

Chapter 1 What is a relationship-centred approach?

Matt's story

Matt had only been at his new school for a month, but he had already come to the attention of both teachers and peers. His peers thought he was 'crazy' because he usually responded to attempts to involve him in conversations or games with grumpiness, shrugging his shoulders or some rude words. A simple enquiry about how he was going would often get, "It's none of your business!" Matt seemed to be angry all the time. If anyone tried to be humorous with him, about school or a teacher, he was likely to misunderstand it as teasing. He ended up chasing his classmates and issuing warnings about how he would bash them after school. Matt had not made any friends and most of his classmates had given up on him.

His teachers found him difficult to manage in class. When he was asked to contribute to a discussion, or to answer a question, he said, "No". If his teachers insisted, he often stormed out of class or kicked a chair. When he found the task difficult he ripped up his exercise book or paper and threw it in the rubbish bin, muttering swear words under his breath.

Teachers' usual responses

Matt is an example of a student who frequently responds to instructions and requests with defiance and non-compliance. Few teachers or students find him likeable. He is also a student whose teachers have tried multiple interventions with the purpose of changing his behaviours. In what follows we describe each of the interventions Matt's various teachers and schools have tried, along with some of the relational and other outcomes they produced. The order of presentation does not necessarily reflect the order of implementation. Rather, we have listed the interventions used on Matt on a continuum, moving from punitive towards restorative approaches.

Zero tolerance and punitive approaches

Some of Matt's current teachers would prefer the school use a zero tolerance approach with Matt or institute harsher punishments. In order to nip Matt's dramatic interruptions in the bud, these teachers frequently chose to send him out of class or refer him to a senior administrator. They often did this at the beginning of a lesson or when they suspected he might be in a bad mood. In addition, the zero tolerance advocates wanted him out of their school, and they stood Matt down for 3 days twice in the previous month. The general opinion among these teachers was that Matt should not be given more chances but should be suspended or expelled, because he wrecked lessons and interrupted the learning of others. Though Matt's current school principal was against zero tolerance, for the criticism it has received for opening up pathways to prison and frequently criminalising mild transgressions (Skiba & Peterson, 1999; Skiba, Michael, Carroll Nardo, & Peterson, 2002), she was finding it hard to convince a group of teachers on her staff.

Behaviour modification

Matt had also been on an individual behaviour modification programme that included strategies based on applied behaviour analysis, along with teaching him social skills and emotional literacy. The aim had been to replace Matt's problematic behaviours over time with acceptable ones through his behaviour specialist teacher and subject teachers using positive and negative reinforcement. Matt received rewards for behaving in desirable ways (for example, stickers that could be exchanged for free time or a preferred activity). Punishments were also applied, such

as withdrawing privileges (for example, free computer time) in order to deter him from disrupting lessons. In his previous school a similar individualised programme had been accompanied by a medical intervention. Matt had been diagnosed with ADHD¹ and was put on Ritalin. His mother had stopped the medication, citing bad side-effects, such as internal shaking and sleeplessness. Matt was currently receiving social skills training from a specialist teacher, both individually and, on occasions, in small groups.

Positive behaviour

On the less intensive end of the continuum of behaviour management interventions we might find what is called a positive behaviour approach (Rogers, 2002, 2011). This was what one of Matt's more tolerant teachers, Ms Smith, used consistently, not only with Matt but with all her students. Ms Smith claimed that she had not felt the need to send Matt out of the classroom and/or refer him to senior administration.

The strategies within this approach are designed to help establish, with the least possible interruption to the lesson and in the short term, the kind of classroom order that is deemed necessary by the teacher or school for teaching and learning to occur. The simple, easy-to-use strategies recommended by Rogers include behaviour description, behaviour direction, rule reminder, directed choice, partial agreement and deferred consequence, which, in Ms Smith's interpretation looked like the following.

