Troubled Hearts, Troubled Minds

Making sense of the emotional dimension of learning

Peter Nelmes

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Introduction

For nearly 30 years I have worked in classrooms where the behaviour of the pupils has often been challenging, both in specialist provisions and in mainstream schools. I have witnessed probably more than my fair share of discord, strong words, strong emotions and flying objects. There have been times when the classroom felt like a place of chaos. And yet from the start of my career I felt drawn to this environment, despite the risks to my mental and, on occasion, physical health. Against the advice of my tutors during teacher training, who deemed such a choice *messy* or *career death*, I chose to work with the children who were the least suited to the rhythms of classroom life. This book describes the sense that I have since made of my experience.

Among the reasons for my career choice was the arrogance and idealism of youth. For reasons I can no longer recall, I reckoned I would be good at my job, and I wanted that job to be transforming children's lives. Within weeks of starting my first post, all sense of arrogance – and even competence – had gone. I was floored by the pace with which the mood in the classroom could change from peace to strife, from benevolence to naked hatred and aggression. These early experiences left me dazed and confused. All my beliefs, whether about myself or about teaching and learning, were lost. I realised that if I was going to survive, and possibly thrive, I needed to strip everything back and find a different way of thinking and acting.

One of the mistakes I made was thinking that the successes and failures in my lessons could be neatly ascribed to separate elements in the interaction. Successes were down to me, whereas failures were down to the children in front of me. This way of thinking was not sustainable, however. I knew that I was at least in part responsible when things went awry. As I slowly came to terms with the often

chaotic world that I had chosen, I realised that there are in fact three components to my – and, indeed, to every – classroom, which each need to be taken into consideration: the pupils, the teacher and the context in which the teacher and the pupils meet, which includes everything from the weather outside, the physical attributes of the space, the type of school the classroom is in, and the practices and ethos of the wider society in which the school exists. This book is an anecdotal study of how I made sense of the many different ways in which these three components interact.

In time, I learned that none of these components can ever be isolated when looking at the success or failure of the classroom as a place of learning. This is not a commonly held view, if the labels that we ascribe to the children who are diverted from the educational mainstream into classrooms like mine are anything to go by. We used to define children with challenging behaviour by their inability to accommodate to us (for example, using the label 'maladjusted'), but we have thankfully retreated from such a stance of outright blame. We are now somewhat less harsh in our terms.

When I started teaching, my pupils were labelled as children with 'emotional and behavioural difficulties' (EBD), and this is the term I will use throughout the book, as the emotional and behavioural aspects are the focus of my exploration. Later on, the word 'social' was added to that epithet, and currently the recognised term is pupils with 'social, emotional and mental health difficulties'.[1] This move towards less-judgemental labelling is to be welcomed, but this book argues that none of these descriptors go far enough; we need a definition which locates the difficulty within the interaction between the pupil, the teacher and the context. As I learned very quickly, challenging behaviour is always contextual. At the start of my career, for example, the context of the children's most challenging behaviour was often my own classroom. The blame I directed at them for the horrendous lesson they had just had with me would be undermined when I heard them working harmoniously with the teacher in the neighbouring classroom in their next lesson. Clearly, and to my shame, the context and the teacher played a role.

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1   Department of Education and Department for Health, *Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice: 0 to 25 Years – Statutory Guidance for Organisations Which Work with and Support Children and Young People Who Have Special Educational Needs or Disabilities*. Ref: DFE-00205-2013 (January 2015). Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/send-code-of-practice-0-to-25, p. 98.

Another argument against these labels became clear as I understood that the children's challenging behaviour had a cause outside of their control. I learned that these behaviours never happened without understandable cause, and such a consideration makes any label which suggests that the difficulties are with the child seem misguided, if not insensitive. If a child came to school crying because they were being hit at home, we would not say that the problem was the crying but with the hitting. If the child replaces the crying with a different action, such as inattentiveness or impulsivity, the problem still remains the hitting. As is related in this book, this was something that took me time to learn.

