

**When Belonging Becomes Belonging:  
A Bourdieuan Theorisation**

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To cite this article: Abenyega, J. (January, 2017). When belonging becomes belonging: A Bourdieuan theorisation. *International Journal of Whole Schooling*, Special Issue, 5-16.

**Abstract**

In this article, I offer an ontological theorization of belonging. The article interrogates the quality of belonging from a Bourdieuan perspective by critiquing exclusion generated from psychological or biological discourses; I aim to question the way that ‘belonging’ is applied in a technical or an emotional sense within the field of inclusive education. The article works towards offering a new theorization that does not treat the meaning of belonging as deterministic. The paper argues that if belonging is a way of addressing concern for ourselves as human beings, then deepening the theoretical understanding of this concept will add to how we practice the complexity of inclusive education based on the Whole Schooling perspective. By articulating Bourdieu’s framing of belonging, it is possible to enable inclusive professionals and families to view conceptions of belonging outside the familiar derivatives applied in everyday discourse. In addition, quality belonging provides the framework for how human relations can be strengthened for inclusive schooling and inclusive society.

### **Introduction**

Working across practice boundaries on inclusive education is now commonplace in theory and practice. However one analytic challenge for achieving the goals of Whole Schooling is to understand and practice ‘quality belonging’ outside the familiar conceptualisations of belonging applied in everyday discourse. I draw on Pierre Bourdieu’s critical sociological concepts of capital, field and habitus to offer insights into the notion of quality belonging. This view invites us to engage critically with how the Whole Schooling approach to education strives to disrupt social and structural arrangements to rethink educational practices that encourage quality belonging.

A concern for educators and researchers is how human relations across boundaries of practice can be renegotiated so that what matters for inclusive practice becomes a continuous adjustment in human habitus. Belonging is a term commonly used in everyday life by academics, teachers, politicians, and so on because it is integral to human existence. First, this article offers an ontological theorization of belonging. Second, it interrogates the quality of belonging from a Bourdieuan perspective by critiquing exclusion generated from psychological or biological discourses to question the way that ‘belonging’ is applied in a technical or an emotional sense within the field of inclusive education. Finally, the article works towards offering a new theorization that does not treat the meaning of belonging as deterministic.

### **Ontological Understanding of Belonging**

To understand the ontology of ‘belonging’, it is important to examine the notion of the object and of objectivity. This is necessary as what belongs and what does not belong take their root from these concepts. We often think of objects as true representations of reality, because we can feel them with our senses. For example, we can touch them. The term objectivity is constructed as an important normative term to mean that the truth has already been found and is therefore closed (Guen, 1989). In this perspective alternative positions are considered as deviations from the truth and must therefore be refuted. According to Guen (1989), to say something is objective:

...signifies that our judgments, evaluations, statements, claims, and so on, are fair to that which we are judging, and appropriate to the situation; the validity of my judgments rests on the hope that they are not merely statements about what I wish were the case, or what is the case in my unique experience, or what I think someone wants to hear (p. 589).

Psychological assessments or measurements serve as forms of judgements that practitioners use to validate some students as ‘disabled’, and as such may indicate that they do not qualify to belong to a particular place of schooling. In fact, the outcomes psychologists produce through such judgements often remain unquestioned truth with those defined by them. Veresov (2014) argues that measuring psychological attributes such as intellectual abilities or personal traits without ever interrogating our scientific methodologies about whether these traits are quantitative in the first place, is a matter of critical concern. Toomela (2007) observes,

We still find objective scores without knowing how many different psychological mechanisms may underlie the same score. We do not know how psychological aspect of experimental conditions may have contributed to study results. Study of fragments gives very little to understanding of a human person as a whole ... Statistical probabilistic prediction has become an end goal of studies even though most of the thinking and insight should begin where the science of mainstream psychology seems to end now (p. 18).