If Matt was off task, fiddling with an object instead of writing in his book, Ms Smith would use a *behaviour description* and a *behaviour direction*, saying, "Matt, you are playing with your phone. Eyes and ears this way, thanks." If Matt said, "No," to a request to contribute to a discussion with a grumpy tone, Ms Smith would say, "Matt, I can understand that you are upset about someone being mean to you (*partial agreement*), but remember our rules about participation. In this class, everyone is expected to contribute" (*rule reminder*, with rules referred to as 'our').

If Matt continued to refuse, Ms Smith would repeat the rule reminder, but adding a *directed choice*: "You could say what you think now or we could come back to you at the end." If Matt still insisted on staying out of the activity, she would use a *deferred consequence*: "If

you decide not to participate, then I will have to follow it up in your own time.”

Used with calm consistency with everyone, Ms Smith claimed these strategies were enough to keep Matt in her class and avoid referral to senior management.

Restorative and counselling-type interventions

Matt’s social worker, John, preferred to use a restorative approach and to take up a listening rather than advice-giving stance. John often visited Matt’s home and had informal conversations with both Matt’s mother, Malia, and Matt. Recently he had found out that Malia had been struggling to find work as her English was not very good. She also had told him that Matt would often eat up all the bread from the kitchen cupboard, leaving nothing for her.

John believed that when Matt was defiant at home, Malia relied on his uncle to ‘discipline’ him, which was a term for giving Matt a serious hiding, for which John had referred the family to child protection agencies. The family had very few possessions and were struggling to make ends meet. Matt told John a number of times how misunderstood he felt, both at home and at school. He was scared of his uncle and angry at his mother for leaving their home country, where they used to have a better life.

He carried his worries about his home life to school, and that was why he was finding it hard to relax and to be kind to the other students. He also found it hard to cope with the work and did not want to embarrass himself in front of the other kids. Matt had also been referred to the school counsellor in order to learn anger management skills.

In addition, Matt’s head teacher had recently called a whole-class restorative meeting with the intention of wanting to improve the relationships Matt had with his classmates. At the start, this meeting resembled the conversations Matt has had with John, his social worker and with his counsellor. Both Matt and his classmates were listened to and they were able to tell why they had felt hurt by the other. However, the meeting very much focused on what everyone’s feelings were, rather than on underlying beliefs that might have shaped both Matt’s and his classmates’ negative responses to each other. The meeting ended with

class members being invited to give individual advice to Matt. It is not surprising that Matt felt as if he had been in court and had been humiliated.

What can we make of Matt's story and his teachers' responses?

In the zero tolerance approach the problem was located solely in Matt. He was judged to fall outside the category of 'good student' and was deemed to present a risk to the school and to the other students. The main strategy in this approach was, therefore, the segregation of Matt from his peers and his exclusion from both the social and academic life of the classroom, even if temporarily.

It is much like how criminals are segregated from the normal members of society. He was expected to change his behaviours while away from others and without much support. Matt's actions were not considered in the context of the complex relational dynamics of the classroom. Within this approach it would be incomprehensible to entertain the idea that his angry outbursts might at times be reasonable—or at least understandable—responses to bullying or provocations and an expression of his hurt. No attempt was made to examine the system of power relationships in the classroom. It was only Matt who was found lacking in social skills. Even a remedial approach, offering training to Matt in social skills, was considered pointless. Teachers were closed to the possibility of trying to reintegrate him into the classroom. While the punishment dished out to Matt might demonstrate the power of the law (in this case the school's rules) and the power of authority or the state (Noguera, 2003), showing the deterrent qualities of disciplinary power, it would do nothing to rework existing power relationships.

Matt was finding it extremely difficult to re-establish himself as a member of his class after the days he had spent being suspended. He had missed some of the happenings that his peers kept referring to in their conversations and felt unable to contribute. He felt even more hurt and was often more grumpy than before, reinforcing the image that his peers and several of his teachers had of him.

