Capabilities:
The new currency for success

There is, sadly, no simple recipe for success in life. But every day we understand more about what the influencing factors are.

Socio-economic status, parenting styles, community and social networks, quality of health, fluency in the vernacular language are just some of these factors. But once children enter day-care or start at school there are a range of other ways in which children can be helped to succeed, especially those who are more vulnerable. Two of the best repositories of evidence about the mechanisms by which social mobility can be achieved through education are The Sutton Trust[1] and the Education Endowment Foundation[2].

Within schools there are many ways in which teachers can make it more likely that children will thrive, regardless of background. Early intervention is well known to be important but a recent review Ofsted concluded that, while there is little doubt that early education for low income and ethnic minority children can combat educational disadvantage, 'the design of programmes and the approach to pedagogy and curriculum is crucial to success.'[3]

Achievement for All has identified promising practices which go further in identifying the approaches to leadership and teaching and learning which help, as well as the kinds of structured conversations with parents and carers which are useful[4]. And clearly the quality of teaching matters enormously as many researchers have shown, with John Hattie having arguably done more than most in making more specific data available, accessible and useful[5].

From time to time the nature versus nurture dilemma raises its head along the lines of success being dependent on intelligence. But there is mounting evidence that, while genetic inheritance of course matters, there are many things that teachers and parents can do to help all children succeed and, effectively, become more intelligent[6]. Angela Duckworth and Martin Seligman have, for example, shown how something like self-discipline is a much better predictor of success in later life than IQ[7].

Capabilities and character matter

Indeed it turns out that there are many attributes like self-discipline which matter both at school and in later life. Nobel Laureate James Heckman and his colleague Tim Kautz at the University of Chicago have identified a set of skills that are generally valued across all societies and culture[8], see Table 1.

Character skills
Perseverance ('grit')
Self-control
Trust
Attentiveness
Self-esteem and self-efficacy
Resilience to adversity
Openness to experience
Empathy
Humility
Tolerance of diverse opinions
Engaging productively in society

Table 1 Character skills. (Heckman and Kautz, 2013)

Increasingly capabilities or attributes such as self-discipline, perseverance and resilience are referred to as a part of a bigger concept – character. In the last decade the Character Education Partnership[9] in the USA has been influential in introducing the idea of 'performance character'[10] as a way of describing the kinds of attributes which correlate with academic success. In the UK the Character Inquiry[11] initiated by Demos invited government and other stakeholders to consider the importance of developing character across the nation both in and beyond school, while the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues at the University of Birmingham[12] has helpfully built further on all of these ideas.

As well as developing young people's performance capabilities, schools are equally concerned with helping students find their moral compass. Guy Claxton and I have distinguished between two kinds of attributes, a set which are to do with becoming a better person which we have called 'prosocial' and another group which we have termed 'epistemic', which relate specifically to the development of children into powerful learners. Both of these lists of attributes are part of the broader idea of character, and both are important to success in life[13] - see Table 2.

Prosocial

- Kind (not callous)
- Generous (not greedy)
- Forgiving (not vindictive)
- Tolerant (not bigoted)
- Trustworthy (not deceitful)
- Morally brave (not apathetic)
- Convivial (not egotistical)
- Ecological (not rapacious)

Epistemic

- Inquisitive (not passive)
- Resilient (not easily defeated)
- Imaginative (not literal)
- Craftsmanlike (not slapdash)
- Sceptical (not credulous)
- Collaborative (not selfish)
- Thoughtful (not impulsive)
- Practical (not only 'academic')

Table 2 – Two kinds of attributes for success in life (Claxton and Lucas, 2013)

Thinking about resilience and perseverance

There is growing evidence that two attributes are particularly important – resilience and perseverance. Resilience is most frequently defined as the ability to bounce back from failure or disappointment. Resilient people are able to adapt to changing circumstances and deal effectively with adverse circumstances or challenging life situations they engage in. They also have the ability to apply themselves to thrive, to grow and to find new meanings in life.

Perseverance is often associated with resilience, and sometimes confused with it, but it is a separate factor specifically impacting on educational outcomes and success in life. Leslie Gutman and Ingrid Schoon define perseverance as 'steadfastness on mastering a skill or completing a task.'[14] They also identified two characteristics associated with perseverance - engagement and 'grit'. Engagement is related to a learner's participation in school and the extent to which they are committed to learning, as evidenced by behaviours such as being attentive, asking questions and showing interest. Grit is an additional factor contributing to perseverance. It relates to an individual's passion for long term a goal which, in turn, influences their ability to work steadfastly on one task over a prolonged period. 'Grit' has been the subject of a significant amount of research conducted by Angela Duckworth and her colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania. Grit is defined as 'the tendency to sustain interest in and effort toward very long-term goals.'[15] In practical terms learners might exhibit grit by:

- reading test instructions carefully before trying the questions
- paying attention to a teacher rather than daydreaming
- choosing homework or practising over TV
- persisting with long-term assignments despite boredom and frustration.[16]

In describing the ingredients of performance character thus far I have used the words 'attributes' and 'capabilities' interchangeably. There are many more words being used. Of them 'twenty-first century skills' is the least precise; it's just lazy thinking not to say what they are but link them to a moment in time! When employers reach for a phrase they tend to say 'soft skills'. But this unhelpfully

undervalues them. Some writers have taken to using the phrase 'non-cognitive skills' apparently and mistakenly to distinguish them from 'cognitive skills' by which they tend to mean the hard thinking called for by learning science or maths. (In fact you are only non-cognitive when you are dead; everything we do or make or learn calls on our cognitive resources!)

