

WHERE DO I BELONG?

Place, identity and belonging in the English
classroom

● *From Master's research to classroom practice*

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A research-informed conversation for English teachers

A learner enters with a place.

We see:

a learner

a uniform

a textbook

a mark on a register

But the learner also carries:

LANGUAGE

MEMORY

RELATIONSHIPS

CULTURE

COMMUNITY

EXPERIENCES OF INCLUSION /
EXCLUSION

*The question is not only: “What does the learner know?”
It is also: “What world does the learner bring into the room?”*

Why should English teachers care about belonging?



LITERATURE

People, places, conflict,
identity, exclusion,
home.



PSYCHOLOGY

Attachment, identity,
recognition, safety,
agency.



PEDAGOGY

Voice, participation,
interpretation, risk-
taking.

English is already concerned with belonging.

The opportunity is to make the psychological and social dimensions of that theme visible without transforming literature to therapy.

The Master's study: the foundation

102

Grade 11
learners

APPROACH

Qualitative case study

PARADIGM

Interpretivist

ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis

DATA

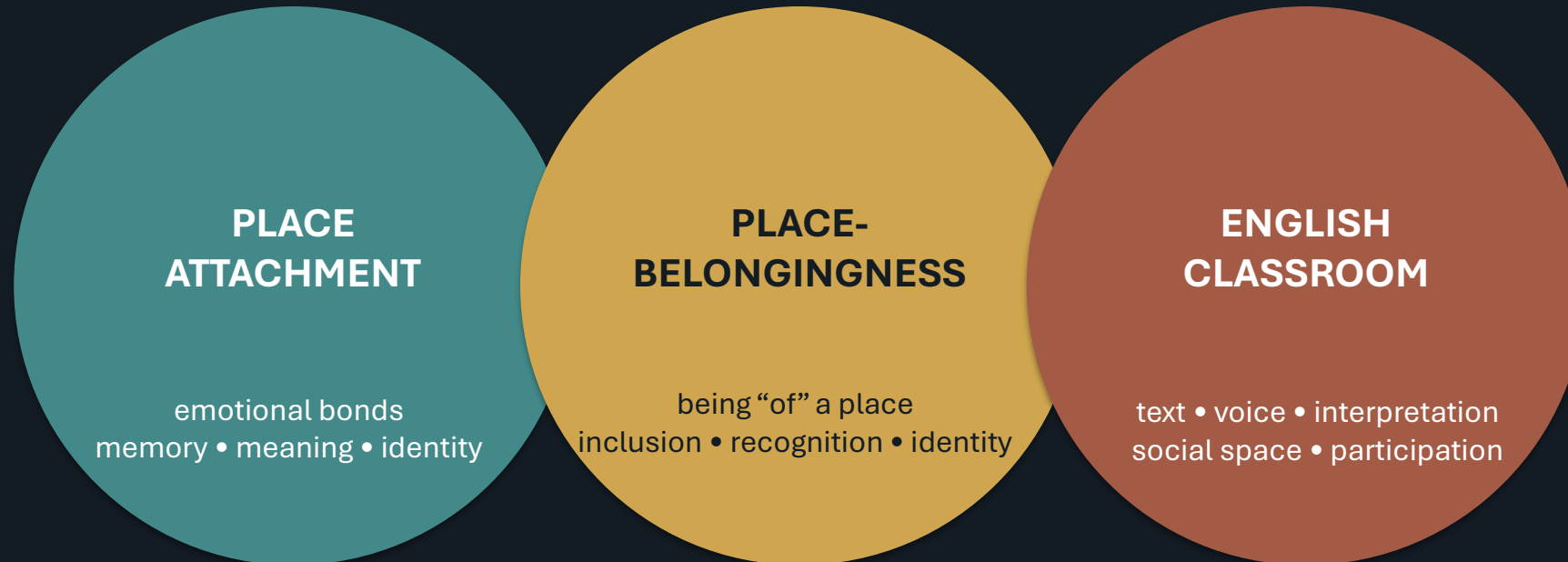
Diary entry • Venn diagram
Questionnaire • Focus groups

