



# The Stones of Belonging

– working systemically in primary schools.

**'Much has been made of the decline of the family but the bonds between parents and child have not weakened. The reality and persistence of the extended family is one of the best kept secrets of modern times'**

*Terri Apter, psychologist*

It was in 2005 that I first heard a radio interview with Camila Batmanghelidjh, the founder of the children's charity, Kids Company. I didn't catch her full name or grasp exactly what it was she did, but, I was particularly struck by something she said: 'The person this child really wants', she told the interviewer, 'is her mother - I'm 2nd best'. It took me several weeks to find out more about Camila and when I finally did, I decided to apply for a position at Kids Company.

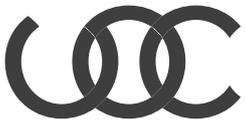
For two years, I was based at Oak Park, a primary school in South London. I would go into class, on request, to help manage issues around bullying and exclusion. There were 600 pupils when I arrived, considerably more by the time I left and the presenting problem was always the same - an out of control classroom and a quietly despairing teacher.

Oak Park primary had a noticeably higher than average turnover of staff and a not insignificant number of teachers would take prolonged sick leave during the course of a term. This resulted in a steady flow of supply teachers, further exacerbating the situation in the classroom. A significant percentage of the children

were not native speakers and some arrived mid-term as political and economic refugees with little or no understanding of English. Some groups, such as the Traveller children seemed especially ostracised. This South London borough has one of the highest levels of child poverty in England. I realised that I needed to do something substantial with these children, something that reached and addressed the deeper issues of their lives.

In the beginning, my class visits were often scheduled during so-called 'philosophy' sessions. These timetabled classes offered teachers a break from the curriculum and enabled them to pursue and develop ideas which were not academically focussed.

In my second term at Oak Park, I was asked to go into a Year 5 class where a Romanian girl, who spoke no English, was being excluded by the entire group. The child had already been moved from a parallel class, but there had been no improvement. I realised that as the girl spoke no English, my approach would need to be experiential rather than explanatory. My mother tongue is Swiss German, a language that is not easily understood outside the culture. I decided to conduct my session entirely in Swiss, behaving with the expectation that everyone in the room could understand what I was saying. I had visited the class before so the children knew that I spoke English. However, the sense of disorientation was complete.



I issued various instructions in Swiss, asking the class to perform certain tasks. I used only words, no gestures, no smiles. I randomly praised one group whilst criticizing another. Eventually I sat down and observed the stunned silence in the room. I asked them how this experience had made them feel. 'Confused, stupid, excluded', they replied. I explained that although this was not a situation that would likely occur for an entire class, there were some children at the school who were born in another country and spoke another language. Perhaps this was the way they might feel when they first came to Oak Park? I asked them what they thought I could have done to make them feel safer and less disoriented. They suggested smiles, gestures, eye contact and so we did the exercise again and I implemented their ideas. We talked about how many languages, other than English were spoken in the classroom. I grouped the children according to their mother tongue - Punjabi, Polish, Lithuanian etc and then asked each native speaker(s) in the group to teach the others a sentence in their own language.

The Romanian girl grew more confident and her behaviour towards her peers became less aggressive as they began to include her more. For several weeks after my visit to Year 5A, children would call out to me in Swiss in the playground.

My role at Oak Park included making home visits to talk with parents about difficulties their children were having in school. On one occasion, I was asked to set up a meeting with the mother of a boy of Spanish/Moroccan descent. As I had anticipated, Ali's mother was initially quite hostile. Gradually though, she began to talk to me about her own mother and how much she missed her family and her country. Her language became almost poetic as she spoke to me about growing up amongst the smells and colours and tastes of Southern Spain. The longing was palpable, but so was the sense of connection and belonging. Everything, she told me, was different here - the climate, the language, the food. As a single mother of three children, she was clearly not in a financial position to return to Spain, even for a holiday. I suggested to her that she speak to Ali about her childhood, that she teach him Spanish words, nursery rhymes and songs so that he too could connect to the Spanish part of him that he had inherited through her.

During the two years I worked at Oak Park, I grew increasingly aware of how important culture and language was for these children. I saw, during individual sessions, how acute the sense of loss and how much these children missed the extended families they had left behind in their homelands. As Marianne Franke says in her book 'You're One of Us': 'The parents thanked their lucky stars that they had managed to escape and poured their energy into finding

a job or procuring money. Usually the price the children paid for their loss and homesickness was failure in school or depression'.

Over time and as a result of these experiences in classrooms and living rooms, I developed an exercise that I call 'The Stones of Belonging'.

In my first week at Oak Park, I had a meeting with the Head Teacher. She talked to me about the challenges that teachers face in today's classrooms. They are expected not only to teach the curriculum but to manage the psychology and behaviour of some very troubled children. They trained as teachers, not as therapists. Having spent a number of years as a teacher myself, both in this country and abroad, I sensed the importance of offering them something practical, an exercise or an idea that they could use or adapt after I had left the classroom.

