

Praise for *Educating Ruby*

It was a teacher that changed my life; not because he taught me my times tables but because he helped me rebuild my confidence through my parents' divorce. I am Ruby, you are Ruby, we are all Ruby. Thank you Guy Claxton and Bill Lucas for breaking us out of the battery farm.

**Richard Gerver, author of
*Creating Tomorrow's Schools Today***

Good schools have always focused on 'results plus', helping children achieve their potential in examinations and at the same time developing confident and creative individuals who are keen to do their very best. Guy Claxton and Bill Lucas are absolutely right to remind us of the need for more expansive approaches. *Educating Ruby* is a timely reminder of how increasingly important it is not to focus on just part of what matters at school.

Brian Lightman, General Secretary, ASCL

It is essential that schools educate the whole child. I strongly support the line of argument made by Bill Lucas and Guy Claxton that schools are about so much more than examination results. *Educating Ruby* is essential reading for everyone who cares about the future of education in our country.

Tony Little, Head Master, Eton College

The UK school system is in urgent need of reform. *Educating Ruby* teems with practical, evidence-based, inspiring ideas for teaching and learning, that will brighten the lives of over-tested students, stressed-out teachers and concerned parents. And when politicians are finally ready to be pointed in the right direction, it's just the book for them too.

**Sue Palmer, literacy specialist
and author of *Toxic Childhood***

A powerful, heartfelt and expert analysis of what's going wrong in the education of our children and how to put it right.

Sir Ken Robinson

Examination grades are important, but they are only half the story of education. Parents send their children to schools like my own because they know we build the kinds of character and roundedness that this book puts its finger on. It's what all schools everywhere should be doing. Guy Claxton and Bill Lucas speak for schoolchildren and their parents everywhere.

Sir Anthony Seldon, Master, Wellington College

The need for a knowledge-rich curriculum is beyond dispute but this provocative book should make all teachers and school leaders think deeply about what is taught and how. A broad range of ideas encompassing deep scholarship, character building and creativity are set out with passion and clarity including practical suggestions for schools and parents. It's going to wind some people up – but that's a good thing.

**Tom Sherrington, Head Teacher,
Highbury Grove School**

The schools of tomorrow are here today – but are too few and far between. We won't get the speed and scale of change without real political will which is currently lacking. *Educating Ruby* is a brave attempt to mobilise parent power to get that change to happen. I really hope it succeeds!

Matthew Taylor, Chief Executive, RSA

Most people believe schools should do their bit to help children become 'rounded individuals' as well as developing their intellectual strength. The obsession with measuring our schools through testing their pupils means that too many children are on a relentless treadmill which is self-defeating. Ruby and her friends need an education with all its richness, with teachers who bring learning alive and supported by parents who play their full part. It is not too complicated and *Educating Ruby* explains why the system needs to change and what everyone can do about it.

**Mick Waters, Professor of Education,
Wolverhampton University**

What would schools look like if they taught children what they really need to know? Could we ever have schools like that? *Educating Ruby* is thoughtful, provocative and optimistic. As ever, Guy Claxton and Bill Lucas are wise and experienced voices on the cutting edge of education. All teachers and parents should read this book – they'd learn lots, and enjoy it!

**Hilary Wilce, author of *Backbone: How to Build
the Character Your Child Needs to Succeed***

Educating Ruby is a must read book for all stakeholders in education. Guy Claxton and Bill Lucas show how we can have happy, positive young people with skills, attitudes and ‘habits of mind’; who are knowledgeable *and* capable of passing examinations.

Sue Williamson, Chief Executive, SSAT

Whether you agree or disagree with *Educating Ruby*, you’ll certainly be engaged, stimulated and challenged.

**Robert Wilne, founding Head Master,
London Academy of Excellence**

Guy Claxton
Bill Lucas

with forewords by Professor Tanya Byron and Octavius Black

Educating Ruby



what our children really need to learn



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Chapter 3

Competence and character

Intelligence plus character – that is the goal of true education.

Martin Luther King

We'd like you to try another thought experiment. It's in two parts. In the first part you will finally meet the Ruby who gave this book its title. Imagine you are the head of a secondary school and you are walking down the street when you are stopped by an ex-student who left about two years ago. Ruby says she just wants to thank you for the great education she got at your school. You remember Ruby well, so you recall that she left at 16 with two rather poor GCSEs (a D in drama and an E in English). So you scratch around for a response. (You can tell she is being sincere.) You say, "Ah yes, I remember you had a big part in the really successful performance of *The Crucible*, didn't you? And I know you made some great friendships." "True," says Ruby, "but that's

not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about the quality of the *education* you gave me. It was wonderful. Really." And now you are rather flummoxed, and you say, "Sorry, Ruby, I don't understand what you mean."

