "It was always two particular people who were not learning," suggesting that involving all children, splitting them into random groups, was problematic as perhaps not every child wanted to participate and this meant that others were unable to.

The teacher felt that "Smaller groups of children" would have helped to allow all children to participate equally as he felt that as well as some children not participating, some children took over stating, "Some of them were really good but some of them were very much, I'm going to talk over this person." He felt that was the case even when they were interviewing others as, "They were answering questions because they knew what they wanted them to say. And that is what I have been told from members of staff," suggesting that some of the more confident students were taking over, talking over others and leading their participants to certain answers in the interviews. This

means that some pupil researchers were less involved than others during the research process and the findings may have been influenced.

The teacher further felt that some children needed additional support to engage with the session content arguing, "I think some of them probably don't have a clue and needed peer support to bring them on and there was like the others that knew what they were doing, how they did it and probably overtook them." However he felt that it would be difficult to differentiate due to the level of academic difference saying, "There are at least two who are working at Year 1 level in Year 5 so you can't pitch, it is not possible to differentiate further," and given this he felt that, "I think the content was spot on and gave them enough of everything and the whole class idea was really lovely." These difficulties reflect the fact that the sessions in this setting were held with the whole class and therefore the children had less personalised and small group support from the research facilitator.

Pupils further expressed that they felt it would have been beneficial to have more time to complete their work suggesting that the sessions were not long enough, and this impacted on their ability to engage with the research process. For instance, Bina stated she would have liked, "More time to do the ideas." Whilst Nathan would have liked, "Longer time to do some of the bits like interviews." The focus group further indicated that children would have liked more time to finish their presentations because they didn't have time to finish as well as more time to write down ideas and to do transcripts properly.

In Kingstown, the reasons children could not engage with the sessions were less explicit. However, from the interviews it became clear that some of the pupil researchers were unable to think critically about their school and this meant that they could not fully engage with the change aspect of YPAR. For instance, when asked to think of things they felt would need to change, some children were unable to think of any negatives, stating things like "Personally I don't have any," (Millie). There were also issues, as mentioned above, with children understanding the terminology used in the project e.g. "What does influence mean?" (Millie) and understanding how to think about

the views of other children, for example, "I'm not sure really. I'm not sure of what other people

think," (Millie). This suggests that this child did not understand many aspects of the project which is

likely to have impacted how well she was able to engage with it.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

This study explored children's perceptions of belonging to their primary school using a YPAR approach. It also explored the opportunities and challenges of using this approach, including whether the use of this method led to any perceived change for both the pupil researchers and their school settings. To do this, this study used a multi-level case study design. Level one was the YPAR project itself and level two evaluated this project. This chapter discusses the findings presented in chapter 4 in relation to each research question and the existing literature mentioned in chapter 2.

Research Question 1: What can the use of YPAR tell us about belonging in individual school settings?

In both settings the data gathered by the pupil researchers in the YPAR project in level one and the data gathered by the research facilitator in level two, suggested that most children felt like they belonged to their school. This is important as research suggests that those who experience a strong sense of belonging in their school environments are more likely to experience positive outcomes than those who feel disconnected (Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Juvonen, 2006). Through the data collected, several key themes arose which provided further information into how belonging was perceived and how feelings of belonging can be influenced in individual settings. These factors will be important for school staff to consider as background data measures indicated that teachers in these settings appear to perceive their students' sense of school belonging more positively than their students do. They may therefore have a differing understanding of the factors which promote or hinder its development. These findings enable the schools to fully understand this issue from their students' perspectives and adapt their practices to support belonging for all children.

As school belonging can be described in an ecosystemic way, influenced by individual, relational and organisational factors (Allen & Kern, 2017), these themes are discussed in relation to Allen and colleagues' Socio-Ecological Framework of School Belonging (2016) which is mapped onto

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model (1979) as it is a useful organising framework that allows researchers, school staff and EPs to intervene at various levels as needed (Allen et al., 2016).

Student level factors

As mentioned in chapter 2, research suggests that at an individual level, there are many biopsychosocial aspects which are believed to influence children's sense of school belonging. Children in this study reported a range of personal factors which they believed influenced their feelings of belonging. These included factors related to academic achievement, their feelings of happiness, as well as elements related to their self-confidence and self-esteem. This corresponds with the available research which is particularly concerned with factors such as academic motivation and social/emotional competencies as these factors are likely to be adjustable through intervention (Allen et al., 2018).

A common criticism of these factors is that biopsychosocial aspects are difficult to measure and are likely to be influenced by other variables. In this case, since these factors were found qualitatively in both stages of the project, we can be confident that these factors do have an impact on feelings of school belonging for these children as they expressed that they were important to them. The findings therefore add to the research base by providing a qualitative insight which enhances clarity about the relationships between variables from the perceptions of those being studied.

One such insight was that participants reported that struggling with, or worry about, your work would be a risk factor that would reduce feelings of school belonging, whereas doing well at school would help you to feel like you belonged. This corresponds with research which suggests that being engaged in and enjoying schoolwork enables children and young people to feel a stronger sense of school belonging (Gillen-O'Neel & Fuligini, 2013; Kuttner, 2023; Sari, 2012) and that finding schoolwork challenging or stressful reduces motivation and engagement, which in turn diminishes belonging (Murberg & Bru, 2004; Skinner & Belmont, 1993; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Wang & Eccles,

2019). Research further suggests that whether a child worries about school work or not is influenced by their perception of their capabilities (Pomerantz & Wang, 2009; Salmmela-Aro & Upadyaya, 2018) as well as the type of goals they have for their performance, with those with mastery goals found to have a higher sense of belonging than those with performance goals (Anderman & Anderman, 2009). In addition, positive personal characteristics, such as self-efficacy, coping skills and resilience (Allen et al., 2016; Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2006), may enable pupils to overcome academic stress. This indicates that support in these areas may enable children to better engage in their work which could then lead to improved feelings of belonging.

The participants further linked feeling happy at school to feeling a strong sense of school belonging, stating that being happy in school, and not feeling sad, would enable children to feel that they belonged. This corresponds with research which suggests that personal factors, such as the impact of emotions and feelings of depression, anxiety and stress are likely to impact upon a child's sense of belonging to their school (e.g. McMahon et al., 2008; Shochet et al., 2011). This further reflects research which suggests that when children are happy at school, they are more likely to engage in school life and therefore feel like they belong (Palikara et al.,2021; Tolan & Rhew, 2016). Happiness at school is believed to support academic confidence (Suldo & Shaffer, 2008), enhance resilience (Seligman, 2011) and enable positive relationships with teachers (Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004) and peers (Wentzel, 1998) and is therefore something that should be considered extremely important.

The pupils further highlighted the importance of being themselves, as well as appreciating the differences of others, for feeling a sense of belonging. Research suggests that when students feel they can be themselves, without fear of discrimination, they are more likely to have higher self-esteem and confidence which enables them to engage more actively in school life and to feel like they belong (Erwin et al., 2022; Parker & Hodgson, 2020). Although most children saw being different as a positive, there were some feelings that being different could be detrimental which was reported

by a child with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). This is something schools should consider as feeling different, or othered, could then lead to negative outcomes for this pupil and for other pupils with SEND. This is particularly important to consider as outcomes for pupils with SEND are often lower than their peers and schools may be able to mitigate these negative effects by being truly inclusive spaces (DfE, 2022) and promoting the importance of embracing differences.

The focus on personal factors, such as academic competence, happiness and self-confidence, is likely to reflect the fact that belonging is a core psychological need which all humans strive to achieve (Allen et al., 2021; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Maslow, 1954), making it no surprise that failure to achieve this leads to negative outcomes such as a lack of confidence and feelings of sadness for pupils. Because of this, it would seem important for schools to prioritise building emotional competencies in their pupils. This is an area in which EPs can support schools as they can facilitate seeking pupils' views, as well as to deliver, advise on and monitor evidence-based interventions, training and initiatives to support the building of emotional competencies.

Microsystemic Factors

The microsystem refers to the environments or systems children experience, such as school or home, and the relationships they have within those systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Research argues that relationships within schools are likely to be of high importance when fostering school belonging as belonging is largely related to interpersonal factors (Chhuon & Wallace, 2014). This corresponds with the findings in this project as pupils' indicated that their relationships with others in the system were extremely important and impacted upon personal factors, such as happiness, academic competence, enjoyment and self-esteem.

The research in this area suggests that the most important relationship for school belonging is likely to be the relationship between children and their teacher (Allen and Kern, 2017; Chiu et al., 2016; Sakiz et al., 2012). The children in this study, in both settings, agreed that their teachers were very important, indicating that teacher support was beneficial to them and would lead to positive

outcomes (Greenwood & Kelly, 2019). They felt it was important for teachers to support them with their work, as well as to support them emotionally. They also felt that negative interactions with teachers would be detrimental (Sancho & Cline, 2012). Children with closer and more positive relationships with teachers reported that they would feel that they belonged more than others, corresponding with research that indicates that a child's connection to their teacher would impact belonging (Chhuon & Wallace, 2014). This suggests that it is important for teachers to aim to build positive relationships with their pupils, provide support with academic and emotional competencies, as well as to reduce negative interactions to promote belonging.

However, the findings also indicated that the influence of peers far outweighs that of teachers, with findings from both the pupil researchers' YPAR projects and the evaluation interviews largely focused on the impact of peer interactions and friendships. This may reflect the developmental stage of the pupils involved as they are likely to begin experiencing increased motivation for peer acceptance and a sensitivity to social exclusion at this age (Sebastian et al., 2010) and this will impact the importance they place on these factors. As such, the children felt that peer support, both academically and emotionally, inclusion and the general attitudes of their peers were important aspects which supported their feelings of belonging. They stated that children who did not have strong friendships and support from peers would find it difficult to feel as though they belonged to their schools. They discussed the importance of fitting in and being accepted, corresponding to definitions of belonging that highlight belonging as a need to "fit in" (Rogers, 1951). They further reported that feelings of belonging would be particularly negatively impacted by being new, being left out or being bullied.

The difference in emphasis between these findings and previous research is likely to relate to the fact that much of the previous research (e.g. Greenwood and Kelly., 2018) is from the teacher's point of view and does not triangulate findings with pupils themselves. However, research which focuses on pupil perceptions e.g. Hamm and Faircloth (2018) found that close peer relationships

were more important to the young people themselves and indicates that support and acceptance from peers is particularly important (Ahmadi et al., 2020; Slaten, 2016; Wagle et al., 2021). The discrepancy highlights the importance of gaining these views from the children themselves as well as the importance of teacher attunement to recognise and understand what the children are experiencing (Bouchard & Berg, 2017). This is further reflected in this study where the teachers appear to perceive school belonging more positively than pupils do.

Supporting children to make and maintain friendships, as well as to build social skills is likely to be extremely important as children who feel rejected by their peers will experience stress, anxiety and loneliness (Allen et al., 2018; Porter et al., 2021). Research further suggests that the experiences they have at this time will go on to influence how they interact throughout their lives (Goosby et al., 2013). Again, this is an area EPs can assist with as they can support school staff to develop interventions and practices which develop social skills as well as to make adaptations to the environment to encourage positive peer interaction. EPs, using child centred practice, can also help school staff to become attuned to their pupils' views and needs, reducing the distance between staff and pupil perceptions. As school staff feel that they have less time to build relationships with their pupils due to ongoing systemic pressure (Partridge et al., 2020) it is also important for EPs to support them to see the benefit of this and make sure that relational factors remain a priority.