The individual behaviour modification programme had yielded several positive outcomes, with Matt learning accepted behaviours and stopping those that often put him in trouble. However, making him

the object of such an intervention also placed him in the category of 'behaviourally disabled'. Although establishing his categorical difference from the other students through assessment and treatment might have been necessary to secure the provision of interventions from a behaviour specialist, such categorisation separated him from the rest of the students, locating him at the negative end of the good student / bad student binary. Once his difference had been made into a problem, the possibilities were opened up for him to be further pathologised and to be rendered not only academically or behaviourally but also morally inferior. His chances of being singled out and bullied were increased. Matt's frequent absence from class as a result of being pulled out for remedial sessions with the behaviour specialist confirmed his difference from his peers and made him an easy target for being bullied for being 'dumb'.

No similar negative effects had so far been identified for the positive behaviour interventions that Ms Smith used. This could be because she did not just use them with Matt but with all the students whenever she thought classroom order needed to be re-established. She had reported to the principal that Matt's on-task time had increased.

The conversations the social worker had been having with Matt and the sessions with the school counsellor had provided a validating experience for Matt, as he felt he was taken seriously and was listened to. However, while these interventions might have eased Matt's stress and improved his overall confidence and wellbeing, they did not go far enough to change the power dynamics of Matt's class. The social worker and counsellor mostly worked with Matt individually and could do little to create a legitimate position for him among the good students in the classroom. While Matt enjoyed these conversations, he had to leave the class to have them, as he did for his remedial sessions, which again reinforced his difference from others.

Both the social worker and the counsellor might have become witnesses to parts of Matt's life that were usually hidden from teachers. The codes of confidentiality, however, usually prevented both counsellors and social workers from sharing such information with teachers. Yet this information shed light on how his circumstances and social conditions might have made the demands of school, and what it took to be a good student, almost impossible to bear.

Even the restorative class meeting that had been called to improve relationships between Matt and his classmates turned into moralising and condemning him, because he did not fit the school's and other students' notion of what constituted an emotionally literate and socially skilled person (Ecclestone, 2007; Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009; Leach & Lewis, 2013). Matt had told his counsellor that he would not want to participate in such a meeting again.

A more relational approach

While several of the above-described interventions could at times be useful with some students, with Matt they produced detrimental effects, achieving the opposite of what the participants intended, with the exception of the positive behaviour approach. We have highlighted above, albeit somewhat artificially, those features of these processes that we think increased the possibility of resistance and hurt and decreased the possibility of collaboration.

All of these interventions (or their various implementations) were based on a liberal-humanist notion of the autonomous individual, which means they all located the problem in the individual rather than in the relational dynamics of the group. Even a restorative meeting, which had the potential to be different, could end up focusing on the effects of hurt on individuals, as opposed to examining the complex relational context of the classroom and the socially available ideas that reproduced conflict and harmful behaviours.

Normalising, or normalisation, is at the heart of this individualistic rather than relational approach (Davies, 2013; Davies, De Schauwer, Claes, De Munck, Van de Putte, & Vertichele, 2013). It was because of this process that Matt had been segregated from others, perceived as different, and felt hurt and humiliated.

What does this mean? It means that schools, and societies, create norms or rules that prescribe both acceptable conduct and the qualities of the kinds of persons who are judged to be normal or proper citizens. Norms establish categories, which divide people into normal and abnormal, or good and bad. Norms also create a desire to belong to and to be recognised as belonging to accepted categories. Judith Butler (2004a) argues that we all depend on norms or categories for our existence and need to be recognised as belonging to them.

Compliance with the accepted norms of a community earns recognition as a person. Non-compliance—being different from the norm and not fitting its categories—can deprive a person of a viable existence. The desire to fit normative categories creates two kinds of vulnerabilities. On the one hand, we are dependent on others for recognition, as it is others who will decide whether our behaviours constitute compliance and whether we deserve to be acknowledged or not. On the other hand, we can also be vulnerable to our own judgement as we internalise norms and want to live according to their specifications, constantly measuring whether we have lived up to them or not.

