

## *Open Dialogue: Author's Reply*

# Continuing the dialogue

John Raven

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**T**O ME, THE MOST SURPRISING and disturbing feature of these important commentaries was the authors' apparent lack of concern about the kinds of abuse of science, logic, and authority I highlighted in my starter paper and/or discussion of what might be done to stem these abuses.

To put this in context, I have had several discussions with teachers, clinical psychologists, and occupational psychologists in which those concerned spoke about the damaging effects of the policies they were required to implement and the way in which such policies were often justified by reference to research.

How could it be that those who commented on my paper were unaware of, or unconcerned about, that research and its effects?

Perhaps they attributed the problem, not to the research itself, but to the politicians or bureaucrats who generated the prescriptions, thereby avoiding responsibility.

That certainly seemed to be the case in relation to high-stakes testing. But what of the cyclical process whereby psychologists' failure to generate meaningful measures of areas of competence beyond 'academic ability' fuels a preoccupation with 'academic ability' in schools, thus leading to a situation in which it is easy to obtain funding for research into such things as 'motivation for academic achievement' but great difficulty obtaining funding for creating alternative curricula and means of enabling people to get credit for alternative talents. Whatever the political motivations behind it, it was *researchers* who dominated the Council of the

International Association for Educational Achievement (the precursor to PISA) who determined the evaluations that were used and were therefore, at least to some degree, in a position to promote more broadly based measures of 'achievement' than those which, despite endless declarations to the effect that the promotion of an International Educational Olympics was *not* what they were about, resulted in just that.

How *could* these commentators *not* be alarmed about researchers' role in this and similar processes?

How could they not be concerned about the process described by Margaret Clark (2015) in a recent edition of *PER* whereby control over both the framing of policy relating to the 'reading' problem and the framing of research commissioned in relation to both reading itself and the evaluation of remedial programmes excludes alternative framings of both 'the problem' and its 'evaluation'?

Perhaps they are afraid to talk about such problems and thus expose themselves as 'unsound' when the time comes to apply for funding or jobs. That was certainly the case for the teachers, clinical psychologists, and occupational psychologists just mentioned. It would be 'more than their job's worth' to say anything. And, if I may share a secret, that is also true of number of prestigious educational researchers with whom I have had conversations.

Perhaps, they thought it was someone else's job to do so.

Perhaps the explanation is that they are, at least in part, caught up in the process

depicted in Figure 1 in my starter paper whereby they, like millions of others, are trapped by a network of social forces which lead to the production of endless non-controversial ‘high-impact’<sup>1</sup> papers in specific areas to feed the needs of the Research Evaluation Exercise and Bologna process and thus the sociological need to promote ‘growth’ via the generation of endless work and thus, having become embroiled in that process, remain unaware of its wider implications.

Perhaps this is how it comes about that, as noted by Rothschild (1982) in his review of the Social Science Research Council, social scientists become their own worst enemies by contributing endless small studies which somehow manage to miss the important issues.

As I see it, if any of these ‘explanations’ have validity, we encounter illustrations of the conflict between a system which operates on the basis of an implicit definition of competence grounded in formal ‘knowledge’ and one which operates on the basis of professionalism.

Perhaps Donald Schön (2001) has done most to highlight the problem.

The results are highlighted in Tommy MacKay’s question about whether or not to intervene when one finds a child lying in its faeces. When does intervention become interference? It seems that modern society seeks to solve this problem by generating endless rule-based prescriptions binding on all instead of relying on professionalism. It is perhaps this process that lies behind the inability of the educational system, and society more generally, to come to terms with the diversity of values.

Perhaps we see the process at work most clearly in the way in which Manualisation has undermined social work. Here we have a 600-page Manual of prescriptions which leads them to spend 60 per cent of their time checking with their computers (in order to avoid accusations of having failed to follow the rules) instead of paying attention to the needs of their clients and taking appropriate action. One sees the same process at work

in the undermining of teacher professionalism by centralised prescription of classroom behaviours. And the undermining of adventurous research by the standardisation of criteria for research competence through the REF and Bergamo processes.

