



*Politicians and the education world have been transfixed by the allure of teaching children character for some time now. But Kat Arney questions whether we really know what character education is – and if ‘character’ is even something that can be taught >*

# The myth of character education



**N**icky Morgan, the former secretary of state for education, didn't seem to have a lot of confidence in the young people of England.

Much like her predecessor, Michael Gove, she demanded rigorous academic tests to push pupils further and harder than ever before, but she feared that a lack of "character" among the country's youth meant those higher expectations would not be met. And so began an obsession with character education in the UK that was led from the top of the policy tree.

"We know that children need certain character traits to excel academically," Morgan said in a 2015 speech. "The kind of traits that should be embedded through a whole-school approach to character education, helping children and young people become decent, happy, well-balanced citizens. Building a strong character and a sense of moral purpose is part of the responsibility we have towards our children, our society and our nation."

She made it pretty clear that she believed the majority of schools were failing to do this for pupils.

"Business leaders – big and small – told us time and time again that they wanted young people to enter the world of work with the character traits that were an essential component to success," Morgan said earlier this year. "So we have encouraged schools to develop pupils who are confident, motivated and resilient, and who will get on better in both education and employment."

Character education came to define Morgan's legacy – and the education landscape of the past few years – every bit as much as the oft-debated tougher tests and accountability overhauls.

The Department for Education threw money at it: millions of pounds was provided in grants for schools to develop character projects (see [bit.ly/CharacterGrant](http://bit.ly/CharacterGrant) as an example). It set up awards for schools which tackled character education particularly well ([bit.ly/CharacterPrizes](http://bit.ly/CharacterPrizes)). It touted the work of "character" heavyweights like Carol Dweck and Angela Duckworth, and Morgan spoke about character obsessively.

As might be expected, schools quickly fell in line. A growth mindset embroidered itself on to the fabric of school life, consultants were hired to help schools "do" character education better and countless books, blogs and social media posts have been dedicated to the topic.

For teachers, perhaps, the hazy elixir of character was a way to protect their students from what they perceived to be unfair accountability measures.

'Character education to me is simply a good education'



### Grit in the genes?

Most personality traits – including things like "grit" or resilience – are affected by genetic make-up to a certain extent, according to studies comparing identical and non-identical twins, says researcher Emily Smith-Woolley.

Smith-Woolley, a researcher working on the Twins Early Development study at King's College London, says studies have shown that the influence of genes contributes between a third and a half of the variation of any given characteristic in

the population (this is referred to as a trait's "heritability"). Much of the rest is the result of the non-shared environment – the unique cocktail of things that happen to each of us as we grow up.

Smith-Woolley explains: "What the data is showing us is that these things we class as common to two individuals – say, two siblings at the same school – are actually different, as they're influenced by their personality and underlying genes. For example, a teacher could give the same piece of

feedback to two people, but it could affect them in very different ways."

Controversially, this research suggests that school-wide, "one-size-fits-all" programmes of character education are unlikely to have much of an impact if they don't take into account each child's individual personality mix. There's some evidence that blanket interventions in the school environment can influence self-esteem in girls, but this isn't borne out in studies for other characteristics.

What quickly grew was a fragmented approach to character – chaotic and variable. Educators and psychologists disagreed about everything from how character should be taught to what character education really was. No one seemed to stop and ask whether it was even possible to "teach" it at all.

So, belatedly, let's do just that. Let's put character education under the microscope and see how resilient the concept itself is under pressure.

### It's nothing new

The first thing to recognise about character education is that it is not new.

"It's basically been part of education for centuries," says Professor James Arthur, director of the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues at the University of Birmingham and lead author of a major 2015 report into

character education in UK schools. "Character education to me is simply a good education – there isn't anything mysterious about it."

In the foreword to Arthur's character education study, Thomas Lickona, a professor at the State University of New York, seems to agree.

"Character education isn't something else on educators' plates; it is the plate," he writes.

But the long history of character-building in schools has been ignored in the gold rush that character education has become. We're talking about it in new ways, with new words and presenting it as a catch-all solution to numerous ills. It has acquired all the hallmarks of a fad, and an entire industry of intervention has been built up.

The driving force behind that industry is a group of academics and journalists who

have, perhaps unwillingly, become the stars of the character show.

Stanford University professor Carol Dweck's book *Mindset*, University of Pennsylvania professor Angela Duckworth's book *Grit* and journalist Paul Tough's book *How Children Succeed* have all topped the bestseller lists and become the semi-official canon of character education.

