

Exploring ‘behaviour as communication’ as a hinge commitment within Whole-School Nurture and Restorative Practice

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Abstract

This thought piece explores the similarities between a Whole-School Approach to Nurture and Restorative Practice, their wider links to relational practice and their underlying hinge commitments to the belief that all behaviour is communication. This position, situated within the concept of care and relationships, has the potential to reinforce a polarised educational discourse, whereby deep disagreement with behaviourist approaches is an ongoing and inevitable outcome. However this is not the intention of this article and, despite deep disagreement, common ground in existing diverse networks is proposed as a tool to facilitate rational persuasion, giving hope to the powerful opportunity of scaled-up aligned practices, all of which have the potential for positive change within education.

Behaviour as communication

The phrase “all behaviour is communication” is considered by many as central to the ideas of nurture and is the concept considered by this thought piece within the context of schooling education. While seemingly uncomplicated, this phrase is often misunderstood and is linked to several differing theories. For many it is based on the axioms described by Watzlawick et al. (1967) and their main premise, that it is impossible not to communicate – i.e. even by sitting silently or not responding, we are communicating meaning within context. However their argument is multifaceted and suggests that behaviour can be open to interpretation, is often interrelated, and is influenced by the reactions of others, prior relationships and hierarchical structures. These ideas have been revised to offer further clarity and in response to critiques (Bavelas, 1992);

however the overriding principle is that we ‘cannot not communicate’, and that patterns of human interactions convey meaning. By seeking to understand these complexities in human behaviour we are more likely to understand the direct and indirect influences, and underlying causes of behaviour.

Implicit to the way in which this idea is conceptualised within education is the notion that not only is behaviour communicating meaning, but negative or unwanted behaviour is communicating unmet needs (Rosenberg, 1983). Therefore being attuned to the idea that behaviour may be signposting unmet needs can help us learn more about young people and help them “understand their feelings, express their needs appropriately and use non-threatening and supportive language to resolve situations” (nurtureuk, 2023).

This article explores the above through the alignment of Nurture and Restorative Practice positioning behaviour as communication as a common underlying belief; one that is also prevalent in other relationship-centred disciplines. This idea is conceptualised as a common hinge commitment (Wittgenstein, 1975) – the notion that one unwavering belief can provide the rational basis which drives practice. The word ‘hinge’ refers to the hinge of a door that could only be opened when attached to fixed ironmongery. The hinge represents the underlying belief, which in turn enables the opening of the door, or the possibility of a philosophy in action. Grouping Nurture and Restorative Practice has exciting implications both for innovative collaboration and collective growth. Moreover, operating in this way may even have the strength to establish a movement with the potential to challenge what can feel like a dominant, punitive educational discourse.

Alignment of practices

The concept of nurture within education is situated within our understanding of early childhood experiences (Bowlby, 1982) and the work of Marjorie Boxall and Marion Bennathan. Their work posits that negative interactions within school-age education can result from a young person’s inability to build trusting, secure relationships resulting from impoverished early nurture and common conditions of hardship (Bennathan & Boxall, 2000). These early nurturing conditions set out the blueprint for our understanding of relationships, how they are formed and maintained, and how they go on to influence our behaviour (Bombèr, 2007; Bowlby, 1982). The nurturing approach to education, therefore, responds to the needs of these young people by providing whole-school approaches, specific nurturing interventions, nurture groups and even highly specialist targeted support.

While not to over-simplify the concepts within nurture, it could be considered that relationships and how we relate to one another are central to this philosophy. Likewise, Restorative Practice has relationships at its core, with its primary aim to address violations of interpersonal relationships (Zehr & Mika, 1997), and its focus on “building and repairing relationships rather than managing and controlling behaviour” (Hopkins, 2004, p. 29). Other scholars make the link between Nurture and Restorative Practice (Colley & Seymour,

2021), foreground positive language and communication commonalities (Hibbin, 2019) and highlight nurture’s commitment to “the creation and maintenance of ongoing relationships... and restorative forms of behaviour management” (Warin & Hibbin, p. 36).

Within education, Restorative Practice is often considered as a conflict resolution tool. However, much like Whole-School Approaches to Nurture, Restorative Practice can be considered as a philosophy in action (Corrigan, 2012), whereby we are creating safe and peaceful schools (Cavanagh, 2007) within the context of positive peace in education (Cremin & Bevington, 2017). It is not to say that Nurture and Restorative Practice are interchangeable, but these two educational philosophies do share several unique and defining characteristics, specifically pertaining to the centrality of relationships; that understanding an individual’s perspective and lived experience is a prerequisite to behavioural change; and that all behaviour is considered as communication. However not everything within Nurture and Restorative Practice obviously aligns and there are nuanced complexities that need to be considered when working with young people who have an insecure attachment style. This most directly links to shame and the way in which young people “who have attachment difficulties experience a high level of shame already... and therefore we have a responsibility as educational staff to ensure that we do not feed into this further shame” (Bombèr, 2007, p. 249–250). Instead, we must carefully navigate the restorative process, allowing control and safety, while providing the opportunity for reparation “regardless of how shocking the behaviour has been” (Bombèr, 2007, p. 250). These ideas are explored further elsewhere (de Thierry, 2017; Perry, 2006); however awareness of nuance, acute contextual understanding, and active and skilled engagement with trauma, are all essential to successful Restorative Practice.