The Stones of Belonging is an exercise that is suitable for any year group, although, in my experience, it generates the most useful discussion with higher years (3 - 6). Initially, we talk about the idea of 'belonging' and I ask the children what the word means to them. We consider the different groups they belong to - school,

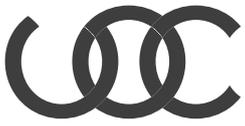
class, friendship, sport, church etc. I talk about how these might change over time, but that there is one group that we are always a part of - our family group. Sometimes grown-ups stop loving each other, one parent may move away, to another town or even to another country, but our parents remain our parents and we remain their children. We belong to our families and they belong to us for a lifetime.

I explain that we also belong to our countries. I tell them that my mother is Swiss and my father is English and so both those places are a part of me. More than 80% of the children at Oak Park primary at the time that I was working there had parents and grandparents who were not born in the UK and many had a mixed cultural heritage. Even having a father from Jamaica and a mother from St. Lucia invites a closer look at the differences between the two. One child suggested we go round the class and ask each person in the room where they came from. The children seemed surprised but also proud to be articulating their heritage in this rather public way. I decided to include it as part of the exercise.

I use a Tibetan singing bowl, initially as a way of gathering the children's attention and as a form of meditation. The bowl resonates at a very physical level and the sound fades gradually. I encourage the children not to speak until the vibration has stopped completely. I then fill the bowl with small, semi-precious tumblestones - rose quartz, amethyst, jade, tiger's eye, opal,

**'Eventhough my mother was abusive, it helps me to have those three stones together'.**

R.D - workshop participant



turquoise. These can be bought in bulk and at relatively low cost on line. I pass the bowl around the circle and ask each child to choose one stone. I explain that this stone represents them. I pass the bowl around a second time and this time, I ask them to choose two stones. I then invite them to guess who these two stones might represent. A response is always immediate – ‘our parents’. This often starts a conversation about stepfathers and grandparents, foster parents, even parents who have died. I tell them that we have just one Mum and one Dad and even if we don’t see one of them very often, even if we live with a step-parent or a grandparent, we belong to our biological Mums and Dads. The children get this idea right away and many of them seem to find it comforting.

I tell them that I have three stones that I carry with me. Sometimes, when I have something difficult to do, something I feel nervous about, I hold my three stones and somehow having my parents close makes me feel stronger, calmer, braver even. I ask them to think about something that makes them feel anxious or worried – a Maths test maybe, speaking in Assembly .... I then suggest they hold the stones in the palm of their hand and see if having their parents close makes them feel better, more supported. Most, if not all report that they feel stronger, safer, more confident.

Early on, I began to make a point of including the teacher and the learning support assistant in the exercise. Some of the children seem astonished when they consider that their teacher might have parents too. It was interesting to observe how teachers related to the exercise; one stitched little bags with the children to keep the stones safe; another, however told me casually that she’d ‘lost her parents’. Interestingly, the latter left the school quite suddenly one day and never returned.

I tell the children that the stones belong to them and I suggest they keep them somewhere safe.

In February of this year, an article entitled ‘The Ancestor Effect’ was published in the European Journal of Social Psychology. Researchers, it seems, have discovered that thinking about one’s ancestors can be a strong motivator and can even improve intellectual performance. Interestingly, thinking about friends or aspirations didn’t generate the same level of confidence.

Teachers have reported to me that some children lay their ‘stones of belonging’ beside them on the desk when they are taking a test. One boy, who has very little contact with his father, told me that he planned to give him his ‘Dad’ stone next time he saw him. Another girl sadly told me that her father hadn’t realised the importance of

the stones and had taken them away from her. Later that day, she approached me at the bus stop, introduced me to her father and asked me to explain to him what the stones meant. I subsequently discovered that he was a single father and that the girl’s mother had returned to live in Pakistan.

Weeks, sometimes months later, a child would call out to me in the corridor: ‘I’ve still got my stones, Miss ...., my Mum and my Dad’.

When I do the exercise, I know that there will be some children who don’t relate to it in quite the same way as others. However, as it’s a class exercise, a child can watch and listen without having to openly agree to anything. It seems to be easier too that we

use stones, which are symbolic. At the end of the class, the

children can allow the ideas to settle. Some talk to their parents and show them the stones, which in itself is a healing movement as it initiates an explanation as to what they represent. Sometimes I am asked:

‘what if the child is being beaten by his father,

what if the girl’s mother is depressed

and unavailable?’ What seems to be

true about doing this exercise is that it

somehow reaches beyond the rational,

beyond the reality of these children’s

lives and touches a universal longing they

have to connect to that part of their parents

that is whole and caring.

Names have been changed to protect anonymity.

*Una worked for many years as a teacher in the UK and Switzerland. In 2001 she trained in Systemic Family Constellations at the Hellinger Institute in New York. Una now works freelance, providing workshops and trainings for educators, school therapists and social workers on the subject of ‘Family Conflict, Family Loyalty – navigating the path between the two’.*

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**Notes:**

- In some cultures ‘supply’ teachers are referred to as ‘substitute’ teachers.
- In some cultures ‘year’ group is known as ‘grade’ group.

**Reference:**

Marianne Franke-Gricksch ‘You’re One of Us. Systemic Insights and Solutions for Teachers, Students and Parents’ Carl-Auer-Systeme Verlag 2001

