
Introduction

Let us begin with a story about a 7-year-old boy named Chris. I (Scot Danforth, first author) was one of Chris's teachers at a special school for students considered to have emotional/behavioral disorders (E/BD). I had been teaching Chris for 3 months. I had also been working closely with the school staff and his grandparents to help this little boy deal with the suffering and challenges that confronted him.

Chris lived with his grandmother, grandfather, and his younger brother, James, in a modest home in a working-class neighborhood. His grandfather worked as a janitor for a middle school. His mother lived in a rooming house only half a mile from his grandparents' home. His father had left the family long ago, not to be heard from again.

Chris had lived with his mother until he was 5 years old. She was addicted to alcohol and narcotics. Her lifestyle was too unsteady, too irregular for her to raise her young boys. Knowing this, she asked her parents to take custody of her two boys. They agreed, believing that their home and their love were the best chance that Chris and James had in this world.

Chris had been moved to a self-contained "emotional/behavioral disorders" (E/BD) class within his neighborhood elementary school during the first grade. He was an angry, confused little kid who refused to follow the teacher's directions. When the adults got more demanding, he screamed, threw tantrums, kicked the principal in the shins, and raced like a wild man around the school. This behavior didn't change much in his brief stint in the special class. His first-grade record is filled with out-of-school suspensions for hitting teachers and the principal. By second grade, Chris had been sent to a more restrictive setting, the E/BD building where I met him.

In my experience, Chris was a delightful kid. He was funny, playful, intelligent, creative, and warm. He was also extremely sad. He often seemed to be brooding in a solitary fog, an encapsulated haze of anxiety and anger. He could break out of this haze for short periods of time to have fun, wrestle, tickle, or play a game. But he always seemed to return to that sad, hazy place.

One day, I asked Chris to draw a picture of himself. This was a way for Chris and I to discuss his life, how he viewed himself, and how he felt. He drew

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a boy with a large heart in the center of his chest. The fact that he drew a large heart was not surprising, for this was literally a boy with a big heart, big feelings, and a strong longing for love and warmth. What was striking was the fact that the heart was upside down. I asked Chris why he drew the heart upside down. He remained silent and looked away so that I couldn't see his face. So I interpreted to him, "Chris, is your heart upside down because you feel so sad?" I figured that this much was true. I was to find out soon that this child had more worries than I had thought.

He nodded.

I continued. "And I'm thinking that you feel so sad because you can't live with your Mom."

"She's sick." Chris had learned that his mother had a disease called alcoholism that sometimes interfered with her ability to treat him in loving ways.

Then I asked Chris if he might feel somewhat better if the many people in his life all loved him a lot. Not that we could ever replace his mother's love, but maybe the love of his grandfather, grandmother, brother, teacher, friends, and me could help him out some. He nodded and picked up the pen. He then drew a second heart, a smaller heart, inside the large one that he had already drawn. The second heart was right side up. It was smaller than and enclosed completely by the upside down heart, but it was right side up.

As he prepared to leave my room, Chris wrote "Bring this Wednesday" in big letters on the top of the picture. I was scheduled to visit his grandparents at home on Wednesday evening. He wanted me to show this to his grandparents and tell them about how he felt.

I didn't fully understand the significance of this until that Wednesday meeting. At that time, I sat down with his grandfather, a very rugged and silent man who rarely spoke or showed emotions. In our previous meetings, I had been extremely impressed with this man and his wife, an older couple who had raised their own children long ago and now found themselves spending their latter years raising their daughter's sons. I sat on the couch in the living room, and Chris's grandfather served me a cup of coffee. He sat next to me. His face quivered and his eyes welled with tears as he told me that his wife had been gone for 3 weeks, and he had not heard from her. Like her daughter, she was an alcoholic. She occasionally went on prolonged binges. With the two boys in the household, she did so by leaving the house for weeks on end. In fact, she often went on these drinking binges with her daughter. This time, both daughter and mother had run off together. Back at the house, her husband and the two boys were worried to tears, wondering if the two women were hurt or in danger, wondering if they would come back.

Chris's heart had been turned upside down long ago when his father left the family. It had been flipped again when his mother gave him up to his grandparents. And it continued to be flipped and flopped by the ongoing addictions and absences of his grandmother and mother. In the midst of all this abandonment and love unfulfilled, Chris's neighborhood elementary school had rejected him by suspending him repeatedly and ultimately sending him away

to the E/BD school. It was amazing that this little boy didn't get in even more trouble at school given the difficulties he faced in his life.

