Open Dialogue peer review: A response to Claxton and Lucas

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A response to Claxton and Lucas
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Drawing on their new book *Educating Ruby: What our children really need to learn* Claxton and Lucas assert that education has lost its way and that by affording a higher profile to the development of character strengths, more appropriate ways forward can be found. With regard to the first assertion I could not agree more; the pressure of performativity (Ball, 1998), so endemic in the UK and many other countries, continues to seriously skew and adversely affect students' experience of schooling (Assaf, 2008; Dooley, 2005). The current system fails to prepare the young for the uncertainties of life and tends to position teachers as little more than technicians. With regard to their second assertion, as Claxton and Lucas acknowledge, even if agreement can be reached on the key dispositions to be developed, innovative ways to nurture such 'habits of mind' (Claxton, 2002) need to be created. Whilst recognising the difficulties, they outline work already in existence in this area, (including their own), and argue that schools need to operate as continual incubators of the strengths and habits that they want their students to develop. They close by challenging psychologists (and teachers?) to become more strategic and politically savvy, seeking to inform and transform parental understanding of what is at stake in order to shift the educational agenda. I support their call; the future will continue to surprise us and transformational change in education is urgently needed. Nonetheless, in my opinion they may underestimate the depth of instrumentalism inherent in contemporary schooling, and may need to afford more attention to the tensions and dilemmas experienced by teachers, many of whom are stretched and stressed themselves and are not well positioned to cultivate character traits such as optimism, zest and curiosity.

Initially Claxton and Lucas remind us that revisiting the differences between education and schooling and agreeing on our vision for education and its implementation are prerequisite steps on the journey towards change. Their book appropriately and arrestingly attends to the voices of young people and their parents, as indeed the Cambridge Primary Review did back in 2006, when, through 87 'Community Soundings', the views of children, parents, teachers, governors, teaching assistants, heads and community leaders were sought (Alexander, 2010). Recognising that policy makers tend to view educational aims as cosmetic, this independent enquiry identified 12 aims for primary education, including for example: wellbeing, engagement, empowerment, autonomy, respect, reciprocity, interdependence, sustainability and citizenship (Alexander, 2010:197-9).

Also seeking to challenge the future of education, Claxton and Lucas summarise its core purpose as the expansion of young people's resources – 'intellectual, practical, social and emotional' – to enable them to handle their unfolding lives. The authors' notion of 'readiness to thrive' is particularly apposite as it highlights the capacity of the young to cope with the uncertainty of tomorrow. The potentiality inherent in this concept stands in marked contrast to the internationally used yet limiting concept of 'school readiness' so beloved by politicians. This profiles a one-size-fits-all set of standards by which to measure children's early learning and as Whitebread and Bingham (2012) assert, leads 'to a situation where children's basic emotional and cognitive needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness, and the opportunity to develop their metacognitive and self-regulation skills, are not being met'. At this phase too there is little or no agreement between policy makers and professionals about the fundamental purpose of education. Arguably each phase is viewed politically as preparation for the next step of schooling rather than 'life', and as a consequence the profession is bedevilled by intense pressure to ensure the 'expected standards' are met, often at the expense of wider outcomes.

Another strand of this instrumentally focused policy agenda is the national performance data reported in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and the Programme for

International Student Assessment (PISA). Students' attainment in these influential assessments is seen as a measure of individual countries' comparative success on a worldwide scale. As Claxton and Lucas and many other scholars assert (e.g. Goodwyn, Reid and Durrant, 2014), layered upon pre-existing national assessment systems, these tests further constrain professional practice. Yet PIRLS and PISA are unable to include any documentation of students as learners participating within or beyond school. The complex factors which interact to develop their knowledge, skills, understanding and attitudes, and the myriad of elements which characterise their lived experience as learners are inevitably ignored in such large-scale studies.

In England, primary and secondary schools are operating in this audit-driven environment (Fielding, 2006); there are currently different kinds of national tests in Year 1 (5-6 year olds), Year 2 (6-7 year olds), Year 6 (10-11 year olds), Year 9 (13-14 year olds) (teacher assessment), Year 11 (15-16 year olds) and Year 13 (17-18 year olds). Based on narrow criteria, most of these are high stakes, publically reported tests which are likely to impact upon the future of individuals and whole school communities. This astringent accountability culture has the potential to create an increasingly dehumanised school context. Indeed as Hayward and Thomson (2012) show, this plays out in the everyday lives and practices of staff and students and causes some students to feel they are 'treated impersonally as if they were not individuals, but rather, we surmise, as performing outcomes' (124).