The fact that all three have publicly urged caution around the use of their work as a "manual" has largely not curtailed the books' usage in prescriptive ways in schools. Dweck, in particular, has lamented the misinterpretation of her work.

"A lot of educators think I'll give a lesson on growth mindset and that will be it, rather than embodying it in their teaching and infiltrating it through the whole culture of the classroom," she explains.

"Different concepts are in different stages of development. Some have well-formed curricula but not much research testing it, others have a lot of research testing the concept but no well worked-out curricula for educators."

But it's not just the fact that the calls for caution from the prophets of the character creed have largely fallen on deaf ears, both on the frontline and in political circles, that is worrying.

It's also that what we now have in the UK is a large-scale adoption of the theory of the necessity of character development without much hard evidence to back up any of the preferred routes to making that happen in schools.

### What does it mean?

The first significant problem about character education is that no one can agree what exactly it is.

Right now the hottest topic is what Duckworth calls "grit" – long-term passion for a particular subject or activity – which is often confused with resilience, the ability to bounce back after criticism or failure.

Dweck's concept of the "growth mindset" is also still widely adhered to by teachers – it is all about recognising that children can grow and change in the way they learn, and that they shouldn't be boxed into thinking, for example, that they're bad at maths or uncreative. Then there are what Arthur describes as the "civic and moral virtues", the glue of respect and honesty that holds society together.

Tough says this variation needs to be more broadly acknowledged and understood. "I do think it's important to realise that when you're talking about character education we're talking about a few different things and I think different educators and different researchers can be using the same words like 'character' or 'grit' or 'self-control' in meaning something very different," he explains.

Another problem is the fact that every child is unique. Research studies are now revealing that at least some aspects of character – such

as grit – are influenced by genes as much as by environment, with up to 50 per cent of the variation in the population coming down to differences in genetic make-up (see box, “Grit in the genes?”, page 28).

So if you are going to teach it, some form of baseline is surely needed to ensure that the right level of character is being taught. That’s assuming, of course, that character is even teachable.

Plenty of people are trying, though. One school that has adopted a character-based curriculum is Green Dragon Primary School in the London borough of Hounslow, led by headteacher Cath Pinkney.

The school is nestled in among tower blocks and housing estates in a deprived area of town, almost within spitting distance of the leafy Kew Gardens across the river.

“We started using the international primary curriculum about eight years ago,” Pinkney says. “Along with it come these eight wonderful personal goals: enquiry, morality, thoughtfulness – things like that. But quite quickly we realised that they didn’t exactly fit with our school. We’re a very challenging and deprived area, and we needed personal goals that fitted our community and gave them a bit more ambition.”

Pinkney and her teaching staff sat down together and came up with nine personal goals that fitted their community, each embodied by a cartoon character. For example, there’s Alex Aimhigh – an ambitious and aspirational female superhero with flowing hair and a cape to match. Dr Global is internationally-minded, the Chameleon is adaptable and open-minded, while Resilient Robin is stalwart in the face of setbacks.

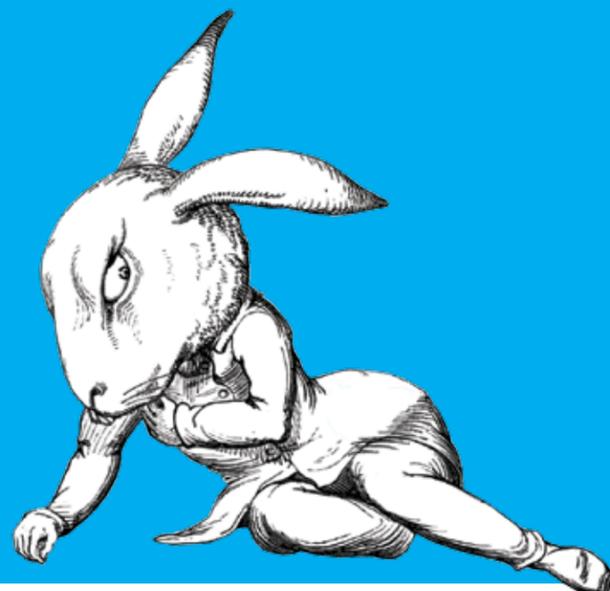
Pinkney and her teaching team have embedded these characters in everything they do, from the language that teachers use and the tasks they set, to the posters in the hallways. And, most importantly in her view, it’s an approach that is personalised to her pupils and their needs.

“I hear about other schools that say they’re doing character education, but have they asked the teachers if these [approaches] are right for their school? Have they asked the parents if they know what ‘resilience’ means? Does the local community believe in this? You have to make [the goals] yourselves, you really do, and you have to believe it. It’s like anything – you’re not going to get involved if you don’t believe in it.”