But whatever about that, here we have endless examples of the operation of the network of social forces sketched in Figure 1 in my original piece.

But let me change tack.

In 1980 HMI (Scotland) reported on a survey of what was going on in primary schools.

They were horrified by the results.

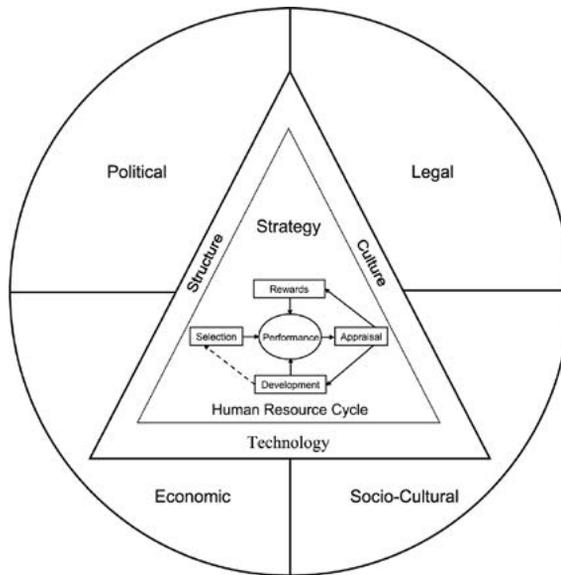
They wrote that ‘The Scottish teacher insists on making her pupils numerate and literate but does not sufficiently recognise areas of competence beyond these’. Furthermore ‘only five per cent of project work going on in schools is of any educational merit’.

The latter resulted in a request that I find some examples of good practice, describe it in such a way that others could do likewise, identify the benefits in such a way that more parents and politicians would think it was worthwhile, and identify the barriers.

So I did my best with the very limited resources available to us to meet this need and, with great difficulty, presented the results in what many would consider an ‘unscientific’ form in *opening the primary classroom*.

Among other things, we described ‘one’ teacher’s use of the environment around the school to nurture a huge range of talents in her pupils. Some pupils developed the skills of the scientist: the ability to problematise, find relevant information through a reading process very different from that with which most teachers are preoccupied, track down others who might be able to help etc. Others became good at writing *in such a way as to evoke emotions that would lead to action*. Others became good at creating turbulence around officials who had failed to take appropriate action. Others re-calculated the spreadsheets which claimed to show that necessary action was ‘uneconomic’. Others specialised in

Figure 1. Domains of Managerial Competence (Reproduced, with permission, from Lees, 1996)



soothing out the conflicts that developed within the group... and so on.

How to think about the competence of 'the teacher' who orchestrated these things?

One way is via the following diagram overleaf which I stole, with permission, from a paper by Lees (1996).

First note that she had to forget the widely-promoted model of human resource development at the centre of the diagram and replace it by one of her own creation – an image of a process through which she could create a developmental environment whereby all pupils were able to pursue their particular motivational dispositions and develop the competencies needed to do those things effectively. That is, she had to replace what was essentially a single-ability oriented process by one which Michael Wigelsworth would call a strengths-oriented process.

Then she had to intervene with parents, the local inspectorate, the bureaucracy, and the head teacher of the secondary school to whom the pupils would go. She had to convince them of the value of what she was doing and persuade them to largely ignore standardised tests of reading and arithmetic. And so on and so on.

Now my point is this.

Here we have an image of *professional* competence which is very different from the image of teacher competence pursued in colleges of education and assessed in current teacher- and school accountability exercises.

Maybe we need to disseminate such a model of professional competence among the members of the *Psychology of Education Section* in place of the implicit model that informs the REF and Bergamo process. Maybe we need to encourage *PER* to publish papers which will advance professionalism rather than papers of the kind promoted by 'High Impact' journals.

### Individual dialogues

I have spent several hours mulling over what the words *review* in the title of our journal and the word *dialogue* in 'open dialogue' might imply for the writing of this response.