The quote above demonstrates that objective judgments based on psychological methods that embrace the positivist orientation of the natural sciences can define students in narrow terms if the assessor fails to account for other psychological and socio-cultural factors that cannot be quantified (Anderson, 1998; Dawson, et al., 2006; Marecek, 2011). Being judged and defined, for example, as disabled, learning disabled, behaviour impaired, and so on, orchestrates separation from one fixed perspective of the norm into another fixed norm. Problems with classification arising from psychological judgements may include stigma to the child, low reliability, poor correlation between categorization and intervention, narrow assumptions and disproportionate representation of minority students. It is difficult to judge objectivity and, in our attempt to simply classify people objectively or fix them into predetermined categories, we may succeed in creating more problems (Guen, 1989; Toomela, 2007). In Guen's view, objective judgments or claims we make about people seem to validate a perspective that ideally we should all be the same, and that individual, cultural, learning and historical differences are somehow unacceptable departures from the norm (Guen, 1989).

Using psychological methods that embrace the positivist orientation of the natural sciences without respect for other perspectives suggests that we are dividing our social world, including educational practices, into things which can only be known objectively. This is not only problematic but a 'bad science'. Thinking in terms of objectivity implies that only our mind can attain objective truth, and all the rest of the human person, including actions and feelings, play little role in our judgements about people (Guen, 1989). Clinging to objectivity again reinforces the idea that what constitutes the truth is separated from human needs and desires and situations; this means truth requires uniformity in negation of individuality, history, culture, and situation (Vygotsky, 1997). This suggests that belonging requires uniformity. However, quality belonging is a relational concept among different kinds of realities, entities, and creatures and not bounded by uniformity. In conceptualising quality belonging, it is necessary to move away from normative constructions of uniform expectations and think about relatedness. According to Gruen (1989), "relatedness to the object is what gives it structure and direction, and recognition is the way in which that belonging relation is subjectively experienced" (p. 597).

A Bourdieuan ontological understanding of belonging is what describes the relational nature of reality (Bourdieu, 2000; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). All students, whatever their situation, are part of historical situations and social relations. In addition, a Bourdieuan ontological framing of belonging restores human subjectivity. As humans, we are the ones that construct tools we use to define others and ourselves, and who are in turn subject to things that we create.

The concept of 'belonging' dominates the literature on special and inclusive education. Inclusivity itself is a term that emerged from special education with the concern that individual students receive support for their disability (Yorke & Longden, 2004, p. 5). Thomas (2012) argues quality belonging can be understood as social engagement. All

humans are born belonging, first to a family, a cultural group, a neighbourhood and a wider community. In this way quality belonging acknowledges interdependence with others and the basis of relationships in defining human identities (Archer, Hutchings, & Leathwood, 2001). The sense of quality belonging has more to do with a commitment to community but there cannot be a commitment when one is denied access to the community's social capital (human relations). This has been explained further using Pierre Bourdieu's concepts. Quality belonging can also be conceptualised as individuals performing identities within social groups (Bhopal, & Myers, 2008; Cashmore, Scott, & Cane, 2011). It is a reflexive processes in which individuals can satisfactorily account to themselves, theory and positionality as to how they come to live and develop in unique ways (Bhopal, 2014; Thomas, 2002). It is these unique ways of relational existence that Bagnall and Longhurst (2005) argue, give feelings of quality belonging and solidarity including new ethics and forms of collective action.

### **Constructing the Quality of Belonging from a Bourdieuan Perspective**

The urgent task for inclusive educators is a need for deeper understanding of key theoretical and practice discourses that frame different versions of the concept of belonging. This understanding has the potential to safeguard educators from simply developing educational sites that continue to replicate dominant practices. Jones Diaz (2003) observes that the experiences of identity and belonging are mediated and negotiated by dominant practices. These dominant practices which often frame difference and disability as being problematic resulting in exclusion, are central arguments in Bourdieu's sociological theory. Bourdieu's concepts of capital, habitus and field theorise 'quality belonging' powerfully as a relational concept, as a practice and a product of the relations of power embedded in particular fields (Agbenyega, 2015; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Through the lenses of his concepts it is possible to interrogate, analyse and make sense of the structured educational practices that undermine belonging and respect for difference. In terms of inclusive education fields, constructing belonging along the lines of deterministic views as outlined in the introductory section of this paper, presupposes the privileging of certain identities. For example, in disability studies and inclusive education, normative constructions are used to divide students into 'normality' versus 'disability.' According to Bourdieu (1999), education practices occur within hierarchical social space, with diverse and unfixed multiple versions of imagined belongings. These imagined belongings result from normative classifications, and to a great extent, are influenced by our habitus (Bourdieu, 2000). Habitus is composed of our values beliefs and norms and pay a powerful role in the ways we define and recognise people's different type and forms of capital they possess within a given field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