Mesosystemic Factors

The meso-system is where the other systems interact and therefore, in this case, represents the procedures and policies within the school environment. The pupils in both stages of this study highlighted multiple environmental factors which supported or hindered their ability to belong either directly, or indirectly by supporting their ability to connect with peers or to enhance emotional competence. This reflects the fact that belonging can be described as a fluid, ephemeral connection individuals have with not only people but with places and their experiences within these places (Allen, 2009), where they feel that they "fit in" to the environment (Hegarty et al., 1992).

One such factor which appeared to influence belonging was the ethos of the school. The children spoke about their school's calm, caring and welcoming ethos which enabled them to feel like they were a family, enhancing their feelings of belonging, corresponding with previous research which suggests that nurturing school climates promote school belonging (Anderman, 2003; Nind et al., 2012). This idea of a "family" environment, an implied closeness, continued when children discussed the size of the school building, and the number of people within it, as impacting upon their feelings of belonging. They indicated that the school being small was beneficial as this made it feel more personal. This directly conflicts with previous research which suggests that larger schools support feelings of belonging as students can meet like-minded peers (Shaw, 2019). It is likely that this difference relates to the age of participants as young people in secondary schools are perhaps more likely to be interested in breaking out of close environments, such as primary schools, to find peers they relate to due to their stage of development (Eccles et al.,1993). This corresponds with the Stage, Environment, Fit Model (Eccles et al., 1993) which indicates that the environment must fit the developmental needs of the children in order to support school belonging.

The participants also discussed how spaces within school such as the playground and calm or quiet rooms, as well as resources within these spaces, could be utilised to promote factors which supported belonging such as friendships and happiness. When talking about elements related to classroom instruction, the participants mentioned the need for "fun lessons" which would support their academic motivation, as well as the importance of sport and extracurricular clubs. These findings correspond with the minimal available research which looks at mesosystemic factors which finds that school activities (e.g. Blomfield & Barber, 2010), school spaces and resources (Chhuon & Wallace, 2014) and school climate (Thapa et al., 2013) are important for school belonging.

The mesosystem can also refer to family and their involvement in school life. This was not discussed by the children in this study which may relate to the developmental stage of the children

and the connections they are able to draw between school, home and their wider community (Connell & Wellborn, 1991).

Due to the importance placed on school culture, school spaces and resources by the pupils for belonging, indicating that these factors influenced both microsystemic and personal factors, school staff should aim to adapt their environments and practices to support pupils, ensuring that the environment fits their developmental needs (Eccles et al., 1993). This is something that EPs can support with as they can advise on developmentally appropriate practices and resources that would support each age group or developmental stage and whole school priorities, as research suggests EPs are well placed to support with this work (Allen et al., 2018).

Exo and Macro Systemic Factors

Although mostly aligned, there were some subtle differences between the findings in all areas in relation to each school setting. This is likely to reflect the fact that belonging is contextual in nature and that the variation in school environments and contexts led to these differences. Regarding personal factors, there was more focus on worry about work at Kingstown than at Wellington whereas being yourself was generally seen as less of a positive at Wellington. In relation to interpersonal factors, children at Wellington felt it was important for their peers to support them with their work which was not mentioned by the pupils at Kingstown. In relation to the mesosystem, the ethos and culture of the school was mentioned more by children in Kingstown and these children were more able to comment on teaching practices. Children at Wellington talked more about using school resources and emphasised the importance of play time in their school. They also mentioned that their school had spaces in which they could be calm whereas children at Kingstown talked about their desire for these spaces, again reflecting differing emphasis. These differences are likely to reflect exo- and macrosystemic factors surrounding the school settings including the different priorities of the leadership team, demographic differences and the socioeconomic contexts of each school as well as community involvement and interpretation of national policies.

There is limited research which discusses the importance of these factors related to school belonging. Although not widely considered, the importance of these factors should not be minimised. These systems should be interrogated critically as belonging in schools is often framed through the dominant cultural lens, perpetrating assimilation (Ramos et al., 2024; Vincent, 2021). This is particularly important in this case as the participants discussed funding and other systemic issues, such as unfair treatment for those with SEND, in both settings suggesting that the macro and exo-system does play a role in children's perceptions of belonging even if they are not able to explicitly recognise it themselves or frame it in the context of structural oppression. Their insights signal how institutional norms can function to include some and marginalise others.

EPs can support schools to address exo- and macrosystemic factors, particularly in relation to policy implementation and school development planning to support all children's developmental needs and promote true school belonging. As seen in a few local authorities already, EPs are well placed to create guidance for schools within their local authorities which reflect the national and local picture to promote school belonging and inclusive practice. It also extremely important for EPs to work with their schools to establish some of the structural inequalities that may exist for their pupils and to put provision in place to mitigate this. The goal should be to enable pupils to feel happy and safe at school without the need to conform to damaging dominant ideas in order to belong.

Summary

The children in this project identified a range of personal, social and environmental factors, as detailed above, which impacted school belonging. When reviewing the available research, as most of it was undertaken in international or secondary school contexts and was not always gathered from the children themselves, it was unclear whether the children in this study would place the same importance on each factor. These findings confirm that there are similarities between factors which promote belonging across the age phases, verifying that factors from prior research can be tentatively applied in primary school contexts, but also highlight subtle differences between previous

research and between settings. Conducting the research in this way provides the schools involved with customised information which is relevant and useful to them reflecting what their pupils believe helps or hinders belonging.

As demonstrated above, EPs may have a crucial role to play in supporting schools to improve school belonging for their pupils. Due to the nature of their work, they have the skills to be able to support schools to gather views from pupils, using child centred methods and research approaches, and then the ability to support them to implement evidence-based interventions, as well as train staff. This will support children to build social and emotional competencies needed and feelings of school belonging. As they work systemically, EPs are also well placed to support schools to consider how adaptations to the environment and teaching practices can support children with social/emotional factors and how the mesosystem can better align with exo- and macrosystemic factors such as governmental policy.

Research Question 2: Does YPAR lead to perceived change in individual school settings?

YPAR by its very nature is designed to enable young people to create social change (Ozer & Douglas, 2015). Research suggests that participation in such an approach is associated with positive developmental outcomes for children and young people (Shamrova & Cummings, 2017) such as increased engagement, motivation, and sociopolitical awareness (e.g. Ozer & Douglas, 2013; Voight & Velez, 2018) and may also be able to increase their feelings of belonging (e.g. Welton, 2018). It is these benefits and the element of change that may make this method particularly useful for schools wishing to make changes to their practices to improve school belonging as this will increase the likelihood that changes made will directly benefit the students. The findings of this study suggest that there is the potential for change to be made to school practices, as well as to pupil outcomes, because of involvement in the YPAR project.

School Based Changes

The children in both settings were able to suggest many changes that they would like to see implemented because of their research. These included changes to help children with their relationships, changes to help with learning, changes to support emotional factors and changes to the school environment and school practices, which correspond with the ecological factors outlined above. The children in the settings were generally positive about these changes taking place and teachers confirmed that they would be implemented. The teachers were willing to make an action plan with the pupil researchers, expressed their belief in the feasibility of the changes and indicated their intention to take this forward. They also expressed interest in conducting future YPAR projects within their schools to explore other areas. This indicates that the project had the potential to lead to changes which, as seen in previous research, may have influenced curriculum development (Wells et al., 2015) and impacted on school policy (Cargo et al., 2003).

However, the findings also suggested that these changes may not have been fully embedded. There was some scepticism from the children about whether adults would be able to implement their changes, and from the staff around the necessity of some changes. The children gave several reasons as to why they felt that change would not happen including that they felt that a lot of things were already going on, a lack of money, changes being hard and limited number of staff. These reasons corresponded with those given by staff who suggested that some of the changes might not happen due to staffing issues, money and time, whereas changes that were quick and easy were likely to be implemented. These issues reflect difficulties in the exo and macrosystem highlighted above related to a lack of resources within schools and pressure put on teachers to focus on academic results.

This was particularly true in Wellington Primary where the teacher indicated that he did not believe that all of the children's changes were feasible. As this school failed to reply to follow up requests for information it seems likely that the initiatives may have been forgotten, and change

abandoned (Cargo et al., 2003). In this setting, there was a lack of buy in from the school leadership team who failed to attend the children's presentations of their research. This is likely to have impacted whether the changes were bought in to and acted upon. This reflects previous research indicating that a lack of institutional support for student-led initiatives has caused research findings to not be translated into action (Ozer, 2017). This is likely to be affected by entrenched power structures where the adults in charge fail to genuinely share power and take children seriously (Ginwright & James, 2002). When thinking about school ethos, research suggests that school leadership plays a crucial role in shaping the school culture and climate as leaders set the tone for positive interpersonal interactions, implement inclusive policies and decide how much pupil's voices are amplified (Allen et al., 2021). If leaders do not prioritise these aspects, it is likely that the schools will be unable to engage in a process like YPAR which requires inclusivity and an openness to new ideas.

When considering how to make change for individual schools in relation to belonging, it is therefore important to secure buy in from key staff members and school leaders from the beginning and throughout the project to ensure its ongoing success. This may require a shift in perspective of those in charge to consider what "could be" instead of what "is", removing barriers to belonging, engaging in collaborative problem solving and promoting inclusivity (Riley, 2022).

Changes for Participants

The findings suggested that there were several changes experienced by the pupil researchers themselves. The pupils were better able to explain what belonging was and how it related to them after completing the YPAR project and gained an understanding of what others in their setting thought about it. This reflects previous findings related to increased awareness after conducting YPAR (Ozer & Douglas, 2013; Voight & Velez, 2018). It was also reported that the pupil researchers gained new skills, such as the ability to carry out research and improved some skills they already had

such as communication and confidence because of conducting the YPAR, which again corresponds with previous research (Castro & Colleagues, 2022).

The available research further suggested that there may be some change to pupil's feelings of belonging after being part of the YPAR project perhaps due to feelings of increased school engagement through being involved in democratic practices (Castro et al., 2022; Schall et al., 2016; Torre et al., 2008). When comparing mean scores for pupils before and after the project using the PSSM, it would appear as though this was the case as scores generally rose from time one to time two. This was found to be statistically significant in Kingstown where the pupil researchers had higher median scores for overall feelings of belongingness as well as higher median scores for '*Most teachers are interested in me*'. This suggests that through completing the project, pupil researchers' general feelings of school belonging increased and that they felt more listened to and respected by their teachers in this setting.

There was no such statistical difference in Wellington, which could reflect the differences in implementation between the settings. Kingstown sessions were conducted over several months rather than a week as at Wellington and it may have been the extended time period that led to this change as has been found in previous research evaluating the successfulness of interventions over time (e.g. Fretian et al., 2021). In addition, at Kingstown pupil researchers worked as a single small group outside of the classroom so it could be that this made the experience feel more special, increasing their feelings of belonging, as seen in research which suggests that effects are more evident for interventions which make children feel special (e.g. Cohen & Garcia, 2008). Lastly, as indicated above, it appears that in Kingstown, there was a greater commitment to change and this was prioritised by staff. This may particularly influence scores for 'my teachers were interested in me', as a commitment to change would indicate that they had truly listened to, and respected, the pupil researchers' views. This may reflect the fact that school staff at Wellington did not fully buy in to the approach and the necessity of passing power and control over to the children (Shaw et al.,

2011) and has therefore gone on to impact the development of skills and feelings of belonging. However, it could also be the case that change did occur at Wellington but due to the small sample size, the non-parametric tests were unable to compute the difference. Due to the small sample sizes in both settings, it was not possible for the statistical analysis to pick up smaller positive effect sizes.

