Open Dialogue:

The Hole in the Heart of Education (and the role of psychology in addressing it)

Guy Claxton & Bill Lucas

The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically.
Intelligence plus character – that is the goal of true education. Martin Luther King

IN OUR BOOK *Educating Ruby: What Our Children Really Need to Learn* (Claxton & Lucas, 2015), we argue that schooling in the UK, and in many countries, has lost its way. We also suggest that the psychology of education could, and should, be making a greater contribution to the resultant battle for the soul of education that is raging around the world.

We start by reminding ourselves of the distinction between education and schooling. Education is a vision of what it is that all young people need help to develop, if they are to cope well with the rigours and opportunities we imagine they will face. It is, therefore, an explicit view of the future and of the resources which adequate engagement with that world will require. Schooling is a putative method of delivering those outcomes. Without a clear sense of what the 'educated 11- or 16- or 19-year-old' needs to know, be able to do, and of the character strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) they are likely to need, there is no way of judging the effectiveness and appropriateness of any version of schooling. All we have to go on are 'performance indicators' such as literacy levels or examination grades that happen to be already enshrined in schooling practice. In times of change, this poverty of vision and lazy approach to measurement is not good enough. For the indicators of success appropriate for a 'textbook, pen and paper' grammar-school intake in the 1950s are very unlikely to be adequate for a digital, multicultural comprehensive school in the 21st century.

In planning and adjusting an educational vision, and its implementation in schooling, the testimony of students and their families about their current experience of schooling needs to be taken seriously. We are often reminded of the old story of a disadvantaged student in a run-down school in New York who was asked by his teacher, 'Lemar, how many legs does a grasshopper have?' To which Lemar's rueful reply, 'Oh man, I wish I had your problems' shows the distance that there may be between a curriculum and the demands of the real world. In the interviews we conducted for *Educating Ruby*, time and again we heard tales of stress, brutality and sheer incomprehension at the things 21st century children were still being required to do and to learn in school. Kirsty, in Year 11 at a good school in the south-west of England, said:

> It's getting tedious, all this pressure around exams. A lot of my friends will cry about it. One of my friends was shouted at for getting an A, and was told she needed to get an A* to be considered 'good enough'. I was told to drop Art in favour of History. They said that because Art is not an academic subject you don't need it. It makes you feel really down and stressed about everything.

Natasha, now an undergraduate, recalled her time in a high-achieving independent secondary girls' school in the south of England. 'In Year 8 I saw the very quiet girl I sat next to cutting her wrists with the point of a compass… I myself had an eating

disorder between 13 and 17. One of the norms was to have a thigh the same size as your calf. The school never suspected anything: it was the norm, so I was no anomaly.' The statistics on the continuing decline in adolescent mental health speak for themselves (Children's Society, 2015; Collishaw et al., 2004).

Put simply, we believe that the core purpose of education should be to expand all young people's resources to cope with the actual and anticipated demands of their lives: intellectual, practical, social and emotional. That includes readiness to thrive at university or college, in the workplace and much more besides. This seems pretty self-evident. The more resourceful you have become, the better able you are to deal with the pressures of life. Education should accelerate the development of psychological resources – knowledge, skills, attitudes and beliefs – so that young people have an expanding sense of confidence and competence in their ability to cope with what life throws at them.

So education is the antidote to stress. When perceived demands exceed perceived resources, stress increases (Lazarus, 2006). To reduce stress, increase resources. However, for very many young people, school serves not to increase those resources so much as to add a great weight of additional pressures on their lives. This, we think, is intolerable, and it is why we think that much of what passes for education in today's schools is not just irrelevant but actually damaging.

We think that psychology ought to be focusing its efforts and resources on addressing these core concerns, and not, for example – where these still happen – on supporting a system which seems geared often uncritically towards knowledge transmission, examination success and good behaviour, or on training educational psychologists to 'statement' young people, some of whose inarticulate rejection of what school has to offer them may be profoundly rational. Specialisms in 'dyscalculia' or

autism are vitally useful for particular sub-populations of school-children, but the needs of the great mass of other students, conventional successes of the system, or at least, biddable and untroublesome, are many times greater.

In his Vernon-Wall lecture for the Education Section of the BPS, Claxton (2013) wrote:

Educational psychology has often been guilty of casting itself merely as a servant of whatever system of schooling happens to hold sway. It has sometimes accepted too much of the status quo. If the politicians are making a fuss about reading, we will do experiments on phonics and textual comprehension. If our society is in thrall to the mind-myth of fixed intelligence, we oblige by inventing ways to measure it. If teachers are worried about kids who are disruptive or distracted, we develop technical concepts like 'dyslexia' or 'executive functioning' that seem to give us a scientific purchase on those problems (and sometimes do).