There is yet another problem with the way in which children have been labelled during my time as a teacher, which is that although the children have been said to have both emotional and behavioural difficulties, it has clearly been the behavioural aspect which has prompted their removal from mainstream education. Children who are in emotional pain yet do not project that pain onto other people through aggression, damage or disruption have rarely made it through my classroom door. Perhaps this can help to explain why, for the first two thirds of my career, my clientele was at least 95% male. It seems that there was little ability or willingness to identify emotional problems in girls. I did not see children of either gender who had emotional problems but no behaviour problems, and I have never met a child with behaviour problems who did not have underlying emotional problems.

Therefore, when describing the children I have taught, I tend to use the term 'troubled children', to emphasise that for all that they *do* in the classroom or home – all the disruption or upset they may cause – they are still, by definition, mainly beings to whom something *is being or has been done*. This book is about how we can understand and teach all such children, not just the punchers, the kickers, the exploders, the flounce-off-ers, the chair-throwers and the otherwise actors-out. It is about how we can relate to any child who is troubled, howsoever they respond to that trouble. Any behaviour which impedes a child's learning and development needs to be understood and addressed, whether or not that behaviour is detrimental to the people around the child.

The concept at the heart of this book

Challenging behaviour, and how emotions affect the learning taking place (or not), is best understood by looking at the transaction between the teacher, the learner and the context in the classroom, and especially at what is created by the interaction between the three components. The concept at the heart of this book, therefore, is the product of this interaction: namely, shared meanings, those joint understandings that we create (or fail to). Examining this element of the process of teaching and learning can lead us to understand how emotions play a role in the learning of all children, and indeed adults, whether or not their behaviour is challenging, and whether or not they are troubled.

Shared meanings happen when two people think together, and can be represented pictorially thus:
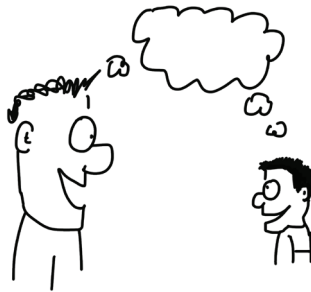
The creation of shared meanings, I will show, is vital if teaching and learning is to take place. In order to fully understand how shared meanings work, we need to consider their emotional as well as cognitive dimensions. Education is, it is often said, about hearts and minds, but it seems to me that we have a lesser understanding of the role that the heart plays in learning. I set out to redress that imbalance, by explaining how hearts and minds – or emotion and cognition – work in a transactional relationship. If we fully understand this relationship, we become much more able to help troubled children to thrive and learn.

I explore shared meanings by describing the pupils I have met, what it has been like to be their teacher, and how context has played a role too. I interrogate the

factors which promoted or hindered the meanings we tried to generate together. I first started to explore these factors with questions – such as, 'How can that boy be a right little sod for me and get so much praise for his work experience at the shop down the road?' When I had answered that question, other questions hove into view, and this book is testament to the journey (sometimes slow and often painful) towards enlightenment that I have been on. I aim to pass on the understandings I have come to in a way that can be taken and used as a model for anyone – be they teacher, other professional or, indeed, parent – who seeks to help troubled children and wants to understand how to help them learn.

This book is about unconventional people in unconventional classrooms. It is necessary, therefore, to do some scene setting before we get started. The rest of the introduction is devoted to this, beginning with a look at troubled children and the role of their teacher. Then it highlights the extent to which underachievement is so often a feature of these children's lives, before addressing you, the reader, by giving a brief warning about the content and language that you'll encounter as you read on. It also asks you to consider your own views of children and childhood, as this will inform your interpretation of the text. First, however, I explain why the unconventional nature of the subject matter necessitates an unconventional analysis.