Although perhaps not picked up on by the PSSM, interview responses provide further evidence of improvements in this area as they indicated improvements for pupils in interpersonal skills, critical consciousness, confidence and collaboration which research suggests may have led to improved social connections for pupils which in turn may then have impacted feelings of belonging (Anyon et al., 2018; Langhout et al., 2014). This underscores the importance of conducting qualitative research alongside quantitative to fully explore nuanced concepts and gain a full picture of the situation from the perspectives of those involved.

Summary

Overall, the project appears to have led to some significant changes for the pupil researchers and the potential for future change in the school settings. In relation to the schools, teachers expressed their willingness and intention to take on the suggestions for change made by the children and their willingness to run future YPAR projects, indicating potential for future change. This process appears to have led to changes for pupil researchers including improved understanding of belonging, and how their peers feel about school, increased skills and, in some cases, improved feelings of school belonging.

However, there were several issues which impacted this change including senior leadership buy-in, funding, staffing and time as well as the inherent power structures in place in the schools and adults' attitudes towards child led initiatives. EPs are well placed to help navigate these systemic issues e.g. funding and staffing, as they could support schools to consider organisational policies which may impact upon this. They are also well placed to secure buy in with key stakeholders,

through building strong relationships and sharing relevant research, as well as to promote the importance of listening to children's voices.

Research Question 3: What Are the Opportunities and Challenges of Using a YPAR Approach in a Primary School Context to Explore School Belonging?

From conducting research using YPAR to explore school belonging, several key opportunities arose which are further outlined below. These included benefits for participants, including gaining skills, confidence and engagement, as well as benefits for schools, including increased understanding of children's views, an idea of what works and does not work, and an action plan to lead to change. This research also highlights the similarities and differences between factors which impact belonging in these primary schools in relation to research. However, there were also several challenges of using this approach. These opportunities and challenges are further explored below.

Benefits for Pupil Researchers

In both case studies, the pupil researchers designed, carried out, analysed and presented their own research projects which confirms that pupils of this age can effectively engage with YPAR. They were able to collect data related to the topic which adds to the research base related to factors which promote belonging in primary schools.

The first benefit relates to the fact that they universally expressed that they enjoyed participating in the project. Their responses suggested that this enjoyment relates to feeling "special" or "important" because they had been chosen to complete the research, and in some cases, they also appeared to feel proud. This corresponds with research that indicates that participating in YPAR is likely to foster feelings of pride, a sense of purpose and being taken seriously (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Ozer & Douglas, 2013), and that this reflects that the children felt genuinely listened to, seen and valued (Cook-Sather, 2006).

This finding was clearer in Kingstown than in Wellington. The outward enthusiasm expressed at Kingstown could reflect the small group nature of the YPAR project in this setting verses the whole

class at Wellington which may have enabled the pupil researchers to feel more listened to and valued. In addition, the small group appeared to better support inclusion as children were able to help each other and received more support from the research facilitator which enabled all children to be included, regardless of barriers to learning, and this could have contributed to the difference. This corresponds to Hart's (1992) advice regarding participation in research for children which argues that when properly scaffolded, the experience becomes more meaningful and enjoyable. This is further reflected in research which indicates that engagement in YPAR is linked to how well the project is structured around the developmental needs of the participants (Ozer, 2017). It appears that at this age, children benefited from a significant amount of scaffolding and support as seen at Kingstown, and this enabled them to enjoy participating more.

The children in both settings also appeared to enjoy learning about other pupils in the school through the research process. This corresponds with research which suggests that participating in YPAR leads to positive outcomes for young people such as awareness of issues around them (e.g. Ozer & Douglas, 2013; Voight & Velez, 2018). The findings of this study further relate to the findings of research by Castro and colleagues (2022) which suggests that being involved in YPAR leads to increased interest in peers for the children and young people involved. They found that this in turn leads to increased inclusion for marginalised pupils as pupils are more likely to consider the issues faced by their peers after participating in YPAR (Castro et al., 2022). As the children comment on how they enjoyed learning about other children's opinions, this may be a further future outcome here.

The children also benefited by appearing to gain a more nuanced understanding of the concept of belonging reflecting previous YPAR project findings which indicate that young people gain a far deeper understanding of complex social, educational and political issues when researching them first hand (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Ozer, 2017). It could be the case that through this increased understanding of the topic and their understanding of what causes difficulties for others, the pupil researchers developed a critical consciousness (Freire, 1970), which research suggests is a

core part of YPAR (Khawaja et al., 2024). As children in this study reported enjoying the fact that they were helping others, emphasising how it was important to learn about this and showing interest in making changes to support them, we can speculate that this may have been the case here.

In addition, through this process, the pupil researchers gained skills such as improved confidence, independence and technology skills which they did not previously have. This corresponds with research which suggests that participation in YPAR supports children and young people to gain skills (e.g. Lac & Cumings Mansfield, 2018). It appears that the skills the children gained were related to the things they enjoyed the most, things they don't usually get to do such as interviewing, using computers to make presentations and then presenting these findings, leading to improved confidence and communication skills. The novelty of the experience seemed to enhance their enjoyment of the process and enable the development of skills through active participation (Ozer, 2017). This corresponds with research that indicates that being in novel roles e.g. researcher, interviewer etc allows children to develop skills they would not normally practise in the classroom (Mitra, 2018) and that young people develop new competencies when they are challenged in supportive but unfamiliar environments e.g. YPAR (Zeldin et al., 2013).

A literature review by Anyon and colleagues (2018) suggests that participating in YPAR was most likely to lead to agency and leadership skills for the children and young people when measured qualitatively. These skills not coming through as clearly as in previous research could indicate that the children may not have been developmentally ready to lead or be truly independent (e.g. Piaget, 1972). Alternatively, it could suggest that the power structures inherent in primary schools did not allow for true pupil leadership (seen as detrimental in research by Cammarota & Fine, 2008) or that the intervention time frame was too short. This mirrors previous research which indicates that short term YPAR projects can fail to yield measurable personal changes (Ozer & Douglas, 2013). This reflects the novel nature of using YPAR in primary schools, as it was unclear exactly which benefits would be applicable in this context and which participants would prioritise. However, although this

was not something that was directly commented on by participants in this project, pupil researchers were able to lead their projects with minimal adult support which could suggest that they did gain skills in leadership and agency.

Benefits for School Settings

When YPAR is carried out well, pupil findings can mirror that of an adult researcher, identifying similar priorities but with additional benefits which may not usually be considered (e.g. Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Mitra, 2008; Ozer, 2017). This was seen in this project where findings from the YPAR project were supported by themes identified by the research facilitator through interviews with the pupil researchers. This indicates that completing research in this way is just as meaningful as when children are merely participants and, in fact, their active involvement enabled a much larger sample to be considered and led to some change for the schools.

For school settings, the main benefits are likely to reflect that the pupil researchers benefited extensively from taking part as discussed above. In addition, the findings from both stages of this study not only add to the research around what supports belonging in primary schools for children but also enable the individual school settings to gain valuable insight into how belonging is perceived in their settings by large groups of pupils, providing information which they may not have been able to access in any other way. It provided information for schools about what works and what doesn't when it comes to belonging in their setting and crucially enabled the development of a co-created action plan that could lead to change. This is something which is reflected in the available research which asserts that YPAR reveals issues in schools which are grounded in student experiences, making this highly relevant for school settings looking to adapt policy or practices (Ozer & Wright, 2012).

Challenges of using YPAR in Kingstown and Wellington

Although the research led to a significant number of benefits in both settings, there were also several challenges reported by participants when conducting this type of research which impacted the overall successfulness of the approach. These challenges appeared to be related to

systemic factors, and as such, each school will be discussed separately. The first challenge relates to the logistics of arranging the sessions in Kingstown and the second relates to the pupil's ability to access the concept, content and materials in Wellington.

Kingstown. The participants in Kingstown felt that there were some difficulties in terms of the logistics of the sessions as they were hard to schedule and often conflicted with the participants' preferred activities, perhaps reducing engagement overall. As the researcher, I felt that it was difficult in some cases to arrange the sessions and carry them out with fidelity due to time constraints. Research suggests that this is a common difficulty when conducting YPAR (e.g. Ozer et al., 2010), as it can be difficult to create space in school time (Mirra et al., 2015; Ozer et al., 2010) as YPAR is often seen as not as important as curriculum subjects (Mitra, 2018) and, as such, most YPAR projects are conducted outside of school hours (Buttimer, 2018). These issues could also be intensified by teacher workload difficulties, as organising YPAR is outside of their usual job specification (Zeldin et al., 2013), and administrative and structural barriers, as it can be difficult to gain approval for YPAR from leadership teams (Hart, 1992). These issues were relevant here as scheduling in and prioritising YPAR sessions did not appear to be high on the agenda. However, participants did express that these issues did not impact the overall quality of the project and once they had seen the results, staff buy in seemed to increase, as demonstrated by the changes they have made since implementation.

Wellington. To act on the suggestions of the pupils at Kingstown, changes were made before the YPAR project at Wellington began. Sessions were booked in advance and took place over a week to avoid the timetabling problems experienced in Kingstown. However, participants reported that a challenge with timetabling in this way related to the fact that this meant there often was not enough time to finish parts of the project and that they felt that they needed more time. This reflects previous research which suggests that longer timeframes are needed for meaningful YPAR work (Ozer & Douglas, 2013). However, due to the changes made before implementation at Wellington Primary, there were not as many logistical issues reported by the participants. The main challenges

that the children discussed were related to them being able to access the session content as some children found it difficult to engage without adult support. To think about this point, it is perhaps useful to reflect on Gal's (2017) ecological model of participation which explains a range of contextual factors which influence participation including participants level of involvement, the length of the project and the extent to which they can participate. Some pupils were perhaps not developmentally ready to participate entirely independently and needed more scaffolding and support (Piaget, 1972), as the concept of conducting research and of "school belonging" in general may have been too complex for some pupils to understand. However, conducting the sessions as a whole class group at Wellington, with less adult support, may have been able to better foster independence and could be considered more child led than sessions at Kingstown because of this, aligning more closely with the underlying premise of YPAR. This balance between support and independence is something that needs to be carefully considered in future projects.

Summary

As outlined above, there may be a range of benefits for conducting research around school belonging in primary schools using YPAR as a method to do so. This includes it being enjoyable for participants, enabling them to build a variety of skills and improving their understanding of both the concept and of their peers which may lead to further systemic benefits such as increased inclusion. For schools it enables them to have a clear understanding of how children in their settings feel about their school and to create an action plan of change going forward in a way that is ethical and child centred. However, participants also identified challenges that arose when conducting research in this way including issues relating to timing, scheduling and access which may have impacted some children's ability to engage with the project and impacted on future outcomes. These challenges were linked to systemic and environmental issues within each school related to power and buy in.

In future YPAR projects, it would therefore be beneficial for school settings to carefully consider how they are going to schedule and facilitate the YPAR. Schools need to make a

commitment to prioritising the project, allowing ample time and resources for it to be completed with fidelity, and ensuring that the pupil participants have adequate scaffolding to engage effectively.

Due to their knowledge of child development, EPs are well placed to support schools to consider what this scaffolding may need to look like so that the method can be truly inclusive. Through this they can give voice to all children including those who are marginalised and underrepresented, whilst also allowing for independence and adhering to the underlying premise of the approach. The challenges in this research highlight the careful balance that needs to be achieved between allowing research to be child led, improving independence skills, whilst also ensuring that all children can engage with the material, so they experience the benefits discussed above.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Introduction

In this final chapter, the findings outlined in the previous chapter are summarised, highlighting the strengths and limitations of the research, before the implications for research, for primary schools and for EPs, are discussed. Suggestions as to the next steps for research in this area are also made.