All this is useful – but we are also entitled to use our psychology to challenge the mainstream as well as to service it. If we want to, psychological research can help us to be in the Vision business, and not just part of the Fixit industry. Yes, Ed Psych, like all psychology, trades in facts and seeks well-established frameworks for understanding mind and behaviour. And Yes, we cannot derive an Ought from an Is; science cannot tell us what it is right or good to do. But it can open our eyes to possibilities, and show us where folk psychological assumptions may be hampering our efforts to improve. You can't get an Ought from and Is, but you can get a Might. (pp.16–17)

In what follows, we want to illustrate how the psychology of education could contribute to a reappraisal of the core purposes of education, seen as the preparation of all young people for 21st century life, and also help to sharpen our understanding of the kind of schooling that could deliver those valued outcomes.

Character strengths

The work of Angela Duckworth, Carol Dweck, Jacquelynne Eccles, Martin Seligman and many others has been the subject of several recent popularisations (see, for example, Paul Tough's *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity and the Hidden Power of Character* (2012)), and is now well known in the educational community. This body of work shows that one of the most valuable residues of young people's time in education is a set of dispositions that surface particularly in the face of difficulty, uncertainty and conflicting goals or values. There are many ways of characterising these dispositions, widespread agreement about some of them, and some disagreement about others. For example, on the basis of a good deal of evidence, Duckworth et al. (2007) propose a core set comprising grit, self-control, zest, social intelligence, gratitude, optimism and curiosity. Perkins and colleagues (1993) propose adventurousness, curiosity, seeking clarity, planning, striving for accuracy, rationality and reflectiveness. Both Costa and Kallick (2000) and Claxton (2002) have proposed longer lists (of 16 and 17 'habits of mind' respectively) that largely overlap. Several authors have argued that empathy and the inclination to adopt different perspectives on tricky issues should be on the core list. In *Educating Ruby*, we boiled these different lists down to 'The 7 C's': Confidence, Collaboration, Communication, Creativity, Curiosity, Commitment and Craftsmanship. Work on refining these continues, but there is no doubt that these personal attitudes and inclinations serve people well as they meet the inevitable vicissitudes of study, work and life.

There is also little doubt that they can be cultivated. Many of the researchers just mentioned have developed and rigorously evaluated detailed specifications for designing school cultures and classroom practices that serve to incubate these characteristics over time. Many practical lessons have been learned in the last 20 years about what does and does not work in this regard.

It does not work to bolt on decontextualised bouts of 'thinking skills training', or to think that such outcomes can be dealt with through separate strands of 'social and emotional aspects of learning (SEAL)', 'personal, social and health education (PSHE)', or 'tutorial time', for example. To be effective, there has to be a sustained effort to embed the cultivation of these traits within the routine, on-going life of lessons and schemes of work. David Levin, founder of the successful KIPP ('Knowledge Is Power Programme') schools, for example, says, 'In order for [character education] to succeed, it has to permeate everything in the school, from the language people use, to lesson plans, to how people are rewarded and recognised, to the signs on the wall. If it's not woven into the DNA of an institution it will have minimal impact' (quoted in Tough, 2012).

Neither does it work to treat these dispositions as yet more things to be taught through conventional classroom methods of transmission, reading and discussion. Students can easily become knowledgeable about them without embodying them in their behaviour (as they can about more moral virtues such as honesty, gratitude or kindness, for instance). It is necessary to offer opportunities for students to discover for themselves the scope and the benefits of these attitudes, and to do so in a wide variety of different subject and topic contexts (Perkins, 2009). Being explicit about these attitudes helps to guide these explorations, and helps students to recognise and pinpoint the different virtues when they occur in the course of learning, but talk by itself does not establish the habit (any more than listening to a lecture on putting of itself makes you a better putter).

And finally, it does not work to treat these complex, evolving dispositions as if they were merely technical 'skills' that could be 'trained' in short order. Qualities like empathy or the kind of resilience that athletes call 'mental toughness' take years to deepen and develop, for example, and it

does no service to the cause to treat them as if they could be adequately developed through a series of worksheets, or assessed via a tick-box kind of evaluation (Claxton et al., 2011). Indeed, we suspect that the nomenclature is critical. The use of the word 'skill' is widespread – people talk of 'soft skills', 'non-cognitive skills', '21st century skills', 'thinking skills' and so on – yet unhelpful. The word skill primes the wrong kind of psychology of learning: something that is relatively short-term, circumscribed and technical. It also underplays the importance of what Perkins and colleagues call 'sensitivity to occasion' – a kind of built-in awareness of the situations in which the ability to persist in the face of difficulty, for example, is appropriate (as opposed to fruitlessly 'banging your head against a brick wall'). Crudely, a skill is something you can do; a disposition is something you are on the look-out for opportunities to do. If education aims to get young people ready to live a learning life, responding to challenges and pursuing difficult projects with confidence and intelligence, we must aim to make them not just able, but ready and willing as well.