How this book is written

The aim of this book is to present a theoretical concept that is firmly grounded in and illustrated by the nitty-gritty of practice, but I don't consider this to be a strictly academic text. I draw on stories involving many of the children whom I have taught over the years, which has some significant implications for how the book is written. I am writing about the meanings that I believe were made and shared in my classroom, and while I try to represent these children as fairly as possible, I am necessarily presenting my version of events. These stories are therefore partial in the sense that they can only present my interpretation. Also, if the meanings that are generated in my classroom are a result of the transactional relationship between myself, my pupils and the context in which we met, I clearly played an active part in creating these meanings as well as identifying and

recording them. Thus I am aware that the stories I relate say much about me, as well as about the children whose behaviours and lives I describe.

Another reason why I cannot claim to adhere to the conventions of academic writing is that I need to be able to explore all the factors that influence the creation of shared meanings when two people interact. Interaction is rarely, if ever, a solely rational activity, even in everyday life, and it certainly was not in my classroom. As we shall see, there are many factors relating to the emotions that influence the nature of the meanings made, and these do not lend themselves easily to rational analysis. My pupils bring into the classroom things which seem, to me at least, to defy logical explanation; the classroom can often appear messy, confused, a place of dark feelings or high energy and exuberance. I need to be able to explore and, indeed, celebrate all of that, even if I cannot accurately measure the impact these factors have on the shared meanings made. The meanings that we have in our own heads are often multifactorial, ephemeral, easily lost and very difficult to describe with a sense of objectivity. The meanings we share with others are no different.

Therefore, this book cannot and does not strive for objectivity. That is not such a disadvantage as it may at first seem. We all have an ability to know when we make connections with other people and when we do not. We know when we have established a rapport with someone, and, equally, can tell when we are struggling to find common ground. I am relying on the creation of shared meanings being such a universal human experience that you, the reader, will know what I am talking about.

Another reason for this book's departure from traditional academic standards is that I cannot really define my terms. I do not want to get lost down the rabbit hole of trying to come up with a rational definition of the emotions, for example. I could spend chapters on such questions as 'How does an emotion differ from a mood?' or 'Is anger a true emotion if it is always a cover for something else, such as hurt or shame?' I want to be able to explore all that is connoted by the term *emotion*, from the feelings that come and go in an instant to our deeper yearnings which may only reveal themselves over the course of many years, and everything in between. Again, I am going to trust the reader's knowledge and intuition rather than spend time trying to rationalise that which is not wholly rational.

Working with troubled children in the classroom

Who are these children?

As I have already mentioned, as soon as I started to teach troubled children, I realised that I had an inadequate understanding, both of my pupils and of what the process of teaching and learning was all about. It quickly became obvious that I needed to start paying attention to the emotions far more than I had assumed was necessary. For example, one of the first pupils I taught was Michael, a boy widely characterised by staff and pupils as a teenage thug. At 15 he was stocky and strong and feared by most of his classmates. He seemed to inhabit the role of school bully quite willingly. He took every chance available to sneer at his peers, denigrate them and, often, to hurt them physically. However, look beyond that behaviour and it was easy to see that in Michael's head, anxiety ruled. Michael feared lots of things, water especially. His mother once told me that he was scared to get into a bath, never mind lie back in it, even if she put less than an inch of water in it for him. Neither she nor I thought to question why she was still running his bath for him at 15 years of age. In almost all his activities he seemed frozen, incapable of vivacity, interest or even just making basic decisions.

So as I, his English teacher, approached the task of improving his writing abilities, I knew that he was not going to be able to write anything, because how could he start making decisions about which words to put down on paper? Like many of my pupils, Michael saw paper as an instrument of torture, a means by which one's shortcomings are turned into a permanent record. He would sit far away from my desk and well back from his own, his back against the wall both literally and metaphorically, his furrowed brow emanating threat, and his cheeks burning with shame and indignation. His hands would be balled tight, and there seemed little chance of getting them to pick up the pen. Even when he did, it seemed that deciding whether to use letters or digits to write the date was beyond him.