Strengths and limitations

This study adds to previous research that explores belonging in primary school settings, creates change for the pupils involved and provides useful insight into how using a YPAR approach can be managed in primary schools to achieve these results. As such, the project has several strengths.

Firstly, the YPAR process itself appears to have been inherently valuable. The pupil researchers gained skills in a variety of areas which they may not have had the opportunity to gain otherwise. They were also able to improve their own feelings of belonging, as well as their understanding of the concept and the feelings of others. Moreover, it was valuable for schools. Through YPAR, a range of children were able to share their views about belonging in their school settings. As this data was gathered by their peers, children may have felt more able to share their true feelings. This means that the findings are authentic, child-centred, reflect genuine experiences (Anyon et al., 2018) and may have led to additional information that the school would not otherwise have had access to. It also provided a plan of action for change which would not have been facilitated using another method. This project was also useful for researchers and EPs as it provided insights into the facilitation of YPAR with this age group which can be used to maximise the success of future projects.

In addition, the case study methodology worked well here as it allowed for a deep and nuanced exploration into belonging and YPAR in two settings. The findings provide insight for the

individual schools about what is working well and what could be improved in relation to school belonging. It allowed for the comparison of settings which provided a deeper understanding of how belonging may be impacted by environmental factors. Through this methodology, the findings were co-constructed with the pupil researchers which ensured that their voices, and the voices of their participants, were heard and valued within their school and the wider research community. Ensuring they were at the centre of this study. This is important as this aligns with the nature of the project.

However, it is important to note that there were some challenges in using these approaches. In relation to YPAR, some children found engaging in certain aspects difficult, this was particularly relevant during the analysis stages as all children found this a difficult concept to engage with and there was not enough time to give this the attention it needed. This meant that some children were not able to participate in all areas of the project. The difficulties in this area relate to the complexity of the task verses the children's developmental skills which led to a dependence on the facilitator (Vygotsky, 1978). When in a small group, this was not problematic as the children could easily be scaffolded and supported, however this did cause issues when working with a whole class as adult support was less available.

To address this issue in future projects, it may be beneficial to conduct YPAR in small groups when working with this age group, as well as allowing enough time for completion. However, it is important to note that any support given to the pupil researchers could be considered to dilute the participatory nature of the project (Cahill, 2007) and could mean that the project is not considered to be truly child-led. It is therefore important to consider how to balance support, to enable access, with independence to produce something organically child-led in future projects.

Further limitations of the YPAR projects relate to the extent to which the pupil researchers really had power in the environment as this related to buy in from those who held the power within the school system. Due to the hierarchical nature of primary schools, this was perhaps not always passed on and as such led to issues with follow up and buy in (Dickerson et al., 2024; Albright, 2023).

This impacted the changes the pupils were able to make and the longevity of the project and is something that should be seriously considered in any future projects. It may be beneficial to hold follow up interviews later with all participants to establish whether change persists over time. This was not possible due to time constraints in this project but meant that real change was difficult to measure which led to difficulties establishing the overall success of the YPAR if YPAR is defined as a process which leads to change. Power is something that is perhaps a surprising limitation here when the participating schools had volunteered and expressed enthusiasm for the project. To fully ensure buy in, it may be necessary for schools to facilitate the YPAR themselves.

Finally, methodologically, the use of quantitative data may not have been particularly effective in this study as there were not enough participants for statistical power that would make quantitative data truly useful or valid. This may be something that could be considered in future research projects as more participants would enable researchers to maximise results and make findings truly generalisable to other contexts.

Future Research

To capitalise on these strengths and address the limitations, future research may wish to expand participatory research with primary school students to provide more evidence as to its benefits and challenges in general, but particularly to establish what can support all children to engage in this type of research. Studies should aim to include more participants to enable the use of quantitative research measures to make findings generalisable and comparable to other existing research.

When looking at school belonging particularly, future research may also wish to include a more diverse range of settings as school culture is known to influence belonging and may therefore influence the conclusion of the research. It would be beneficial for YPAR to be run before and after the transitional period as well as in alternative provisions to highlight this effect.

Additionally, YPAR studies in this area may wish to be more longitudinal, spanning over a year or more to ensure that effects are fully realised and there is sufficient time to complete the project. It would be important for buy in for these studies to be facilitated by school staff but should have regular check ins and ongoing support from the researcher to monitor and enable further change. This would also enable the pace of the study to be slower, allowing all children to engage fully, which was perhaps not possible in this project.

Finally, it may be useful for further research to compare the level of adult support given to children in YPAR projects to establish whether results are impacted by scaffolding or whether allowing children to be truly independent is more beneficial for the research or for them.

Implications for Schools, EP Practice and Research

There are a range of implications from this research for EPs, school leaders and policy makers which align with prior research suggesting that involving children as much as possible in research has a range of positive implications for the child, the wider system and the research itself (Brett et al., 2014).

First, the schools involved are provided with clear, child-centred, feedback on what helps children to feel a strong sense of belonging in their settings and given actions to address issues in this area that the children themselves have decided upon and are enthusiastic about. Schools should aim to act on these findings and make the changes to see the most positive results. The research should have highlighted for them that belonging can be fostered through social and emotional intervention and through adapting school spaces to support personal and interpersonal outcomes. This should help inform the schools policy decisions and enable them to adopt targeted interventions to address any issues which have been highlighted. As the case study included two schools, it is possible to transfer some of these findings across schools, so other similar primary schools can gain an understanding of what works to support belonging, as well as some guidance around how to facilitate their own YPAR projects to explore this.

For policy makers, this research highlights the benefits of using participatory approaches to support with policy decisions which affect children in schools as it highlights that children are capable researchers who have a right to express their views. This reflects research which suggests that exploring belonging from young people's perspectives and involving them as much as possible in the research is likely to help effectively inform practice relevant to policy and pedagogy (Longaretti, 2020) and this is what will ultimately lead to widespread and impactful change (Kiefer et al., 2015). Policy makers should consider how they can involve children's voices as much as possible as this research highlights that they are knowledgeable about issues which affect them and are as capable of conducting research as adults when given support to do so.

For researchers, this study provides further insight into using YPAR as an approach with primary aged pupils, which will help to ensure that tools, methodology and reporting in this area are appropriate for children and young people (Ansell et al., 2012). It confirms that children have the skills to be able to meet research standards and provides information about how projects of this type can be facilitated and what training and support they may need to do this (Kellett et al., 2004). It also adds to the existing research base around supporting school belonging in primary schools and comments on the ways in which EPs might support this process.

For EPs, this research highlights areas through which they can help schools to promote belonging, such as through facilitating social skills interventions. EPs can support schools to develop these interventions and monitor their success, as well as supporting schools with policy decisions which will have a systemic impact. This project also highlights the benefits of gathering children's voices and of giving them power in decisions which affect them. As EPs are skilled at gaining children's voices, they are likely to be able to support school staff to gather children's authentic views and provide support to interpret them. This could be through their individual work with children, through staff training and the dissemination of research around participatory approaches and through encouraging school staff to reflect on their practice. EPs also have an important role to play

in the promotion of YPAR to gather these views and to make change as many staff members may not have come across this approach before.

Summary and Concluding Comments

This study explored how a YPAR approach could be used in a primary school context to explore pupils' perceptions of school belonging as few studies had explored this concept in these contexts, leading to limited understanding of how to improve feelings of belonging for children in these settings (Allen & Bowles, 2013). Within this, the study identified factors that helped or hindered belonging in each setting and created a plan of actionable change to improve this and promote belonging in these schools. It also established some of the opportunities and challenges of using YPAR as a method to do so. YPAR was chosen as a vehicle for involving children as research suggests this may be the most ethical way of gaining and promoting children's voices in a way that can lead to real change which is meaningful to them (Jacquez et al., 2013; Shamrova & Cummings, 2017).

The study found that there were multiple factors which children felt influenced their feelings of school belonging and indicated that there was a large amount of similarity across both settings, and across existing research. This perhaps consolidates the generalisability of these findings. These factors include personal factors such as happiness, academic competence and self-esteem, microsystemic factors such as support from peers and teachers and mesosystemic factors such as the culture and ethos of the school. This study further highlighted that personal and interpersonal factors can often be impacted by environmental elements such as having space to play with peers, as well as exo and macrosystemic factors, such as policies which limit teachers' time to build relationships, underscoring the importance of schools carrying out their own research to reflect their own specific contexts.

Through YPAR, the pupil researchers were able to reflect on this and decide on actionable changes which they felt would support children to feel a greater sense of belonging in their schools.

These changes included spaces for social interaction, support in lessons and extracurricular activities to improve happiness. Through this process, these changes were agreed with school staff and they expressed their intention to take this forward. This suggests that pupils in year 5 can engage with YPAR as they were able to meet the three key principles of the approach proposed by Rodriguez and Brown (2019). They engaged in the inquiry process, they participated actively, and they proposed change to lead to transformation (Rodriguez & Brown, 2019). This highlights that YPAR is a useful and practical approach to use with this age group.

In addition, from engaging in this work, this study suggests that the pupil researchers gained improvements in their understanding of the topic of belonging as well as an understanding of their peers. They also gained several personal and interpersonal skills such as confidence, independence and collaboration from working in this way. This highlights that not only is YPAR useful for gaining children's voices, but it may also be beneficial for the children involved, empowering them and enabling to increase control in their lives (Baum et al., 2006).

However, it was also clear from this study that the successfulness of YPAR, the extent to which changes were made in each setting and the benefits the children involved experienced were in some cases limited by issues related to power due to the inherent power structures evident in the school system. This influenced the longevity of the changes. This suggests that for YPAR to be truly successful in primary schools, there may need to be greater systemic change, where children's voices are valued by all involved, to recognise them as active contributors to the research process. This study further highlighted the need for YPAR facilitators to think carefully about the degree of independence and power which is given to pupils related to their developmental stage, as some children may need scaffolding and support to engage effectively.

The findings are perhaps particularly useful for EPs to consider. It highlights ways in which they can support schools to promote school belonging for children in their settings in a way that aligns with governmental priorities and provides evidence surrounding the benefits of seeking

children's voices when aiming to understand their views. EPs may be able to use this information to

support schools to carry out their own child- led research projects in their settings, to amplify

children's voices and provide context specific feedback, supporting schools to create change and

ultimately promoting inclusion for all.

