The Hole in the Heart of Education (and the role of psychology in addressing it). Guy Claxton and Bill Lucas.

*Open Dialogue peer review:*

**A response to Claxton and Lucas**

Professor Chris Kyriacou

The timing of this paper by Claxton and Lucas could not have been more perfect for me personally. I had just sent an open letter to the newly appointed shadow secretary of state for education concerning what I felt were the five key areas where things were currently going wrong in education (Kyriacou, 2015a). The areas I focused on were (i) Pupil well-being; (ii) The state system of education; (iii) Post-16 opportunities; (iv) Qualified teachers; and (v) Vulnerable and troubled pupils.  As such, I was very keen to see how Claxton and Lucas viewed the current terrain in education.

Their paper was prefaced with a quotation from Martin Luther King, which viewed the true goal of education as the development of intelligence and character. This was an interesting and well-chosen signal of what was to come. The paper itself started with the need to distinguish between education and schooling, and a claim that the over-emphasis on attainment grades in schools as the key educational outcomes was flawed. This is evident in the extracts they presented from their book *Educating Ruby* (Claxton and Lucas, 2015).

And yet, I find their claim that the purpose of education should be to enhance young people’s resources to cope with demands, was starkly and surprisingly narrow. This puts the pupil in a reactive stance, and seems to me less empowering of pupils than it should be. Developing a sense of confidence and competence in their abilities seems odd too – and mimics the often cited claim that having positive beliefs in one’s abilities implies that one actually has those abilities. This leads on to the pitfall that occurs when it is claimed that in the face of the pressure that the education system places on pupils, what is needed is to help pupils develop greater resilience. To me, it seems obvious that the main problem nowadays is an aggressive culture of performativity imposed on schools.

If one accepts Claxton and Lucas’ view, there is a danger that the mental health problems generated by such pressures can easily come to be seen as a problem that lies primarily in a pupil’s lack of resilience. Strangely, the extract presented from Claxton’s Vernon-Wall lecture seems to fit my view much more than the view presented by Claxton and Lucas. There is no doubt that character (viz. character education) is now high on the educational agenda in the UK, and character education is being widely advocated. Whilst I agree that character strengths may empower, that is not the same as saying that building pupils’ character is the best approach to dealing with the pressures that pupils face.

The section on communities of practice is of particular interest to me because I too see a major role that educational psychologists (and other psychologists) can play in creating a heathier school climate and, more specifically, in supporting troubled and vulnerable pupils. Many educational psychologists are already very aware of the many ways in which schools can exacerbate rather than help solve the problems that some pupils face in schools, and in their lives in general. This is often evident in multi-agency collaboration. However, professional boundaries sometimes prevent educational psychologists moving down the road towards what they perceive to be the domain of social work.

At this the point I had hoped that Claxton and Lucas may be moving towards advocating what in mainland Europe is widely practised as ‘social pedagogy’ (Kyriacou, 2015b): an approach in which a professionally trained social pedagogue empowers the pupil to solve the problems they face through a mentoring relationship based on trust and care. Instead, however, Claxton and Lucas see the way forward as arguing for habit formation as the key process that teachers need to employ in order to develop pupils’ character strengths. Whilst the development habits has an important part to play in education and schooling, some confusion is generated by a lack of consistent definition and terminology when one considers habits of mind, mental habits, and mental disposition. The complexity in gaining clarification is increased by the fact that many concepts, such as resilience, have both a mental (attitudinal and decision-making) component and a physical (overt behavioural) component.

The final section of their paper looks at the development of educational policy. There is little doubt that the government narrative on the need to raise educational standards, as evident in international comparisons of pupil attainment data, has impoverished the development of educational policy in the UK. The introduction of the *Every Child Matters* agenda in 2004 (Cheminais, 2006) seemed for a while to rise above such pressures and to inject a more positive vision of education and schooling, in its call for learning to be more engaging, and for greater social inclusion. However, in recent educational policy, this glimmer of hope has been submerged.

Interestingly, one of the functions of social pedagogues is to seek and, where possible, to advocate or bring about changes in aspects of the child’s context that either create the problems they face or make it more difficult for the child to deal with the problems. This seems to be exactly what Claxton (2013) was calling for in his Vernon-Wall lecture when he criticises educational psychologists for accepting too much of the *status quo* when they should be using their expertise to challenge it where appropriate. Indeed, elsewhere in that lecture, Claxton spends some time addressing the importance of culture change – an issue which is not emphasised in the Claxton and Lucas paper. However, one of the major challenges facing those who wish to bring about changes in schools and educational policies, is the need to address those factors which make change hard to implement – including circumstances where changes are quickly and superficially accepted in the first instance, but gradually regress back to the *status quo.* Nevertheless, I very much agree with Claxton and Lucas that psychologists need to be more assertive in changing the current mindset of politicians and educational policy makers in how they view the purposes and processes involved in education and schooling

Claxton and Lucas argue that the government narrative on standards has denigrated the call for the cultivation of positive learning dispositions, although this does not in fact square with the current popularity of character education amongst politicians. In fact discussion of character education featured in both the Labour Party Conference and the Conservative Party Conference held in the Autumn of 2015. In this respect, it would have been useful to have read their views of the massive drive towards character education currently been advocated in the UK (e.g. Arthur, 2014; Department for Education, 2014).

Character education is a contested area, and it comes in many forms. One wonders which of the various approaches to character education Claxton and Lucas would highlight as being closest to the approach they are calling for in their paper, and why. The waters may have been muddied here by the way Claxton and Lucas refer to dispositions and habits, which touch upon or overlap with approaches to developing character contextualised by both moral education and citizenship education, whilst what is being advocated by Claxton and Lucas appears to be contextualised by personality education, personality attributes, and, in particular, notions of self-efficacy and grit.

In this respect the excellent work on developing pupils’ resilience and self-efficacy certainly deserves to be celebrated and more widely advocated, and there are many good examples of this to be found within alternative educational provision for pupils excluded from schools or at risk of exclusion from schools. The approaches adopted here are often embedded within the development of a positive teacher-pupil relationship, and the use of a variety of creative activities and outdoor activities, where the teacher can develop their relationship with troubled and vulnerable pupils whilst working alongside the pupils when they are engaged in such activities (Kyriacou and Nash, 2012).

For example, one school made use of canal boats in an inner city setting to promote pupils’ gradual re-engagement in the process of learning. Although the small groups involved make the provision of such activities expensive – taking a group of ten children with two or three staff members present on a two-hour canal boat ride activity is not something that schools can easily afford to do for a large number of its pupils, there are nonetheless ways of extending a variety of such practices within mainstream school settings.

Least it be thought that a mentoring or counselling style of dialogue with pupils is unequivocally the best way ahead in terms of promoting a positive disposition in pupils towards learning, one needs to acknowledge the importance that establishing good habits and routines also play. Whilst it is easy to view human behaviour as being dominated by rational and controlled choices, in fact most behaviour is simply governed by well-rehearsed habits and attitudes. Teachers and other professionals working with children are aware of the need to shape these habits and attitudes so that the pupils’ routine behaviour becomes beneficial to them and others, is socially acceptable, and makes it more likely that they will be able to engage in and sustain their learning. I take this to be the key message running through Claxton and Lucas’ paper.

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