A deep analysis of shame sits outside the scope of this article, and I am not suggesting that Nurture and Restorative Practice are identical. However what is being suggested is that the concept of behaviour as communication (considered within the frame of relationships and positive and negative interactions) is a fundamental accepted belief within Nurture education and Restorative Practice. Positioning it in this way it becomes the

rationale for other concepts, strategies, frameworks and practice within these disciplines. I suggest, therefore, that behaviour as communication becomes a hinge commitment, an idea which originates from hinge epistemology (Wittgenstein, 1975), whereby a central unquestionable understanding becomes the rationale for all other things. This is often considered as the rules of the game, or here as the presupposition that Nurture and Restorative Practice are built upon.

Hinge commitments

Hinge commitments are unwavering beliefs that are often impossible to test and make up how we see the world and therefore how we construct meaning. They are part of hinge epistemology, a theory in response to radical scepticism, where doubt exists within all areas of knowledge construction. Hinge commitments, however, “do not respond to evidence in the usual way: they are too close to the foundations of our beliefs. But, precisely because they are so close to the foundations of our beliefs, they are absolutely necessary to our epistemic practices” (Ashton & Cruft, 2021, p. 599). These commitments are often difficult to prove, but are foundational to what we believe and how we understand the world.

When considering behaviour as communication as a hinge commitment, it can be seen as the rational basis for all things that follow. Therefore those with opposing hinge commitments are likely to experience significant difficulties engaging with the theories, frameworks and practice within Nurture and Restorative Practice. Before exploring this further, I want to suggest that the shared hinge commitment of behaviour as communication is also situated within other theories, such as attachment theory itself and emotion coaching. Although not articulated as a shared hinge commitment, there is existing guidance that suggests grouping aligned practices is helpful in meeting learning needs (The Attachment Research Community, 2024). Articulated as a relational approach to education, here the word ‘relational’ is used as an umbrella term for adverse childhood experiences, attachment-aware practice, emotion coaching, nurture, resilience, Restorative Practice and trauma-informed practice. Grouping these practices as relational approaches encourages us to consider their underlying philosophies and beliefs. While not all these practices explicitly define behaviour as

communication, it seems reasonable to attribute this as a presupposition for their frameworks and practices.

Hinge commitments are “everyday claims of which we are optimally certain” (Pritchard, 2021a, p. 1), and therefore critics may suggest that this interpretation of behaviour as communication is an over-stretch, does not meet the threshold as a hinge commitment, and is not tacit enough in the discourse to be a true hinge. Regardless of the terminology, what I am describing is an underlying belief that knowledge is built on; one that is unquestioned by practitioners in the fields of Nurture and Restorative Practice and a statement that is foundational to the manifestation of their work.

Alternative hinges

While the above relational approaches have a shared commitment to behaviour as communication, other educational approaches base their ideas on different beliefs. This causes them to manifest in different ways and could therefore render them intrinsically incompatible with practices that have behaviour as communication as a hinge commitment. The obvious examples of this are zero-tolerance behaviourist strategies and fixed rule-based policies. These ideas also consider our interactions and relationships; however here this is manifested through conscious and unconscious conditioning, learnt responses and consequences and rewards. One could therefore suggest that within a behaviourist approach behaviour is driven by “what we want to gain and what we want to avoid” (Brummer & Thorsborne, 2024, p. 31).

Behaviourist ideas have been widely criticised (Casella, 2003; Hopkins, 2004; Kohn, 1999; Reid, 2017). However it is also recognised that there is a counter critique of therapeutic educational practices (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009); studies that offer nuanced critique of the perceived systemic issues within nurture programmes (Bailey, 2007); and a body of evidence in favour of more punitive approaches. That said, engaging with critique to establish superiority is not the purpose of this article. What is relevant is that the wide-ranging critique of behaviourist approaches all stem from a similar belief system or hinge commitment. One that is intrinsically opposed to a behaviourist approach, with a similar logic applied to hinge

commitments that drive the critique of Nurture and Restorative Practice. This notion of “significant difference in hinge commitments” is supported by Pritchard (2021a, p. 11); not to the extent of epistemic incommensurability, but similar to his example of differing religious conviction, or “someone raised in a deeply politically conservative social milieu, as opposed to someone brought up in a commune exclusively populated by people of a left-wing political persuasion”. These conditions, he suggests, lead to “individuals with very different hinge commitments” (Pritchard, 2021b, p. 1119).

