Behaviour as communication: Counter-stories of resistance and dignity work

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Abstract

The words “behaviour” and “resistance” often conjure up fear-invoking images that prevent us from reflecting on what it is that we, as educators, understand behaviour to mean. In this paper, we use resistance theory to rethink behaviour as communication by counter-storying one observation of resistance involving a child and teachers in India. Offering parallel interpretations of this experience, we unpack how resistance as ‘dignity work’ requires us to listen and respectfully re-engage with children and ourselves. We conclude by exploring pedagogical possibilities and the need for preserving our dignity and shared humanity when reflecting on (our own and children’s) behaviours.

Keywords: Resistance, Resistance Theory, Dignity Work, Behaviour, Street Children, Counter-storytelling, Rashomon, India

The Rashomon Effect

In 1950, the Japanese filmmaker Akira Kurosawa released the film ‘Rashomon’. Rashomon told the story of a brutal encounter of violence – from the perspective of four central characters that witnessed, perpetrated or were victims of a crime (Kurosawa, 1950). What was uncommon about this plot was that each of the four stories told by the central characters, were equally plausible and yet substantially different. Rather than providing closure, however, in the form of a ‘solved’ murder mystery, the film left the multiple contested realities open to the interpretation of the viewer (Heider, 1988). Derived from this, the Rashomon effect refers to instances in which different people provide conflicting interpretations of the same reality, and the impacts of this upon individual and collective meaning-making, and understandings of truth and justice (Heider, 1988).

From the standpoint of critical theories, these processes of meaning-making and storytelling involve a political struggle for legitimacy (Apple et al., 2009). Thus, to fully explore the Rashomon effect, counter-stories are needed. Critical theorists hold that the human inclination for relationships lends itself to storytelling (Hunn et al., 2006). Stories are part of what make us human. Stories connect us, opening spaces for empathy and honouring dignity. Stories enable us to feel – to share dreams, desires, to dare to hope, to recognise and question our values and, ultimately, to gain a sense of who we (ALL) are – so that there is no ‘other’ (Cologon et al., 2019). By engaging with critical and resistant perspectives (that is, counter-hegemonic discourses), ‘silenced’ and/or dissenting counter-stories can flower through the concrete of dominant discourses – enabling us to ‘see’ what was previously hidden in the underlife.

In this paper, we story and counter-story one observation of resistant behaviour from a service for children living on the streets in Mumbai, India. One child, Rathore (aged 8) and two adults, Deva and Ria (participant names are pseudonyms), become the protagonists as we explore different interpretations of, and reactions to, behaviours unfolding in one situation. This enables us to recognise and problematise the inequitable power relations that shape individuals' truths – thus revealing Rashomon effects and contributing insights into how we might truly listen and respond to others, with (and for) dignity.

Behaviour and 'Rashomon' Listening

Behaviour can be defined as any observable action. In the research literature, much emphasis has been placed on behaviour that is conceptualised as 'disruptive', 'challenging' and/or 'problematic' (Armstrong, 2019; Porter, 2020). Criteria for what constitutes 'disruptive/challenging/problematic' behaviour has been variously defined using language such as 'rule-breaking', 'aggressive' (Michail, 2011), 'interfering' and 'anti-social' (Dunlap et al., 2006). However, as Kombarakaran (2004) points out, many such behaviours are necessary for the survival of children living on the streets – thus emphasising the importance of context and culture in understanding when behaviour is challenging, and to whom.

Smith and Fox (2003, p. 5) define challenging behaviour as "any repeated pattern of behaviour, or perception of behaviour, that interferes with or is at risk of interfering with optimal learning or engagement in pro-social interactions with peers and adults." Similarly, Michail (2011) defines 'challenging behaviour' as "behaviour that is seen as *abnormal* within the context of a person's culture" (p. 157, emphasis added). However, such definitions are problematic as they can superimpose totalising, pathologizing and 'middle-class' cultural norms of behaviour upon ALL children, thus "othering" identities and experiences that do not fit within the

boundaries of a socially constructed ‘norm’ – such as in this case example where a child belongs to a marginalised community. These constructions also emphasise adult-centric judgements of children’s behaviours as being the sole basis for which labels are applied without consideration of the imbalance of power or ‘Rashomon effects’ at play in how (and what) adults are *perceiving or observing*.

Previously, the concept of Rashomon effects have been used to examine multi-perspectival insights into contested events (Roth & Mehta, 2002), ethnography (Heider, 1988), organisational ethics (Werhane, 2019), media portrayals of events (Muralidharan, 2008), family therapy (Mittelmeier & Friedman, 1991), and communication studies (Anderson, 2016) – showing how individuals observe the ‘same’ realities but construct different understandings of what occurred. However, the concept of Rashomon has yet to be used in examining how adults observe and conceptualise children’s behaviours. This is significant as Cohen et al. (1997) acknowledge that adult observations of children’s behaviours are fundamentally interpretive. Fawcett and Watson (2016) further highlight how an observer’s own experiences of childhood, their views about children, professional backgrounds, culture, and assumptions contribute to the “inevitable subjectivity of the observer” (p. 17). Despite this, much has been written on the importance of observation as a means of ‘listening to children’s behaviours’ (Fawcett & Watson, 2016) – thus framing behaviour as communication.

The conceptualising of behaviour as communication is not a recent occurrence. Durand (1993) notes how young children’s behaviours (e.g., crying) have been recognised as a means of communicating underlying unmet needs for many centuries. This understanding of behaviour as communication continues to hold currency, as in a review of research literature, Porter (2020) summarises the evidence on two opposing approaches to supporting children’s behaviours – controlling approaches (which seek to coerce children into compliance using rules,

rewards, and punishments) and guidance approaches (in which adults listen and responsively support children's behaviours through supporting problem-solving, emotional regulation, meaning-making and agency). In summarising the evidence, Porter (2020) outlines the many short and long-term negative outcomes which emerge from the use of controlling and coercive approaches, including – children experiencing difficulties with self-regulation, having higher rates of conduct disorders, showing increased dishonesty, having lower language-comprehension skills, and experiencing greater stress in situations of adversity.

