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
Character education to me is simply a good education

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. What does it mean that something is taught to what? If you were asked to explain the concept of character education, what would you say? How does character education underpin all else on educators’ plates; it is the plate,” writes Professor Angela Duckworth, 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.”

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 with no evidence to back 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 tends to be resilient, and who will get on better in society together.

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

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 students.

The increasing stress levels and challenging working environment in the teaching profession is well known as a reason 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 to be receptive to these 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 our side. If we empower them, we listen to them, we recognise what they do, we support them.’

As a body of evidence is the conclusion Tough has also come to, detailed in his new book – a follow-on 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 education programmes have better academic performance. As such, we don’t really know if they don’t add up to data yet.”

To prove an impact, these approaches also have better academic performance. If we really want to improve character, then we have to show some curiosity, or really need to ask ourselves if children who are doing these programmes tend to be more rational.

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“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.”

Dr Kat Arney is a science author, broadcaster and co-presenter of the BBC Radio 5Live Science show.