In general, recent work in positive psychology has provided evidence for the importance of certain character strengths in underpinning a life that is fulfilling and harmonious, has identified and clarified a good number of these attitudes, has demonstrated that they are psychological habits of mind that are strongly influenced by experience, and has underwritten the design of learning environments that are effective at cultivating these strengths in young people (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). There has also been a wealth of research that shows that the effort to foreground the development of character strengths for learning, provided they are implemented gently and consensually, tend to raise rather than jeopardise conventional performance indicators such as examination grades and literacy levels (Watkins, 2010).

These evidence-based developments show that such an ambition for education is psychologically coherent and practically feasible. They create a strong sense of possibility. But they do not tell us that this possibility ought to be enacted. To turn the 'might' into an 'ought', this possibility has also to be seen as desirable. As we argued earlier, a society needs a vision of the general demands that will characterise the world in which the next generation will find themselves, and a view of the kinds of psychological – as well, of course, as social and material – resources they will need to cope with those demands, to take advantage of the opportunities and freedoms they will encounter, and to do so without experiencing debilitating levels of anxiety or stress. Several psychologists have pursued such a line of thought. Robert Kegan's book *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Kegan, 1994) was an early, and still valid, example.

Communities of practice

The work of socio-cultural researchers such as Lave and Wenger (1991), many of them working within a neo-Vygotskean perspective (see Wells & Claxton, 2002), has contributed to our deepening understanding of the school as an incubator of mental habits, values and beliefs. Superficially, schools are places where one generation passes on knowledge (e.g. history and science) and competencies (e.g. literacy and numeracy) to another. Look closer, though, and you will see that school is also a place full of habits and customs that are passing on values, assumptions and identities as well. Some of these are evident in the school rules and explicit communications, but many are embedded in 'the way we do things round here'. Every lesson by every teacher is a tutorial in what is to be considered 'clever', 'silly', 'dangerous', 'funny' or 'unworthy of attention', for example. Every comment on an essay is an attempt to teach what is of value and what is not. The timetable enshrines powerful, deep-seated judgements about the relative merits of academic (e.g. algebra or the periodic table) as opposed to

physical (e.g. dance or PE) knowledge and learning, and those who are good at the latter, but not the former (or vice versa) are given relentless tuition, in dozens of direct and indirect ways, about how to think about themselves and the kinds of 'intelligence' they possess.

Freud was surely right that 'sometimes a cigar is just a cigar', but in a traditional classroom – many of which still exist – an eraser is rarely just an eraser, for example. If 'intelligent' or 'bright' are terms of approbation, honorifics that are bestowed on children who regularly do what they are asked to do quickly, correctly and without error, then errors come to be seen as symptoms of lack of intelligence (or of carelessness or disengagement). Crossings-out are treated as 'messy', so thinking has to be done in pencil so that mistakes can be erased and history quickly rewritten. In a kind of double accounting, 'rough work' is carried out, if it must be, in a scruffy book that parents do not see, or on odds and ends of paper that are thrown away as soon as they have served their purpose, while the eraser makes sure that no signs of error (or experimentation, or anarchic humour) are visible in the 'best books' that are proudly put on display or sent home. To this day, thousands of bright but anxious girls – this habit does seem to be gendered – hoard a prize collection of pristine erasers, and are horrified if a new teacher threatens to ban their use, and insist that mistakes – the historical records of learning itself – be highlighted rather than removed, or that Track Changes must be turned on when they are working on an essay. (An 'essay' is, of course, precisely an attempt, a try, a provisional exploration or 'assaying' of ideas and possibilities; not a polished product against which one will be, perhaps forever, judged.) Of course, sometimes one wants or needs to present something that is 'the best it can be', but 'learning mode' and 'presentation mode' are complementary, and both are necessary and to be equally esteemed if genuine progress in the face of difficulty is to be made.