Deep disagreement

The above two differing hinge commitments seem to represent deep disagreements, perhaps causing us to think that trying to rationally resolve this argument between them is futile. Indeed, due to the polarity of beliefs, discussions could easily lead to talking across one another, seemingly due to no common ground. However Pritchard (2021b) reminds us how hinge commitments are context-driven and always have some kind of commonality (described as an *über hinge*), regardless of how disparate they may seem.

“The crux of the matter is that while it would be fruitless in the face of deep disagreement of this kind to try to change someone’s hinge commitments head-on, there will always be a rational way of engaging with the other party by looking to common ground (common beliefs, common hinges), and using that common ground to try to change their wider set of beliefs. If this is achieved, then over time one can change the other person’s hinge commitments.” (Pritchard, 2021b, p. 1123)

An openness to the above seems to facilitate a more positive outlook on conflicting educational theory, speaking to the ideas of rational persuasion, ideas that are explored in more detail by others such as Ranalli (2020), alongside the notion of direct and indirect deep disagreement, whereby the former speaks to disagreement over issues which are directly influenced by the hinge commitment. Moreover, “philosophers don’t [even] agree on what it is to be a hinge commitment”, let alone if these fixed positions can be rationally resolved (Ranalli, 2020, p. 4980). My preference is to agree with Pritchard’s notion and to look for common ground, to attempt to understand differing perspectives

and to try to work together to find a way forward. However it would be naive not to recognise the irony in taking this stance, as by doing so I am using restorative concepts and inadvertently reinforcing my own hinge commitment.

Regardless of the above, deep disagreement reminds us that being wedded to a hinge commitment can cause dogmatic behaviours, context blindness and encourage practitioners to use theory as slogans rather than in an engaged way. Behaviour as communication may be a belief that Nurture and Restorative Practice agree on. However, using this phrase as a response to a challenging or harmful situation is not enough – what needs to happen is that this phrase needs to be put into action and operationalised into the way in which the work is done. Likewise, the restorative phrase ‘working with’ becomes obsolete if used while implementing change in a ‘done to’ way.

It is, of course worth noting that the idea of behaviour as communication does not mean that every behaviour links back to childhood trauma, but simply that “behaviour has no opposite. In other words, there is no such thing as non-behaviour, or to put it more simply: one cannot not behave” (Watzlawick et al., 1967, p. 48). This tells us that ‘behaving’ has become a socially constructed notion relating to accepted norms; one that produces a value judgment on the individual, rather than being understood as all interactions within our environment. Understanding these interactions and identifying where needs are not being met has great potential. Likewise, this article understands that all behaviour is communicating meaning regardless of if this is an acute pain, a joyful interaction or a mundane everyday response to routine. It seems helpful, therefore, to think more deeply about the notion of behaviour as communication and navigate away from dogmatic behaviours within our work. While accepting that there will always be nuance and differences in how these practices are understood, we can now begin to consider how a shared common hinge carries great strength and potential when explored in a scaled-up way.

Scaling up

The work of Levine (2023), also considers formalist compositional elements such as hinges. Referencing Bruno Latour, she describes the

opportunities that hinges afford, their potential to open spaces, move freely, to connect and link different ideas and practices. This, she posits, is powerful due to the ability to scale up “political actions to sizes large enough and durations long enough to change dominant structures and systems” (Levine, 2023, p. 134). An idea which, I suggest, could be extrapolated into education where Nurture and Restorative Practice, alongside other relational practices, could affect greater change due to their hinge commitment commonality. In her work on climate change, Levine describes how “separate campaigns and actions can have major structural impacts if they can be linked and coordinated, amplifying and extending each other to shared ends” (Levine, 2023, p. 134). She goes on to describe how social movements are often more successful when tapping into existing similar networks; these networks becoming the secondary link (or hinge) that allows the movement to grow. It seems obvious that this is likely to draw in like-minded people, but what existing networks also afford is allowing people with differing hinge commitments to come into contact to discuss their ideas, and in some cases to radically transform their beliefs (Levine, 2023). This reinforces the idea of “common ground” (Pritchard, 2021b, p. 1123) as a place for hinge commitments to change over time in rational ways.