Porter's (2020) review also highlights the many benefits of adopting guidance approaches that acknowledge the significance of *listening* to children's behaviour as communication (rather than attempting to control it). Porter shows that the use of guidance approaches is linked to low rates of delinquency, better self-regulation capacities, greater empathy and compassion, and less expression of anxiety over failure. However, despite this evidence, as Armstrong (2019) points out, dominant discourses around 'challenging' behaviours remain pervasive, and hegemonic 'control-based' practices abound as "schools frequently utilise a manage and discipline model" (p. 1). This is particularly troubling as research has consistently highlighted the ways in which the behaviours of children from marginalised backgrounds and children who experience disability are criminalised in education settings (Basile, 2020; Cramer et al., 2014).

Resistance Theory

Resistance theory in education is a tool which seeks to provide "explanations for why and how individuals and groups resist oppressive or threatening situations, structural arrangements and ideologies" (Knight Abowitz, 2000, p. 878). Resistance theories stem from the understanding that educational sites have the potential to both reproduce and resist dominant discourses and

inequitable power relations in society (Toshalis, 2015). These theories provide avenues for examining children's resistance as critiques of social oppression, while offering insights into how educational institutions reject marginalised children. Resistance theory recognises that some resistant behaviour could be evidence of a developing critique of issues of power and domination playing out in children's lives (Langhout, 2005) – that is, that students might be challenging the dominant ways of thinking, being and doing that are being privileged in the education system (Basile, 2020), or that students are challenging structural issues they face (such as ableism, racism, imperialism, and/or classism) in education systems (Pechenkina, 2017; Sosa & Latta, 2019).

Whilst resistance theory has been used to explore behaviour and injustice across a range of contexts, the theory is not without critique. Critics of resistance theories suggest that oppositional behaviours categorised as 'resistance' may lack socio-political critique – that is, students may be 'defiant for the sake of it', rather than expressing systematic critiques – and such behaviours offer little insight into ways to mobilise transformative change. Critics also argue that much of the research on resistance has concentrated on self-defeating, rather than transformative resistance (Pechenkina, 2017) – thus leaving a desired gap in recognising the utility of resistance theories in educational praxis. Lastly, resistance theorists have also been critiqued for romanticising resistant behaviours and for overgeneralising its underlying intention or ideological significance (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001).

Despite these critiques, several researchers have engaged with resistance theory in educational contexts to unpack how children challenge practices of racism, ableism, dehumanisation, and anti-dialogue (Connor, 2006; Sosa & Latta, 2019). However, researchers also caution that not all behaviour can be considered 'resistant' – with scholars such as Giroux (2001) arguing that resistance requires a) motivation for social justice and b) critical

consciousness (i.e. awareness of social oppression). We have explored children's experiences of social justice and critical consciousness of social oppression in this research context in more depth in Mevawalla (2020).

However, Langhout (2005) suggests that since young children in marginalised communities often lack access to the necessary "tools to theorise resistance" (p. 152), an alternative conceptualisation of resistance is needed. In considering the critique that children's behaviours may lack socio-political critique, Langhout (2005) argues instead, for a focus on how children push back against attempts to control their "body, identity, goals, values or assumptions" (p. 127). In this paper, we use (and extend upon) Langhout's criterion of resistance in an attempt to avoid romanticism. In doing so, we also draw on the work of Rios (2011), who developed the notion of 'dignity work' – i.e., acts of resistance and defiance that are intended to preserve one's dignity amidst systems and practices that seek to oppress marginalised groups. Although there has been limited follow up research on 'dignity work', emerging research suggests that even young children might engage in resistant 'dignity work' (Basile, 2020).

Merging these ideas, we suggest that resistance involves an ethical-political component that can be geared towards both resisting control and maintaining one's dignity – that is, not only a struggle *against* control, but also *for* self-determination, self-authorship, self-worth, and respect. The notion of dignity underlying this conceptualisation of 'dignity work' encompasses human rights *and* responsibilities – that is, the understanding that our own flourishing goes hand-in-hand with our obligations and connectedness to others (we are all equal and *inter*dependent). Thus, dignity recognises our *inherent and shared humanity and our desire for belonging*. It advocates for critical reflection in 'listening' to behaviour as communication – avoiding punishments or consequences that are inhumane, exclusionary, and degrading.

Method: Construction of Counter/Stories through Relational Listening

This paper uses the method of ‘counter-storytelling’ developed by critical and resistance theorists (Bell, 2019; Miller et al., 2020; Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Counter-storytelling is a technique for listening to marginalised, silenced, and oppressed perspectives. It is also a “tool for analysing and challenging the stories of those in power and whose story is a natural part of the dominant discourse” (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001, p. 327). From a resistance perspective, the majoritarian story in this paper on ‘challenging behaviour’ produces an insidious discourse of what is ‘desired, normal and valued’ which in turn acts as a motivation for conformity. Conversely, counter-stories offer portals for ‘(re)seeing’ what is otherwise rendered invisible (i.e., children whose resistance may communicate a desire for dignity). Solorzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) argue that such a methodology is transformative as it enables educators to question the power of dominant stories, creating spaces ‘outside’ of taken-for-granted worldviews to honour the dignity of those considered to be ‘other’.

As this research was conducted with young children (aged 3-8), we have also adopted the notion of ‘relational listening’ to develop the counter-stories presented here. This refers to listening which acknowledges, validates, empathises, questions, (re)generates self-reflection, and secures trust amongst communicators to ensure that people feel heard and understood (Cologon et al., 2019). In the early childhood literature, this listening is conceptualised as a multi-dimensional concept, which, according to Rinaldi (2001, pp. 2-3) includes:

- engaging “with *all* our senses” (p. 2)
- tuning in to ourselves “internal listening” (p. 2)
- time and reflection

- sharing “curiosity, desire, doubt and uncertainty” (p. 2)
- providing “questions, not answers” (p. 2)
- feelings and emotions
- openness to another’s views and differences
- active meaning-making, “giving and interpretation” (p. 3)
- non-judgement “a suspension of our judgements and prejudices” (p. 3)
- vulnerability which “legitimises us and gives us visibility” (p. 3)
- space where “understanding and awareness are generated through sharing and dialogue” (p. 3).

This approach to listening emphasises the importance of moving beyond what is ‘said’ to empathising with what is *felt*. Halone and Pecchioni (2001) suggest that this listening has three ‘phases’ – ‘before’ an interaction (transitioning to an inner space of non-judgement), ‘during’ (listening, responding, and *being present* to the verbal and non-verbal cues), and ‘after’ (praxis – where reflection and action follow). In the context of young children, this involves listening to the ‘hundred languages’ (Malaguzzi, 1993) that children use to communicate – before, during and after an interaction. Thus, in constructing the counter-stories we have engaged in relational-meaning-making with children over six months using drawings, mark-making, photographs, conversations, and observations, to gain insights into children’s feelings and understandings.