Additionally, we should keep in mind the larger, socioeconomic context of Chris's experiences. His parents and grandparents struggled financially. His mother did not have the money or health insurance that would provide her access to the best drug rehabilitation treatment. His grandfather had health insurance through his employer, but that provided only very limited mental health coverage for Chris. The grandfather sought help for Chris at a local nonprofit mental health clinic that accepted payments through the federal Medicaid program. That community clinic provided mental health services for poor families. It was so overwhelmed with business that children and families could see a counselor only once per month, too infrequent for anything but superficial therapy. Medication (usually Ritalin) was the primary treatment for young children like Chris.

I had no illusion that Chris's school could somehow solve all these problems. But the professionals there could learn to understand these problems and play important roles in helping this boy and this family cope with very difficult life struggles. What were the school professionals doing to help?

At school, Chris was viewed by most of the teachers as an angry, resistant boy who needed to learn how to follow the rules and obey directions without mouthing back. Our school program consisted of a system of rewards and punishments—rewards for good behavior and punishments (or “consequences”) for bad behavior—aimed at modifying Chris into a more compliant, obedient, agreeable boy. The school had a fairly elaborate system whereby students earned points for good and obedient behavior. These points were translated into status on a hierarchy of four status levels. Students who behaved themselves earned their way up the four levels over the course of months. Students who reached and maintained the top level for a month were considered ready to mainstream back to a regular education building. The basic idea was that if Chris changed his behavior and kept it changed, the school could transition him back to a less restrictive setting, a self-contained E/BD class in a regular building. Chris was supposed to try to earn his way back to a less restrictive setting by being good.

Chris didn't really try to earn his way back and didn't care very much about the rewards the school had to offer. His heart was too large and his troubles too deep for games like that. Often, he even seemed to relish the consequences, as if he somehow deserved the disapproval of the teachers, as if somehow he deserved more pain and sadness in his life. This was often taken by some of my fellow teachers as a further indication of how “disturbed” Chris was. “He's very E/BD,” they would say, because if he was less E/BD, he'd “buy into the system.” He'd go for the rewards and avoid the consequences and work toward earning back a spot in a regular education building. Only a severely E/BD kid would not do this.

During that school year, of the approximately 200 students we had in that E/BD school, fewer than 10 made it back to a general education building. Many

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of the teachers took this to mean that their students were very, very disturbed. This was full justification to continue with our important efforts to modify behavior with rewards and punishments. The program was good. It was the kids (and parents) who were screwed up.

TEACHING AS RELATIONSHIP

In our many years of experience as teachers and teacher educators, we have found this to be a common approach to the education of deviant, disruptive, and nonconforming students. We can't deny that if Chris only improved his behavior and maintained that improvement for a convincing amount of time, he would move one notch closer to the general education classroom. What we believe, though, is that an approach that focuses primarily on altering or controlling the behavior of the student is shortsighted and misguided. To be blunt, it misses the boat altogether.

What Chris needed was not just an improvement in his behavior. His problem was not merely that he misbehaved at school. The problems in his life were multiple, complex, and much deeper than that. Chris had been let down and wounded by dramatic losses and repeated instabilities in the most essential relationships in his life. This had occurred initially and powerfully within his family. This was continued by school professionals, who responded to his emotions and behavior with punishment, rejection, exclusion, and a systematic attempt to modify his actions rather than embrace him as a valuable person. He was heartbroken, heart-flipped, angry, sad, afraid, and confused.

At the very least, what he needed was to be surrounded by and fulfilled by a series of supportive relationships with people who cared about him deeply. What he needed was a variety of supportive people who could believe in him, accept him as he was, love him without condition, and help him express and cope with the many painful emotions that ran through his small body. These are the kinds of relationships that any child, adolescent, or adult needs in life. It is our belief that the primary goal of educational and mental health professionals should be to develop, arrange, and sustain relationships of caring, acceptance, and understanding for young people who face emotional and social challenges in their lives. This goal is not a supplement to good teaching, a side item on the menu that we toss in occasionally to add flavor. This goal is vital to and inseparable from good teaching.