Is the dialogue meant to be with the editors, the readership, or the authors?

The answers to these questions are fundamental to the future of our journal.

In what follows I have fished a few sections of dialogues with individual authors out of the 8000 words I found I had written (and

Table 1. Top priorities in child rearing for LSES, HSES and EHV parents (% rating each item 'very important'). From: Raven, J. (1980). *Parents, Teachers and Children*. Hodder & Stoughton, Sevenoaks

	EHV Group		LSES Group		HSES Group	
1	That your children need you.	90%	That your child develops respect for his parents.	81%	For your child to be read to.	93%
2	For your child to be read to.	85%	That your children need you.	75%	For you to talk to your child a lot.	90%
3	For you to ask him about pictures in books and things he has seen.	75%	For you to teach him to respect property.	63%	For your child to have books at home.	88%
4	To teach your child to respect property.	75%	For your child to learn to stick up for himself.	55%	For you to ask him about pictures in books and things he has seen.	73%
5	That your child develops respect for his parents.	75%	For your child to be read to.	54%	To encourage your child to be willing to use books to find information for himself.	73%
6	To teach your child to think for himself.	72%	For your child to develop the ability to work with others.	53%	For your child to know how you feel when he does something well.	70%
7	To encourage your child to talk to you about what he is doing.	70%	For your child to have plenty of time to play with other children.	50%	To encourage your child to talk to you about what he is doing.	68%
8	For your child to have books at home.	67%	To talk to your child a lot.	50%	To teach your child to think for himself.	68%
9	For you to talk to your child a lot.	67%	For you to ask him about pictures in books and things he has seen.	49%	For you to treat him with respect as an individual in his own right, who is entitled to pursue his own interests and ideas.	63%
10	For your child to be given educational toys.	62%	To teach your child to respect figures in authority.	49%	For you to encourage him to be independent.	60%
11	To encourage your child to ask questions.	57%	For your child to develop the ability to mix easily with others.	47%	To encourage your child to ask questions.	60%
12	To encourage him to work and read on his own a lot when he's older.	55%	To teach your child you don't get anything you want without working for it.	46%	That your child develops respect for his parents.	60%
13	For you to continue the work of the school at home.	55%	For your child to know how you feel when he does something well.	46%	For you to encourage your child to question and seek reasons for things he is told.	58%
	For your child to do well at school.	55%				
	To encourage your child to question and seek reasons for things he is told.	55%				
	That your child develops the ability to work with others.	55%				

which I hope eventually to place on my *eye-nsociety* website).

I have selected those which related most closely to my original theme and those which seemed to merit further elaboration.

### *In dialogue with Piotr Oleś*

I entirely endorse what Piotr is saying. But there is a tension between *influencing* values and *respecting* values.

This is illustrated in the table overleaf which stems from an 'illuminative' evaluation of an Educational Home Visiting project

designed to influence the parenting behaviour of 2- to 3-year-old children.

Note what lies behind this. A concern with 'cognitive development' (actually success in hierarchically-organised schools) led to a cyclical process whereby both practitioners and researchers focussed on 'cognitive development' (mainly valued by HSES mothers, bureaucrats, and researchers) and neglected other areas of competence. Hence the framing of the narrowly based intervention and the expectation of a focus on 'cognitive ability' in the evaluation.

This process took effect, *a fortiori*, in the Scottish Government's *Children and Young People* act which was/is designed to force parents, against the threat of overwhelming punishment, (including that of having their children taken into care and themselves being consigned to prison), to comply with this process.

To my mind, this story implies that we, as members of the Psychology of Education Section, and the BPS more generally, have a huge responsibility to seek to intervene in the process whereby the framing of issues influences both the framing of policy and the framing of the research which gets commissioned.

But there is another vitally important issue raised by Oleś' commentary... the apparent need to *influence* values. There is no doubt in my mind that we do have to radically change the way we live if we are to survive as a species. The question is whether this is to be brought about by values change or by studying the sociocybernetic<sup>2</sup> processes which determine the way we live and prevent people enacting values they already endorse.

