

Teaching good traits: Do character-bolstering projects work?

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Money is being poured into boosting desirable traits such as grit and resilience in children. But do they make a difference?

IT IS a common refrain down the ages: the young of today lack the backbone of earlier generations. In the UK, education secretary Nicky Morgan is ploughing £3.5 million into efforts to instil characteristics such as grit, resilience and self-control in state-school pupils, and millions more have been pledged for military cadet units in schools, partly to bolster such traits. Across the Atlantic, the US has long invested in character education.

Putting aside the debate about whether a grit deficit exists, what does science say about character and how it's shaped?



The very existence of character has been hotly disputed by those who argue that how we act is simply a reflection of external circumstances and not internal traits. But there is now strong evidence from psychology that character exists, that people differ in traits and that character is not immutable but can change and be improved, whatever you think about its heritability. There is evidence that it influences behaviour – from criminal acts to charitable giving – and correlates with longer-term prospects.

We also know that character traits split into at least two groups: performance virtues and moral virtues. Grit, self-control and resilience are all performance virtues. A lot of formal character education focuses on them.

But these traits are found in both the best of saints and the worst of sinners. An assassin might show a lot of grit if he or she spends years tracking down a target. More grit does not necessarily equate to a desirable outcome.

That is why, among other reasons, we must cultivate moral virtues, too. Traits such as honesty, compassion and respect balance the performance virtues and are vital for society to thrive.

To a degree, character education happens informally in classrooms around the world. Character is shaped when a teacher tells a student to clean up a workspace or try again on a project.

What about the effectiveness of dedicated character-education programmes? Here we are largely in the dark – in most cases we do not have enough evidence to say whether they even enhance traits.

Take moral virtues. Only a few character-education programmes have been subjected to sufficient research, and in those cases it was unclear whether the benefits accrued were as a result of the development of moral virtues.

The same is true for performance virtues. In the case of grit, I am not aware of a single published study that assesses the effectiveness of interventions.

So although the increased attention to character education is important, a big question remains: are these programmes actually doing the job?