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Appendices

Appendix A - *Search Criteria*

The aim of this review was to critically examine literature relating to two intersecting domains:

school belonging and YPAR, particularly in primary education contexts. A structured search strategy

was implemented to ensure transparency, replicability and relevance. Although not exhaustive the

process followed the principles of identification, screening and selection. The databases searched

were JSTOR, OVID and ProQuest. The databases were searched using the terms "school belonging"

or "belonging", "Youth Participatory Action Research" or "participatory research" and "primary

schools". Search results were filtered by journal type to include only journals relating to education

and psychology, and location to only include those written in English. The following PRISMA diagram

illustrates the number of identified studies and reasons for exclusion.
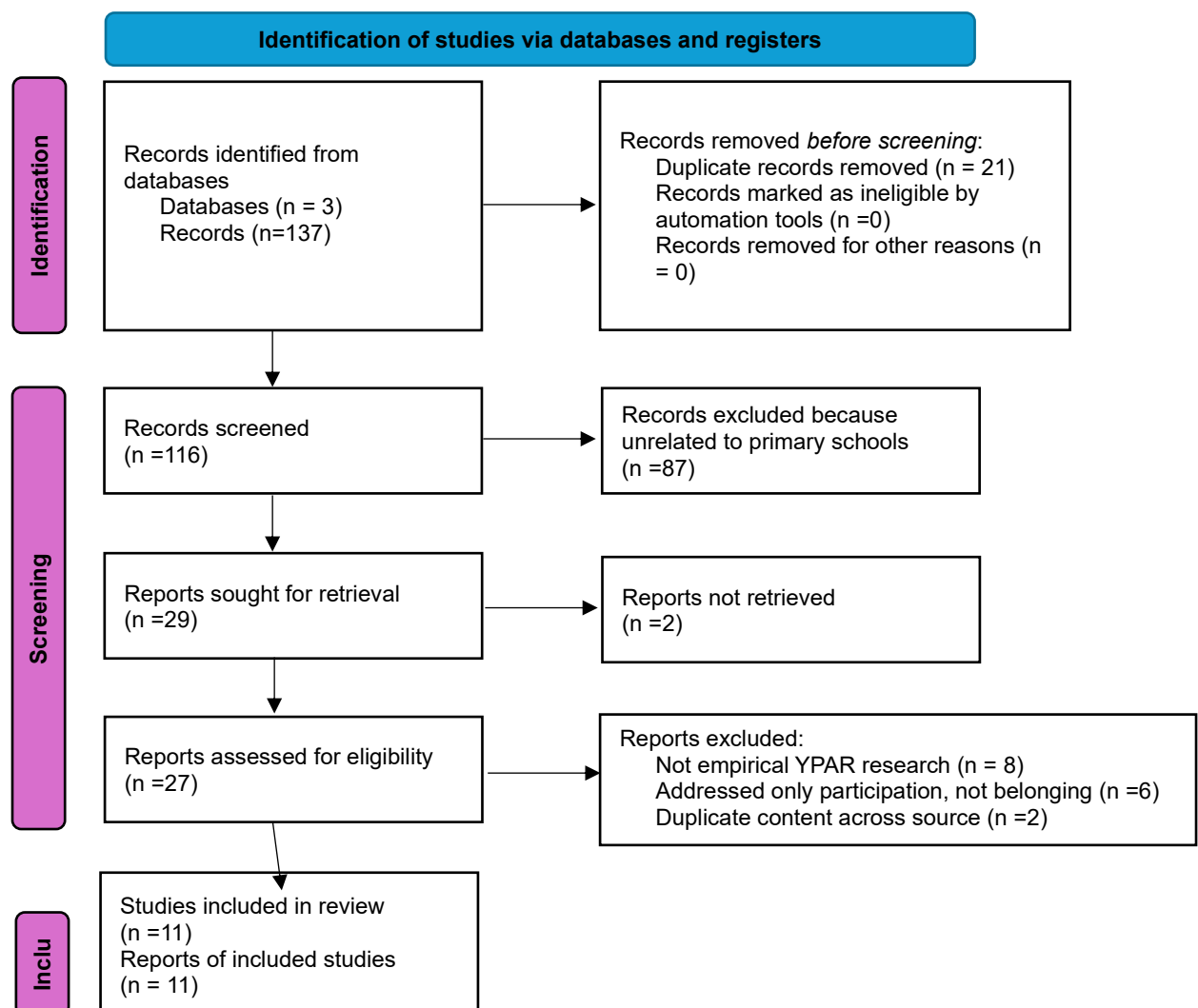
An initial reading of all abstracts was undertaken and from this only 11 articles were chosen using the following inclusion criteria: articles written in the last 20 years, articles with a focus on participatory research with children in primary schools AND related to belonging in any way.

These are summarised in the following table:

Author(s), Year	Title / Focus	Methodology	Sample	Key Findings / Relevance
Anselma et al., 2020	Children's participation in research about school health and wellbeing	YPAR with primary-aged children (qualitative)	Primary school children (Netherlands)	Children can meaningfully influence school wellbeing through structured participation.
Kellett, 2010	Pupils as researchers: empowering children in their own learning and environments	(qualitative case studies)	Children aged 9–14 in UK schools	Children are capable researchers with proper support
Mayes et al., 2019	Pupil voice, rights, and belonging in schools	Qualitative participatory design	Pupils aged 8–12 (Australia)	Belonging is tied to voice, visibility, and relational equality in schools.
Abraczinskas et al 2022	Improving school climate through school wide YPAR	Participatory design	Middle school pupils (US)	YPAR promoted equity through use led decision making
Voight & Velez, 2018	Youth voice and civic engagement through participatory action research in school reform	Mixed methods PAR in secondary schools	Urban adolescents in US schools	YPAR builds belonging, civic agency, and inclusivity.
Renick and Reich 2023	Elevating student voices and addressing their needs using YPAR to improve school climate during covid.	YPAR methodology Quantitative pre and post	Middle School (US)	Improve shared experience of lunch.
Stack and Wang 2018	Student's perceptions of belonging: A photovoice participatory action project	Participatory-photo voice	Grade 9	Photos helped to understand pupils perspectives.
Langhout et al 2014	Examining relational empowerment through YPAR	YPAR Interviews Social network analysis	Elementary	Children experienced relational

				empowerment by participating.
Marren, 2024 (Thesis)	Navigating Youth Participatory action research in a primary school	Mixed methods	Ireland Primary	Adult researchers must acknowledge their power
Cox and Robinson-Pant 2008	Power, participation and decision making in the primary classroom	Action research	Primary	Teachers struggled with changing professional role.
Messiou and Lowe (2023)	Developing student researchers in primary schools	Inclusive inquiry-collaborative action research	Primary	Benefits included confidence and engagement.

Following this review, no studies were found to directly focus on belonging AND YPAR and be

conducted within UK primary schools.

Appendix B - Letter to Head Teachers

Dear (Headteacher),

My name is Jenny Conway, I am a trainee educational psychologist (EP) studying at the Institute of Education, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society in London and am on placement in….. I am your link EP and have been working with children in your school since September.

I have been passed your contact details by (Senco) because I wanted to get in touch with you to invite you to participate in my research. As part of my doctorate, I am conducting a project around school belonging. It is important that children feel like they belong in their school settings because it is linked to a range of positive outcomes such as academic motivation and success, better attendance and happiness. Unfortunately, more and more children across the county seem to be experiencing issues with feeling like they belong at school, and this appears to be leading to negative outcomes such as increased rates of emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA), unhappiness and a lack of feelings of inclusion.

To support schools with this issue, I aim to explore school belonging for children in individual primary schools using a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) approach, where children take the lead in designing, carrying out and disseminating research. This approach has been chosen to maximise the benefit participation will have on individual children as it aims to fully include children in research and give them power and control (Boyden & Ennew, 1997).

The research questions are as follows:

RQ1: How can a YPAR approach be used in a primary school context?

RQ2: What can the use of YPAR tell us about school belonging in a primary school context?

RQ3: Does engagement in YPAR influence feelings of school belonging for pupil-co-researchers?

RQ4: How may a YPAR approach contribute to change to strengthen school belonging in a primary school context?

Some of these benefits of participation in this project for children will include:

-   The development of transferable skills.
-   Increased confidence.
-   The opportunity to make an active contribution to their communities.
-   An increased sense of school belonging.

This approach will also be beneficial for school settings and staff as it offers a chance to understand children's lives at school in a way that would not be possible if this research was conducted by adults, providing an action plan of what students would like to see in their school, giving a real insight into their views.

As part of this project I will:
-   Work with 8-10 pupil researchers across 7 weeks (1 session of around an hour a week at a time that works for the school).
-   Teach the children about various research methods and then support them to develop and carry out their own research project into school belonging. This will include developing research questions that are important to them, choosing a method, carrying out the research, analysing their findings and then creating a way to present these.
-   Conduct pre and post session interviews with the pupil researchers to find out how participating in the project has influenced them.

- Ask all children in the year group to complete a short questionnaire about school belonging before and after the research takes place,
- Ask staff to complete a short online questionnaire before the research begins.

I will need you to:

- Ask staff to complete a short online questionnaire.
- Allow me to come in and introduce the project to year 5 and ask all children in the year group to complete a short questionnaire.
- Ask teachers to choose children to participate (6-8 children at random who are interested in participating).
- Send home consent forms for pupil researchers and collect these back in.
- Send home an opt out consent form to other pupils in the year group.
- Decide on an appropriate time, based on timetables, for me to meet with the group every week, providing a room/space for me to meet with the children.
- Be available after the last session for the pupils to feed their findings back to you and be committed to carrying out some of their suggestions based on their findings.

I have attached an information sheet to provide further information. Please have a look at this and let me know if you have any questions or queries.

I am keen to discuss this further with you to explore whether this is something your school would be interested in participating in. Would you be available on….. for a short meeting to talk about the project in more detail?

Thank you for your support and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Best wishes,

Jenny Conway
Trainee Educational Psychologist
IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Soc

Appendix C – Pupil Researcher Parental Consent

<u>Research Participation Information Sheet</u>

The opportunities and challenges of using Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) in primary schools to explore school belonging.

My name is Jenny Conway. I am conducting a research project that explores school belonging through the use of Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) in primary schools as part of my doctorate in Educational Psychology. I am studying at IoE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society and am on placement in…. I am also your school's link Trainee Educational Psychologist and have been working with the school since September.

This information sheet explains my research project. Please read the following information carefully and retain for your records. If there is anything that is unclear, or if you require any additional information, do not hesitate to contact me at   After reading this information sheet, if you are willing for your child to participate please sign and return the attached slip below.

What I aim to do:

This study aims to investigate how youth participatory action research can contribute to school belonging and guide schools in how they can strengthen school belonging with their pupils.
I want to find out:

- How YPAR can be implemented in primary schools.

- How YPAR can contribute to understanding of school belonging.

- The influence of the YPAR approach on the school belonging of pupil co-researchers.

- How a YPAR approach may lead to change to strengthen school belonging in a primary school context.

To answer these questions, I hope to work with a group of pupil researchers to conduct their own project. They will decide on their own research questions and method. They will then be able to present their findings to school leaders and produce a plan to improve school belonging in their school. Alongside their project I will be evaluating the impact of their participation on their sense of belonging to their school

What will happen if you agree to your child's involvement:

Your child has expressed an interest in taking part in the research project and becoming a pupil researcher. With your agreement, your child will attend a session with me once a week during school

time for seven weeks where they will learn about how they can carry out research, carry out their own research and share their findings with school leaders. Your child will also take part in two interviews with me and complete a questionnaire before and after they conduct their research to establish whether participating has influenced their feelings around school belonging. Although your child has indicated they want to be involved, they can withdraw at any time until the end of their research project, and this will be made clear to them. After this point, their data will form part of the overall data set and it will be impossible to take out.

Benefits of participation:

Whilst there are no direct benefits to you for your child taking part in this work, your child's participation will contribute to a better understanding children's views of school belonging and some of the factors that might influence this. Their thoughts will be shared with school leaders and may contribute to positive changes within the school. This in turn may improve their feelings of school belonging and help them to feel that they are heard and valued in school. Other benefits to your child may include increased confidence, the development of transferable skills and the opportunity to contribute to their school community.

Confidentiality:

All data that is collected will be anonymised or pseudonymised, meaning names and any other information that could lead to your child being identified will be removed. The data will not be accessible to anyone but me as the researcher and my supervisor. All identifying data will be destroyed at the end of the research activity.

