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To cite this article: Deborah Flitcroft & Catherine Kelly (2016) An appreciative exploration of how schools create a sense of belonging to facilitate the successful transition to a new school for pupils involved in a managed move, Emotional andBehavioural Difficulties, 21:3, 301-313, DOI: 10.1080/13632752.2016.1165976

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13632752.2016.1165976

Published online: 04 Apr 2016.
An appreciative exploration of how schools create a sense of belonging to facilitate the successful transition to a new school for pupils involved in a managed move

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**ABSTRACT**

Much of the current guidance on managed moves focuses on the benefits of the ‘fresh start’ provided. This paper describes an appreciative inquiry to explore how schools in one local authority create a sense of belonging to facilitate a fresh start for pupils involved in a managed move to a new school. Six deputy head teachers with pastoral responsibility took part in a focus group using an appreciative inquiry (Ai) 4-D cycle. The discovery, dream and design phases sought to build on the current practice and identify the improvements to practice. Thematic analysis of the data identified many aspects of belonging, which are in line with those identified in the literature such as creating a school identity, developing partnerships and specific activities such as inter-form competitions and family assemblies. Generating school identity and home-school-pupil partnerships were also identified in relation to managed moves. In the destiny stage, themes were fed back and discussed with a wider Deputy Head Group and Good Practice Guidance to facilitate the successful transition to a new school for pupils involved in a managed move that was produced and circulated across the LA. The importance of empathising with the potential challenges of changing school and forming and maintaining new relationships for pupils engaging in a managed move is highlighted and the Good Practice Guidance illustrates how transition, induction and ongoing support plans can take this into account.

**KEYWORDS**

Belonging; secondary school; managed move; appreciative inquiry; transition

**Introduction**

A sense of belonging has a growing body of evidence as a useful concept in further illuminating the nature of school contexts linked to positive pupil outcomes (Abdelnoor 2007). School belonging can be defined as when pupils

\textit{feel close to, a part of and happy at school; feel that teachers care about students and treat them fairly; get along with teachers and other students and feel safe at school. (Libbey 2007, p.52)}

A greater sense of belonging is associated with a higher academic interest, motivation and engagement (Freeman, Andermam and Jensen 2007; Osterman 2000; Sánchez, Colón and Esparza 2005) and lower levels of truancy and inappropriate behaviour (Demanent and Van Houtte 2012). A sense of belonging is especially important at particular times in a pupil’s school life, for example
engendering a sense of belonging can have a positive impact on transition (Bulkeley and Fabian 2006; Ebbeck, Yim and Lee 2010).

In the United Kingdom head teachers may permanently exclude pupils due to their behaviour being in breach of the school’s behaviour policy (Department for Education 2015). Managed moves are advocated as an alternative to permanent exclusion and facilitate a move to another school to enable a pupil to have a ‘fresh start’ (Vincent et al. 2007; Department of Education, DfE, 2011). The conditions necessary to facilitate a new start in a receiving school are not specified in the current guidance (DfE, 2011), however, the academic literature reveals a small evidence base to inform practice. The evaluations of specific managed move schemes indicate that how a move proceeds and develops ultimately influences its success rather than the move itself, with positive outcomes being linked to the inclusive ethos of the school and pupils feeling they were genuinely cared about, wanted, listened to and supported (Vincent et al. 2007). Abdelnoor (2007) summarises that a child is most likely to succeed in a managed move if they are able to feel a sense of belonging and motivation. It would seem then that a key element of the ‘fresh start’ offered in a managed move is developing a sense of belonging to the new school.

Facilitating a sense of belonging where pupils feel that in the new school they are ‘genuinely cared about, wanted, listened to and supported’ is often balanced against the notion of the pupil being on a ‘trial period’ and concerns from the staff in the receiving school regarding the impact of the pupil’s presenting social and emotional difficulties (Harris et al. 2008). Additionally, the nature of the pupils’ needs can create obstacles to being offered, and being able to make use of, the trusting relationships required to facilitate and maintain a successful fresh start (Mowat 2009).

To date the research base on belonging in schools focuses on the effects of belonging on pupils’ behaviour and academic outcomes with a small literature base on the importance of a sense of belonging at times of transition. No research has been found which examines a sense of belonging in the context of a managed move. Furthermore, the possibility of conflicting drivers in creating a ‘fresh start’ highlights the need to explore how school staff conceptualise and create a sense of belonging for their pupils and specifically for the ‘managed move’ pupils.

The current research therefore aimed to explore how school staff in one local authority conceptualise and create a sense of belonging. This small piece of action research engaged participants in a process of discussion to identify best practice and further areas for development to create a sense of school belonging for pupils and ‘managed move’ pupils in particular.

