

BEING EMOTIONALLY AVAILABLE: TEACHING MATHEMATICS TO CHILDREN WITH EBSD

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This paper presents the results of five years research into my practice, teaching mathematics to children with emotional, behavioural and social difficulties (EBSD). The aim is to explore the possibility of a pedagogic framework for improving the accessibility of mathematics for these children. In order to achieve a balance between caring and learning, the teacher needs to be “emotionally available” to the children while, at the same time, providing opportunities to access mathematics.

INTRODUCTION

The subject of my thesis – teaching mathematics to children with emotional and behavioural difficulties - is essentially personal, centred as it is on my practice in three schools over the period 1996-2001. Two of the schools are secondary EBD schools and the other is a mainstream secondary school, which at the time was on special measures.

My enquiry began with me as researcher-practitioner and gradually moved towards a focus on researching my own practice. The various threads of enquiry – personal, environmental, interactional and holistic – entwine to form a multiperspective on my practice. As a result, I have found interrelationships to be of greatest significance. Children with emotional and behavioural difficulties are most conscious of the interplay between emotions and the learning environment – I, as their teacher, act as a catalyst between the two in desiring to lead the children towards mathematical objectives while, at the same time, considering the emotional dimension.

METHODOLOGY AND METHOD

As the research began in an exploratory way, the methodology emerged over the period of research through experimentation with different methods. The evidence I produce is grounded in my experiences with pupils in the classroom. The central resource for this exploration is a research diary and the methodology is linked to the efficacy of diarising in the context of the development of practice. Other methods used for collecting data include transcripts of audio and videotapes of classroom

activity, interviews with pupils, observations and pupil diaries. I used case studies of particular classes and pupils as a focus for data collection.

The diary was used for description and interpretation, often of “critical incidents” (Tripp, 1993) which were reflected upon and revisited. An incident is critical for me if it has an emotional significance, judged by the demonstration of emotion during the incident and the extent to which my own emotions are aroused.

All data was searched for common themes and categorised accordingly. Such themes included flexibility, trust, empathy and risk-taking and helped to crystallize my personal theories about teaching mathematics to children with EBD.

A review of the literature in the wide areas of mathematics education and special education supported and informed the fieldwork. Certain works (Cambone, 1994; Lazarus, 1991; Weil-Kayley, 1985) had a major influence on my way of thinking at different times during the research. For instance, I applied Lazarus’ theory on emotion and cognition to my classroom, which enabled me to question the norms of my practice and reflect on everyday interactions, thereby informing and advancing my practice.

FINDINGS

What emerged from a consideration of the data was the possibility of a relevant pedagogic framework for teaching children with EBSD, by which is meant, the methods and principles that inform my practice. Since the research is intensely personal, it was never the intention was to produce a prescriptive theory, only to present a perspective that others working in the field may be able to share.

A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

The concept of “emotional availability” means to acknowledge my own emotional vulnerabilities so as not to hamper attempts to connect with the emotional needs of the child. It is pertinent to ask:

“What am I bringing to the relationship?” and

“What is the child bringing to the relationship?”

I am bringing my pedagogic framework, which acknowledges that the affective component in learning coexists with the cognitive.

“Children do not think in the absence of how they feel.”

(Daniels, 2001, p.113)

Whatever is brought to the relationship, the point of connection is made through mathematics. I believe that it is easier to connect through number than through written language. In my view, number is “emotion-free”, which does not mean that it is devoid of all emotional connotations but that it is not so laden as to hinder enablement. My way of thinking about these children is predicated on my reaction to their behaviour. Their way of thinking about mathematics is a product of my attitude towards them.

What follows is a summary of the conclusions, which form my perspective.

1. It is important to *like* the children. This needs stating because it is too easy to feel negative about them in stressful situations of conflict. A growing dislike can be displaced by empathy and understanding but this takes a great deal of effort and self-awareness in practice. Many are practised at alienating adults, therefore, it is important to show that I am not alienated by their behaviour. I view the behaviour as one emotional episode, not an ongoing behaviour trait. I need to recognise my own emotional vulnerability, for example, I feel wounded if anyone criticises my teaching ability. I cannot reduce this emotional vulnerability but I can be aware of the part it plays in interactions.
2. I reject a deficit model of underachievement, which assumes that the children’s lack of progress in mathematics is a result of something inherently lacking in them.
3. I also reject a conflict model of EBD, in particular the term “challenging children”. The assumption here is that they are challenging *me* and that, therefore, I have to change *them*, whereas it is more productive to assume that the classroom is challenging to the pupils and to predicate my actions on changing the classroom. I can more easily influence the environment, seating arrangements, materials used, organisation of the lesson, the way that I choose to teach mathematics and my own attitude. It means indirectly managing behaviour through the classroom setting. Within this setting I can manage behaviour by making it easy for pupils to succeed, by not placing obstacles in the way of success, which means minimising opportunities for misbehaviour.
4. I perceive the children as ‘attention-needing’ rather than ‘attention-seeking’ (Wright, 2001) which has such negative connotations. This means that instead of being dismissive of the behaviour I can give them the attention they need before they demand it. It could be that a fear of failure motivates their actions; therefore, I need to address that fear. I distinguish this fear from ‘mathphobia’ or children who have problems with particular numbers (eg. 2 due to the loss of one parent)

- or aspects of mathematics with emotional connotations (eg. fractions refer to splitting). I have not met any children with these problems.
5. As stated above, the way that children access mathematics is through my attitude to them. It can also be through the way I physically present mathematics but it is mainly through my attitude and expectations of them. I try to show that every contribution has value (and not reject it out of hand) and to move the pupils away from thinking that there is only one right answer.
 6. *Being there* (physically or emotionally) is an expression of affirmation, of acceptance. It is a way of finding that quality about oneself that enables one to engage fruitfully with pupils. That quality is encapsulated by the phrase “feeling into” (Einfühlung), which has been defined as the self’s feeling into the affect of another person (Strayer, 1987). For me, it is the ability to see more than the behaviour when emotional and behavioural difficulties are presented by the child but to see behaviour as an event within the classroom discourse – a discourse about mathematics. Here the behaviour cannot be separated from the mathematics – if behaviour is to be changed it is through the use of mathematics. Empathy is employed within the social practice of mathematics.

CONCLUSION

To summarise, a child with EBD is not a different type of learner, the teacher does not exist in a separate world of learning and is not the centre of knowledge in the classroom. Mathematics is a social practice, where pupils can justify their answers or explain their conjectures to each other, which involves discussion and argument. This requires a level of risk-taking on the part of the teacher who is mainly concerned with control. The perspective of the ‘challenging’ classroom and the ‘attention-needing’ child prompts the teacher to ask a different set of questions: instead of, “What rewards and sanctions can I use to modify behaviour?” the question becomes, “How can *I* change or change the classroom in order to reduce the challenge?”

I believe that my thesis represents an alternative perception of pupils’ behaviour and the role of the teacher in teaching mathematics to pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties.

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