In recognising that ‘listening’ to behaviour is fundamentally subjective, we have drawn on the concept of relational listening to use the counter/stories as spaces to offer interpretational insights. However, unlike traditional ‘counter/stories’ developed by authors with older participants (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001), the counter/stories we present here have been constructed by us. As such, we acknowledge that Rathore’s story (the child protagonist) is complex for an 8-year-old and is not a verbatim recount of the event. Rather, his story reflects

an accumulation of evidence and relational knowledge of his behaviours, experiences, feelings, and understandings, that were shared through multiple interactions over time (see Mevawalla, 2020). Relational listening has also been used to construct counter/stories told from the perspective of the teachers (Deva and Ria), however, unlike Rathore's story, these have been developed primarily from verbatim transcripts of interviews, observations, and fieldnotes.

In this paper, we have tied together the Rashomon and counter-storytelling methods with 'relational listening' to generate a 'dialogue' between multi-perspectival narratives. Thus, "combining elements from both the story and the current reality… [to] construct another world that is richer than either the story or the reality alone" (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001, p. 328). Counter-storytelling supports readers to reposition – i.e., to "see the world through the eyes of the dispossessed and act against the ideological and institutional processes and forms that reproduce oppressive conditions" (Apple et al., 2009, p. 3). Thus, the method of Rashomon counter-storytelling used here invites educators to reposition themselves, and to re-analyse resistant behaviour by de/re-constructing "truths."

Positionality

In acknowledging that we have been intimately involved in the construction of the narratives, this section provides a brief description of positionality. Specifically, Zinnia (who collected data) will share part of her story – see Mevawalla (2020) for more detail.

Zinnia and 'this' story

I am an Indian-Australian who spent my early years in Mumbai before moving to Australia. As a qualified early childhood teacher, I engaged as a volunteer teacher-researcher for the purposes of this research. This meant, that I spent six days a week for a period of six

months in the research context. During this time, I witnessed first-hand the agentic and critical capacity of children, and the experiences of injustice they resisted. Rathore's experiences were further compounded by the labels imposed on him, his life experiences, his fierce criticality and his 'rebellious' refusal to conform in various circumstances. This is the reason that Rathore is presented as a central protagonist – his experiences and personhood are both a reminder of the brilliance and game-changing power of children's resistance, as well as a painful source of reflective discomfort on the injustices of exclusion, ableism, racism, inequity, and silencing.

This 'story' was chosen as following the encounter, the experience was re-counted in fundamentally different ways by all – Rathore, Ria, Deva, and other children. It was Ria and Deva's 'recount' which was heard by those in 'higher' positions of authority (e.g., the director and psychologist). Rathore's own retelling of the story was the last to be heard. His own behaviour following the event reflected anger (e.g., throwing rocks), a desire for inclusion (e.g., asking to run errands for the teachers), and defiance (e.g., silence when meeting the psychologist) – all of which are experiences which inform the counter-story.

The difference in the interpretations offered by Deva, Ria and Rathore were further examined in discussions with Kathy, both during shared time that we spent in the setting and afterwards in analysing, exploring, and constructing the narratives and writing the paper. Unpacking, retelling, and reinterpreting the 'story' with Kathy highlighted many different interpretations and raised further questions about whose voices were being legitimised and 'heard'. The many thoughts, emotions and questions that emerged from our shared reflections led us to use this story for Rashomon analysis.

Trustworthiness and Limitations

The continuous reflection, interpretation, and dialogue carried out during data collection ensured that post-fieldwork data analysis was primed by discussions with children (Yoon & Templeton, 2019). We acknowledge that this 'lens' has influenced how these counter/stories are presented, however, to ensure rigor, multiple methods for data collection and holistic approaches for analysis were used to gain insights and construct stories (e.g., drawings, dialogue, interviews, photographs). Prolonged engagement in the field also provided contextual understandings of society, politics, and culture.

Whilst we have sought to ensure rigour; we acknowledge limitations to this study. A key limitation is that participants did not write their stories, and there were limited opportunities for member-checking counter/stories, particularly with Rathore. However, to ensure 'trustworthiness' of 'voice', participatory and 'relational listening' methods (as detailed above) were used to ensure Rathore's perspectives were 'truly heard'. 'Relational listening' (Rinaldi, 2001) adopted during data collection supported the development of inter-subjective knowledge which was based on multiple means of communication (drawing, conversations, behaviours) – thus providing multi-dimensional insights.

In what follows, we introduce the research context and then each central character before sharing an imagined 're-telling' of events using a first-person perspective. Consistent with the requirements for ethical engagement of participants and confidentiality, all characters are presented here with pseudonyms. We then offer a Rashomon narrative in which one observation is storied and counter-storied from the perspectives of three central characters (two teachers and one child).

The research context

This paper reports on data from research conducted within an educational setting run by a Non-Government Organisation (NGO) for children living on the streets in Mumbai, India. The NGO focused on basic education and provided children with lunch and 1-2 daily snacks, educational materials (books, pens, uniforms) and paid for some students' school fees. Some school-aged children (usually those with impairment labels) were not provided with formal education and therefore spent their time with pre-schoolers. More than 135 children (aged 3-18) attended the setting from Monday to Saturday. The centre was located near a red-light district and at the crossroads of several key public and private spaces (beaches, train lines, main roads, public and private education settings, tourist landmarks, restaurants, cinemas, stalls, and shops). Most children lived on the street with their families/caregivers, however some lived with peers – see Mevawalla (2020) for more contextual details.

This section has provided a brief overview of the research context. The subsequent section provides insights into 'who' the central characters are, and their counter/stories – beginning with Deva (head teacher), Ria (teacher) and finally, Rathore (child).

Deva

Deva was a young professional who, at the time of data collection, had been recently appointed as 'head of centre' following the completion of a qualification. Deva described the role as giving children "quality education [to children so] they can make the most of it in the future and lead a good life independently which is an asset to a country's progress". Deva commented that children were highly resilient as they "deal with many ups and downs of life at a very young age; they are mentally and physically strong". When first starting the role, Deva attempted to engage children using a "soft" (guidance) approach to supporting behaviour, and shared knowledge of

the importance of having good relationships since children were good ‘judges’ of character, reflecting “we are here to care for them… they recognise people well. Meaning they recognise the people in front of them easily, this… is the best quality they have.”