The study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. What effective practice do schools currently use to create a sense of belonging for pupils in their schools?
2. What effective practice do schools currently use to create a sense of belonging for ‘managed moved’ pupils in their schools?
3. What are the current facilitators for creating a sense of belonging for pupils and ‘managed moved’ pupils?
4. How could schools further improve their practice of creating a sense of belonging for pupils and ‘managed moved’ pupils?

**Methodology**

**Design of the study**

A qualitative case study design was used to facilitate the stages of an appreciative inquiry (AI) 4-D cycle – discovery, dream, design and destiny (Cooperrider and Srivastva 1987). This approach to organisational change has a focus on current best practice to build upon the strengths already in place and allows for shared learning and co-constructing possible developments to practice.
Participants

Data were collected through a focus group with an opportunity sample of six secondary deputy head teachers whose roles involved working with pupils during the managed move process. Data were also collected from an interview with the local authority officer responsible for supporting pupils and families involved in managed moves.

Data collection and analysis

The focus group and interview were structured to consider the discovery, dream and design stages (see Table 1 for the focus group and semi-structured interview schedules). Data were audio-taped, transcribed and thematically analysed (Braun and Clarke 2006).

The thematic analysis used a combination of both inductive and deductive strategies (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006). Codes identified were collated into basic themes and organising themes. The identified themes and codes came from the participants’ responses within the interview and focus group, and the codes and themes were processed according to the research questions based on what schools are currently doing and what they can do in the future.

To minimise the researcher bias and to enhance the credibility of the analysis, a selection of codes and themes were checked by a second Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP) rater, and participants were also given an opportunity to check the codes and themes generated (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

The themes generated were fed back in the later destiny stage with a wider Deputy Head Group, and Good Practice Guidance was produced and circulated across the LA.

Results

The data gathered and analysed from the focus group and interview are presented under each of the research questions. These are presented in Figures 1–4. Each organising theme is expanded upon and some examples given.

Table 1. Appreciative inquiry questions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AI Focus Group Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. Discovery</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is it about your school that supports a sense of belonging for pupils?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As a teacher committed to pupils’ social and emotional development, there are inevitably high points and low points, successes and frustrations. What stands out for you as a high point when you were part of an outstanding effort to create a sense of belonging for a pupil involved in a managed move?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>2. Dream</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imagine a time in the future when people look to your school as an exceptional example of creating a sense of belonging for your pupils.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In this exciting future how is your school creating this sense of belonging in general and for pupils involved in a managed move? What bold decisions are made and by whom?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What kinds of systems and structures are most encouraging a sense of belonging?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are you most proud of having helped your school accomplish?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3. Design</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the areas where you feel a greater sense of school belonging can have the most impact on improving outcomes for pupils in general and for pupils involved in a managed move?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As you reflect on the successful ways your school is currently promoting a sense of belonging, what initiatives stand out as being exceptionally promising?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4. Destiny</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What specific ways would you like to contribute to realising this move forward?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the first thing that is needed to make it happen?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What small changes could we make right now that would really encourage more school staff to get engaged with creating a sense of belonging?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How would you personally like to be involved?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research Question 1: What effective practice do schools currently use to create a sense of belonging for pupils in their schools?

Three organising and nine basic themes emerged regarding the current effective practice to create a sense of belonging.

Generating school identity

Participants identified the importance of generating a school identity for pupils, so they felt a part of something and therefore develop a sense of belonging. This was illustrated by the practices such
Figure 3. Organising themes and basic themes emerging from the data analysis for RQ3.

Figure 4. Organising themes and basic themes emerging from the data analysis for RQ4.
as the school uniform and whole school photographs and, for pupils new to the school, by giving pupils the key information about the school and sign-posting to facilities.

**Developing partnerships**

Many of the descriptions of creating sense of belonging focussed on developing partnerships between pupils, parents and staff and the impact of schools ‘owning’ pupils as part of these partnerships.

A lot of the talk around this theme was centred around the year 6 to year 7 transition and this being a key time for schools showing their ‘ownership’ of the pupils through strategies, such as the parent-school handover ceremony, welcome assembly and buddy system. The participants felt this ‘ownership’ would develop a partnership between the pupil and school and engender a sense of belonging. Pupil involvement in the process of partnerships was exemplified by having pupil-centred meetings and helping with school equipment, for example pen, pencil and calculator.

This theme is exemplified in the following comment:

> security and certainty no matter which school the young person ended up at, the level of welcome, the level of inclusion, the level of commitment would be the same (FG3).