Further up the country, education consultant Steve Harris has been busy running character education workshops with eight primary schools in Leicestershire. He’s spent a whole year working with staff and parents, funded by Public Health Leicestershire, creating free resources that will be rolled out across all primary schools in the county.

“What we’re saying to teachers is, ‘Here are some core strategies that we have seen work really well.’ For example, if you’ve got a lesson objective then the teacher might say, ‘So what out of our pool of characteristics do

The problem is that no one can agree exactly what character education is



we mostly need to bring to the fore in order to achieve this? How am I going to learn?”

He’s trying to help students and their teachers identify the particular character traits they need to draw out of themselves in order to achieve their academic goals. But there’s a longer-term plan at work.

“We’re aiming to wean children off needing to be told what characteristics they need to use, so they can say to themselves, ‘I guess I have to show some curiosity, or really need my imagination or reflecting skills.’ Whatever it is, it’s orientated towards the task in hand,” says Harris.

If you go to any local authority, any academy chain or any individual school, you are likely to find countless other ways of approaching the issue of character education. Even those that adhere to one of the big theories like growth mindset use it in highly variable ways.

Is this evidence of good practice in that schools are tailoring theories to their own context? Possibly, but it is more likely that this is a symptom of the fact that there is little evidence about what makes for a successful curriculum of character education that can be rolled out across the country. Frustratingly, there is no rule book.

Politicians may talk a good game on character, but what’s lacking is a solid research base investigating which – if any – of these approaches work specifically in schools (there are several substantial studies, including a major one by the Education Endowment Foundation – see [bit.ly/EEFGrowth](http://bit.ly/EEFGrowth) – in the works).

### Lack of reliable evidence

More worryingly, there’s also little research on what difference such interventions make in the long-term to educational and societal outcomes.

Sure, there’s plenty of anecdotal evidence on the frontline, but how that translates to reliable evidence is unclear.

“This is going to be the hardest question for everyone to answer,” admits Harris. “I’m at the stage where I have piles of questionnaires and other evaluations that I’ve not had a chance to analyse yet. What I have got is heaps of positive comments from parents, students and teachers, but they don’t add up to data yet.”

To prove an impact, these approaches need long-term follow-up, focusing on life outcomes and socio-economic measures, as well as academic achievement.

That’s not to say that the big theories underpinning the character education movement have no research basis: there is plenty of hard data backing the work of the likes of Dweck and Duckworth.

For example, Duckworth and colleagues have investigated the effectiveness of teaching 10-year-olds a specific psychological intervention known as “Mental Contrasting with Implementation Intentions” (MCII) – a structured way of thinking about the actions that are needed to achieve a given goal, along with planning ways to overcome any possible obstacles.

Compared with children receiving bland “Believe it and you can achieve it!” messaging, the kids taught the MCII strategy had better academic performance.

Dweck, meanwhile, has tested her programmes with thousands of students. Delivering short workshops encouraging students to believe that they can grow and develop seems to lead to a decrease in aggression, reduced stress and a drop in the number of children showing signs of depression when they make the transition to high school.

Here in the UK, Arthur has carried out a study with 30,000 children in London primary

schools, working through a programme called the “Knightly Virtues”, which uses allegorical stories to explore different aspects of character.

“We’ve got kids all over the world using these Knightly Virtues as a resource,” he says proudly, “and we discover that kids who use it become much more fluent in speaking about virtues and were able to talk about them with their parents and the teachers.”

But the transference of academic data to national or international strategies is notoriously difficult in education.

This is partly due to the variable context of each classroom and kids within it, and also because a lot of academic research happens in relatively contrived situations or is poorly translated when rolled out into real life. As such, we don’t really know what works in education when it comes to teaching character.

“As a body of research, I don’t think that we’re there yet,” argues Tough. “I wouldn’t feel comfortable pointing to any particular curriculum and saying, ‘Yes, we know that this creates self-control in children and we know that it lasts a long time.’ Some interventions seem to work in the short term in a moderate sort of way, but as far as I know there is no good evidence that this particular pedagogy or this particular curriculum is going to have a lasting effect on children’s character.”

The good news is that long-term data is being gathered, particularly about how character interventions affect educational or life outcomes.

“We’re doing a longitudinal study at the moment on that,” says Arthur. “The early results indicate that it does impact on academic attainment by the kids being more receptive, more precise about doing their homework in an accurate way, and being more rational.”

Until we get these results and others, though, there a few things worth considering.