What are some of the consequences of such an individualistic approach, and how can the normalisation process play out in relationships? Any difference from the norm becomes a problem, because a norm “comes to be what is expected, and the expected slides quickly into morality. It becomes ought. The normative becomes the socially approved way of being” (Davies, 2013, p. 21). Normative categories are exclusive because they rely, for their definition, on what they are not: people, qualities and behaviours that do not fit them.

While norms can provide a necessary certainty for how we should act in particular situations, they can also obstruct or prevent change. Judgements by others about whether a person is compliant or not with a norm can become fixed descriptions about a person’s qualities and attributes. Once considered different and excluded from the category of ‘normal’, it can be very hard for anyone to gain recognition.

The location of the problem in Matt and his temporary separation and segregation from others based on his differences (for instance, during his stand-down or suspension, his individual behaviour and counselling sessions) marked him out as pathologically different from the rest of the class, whose behaviours were considered worthy of recognition. Being stood down for a few days not only temporarily deprived Matt of schooling, but made it virtually unmanageable and impossible for him to weave himself back into the complex web of relationships and connections that had been established in his absence.

We think the fact that most of these previously described interventions did not achieve the desired positive relational outcomes that Matt’s teachers, social worker and counsellor had hoped for is not the fault of any individual. Rather, these negative effects are due to the

dominance and strong pull of ideas and practices that privilege and support the process of normalising, that centralise the autonomous individual, rather than introducing a relational view of problems. Matt was made to be solely responsible for all his relational problems. Ms Smith, on the other hand, did not locate the problem solely in Matt, because she treated everyone the same, although she did not go as far as addressing the power dynamics of the classroom.

Even the restorative meeting, which had deliberately set out to be relational and to treat problems as a collective responsibility, had deteriorated into moralising and targeting him rather than trying to find collective solutions. A restorative meeting can be hijacked by these ideas, which is testament to how firmly they are embedded in our everyday practices. They have become so taken for granted that it is hard to replace them with something else and to conduct relationships differently.

The particular relational approach we introduce in this book, we believe, helps reduce the potential for unhelpful outcomes—for Matt and for students similar to him. It is an approach that moves away from the notion of persons as individuals separate from others. Instead, it considers them not just as interacting, but as *intra-acting* with everything else, persons, objects or other living things included. Interaction is an exchange between two autonomous individuals. Intra-action, on the other hand, means that different persons, their environments and the objects, thoughts and living things in those environments, interfere with and affect each other in often unpredictable ways (Barad, 2007; Davies & Gannon, 2012).

Within an intra-actional view, problematic behaviours (for example, Matt's angry response or his grumpiness) will not only belong to him but will be produced as a response to a look by someone else, a tone of voice that might resemble the way his uncle speaks to him when he beats him, or by seeing someone eating a sandwich when he knows there is no more bread at home in the cupboard.

We think that much more is needed than just good intentions to achieve a shift from the judgemental moralising that “responds to the failings of individual autonomous selves” (Davies, 2014b, p. 738). We believe that two key assumptions and the conscious use of a number of ways of speaking and relational practices can help implement this

relational approach more easily. We will introduce each of them in more detail in the following chapters, but let us describe them briefly here.

The relational approach we use in this book

The following two key assumptions are the basis of all the relationship practices described in this book:

- the importance of being recognised and validated as a person
- the importance of challenging ideas circulating in the social context that exclude, oppress and disadvantage persons.

The importance of being recognised and validated as a person means that we advocate relationship practices that reduce the effects of, or try to minimise opportunities for, normalising. How is it possible to do this? The specific relationship principles and ways of speaking or conversational moves that can help achieve this purpose are introduced in Chapters 2, 3 and 4.