If teachers want to help young people preserve and strengthen dispositions such as craftsmanship, resilience and creativity, then they will need to check the insidious beliefs and values that may be invisibly strapped to the underside of every eraser in their classroom. To erase or not to erase; that is a question that matters. Schools, like all cultures, are composed of hundreds of such tiny, seemingly innocuous habits. And when we look at a school from such a sociocultural perspective, these habits can be drawn into the light and inspected for the work of socialisation that they may be doing. Sometimes, it turns out that such habits and enshrined practices are pulling against values that are more explicitly espoused. On the website, there may be a clear commitment to helping all students develop the habits and dispositions of powerful, confident lifelong learners – but the comforting eraser in the pencil case may well be whispering something rather different.

Educational psychologists have moved, over the last few decades, from being predominantly assessors and labellers of children, applying tests that are shot through with often unexamined cultural values, against a backdrop of often unquestioned cultural values in the school, to agents of culture change themselves, supporting a school in clarifying its vision and values, and in examining the degree of match and mismatch between these and the implicit messages of embedded, day-to-day cultural practices (Wagner, 2000). When able to play this role, they are well placed to help a school determine its own direction of cultural evolution (in the face of often countervailing external pressures), and to spot ways in which it can narrow any previously unnoticed gaps between its values and its structures and practices.

Habit formation and habit change
Character strengths are habits; largely learned responses to broad classes of events, especially those that involve uncertainty, complexity and either intrapsychic or social

conflicts between competing values and interests. I find a wallet containing a wad of £20 notes. I need the cash, but I am also keen to see myself as a 'good person'. Honesty is the disposition, in the heat of the moment, for the latter consideration to over-ride the former. I find myself struggling with a maths problem. I want to escape from the feeling of confusion and self-criticism that is growing in me, but I also want to keep on struggling to see if I can get the right answer. *Perseverance* is the tendency for the latter to over-ride the former. I am getting into an argument about whether we will accept an invitation to spend the weekend with people we don't know very well. From my point of view, I'm not keen, but I also recognise that this might mean a lot to you. *Empathy* is the inclination to suspend my point of view while I take time to understand why you are feeling so strongly about it.

The development of dispositions is, therefore, a process of habit formation. We know from the psychological literature that habit formation is a kind of learning in which knowledge of facts and intellectual understanding play only a small role (Prochaska & Norcross, 1994). Also involved are the cultivation of affective buy-in to the value of the new habit, forming appropriate 'implementation intentions' (Gollwitzer, 1999), alertness to opportunities to act in the 'new way' rather than the more strongly habituated 'old way', setting of realistic targets, self-forgiveness for inevitable lapses and forgetfulness, the support of coaches and others, celebrations and 'treats', and so on. Habit formation involves the progressive re-wiring of neural connectivity, and even in the case of simple habits, this usually takes of the order of two months of awareness and determination (Lally et al., 2010).

This means that teachers have to create a learning environment that functions as a continual incubator of the strengths and habits that they want their students to develop. Occasional pep-talks, or intermittent bursts of 'skills training' that leave routine pedagogy unaltered, are unlikely to be effective, and this has been borne out in evaluations of the effectiveness of stand-alone sessions or workshops on 'thinking skills', for example (Nickerson, Perkins & Smith 1985). Teachers need to learn to see themselves as on-going coaches of these attitudes, constantly looking for opportunities to draw attention to and cultivate the desired outcomes. For example, they learn to spot opportunities to acknowledge students' use of the dispositions, and encourage students themselves to look for ways in which they can stretch their own imaginativeness or attentiveness to detail. They talk to their classes about the nature of persistence, say, and invite discussions about what students' experiences of persistence have been like, what undermines their persistence, and in what situations, past, present and future, might persistence be, or have been, of value.

Teachers often complain of students' apparent desire to be 'spoon-fed'; they have become dependent on teachers to explain, rescue and correct their learning efforts, and their own 'learning muscles' have become weak. So teachers might want to build up the dispositions of resourcefulness, proactive inquisitiveness and independence. They might realise that their existing habits have led them – perhaps in the interests of efficiency and 'getting through the syllabus' – to systematically underestimate students' ability to take responsibility for their own learning. They, the teachers, will thus need to change their mindset a little, learning to continually ask themselves, 'What might this group be ready to do for themselves?' Could they be ready to undertake more independent research in the library or on the internet? Might they be ready to form their own study groups to review learning and identify areas of difficulty or misunderstanding? Might they be ready to sequence an array of learning tasks for themselves? Might they be ready to work together to improve each other's 'first drafts'? Might they be ready to struggle more, and be rescued less when they are struggling? And so on.