Firstly, Arthur’s research suggests that at least some aspects of character can be imparted through conventional teaching methods. But he says character needs to be caught as well as taught. And here’s where the government could have a problem.

### The right environment

If we really want to improve character, then some argue that we should not be targeting the children for intervention, but the people who teach them. “Teachers are role models and they perform many other roles rather than simply just the transmission of knowledge,” says Arthur.

Professor Steve Peters, psychiatrist and author of *The Chimp Paradox*, agrees and says that the ever-increasing pressure put on teachers is detracting from their ability to fulfil this vital role.

“I’m going to be a bit provocative now,” he says. “I think we should start with teachers. As a group they’re not in the best place right

now, so it might be better if we’re looking really broadly at education and asking how we can get the best out of our staff.”

The increasing stress levels and challenging working environment in the teaching profession are well known. So is it fair to expect staff to create and model a character-building environment for their pupils when they themselves are being disempowered and demoralised by politicians and purse-holders?

“You can’t present the best for yourself if you’re put in the wrong environment,” says Peters. “I think we have to create environments and cultures that allow teachers and children to discover what’s best of themselves. If children are looking to them as role models, then let’s get the teachers absolutely on fire. We empower them, we listen to them, we recognise what they do, we support them.”

The importance of environment is a conclusion Tough has also come to, detailed in his new book – a follow-up to *How Children Succeed*.

“In my new book, *Helping Children Succeed*, I am focused less – because I’m persuaded less – by those explicit attempts to teach specific character strengths,” he explains. “Instead I am more persuaded by the evidence that these character capacities are the products of children’s environments. So instead of trying to find the perfect pedagogy to try and teach the skills explicitly, it works better to think about the environment in which kids are growing up in, both at home in their early years and at school in the classroom, and think about how to make that environment in school and at home most conducive to these kind of capacities.

“It’s less attractive in some ways to educators because it’s less of a quick fix. It’s much easier to say, ‘Here’s the pedagogy, here’s the two-day professional development programme, here is the textbook, here’s the curriculum, here’s what you say in class.’ Instead, it’s about changing things like the way the parents interact with their kids and their babies, changing things like how we do discipline, the homework we assign, how we teach maths and history – all of those things that are really complicated and difficult to change.

“But what the research suggests to me is that that’s what actually makes kids display what we would normally call character: it makes you motivated to persevere, to stick with tasks for a long time, to bounce back from setbacks and get along with others better.”

The second important point to consider is that we should not be measuring the success of character education purely on academic results. It’s important to remember that there’s more to education (and to life) than just getting good grades – something many of the people I spoke to were keen to stress. Focusing more on character shouldn’t be

'These character capacities are the products of children's environments'



seen as a means to boost exam results, but as an important investment in the future of our society.

Arthur is near-evangelical about this, referring to the late MP Jo Cox's famous statement that we have much more in common than we have that divides us.

"What we have in common is our humanity, and humanity consists of these certain virtues – things like moral virtues, civic virtues – and if we can get them right, people will live in peace with each other and society will be better," he enthuses. "You don't send your children to school simply to pass examinations, you want them to come out a better person. Parents have some responsibility for this, of course, but schools have a huge responsibility in this area as well."

Of course, just as we don't know for sure that character education leads to better results in the long-term, we don't know whether character education can change

our non-educational outcomes either. After trawling through the studies and dissecting the rhetoric, it still feels like there are some parts of the puzzle missing when it comes to character education.

Duckworth, Dweck and the rest do have some good evidence that their theories work in practice. But as they say themselves, this doesn't mean that their books should be used as lesson plans or that they're the golden solution to teaching character in schools.

We seem to be in the odd situation where schools are racing to adopt new ideas while the researchers who are painstakingly piecing together the evidence to support these trendy interventions are struggling to catch up. This gap is something that greatly concerns Dweck.

"It's very positive that people are working on this when it's so needed," she says. "The one reason we are working so hard is that we don't want these concepts to be distorted and then found to be ineffective in their distorted

form. The ideas I'm putting forward have more evidence behind them than any educational concepts have ever had, but there's always a danger that they'll be distorted and misused and found to be ineffective, and then they'll be discarded and the next fad will come along."

Duckworth is also cautious of labelling character education as either a fad or a fully fledged fact. "I hope it isn't just a fad," she says, optimistically. "Fads come from false expectations and an impatience for easy, quick solutions. I don't think figuring out how to cultivate character in our children will be easy or quick. On the contrary, it will likely be difficult and progress may be uneven. But will we make progress? If we grown-ups can do this work while exemplifying character, yes, I think we'll make progress." ●

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