In such a context, teachers may not feel able to develop a person-centred relational educational focus which is surely necessary if, as Claxton and Lucas suggest, they are to foster students' character strengths – their attitudes and inclinations. Additionally, where 'teacher-student and student-student relationships are merely a means to league-tabled ends' (Thomson et al., 2012), 'learning to know' is likely to become inappropriately reified. Yet UNESCO's 'fours pillars' framework for education in the 21st century makes it clear that balanced support from all pillars is key (Delors, 1996). The other pillars include: 'learning to do' - the dispositions and skills used to apply knowing in practice; 'learning to live together' – constructing meaningful associations and working towards common objectives; and 'learning to be' – the development of new identities, embodiments, and horizons of possibility. Claxton and Lucas, in foregrounding the second of these pillars, draw upon research that suggests that if certain character dispositions, such as empathy, curiosity, optimism and grit are implemented appropriately, this can lead to enhanced student performance in conventional assessments (Watkins, 2010). It is though hardly surprising that students' habits of mind, their dispositions and desires influence their achievements. There is already considerable evidence that reading for pleasure for example, a volitional activity requiring commitment (one of the authors' seven C's), is a strong predictor of reading attainment (Anderson, Wilson and Fielding, 1988; Mullis et al, 2006; OECD, 2002; 2010). The relationship between reading attainment and positive attitudes to reading is bi-directional: the will influences the skill and vice versa. Nonetheless more work is needed to document and examine this relationship in other subject domains and the authors' call to psychologists is well made in this regard.

In considering the pedagogical consequences of their argument, Claxton and Lucas reflect upon the tensions which surface if reductionist perspectives are applied and dispositions are treated as if they are merely 'technical' skills in which students can be 'trained' through the use of decontextualized activities. Such training offers minimal transfer, and as they readily acknowledge it is much more demanding to embed character education within the life and culture of the school. This represents a significant challenge for teachers whose own confidence as educators is likely to have been radically reduced by prescribed curricula, intense accountability and endless change. Indeed scholars suggest that teaching is consistently one of the most stressful professions; Teach First (a large 'training' provider in England) now offers student teachers psychological support (Cooper quoted in Wiggins, 2015). The well-being of teachers and their resilience, determination and creativity deserves more attention. The relentless quest for higher standards has tended to obscure the personal and agentic

dimensions of teaching (and learning), and may have fostered a professional mindset characterised more by compliance and conformity than curiosity and creativity.

Nonetheless, many teachers, encouraged by working with partners from creative and cultural organisations, and determined to offer education not training, proactively seek to foster their students' creativity and curiosity and shape their school curricula responsively. Despite the persistently performative agenda, these professionals show considerable commitment and imagination and often model the very characteristics which they wish to foster in the young (e.g. Craft et al., 2014; Cremin, Barnes and Scoffham, 2009). The power of role models in education has long been recognised; in 1966 Bruner noted the value of such 'day-to-day working models' with whom young people could interact. In a cross-phase study of creative teachers working with students from 4-16 years, Cremin, Barnes and Scoffham (2009) examined their personal qualities, ethos and pedagogical practice. Professionally independent and curious, these creative teachers modelled a questioning stance and the making of connections, showed a marked degree of autonomy and ownership, and valued and nurtured originality and the generation/evaluation of ideas. The researchers theorise that a creative teacher is:

> one who is aware of, and values, the human attribute of creativity in themselves and seeks to promote it in others. The creative teacher has a creative state of mind which is actively exercised and developed in practice (Cremin, Barnes and Scoffham, 2009:46)

I wonder if Claxton and Lucas need to pay more attention to teachers' own habits of mind: their dispositional inclination to take risks as educators for instance, enabling the young to risk take also and learn from their mistakes as they collaborate with one another *and* their teachers. Whilst the authors recognise that 'habit formation in students may necessitate reciprocal habit change in their tutors and "instructional designers"', I think they may underestimate the pressure on the profession, and the very considerable support that pre-service and practising teachers will need if they are to hold a mirror to their own dispositions, attitudes and culturally embedded practices, *and* consider the consequences. While sociocultural research reveals that teachers frame and position what it means to be a 'good' reader or learner, often limiting and constraining young learners' identities (e.g. Hall, 2012), it is possible for mindful teachers to contest the persistent deficit discourse and offer new, less school-centric forms of participation and engagement (Kamler and Comber, 2008; Cremin et al., 2015). But in order to make this work, teachers need to be challenged and supported to develop enquiring and creative mindsets themselves, and to invest in cultural change and a broader vision for education. As the authors assert there is a role here for psychologists both as change agents in schools and as co-researchers of the process alongside teachers. Such work is urgently needed in order to enrich school learning communities and to enable teachers to take an attentive and reflective view of how their espoused educational aims, pedagogy and curriculum work to restrict or expand the potential of all learners.

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