I used to write the beginning of the first sentence for him, in an effort to get him started. I narrated as I wrote. 'The match took place last Saturday morning when the weather was …' I would look at him and ask, 'So was the weather sunny or rainy?'

Michael would grunt, 'What? I dunno.'

I tried hard not to be cowed by the sense of sullen discomfort pulsing from across the desk.

'Come on, you were there. What was the weather like? Did it rain?'

Michael's gaze would sink down to the desk. If he did not engage now, he never would. I couldn't think what else to do. I had let him write about his favourite sport, cricket, even though the other pupils were writing fiction. I knew better than to ask him to be creative, an abhorrent activity in his view. He could simply report facts. All he had to do now was add the last word of the sentence. This is a 15-year-old boy, strangled with anxiety in the face of both his fears and his hopes. When the captain of Michael's local cricket club knocked on his door one Sunday morning, asking to speak to him because the first team was a player down and they wanted Michael to play for them – a dream scenario that Michael must have imagined many times – he refused to come out of his bedroom.

Michael was just one of many children to struggle to engage in my classroom because of their emotional state. Although there was a great deal of variety in the iterations of this struggle, I started to become aware that these children did have some things in common. Cooper, Smith and Upton's list of commonalities between children who have been excluded from the classroom or school reso-nated with my own experience.[2] It describes a life of underachievement at school, with few or no friends. Engagement in school is characterised by behavioural problems. Family life is often marked by trauma, abuse and violence. Social care is often involved. Low self-esteem is cited as a common factor, and I would also cite a sense of shame.

My thinking about these children started to gain some coherence, despite the frenetic, chaotic nature of my lessons, and despite the myths that circulated in the staffrooms of schools like mine. 'You should only teach EBD for seven years or you'll burn out' was a regularly uttered axiom. Another was that the children were either *mad, bad or sad.* This description, I soon realised, was unhelpful. Perhaps it was a form of self-protection, a way of keeping a distance between

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2   Paul Cooper, Colin J. Smith and Graham Upton, *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties: Theory to Practice* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 1994).

the speaker and the subject. By using a judgement or a label one could impose a meaning on the child, rather than construct a meaning with them, which might expose the speaker to the child's pain. And it seemed to me that these children were the unluckiest of the unlucky. Their backgrounds often featured combinations of negative factors that multiplied their misery exponentially. Children, for example, whose trauma in their early years had led them to be removed from their families, only to be put with foster parents who did not want, or were not able, to care about them.

I believe that I have never met a child who is intrinsically so disturbed as to warrant the descriptor 'mad'. I have never met a child who is intrinsically 'bad', although I have seen children do things to others which are appallingly hurtful or cruel. These actions always have reasons which at least explain if not pardon them. And as for the word 'sad', well, while it fits, such a small word cannot really do justice to the misery and challenge in these children's lives. I have never met a child whose challenging behaviour did not have a recognisable root cause, and perhaps *sad* is the best catch-all term for such roots, even if it does not communicate the depths of the problems that many of my pupils faced.

I have my own definition of what I mean by troubled children: they are people with a greater than average need to communicate and a smaller than average ability to do so. In other words, they come into the classroom needing to create shared meanings more than anyone else because they are lost and lonely, but they find this much more difficult than the majority of their peers do.

They usually arrive at school with paperwork describing some of the sadness that they have experienced. Incident reports from primary school, exclusion letters, safeguarding concerns, social services interventions, records of entries into and exits from a much higher than average number of schools. This all speaks of rejection, failure and probable disaffection. But the paperwork just records the chapter headings of their misery. It does not capture all the sentences in between or the day-to-day nature of their plight. Perhaps the most cogent understanding of their sadness comes from the feeling that you may get after spending even 15 minutes in their company. Your head may be filled with difficult feelings – such as anxiety, irritation or hurt – and it is a relief when you can get away from them. You may think, 'My word! That was hard work, and somewhat unpleasant.' You go off and,

to regain your sense of well-being, find someone you can connect positively with – your friends, colleagues you like or your family.