Contact Information:

If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to email the researcher

If you do not give consent for your child to participate, you do not need to do anything further.

If you **consent** to your child's participation in this study, please sign in the space below and return this form to your child's class teacher.

I give consent for my child [INSERT NAME] who is in [INSERT School and Class and Teacher Name here} to participate in this study.

Print Name:

Sign Here: _____

Date:

Data Protection Privacy Notice
The controller for this project will be University College London (UCL). The UCL Data Protection Officer provides oversight of UCL activities involving the processing of personal data, and can be contacted at data-protection@ucl.ac.uk.

Appendix D – Pupil Researcher Consent

Young Person Information Sheet
Project Title: Using a YPAR approach to explore school belonging in primary schools.

Jenny Conway, Trainee Educational Psychologist, UCL Institute of Education

You can watch a video about the project here>>>> or by following this QR code!

Important information

WHO?

Who am I?

I am Jenny Conway. I am training to be an Educational Psychologist. I often work with young people to find out what helps them at school.

HELLO!

Why am I doing this project?

?

- I want to help children feel like they belong and feel included in school.
- To do this I want to find out what you think and whether you feel like you belong.
- I also want to help you to do some research in your school to find out what other children think and to make some changes.

What will you be asked to do?

- **You will take part in 2 interviews with me. 1 at the start and 1 at the end of the research project.**
- **You will take part in 6 research workshops to learn how to be a researcher.**
- **You will carry out a research project in your school.**
- **You will feedback your findings to your teachers!**

What will happen with the information you tell me?

- I will write a report about what we have found out.
- I will share the findings with other people but I won't use your real name. This means that people won't know that it is you who has told me the information.
- I will give you a summary of the findings at the end of the project.
- What you tell me is confidential so is private between you and me, but if you tell me anything which makes me think you or anybody else are in danger I will need to tell somebody.

NOW!

What do you do now?

- If you have any questions you can ask me when I come into school.
- If you want to take part you do not have to do anything else. If you do not want to take part, let your teacher or your parents know.
- You can change your mind about taking part once we get started!

THANK YOU :)

Appendix E – Semi Structured Interview Schedule

<u>**Interview schedule**</u>

<u>**Using a YPAR approach to explore school belonging in primary schools.**</u>

The present study aims to understand the contribution a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) approach can make in a primary school context to explore school belonging. This will provide greater understanding of what influences school belonging for children and explore how this method may contribute to our understanding of this concept.

<u>**Introduction for participants/Preamble**</u>

Aim: to give a brief introduction to the study, confirm consent from participants and give the opportunity to ask questions.

Thank you for taking the time to talk to me today. I am going to ask you some questions relating to your thoughts about belonging at school. We are interested in your experiences and perceptions.

1. Is that ok with you?

2. Are you still willing to participate?

3. Do you have any questions at this time?

<u>**Ethical considerations**</u>

Aim: to remind participants of their rights during the interview.

Before we begin let me remind you:
- The interview will take about 20 minutes.
- You do not have to answer any questions that you are not comfortable with
- You can stop at any time, no explanation needed
- If any question doesn't make sense, please ask for an explanation
- We will be recording this interview, after the interview the recording will be stored in an encrypted folder (explain this) on my laptop.
- Transcripts (explain this) will be made from the audio file, which will then be deleted.
- Transcripts will also be stored in an encrypted folder and anonymised (explain this).
- Everything you say in this interview will be confidential (explain this) unless deemed to impact your safety or the safety of others.

Is it alright to record the interview? The full transcript will only be seen by those working on the project.

<u>**Procedure**</u>:

Aim: to explain the structure of the interview to the participants.

I will begin the interview with my name, the date and time - this is just to keep the recordings organised.

The first question will be your name and what year group you are in. Remember, all your details will be anonymised when the data is transcribed.

Have you got questions before we start?

Is it OK for me to start recording now?

Background information questions

Aim: to gather background information about participants and ensure that recording devices are working.

1. What is your name? (this will be anonymised in the report)
2. What year are you in?

Rapport building questions

Aim: to build rapport with the participant.

What is your favourite thing about school?

Why do you like it?

Research questions PRIOR TO THE START OF THE PROJECT- Using the three houses approach to structure the discussion

Theoretical Framework	Related research questions	Interview questions	Prompt questions
Self-perception	Does engagement in YPAR influence feelings of school belonging for pupil-co-researchers?	1. What do you think school belonging means? Why? Can you give some examples? 2. Do you feel like you belong at school? Why? Why not?	Prompt questions: - Can you tell me more about…. - Can you explain that further… - Do you have any further thoughts around this? -
Perceived strengths	What can the use of YPAR tell us about school belonging in a primary school context? HOUSE OF GOOD THINGS	3. What does your school do to help you belong? 4. What else helps you to belong at school? 5. Do other pupils help you or others to belong at school? How? 6. What is going well at your school?	
Perceived challenges	What can the use of YPAR tell us about school belonging in a primary school context? HOUSE OF WORRIES	7. What would stop you or other children from feeling like you belong in school? Why? 8. Do other children influence your feelings of belonging?	
Potential for change	How may a YPAR approach contribute to change to strengthen school belonging in a primary school context? HOUSE OF DREAMS	9. What could your school do to help you belong? 10. What would you like to change in your school? Why? 11. What would help pupils in your school to belong? Why?	

		12. How could other pupils help you to belong?	

AFTER THE PROJECT HAS FINISHED

Theoretical Framework	Related research questions	Interview questions	Prompt questions
Self-perception	Does engagement in YPAR influence feelings of school belonging for pupil-co-researchers?	1. What do you think school belonging means now? Why? 2. Do you feel like you belong at school? Why? Why not? 3. Has anything changed since you started this project?	Prompt questions: - Can you tell me more about…. - Can you explain that further… - Do you have any further thoughts around this?
Perceived strengths	What can the use of YPAR tell us about school belonging in a primary school context? HOUSE OF GOOD THINGS (Look back at three houses from the start)	4. Does your school do anything else now to help you feel like you belong at school?	-
Perceived challenges	What can the use of YPAR tell us about school belonging in a primary school context? HOUSE OF WORRIES (Look back at three houses from the start)	5. Is there anything else you want to add here about things that might make children not feel like they belong in your school?	
Potential for change	How may a YPAR approach contribute to change to strengthen school belonging in a primary school context? HOUSE OF DREAMS Look back at three houses	6. What has changed now? 7. What do you want to change? 8. Do you think these changes will happen?	
Evaluation of approach	How can a YPAR approach be used in a primary school context?	9. What did you think about taking part in this project? 10. What did you find out? 11. What did you like? Why? 12. What did you not like? Why? 13. What could be done differently?	14.

Concluding statement

Aim: to debrief participants and provide support if needed.

Thank you for participating in this interview today. I will now turn off the recorder.

- All of your information including consent forms and recordings will be stored securely.
- If you would like to access any of the information I have stored, please let me know.
- The information you have given me will form part of a larger data set which will be analysed to identify themes.
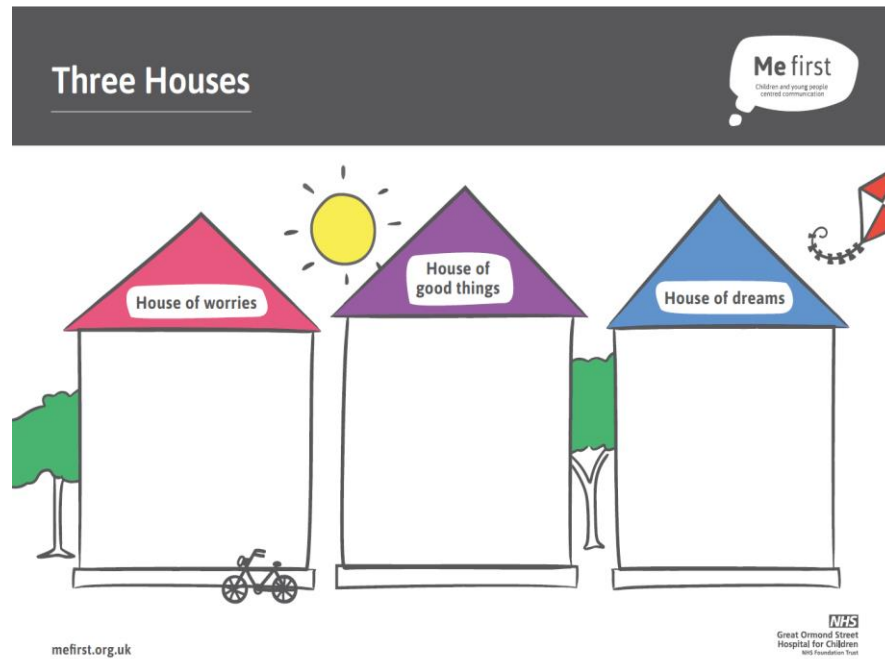
Appendix F – Adapted PSSM

School Belonging Questionnaire (2)

My name is Jenny Conway.

I am conducting a research project that explores school belonging through the use of Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) in primary schools as part of my doctorate in Educational Psychology.

 I am studying at IoE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society and am on placement in   am also your school's link Trainee Educational Psychologist and have been working with the school since September.

I want to find out:

·   How YPAR can be implemented in primary schools.

·   How YPAR can contribute to understanding of school belonging.

·   The influence of the YPAR approach on the school belonging of pupil co-researchers.

·   How a YPAR approach may lead to change to strengthen school belonging in a primary school context.

To answer these questions, I hope to work with a group of pupil researchers to conduct their own project. They will decide on their own research questions and method. They will then be able to present their findings to school leaders and come up with a plan to improve school belonging in their school.

Alongside this project I will be evaluating the impact of their participation on their sense of belonging and the impact of the approach in general. **As part of this evaluation I would like to ask teachers to complete this short online form about their perceptions of belonging in their schools.**

Please complete this online form. It should take no longer than 5 minutes. **By completing this anonymous form you are consenting to your answers being used as part of the evaluation of the project mentioned above and also agreeing to support the pupil researchers to make changes to improve school belonging in the school community.**

Thank you!

1. *Click the answer for each statement that you believe is most true.*

	1 (Not at all true)	2	3	4	5 (Comp
1. All children in my class feel a part of the school.	○	○	○	○	
2. Staff in the school notice when the children are good at something.	○	○	○	○	
3. It is hard for children to be accepted in this school.	○	○	○	○	
4. Other students in the school take their peer's opinions seriously.	○	○	○	○	
5. Most teachers at this school are interested in the children's views and opinions.	○	○	○	○	
6. Children can talk to at least one teacher if they have a problem.	○	○	○	○	
7. Staff at this school are friendly to the children.	○	○	○	○	
8. Teachers in this school are not interested in the children.	○	○	○	○	
9. Most children are included in lots of activities at this school.	○	○	○	○	
10. All children are treated with as much respect as other children in the school.	○	○	○	○	
11. Some children feel very different to most other students at the school.	○	○	○	○	
12. All children can be themselves at this school.	○	○	○	○	
13. Staff respect the children.	○	○	○	○	
14. Staff believe in the children.	○	○	○	○	
15. The children wish they were in a different school.	○	○	○	○	
16. Children feel proud to belong to the school.	○	○	○	○	
17. Students like each other and get along well.	○	○	○	○	

2. What does feeling a sense of school belonging mean to you?

Enter your answer

3. What do you think feeling a sense of school belonging means for your students?

Enter your answer

4. Do you think having a sense of school belonging is important for your students? Why?

Enter your answer

Appendix G – Example Training Plan and Resources

Session	Intended Outcomes
An introduction to belonging and conducting research.	The children develop a basic understanding of the concept. The children are introduced to different ways to conduct research. The concept of ethics is discussed. The children decide on a concept to study and create a research question.
Planning the research design.	The children choose a method of data collection after exploring a selection. Children prepare interview schedules or other resources they will need and practise their chosen method with each other. Ethics and data protection is again discussed in detail.
Collecting data.	Children collect their data using their chosen method.
Training around analysis of data.	Children learn how to analyse their data and conduct preliminary work e.g. transcripts. Children use their chosen data analysis method to analyse the data.
Presentation of the data.	Children discuss the most important points of their data and what they want to feed back. Children create a presentation to present their thoughts to senior leaders.
Stakeholder group meeting.	Children present their findings to the stakeholder group. Children discuss ways forward with the stakeholder group.