THEORY

**Place Attachment +
Place-Belongingness**

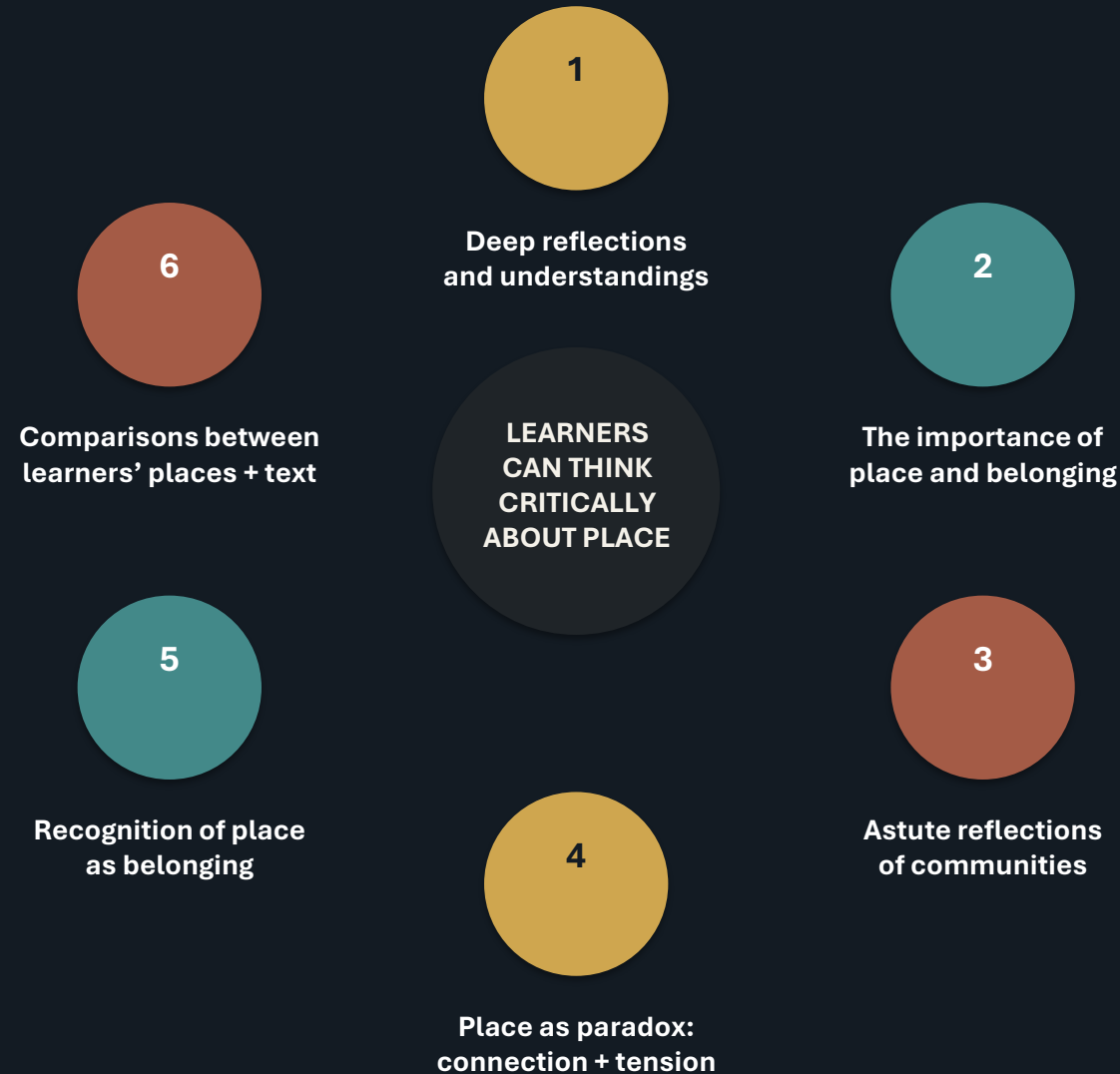
The study's purpose was not merely to identify a literary theme, but to understand how learners themselves understood and reflected on place and belonging.

Two lenses. One human question.



The key move: from “Where is the character?” to “What does this place make possible and impossible for this person?”

Six findings and one larger implication



From the learner's place to the literary place

The learner does not enter the literature classroom as a blank reader.

LEARNER'S WORLD

What does place mean to me?

memory • identity • relationships
safety • community • belonging

ENCOUNTER WITH TEXT

What does place mean to this character?

setting • language • imagery
relationships • conflict • perspective

LITERARY INTERPRETATION

What does the representation of place make visible?

identity • belonging • exclusion
power • agency • meaning

The movement is reciprocal:

learners bring understandings of place to the text and the text can challenge, complicate or extend those understandings.

The learner's place becomes a lens, not an answer

A learner can move between lived understanding and textual evidence without collapsing the two.

1 MY UNDERSTANDING

What makes a place
feel like home?
What makes me feel
included?

2 THE TEXT

What does this setting
mean to the character?
Which textual details show
it?

3 THE INTERPRETATION

How does the
representation of place
shape identity, belonging
and power?

The English task remains textual: learners must return to words, images, dialogue, structure and context as evidence.