However, sometimes Deva became frustrated, noting that the children “do not deal with the problems softly I would say when they open their mouths most of the times they abuse, they fight I wish they deal[t] with the problems softly…. They handle everything, but their way is a bit different, most of them go rowdy when a situation arises as they have been watching their elders behaving in the same awful manner. They tend to abuse straightaway which is not right.” With the perceived ‘failure’ of a “soft” (relational and guidance) approach to behaviour, Deva turned increasingly to “hard” approaches (i.e., controlling and coercive discourses of behaviour ‘management’) justifying this view by reflecting that “being in a society when they are seeking education they must behave like an educated person.”

Counter-storying: Deva’s Story

By the time it gets to Saturday, I am over-tired. My eyes are squinting, I think of the thousand things I have yet to do before Monday. When I see Ria coming back firmly holding Rathore’s arm, my stomach drops – half anxiety, half anger. I notice that Rathore’s young and often-turbulent face is scrunched in hatred. Exhausted, annoyed, disappointed, angry, and sick of the responsibility of dealing with this constant ‘bad behaviour’ day-in and day-out, I think to myself: Not again. What’s wrong with this child?

As Ria holds Rathore’s arm out, I grip his other hand; Rathore yanks himself out of it. I expect him to run, kick, scream, but he doesn’t. He stays still. His brow still furrowed, Rathore stands, his own fists clenched by the sides of his body. “What has he done now?” I ask, and

even before the words are out, Ria screams – “This shameless boy has insulted an old lady! He has brought shame on our centre! I will NOT take him again to the garden! He is banned! He screamed and was swearing at her! At an old lady because she would not give him the swing! Is that any way to speak to an old woman?” My throat begins to burn with worry and dejection. If the old lady complains, or the Director gets word of this, it’ll be my head on the platter, not his. I turn to Rathore and exasperated ask him, “have you gone mad or what?” When Rathore’s face only closes itself further into a scrunch, I take a deep breath and close my eyes a minute, trying to think of a befitting punishment.

But this kid, he’s never going to change. What punishment is even of any use when he just keeps doing this repeatedly? I have tried everything! I have tried being nice, I have tried to listen, I’ve tried being his friend… and nothing’s worked. I try to think of what the Director would do… How do I teach him that these are “dirty street values”, that they’re bad for him? The answer pops in my head: shame. Yes. That’s it. Like the Director once said, “his ego needs to be cut down to size”. Shame. If his own friends ostracise him for his behaviour, then he will know he has to change.

At the end of the day, the children pray together as a group and then I call on Rathore to come up to the front. Rathore gets up but his eyes are suspicious. I don’t *want* to do this, but I don’t know what else to do! I take a deep breath, and balefully begin: “this boy has done something disgusting”. I let the words hang in the air, the children look expectantly, their eyes riveted to the front. “He has insulted an old lady!” I wait for the words to sink in, but rather than gasps, I hear silence. I continue, “he should be ashamed. We need to make sure he feels ashamed, so nobody talk to him. Nobody play with him. Make sure you make him feel ashamed”. More silence follows. I am hoping the silence is sobering but when I see Rathore’s menacing smile, I wonders if it is only apathetic. My shoulders tense as Rathore stifles giggles

and then bursts into laughter. I feel waves of indignant disrespect and a kick of anger spikes through my blood. To add insult to injury, a few other snickering laughs echo from the group. I turn back to face Rathore, but he is seemingly unaffected by my words, his laughter is rollicking. I knew there was no point. Frustration itches at my skin as my voice carries loudly over the laughter, “you’re never going to be allowed to go to the garden again! I’m going to tell the guards to not let you in!” Though far from satisfied, I dismiss the children – hoping that I have made an example of him. Hoping he learns to behave.

Ria

Ria had been a teacher at the centre for over fifteen years and saw the role as a way to “guide the kids and encourage them to move on” which involved making “kids independent by providing them education”. For Ria, the centre was “as much my home as my own home”. Once, a colleague had said, “your ghost will be hanging around here doing the same chores and jobs that you do today”, and this comment filled Ria with pride as it reflected dedication and commitment to the centre and children. Ria had strong relationships with the local community, noting that “if something happens then they immediately inform our staff members and seek advice that what should they do.”

For Ria, humour, discipline and ‘tough love’ went together. Ria also emphasised the importance of ‘listening’ using both “soft” and “hard” approaches saying, “I get answers from the kids… they are deprived of love… they count on [me] that’s the reason they share anything and everything”, and being strict is “important to [get children to] follow all rules and regulations…” The point of discipline for Ria was to support children in fulfilling their dreams “the kids wish to become great and to earn a lot of money… and if they earn money, they can fulfil their

dreams… because of good education they will get a good place in society, they will be with high class people."

Thus, Ria emphasised the importance of children studying, saying, "if a kid will work hard in his studies, then only, he can develop himself. If he doesn't know how to focus, he will face a lot of problems" and believed that the centre was responsible for 'disciplining' children to be responsible citizens. Discourses of obedience, and a desire for children to 'sit still' were common in Ria's thoughts on behaviour - "when the kids arrive here, they are not well mannered, so we teach them discipline and manners first… Discipline is compulsory because the kids can't stay at one place, they keep on running and doing mischievous activities… They have to concentrate and study that is why they have to stay at one place… Because for their own responsibility they must show some discipline."

Counter-storying: Ria's Story

When we get to the garden, I watch with pleasure as the children run off. I find myself a seat and sit in the sun, appreciative of the cover of trees and any passing breeze. I can see some other people are in the garden today, a child and a woman by the swing. I let myself relax on the bench, watching… the trees, children, sky. I let myself take some deep breaths.

I'm still watching the children – sometimes they come up, talk to me, ask me to intervene when something is wrong. To each complaint, I respond with solutions, 'send him to me', 'let her finish then you can have a turn'. All the usual things. Rathore comes up too, telling me that some grandmother won't share the swing, and like I did with the other children, I remind him to share and redirect him to find another part of the garden to play in.

I know he's frustrated but it's important, more important than anything, for us not to cause trouble with anyone from 'the outside'. The centre is funded by donors, our reputation in the community and amongst these people is so very important. So, we must, show our gratitude, and present ourselves as a good, worthy, reputable cause.

