
Children’s “Mis”behaviours: An Ethical Engagement with the Mystery of the Other

MELANIE D. JANZEN
University of Manitoba

“He was the most non-complaint, violent and challenging child I ever encountered in my three decade career.” (Lena, early years teacher, 32 years of experience)

The child was sometimes described by teachers in our study in dramatic terms; sometimes considered “a nightmare,” “uncontrollable,” “totally disruptive,” or “absolutely wild.” Other times, teachers told of the ways that their colleagues discounted children because they were “bad” or “going to end up in jail anyway.” Additionally, the teachers described the frustrating processes of their students being referred to experts who would formally or informally diagnose children or provide recommendations, often suggesting of a variety of “interventions.”

Children who do not comply with the school’s expectations of conformity and control are often positioned as deviant and defective, exceed the frames of recognizability as “students,” and although already precarious, become even more vulnerable (Butler, 2010). Yet, the teachers we interviewed also acknowledged the greater contexts of these children’s lives, recognizing that many of these children were affected by poverty, being in foster care, or living in “hopeless situations.” In these teachers’ emotional stories premised on relationality, the teachers conveyed the ways in which, due to their felt obligations to children, they sought to foster particular types of relationships with these precarious children. Seeking to understand and engage with children beyond hierarchical relationships premised on control, they instead sought relational ways of being with children who demonstrate difficult behaviours, premised on an openness to difference and a resistance to pathologizing children through labels and dehumanizing recommendations.

This paper draws on data from interviews with teachers from a multi-year study that sought to articulate the emotional toll of obligation and teachers’ disengagement from the profession (see Janzen & Phelan, 2015, 2018). The research team conducted 24 in-depth, phenomenological interviews with teachers from two Canadian provinces who had left or who had considered leaving the profession. “Leaving” was defined as: moving from a current school, district, or teaching position; medical, stress, or personal leave; quitting or resigning from the profession; or taking early retirement. Participants were invited to respond to a list of prompts (similar to the methods

used in Pitt & Britzman, 2006; Pitt & Phelan, 2008) that included, for example, times when they felt frustrated by the expectations of others, had disappointed others, or had felt insufficiently prepared to support children. The interviews sought to solicit participants' reflections on personal, social, and historical narratives related to their decisions to leave or stay in the profession. We aimed to elicit teachers' experiences and understandings of obligation and to trace the various events that created their sense of moral disengagement.

In the analysis for this paper, I was particularly provoked by a few snippets of data that signalled larger political, ethical, and theoretical issues. I read these data hermeneutically and drew them into a "dialogic encounter" (Schwandt, 2003, p. 292) with theory and philosophy. Importantly, working hermeneutically allowed for a focus on the particulars, attending to the subjectivities of the participants in order to inform understandings of teachers' experiences.

Here, obligation is conceptualized as that "feeling that comes over us when others need our help, when they call out for help, or support, or freedom, or whatever they need" (Caputo, 1993, p. 5). Importantly, obligation gives teaching its moral integrity in that it requires that teachers respond to the Other, but notably, it also takes an emotional toll on teachers, in that one can never respond fully to one's obligations. Obligations are always ripe with uncertainty and knowability. Yet, although the teacher is always burdened by obligation, obligation is also "the pedagogical site from where the teacher derives a sense of ethical integrity" (Janzen, in press). Here, I will take a curricular research "line of flight" (Deleuze, 1995), inspired by participants' perspectives and enlivened by theoretical engagements, into that space of ethical integrity, in order to conceptualize possibilities for ethical relations between the teacher and the child. Enlisting hermeneutic analysis, I put empirical data into conversation with theory and philosophy in order to provoke reconceptualized understandings of teachers' engagements with children and their "mis"behaviours. I use this term, "mis"behaviour, to signal the socially constructed and subjective nature of the term, while also problematizing its use (Janzen & Schwartz, 2018).