The question is: what does Ruby say? How can Ruby honestly feel that those years were well spent, when she was a 'loser' at the examination game? You might like to discuss this with someone before you read on. (You might like to be reading this book with someone else – your partner, your child, your mother – so you can discuss and argue along the way.)

Here is the kind of thing that we think Ruby might say. We've neatened up her words so this is partly our voice, as well as Ruby's. But see if you think this is plausible.

You helped me develop my *self-confidence*. By that I mean you treated me in ways that helped me build my self-respect. You taught me that, even though I wasn't an egg-head, I wasn't stupid. By the way your teachers responded to me, you gave me faith that what I thought was worth thinking. You helped me to become optimistic and positive in my outlook on life. You gave me the feeling that there were many worthwhile things I could achieve and become, if I put my mind to it, even though they were not academic things. All of the teachers in your school believed in us, and so helped us to believe in ourselves. And you made me discover that, if I put in the effort, it often paid off. By pushing me and not giving up on me, you helped me learn to be a can-do sort of person.

You helped me become *curious*. When I asked questions your teachers didn't make me feel stupid or tell me 'I

should have been listening'. If my questions were a bit wacky you explained why in a respectful way. You made me feel that the questions I asked were worth asking, even though there wasn't always time in class to go into them. You encouraged us all to try new things, and made it so nobody ever laughed at anyone for having a go, even if they weren't very good to start with. I learned that everyone makes mistakes: it doesn't mean you are no good, it means you are learning. So I'm always up for a challenge now, and I'm exploring all kinds of things I would never have dreamed of – especially through books. You really helped me to see reading as a pleasure, not a drudgery. And you encouraged us to question what we were being told (or what we read, especially on the net). We could always say, "Hang on a minute, Miss, how do we know that's true?" And your teachers would say, "Fair point, Ruby – how could we check?" So now I'm quite bold about challenging things I read or am being told (but in the respectful way you modelled for us).

You helped us all become *collaborative* kinds of people. Sometimes you called it 'conviviality', and talked of the friendship and comradeship that learning so often requires. Your teachers showed us how to discuss and disagree respectfully, so we naturally treated each other like that. I'm now not afraid to ask for help, or to offer it when I think someone needs it. You taught us never to laugh at anyone just because they didn't know something. I learned to be more open and friendly to new people and to want to help them fit in and feel at home. We were a very non-cliquey school. I learned to be a good team player, and to know when to button my lip

(that took some learning, but it was worth it). I think I'm more generous-spirited than I was. And I'm definitely a better friend: you helped us understand why it is so important, for our own sake, to be trustworthy and honest in our dealings with people – and to admit when we had screwed up or apologise when we said something out of order.

You definitely helped me become a better *communicator*. Because I learned to enjoy reading, I think I have a better understanding of people and a richer vocabulary – especially for talking about emotional or intimate kinds of things. I like looking up new words and trying them out. I love how we can be really into what Liam called 'the craic' one minute, just joshing and having fun, and then we can switch to being serious and soft if someone is troubled about something. We talked a lot in class, and your teachers helped us to recognise the different kinds of talk we could have, and how to be appropriate. And I learned that sometimes I need to be quiet and by myself too, and that doesn't mean I'm shy or upset. I've learned that sometimes I need to stop and think before I speak – but not always. And I'm happy to talk to anyone – teachers, strangers, my friends' grandparents ... even the Queen if she came by! It's part of being confident, I suppose, and not being on edge that what I say might be stupid.

You helped me discover my own *creativity*. Your teachers often set us puzzles and asked us for our ideas, so we got used to thinking aloud and building on what other people had said. We learned not to dismiss things that sounded daft too quickly, because they could often lead to interesting and novel ideas. Your teachers often set us

great projects that really stretched us to achieve more than we thought we could. And there were plenty of opportunities (though not always in lessons) for us to pursue our own interests and experiments, and to learn to think for ourselves and come up with our own proposals. You gave us opportunities to be funny and zany, and you also made us think about our own education and come up with suggestions for improvement that you took seriously. Some teachers even taught us how to do wacky things like learn to toggle between being clear and logical and then going dreamy and imaginative – how to control our own minds better to get the most out of them.

You helped us all discover the value of being *committed* to what we do. Through being given the chance to learn independently, you helped me learn to take responsibility, to sort things out for myself and to stick with hard things and not wait to be rescued. (I remember one assembly where you talked about Ricky Gervais discovering what he called ‘the joy of the struggle’: I’ve never forgotten that.) Teachers used to go on a bit about ‘resilience’, but I think I have really learned how to be patient and persistent, and to know when to push myself and when it is smart to take a break and cool off. I’m not afraid of hard work, and you showed me that worthwhile things usually don’t come easily, so when I do go to university (I will, you know) I will be ready for the self-discipline and slog I will need to put in.