Two other ways of describing them are 'habits of mind' and 'dispositions' which also indicate something about their distinctiveness. These last suggestions bring with them the idea that they do not exist in a vacuum but are skills which are routinely deployed when actually needed. Paul Tough has usefully suggested that, if we want to cultivate a child's dispositions 'the place to begin is not with the child himself. What we need to change first, is seems, is his environment'[17]. We need to create a culture for the child in which as many as possible of her daily interactions with adults are conducive to the development of these valuable capabilities.

With Guy Claxton I have made the arguments for teaching capabilities accessible to parents in *Educating Ruby: What our children really need to learn*[18]. Across the world there are initiatives which demonstrate that capabilities can be both developed and assessed. These include Building Learning Power[19], the Partnership for 21st Century Learning[20] and New Pedagogies for Deeper Learning[21]. But capabilities are seldom explicitly mandated by education ministries or departments and almost never assessed.

Cultivating capabilities in young people

From work with teachers across the world and from the kinds of initiatives listed in the previous paragraph we know a considerable amount about how best to develop the kinds of capabilities at the core of performance character. Essentially it is a four step process as in Table 3:

Step 1. Developing real understanding of the capability
Step 2. Create the climate for the capability to flourish
Step 3. Create the context and choose teaching methods which facilitate the development of the capability
Step 4. Build learner engagement and commitment to the capability

Table 3 – A Four Step Process to Cultivating Capability – Lucas, 2016

Step 1

Real understanding is just as important when teaching a capability as it is when teaching knowledge or skills. Schools will want to decide which capabilities they are going to focus on. In some cases these will be value judgements and in others it will require a careful study of the research. With Educating Ruby we settled on seven, each beginning with the letter 'c' for ease of memory – confidence, curiosity, collaboration, communication, creativity, commitment and craftsmanship.

Step 2

Here is where Paul Tough's point about the wider environment is important. The co-curriculum, family learning and the many opportunities available in the wider community matter as well as what is offered in an early years or school setting. Climate is another word for culture in effect, rewiring us to think about all of the messages we give out as to whether something is valued or not. Influential here will be the degree to which leaders of any institution model the capabilities espoused by their public pronouncements. So too will the existence of reward systems in place to celebrate their acquisition and the degree to which displays on the walls of the institution reflects its beliefs. So, for example, if perseverance is required we would expect to see many examples of work in progress, of first second and third drafts

and of proto-typing rather than endless triple-mounted blemish-less pieces of work. Critical here will be a strongly developed and subtle approach to engaging parents.

Step 3
Two messages are important here. Capabilities are not taught or learned in a vacuum. They happen in context – during science, while in football practice, during assemblies. Whether within the formal curriculum or outside it is it important to name the capability explicitly. 'Today we're going to learn how to pass into space and I'd like all of you to see how many times you can practise this; get your team mate to make it really tricky for you as you get better.' In lessons we know that certain approaches to teaching and learning work better than others. These include, when rigorously done, problem-based, enquiry-led learning; philosophy for children approaches; the use of thinking routines, extended tasks, case studies; role play; peer teaching; coaching; self-managed projects.

Step 4
Schools which really embed capabilities rapidly realise that, for it to be sustainable and authentic they need to be creative in engaging children and young people, giving them new roles, creating new co-curricular opportunities and partnering with a range of youth and community groups outside of the formal sector.

The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) has, through its research, gone a long way to giving us a better understanding about some of the mechanisms which are likely to be at work in these kinds of learning contexts. They include an explicit focus on the process of learning (meta-cognition) and self-regulation[22] as well as on the processes by which children learn how to manage their emotions, set and achieve goals, show empathy for others and develop positive relationships with others (social and emotional learning)[23].

Why this matters to disadvantaged pupils especially

A recent report from the DfE goes further than the EEF advice in seeking to define strategies which are most likely to help disadvantaged children in *Supporting the attainment of disadvantaged pupils: articulating success and good practice*[24], there is a helpful summary:

'The most popular strategies, and those that schools considered to be the most effective, focused on teaching and learning, especially: paired or small group additional teaching; improving feedback; and one-to-one tuition.'

If all young people are to be successful in all walks of life they will need a combination of knowledge, skills and capabilities of the kinds I have been exploring delivered with the kinds of explicit focus on best teaching methods just mentioned. In fact the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Social Mobility form has suggested that 'personal resilience and emotional wellbeing are currently too often missing. It noted that 'developing the social and emotional skills which give young people the resilience, persistence and motivation to deal with the stresses and the rebuffs of everyday life, are key to being able to move up the social ladder.'[25] It also argued that insufficient notice was being taken by policy makers

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of evidence that skills such as resilience, self-belief and persistence both underpin academic success and can be taught. The group therefore proposed that in addition to policy interventions to develop character focused on Early Years, schools should put in place programmes to develop character.

Across the world governments are waking up the importance of a focus on capabilities in addition to one on knowledge and skills. Finland is moving in this direction[26] and Australia has already got there with its capability-led curriculum[27]. Sadly the UK in general and England in particular has a considerable way to go, despite occasional positive noises. But if we want all British children to succeed, we should start embracing approaches to developing capabilities and character which have been shown to work, with a much greater sense of urgency.

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