I will begin by arguing that schools remain reliant on technologies of control and the effects this has on the ways in which "mis"behaviour becomes situated within and as the fault of the child (Millei, 2014). Thus, because the child fails to conform to school norms and because the school (in many cases) does not understand and know how to respond to difficult behaviours, the "mis"behaviours become pathologized and conceptualized as a "disability." Pathologizing the child results in medicalized—and thus, legitimized—approaches to responding to "mis"behaviours, whereby the goal is to "treat" the problem, which is framed as residing within the child. Importantly, I will argue that this "framing" of children as deviant positions these children as precarious (Butler, 2010), further marginalizing those already marginalized and subsequently devaluing their humanity. In the final section, I will then enliven this theorizing with a data segment from one of our research participants, in order to illustrate teachers' insights into ethical relationships with children and possibilities for reconceptualizing "mis"behaviour.

"Mis"behaviour as Disability

Education systems are premised on notions of knowledge as rational and objective (Säfström, 2003), which has both epistemological as well as ontological effects. Epistemologically, the curriculum becomes a tool of transmission, rather than a function of how schools understand, create, and make sense of the world (Smits & Naqvi, 2012). These epistemological presuppositions constitute knowledge as fixed and apolitical, constituting

curriculum as a stable and transferable product. Whereas, ontologically, the subjectivities of teachers are reified as masters—masters of knowledge and over students. The ontological effects of such rational knowledge maintain imbalanced hierarchies, positioning teachers as knowers—or masters—over knowledge and over children, and subsequently constructing children as knowable objects. The ontological effect on children is that they become the “ultimate ‘Other’” (Cannella, 2000, p. 36). Thus, children are constructed as always inferior, as:

those who must have their decisions made for them because they are not yet mature—those who must gain knowledge that has been legitimized by those who are older and wiser—those whose ways of being in the world can be uncovered through the experimental and observational methods of science—those who can be labeled as gifted, slow, intelligent, or special. (Cannella, 2000, p. 36)

When children are objects of the education system and products within the industrial model on which modern day schooling is based, children are required to be compliant, controlled, and controllable. The dominance over the child is the mode of maintaining order in the school (Davies, 2008; Gore & Parkes, 2008). The “good” student, therefore, is one who obeys, completes tasks, masters knowledge presented, and performs “student” in a particular way. These performances of the “good” student become the normalized behaviours of being a student.

When education's foundations are built on the certainty of rational knowledge, the perceived lack of such knowing has serious consequences for those within the system. Specifically, when particular knowledge is valued and centred, other ways of knowing and being are devalued and marginalized. It is here, within this particular staging of “knowledge,” that special education emerged and grew with potency particularly in the twentieth century. As education cultivated notions of particular forms of “intelligence” as naturalized, concomitantly, the “lack” of “intelligence” was considered as a deficiency of the individual, facilitating the flourishing of special education and the enlisting of psychologizing as the means by which the students with deficiencies could be identified, measured, and fixed (Thomas & Loxley, 2007).

Importantly, the reach of educational psychology extended to include behavioural psychology as a means to address children's identified learning and behavioural deficits. The hyper-rational assumptions of knowledge ultimately distort the educational project, leading to oversimplified responses to those who are deemed lacking. In other words, when knowledge and ways of being are considered within strict boundaries of normalcy, the ease and ability to identify *abnormalcy* becomes routine—and even desirable by the system. So, even for children who have extreme impairments that cause or manifest in “mis”behaviour, the problem is not positioned as our limited knowledge or misunderstandings about the perceived impairment and how this becomes expressed by the child, but rather, the problem is that we do not know how or do not have the resources to respond. Pathologizing the child's “mis”behaviour redirects our focus from acknowledging our limited understandings of the impairment, the inadequate resources to respond to and support the child, and our own frustrations about the child's lack of compliance. This allows us to direct our focus away from our (and the system's) shortcomings towards the child, locating our lack of understanding and support for these particular differences on and within the child who, thus, becomes defined as deficit, deviant, and/or disturbed.

Thus, the student who demonstrates compliance and controllability is positioned as normal, while student non-compliance and uncontrollability becomes positioned as *abnormal*. Non-compliant and uncontrollable behaviour is often considered by the schools as “misbehaviour.”