As far as I can make out, the main problem is that people cannot see *how* to influence those sociocybernetic<sup>2</sup> processes in order to be able to enact their values. They know that single-factor intervention will be over-ruled by the reactions of the system.

So what are the constraints which conspire to drive the kind of education Oleś endorses out of schools?

Steve Higgins has hinted at the immediate role of centralised curricula and high-stakes, hierarchically organised, testing.

But what lies behind *that*?

As Steve recognises, the answer lies in the self-reinforcing (autopoietic) network of social forces sketched in the diagram in my starter paper. That diagram suggests that two key components in the system are: (i) a governance system which does not encourage the kind of experimentation and learning that would be required to evolve the network of educational activities required to cater for diversity; and (ii) a network

of sociological functions associated with the promotion of hierarchy<sup>3</sup>.

If we are to improve education it seems to follow that our top priorities must be to study these systems and find ways of intervening in them.

Yet this perspective does not seem to be widely shared. The activities of Research Committee 51 (sociocybernetics) of International Sociological Association are consigned to a basement dungeon while the lecture rooms in the skyscraper above are full of people debating the more 'academic' issues which will enable them to generate publications which will non-controversially advance their careers.

What I am saying is that we, as a Section and we as members of the BPS, have a responsibility to get such issues onto the agenda of those who commission and fund research. It has to do with the framing of 'the problem'. Politicians focus on presenting problems not the social forces which lie behind them. As I see it, it is our job to re-focus that debate.

### *In dialogue with Tommy MacKay*

Perhaps the most thought-provoking/disturbing comments of any in the responses were those of Tommy MacKay in relation to reading and dyslexia. Unfortunately, I have deleted these to save space.

As mentioned earlier, Tommy's comments prompted reflection on the issue of intervention or interference, particularly as exemplified in the *Scottish Children and Young People (Scotland)* act.

I have great problems with the GIRFEC<sup>4</sup> and SHANARI<sup>5</sup> questionnaires prescribed for mandatory use when the 'named person' in question mandatorily visits the home of every child aged minus five months to 22 years in Scotland five times over that period.

I may illustrate the problem by taking what might be considered to be an extreme example.

The named persons, when visiting the homes of adolescents, were asked to rate whether the young person in question has

‘appropriate attitudes toward his/her sexuality?’ The values issue could not be more apparent. And who is to do what as a result of a negative rating?

This may be an extreme example. But the problem is that these questionnaires generally reflect the thoughtways of what Plomin calls a ‘head girl’ mentality.

I have not taken these particular questionnaires to the homes of low socio economic status mothers. But I vividly recall one mother’s response to our question about children using books to find their own information in the Home Visiting project mentioned above ‘Oh. No. I wouldn’t want that. Goodness knows what he might come across poking about in books’.

The problem is not what to do about the child in the faeces. It is that many social workers adopt what I find to be an extraordinarily judgmental stance. As far as the *Children and Young People’s* act is concerned, very disturbing examples have been reported via the ‘No2NP’ (No to Named Persons) campaign.

I don’t have an answer to the problem. But there must be a better way than relying on the law, or, worse, hiding behind the law. How can one justify the cascade of personal decisions which result in the statistics<sup>6</sup> which lie behind the film *I Daniel Blake*. Ken Loach’s and John Pilger’s films have sought to provoke political responses. In contrast, I see myself, as having tried to formulate an answer based on the little I know about the social constraints on behaviour. In this context, I feel I have to mention that I have been appalled at the workings of the cross-party committee on ACEs<sup>7</sup>. The quest for a net, justified on the basis of ‘trying to avoid harm’, that will enable central government to catch all its embrace seems to grow ever wider. We could really do with some serious research, both psychological and sociological into what lies behind it.