In Bourdieu's theorisation, the concept of belonging and the concept of capital are inextricably linked. Capital according to Bourdieu (1986), denotes assets accumulated over time which determines an individual's place in social fields. Bourdieu's conceptualisation of capital integrates three forms of capital: economic, social and cultural. Cultural capital is complex with layers such as embodied capital, objectified capital and institutional capital (Bourdieu, 1986). It is through social acceptance, interaction and shared thinking over time and exposure to a particular habitus that cultural capital is acquired. Cultural capital is embodied in the practices of social agents and produces social mobility beyond economic means thus paving the way for one to belong. Bourdieu emphasises the social or relational capital in terms of individual and group interactions with social structures.

Again, Bourdieu illuminates that self-positioning is important to belonging to a 'field' and is determined by capital that social actors consider worth celebrating, demonstrating how

social inequality can be reproduced in terms of cultural capital (Agbenyega, 2015; Bourdieu, 1986). While some people may experience positive social interactions and feel belonging to a particular social field, for some according to Robinson and Jones Diaz (2007), our social and educational practices subject individuals to “various forms of violence, such as being treated unfairly or denied resources, or are limited in their social mobility and aspirations” (p. 93). Thus, it is not the individual deficit per se that excludes, but how other people classify themselves and others as belonging to or not belonging to certain spaces based on the nature and value of their capital. In reference to this, it can be argued that capital determines the field positioning (belonging) of an individual in all educational fields.

Human classification in terms of ‘normality’ and ‘disability’ can lead to discrimination, exclusion and social distance. Classification can be understood in the form of symbolic capital. According to Bourdieu (1986) symbolic capital represents a person’s status, prestige or honour. Students with disability are usually labelled with forms of symbolic capital that confer on them negative titles, such as disruptive student, lazy student, attention seeker student and so on, which produce discrimination. To discriminate against a group is to exclude or deny them belonging to a place. This also, applies to barriers to participation in school or to the acquisition of social and economic capital. In our social world, signs are looked for and interpreted in terms of e.g. skin colour, disability, ability, accent, and behaviour and these can also become the defining factor for social rejection (Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2007). This is reminiscent of the work of Bourdieu (1999) and that, quality belonging is a lived complex process, shaped by theoretical and personal positioning, and the power relationships inherent in social structures.

Bourdieu also argues that habitus plays a crucial role in defining who belongs to what and where, because it describes the individual’s way of seeing, interpreting and acting in the world, in accordance with their social position (Bourdieu, 1999). Robinson and Jones Diaz (2007) argue that “through habitus ... [some people are often] ... confined emotionally, socially, economically and physically and the perception that [they] are inferior” (p. 93) to other people. For example, discourses of deficit emanating from the habitus often pervades educators’ expectations of students with disability pushing them away from realising their belonging to a place. Habitus is internalised and consolidated in childhood through family and educational structures and circumstances (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). To be successful in inclusive education, students need to feel they truly belong to the school’s field. The field is the analytical space defined by the inter-dependence of the entities that compose a structure of positions within the school. These structural positions are governed by rules and power relations that often favour those who can negotiate the power relations and ‘dance to the tune of the rules.’ According to Bourdieu (1999), to gain access and feel belonging to a particular field, one needs to understand and be able to follow the rules and processes enacted within that field. In terms of education, it means having a sense of how the school structures operate and what they value (Hillier & Rooksby, 2002; Web et al., 2002).

If inclusive schools are considered educational spaces that everybody belongs (Thomas, 2013) then in order to develop inclusive schools that all student feel they belong, educators need to pay attention to their habitus - political, ideological and philosophical beliefs (Bourdieu, 1997, 1999; Moore, 2012). As educators we need to be mindful of our own position relative to our interactions and practices so that our actions do not become catalysts for reinforcing exclusion that we are fighting against. We need to also understand that true belonging is only possible when the borderlines between power, space and place are blurred.