Although student "mis"behaviour may in fact be due to factors such as difficult family situations, trauma, frustration, social or contextual factors, or as protest against schooling itself, student "mis"behaviour, reflective of the discourses of special education, is positioned as a problem that resides within the student—something to be found, identified, labeled, and fixed. Even if the child has an extreme impairment, the problem is positioned as the deficit of the child and not of the system's lack of ability to understand, respond to, and support the child. What I would like to argue or explore here is that, while the school system positions student compliance and controllability as *normal*, it consequently constructs student "mis"behaviour as *abnormal*, constructing behavioural difference as deficiency, deviancy, or being disturbed. The basis of the schools system's approach to identifying "abnormality" is grounded in the "special education" discourses, which are premised on developmental psychology's tyrannical reign over and colonization of education (Pinar, 2004). The discourses of psychology have been a powerful influence in constituting student identities, particularly those deemed "behaviourally disturbed" (Laws & Davies, 2000, p. 207). It is within this context that we can see the ways in which student "mis"behaviours have been pathologized, creating the sense that schools are responding to the child's "needs" and reinforcing the school's expertise and benevolence, while detracting from the problems of curriculum, pedagogy, or of schooling itself (Thomas & Loxely, 2007).

Importantly, this shift of "mis"behaviour to the realm of the duties for which special education is responsible is, in part, an aspect of the ways in which those who "mis"behave are subsumed under the umbrella of "disabled." As Bernadette Baker (2002) so clearly articulates, marking the body or mind as "disabled" is an attempt to be seen as fixing what is defective, while maintaining a particular order of things. Moreover, Baker, who draws on Fiona Campbell, argues that the application of the label of "disabled" is an insidious project of exclusion, "a deep-seated despise of unevenness, asymmetry, or imbalance that places bodies-minds labeled as disabled at the edge of the abyss, pushing limits of human subjectivity, and creating an outlaw ontology" (p. 674). In other words, those identified as disabled are outside the norm and, ultimately, less human. This medicalization of difference, constructing difference as a "disability," is reflective of the positivistic and hegemonic implications of the epistemological underpinnings of schooling and reifies the social constructions of disability (Gallagher, 2006; Linton, 1998) resulting in schools' simplistic and binaried conceptions of children as normal-abnormal, able-disabled, and behaved-misbehaved. These simplistic dualisms reduce our responsibility to better understand and accept differences presented by children.

The medicalization of difference within schools has meant an increased "hunt for disability" with a "proliferation of categories of educational disability used to mark students as outside norms of child development or as at-risk of school failure" (Baker, 2002, p. 676). Baker provides a list of the labels to illustrate the increased phenomenon of behaviourally deviant children, which includes ADD, ADHD, ED, BD, and SBD (to which I would add EBD) and argues that this "proliferation of Ds" (p. 677), does not just reflect a new language for understanding development, but rather reflects "a shift from the moralization of disability to the medicalization of disability during the 20th century" (p. 678). The medicalizing of difference legitimizes the claim of difference as a disability, thereby, sanctioning labeling and interventions of the school and reinforcing a "natural" order of things, "a 'quality control' of national populations" (Baker, 2002, p. 664). Ontologically, the homogeneity of children is what is sought, wherein children's differences become hunted by schools, reinforcing the categorizing and labelling of children, devaluing them as objects to be fixed—or if too broken, then discarded. Again, this move puts the

onus on the child as the problem, abdicating responsibility of schools and society for their own complicity.

As an example, let us consider the label of Emotional Behavioural Difficulties (EBD), which has emerged as a diagnostic category that is, "specific to children, which combines legal, medical and education connotations and meaning" (Thomas & Loxley, 2007, p. 48). It has become a legitimized label for children with "wide-spread and unquestioned acceptance" (p. 49). The pseudo-medical term positions the child's "mis"behaviours as problems of and within the child and as manifestations of the child's innate deviance and deficiency, thus, requiring intervention and treatment of the child (Thomas & Loxley, 2007). The labeling of children as EBD, according to Thomas and Loxley, invokes the legitimized fields of psychology and medicine in the service of education's need for order and control. As per the epistemological order of "special education," once a child has been identified as deficient, the child's "need" can, therefore, be addressed, and interventions (in the form of "helping") can be applied. Importantly, this subversively transmutes the school's fear of uncontrollability onto the child's constructed deficiencies (Thomas & Loxley, 2007).