Our valuing of the possibilities and promise of deep interpersonal relationships between teachers and troubling students is supported both by our own experiences and by decades of psychotherapy research. Psychiatrists and psychologists call the relationship between the therapist and the client the *therapeutic alliance* or the *working alliance*. The many decades after World War II were filled with research in which psychotherapists attempted to pinpoint the specific methods and techniques that were predictive of positive outcomes for

clients. Researchers wanted to know what kinds of psychotherapy worked best. Instead of finding that a particular approach (such as psychodynamic or cognitive-behavioral therapy) stood above the rest, they found a common element within all forms of effective therapy. That common element was a respectful, valuing, and empathetic bond between therapist and client. Furthermore, researchers found that a central feature of this positive therapeutic alliance is an intentional and consistent focus by the therapist and client on discussing and developing the relationship they share. Ongoing collaboration on improving that relationship is vital to the success of the therapy itself (Gaston, 1990; Horvath & Greenberg, 1994; Horvath & Luborsky, 1993; Horvath & Symonds, 1991).

We believe that a similar bond—a pedagogical alliance—between teacher and student is similarly powerful when teaching students who struggle with social and emotional difficulties. No significant educational research base on this matter exists. We find the extensive psychotherapeutic research base to be compelling. Moreover, emphasis on building a pedagogical alliance fulfills our belief that human relationships are central to emotional well-being, happiness, and human fulfillment.

This book is devoted to the mission of helping new and experienced teachers actively develop nurturing, supportive, and even enjoyable relationships with students who are considered troubled and troubling. Although this goal of relationship seems simple, we must tell our readers up front that the task is uncertain, ever-changing, and filled with risk. There is no single method, no foolproof procedure, no scientifically validated series of steps for doing this. Teachers who engage in deep, valuing relationships with troubling students learn this delicate human art through years of practice, mistakes, reflection, suffering, and dialogue. Even then, a new student comes along who offers unforeseen challenges. Even then, a new student comes along whom we cannot understand, with whom we cannot connect. The challenge is unending.

Some teacher educators and traveling workshop gurus will espouse a system as the best way to be successful in teaching resistant and troubled youth. Although our tender and nervous teacher hearts yearn for a guaranteed way to be competent in the midst of messiness, we know better. There is no one way, no best system. There is only the goal of creating caring relationships and the fascinating journey we take with our students toward this goal. This book is a teacher's companion to that goal and that journey.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

The Bias of the Book

We do not claim to be neutral or objective in any way. Claiming objectivity and neutrality have been common ways for some researchers and purveyors of research to assert their beliefs and values in an indirect fashion, concealed

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under the cover and authority of social science. In a sense, a common bias has been to pretend to be, or try to be, unbiased. We don't believe that anyone can be objective and neutral. Each of us thinks, feels, and acts from a specific position in the world that is very partial, very limited, very fallible, and fully colored by human experience. The best we can each do is put our current beliefs and values out on the table for all to see.

The theoretical grounding for this book is a set of ideas called critical constructivism—basically, a combination of critical theory and constructivism. Within the umbrella of critical constructivism, we place and articulate our beliefs about educating troubling students in American schools.

Critical theory, briefly speaking, holds that our communities and our country are plagued by many forms of social injustice and economic inequality that bring tremendous suffering to children and families. These multiple forms of injustice and inequality tend to play out along the dimensions of social class, race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and disability. The incredible array of difficulties that falls under generic headings like “behavior problems” or “discipline problems” occurs within schools and communities where human suffering and social inequality frequently go hand in hand. We view these behavior problems as inseparable from the depths of human suffering and the struggle for dignity and respect in a society where dignity and respect can often be difficult to find. Although the current tendency is to individualize these problems by diagnosing, labeling, and blaming the “disruptive” student, we view these problems as inseparable from the concrete, lived social contexts of the school and community. For us, the bottom line concerns in relation to all “behavior problems” are ethical and political. How can we find ways to live and learn together in mutual respect and peace? How can we do so within a society, community, and school rife with problems of economic and social inequality?

Constructivism is an approach to learning and teaching that assumes that knowledge is actively made rather than passively taken in. Traditional approaches to teaching and learning often assumed that knowledge resides in the artifacts of the curriculum—in the textbooks, the computers, and the teacher's mind. The job of the teacher was to effectively transmit that knowledge to the waiting students. A good student was a passive student who accepted the transfer of authoritative knowledge during the lesson, held on to it in his or her memory, and later demonstrated this knowledge on the examination.