**Activities to create a sense of belonging**

Activities which allowed pupils to feel like a vital component of their form group, year group or school were described, for example inter-form competitions. At the level of the community, activities were focussed on family assemblies, bringing the community in to the school and engaging parents in the school.

**Research Question 2: What effective practice do schools currently use to create a sense of belonging for ‘managed moved’ pupils in their schools?**

Two organising and six basic themes emerged regarding the effective practice to create a sense of belonging for pupils starting at school as a part of a managed move.

**Preparations for the individual**

Participants described the advance preparations the school could make for the managed moves such as an induction calendar and staff being made aware of the arrival of a new pupil to their classes. Participants also referred to ensuring preparations for pupils are individualised as each pupil will have different reasons for their managed move and the school will need to adapt according to the pupils’ background and any additional needs.

**Parent-pupil-school partnership**

Many descriptions were again centred around developing partnerships between pupils, parents and staff and the impact of schools’ ownership on developing these partnerships. Participants viewed their partnership with parents as were key due to the influence parents were perceived to have on their children’s attitudes to school.

Another aspect of preparation was clarifying if the school was suitable for the pupil. This was voiced as the impact of managed move on current pupils and schools needing to be convinced that they were the right place for a pupil. This was balanced with talk of the need for schools to show pupils that they were taking ownership of them as key to creating a sense of belonging for managed move.
Research Question 3: What are the current facilitators for creating a sense of belonging for ‘managed move’ pupils?

Four organising and seven basic themes emerged regarding the current facilitators for creating a sense of belonging for ‘managed move’ pupils.

**Process of transfer**

Participants identified the process of transferring from the old school to the new school as central to creating a sense of belonging. Preparing the pupil prior to the initial school-based managed move with head teacher was thought to be key as the pupil’s attitude could act as a facilitator to the attitudes of those involved in the meeting. The initial welcome from the head teacher in this meeting was also identified as a facilitator to this process as the message from the welcome determines if a sense of belonging can be created.

**Positive language and attitude**

This theme was generated from the participants’ discussions about positive language and the attitude of people acting as a facilitator in creating a sense of belonging.

Participants identified that it was important to have a positive attitude, and a wide range of people were identified whose attitudes could impact the sense of belonging; schools being created, these included: teaching staff, parents, pupils, peers, management. From this, participants also identified positive language as also having an impact of this sense of belonging, participants used terms such as ‘advice giving language’ (FG9), ‘positive belonging language’ (P) and ‘inclusive language’ (FG3). For example, ‘did you know you don’t wear your shirt like that’ (FG 9) as opposed to ‘the rule here is you tuck your shirt in’? Participants also highlighted tensions with viewing the move as a ‘trial’ as this means the move is not permanent and so does not allow the participants to feel like they belong, instead the participants felt a ‘fresh start’ would act as a better facilitator for creating a sense of belonging. The final aspect of this organising theme was understanding the emotions of the people involved. Participants talked about the different people involved in the managed move process and understanding how each of them was feeling was a key facilitator. For example, the managed move can be a highly anxious time for pupils as they need to settle in to a new environment with new rules and expectations. Additionally, a new pupil whom teachers feel may ‘threaten’ their established, settled class routine and environment could be perceived as a source of stress for the teachers.

Research Question 4: How could schools further improve their practice of creating a sense of belonging for pupils and ‘managed moved’ pupils?

Four organising and 13 basic themes emerged regarding how schools felt they could further improve their practice in creating a sense of belonging.

**Knowledge of individual pupils**

Participants identified the various pieces of knowledge they needed about pupils to make relevant preparations for pupils to show them they belonged to the school, for example health issues, issues with other pupils, support strategies, knowledge of child’s home life, knowing their previous GCSE options and reasons for move. Participants also talked about having interviews with pupils and developing a pupil profile to develop and facilitate the sharing of information.
School integration

This theme was generated from talk about different processes to integrate pupils into school life. Participants identified that it was important to monitor pupils’ progress through regular meetings with the pupil and follow-up meetings after their transfer. One participant suggested an induction calendar to support the transition.

School ownership was again discussed as core to creating a sense of belonging. An example of how one school showed this was given by one of the participants:

*What worked well for one of our girls who was a school refuser when she had been given a place at the school prior to the meeting, was the school wrote to her and you know a welcome letter prior to even having the meeting, we are really looking forward to meeting you, this is a copy of our options coz she was going into year 10... (FG6)*

A further aspect of school integration the researcher identified was schools empathising with pupils, for example being flexible with rules for year 7 pupils for the first couple of months and making allowances for pupils that are going through a difficult time at home.