Importantly, the effects of "diagnosing" children as "emotionally disturbed" has serious long-term effects on the children's ability to be seen as "viable" in their ability to succeed in school. As a case in point, Gresham, Hunter, Corwin and Fisher (2013), who work from a medical perspective regarding "emotionally disturbed" children, argue that, "outcomes for children with such [emotional] difficulties are the worst of any disability class" (p. 19) and manifest in high rates of dropping out, being suspended, and being placed in out-of-school placements—alongside experiencing poor grades, employment rates, and personal relationships. The premise from which the medical perspective operates is that students classified with emotional difficulties are positioned as the problem themselves, medically deficient, requiring both diagnosis and remedy. This medicalized conception of misbehaviour as a "disability" heavily informs the views of children in school, legitimizing the construction of children as deficient and requiring remediation. Yet, these identified deficiencies are addressed through remediation that often further marginalize and inhibit children (Buffington-Adams, 2014). Therefore, imposing these diagnoses and subsequent remedial measures can end up doing more harm than good. The child, framed as precarious, becomes devalued (Butler, 2010). As Buffington-Adams (2014) writes, "subjected, limited, and mechanically trained, humanity slips away" (n.p.).

The labels imposed upon children act as discursive frames that illustrate the operations of social and political power, differentiating between those lives that count and those that do not (Butler, 2010). As Butler states, "thus, there are 'subjects' who are not quite recognizable as subjects, and there are 'lives' that are not quite—or, indeed, are never—recognized as lives" (p. 4). The school's preoccupation with the compliance and conformity of children means that children who do not comply with behavioural norms of schooling become diagnosed as deficient, a political move sanctioned and legitimized through medicalized discourses. This labelling reinforces the regulation of the subject through pre-established norms, ultimately dehumanizing the child and magnifying the child's precarious existence in school (Janzen, in press).

"Mis"behaviour as Difference: A Reconceptualization

Shifting the focus from student compliance and control to an ethical engagement with the other requires a reconceptualization of misbehaviour and centering of difference. Here, I draw on

the work of Sharon Todd (2003) to consider the “violently lived realities” (p. 1) of children who are often living in contexts of injustices that include various forms of inequity, poverty, abuse, trauma, and so on. Todd argues that difference and “Other” are “seen to be the consequence of social, economic, or political disaffiliation, and thus to be ‘Other’ signals that which is undesirable by virtue of its formation within oppressive circumstances” (p. 2). Through this lens, Todd draws heavily on Levinas and argues that we can respond in an ethical manner to a wide range of lived experiences, specifically by attending to the Other in a manner that preserves one’s alterity. Thus, rather than seeking to categorize, label, and diagnose, an ethical relationship requires, “giving up on the idea that learning about others is an appropriate ethical response to difference” (p. 16). When one presumes to know the Other, according to Todd, one exercises power over the Other, enveloping the Other into the self. Therefore, to seek to know the Other is an act that attempts to reduce the Other to the self (Todd, 2003).

Todd’s (2003) distinction between *knowing about* the Other and *learning from* the Other is useful in considering the importance of difference. Todd conceptualizes *knowing about* the Other as informed by rational perspectives of knowledge and of the subject, assuming the Other can be known and that, in knowing, differences can be mitigated—and minimized. In attempting to know the Other, the relationship between the teacher and the child is, thus, reified within the power hierarchy of master and object; the teacher remains the knower, and the child is objectified and measured against norms. Rather, *learning from* the Other is an ethical encounter in which the “self and the Other exist as radically distinct beings” (p. 29). It is this distinction between the self and Other, “the break between self and Other” (p. 29), where the conditions for ethical relationships exist. In this reconceptualization of the teacher-child relationship, the focus is on maintaining the alterity—the difference—of the Other, not subsuming the Other into the self or into distinct categories of knowability. Here, difference is not seen as deficiency or disability, but rather is integral to maintaining the alterity of the Other and creating the space where ethical relationships become possible.