And you also taught me the pleasures of *craftsmanship*. I used to be a bit slapdash, but now I take a real pride in producing work that is as good as I can make it. I mean college work – homework assignments and so on – but

also when I practise the guitar the week before we have band rehearsal. I don't want to let the others down, but, more importantly, I don't want to let myself down. It's not just about determination; it's about being careful, and thinking about what you are doing, and taking time to reflect and improve, and going over your mistakes and practising the hard parts. You used to talk to us about the three Es of 'good work' – being engaging, being excellent and being ethical (I think it was from some prof at Harvard). I liked the ethical bit. My friends laugh, but when we are writing lyrics I won't stand for anything sexist or abusive these days! I want what I do to be, not goody-goody, but good in all three ways.

Now, obviously we have made Ruby up, but we think what she says is really important. She is trying to capture another side to what goes on in schools which, when it works well, produces more young people who are enterprising, friendly, moral and imaginative. She has tried to capture them in what we call the seven Cs: confidence, curiosity, collaboration, communication, creativity, commitment and craftsmanship. This, in a nutshell, is the 'other game' of school. If you cannot be a winner at the grade game, you can still come away having been a winner at the character game. The first requires losers; anyone can win the second. And the second actually counts for more in the long term, in real life.

If you had longer, Ruby could have told you about her friend, Nadezna, who was not so fortunate. She went to a school down the road where instead of the seven Cs she learned the seven Ds. Instead of becoming confident she became defeated. Instead of developing curiosity Nadezna

became disengaged. Instead of collaboration she developed distance from all but members of her own gang – her world became split into a very narrow group of *us* and a very large group consisting of everyone else called *them*. Instead of communicative she became, with the wider world, largely dumb (or at least monosyllabic). Instead of becoming creative she became deadbeat: passive and lethargic. Instead of committed she has become a drifter, unable to stick at anything, moving on whenever things threaten to get difficult. And instead of cultivating craftsmanship she has become a dogsbody, capable only of menial tasks and unable to raise her game when greater precision or responsibility is required. Between Ruby and Nadezna there is, of course, a whole spectrum of attitudes – but we know which end we want our children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews to head towards.

* * *

One of the absurdities of the current education system is the single-minded obsession with results at any price – especially at secondary school. Schools are judged on the examination performance – mainly at GCSE and A level – they manage to wring out of children, regardless of whether this is appropriate or of any collateral damage that may be caused. We'll come back to this later, but just a quick illustration here will do. In England, there is a very important metric by which schools are judged. It is the percentage of students who manage to attain a C grade or better in at least five subjects, of which two must be English and maths (soon to be

superseded by the even more stringent Progress 8).¹ If your 15-year-old son is heading for a D in one of his GCSE subjects, but the school thinks that, with a bit of help he might just make a C, in many schools he will get extra tuition and a lot of coaxing and coaching. Transforming a D into a C counts for a lot, whereas transforming an E into a D doesn't. If he is not judged to be capable of getting a C, he won't get that attention. The quality of his teaching will vary dramatically, depending not on what suits him, nor on trying to get the best out of all pupils, but because schools need to game the system – and your son becomes a pawn in that game.

We were reminded of this when thinking about Ruby and Nadezna. How lovely it would be to be able to transform all of Nadezna's Ds into Ruby's Cs – for all the tens of thousands of Nadeznas there are out there. But that would be a very different ambition from the petty, pernicious little game that is played every year at the moment.

We don't think Ruby is at all unrealistic. We know schools, as you probably do, where a lot of care goes into creating a culture that successfully incubates qualities like the seven Cs; and we know schools that don't. And we don't think this is a reversion to some feeble and discredited notion of 'child-centred' or 'progressive' education. Our guess is that millions of parents would like their children to go to schools where values like these – some of them quite 'old fashioned', some more specialised for the modern world – are being explicitly cultivated; and millions of teachers who are not lucky enough to be working in such schools already would love to.

1 Progress 8 is the latest term for EBacc (a short form of English Baccalaureate), a deliberate attempt by government to control the subjects by which a school's success is measured.

Competence and character

- Are the seven Cs the kinds of attitudes you would like your children (or students) to have?
- Are the seven Cs ones that you think will help them to thrive in the 21st century?
- If you had to rank order the seven Cs, which would be at the top of your list? Which at the bottom? How would you adjust them?
- Do you think it is realistic to think about cultivating them explicitly (or is that pie in the sky)?
- If a school did pay more attention to this ‘other game’, do you think its results would go up or down?
- Are the seven Cs just for the ‘low achievers’ like Ruby, or are they appropriate – vital even – for the high fliers as well?