A constructivist approach assumes that the minds and bodies of students are not empty slates on which the curriculum may be written. Instead, students bring their intellectual and emotional lives—the total of their experiences—to the classroom. These experiences are individual, familial, and cultural. When a lesson is taught, students bring all of their meanings and identities to the interaction with the course content. This interaction yields a wide variety of emotional responses and intellectual results.

Constructivism is an invitation to teachers to develop instruction that engages students in an ongoing dialogue of meaning, in a shared interaction

that opens up channels of thought and communication. For the many students who resist and oppose the educational structures and activities provided by the school, a constructivist approach means not only that we ask the students to open themselves to the knowledge available within the curriculum, but that we make this act of opening up mutual, operating respectfully in two directions. The teacher opens up to hear, value, and accept the active contents of the student's experience, accepting the student's ways of knowing within the world. This allows for a negotiation leading to an exchange of ideas in both directions, authoritative knowledge for personal knowledge, school stuff for kid stuff. If we are asking students to engage the curriculum, we must simultaneously engage students in ways that support their emotions and thinking, in ways that value their experiences and cultural identities. We also must value the many ways that these students respond to and interpret the very thing we call the curriculum.

The Research and Scholarship Basis for the Book

In this book, we draw wisdom, knowledge, and support from the wide variety of intellectual and practical resources that have affected us as teachers, learners, and human beings. We draw from many academic fields, including psychology, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, education, and special education. The knowledge of these many disciplines are fully mingled with and flavored by our own lived experiences as teachers and students, brothers and sisters, parents and children. From the richness and depth of our lives, we bring forth lessons of thought, feeling, and action to bear on the pressing challenges of the moment.

Some books on teaching "disruptive" or "disordered" students assume that teaching practices should be supported by good social science research. We have been fully trained in the methods and procedures of quantitative and qualitative social science. Yet we do not believe that social science research stands above other kinds of available knowledge. It is our belief that social science provides an important source of knowledge for practitioners. Yet it is only one of many useful sources of guidance for teachers attempting to take ethical and practical action. A teacher in a given situation may draw guidance from a poem, a piece of literature, the words of a student, a spiritual belief, a lesson drawn from personal experience, the findings of social science, or a discussion with the teacher next door. All may be useful within the situation.

We have filled this book with a rich and valuable form of knowledge within the constructivist tradition: stories. Most chapters include one or more experiential stories written by us or by other teachers.¹ These narratives are richly textured and detailed. They are loaded with the ambivalent and antagonistic tensions of real teaching. We provide them as sources of wisdom and objects of discussion. Some stories provide examples of promising practices. Other tales tell of the very human struggles experienced by teachers, students, and parents.

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While the experiences presented in this book are likely to be similar to those experienced by others, we do not pretend that these stories somehow cover all of the experiences of our readers. In fact, we encourage our readers to compare the experiential narratives in this book to your own experiences as children growing up, as parents raising children, as teachers working with students, and as human beings struggling to find love and fulfillment in a complicated world. We invite you to dig inside your own stories for the lessons you can cultivate there.

Our Focus on “Troubling” Students

It is very difficult in the current climate to write about students who experience significant social or emotional problems in schools without somehow creating a new diagnostic category, a new buzzword that fills the workshop circuit with lists of symptoms or characteristics. If we precisely define the students about whom we are talking in this book, the risk is that we, too, have joined in the diagnostic melee by creating just one more brand of pathology to hang on the necks of kids and families. We want to avoid that. Yet the risk in avoiding that consequence lies in not clearly defining the students about whom we are talking, leaving readers confused about our entire approach to working with “troubling” students. So we’ll have to walk a tightrope in describing these students.

We have borrowed the term *troubling* from Nicholas Hobbes’s (1982) classic book *The Troubled and Troubling Child*. Hobbes directed the focus of educators toward improving the quality of interactions and relationships between students and meaningful others (peers, teachers, parents, etc.). In dropping the term *troubled* from our description in favor of *troubling*, we are not at all downplaying the emotional life or human suffering of students. We choose the word *troubling* in order to attend to the wide range of students in public schools who behave in ways that teachers and administrators find troubling, concerning, problematic. This wide range includes students who resist and oppose school authority and norms in dramatic, loud, and violent ways; students who subvert the norms of schooling in humorous, sneaky, and manipulative ways; students who have great difficulty making friends and sustaining relationships; students who struggle to concentrate because of depression, anxiety, and fear; students who have been emotionally traumatized by violence and violation; students who feel deeply alienated and disengaged from the academic and social world of the school; and students who are withdrawn and isolated on the fringes of the social web.