Honouring Alterity: Maintaining the Mystery

“We can’t blame the child. I can think of a student who was barely passing for years. I got her in grade 9 and she was labelled a ‘struggling’ learner.... I was fortunate to have the time to just sit with her—to talk. It was a chance to work with a kid that was a mystery to me.” (George, middle years resource teacher, 10 years experience)

Here, we see George honouring the difference of the Other, engrossed by the mystery of the child, without an aim to identify, categorize, or fix. George’s stance is emblematic of the Levinasian argument that Todd (2003) is making, specifically that, “the relationship with the Other is a relationship with a Mystery” (Levinas, as quoted in Todd, 2003, p. 51). Mystery, here, is understood not as a puzzle to be solved, but as an engagement with, and maintenance of a stance of intrigue and curiosity about, the Other. As Todd goes on to explain, this mystery maintains the difference of the Other, the “radical alterity” that seeks to keep the space between the self and the Other. It is not where the self seeks to know about the Other, but rather experiences the alterity of the Other through its own revealing; “where the self is receptive to the revelation of difference and is thereby moved to a level of responsibility” (p. 51). An important aspect of maintaining this mystery for the Other is not an effort to seek to know or to create a connection in the space of

difference between the self and the Other—to bridge the gap—but rather to maintain the space between the self and Other by honouring the Other's alterity.

The second characteristic that Todd (2003) identifies in this relationship with the Other is the necessity for the self to remove its ego. This means that, in an ethical relationship with the Other, it is not premised on the interests, intentions, or needs of the self. It is an attention to the Other "in such a way as to limit one's own self-concern" (p. 52). This is an "egoless passivity" (p. 53) that orients the self to the Other, creating the conditions for "being for the Other" (p. 53), opening one up to a state of exposure, of feeling for the Other, "in the sense of giving oneself across difference through one's pain and enjoyment" (p. 53), creating an exposure or vulnerability of the self "susceptible to the Other's needs" (p. 53). Thus, the ethical relationship with the Other is premised on a stance of mystery for the Other and of an egolessness within the encounter.

As we see with George, an engagement with the mystery of the Other requires an investment in listening. George wants to "sit with her" and to "talk." Within his words, we can hear his allusions to a patience, openness, and listening. We hear his sense of responsibility to the student. Where Levinas and Todd use the idea of mystery to illustrate an aspect of the ethical relationship that refuses to seek certainty but rather is premised on maintaining difference, I see this is a fruitful conceptualization for the ways schools might reconsider their relationships with children, particularly those who "mis"behave. What might be productive is engaging in a genuine curiosity about children and their behaviours—not to seek to attempt to know them and "fix" them, but rather to learn from them. This is the type of relation that aims to be vulnerable—open to the possibility of being altered by children.

This is where the ethical encounter becomes salient; the stance of a mystery is not about seeking to know why a child behaves the way she does, but rather to be in relation with a child, to listen "as an ethical response to suffering" (p. 118). It is an attentiveness to the Other enlivened through listening, requiring a suspension of judgement, and a sense of trust that always positions the listener as implicated (Todd, 2003). This type of listening that inquires into the mystery of the Other aims to create "new forms of relationality" (Todd, 2003, p. 125). This engagement with children as a stance of attentiveness to their mysteries—particularly those who are seen as "mis"behaving—is an attempt to reconceptualize our understandings of children and their behaviours, to alter how teachers engage with these children, and to honour the differences of those children who do not comply. This type of ethical relation has no guaranteed outcomes or certainty of effects, but it is a way in which children might have the opportunity to be seen, acknowledged, and valued for the differences that they bring.

References

- Baker, B. (2002). The hunt for disability: The new eugenics and the normalization of school children. *Teachers College Record*, 104, 663-703.
- Buffington-Adams, J. (2014). Conceptualizing the "dis" of our abilities: A heuristic phenomenology. *Review of Disability Studies*, 8(2).
- Butler, J. (2010). *Frames of war: When is life grievable?* London, UK: Verso Books.
- Cannella, G. S. (2000). The scientific discourse of education: Predetermining the lives of others—Foucault, education and children. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 1(1), 36-34.
- Caputo, J. D. (1993). *Against ethics: Contributions to a poetics of obligation with constant reference to deconstruction*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University.