### *In dialogue with Steve Higgins*

Although I penned a couple of pages of meandering thoughts after reading Steve’s beautifully organised commentary

I am reluctant to devote much of my space here to those ramblings. Let me just say this. I feel that, if Steve added Bookchin’s<sup>8</sup> law to Campbell’s law in his organisational framework, that framework would provide even more insights into the problems of the ‘educational’ system. Bookchin’s law states that ‘In any situation of surplus labour, society somehow manages to create endless, hierarchically organised, senseless work to occupy the idle hands.’ (The work is senseless in that the products it delivers fail to enhance quality of life.) As I see it, much of the ‘educational’ system falls into this category.

But note this. The process offers a wonderful illustration of the popular saying that ‘The Devil finds work for idle hands’.

### *In dialogue with Dave Putwain*

Dave’s discussion of the relationship between what has come to be termed ‘reductionist thinking’, systems thinking, and ecological thinking is interesting and important, not least because he highlights the difficulties of reporting the results when confronted with editors who, at least in part, precisely because of the systems constraints under which they operate, are unwilling to publish the material<sup>9</sup>.

When a request for proposals for articles relating to ‘Closing the gap’ fell on my desk some three years ago, I could not resist the temptation to return to an unfinished debate which had occurred in the pages of *The American Psychologist* some 15 years earlier. Ceci and Papierno (2005) had explored the social implications of the finding that, when the ‘enrichment’ programmes offered to poorly performing pupils were also offered to the others, the ‘have’s’ gained more than the ‘have nots’.

There were many interesting things about that article, not least the fact that the authors whose work they reviewed had sought to ‘close the gap’ by increasing scores on what were essentially single-factor, norm-referenced, measures of outcomes – ie they had ignored the possibility of dealing with the problem by nurturing the other

talents the ‘have nots’ possessed. But they also made the ‘mistake’ of exploring the assumed long term social consequences of enhancing everyone’s ‘performance’.

Now note this.

Dave readily accepts the example of mis-application of reductionist, viz non-systemic, science in the fertiliser example.

But he fails to notice that Ceci and Papierno have done exactly the same thing.

First they fail to note that focussing on a single outcome ignores the damaging effect of those programmes on many, if not all, pupils by rendering invisible many important talents which schools could have helped to nurture.

Then they fail to notice the recursive effect that this preoccupation with a single outcome has on the educational programmes offered by schools. That is, they neglect its ecological context.

Then they say that the implementation of a process in which *everyone’s* scores will result in more brilliant scientists.

In so saying, they fail to notice that it is those very scientists who have, through the application of their reductionist, non-systemic, science contributed to the destruction of the soils, seas, and atmosphere that constitute our habitat and thus our imminent extinction as a species.

Nothing could better illustrate the misapplication of science that I am complaining about *in the educational area*.

How to obtain funding for more broadly-based research? How to get any such studies published in the context of a preoccupation with narrow high-impact studies.

It has become fashionable to advocate teaching ‘systems thinking’ in schools. This can mean many different things. But one stream of thought leading to its the advocacy has to do with the need to consider the negative as well as the positive outcomes of burning fossil fuels – although, ironically, the outcomes considered actually get reduced to a single outcome (climate change) in

most of the debate that has followed. And the need to find ways of intervening in the network of social forces which promote this process has again all too often reduced to proposed single-factor inputs<sup>10</sup>. The need to promote systems, that is, non-reductionist, thinking is all too apparent.

But what happens if one takes the task of nurturing (not ‘teaching’) systems thinking in schools seriously? One finds oneself in conflict with the image of science that has imbued the thinking of science teachers and is embedded in the science curriculum and examinations process. And one finds oneself in conflict with politicians.

### *In dialogue with Michael Wigelsworth*

Although it is not the main focus of my full response to Michael, I feel I need to say a bit more about the fascism issue because it seems to be represented here and in Gorard’s paper in ways which I did not quite intend.

‘The nature of the damage appears to be one of stagnation, (“a self-perpetuating system which... negates efforts to introduce change”) by virtue of suppression and discrediting of talent and innovation, and as a consequence, the promotion of a “fascist ideology” in education (ibid).’