The final aspect of this theme the researcher identified was a consistent approach to all pupils. Participants discussed that teachers need to be consistent with all pupils to develop a sense of fairness.

Preparations for managed move

Participants discussed the preparations they could make for a managed move in two ways: preparations school can make for a managed move and information school can give to the pupil and family. The preparations by the school were based on suggestions centred on an induction calendar, planning their first day/week/month and having a starter checklist for pupils. Important information for pupils was based on suggestions about making the child aware of the school rules and procedures, list of GCSE options and guidelines of acceptable behaviour. Another preparation schools felt they could make was having a key adult for the pupil to link in to developing the parent-pupil-school partnership.

Changes to the managed move system

This theme was generated from the ideas given by participants, which were based on changes that could be made at school level and LA level. At school level, participants discussed developing pupil and parent voice to learn about how they felt about the process and what they could do to improve the process. At LA level the suggestion was to discuss managed moves and placing permanently excluded pupils in separate panels, so more focus could be given to the managed moves developing consistency between the schools and making the procedure more transparent for parents.

Discussion

The participants in this study identified many aspects of belonging which are in line with those identified in the literature such as creating a school identity, developing partnerships and specific activities such as inter-form competitions and family assemblies. Generating school identity and home-school-pupil partnerships were also identified in relation to managed moves.
Effective practice in creating a sense of belonging for pupils involved in a managed move

Generating a school identity
Generating a school identity is considered to be facilitated by the schools preparing for the individual pupil in the managed move and ensuring these preparations are specific to the pupil. It seems likely that making preparations for incoming pupils conveys that they are a part of the school and that their teachers care about them (Libbey 2007). The respectful and inclusive ethos characterised by such a sensitive and flexible response to academic and non-academic needs is suggested to be a key intervention in promoting belonging and has been shown to be linked to positive outcomes of managed moves (Shochet et al. 2011; Vincent et al. 2007).

Home-school-pupil partnerships
Home-school-pupil partnerships are also identified as facilitating a sense of belonging for pupils involved in managed moves; with schools particularly identifying the need to create partnerships with parents. While the Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice (Department for Education & Department for Health, 2015) states that ‘Local Authorities must ensure that children, young people and parents are provided with the information, advice and support necessary to enable them to participate in discussions and decisions about their support’ (p.19), it is also recognised that trusting relationships are needed to build effective home-school partnerships (Dunsmuir, Frederickson, and Lang 2004; Roffey 2004). This can be challenging when parents, pupils and teachers perceive the causes of poor behaviour differently (Miller 2003), and parents of pupils with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties often feel blamed for their children’s behaviour (Roffey 2004).

From the perspective of the school staff, there was some possible tension evident between feeling confident the school could meet the pupils’ needs and ‘taking ownership’ of the pupils. There was also some contrast between the description of efforts to welcome and include all year 7 pupils and being sure that a ‘receiving school’ was the ‘right’ place for a managed move pupil. This seemed to suggest some recognition that the notion of the ‘fresh start’ alone was not sufficient to ensure success for managed moves.

Activities to promote belonging
Libbey (2004) proposes that participation in extra-curricular activities increases the sense of belonging for pupils and this theme emerged in relation to all pupils but was not mentioned specifically in relation to managed move pupils. However, involvement in extra-curricular activities is associated with decreased likelihood of dropping out of school early and a reduction in the likelihood of being arrested (Finn 1989; Mahoney 2000). These associations are not causal and it may be that those who have a sense of belonging are more likely to take part in the extra-curricular activities but positive school and spare time experiences are well-documented protective factors for vulnerable pupils (Gilligan 2000), which are likely to also benefit those pupils experiencing a managed move.

Some schools talked about vertical streaming and houses to create a sense of belonging. Osterman (2000) proposed the purpose of these strategies was to extend the time that students remain with same peers and teachers, and participants in this study suggested that it helped to create a ‘family’, helping pupils to feel part of their group. It would seem likely that such systems facilitate relationships with peers and teachers, and Shochet et al. (2011) found that acceptance by adults and peers was a key component of school belonging and predicted current and future pupil wellbeing.

Activities to create a sense of belonging at a community level for all pupils were focussed on bringing the community into school and engaging parents in school. Interestingly, this was not mentioned for managed moved pupils. Consideration of engaging with parents of pupils in a managed move focussed on building partnership with parents due to the influence parents were perceived to have on their children’s attitude to school. It would seem that engaging the parents of pupils who have a managed move in school life may not only build trust and influence the success
of the move in the short term but also, through engaging parents in school and the wider community, may aid in improving outcomes more broadly (Watson 2005).