- Davies, B. (2008). Re-thinking "behavior" in terms of positioning and the ethics of responsibility. In A. M. Phelan & J. Sumsion (Eds.), *Critical readings in teacher education: Provoking absences* (pp. 173-186). Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense.
- Deleuze, G. (1995). *Negotiations 1972-1990*. New York, NY: Columbia University.
- Gallagher, D. (2006). The natural hierarchy undone: Disability studies' contributions to contemporary debates in education. In S. Danforth & S. Gabel (Eds.), *Vital questions facing disability studies in education* (pp. 63-76). New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Gore, J., & Parkes, R. (2008). On the mistreatment of management. In A. M. Phelan & J. Sumsion (Eds.), *Critical readings in teacher education: Provoking absences* (pp. 45-60). Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense.
- Gresham, F. M., Hunter, K. K., Corwin, E. P., & Fischer, A. J. (2013). Screening, assessment, treatment, and outcome evaluation of behavioral difficulties in an RTI model. *Exceptionality, 21*(1), 19-33.
- Janzen, M. D. (In press). Un-knowing the child: Towards ethical relations with the precarious Other. In A. M. Phelan & W. Pinar (Eds.), *Reconceptualizing Teacher Education Worldwide: A Canadian Contribution to a Global Challenge*. Ottawa, ON: University of Ottawa.
- Janzen, M. D., & Phelan, A. M. (2015). The emotional toll of obligation and teachers' disengagement from the profession. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research, 61*(3), 347-350.
- Janzen, M. D., & Phelan, A. M. (2018). 'Tugging at our sleeves': Understanding experiences of obligation in teaching. *Teaching Education, 30*(1), 16-30. doi:10.1080/10476210.2017.1420157
- Janzen, M. D., & Schwartz, K. (2018). Behaving badly: Critiquing the discourses of "children" and their "mis"behaviours. *McGill Journal of Education, (53)*1, 109-127.
- Laws, C., & Davies, B. (2000). Poststructuralist theory in practice: Working with "behaviourally disturbed" children. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 13*(3), 205-221.
- Linton, S. (1998). *Claiming disability: Knowledge and identity*. New York, NY: New York University.
- Millei, Z., & Petersen, E. B. (2014). Complicating 'student behaviour': Exploring the discursive constitution of 'learner subjectivities.' *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties, 20*(1), 20-34. doi:10.1080/13632752.2014.947097
- Pinar, W. F. (2004). *What is curriculum theory?* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Pitt, A., & Britzman, D. (2003). Speculations on qualities of difficult knowledge in teaching and learning: An experiment in psychoanalytic research. *Qualitative Studies in Education, 16*(6), 755-776.
- Pitt, A., & Phelan, A. (2008). Paradoxes of autonomy in professional life: A research problem. *Changing English, 15*(2), 189-197.
- Säfström, C. A. (2003). Teaching otherwise. *Studies in Philosophy and Education, 22*(1), 19-29.
- Schwandt, T. (2003). Three epistemological stances for qualitative inquiry: Interpretivism, hermeneutics, and social constructivism. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The landscape of qualitative research: Theories and issues* (2nd ed.) (pp. 292-331). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

- Smits, H., & Naqvi, R. (2012). Challenging the frames of curriculum. In R. Naqvi & H. Smits (Eds.), *Thinking about and enacting curriculum in "frames of war"* (pp. 9-20). Lanham, MD: Luxington Books.
- Thomas, G., & Loxley, A. (2007). *Deconstructing special education and constructing inclusion* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: McGraw Hill.
- Todd, S. (2003). *Learning from the other: Levinas, psychoanalysis, and ethical possibilities in education*. New York, NY: SUNY.

Acknowledgement: This research was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada [grant number 430-2015-00814].