When I see a little one crying in the far corner, I sigh and make my way to the slides. It's Bhijali, the youngest, wailing at Akbar, who refused to let her go on the slide. In sharp tones, I tell Akbar to come down, and direct Rani to take Bhijali to the slide so they can come down together. Like a broken-record, I repeat to Akbar the importance of looking after our little ones, of being responsible. But Akbar is looking past my shoulder, and even before his hand finishes reaching up to point, I've begun to turn.

In the other corner, I can see Rathore and the grandmother by the swing. In a dreaded panic, I race to them – I can already hear him screaming at her. My stomach clenched, I stand in front of Rathore to protect him, holding him (with some effort) behind my back.

I want to ask what has happened, but the grandmother is turning to me – telling me he has used horrible words. I begin to apologise at once. When she lets me, I try to explain – about the children, the centre, I try to appeal to her sense of charity, but Rathore must have said something awful because she seems very angry. She says to me, "that boy has been harassing my grandson. He won't leave us alone; he keeps coming back!"

I feel myself blush with shame, but before I can apologise, Rathore has started up again – he just doesn't know when to stop! Before I can even *do* anything, he has insulted her again and she says, "is this what you teach them at your school?"

I want to scream with frustration – of course not! If you only knew the wonderful things we do, if you only knew how hard we work and how much we do for these children, but this is what you've seen! I feel so disappointed, that this is what you've seen. Alongside the shame is anger. Rathore! How could you bring shame upon us this way?

I apologise and lead us all away before the grandmother can say more. I'm so tired, so angry – I don't want to talk to Rathore, I'll leave it to Deva. Oh, but what will Deva think! That I couldn't handle a group of children in the garden!? But it wasn't my fault! I didn't even see until it was too late, and why does Rathore always have to cause such trouble, everywhere he goes!

Rathore

As described in earlier work (Mevawalla, 2020, pp. 218-219):

> Rathore (Male, 8) was an only child who lived alone with his father… [his] mother had passed away a few months prior to his attending the centre and Rathore and his father had recently returned to the streets following an interval of many months, some of which Rathore had spent in a boy's shelter. Rathore had previously attended the centre… and was still familiar with many of its workings... Rathore was critical of strangers, adults, authorities, the council and other children living on the streets (except his close friends). He shared numerous experiences of run-ins with police, the council and other authorities… Rathore was highly independent, confident, strong-minded, dynamic, critical and an expert at expressing defiance… At the centre, Rathore was often considered to be a 'problem child' as he expressed himself often through physical violence, colourful language, and destructive behaviour. At the time at which this research was conducted, Rathore was in the process of undergoing psychological testing, with teachers at the centre indicating that he had "a low IQ and at the slightest provocation [he] exhibits negative behaviour" (Deva). As a result of this label and perception, Rathore did not attend school as he was thought to have a 'mental disability' that schools could not 'control' or work with. Rathore often expressed frustration at being characterised as 'sick' and/or 'mad' by peers, teachers and educational systems that he

> thought either excluded him or sought to control him… Rathore came to the centre regularly, engaging with the Balwadi [preschool] group of children despite being older than them… Rathore often took a leadership role—sometimes against the wishes of the attending teacher or volunteers—in directing, punishing, or playing with children. Rathore was eager to learn, he loved books and was especially fond of 'reading' out stories to the younger children. He also enjoyed writing stories, engaging in dramatic play, playing football (soccer), and like many other children, sought to attend an English school, but was very critical of the education systems that he was excluded from. Rathore shared some bleak and self-defeating prophecies about his future, narrating that he would "grow up and die in a fight" or "be hit by a bus or train one day." Despite this, he also shared that he wanted to be a "good policeman or a hero" (i.e., a film star).

Counter-storying: Rathore's Story

"Everybody tells me I'm mad" (Rathore, 8-year-old Child)

I see the world – and watching it hurts. I see the way that others see me – as a catastrophe, a troublemaker, a destructive mess in the making. And it's hard not to be mad with the constant noise of it all. I'm always being watched, suspected, nagged, distrusted. I'm always the problem. I'm always the one in the wrong – even when I *know* I'm not. I know that I'm not perfect. That in my life, I've made mistakes and I think often about going back in time and changing things so that my mistakes had never been made.

Fixing a mistake is so much harder; it requires much more courage than simply travelling through time. 'Fixing' requires being vulnerable in knowing that I have done something wrong, or knowing, that others think that I have done something wrong. 'Fixing' means dreading and knowing that I can't go back; but trying my best to figure out how to go forward. 'Fixing' is deciding to take responsibility, to do something – more than getting mad, or blaming others, or

worst of all, being a coward and doing nothing at all but always feeling guilty, stupid, or afraid. I know that anger, guilt, and hurt have never brought peace or forgiveness – I'm not sure that anything does. But anger, it can be powerful, even useful – a weapon to shield yourself with, a knife to hurt others, to hurt yourself.

I know that people see me as 'a wildcard' and that's something that can be powerful too – lonely, but powerful. It's like they think, one day I wake up feeling brutal, another day, feeling calm. I'm 'dangerous and unpredictable' – and this means that they're scared of me. But they feared me even before I arrived at the centre because warnings had been issued to the staff about my 'violent and erratic behaviour'. So even before they knew who I was as a person, a portrait of how I behaved had been painted in their minds. I felt like a 'marked' child when I came – because even before I could set foot into the setting, my reputation lay the groundwork for who others in the centre would let me be and become. All this… Before anyone even knew who I was, what I liked, or who I aspired to be….

Even after being here a while, mothers warn their children not to play with me, and the other children tease me. Sometimes I feel like they're 'pushing my buttons' just to see what I'll do – like a toy, will I do something funny or violent? But I'm only angry when things are unfair – and still people see me as the problem. It's the unfairness of it that burns in my throat, and pumps through my blood and out through my fists – how could I *not* be angry? How could they not see the world? How could they not understand? How could they not be angry themselves at how messed up it all is?

I want, so badly, to go to school – because I know, that it would give me… something to my name, something to help me stand on my own two feet. I know too, that the only way to get into school is to "be good" in the way the teachers want me to be, and so I've been trying, hard,

to listen, and to perform their version of who they think I should be. I'm pretty clever at it sometimes – I've begun to shift, finding myself using their words, mirroring their actions – trying to figure out how to not make 'mistakes' by working harder to change the way they see me and from there… the way they treat me.