I don’t think the system becomes self-perpetuating by suppression and discreditation of talent, although that is part of the picture.

It becomes self-perpetuating, as Michael recognises, via the recursive feedback loops depicted in Figure 1.

Nor do I think schools necessarily perpetuate a fascist *ideology*. (In fact, I have very little to say about either ideologies or Fascists.)

Schools do model, authoritarian, hierarchical, institutions and promote single-factor notions of ‘ability’.

But my concern in recent years has been with the pervasive disposition, evident in the Woke movement, the procedures of the ‘benefits’ system and systems proposed for guarding against ACEs, for people in general, and many of those engaged in these systems, to believe that they *have a right to impose on*

others that which they believe to be good and right regardless of the wishes of those concerned and the long term social consequences of what they are doing.

Such thinking lies at the heart of fascism. But it does not constitute fascism... and it seems to me much more dangerous. I am not at all sure that, despite the extensive literature on Authoritarianism, the issue has been adequately addressed.

This was, of course, a minor issue in Michael's contribution and, in my full response, I respond at length to what he had to say about both the 'strengths' movement and Social and Emotional Learning. One thing, though, the basis for the strengths movement has recently found support in an unexpected quarter<sup>11</sup>.

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## Dialogues with Richard Remedios and Stephen Gorard

Owing to space limitations, I have deleted my responses to Richard Remedios and Stephen Gorard. I trust that they will not feel too offended. At least until they read those responses on my eyeonsociety website.

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## Endnotes

- 1 As is typically the case, the term means it's opposite. It means that the paper is cited by a network of researchers working in the same area within the same framework. It does not mean that it had a high impact on the educational system or society. I have learned a new acronym to describe these studies: DRIP (data rich information poor). But it seems to me that DPIP are even more common and that it is the latter that have fuelled the replication crisis.
- 2 Cybernetics deals with the study of the guidance and control processes in animals and machines. So sociocybernetics deals with the study of these, largely hidden, processes in society.
- 3 These are discussed more fully by Murray Bookchin (2005 [1971, 1991]). *The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy*. Oakland, CA: AK Press.
- 4 Getting it right for every child. (Means the opposite, of course.)
- 5 An acronym for the eight wellbeing indicators in the CfE Health and Wellbeing curriculum. It stands for safe, healthy, achieving, nurtured, active, respected, responsible, included.
- 6 Webster, D. (2014). *Inquiry into benefit sanctions policy beyond the Oakley review*. House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee. [www.cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/CPAG-HofC-Wk-Pens-Sanctions-DW-evidence-Dec-2014.pdf](http://www.cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/CPAG-HofC-Wk-Pens-Sanctions-DW-evidence-Dec-2014.pdf)
- 7 [www.parliamentlive.tv/Event/Index/730b9508-5ff6-4464-a7b8-2bbb6f709ef5](http://www.parliamentlive.tv/Event/Index/730b9508-5ff6-4464-a7b8-2bbb6f709ef5)
- 8 Bookchin, cited above.
- 9 By the way, much of the requisite discussion could not meaningfully be consigned to background appendices.
- 10 Interestingly enough the processes of systemic – i.e. multi-pronged – intervention in systems to yield systemic change was nicely illustrated in the previously mentioned environmentally based project conducted by primary school pupils. The process facilitated the emergence of new competencies in the pupils... competencies which, in a sense, could not have existed outwith that context. But it also facilitated the emergence of a climate of enterprise going far beyond the talents of individuals. And it was the harnessing of those emergent talents that made possible the systemic, multi-pronged, intervention that achieved the desired effect.
- 11 Möttus, R. & Rozgonjuk, D. (2019). Development Is in the Details: Age Differences in the Big Five Domains, Facets, and Nuances. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. doi:10.1037/pspp0000276, Raven, J. (2020). Recent research supporting a specific-motive based model of competence. Contribution to a symposium held in Prague, January 2020. [www.eyeesociety.co.uk](http://www.eyeesociety.co.uk).