It is obvious to see fine differences made between people based on their ability, disability, colour etc., and the site of educational practice in which they live and to which they are forced to belong. To understand the complexity of inclusive practice in which



belonging is central, this paper calls for a critical transformation in our habitus in relation to the objective stance of how we define others. It is therefore important to analyse critically, the structured and structuring practices of the social world and education systems in order to develop new understandings of belonging (Grenfell, 2012). One way to do this is to reform the way we think of differences and disability. In education, the structuring practices can create an opposition between those who conceive education as an autonomous domain primarily concerned with ability, disability, cultural matters and so on, and those who emphasize education in relation to external concerns such as economic prosperity and competitiveness. These forces within education environments clearly impact on students' sense of belonging.

With these points in mind, it is important to search for novel meaning of quality belonging and what constitutes it. The risk for realising true belonging lies in educational institutions maintaining institutional power structures and what Bourdieu describes as 'doxic' attitudes or taken for granted assumptions and practices (Bourdieu, 1990). Recognising that habitus plays a strategic role in the ways we conceptualise, make sense and implement educational practices, is an important first step for a positive transformation in one's habitus for creating inclusive schools that all students would feel they truly belong.

### **Moving Away from Deterministic Perspective of Belonging to Quality Belonging**

There is a broad consensus and understanding that belonging increases participation and decreases educational, cultural social and economic exclusion (Agbenyega, 2015; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Moore, 2012). Although belonging can take many forms, the things that educators do to give meaning to the concept of quality belonging are not well articulated. Inclusive researchers and educators are increasingly advocating for educational spaces where every student will experience quality belonging. However, educational practices are still bounded by paradigmatic and practice boundaries. Paradigmatic and practice boundaries often define students, not in terms of their strengths and unique identities, but on the basis of psychological classifications induced by quantitative testing (Veresov, 2014) or based on cultural, racial and economic profiling (Bourdieu, 1997; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).

Students' identification with educational place currently involves some form of categorisation, of notions of members and non-members, insiders and outsiders, special schools, inclusive schools, mainstream schools, and so on. These trajectories have serious implications for quality belonging. Massey and Jess (1995) have argued that people's belonging to a place is affected by how social actors within that place define them. The way different people are defined within places are diverse, implying that definitions may either include or exclude a person from belonging to a particular place (Bhopal, 2014).

Belonging is an unfixed and complex construction, a concept that brings histories and a multiplicity of trajectories together in a place (Thomas, 2015). Thus, moving away from deterministic views of belonging to quality belonging sets a high standard for a new construction and practice of belonging. First, we must confront the link between 'imagined' socially constructed educational spaces and how our habitus influence us in categorising students into pre-existing groups that maintain ritualised education practices. In line with a Whole Schooling commitment to inclusive education, transformation of our habitus is critical to this endeavour of quality belonging (Artiles & Kozleski, 2007; Ballard, 2013).

Teachers are increasingly and heavily responsible for the delivery of practices that facilitate true belonging (Agbenyega & Klibthong, 2012). As social beings, relationships are considered a key component of belonging (Ahnert, Milatz, Kappler, Schneiderwind &

Fischer, 2013; Black-Hawkins & Florian, 2012). Expectations that teachers' hold of students, and the beliefs they have about learning, are well documented areas of research that play a crucial role in belonging (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2012; Goodwin, 2010). Hamre and Pianta (2005) argued that when teacher-child relationships are close, student levels of belonging and participation are higher. Carrington and Robinson (2004) added that a focus on staff-student relationships, in combination with curriculum and pedagogy, enhanced teachers' practice in more successfully constructing quality belonging for diverse learners.

Quality belonging is a prerequisite to wellbeing, which is crucial for the realisation of Whole Schooling outcomes (Brooker & Woodhead, 2008; Woodhead & Brooker, 2008). Crivello, Camfield and Woodhead (2009) recognize that, much like equity and quality, the concept of 'wellbeing' is open to a range of conceptualisations and methodological approaches. Mashford-Scott, Church and Tayler (2012), for example, recognize four broad, conflicting and at times overlapping perspectives on wellbeing: social and economic; psychological and mental health; philosophical; and educational. For others, wellbeing is significant for maintaining physical and emotional health (deRoist, Kelly, Molcho, Gavin & Gabhainn, 2012), belonging and resilience (Osterman, 2000). Different people might perceive belonging and wellbeing differently (Glazzard, 2011), but the key argument here is that fundamental to wellbeing is the feeling that one truly belongs to a particular space(s). Laevers (2005) argues that a feeling of quality belonging leads to emotional health which in turn contributes to "the full realization of a person's potential" (p. 1).