This is the distinction between using experience as a springboard and using experience as the evidence.

Belonging is relational, emotional and meaningful.

ACCEPTANCE

SUPPORT

SAFETY

LOVE

HAPPINESS

FREEDOM

Belonging is not produced by physical presence alone.

It is experienced through relationships, recognition and the feeling that one's presence has meaning.

Belonging can contain contradiction.

I BELONG

**AND I CAN STILL
QUESTION THIS PLACE.**

**TENSION
IS NOT FAILURE**

I FEEL CONNECTED

**AND I CAN STILL
EXPERIENCE EXCLUSION.**

This matters pedagogically: belonging should not be taught as harmony. Literature gives learners a language for holding competing truths together.

The English classroom is itself a place.

VOICE

LISTENING

RISK

DIFFERENCE

TEXT

ERROR

POWER

LANGUAGE

IDENTITY

RECOGNITION

CHOICE

SAFETY

EVIDENCE

EMPATHY

AGENCY

Every routine answers an unspoken question:

“Is there room for me here?”

The classroom is not only where English happens.
It is a social place that learners continually read.

Move from literary identification to psychological interpretation.

THE USUAL QUESTION

“What does the setting represent?”

SETTING → MEANING

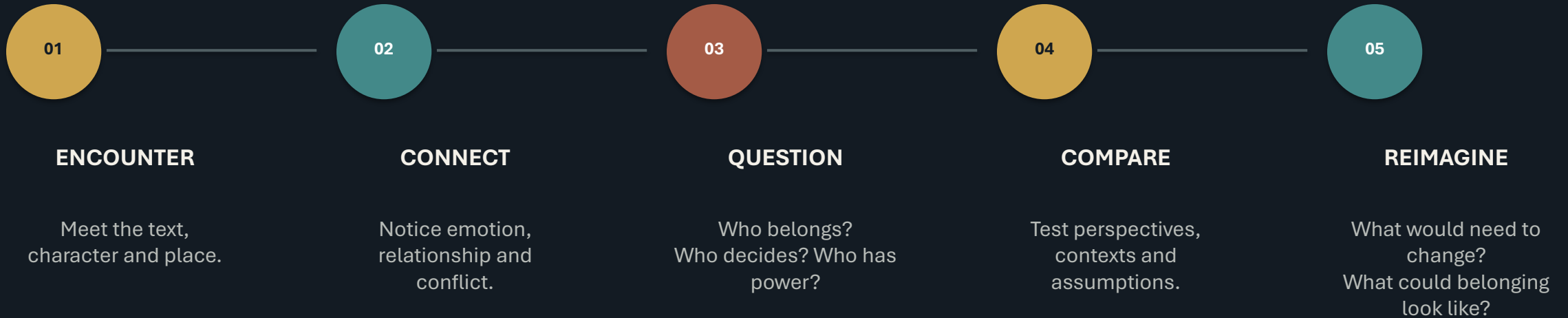
THE DEEPER QUESTION

“How does this place shape identity, belonging and power?”

PLACE → IDENTITY → RELATIONSHIPS → POWER

Still literary analysis. But now the analysis is psychologically and socially textured.

A five-movement classroom framework



The point is not to make English “psychological”. The point is to make literary interpretation more human, critical and meaningful.

What this could look like in a real lesson

BEFORE READING

What makes somewhere feel like home?

activate conceptual vocabulary

DURING READING

Where does the character belong and why?

track place + relationships + language

CLOSE READING

Which words construct inclusion/exclusion?

analyse diction, imagery, dialogue

AFTER READING

What conditions make belonging possible?

synthesise evidence + perspectives

REIMAGINE

What would change the character's experience?

creative / argumentative response

Before we ask learners where they belong...

- 1 Whose experiences are visible in my texts?
- 2 Whose language is treated as legitimate?
- 3 Who speaks most in my classroom?
- 4 What kinds of disagreement are safe?
- 5 Do learners have ways to participate without public disclosure?
- 6 Can a learner be different here without being diminished?

Belonging is not an activity we add.

It is a quality of the learning environment we continually construct.

Three shifts for English education

FROM SETTING

TO PLACE

Teach the emotional and social meaning of environments.

FROM INCLUSION

TO BELONGING

Ask whether learners experience themselves as valued participants.

FROM THEME

TO AGENCY

Let literature help learners interpret and reimagine the conditions around them.

The English classroom becomes a site where learners can read the world, read themselves, and imagine differently.

WHERE DO I BELONG?

Place is where we are.

Belonging is where we feel that we matter.

And perhaps the most powerful thing an English teacher can say is:

“Your voice has a place here.”