But what does the troubled child do? Often they go on to reproduce those same negative feelings in the next interaction they have, and the next, and so on *ad nauseam*. Their ability to connect with other people is often severely impaired or skewed, and so they end up being marginalised by the rest of us. They are the children educated in the corridor because their presence in the classroom causes too many problems. They are the children who never get asked back for play dates or parties, or who get passed from one foster carer to another. They are vulnerability hiding in plain sight. Their dilemma is acute; they cannot live with people, nor can they live without them. Even though they may appear wildly antisocial, most of them abhor isolation. As a teacher, I soon learned that isolation could not, and indeed should never, be enforced upon them. They will fight it with all their will. They cannot be alone. Their hearts drive them again and again into the very interactions they struggle with. They are like incompetent gamblers, who – despite a lifetime of losing – feel compelled to come back to the table to roll the dice one more time, squeezing yet another final drop of hope from an almost empty reserve.

The role of the teacher of troubled children

There are many aspects to teaching troubled children and these are detailed throughout the book. For now, I just want to highlight some of the particulars, to give a flavour of what the job entails. Trying to interact and make meanings with children whose lives have so much trauma, loss and hurt in them is not easy. It's even harder when they are not sitting calmly and telling you about their misery, but instead are manifesting it by telling you to *fuck off* or by throwing punches at their neighbour. Making sense of the role, and above all making sense with the children, necessitates the recognition that the role is not a wholly rational or conventional one. For example, I have never had the luxury, as teachers in other areas of the profession sometimes have, of being able to decide, as I plan my lesson, what meanings are going to be made when I deliver it to the class. The children in front of me were never going to look up eagerly at me, waiting to catch every pearl of wisdom I cast their way, and receive my lesson exactly as I had intended it to be received.

How are we to think of the disruptive or destructive child?

Drawing on over 25 years of experience working with children with challenging behaviour, Peter Nelmes argues that such children are members of a community who are possibly the least understood and accepted in society – and whose problems are often met with condemnation rather than understanding and support.

Through his insightful explanation of this phenomenon, Peter gives everyone who works with such children a framework for understanding how the heart and the mind relate to each other in practice.

Writing with warmth and compassion, he shares a range of real-life case studies which illustrate how emotional difficulties can often diminish a child's capacity for learning and delivers key lessons on the importance of nurturing pupils' self-regulation and providing them with supportive interventions.

If you have ever struggled to teach – or even just connect with – a troubled child, then this book is for you.

Troubled Hearts, Troubled Minds gives us a refreshing perspective from a teacher who has actually walked the walk and doesn't just talk the talk. A true expert! Drawing from his years of experience working with 'troubled children', Nelmes is able to use anecdotes and real examples that focus on the reasons why children challenge their teachers and the education system.

Dave Whitaker, Director of Learning, Wellspring Academy Trust

Heartbreakingly accurate in its description of 'hard to reach' children, unapologetically truthful in its commentary, and ultimately reassuring to all staff and agencies working in special education that their work makes an enormous difference to young people's lives, *Troubled Hearts, Troubled Minds* is essential reading for all educators.

Gill Kelly, Co-director, Making Stuff Better Ltd, educator, author and Independent Thinking Associate

Troubled Hearts, Troubled Minds is deeply rooted in Peter Nelmes' extensive experience of working with children who have struggled in the standard mainstream schooling model. It is replete with warts-and-all examples and, refreshingly, Nelmes is very honest about his own past mistakes. He lays bare his learning from these experiences in a coherent framework that will influence your thinking, reduce your frustrations and improve your teaching.

Jarlath O'Brien, author of *Better Behaviour: A Guide for Teachers*

Peter Nelmes has worked with children with challenging lives and challenging behaviour since 1990. As part of his endeavours to make sense of his professional world, he gained a doctorate in education – the subject of which was the role of the emotions in teaching and learning. He has taught and researched in a variety of settings, and has also been an associate lecturer for the Open University.