Chapter 2 discusses the importance of paying conscious attention to the productive power of language, and the process of producing undesirable subjects by the ways in which we speak repeatedly about a person. Ways of avoiding totalising as opposed to fixing someone as the problem are introduced. Instead of segregating and separating a person because of his or her difference and making difference a problem, within a relational approach difference is considered to be normal. This means that we consciously and deliberately explore people's different views and the meanings they might make of events. This requires us to take a *curious* stance and to give up our assumptions about what is normal in order to include not only dominant but also other knowledges.

Chapter 3 contrasts the stances of curiosity and certainty and shows, through examples, how it is possible to generate conversations that increase possibilities for recognition, because they stretch the boundaries of normal through listening to the *not-yet-known*. We also show how it is possible to increase a person's capacity to be open towards, and be affected by, others.

Chapter 4 introduces externalising, another conversational move that helps avoid totalising and permanently fixing difference from the norm as problematic.

The second major assumption on which this book is based is the importance of challenging ideas circulating in the social context that exclude, oppress and disadvantage persons. According to this assumption, the normalisation process mentioned previously is informed by socially available ideas or discourses, which prescribe what kind of relationship practices, identities, persons, qualities and categories are considered normal, acceptable and preferable. Some of these ideas can become so taken for granted that their oppressive and exclusive effects are no longer noticed.

Because people take up their identities and conduct their relationships according to such ideas, it seems feasible that they also shape relationships in an indirect, not-obvious way. In order to change unhelpful relationship patterns, it is not enough to change how we relate to other individuals. We need to problematise, challenge and unpack the ideas or discourses that call harmful ways of interacting into being. Without changing the hidden assumptions that guide relationship practice, lasting change cannot be achieved.

In addition, discourses are produced and reproduced not by a single individual but by all of us. Therefore, problems are also located in discourses and not individuals. Matt was not grumpy and angry because he is a bad person, but because he was using a socially available response to hurt, which is also a more legitimate expression of being a male and being strong than crying is. Taking a relational approach means going beyond seeing everyone in Matt's class as separate entities. Instead of blaming individuals like Matt, within a relational approach we would examine discourses on which Matt and his classmates and the teachers in his school draw, identifying the ways they shape relationships. This means that we create opportunities for both teachers and students to engage with each other differently in the collaborative examination and challenging of hidden assumptions.

Chapter 5 describes how it is possible to be sensitised to recognising hidden assumptions that support conflict, particularly ideas about the purpose of schooling and the learning process.

Chapter 6 introduces a class meeting process that helps teachers and students to collaboratively examine and critique ideas about learning that place them in conflict with their own best intentions. The process also supports students' learning of key competencies.

Chapter 7 demonstrates the use of teacher support groups and teachers critiquing ideas and notions of professionalism together in support of developing their professional identity and ethics.

Finally, **Chapter 8** describes one possible way of introducing these practices into a school.

One of us teaches beginning teachers, whose common response to any relationship or other problems is a request for specific strategies and interventions. They say that they need to learn skills and have specific knowledge that will help them cater for the needs of each of their students. However, when they talk about how they might obtain the knowledge required, they do it with anxiety about whether they will be able to have access to the right kind of professional learning opportunities, resources and support from management. Some beginning teachers admit they are scared because they do not know whether they will be able to keep up.

We think this fear and anxiety is the product of a particular notion of teaching and of the teacher's role on which these student teachers draw: technical solutions are the most important part of the job. We are not saying that technical knowledge is not important. However, within such a conceptualisation of teaching, one can only be either competent and effective or incompetent. Having (or not having) a particular kind of knowledge is the only measure of a teacher's value.

We believe that in order to be able to respond to the diversity of today's classrooms and constantly changing relational dynamics it is useful to have a different conceptualisation of the teacher's role, one that calls for teachers to develop their capacity to sit with uncertainty and to respond to ethical dilemmas by using an analytical framework, as opposed to using technical knowledge. Within this view, a teacher is comfortable with the uncertainty that every relationship encounter might present and she or he accepts that it might not be possible to know at the start what the solution to a relationship problem might be and how particular relationships will play out. The knowledge that will be required to change a relationship will emerge from the process of engagement with others—with students, colleagues and parents.