So in order to help young people develop these habits of mind, teachers and school leaders may well need to adjust their own habits. Habit formation in students may necessitate reciprocal habit change in their tutors and 'instructional designers'. They could learn to design activities slightly differently, so that, as well as building skill in solving simultaneous equations, or understanding of the political machinations of the Elizabethan court, they are also stretching their inclinations to enjoy digging below the surface of the subject-matter to unearth deeper issues, or to put themselves in the shoes of people who lived in very different times and cultures from their own (Claxton et al., 2011). Or teachers could learn to adjust habits of speech so that they used less indicative language – 'It IS called this; there ARE five factors to remember', and so on – and more subjunctive language – 'People have SUGGESTED that; there MIGHT BE five or more factors to bear in mind'. Langer has shown that such a shift in linguistic register moves students from an attitude of passivity and retention to an attitude of greater engagement, proactive questioning, and use of imagination (Langer, 1997).

Again we see how psychological research can open up evidenced lines of thinking that can support a particular vision of the desirable residues of education. And we can also see how educational psychologists can also draw on research – into habit change and habit formation, for instance – to strengthen their roles as supportive habit change agents in schools, for the benefit of the mainstream, as well as in the service of particular sub-populations of students.

Psychology's vital contribution to policy development

As a final example, we might look quickly at the wider question of educational policy. There are many schools that have made great strides in developing young people – of all so-called 'ability levels' – who are confident, curious, articulate, convivial, imaginative, resilient and craftsmanlike in their approach to learning, whether in study, work or life in general. Once school principals are convinced of the desirability of such an approach, and know enough of the scientific background to see that it is also possible, they sense a new direction of travel for the school and start gathering practical support and resources to make the cultural changes that are required. But overall progress is patchy, both nationally and internationally, and too dependent on individual school principals who are willing to 'give it a go'. What is needed is stronger system-wide – and that means political – commitment.

As a first step, some countries have recently developed more or less detailed descriptions of the kinds of dispositions they want their young people to develop. Singapore, for example, has adopted a specification of their 'Desirable Outcomes of Education' that go way beyond literacy, numeracy and performance in the international PISA comparisons. So have New Zealand, Australia, Scotland and Ireland. Many countries (such as England and the US) have not even got that far yet. But even where these first steps have been taken, the journey has often proved hazardous. In some countries there are deep cultural currents that require deference and compliance of 'junior' towards 'senior' members of society – and there is no-one more junior than children. So the cultivation of students as curious, questioning, independent learners can be stymied by these entrenched beliefs. Even when the culture at large is more hospitable, rightwards shifts of government – in New Zealand and Australia, for example – have largely buried these initiatives under a welter of reactionary concerns with accountability and testing. And often the scientific psychological underpinnings have not been emphasised enough, nor broadcast widely enough to the general population. Lacking such recognised and rigorous root systems, the concern with cultivating positive learning dispositions through education has often been characterised as merely 'liberal' or 'progressive', and thus denigrated and pushed aside.

Psychology needs to get out there and trumpet its discoveries and possibilities. Parents need to be convinced, and to feel empowered to ask pertinent (at the risk of being thought impertinent) questions of their children's school principals and of their local and national politicians. This is what we tried to do in *Educating Ruby*. The book was written to inspire and empower parents and employers, as well as teachers, to grasp these new possibilities, and to pester those in power for change. With some exceptions, politicians treat politics as a form of tribal warfare, in which nothing is worse than losing the next election. Thus both legislation and electioneering tend to be driven by the attempt to activate the short-term self-interest of the electorate in favour of a particular party, and changes that are more subtle, harder to explain, or which will take more than one electoral term to accomplish are dropped in favour of the dog-whistle and the sound-bite.

What gets politicians' attention are changes in the public mood: shifts in values and priorities that must be responded to if increasing proportions of the electorate are not to stop voting for you. That is why fomenting such changes is so important, and it is why 21st century education, as we have outlined it here, will not scale up fast enough unless parents in their hundreds of thousands have the courage to pester their politicians with knowledge and confidence. And psychologists who work in education, whether as practitioners or researchers, have a powerful role to play in that process.

A century ago William James asked psychologists to explore two important questions: what types of human abilities are there and by what means are humans to unleash these abilities? (James, 1907) We would add: which aspects of character impact most on success in life and how best can these be cultivated? These are the kinds of bold questions to which psychology can and should contribute its thinking.

The Authors
Professor Guy Claxton &
Professor Bill Lucas
Centre for Real-World Learning,
The University of Winchester,
The Masters' Lodge,
Romsey Road,
Winchester SO22 5HT.

Correspondence
Professor Guy Claxton
Email: Guy.Claxton@winchester.ac.uk

Professor Bill Lucas
Email: Bill.Lucas@winchester.ac.uk

Guy Claxton & Bill Lucas

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