It doesn't always work. I can't always help it – some days people are just too much – too cruel, too frustrating, too patronising for me to be anything but angry. Like the grandmother in the garden… that unreasonable, horrible, arrogant old woman. I didn't think that she was even anybody who could *do* anything – and yet that's all it took to turn them against me, just an implied threat from a shadow of a person in a position of privilege.

The garden is one of the few beautiful things I love. That day, I felt proud because they'd chosen me to go to the garden with some of the other kids – chosen me! Which must have meant that I'd been "good" or "good enough" throughout the day. I raced ahead through the gates and hoped that we could spend the rest of the afternoon there. When I came in, I saw the swing was taken, some old lady and a kid, so I ran instead to the outer edge to play on the slide. After a few minutes, I glanced at the swing, but was only a little annoyed, and debated with myself. The kid wasn't even really swinging, he was just sitting there under her watchful eye. Eventually, I took a breath and walked over to them, "are you done with the swing?" I asked carefully but the child said nothing. The old lady bent her head and stepped between us "No, my grandson isn't done." I didn't appreciate her tone, but being used to hearing it from most people, I just took a step back, and went off to play on the spinning wheel with my friends before going back again to the swing.

This time I asked the grandmother directly, knowing the child wouldn't answer. "Is he finished yet?" I asked. She stood up again and took a step towards me, trying to tower over me,

even though she wasn't tall "I said no." I rolled my eyes, but I could feel the burn of shame and anger in my chest. My brow furrowed, but still, I was good. I turned and walked back – racing towards my friends. Though I was becoming impatient… I thought, it's a lucky day because Ria's still sitting on the bench and seems to be in no hurry to move back inside. But then I thought, you never know when Deva might send a child to say 'come back again' – and I just wanted *one* swing. I just wanted to feel that flying feeling, feet off the ground, moving against the wind, alone with the sky. So, I thought I'd try one last time… I've waited so long. But… I thought… I'll just wait a *little* bit more… I'll play with the climbing frame… I'll climb it twice, that'll be enough time.

But when I finished and looked over again, the kid hadn't moved, the grandmother hadn't moved. And now… I couldn't help but feel like there was something deliberate about this – like she was waiting for me to come back, ready to snarl. Frustration (and a bit of fear) began scratching at the back of my neck – but that familiar sense of injustice had my back straightening. I watched Ria and wondered how long I had left. I watched the kid and wondered how long he would stay. More out of fairness than anger, I turned to make my way to the grandmother again. I stopped before the swing and held on to the side of it, "he's been here for a long time…" I began – hoping to show her that it wasn't fair, but I knew it… she did snarl. "I said go AWAY from here, stop bothering my grandson! GO!" My stomach muscles bunched but my body straightened like steel "what, does this park belong to your father?" I said and couldn't help answering my own question, "It's a PUBLIC PARK!" The grandson watched silently, but the grandmother began to yell "SHAMEFUL CHILD! Is this how you speak to your elders?" And that's when my grip tightened, and the loudness of my voice matched hers "Maybe you should learn not to speak at all!"

That's when Ria noticed the ruckus and came over. I saw her walking briskly, and in the periphery of my vision, saw her face, filled with shame and I knew what was to come, and that I'd already lost. And that's when the anger found the hurt inside my heart… which didn't help, and only made me angrier. Then, since I knew I'd lost, I just let loose, "IT'S NOT YOUR SWING! YOU DON'T OWN THE PLACE! THERE ARE OTHER CHILDREN WHO HAVE BEEN WAITING AND WANTING TO PLAY! HE'S BEEN ON IT FOR SO LONG!"

Ria reached us and stood in front of me, but I edged my way out of reach. The grandmother began to yell at Ria now – and I began yelling back, because I knew that Ria wouldn't, and I let loose profanities as Ria tried to diffuse the situation, one hand on my arm, holding me back. The grandmother hurled threats – she would make complaints against us; we had no manners… what sort of teachers were these… whatever. All of it only served to further boil my blood, and the red that hazed in front of me, whistled in my ears and pounded in my chest – hatred running through my whole body like it was on fire. Who the hell did she think she was? But Ria was already beginning to apologise. To *apologise*… for *me* to *her*!

She didn't deserve an apology! I had tried being "good", I had tried being peaceful, and now *I* was being pinned as the problem once again. Screw them! I saw how things were, how they would unfold – and I hated it, hated all of them.

As I left the garden, I knew more was to come. Ria didn't let go of me, and when we reached, she began to yell to Deva about the things I'd done. *I'd* done! Like it had been my fault all along – like the grandmother had done nothing! Like it had been fair for her to hog the swing for hours, and for me to be punished for it! For standing up to her! For daring to be an equal to a woman who didn't deserve the privilege she'd been born into. I hated them all.

I didn’t hear what Deva said, but I told myself that I didn’t care. I wanted the day to be over – I wanted to be free. At the end of the day, Deva stopped us all from going home and that’s when I knew there was something coming. I stood tall when Deva called me to come and stand up in front of everyone. And really… I wasn’t surprised when Deva began to scold me – I felt the prickling tentacles of shame again, but I just clenched my teeth and thought in my head repeatedly: “Screw you. I hate you. Go to hell” willing the voice inside to be louder in my ears than Deva’s.

When Deva was finished, I heard the words “you’re not allowed to go back into the garden!” and I shrugged and thought, “good luck trying to stop me”, and a small laugh escaped, and then it became louder and louder. As Deva’s face scrunched into annoyance and puzzlement, I found the laughter was powerful, and began to heave it out like a punch – using my whole body to resist the attempted imposition of shame with laughter. As I felt other children laugh, I couldn’t help the winning glint in my eyes, and my chin went up with triumph. Deva’s voice became louder – and the more it did, the more I knew that to laugh was the best way to win – the best way to say without words: “Screw you. I hate you. Go to hell!”

When Deva dismissed everyone, I ran… straight to the trees to climb over the garden fence, and when I made it over the tall and dangerous path across and I was alone… I watched the world again. Alone, I let the anger turn to hurt, let the shame turn to guilt, but held on in my mind, to the fact that I had been right – even though I hate so much that the others would always see this whole thing – and me, as a mistake which needed to be “fixed”. But screw them, I hate them all. I brushed the tears away and made my way down towards the inside of the garden where the swing was finally free, and this time, bittersweet but with pride, the words ran through my mind: “I told you that you couldn’t stop me.”