These “troubling” students are educated in many school settings and placements: juvenile delinquency programs, mental health facilities, “behavioral disorders” schools and classes, substance abuse programs, alternative public school programs, special education resource classes, inclusion programs, and general education. Our goal is to speak directly to teachers who experience many forms and instances of “troubling” student activity each day in order to

provide a useful practical and theoretical resource for teachers concerned with issues of classroom management and disruptive and deviant behavior.

Our approach focuses on building helpful, supportive, and trusting relationships with “troubling students.” We make the assumption that teachers do not cure kids of internal psychological disturbances and mental illnesses. Teachers work in interactive and relational ways with students. These interactions and relationships can have a profound impact on the emotional well-being, learning, and whole life of a student. As teachers well know, there are times when it seems that their relationships with students fall far short of having the kind of positive influence for which they hope and strive. In the end, the role that the actions of a single teacher plays in the life of a student is greatly unknown. Students leave our classrooms and move on to futures about which teachers often know little. That being true, we take it as an article of faith that the most profound thing a teacher can do is to create a relationship with a student that communicates deep acceptance and love to that student. That relationship is the cornerstone of good teaching.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

We have divided the text into three sections. The first section (Chapters 1–3) deals with the broad concepts and underlying knowledge that provide the background support for our practical work as teachers. In this section, we explore critically the historical and theoretical development of programs and teaching troubling students.

Chapter 1, “Society, Schooling, and Childhood Misbehavior,” looks back within the history of American education and the development of the mental health professions to explore the roots of current issues and dilemmas.

Chapter 2, “Introducing Critical Constructivism,” critically examines behavioral theory and practice and offers alternatives to this dominant way of thinking about and dealing with child behavior problems in the public schools.

Chapter 3, “Creating a Participatory Classroom Community,” explains the theoretical foundation for all of the ideas, practices, and programs that we discuss in the remainder of the book.

The second section (Chapters 4–6) offers a series of short chapters on the various dimensions of critical constructivist teaching. It is a sampling of the teaching practices that support the development of strong relationships and the construction of personally meaningful knowledge. Each form of teaching practice adds another array of tools to the artful complexity of the seasoned professional.

Chapter 4, “Adopting a Caring Pedagogy,” focuses on the centrality and nature of the teacher-student relationship, explaining how a relationship of a certain quality is vital to good teaching.

Chapter 5, “Working Together,” looks at how we can engage students in group experiential activities that capture their interest, promote greater learning, and build relationships among peers.

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Chapter 6, "Reflective Teaching," explores ways that teachers attend to their own thoughts and feelings in order to develop improved practices with students, framing and reframing problems in multiple schemes in order to create more useful ways of thinking.

The third section (Chapters 7–11) examines specific programs and teaching practices that we find encouraging and hopeful.

Chapter 7, "Using Conflict Resolution as Instruction," explains the research literature and educational practice of teaching children and adolescents how to settle interpersonal disputes through peaceful negotiation.

Chapter 8, "Implementing the KEYS Program for Students With E/BD," is an in-depth description of a unique therapeutic program in St. Louis County, Missouri, whereby teachers provide additional social support for students who experience behavioral, emotional, and social difficulties.

Chapter 9, "Working With Families," examines the most promising ways of involving parents in the education of their children. In that chapter, we accept the insight and advice straight from parents as we hear three first-hand stories from parents of students labeled "emotionally/behaviorally disordered."

Chapter 10, "Considering Inclusive Education," explains why inclusive education is a worthwhile social goal and explores the complexities, difficulties, and successes of actively seeking that goal.

Chapter 11, "Honoring and Developing Ourselves as Teachers," is our chance to offer some direct practical advice for teachers about caring for one's own emotional well-being while struggling to help deviant and defiant students.

NOTE

1. When necessary, names have been changed to protect the identities of those individuals discussed in the narratives and case studies.