Research points to complex links, going in both directions, between belonging and involvement (Laevers, 2005). Laevers (2005) reiterates, "Involvement goes along with strong motivation, fascination and total implication..." and argues that "[i]f we want deep level learning, we cannot do without involvement" (p. 5). According to Laevers (2005), "Involvement is linked neither to specific types of behaviour nor to specific levels of development" (p. 4) and thus emphasises how differences in human diversity and ability lead to the notion of belonging for all. Just because people live in the same locality, and operate in the same classroom or school does not necessarily constitute quality belonging. The big question then is, what are the practices through which a collective consciousness of belonging is maintained? In early childhood, and throughout life, relationships are crucial to a sense of belonging. Belonging is central to being and becoming in that it shapes who children are and who they can become in later life (Laevers, 2005).

In a Whole Schooling community, educators who are attuned to students' thoughts and feelings, support the development of a strong sense of belonging that leads to wellbeing. By giving priority to nurturing relationships and providing children with consistent emotional support, educators can assist every student to develop the skills and understandings they need to belong and interact positively within different geographies (Meek & Wright, 1996). Quality belonging goes with responsibility which is part of democratic education, one of the components of Whole Schooling. Focusing on quality belonging, educators also help all students to learn about their responsibilities to others, to appreciate their connectedness and interdependence as learners, and to value collaboration and teamwork (Goodwin, 2010). Quality belonging also involves educators, families and support for professionals working together to explore the learning potential in every student, but not on the basis of deterministic classifications. Instead, they see every moment as a learning moment for students' active participation and engagement in these experiences.

Children are born belonging to a culture, which is not only influenced by traditional practices, heritage and ancestral knowledge, but also by the experiences, values and beliefs of individual families and communities. Respecting diversity means valuing and reflecting the practices, values and beliefs of families within the curriculum (Bhopal, 2014; Moore, 2012).



Educators honour the histories, cultures, languages, and traditions that students bring to the school community (Bilge, 2010). They value children's different capacities and abilities and respect differences in families' home lives. Moving away from deterministic views of belonging to quality belonging, educators need to make curriculum decisions that uphold all students' rights to have their cultures, identities, abilities and strengths acknowledged.

Bourdieu (1998) emphasises fluidity, and the importance of different locales, situations, spaces, times, different dispositions and subjectivities, for understanding the quality of belonging. The quality of belonging is important in educational practice because education is often hostile to those it considers 'outsiders' and there is little sense of community, belonging and feelings of inclusion for students with difference (Bhopal, 2014). Moreover education systems and practices must make all students invisible. Visibility is related to being accepted as an insider, as a legitimate member of the school's community. Whilst some students may define themselves or be constructed by others as having a disability and/or additional needs, their self or others' positioning should not be used to override their identity as unique human beings belonging to a place, members of a community in which they should equally share in the capital distribution of that community. This means, all students with or without disability must be able to access educational places of their choice as legitimate cultural, political, social and economic citizens.

According to Brah (1996), one can possibly feel at home in a place and yet, the person may not be able to call that place as home. Students' sense of belonging to a place may be affected by arbitrary dividing lines that are simultaneously social, cultural and psychic. In addition, schooling structuring practices that orchestrates dividing lines between the 'able' and the 'disabled', the 'smart' and the 'sub-average', the 'poor' and the 'rich' etc., can lead to exclusionary practices (Brah, 1996). Therefore, a Bourdieuan understanding of belonging calls for all educators to dismantle educational borderlines (Abes, 2009) through continuous interrogation of our habitus and practices to enable all students to experience the quality of belonging.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have sought to illustrate the complex ways in which to understand quality belonging (Bilge, 2010) and how deterministic views of belonging can lead to the construction of human categories and exclusionary practices. I have shown that Bourdieu's sociological theory encourages us to consider social and educational practices as contested spaces where pure psychological assessments produce class, ability, disability, ability, and so on, privilege some people and prevent others from realising their potentials and capital in life. If quality belonging is a way of addressing issues of discrimination and objectifying practices that concern us as human beings, then deepening the theoretical understanding of this concept will add to how we practice the complexity of inclusive education based on the Whole Schooling perspective.

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