This book introduces some possible processes for engaging with students and other adults differently from the usual modes of interacting in the classroom or in a school. Although we provide examples

of conversational moves and processes, this book is not intended to be used as a ‘how to’ resource. Rather, our aim is to show that other possibilities and alternatives to conflict can be opened up when teachers approach a difficult situation with some specific relationship principles in mind and by thinking about the situation using a particular theoretical framework and the notion of discourse. None of the processes introduced can be used in a script-like manner; there is more work required to adapt them to specific situations.

The ideas and practices described in this book do not require teachers to completely throw out assessment, diagnosis and all the categorical labels that are inevitable within an individualistic approach to problems. The specialist knowledge applied in response to students’ differences—whether those differences are to do with learning or behaviour difficulties, special needs or disabilities—can help students to participate more fully in a classroom community. However, within the relational approach that we recommend, we ask teachers to move away from “judging the failings of individual autonomous selves” (Davies, 2014b, p. 738) that is often involved in assessment and diagnostic practices, and that, in addition to informing interventions, can easily be used as moral judgements about students.

We ask teachers to engage in a completely different ethics that compels them to ask how things are possible. It is, as Davies (2014b) proposes, “a provocation to think differently and to become different—to move away from moral judgment and toward ethics” (p. 738) in encounters with students, colleagues and parents. It is also a move away from the binary of good/bad, becoming instead open to other possibilities that might emerge in a particular relationship if we consciously set out to avoid normalising and if we are willing to problematise (make harder) those ideas in the social context that place us in opposition to each other.

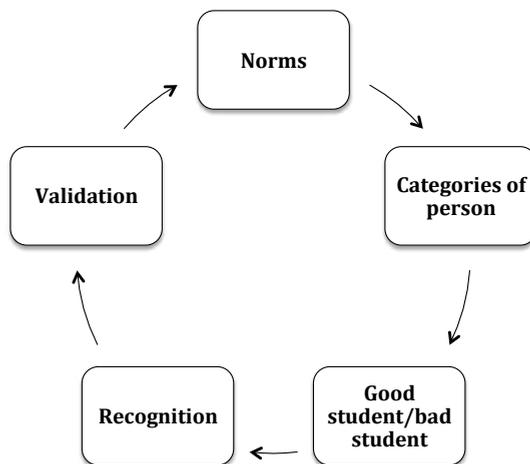
Summary of main points in Chapter 1

- Common responses to challenging behaviour include zero tolerance and punishment, behaviour modification, positive behaviour support, restorative class meetings, and counselling.
- All of these approaches usually assume that problems lie inside the

individual student, rather than in relational dynamics.

- A relational approach pays attention to the process of normalisation, through which school communities establish norms and then categories of persons as good or bad students.
- These categories divide people into normal and abnormal, or good and bad.
- Norms allow certainty, but also lead to judgements of some persons as abnormal.
- Everyone needs to be recognised as belonging to socially accepted categories.
- Students who are not included in accepted categories find it hard to establish a viable existence.
- Helping students change challenging behaviours starts from treating as important every student's need to be recognised and validated as a person.
- It is also important to challenge ideas circulating in the social context that exclude, oppress and disadvantage persons.

Figure 1: The process of normalising judgement



Exercise

Reflect on or discuss the following.

1. Can you think of situations you have encountered that resemble Matt's story?
2. In your experience, what are the limits of the usual individualistic approaches to responding to problematic student behaviour (zero tolerance, behaviour modification, positive behaviour support, certain uses of restorative class meetings, counselling)? How much do the limits you have experienced echo what this chapter is describing?
3. In relational terms, how do you explain why Matt felt hurt about being singled out?
4. Can you think of other examples in your own school in which students are commonly responded to in terms of categories?
5. At first glance, what appeals to you about thinking in more relational terms?

Endnote

- 1 Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.