**Facilitators for creating a sense of belonging in managed moves**

Preparation with the pupil for the move and positive attitudes and language of the pupil, parents, teachers and head teacher were identified in this study as key facilitators, as was an understanding of the emotions of those involved. A commitment to the pupil and not presenting the move as a ‘trial’ were also seen as facilitators. This is echoed in Harris et al.’s (2006) evaluation of managed moves between seven secondary schools in one area. They concluded that ‘if schools think that these young people matter and act accordingly, the pupils themselves will internalise this and begin to act as if they do’. (p.36)

It would seem that relationships between pupils and school staff are a key component; O’Riordan (2015) identified building productive relationships as a key element in young people identified as having social, emotional and behavioural difficulties demonstrating resilience through a transitional period. Similarly, Hatton (2013) found that staff from schools which served deprived areas but which rarely excluded pupils, considered positive teacher/pupil relationships to be one of the key features of their school, and Tucker (2013) reported that pupils involved in pastoral care viewed relationships with school staff as important. Shochet et al. (2011) also found relationships with peers to be important in adolescents’ feelings of acceptance at school.

Abdelnoor (2007) suggests some key areas for consideration with the pupil in preparation for a managed move, including their understanding of why they had to leave their initial school; how their outlook has changed during the managed move period; why they believe they can be successful in a new setting; how their behaviour will be different; and what help they would like in order to make a success of their new placement. It would seem that there is a role for a key adult with whom the pupil has an existing trusting relationship in assisting a pupil to reflect on these issues outlined.

A move to a new school is a significant transition for any pupil (Evangelou et al. 2008) and planned endings of important relationships and careful handover to help establish new key relationships are important aspects of a managed move (Abdelnoor 2007), particularly as pupils who are experiencing difficulties with their social and emotional development and behaviour are likely to find transition and the management of relationships difficult (O’Riordan 2015). This was alluded to by the participants in this study who identified an understanding of the emotions of those involved as a facilitator in creating a sense of belonging for pupils experiencing a managed move.

**Developing practice**

Many of the themes and ideas generated regarding improvements to practice were confirmed as existing, recently implemented or planned practice within a second meeting by the wider Deputy Head group. The practice described was incorporated into the Good Practice Guidance for pupils moving into schools as part of a managed move process (known locally as positive pupil placements, PPPs), and recommendations were summarised under four headings: preparation for PPP; making a fresh start; building belonging and monitoring support and progress (see Table 2).

The focus on preparation, a positive, sensitive welcome, and an emphasis on building relationships can all be seen as supporting the change to a new school and are key elements of the literature on transition common to a variety of vulnerable pupil groups (e.g. O’Riordan 2015). In the reported research, participants discussed making advance preparations for managed move pupils and creating pupil-parent-school partnerships to foster a sense of belonging and ownership of the
The idea of a fresh start and the possibilities of growth offered by a change in circumstances is also a key theme in resilience research; Rutter (2013) highlights that key turning points in people's lives (such as changing schools) bring the possibility of developing along a different path with the interaction between the person and the experiences offered by the new situation influencing outcomes. This dynamic view of a fresh start echoes the findings of (Vincent et al. 2007) who concluded that it is not the move to a new school itself but the process of the managed move which underpins its success.

Conclusions

A managed move provides an opportunity for a fresh start; the chance to form new positive relationships, escape previous reputations and experiment with new behaviours. What schools can do to facilitate this fresh start has not previously been clearly detailed; however, this local, practitioner produced view of good practice goes some way to filling this gap for pupils experiencing a managed move in one local authority.

It is also recognised that forming new (more productive) relationships in a new school can be a challenging task for pupils presenting with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties and the Good Practice Guidance illustrates how transition, induction and ongoing support plans can take this into account.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the focus group participants in this study: Jayne Roberts, Jayne Szpunar, Debra Wood, Tina Astley, Helen Majerski, Susan Sharples, Rob Faulkner, Maureen Brettell, Sharon Wall and staff from Bury High Schools who contributed to the Good Practice Guidance: Broad Oak Sports College, Bury Church of England High School, Castlebrook High School, The Derby High School, The Elton High School, Parrethorn High School, Philips High School, Prestwich Arts College and Spring Lane School. The authors would also like to thank Caroline Bond for research design advice and Mark Carriline and Susie Miles for their encouragement to disseminate and publish.
Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding
This project was funded through England’s Department for Education (DfE) National College for Teaching and Learning (NCTL) ITEP award 2012–2015.

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