Session	Activities	Timings and notes	Resources needed
Pre interview	- Gain informed consent - Go through questions - Do three houses	Held during first session- did intro and then interviews and then into groups- Still not sure they understood belonging and needed to give a definition. Interviews were hard work- very loud environment lots of moving around.	Consent sheet Interview questions Paper Pens
Session 1	- Who am I? Why am I here? - What is belonging? - display word on the board - Explain we are going to play a game- give out cards for the belonging game. - Right we all want to belong- what other words could we write up here? SYNONYMS and ANTONYMS - School belonging?	5 mins 10 mins with discussion Game really helped to explain and for understanding. 5-10 mins 10 mins	PPT Card game Questionnaire Flip chart paper

	- Questionnaire for you to do - You are going to do some research about belonging to your school. - Give examples - Initial discussion - Now split into groups- your number groups and decide	10 mins 10 mins All group ideas were good- seems they have understood.		
	- Feedback from each group - What are they going to do? - If time do the animal version of first game			
Session 2	- Warm up game in your groups- things we all have in common	10 mins 5 mins	Paper Pens Flip chart paper	
	- Recap on yesterday- can you write a definition of what belonging is in your groups- what does it mean to belong to your school	Definitions were good 5 mins	PPT Planning sheet	
	- Recap on what each group is doing and what their next steps are - Groups work on their ideas. - PAUSE- think ethics - Continue working on ideas- writing questions etc	10 mins 5 mins 10 mins 10 mins Not sure they understood ethics- may need to recap. 5 mins		
	- Groups present back what they have been working on- feedback - If time- split into new groups- list of things they have in common	This session was straightforward- all groups ready to go.		
Session 3	- Warm up game, each side of the line	- Interviews went well all very engaged.	Tape Planning sheets	
	- Go back into groups, hand out resources- discuss roles, who is doing what?	- School really helped with the organisation	Notes Printed questionnaires etc Cameras if needed	
	- Split off to conduct the research- interviews, photos, focus groups, surveys	- Even SEND children could engage- all involved	Ipads	

	- Feedback, how did it go?	- Groups very sensible. - Ethics and consent was mentioned - Special questions	
Session 4	- Warm up game, find my twin	5-10 None did surveys so did not discuss this Gave examples of a transcript- never seen before Demo of how to transcribe Needed was more time. Gave post its to write on for themes- did not understand this really.	Find my twin sheets PPT Flip chart paper Thumbs up or down picture
	Finding out results - Surveys- how could I do this? - Interviews- how could I do this? - Others- how could I do this?		
	In groups - Write up your results - What did you find out? - Ready to present your findings - What do you want school to do? One suggestion.		
	Plenary - Sharing your suggestions- vote on whether we think school will be able to do it		
Session 5	- Preparing to present - Presenting to the class/senior leaders - Certificate giving out - Post questionnaire	- Went over themes - Made suggestions for improvement, - Made PPT needed way more time for this- took 2 hours and still needed more - Presented but not ready - Action plan made but not the right people?	Presentations Certificates Flip chart paper Questionnaires
Post interviews	- Go through questions - Do three houses - Compare before and after questionnaires	1 child absent Did not compare questionnaires but did discuss.	Questions Original 3 houses Both questionnaires.

Planning Sheet Group:	
What are you going to do?	
Why is this the best method?	
What do you want to find out?	
What questions will you ask?	
How will people answer?	
Who will you ask?	
What will you need?	
Notes ETHICS!	

Slide 1

Who am I?

Hi!
I'm Jenny.
I am currently doing some research about "belonging" and "belonging to a school".

I want to help you to do your own research about belonging to your school!

HI!

Slide 2

School belonging OR belonging to a school?

HAVE A GOOD WEEK

Slide 3

When?

OH?

WHAT HAPPENED?

Research?

Yes OR NO

WHERE?

WHY?

Slide 4

Questionnaire/survey

What are the features?

What kinds of questions do we ask?

How can answers be recorded?

Slide 5

Interview/focus group

• Why would we do an interview?

• What is the difference between an interview and a focus group?

Good Night

WHY?

Slide 6

Other methods

• Photo voice

• Observation

• Any others?

Slide 7

Planning

• What are you going to do?

• Why?

• What questions will you ask?

• What will this tell you about belonging to your school?

Slide 8

Planning

Planning Sheet Group:

What are you going to do?	
Why is this the best method?	
What do you want to find out?	
What questions will you ask?	
How will people answer?	
Who will you ask?	
What will you need?	
Notes	

Appendix H - School A Data Collection Methods

Questionnaire

Questions	Yes ☺	Sometimes	No! ☹
1. Do you feel like a part of this school?	29	8	1
2. Do you think you can be yourself at school?	20	14	4
3. Are you proud to be at this school?	34	5	0
4. Do you feel safe at school?	28	2	2
5. Do teachers recognise your hard work?	11	25	0

Questions	Yes	Sometimes	No!
6. Do you think people are friendly at this school?	13	20	2
7. Do you take part in lots of activities at school?	19	12	5
8. Do you want to make more friends?	18	8	12
9. Do you have friends to play with at break?	22	11	5
10. Do things worry you at school?	10	17	9

Focus Group Questions:

- What do you like about this school?
- What makes you feel like you belong to this school?
- What do you want to change about school?
- What makes you feel worried at school?
- How can we help people to be happier at our school?

Photovoice

- Survey- I chose the first one because it is good to ask children how they are feeling and this is what we did.
- Classroom poster- I chose the second one because it helps people to be friends.

- " I chose to take a picture of the hut because people like to go in it and it has spare clothes we can have if we need them"
- " I chose the picture of the pants because it helps us to stay safe"
- "I chose this picture of the octagon because people like to play in it".

- I chose the first picture because sometimes if you don't feel good its sometimes because you haven't eaten healthily.
- I chose the feelings picture because if you feel sad you can look at this and you might think it is ok to feel sad.
- I chose this picture of the worry box because it is for people who have worries and need to talk to someone.

- I chose the picture of courage because it is when you are brave.
- I chose the toy box because lots of kids love playing with these toys.

- I chose the first picture because it shows how to be respectful to others and their learning.
- I chose the signs because these signs show how to be a good, caring person.
- I chose this last picture because this area brings people together and people care for everybody there.

- I chose this picture because god Jesus and Jesus is the light of the world and this helps us think about how to behave in school.
- I chose the dragon because this shows all of our work and the hard work we put in and how much fun we have learning.
- I chose this field because it is meant to be a quiet area where people can come together and do stuff like reading.
- I chose the last picture because it is all the values that we show which is significant

Appendix I - School B Data Collection Methods

<u>All interviews</u>

Group 1

- Question 1: do you like this school?
- Question 2: is it hard making friends?
- Question 3 : do you like the teachers in this school?
- Question 4: how do you feel in school?
- Question 5: do you like to learn?
- Question 6 – Special question- do you feel like you would want to be in a different school?

Group 2

- Question 1: do you like school?
- Question 2: do you like school lunches?
- Question 3: Do you have any friends?
- Question 4: Is anyone being rude to you?
- Question5: what is your favourite subject?

Group 3

1. Do you like this school?
2. Do you like your teacher?
3. Do you feel a part of this school?
4. Do you have people who annoy you?
5. Is there example of groups you are in?
6. Do you think year 3 is challenging?
7. Do you feel safe?
8. Is the work hard?
9. Are you fidgety?
10. Do you feel you want to get out of class?
11. Do you have any worries?

Group 4

- How do you feel about our school?
- How do you treat bad behaviour?
- How do you reward good behaviour?
- How do you feel about people not representing the school properly?
- How do you feel about tournaments and residentials?

Appendix J- Opt Out Consent Form

<u>Research participation information sheet</u>

The opportunities and challenges of using Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) in primary schools to explore school belonging.

My name is Jenny Conway. I am conducting a research project that explores school belonging through the use of Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) in primary schools as part of my doctorate in Educational Psychology. I am studying at IoE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society and am on placement in…. I am also your school's link Trainee Educational Psychologist and have been working with the school since September.

This information sheet explains my research project. Please read the following information carefully and retain for your records. If there is anything that is unclear, or if you require any additional information, do not hesitate to contact me at   After reading this information sheet, if you are willing for your child to participate you do not need to do anything further. If you do not wish for your child to participate, please sign and return the slip below.

What I aim to do:

This study aims to investigate How youth participatory action research can contribute to school belonging and guide schools in how they can strengthen school belonging with their pupils.
I want to find out:

- How YPAR can be implemented in primary schools.
- How YPAR can contribute to understanding of school belonging.
- The influence of the YPAR approach on the school belonging of pupil co-researchers.
- How a YPAR approach may lead to change to strengthen school belonging in a primary school context.

To answer these questions, I hope to work with a group of pupil researchers to conduct their own project. They will decide on their own research questions and method. They will then be able to present their findings to school leaders and produce a plan to improve school belonging in their school. Alongside the project I will be evaluating the impact of their participation on pupils' sense of belonging to their school.

What will happen if you agree to your child's involvement:

With your agreement, your child will be asked to complete a short, anonymous, questionnaire before and after the research project begins. They may also be asked to participate as part of the pupil researchers' project. They may be asked to complete a short questionnaire or be involved in a

short interview by their peers. It is important to note that they do not have to participate and will be given the option to opt out if they wish to.

Benefits of participation:

Whilst there are no direct benefits to you for your child taking part in this work, your child's participation will contribute to a better understanding children's views of school belonging and some of the factors that might influence this. Their thoughts will be shared with school leaders and may go towards making positive changes within the school.

Confidentiality:

All data that is collected will be anonymised, names and any other information that could lead to your child being identified will be removed. The data will not be accessible to anyone but me as the researcher and my supervisor. All anonymised data will be stored securely and kept for a period of 10 years. Any un-anonymised data will be immediately destroyed.

Contact Information:

If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to email the researcher

If you give consent for your child to participate, you do not need to do anything further.

If you **do not consent** to your child's participation in this study, please sign in the space below and return this form to your child's class teacher.

I do not consent for my child [INSERT NAME] who is in [INSERT School and Class and Teacher Name here} to participate in this study.