In practical terms, therefore, the idea of connecting Nurture and Restorative Practice is likely to encourage one to amplify the other. Moreover, by sharing their ideas across existing educational networks, while targeting newcomers and keeping the entry to engagement “simple and without sacrifice” (Levine, 2023, p. 1123) we are likely to see a snowballing effect, engage with a greater number of people and potentially radically change people’s beliefs. We should not limit this alignment to educational networks solely situated in the behaviour box. Engaging with networks situated within teaching and learning is likely to have a greater reach and potentially offer even wider common ground. Critical pedagogy (Freire, 1996), for example, does not mention behaviour as communication, but does encourage us to consider how teaching and learning is directly linked to social injustice. Therefore through critique and understanding we can experience transformation. These ideas are mirrored in the core values of Nurture and Restorative Practice, manifested through concepts such as the restorative question

framework and the notion that understanding a young person’s needs enables us to support their positive engagement with education. Scaling-up, therefore, is likely to require aligning practices to amplify voice, frequenting new spaces, engaging with opposing ideas and creative thinking, where links are established with other narratives such as teaching and learning.

Whole-school ethos

When considering these ideas within organisations that embed Nurture and Restorative Practice within every aspect of school life we begin to experience organisational change and see how hinge commitments not only influence individual practice, but institutional behaviours. Hinges on doors are often situated at the top and the bottom; a visual image which foregrounds the ideas of top-down or bottom-up implementation, whereby grassroots community-driven action works alongside or is in competition with a top-down approach (Hobson et al., 2022). Although top-down change is best done using a ‘working with’ strategy, implementation can of course be driven by one key decision. These decisions can be used as the explicit form of the tacit hinge commitment and therefore, might look like a senior leader who takes the active decision to implement a non-exclusion policy. This fixed decision becomes a roadblock for adult behaviours in response to challenging interactions with young people and although this creates a barrier, it also creates a new hinge for new avenues, creativity and innovation. I call this taking a zero-tolerance approach to exclusion.

Despite the merits of a singular decisive approach, alignment of practice is most effective when there is collective buy-in and when individuals throughout the institution integrate a suite of practices representing one collective shared hinge or school ethos (Procter-Legg, 2022). This continuous hinge, like the ones seen on pianos, cabinet doors and heavy-duty storage boxes, becomes a seamless, stronger and more durable anchor where weight is evenly distributed, creating a powerful and aligned community. Therefore for practitioners wanting to adopt a whole-school approach to behaviour as communication I advocate adopting a top-down and bottom-up stimulus, where there is continuity of efforts from senior leaders and practitioners, stemming from a single common hinge commitment.

Conclusion and practical implications

This article aims to link whole-school approaches to Nurture and Restorative Practice through the common theme of behaviour as communication. It is understood that there are limitations to conceptualising this belief as a classic hinge commitment due to its prevalence in the discourse and explicit, rather than tacit, voice. However it is uncontested that the concept of behaviour as communication is significant within the field of Nurture and Restorative Practice – it seems unquestioned by practitioners and, I would argue, has become a presupposition that governs practice. With the above in mind, it seems logical that linking these practices will afford practitioners new ways of working and both increase the breadth and depth of their work.

This alignment, however, can present as oppositional or as in deep disagreement with other educational philosophies. Although the following is not fully accepted by all hinge epistemologists, Pritchard (2021b) reminds us how hinge commitments are context driven and always have some kind of common ground to enable rational discussions. Moreover, when situated within existing networks these discussions can enable radical change of individuals' beliefs and therefore afford the possibility of scaled-up aligned practices, all of which have the potential for positive change within education. These alignments need to be embedded across institutions and need to be situated in pedagogical spaces, rather than limited to the context of behaviour when understood as 'misbehaving'; instead applied to behaviour as the external representation of communication in everything we do. Practitioners may therefore wish to consider building stronger links between Nurture and Restorative Practice and to lean into the underlying beliefs and reasons why this work is done, rather than how and what it looks like. This requires practitioners to not be distracted by definitional confusion and call for more explicit descriptions, but to instead adopt a holistic perspective rather than a binary-choice model of educational research.

This thought piece aims to encourage collaboration between disciplines that hold similar underlying beliefs while cautioning against insular practices that fail to engage with deep disagreement. This can take place in many different ways; however a practical example of this within professional development programmes can be seen in the following recommendations:

- Consider creating opportunities to co-deliver programmes with common hinge commitments.
- Avoid unhealthy competition between programmes such as Nurture and Restorative Practice.
- Actively seek opportunities to promote collaboration through local and national networks and development events.
- Ensure programmes include both practitioners and school leaders while targeting practical and strategic implementation.
- Highlight the positive outcomes for young people that relate to teaching and learning as well as positive behavioural change.
- Explore underlying beliefs and question how they influence practice.
- Consider the wider impact and learning that takes place at a community level.
- Actively engage with professionals who take differing approaches, be critical as well as complementary of behaviour as communication and challenge dogmatic behaviours.

It is recognised that these recommendations present challenges as well as opportunities, but grouping relational practices and exploring their common hinge commitments has exciting implications. By doing this work we afford the possibility of positive change within the future narrative of education and with equal importance, offering support to those working in relational disciplines.

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