Talk amongst yourselves!

Now here’s the second part of our thought experiment. It involves you being the head teacher again, but this time you are wandering down the High Street in Cambridge. As you are passing the offices of the University Counselling Service, the door opens and out in front of you steps Eric – who was one of your brightest students in the same year as Ruby, and left to read natural sciences at Trinity Hall. You are both a little embarrassed, but after a few stilted attempts at conversation you say you can’t help but notice that he has been in the counselling offices, and you hope everything is all right. It patently isn’t: Eric, who was a confident young man at your school, is now pale, withdrawn and having great difficulty making eye contact. You are finding it hard to hear what he is saying, but he mumbles something that sounds like “Feeling like a fraud”. Overcome with concern

for the dramatic change in Eric, you suggest a cup of tea which he warily accepts. What do you think is the story that he gradually reveals over tea? Do you find Eric plausible?

It turns out that Eric is all too real. A significant number of apparently bright, self-confident, articulate, high-achieving students will seek counselling during their undergraduate years at Oxford and Cambridge: that's several thousand young people.² There will be a variety of causes, obviously, but one of the major ones is this feeling that Eric is suffering from of having been found out, unmasked as an imposter – someone who, the evidence seems to suggest, is unworthy of being where they are. And that evidence is that they are now struggling with the weight and the difficulty of the work they are being set, yet they are supposed to be 'bright', and bright students are not supposed to struggle. Therefore, so the thought pattern goes, I must be more stupid than I and others believed, and so I am a fraud. This is a shattering realisation, so it is no surprise that anxiety and/or depression ensue.

So-called 'imposter syndrome' is on the rise, according to the directors of both the Oxford and Cambridge counselling services, and one of the reasons is that schools are getting better at force-feeding and shoehorning their students through the syllabus, so they get the grades they need, but do so in a way that fails to prepare them for the demands of life after school. More modularising, more coaching, more detailed feedback from caring teachers about what exactly you need to improve if you are going to get the coveted A* in your A levels. All of this helps to get the grades, but systematically deprives students of opportunities – as

2 Warwick Mansell, 'Spoonfed' students lack confidence at Oxbridge, *TES* (10 December 2010). Available at: <https://www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storycode=6065624>.

one tutor put it to us – to learn how to ‘flounder intelligently’. As we saw earlier, this is vital not only to cope when you are at university, but also to field that curve-ball question which you are sure to be tossed at interview. (We’ve used Cambridge as our example here, but we know that there are Erics in many universities and colleges.)

The same applies, by the way, in today’s job market. Working for Google is a plum job, and they get thousands of applications. But, again, watch out for the questions they will ask your daughter at interview. If she is asked whether she has an IQ of over 130, warn her that there are right and wrong answers. Yes is the wrong answer. At Google, they think if you have bothered to take an IQ test, and have bothered to remember the result, you may well be the kind of nerd who treasures badges of past accomplishments, rather than the kind of ‘intelligent flounderer’ they are looking for. At Google, intelligence does not mean being able to solve abstract logical puzzles under pressure. It means being able to think and question and learn in the face of unprecedented problems for which there are as yet no right answers. Likewise, if they ask your daughter whether she has a track record of success, it is much better for her to say it is patchy than to edit her CV and pretend she is Little Ms Perfect. Crowing about the past doesn’t cut it at Google; grappling with the future does. And some schools teach that, and many don’t.

Everyone knows schools need rethinking, but few speak from the perspectives of children, families and teachers.

Most offer simplistic critiques, creating false opposites between traditionalist and progressive viewpoints. Acclaimed educational thought-leaders Guy Claxton and Bill Lucas suggest something different and more optimistic. Just as Willy Russell's *Educating Rita* helped us rethink university, the authors of *Educating Ruby* invite fresh scrutiny of schools.

Educating Ruby is a powerful call to action for everyone who worries that our school system is not preparing children for the uncertainties and challenges of the real world. It shows how we can cultivate confidence, curiosity, collaboration, communication, creativity, commitment and craftsmanship in children at the same time as helping them to achieve success in public examinations.

Educating Ruby is essential reading for everyone who cares about the future of education in our country.

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Sir Ken Robinson

Individually and together, Professors **Guy Claxton** and **Bill Lucas** have written many best-selling and highly regarded books such as *Hare Brain, Tortoise Mind*; *The Learning Powered School*; *rEvolution*; *New Kinds of Smart* and *Expansive Education*. To show your support for the ideas in this book and consider what practical action you might like to take go to:

www.educatingruby.org #educatingruby