Print Name:

Sign Here: _____

Date:

Data Protection Privacy Notice
The controller for this project will be University College London (UCL). The UCL Data Protection Officer provides oversight of UCL activities involving the processing of personal data, and can be contacted at data-protection@ucl.ac.uk.
This 'local' privacy notice sets out the information that applies to this particular study. Further information on how UCL uses participant information from research studies can be found in our 'general' privacy notice for participants in research studies here.
The information that is required to be provided to participants under data protection legislation (GDPR and DPA 2018) is provided across both the 'local' and 'general' privacy notices. The lawful basis that will be used to process any personal details: 'Public task' for personal data and 'Research purposes' for special category data.
If you are concerned about how your personal data is being processed, or if you would like to contact us about your rights, please contact UCL in the first instance at data-protection@ucl.ac.uk

Appendix K - School Staff Interview Schedule

<u>**Interview schedule**</u>

<u>**Using a YPAR approach to explore school belonging in primary schools.**</u>

The present study aims to understand the contribution a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) approach can make in a primary school context to explore school belonging. This will provide greater understanding of what influences school belonging for children and explore how this method may contribute to our understanding of this concept.

<u>**Introduction for participants/Preamble**</u>

Aim: to give a brief introduction to the study, confirm consent from participants and give the opportunity to ask questions.

Thank you for taking the time to talk to me today. I am going to ask you some questions relating to your thoughts about the YPAR project. We are interested in your experiences and perceptions.

4. Is that ok with you?

5. Are you still willing to participate?

6. Do you have any questions at this time?

<u>**Ethical considerations**</u>

Aim: to remind participants of their rights during the interview.

Before we begin let me remind you:
- The interview will take about 20 minutes.
- You do not have to answer any questions that you are not comfortable with
- You can stop at any time, no explanation needed
- If any question doesn't make sense, please ask for an explanation
- We will be recording this interview, after the interview the recording will be stored in an encrypted folder on my laptop.
- Transcripts will be made from the audio file, which will then be deleted.
- Transcripts will also be stored in an encrypted folder and anonymised
- Everything you say in this interview will be confidential unless deemed to impact your safety or the safety of others.

Is it alright to record the interview? The full transcript will only be seen by those working on the project.

<u>**Procedure**</u>:

Aim: to explain the structure of the interview to the participants.

I will begin the interview with my name, the date and time - this is just to keep the recordings organised.

The first question will be your name but remember, all your details will be anonymised when the data is transcribed.

Have you got questions before we start? Is it OK for me to start recording now?

<u>**Research questions**</u>

Related research questions	Interview questions post intervention	Interview questions follow up (3 months later)	Prompt questions
What are the opportunities and challenges related to YPAR?	What did you think about the project in general? What did you think about the presentations? What were the positives and negatives for you? What did you think about the findings? Would you participate in something like this again? Why?	What changes have you made? What have been the impact of these changes? What have been the positives and negatives?	Prompt questions: - Can you tell me more about…. - Can you explain that further… - Do you have any further thoughts around this?
What can the use of YPAR tell us about school belonging in a primary school context?	What did this tell you about school belonging? Do you think it has impacted on their school belonging?		
How may a YPAR approach contribute to change to strengthen school belonging in a primary school context?	What will you implement? Would you participate in something like this again? Do you think the school could do YPAR again? What suggestions do you have for the future?		

Appendix L – Debrief Documents

Parent and Teacher Debrief

<u>Using a YPAR approach to explore school belonging in primary schools.</u>

Debriefing Sheet- Please keep this sheet:

I would like to thank you for your interest in this study around school belonging in primary schools and for allowing your child/the children in your class to participate.

The purpose of the research was to understand the contribution a youth participatory action research (YPAR) approach can make in a primary school context to explore school belonging. This will provide greater understanding around what influences school belonging for children and explore how this method may contribute to our understanding of this concept.

The aims of the project were:

- To explore how a YPAR approach can be used in a primary school context.

- To identify how a YPAR approach can contribute to understanding of school belonging in a primary school context.

- To understand the influence of the YPAR approach on the school belonging of pupil co-researchers.

- To ascertain how a YPAR approach may lead to change that strengthens school belonging in a primary school context.

As part of this, the pupil researchers were asked to conduct their own research project to explore school belonging and this was evaluated to assess the usefulness of the approach.

The data gathered as part of this research will be written up as a report as part of a thesis for the Doctorate in Educational Psychology at IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society.

The findings will be shared with the school, and it is hoped that they may act as a reflective tool for all practitioners and settings to inform future strategies and approaches for supporting children to conduct their own research projects, whilst also informing future research around school belonging.

I would like to remind you that all data was used for research purposes only, anonymised or pseudonymised and kept confidential throughout. If you have any questions about this, please feel free to email me at;

Once again, I would like to say thank you and express how appreciative I am for your permission for your child's/ the children's involvement. I hope this research will be a useful tool for the school and all its staff.

-

Young Person Debrief Sheet
Project Title:Using a YPAR approach to explore school belonging in primary schools.
Jenny Conway, Trainee Educational Psychologist, UCL Institute of Education

Thank you for taking part as a pupil researcher! Here is a reminder of what we wanted to find out!

Why did we do this research?
- We wanted to help children feel like they belong and feel included in school.
- To do this we wanted to find out what you think and whether you feel like you belong.
- We also wanted to help you to do some research in your school to find out what other children think and to make some changes.

What happens now?
- I will write a report about what we have found out.
- I will share the findings with other people but I won't use your real name. This means that people won't know that it is you who has told me the information.
- I will give you a summary of the findings at the end of the project.
- What you tell me is confidential so is private between you and me, but if you tell me anything which makes me think you or anybody else are in danger I will need to tell somebody.

NEXT STEPS
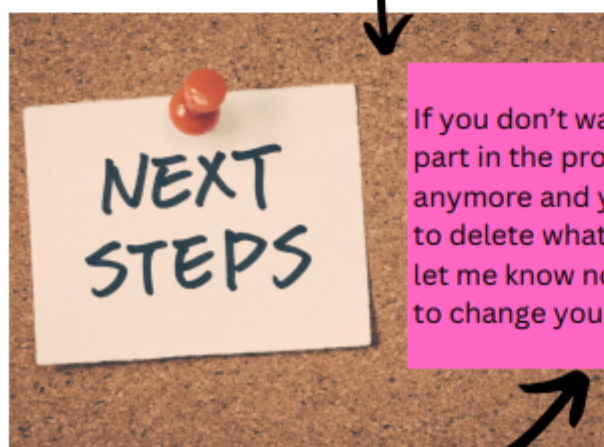
If you don't want to take part in the project anymore and you want me to delete what you said, let me know now. It is OK to change your mind :)

THANK YOU :)

Appendix M - Initial Inductive and Deductive Code Examples

RQ's	Initial Deductive codes	New inductive codes	Possible themes

RQ 1: What are the opportunities or challenges of using an YPAR approach in a school context to explore school belonging in primary school settings? -	1. **Skill Development**
	
	   o Mirra, N., Garcia, A., & Morrell, E. (2016).
	
	      ▪ Discusses how YPAR builds critical thinking, collaboration, and leadership skills.
	
	2. **Enhanced Belonging**
	
	   o Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R. (1995).
	
	      ▪ Explores how interpersonal connections, like those fostered in YPAR, strengthen belonging.
	
	3. **Teacher-Student Collaboration**
	
	   o Ozer, E. J., & Douglas, L. (2015).
	
	      ▪ Reviews how participatory approaches enhance relations
		- **An enjoyable process**
		- **Collaboration with others**
		- **Unequal Participation**
		- **Sustaining change**
		- **Understanding of the process**
		- **Increased understanding of belonging**
			Empowerment Through Participation
			
			• **Description**: Opportunities for students to feel valued and influential within the school environment.
			
			Tensions in Power and Agency
			
			• **Description**: How power imbalances between students and adults influence the success of YPAR.
			
			Engagement with the process
			
			• **Description**: How levels of engagement helped or hindered YPAR and changes.
			
			Systemic Barriers to Implementation
			
			• **Description**: Challenges related to rigid school systems, assessment pressures, or limited resources.

	hips between youth and adults. 1. **Time Constraints** 　■ Addresses challenges like time limitations in collaborative inquiry projects. 2. **Power Dynamics** 　○ Fielding, M. (2004). 　　■ Explores issues of power in participatory approaches within schools. 3. **Institutional Resistance** 　○ Mitra, D. L. (2009). 　　■ Examines resistance to student-led initiatives in schools.		

| RQ 2: Through involvement in research and school wide decision making, does YPAR influence feelings of school belonging for pupil co-researchers? | **Involvement in Research**

1. **Collaborative Decision-Making**
  o Fielding, M. (2001).
    ▪ Examines how students' involvement in school-wide decisions impacts their connections with the school community.

2. **Social Connections**
  o Goodenow, C. (1993).
    ▪ Investigates the role of connectedness with peers and teachers in developing school belonging. | - Unrecognised change to feelings
- Increased understanding of belonging
- Belonging as a relational process | 1. **Social and Emotional Connections**
  o YPAR facilitates the development of strong peer and teacher relationships, which are integral to belonging.

2. **Barriers to Belonging**
  o Power imbalances, limited student voice, or tokenistic participation can limit the positive impact of YPAR on school belonging. |

Appendix N – Braun and Clarke's Six Phase Approach and Examples of Initial Codes and Coding

Step Number	Activity
Step 1: Become familiar with the data.	Pupils listened back to interviews making notes on early impressions. They then transcribed their interviews.
Step 2: Generate initial codes.	Pupils and facilitator worked as a group to highlight potential codes.
Step 3: Search for themes.	The concept of themes is introduced. Pupils grouped the codes together into themes using post it notes.
Step 4: Review themes.	Themes were discussed and edited as a whole group.
Step 5: Define themes.	Pupils gave the themes names.
Step 6: Write-up.	Pupils made a ppt of the themes with one theme per slide.

Example Codes from NViVo:

Code		
Accademic pressure negates belo	4	4
Accademic self efficacy	4	5
Acknowledgement of work	1	1
Availability of support	3	4
Being liked or accepted leads to	1	2
Being listened to helps you to bel	1	1
Being together important for bel	1	1
Being yourself fosters belonging	4	8
Belief in teacher's efforts to make	2	2
Believing in themselves post YPA	1	2
Belonging as opposed to feeling l	1	1
Change comes from talking abou	1	1
Change of subject	1	2
Children could check in on each o	1	1
Children in the school are friendly	1	1
Concern that others have many w	2	3
Confusion around belonging	1	1
Cultural differences	1	3

Example of Codes on Transcript:

P1 interview 1: Using the three houses resource to discuss school belonging.

00:00:40 JC: So we're going to start off with an easy question. You don't have to write anything for this one. So what do you like about school?

00:00:47 P1: I like all my subjects. I do, and I like how my teacher explains them really well to us.

00:00:53 JC: Yeah. What does she explain to you?

00:00:55 P1: So she acts, so she acts sometimes, she explains our work in steps. So, so sometimes if it's easy, she will. She will. She'll just explain it in words. But then sometimes if it's a bit hard, she'll like, say, this is step one. This is how you do this one too. Then you can do Step 2.

00:01:11 JC: That sounds really good. Anything else that you like about school?

00:01:14 P1: I quite like when we're in assemblies cause sometimes I like the stories that we have in assemblies like from the Bible.

00:01:22 JC: Sounds lovely. Anything else? (*P1 shakes head*) No. OK, let's go on to our first question then. So can you just tell me what do you think school belonging means and why?

00:01:36 P1: I think school belonging means that you, that you make sure you feel happy about where you are and where you are at school and making sure you're not

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CODE STRIPES

Coding Density

- Friendships important at school
- Peer support as important
- School spaces to foster belonging
- Teacher support as important for belonging
- Friends as a support system
- Belonging as opposed to feeling lonely or sad
- Peer disrespect negates belonging
- Availability of support
- Emotional support helps belonging

- Faith aspect important for
- Being together important