Rashomon: Interpreting and Re-interpreting Behaviour as Communication

Having shared the pieces of these stories, we recognise that the realities we present here are incomplete and never as simple as they seem. The people from these stories are real, but the characters are constructed portrayals – and we recognise that we are only presenting our own interpretations of a fragmented reality. In analysing the counter/stories, it's evident that each person was concerned with their own worries, anxieties, and truths. Multiple aspects of fear and dread permeate each story. Each of these sensations, in some way, guides the decisions that people make. For each person, the presence of their own messy concerns distorts the recognition that other's behaviours are communicating underlying needs. In storying and counter-storying, we also seek to acknowledge the wholeness, fragility, dignity, and complexity of each person's ways of thinking, being and doing – in a spirit of solidarity. We do not wish to blame the educators – to invalidate their worries and fears or to decontextualise their thinking and actions from the culture in which it occurred. Nor do we wish to romanticise Rathore or his behaviour. Instead, we seek to use the tool of Rashomon to provide a lens through which to identify and explain where the power imbalances in the relationships, interactions and systems come from. Thus, we invite the reader together with us to consider the counter/stories as opportunities for learning and self-reflection for praxis. There are many ways to think about behaviour as communication – one approach is explored below.

Behaviour and Resistance: Who is Communicating What?

Resistance theory highlights that culture, context, relationships, values, beliefs, attitudes and diverse ways of thinking, being and doing constitute what behaviour communicates and what behaviour is considered resistant to whom, how, and why (Toshalis, 2015). Similarly, the

Rashomon Effect teaches us that behaviour that might be considered oppositional in one scenario may be acceptable in another (such as, looking someone in the eyes). Considering this, when analysing Rathore, Ria and Deva's stories, we may well ask, what role/s did individual characteristics (age, gender, etc), context, culture, relationships, values, beliefs, attitudes, taken-for-granted assumptions, and ways of thinking have in framing the way each person's behaviour was interpreted, and what reactions followed. For example, how might Rathore's behaviour have been interpreted (and reacted to) if he were female, or an adult?

Considering what might "shift" if Rathore was not Rathore (if instead, for example, he occupied the same position on the social hierarchy as the Grandmother), opens spaces to reposition our understandings of power. Reflecting on whose version of events is considered more (or less) 'legitimate' and 'valid' (Connor, 2006), it is evidently Ria's version of events that is recounted to Deva. Significantly, when the 'story' reaches Deva, Rathore is given no opportunity to "re-tell" the events as they occurred from his perspective, but rather, it is assumed that as Ria "saw" what happened, her version of events is total and accurate (devoid of any Rashomon effects).

In exploring the more subtle and 'unseen' taken-for-granted assumptions on behaviour, Porter (2020) suggests that there is a common presumption that adults automatically *know* how to behave or communicate, whereas children *should know* how to behave or communicate (but choose not to). From the counter/stories above, we know this is not necessarily always the case. For example, Ria's difficulties in attempting to communicate to the Grandmother an apology whilst also trying to defend the work of the centre – presents the impetus to reflect on the view that: if adults find it difficult to communicate clearly, how realistic might it be to expect that children (who are still learning the best ways to communicate) will always know how to

behave in ways that are ‘clear’ and ‘acceptable’ to the people surrounding them in a particular context, and at a given time (Gartrell, 2013).

This view is further complicated when we consider the nuances of ableism, racism, imperialism, and classism impacting on Rathore’s experiences as a “street child”. For example, the expectation that Rathore ought to ‘conform’ disregards the consideration that Rathore was being asked to ‘perform’ a particular identity or way of thinking, being and doing which was likely divorced from the pattern of interactions and behaviours he himself experienced on the streets (where autonomy and critical thinking rather than conformity are necessary for safety) (Kombarakaran, 2004). Additionally, Rathore (who did not have access to schooling) would likely not have had as many opportunities as his peers to practice communicating across different cultural and social sites – therefore, it is likely that Rathore possessed a very different set of social and cultural “presumptions” about what ‘respectful’ interactions involve and how these are constructed (hooks, 1989).

From a resistance theory lens, it could be argued that it was not Rathore who was resisting the grandmother, Ria or Deva – but rather, that the social and cultural systems in which these people live, resist and exclude certain children like Rathore (Bourassa, 2012). That is, for example, we might consider how cultural norms around ‘respect for elders’ impacted on how Rathore’s behaviour was interpreted as being disrespectful rather than as him ‘standing up for himself’. Similarly, the nature of power relationships in this scenario (between adults and children as well as between the adults themselves) could also have impacted on Ria and Deva’s desire to support Rathore to assimilate to an “unjust social order” (Freire, 1970, p. 26) rather than to challenge those in positions of power – since, to an extent, teaching Rathore to be silent is also teaching him to be safe (hooks, 1989, 2014).

Moreover, the valuing of particular ways of being over others can be seen to inform what Ria and Deva sought to 'teach' Rathore about 'how to behave'. For example, it is possible that these educators sought to socialise Rathore into understanding that the language and behaviours which he might consider to be 'normal' on the streets, would not serve him in educational, workplace or other societal spaces, thus, limiting his opportunities to live a better life (hooks, 1989). Alternatively, it could be that attitudes towards Rathore, his label as a 'street child' and his continuous criminalisation informed the assumptions Ria and Deva made about why he behaved as he did (Hodge, 2016). This in turn could also influence the ways in which his behaviour was interpreted, as well as the punishments that were imposed on him.

Resistance theory highlights that this criminalisation, marginalisation and dehumanisation of children is not an extreme, disconnected reality – but rather a common occurrence across the world, including in so-called 'developed' contexts (Mallett, 2017). The research tells us, time and again, that it is the 'usual suspects' (Graham et al., 2010), like Rathore, who move through the school-to-prison pipeline (Hemez et al., 2020). That it is those children who are frequently and deeply excluded, who are also the ones who continue to face multiple forms of (systematic and other) violence and exclusion (Allen & White-Smith, 2014). This is not a new finding, however it does require deeper investigation. Basile (2020) argues that there is a need to delve 'below the surface of the iceberg' of a child's behaviour to look at how systems and practices producing social, economic, political, historical, and cultural conditions have immediate and intergenerational impacts on people's situations, experiences, and the nature of barriers they face in society. This, in turn, can offer alternative insights for re-interpreting the social origins of how and why certain groups of people who continue to experience systematic exclusion and dehumanisation might feel the need to engage in resistant behaviours in order to preserve a sense of dignity (Rios, 2011).