Strengthening the literacy thread

THE THREAD

How can learners carry increasingly sophisticated understandings of place, language and belonging from GET into FET?

THE CLAIM

Literacy becomes stronger when connections between lived experience, language, text and critical interpretation are deliberately sustained.

THE QUESTION

What changes when place and belonging become a thread across phases rather than a once-off topic?

Why a 'thread' rather than a 'bridge'?

BRIDGE

Suggests separate territories that are crossed once.

THREAD

Suggests continuity, return, strengthening and increasing complexity.

LITERACY

Learners revisit place and belonging through richer vocabulary, more complex texts, stronger questions and more disciplined evidence.

The developmental progression

GET

My place / our places: naming, describing, speaking, listening and representing.

FET

Literary place: analysing setting, character, identity, relationships and belonging.

CRITICAL LITERACY

Place as constructed meaning: whose place, whose voice, who belongs, who is excluded, and why?

The literacy moves

1. NAME

Learners acquire language to name places, feelings, relationships and experiences.

2. CONNECT

They connect language to memory, identity and belonging.

3. ENCOUNTER

They meet literary representations of places that may resemble or differ from their own.

4. ANALYSE

They use textual evidence to examine how writers construct place and meaning.

Place is more than setting

SETTING

Where does the story happen?

PLACE

What does this space mean to the people who inhabit it?

BELONGING

Who feels at home here? Who does not?

POWER

Who has the right to occupy, define or control this place?

GET foundations that matter in FET

LANGUAGE

Describing place develops vocabulary, precision and expressive choices.

ORAL LITERACY

Talking about place develops questioning, listening and perspective-taking.

MULTIMODAL LITERACY

Maps, images and representations make place visible and interpretable.

TEXTUAL LITERACY

These foundations can later support close reading of literary settings.

What changes in the FET classroom?

FROM

“Where is the story set?”

TO

“How is this place constructed through language?”

THEN

“How does this representation of place shape identity and belonging?”

FINALLY

“What does the representation of place reveal about power, exclusion and agency?”

Life of Pi: carrying the thread into Grade 12

START

What makes a place feel like home?

ENCOUNTER

What happens when Pi's familiar world disappears?

CLOSE READ

How do Martel's descriptions and narrative choices construct changing experiences of place?

INTERPRET

How does displacement reshape identity, belonging, survival and agency?

Life of Pi: from lived place to literary setting

A classroom sequence that keeps learners' experience as a springboard and the text as evidence.

1 BEGIN WITH THE LEARNER

What places make you feel that you belong?
What makes a place feel like home?

2 ENCOUNTER PI

What happens when the place we call home disappears?
How does Pi experience changing places?

3 CLOSE-READ THE TEXT

Which descriptions, images and narrative choices construct Pi's changing relationship with place?

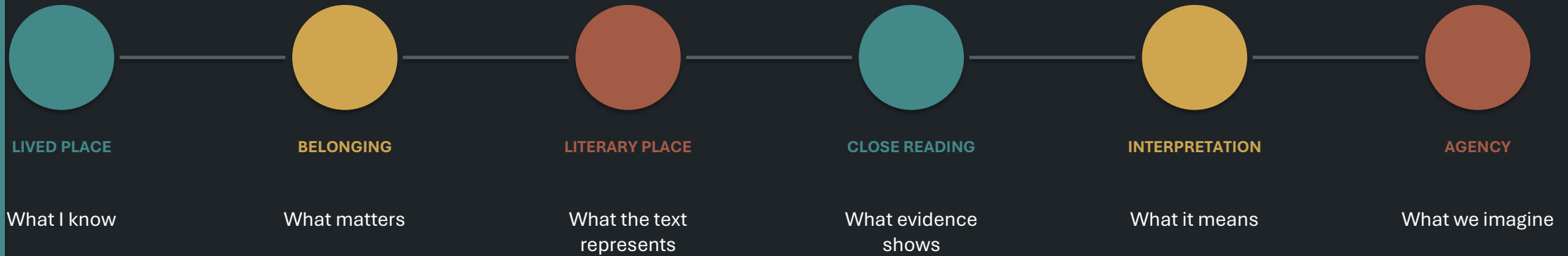
4 INTERPRET

How does place shape Pi's identity, survival, relationships and sense of belonging?

KEY PEDAGOGICAL PRINCIPLE

**The learner's experience opens the question. The literary text provides the evidence.
Interpretation happens between them.**

From lived place to literary meaning



This is not a move away from literary analysis.

It is a richer route into it.

Learners bring conceptual knowledge of place. Literature tests, complicates and extends it.

Research foundation & selected scholarship

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