Resistance as Dignity Work

If we think about the counter/stories presented in this paper, there are multiple ways to interpret resistant behaviour. From one perspective, it is ‘problematic’ behaviour which requires ‘fixing’. Alternatively, the behaviour is communicating a need for connection, trust, and a desire for someone to be ‘on our side’. If we understand Rathore’s resistance as a form of communication in context, there is evidence of a developing critique of social oppression and a desire to maintain his dignity. Basile (2020) writes about the importance of children engaging in resistance as ‘dignity work’ – that is, where children face criminalisation and ‘othering’ but fight against these practices whilst preserving a sense of self-worth. This notion of dignity is built on principles of respect and equity, even as the reality of ‘dignity work’ recognises the in/equality paradox, that is – to paraphrase George Orwell – all people are equal, but some people are more equal than others.

From the outset, Rathore tried his best, to communicate in ways that would be understood and accepted by going to the teacher and asking for intervention or by speaking to the child and grandmother to ‘negotiate’. When these methods did not “work”, Rathore’s expressed his anger and frustration using colourful language (that he did not use violence in his reactions when his own experiences so strongly normalised violence could arguably be seen as an act of resistance itself). A depoliticising, decontextualising analysis of this behaviour might suggest that Rathore simply “wanted a turn” and acted without socio-political intent or critique. However, using Langhout’s (2005) criteria for resistance, there is consistent evidence (even in this one snapshot) of Rathore resisting attempts by adults to control his body – for example, by pulling his arm away from Deva, by refusing to stand behind Ria as the Grandmother yelled at them, or more subtly, by standing tall even as the Grandmother sought to intimidate him by ‘towering over’ him. Additionally, in drawing on Rios’s (2011) notion of dignity work, the counter/stories

provide insight into how Rathore attempted to ‘self-author’ his own narrative – for example, in response to being scolded in the front of the group, Rathore used laughter to trivialize the disrespect he showed to an elder, and maintain a sense of belonging by getting his peers to be “on his side”. Lastly, in demonstrating an attempt to resist control, whilst showing self-determination, Rathore expertly climbed over the fence to make his way into the garden despite being banned.

These frequently occurring layers of ‘ordinary, overt, covert, passive, active, verbal, non-verbal and spatial’ resistance emphasize that Rathore’s behaviour was not simply ‘situational’, but rather that it was cognizant, complex, and stemming from a sense of indignation against practices that he perceived to be unjust. Rathore sought to speak out against the Grandmother in order to assert his right for an “equal turn” while knowing that the consequences of his actions would result in punishment. Such ‘punishments’ and ‘loss of freedom’ limit opportunities for resistance to be acknowledged as a “valid” problem with the system (instead blaming the individual) by subtly reinforcing the idea that it is the individual who is broken and needs to be ‘fixed’, rather than the system. Given that ‘dignity work’ stems from a desire to uphold one’s sense of worth and humanity in the face of systematic oppression – this form of resistance maintains transformative potential. Rathore’s behaviour could reflect, not only transformative and micro-political intention, but also that Rathore was attempting to maintain some sense of dignity by using the ‘everyday tools’ of resistance that he had available to him (Bayat, 2013). This echoes Rios’s (2011) findings where the resistance of youth of colour “often placed the boys at risk of punishment. The delinquent boys calculated that it was worth taking the risk of losing their freedom in order to gain some dignity from the system” (Rios, 2011, pp. 144-145).

Pedagogical Possibilities for Doing Dignity Work with Children

Macklin (2003) argues that dignity can be a 'useless' concept since it "means no more than respect for persons or their autonomy" (p. 1419). However, from a Freirean standpoint, the concept of dignity is connected to the process of liberation, dialogue, and dissent (Lohrenscheit, 2006). Thus, as Lohrenscheit (2006) argues, to engage with educational practices that acknowledge children's humanity, there is a need to consider dignity and resistance together.

As there are endless educational possibilities for 'how' one might practice dignity in supporting children's resistant behaviours, it is not the intention of this paper to provide a 'how to guide'. Rather, in this section, provocations for pedagogical possibilities are offered through reflective prompts. In exploring the pedagogical possibilities for engaging with resistance, there is scope to consider how we might support children's behaviour as communication in ways that maintain our shared dignity, belonging, and humanity (Gartrell, 2013) by a) reflecting on behaviour as communication, b) considering how social, cultural, economic, political and historical conditions influence the nature of resistance, c) recognising transformative potential in resistance, and d) examining 'dignity work' in educational praxis. Thus, we may ask:

- What are different ways we could interpret what behaviour is communicating?
- What might behaviours be communicating a desire for?
- What insights are offered through understanding context, personhood, or the many aspects of who people are (and want to be)?

These questions offer a starting point for thinking through the relational nature of behaviour as communication. In examining the pedagogical possibilities that emerge from 'dignity work', Freire (2004) suggests that there is a fundamental need to support children through the expression of "radical" and relentless humanity. That is, for example, if Rathore's behaviour is

violent – there is a need to respond with dignity. That is not to say that violence should be 'allowed' – but rather that responding to violence with "equal or greater forces" of violence, shame, humiliation, exclusion and/or othering should also not be allowed. In considering how we might "do" dignity work with children; we can ask ourselves:

1. Would I treat or think about another adult this way?
2. Would I want to be treated or thought of in this way?
3. Would I want someone I look up to, to treat or think about me in this way?

Conclusion

This paper has presented three counter/stories of one experience from a Rashomon perspective to offer multi-perspectival interpretations of behaviour as communication. In doing so, we have reflected on the need to "listen" to behaviour by examining a) the social origins of behaviour and resistance, b) the potential for resistance to be a positive force, and c) the ways in which certain acts of resistance might communicate a desire for maintaining dignity. Though the counter/stories presented in this paper tell 'one' story, research from across the world points out that Rathore's experiences of stigma, exclusion and shame are common, particularly for those of us considered to be the "usual suspects". Resistance theory tells us that it is the "usual suspects" who continue to resist and be resisted by educational systems. Using a relational approach for conceptualising, responding to, and proactively supporting children's behaviour as communication – we offer reflective prompts for considering how practices that communicate dignity, shared humanity and solidarity can not only support children, but also work to slowly transform the systemic barriers that our "usual suspects" may face.

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