

# EDUCATION WEEK

Published Online: January 15, 2013

Published in Print: January 16, 2013, as **Giving Cognition a Bad Name**

## Giving Cognition a Bad Name

By **Mike Rose**

Cognition traditionally refers to a wide and rich range of mental processes, from memory and attention, to comprehending and using language, to solving a difficult problem in physics or choreography or a relationship. But over the last few decades, cognition has been reduced to a shadow of its former self. Under the No Child Left Behind Act and the federal Race to the Top initiative, cognition in education policy has increasingly come to mean the skills measured by standardized tests of reading and mathematics. And as economists have gotten more involved in education, they've needed quantitative measures of cognitive ability and academic achievement for their analytical models, so they've used IQ or other standardized-test scores (like the qualification test, known as the AFQT, that the armed forces use to determine eligibility) as a proxy for intelligence or achievement. From a rich heritage (consider the Latin origin of the word *cognition*: to come to know), we've devolved to a few digits on the AFQT.

As if that were not enough, there is now emerging on a number of fronts—nicely summarized in Paul Tough's most recent book, *How Children Succeed*—a belief that our nation's educational focus on cognition has been misguided. Rather than focusing our energies on the academic curriculum, or on academic-intervention programs for the poor, we need to turn our attention to the development of qualities of character or personality, like perseverance, self-monitoring, and flexibility. As much as or more than the cognitive, the argument goes, these are the qualities that account for success in school and life.

The importance of traits like perseverance and flexibility is indisputable, but what concerns me is that the advocates for character education seem to accept without question the reductive notion of cognition that runs through our education policies, and by accepting it, further affirm it. The problem is exacerbated by the aforementioned way economists carve up and define mental activity. If cognition is represented by scores on ability or achievement tests, then anything not captured in those scores (like the desired qualities of character) is,

[← Back to Story](#)

## EDUCATION WEEK Multi-User LICENSING



**UNLOCK  
ESSENTIAL  
CONTENT**  
Open your  
team's potential

**+ Click here for more info**

de facto, noncognitive. We're now left with a pinched notion of cognition and a reductive dichotomy to boot.

This downplaying of the cognitive and the simplistic construction of the cognitive vs. noncognitive could have some troubling implications for education, especially the education of the children of the poor.

To begin with, the labeling of character qualities as "noncognitive" misrepresents them, particularly if you use the truer, richer notion of cognition. Self-monitoring, for example, has to involve a consideration and analysis of one's performance and mental state, which is a demanding cognitive activity. Flexibility requires a weighing of options and decisionmaking. The issue of labels is not just a problem of terminology, for if we don't have an accurate description of something, how can we help people develop it, especially if we want to scale up our efforts?

Furthermore, these desired qualities are developed over time in settings and through relationships that are meaningful to students, which most likely means that the settings and relationships involve significant cognitive tasks. Two classic preschool programs—the Perry Preschool and Abecedarian projects—have provided a research basis for the character advocates. Serving children from disadvantaged backgrounds, —Bob Dahm these programs were cognitively rich in imaginative play, language use, and activities that required thought and cooperation.

A very different example comes from a study I just completed **observing community college occupational programs as varied as fashion and diesel technology**. As students developed competence, they also became more committed to doing a job well, were better able to monitor and correct their performance, and improved their ability to communicate what they were doing, and help others. You could be, by inclination, the most dogged or communicative person in the world, but if you don't know what you're doing with a garment or an engine, your tendencies won't be realized in a meaningful way in the classroom or the workshop.

Also, we have to consider the consequences of this cognitive-noncognitive dichotomy in light of the history of American educational practice. We have a powerful tendency toward binary, either-or policies: Think of old math vs. new math or phonics vs. whole language. Given this tendency, we can predict a pendulum swing away from the academic and toward character education. But over the past 50 years, attempts at character education as a distinct pursuit have not been particularly successful.

Finally, the focus of the current character education movement is on low-income children, and the cold, hard fact is that many poor kids are already getting terrible educations in the cognitive domain. There's a stirring moment in Paul Tough's book where a remarkable chess teacher decides she's going to try to prepare one of her star pupils for an admissions test for one of New York City's selective high schools.



What she found was that this stunningly bright boy had gained little academic knowledge during his eight years in school. It would be tragic to downplay a strong academic education for children like him.

By all means, let us take a hard look at our national obsession with tests and scores and grades, and let us think more generously about what kinds of people we want our schools to develop. Part of such reconsideration would include a reclaiming of the full meaning of cognition—one that is robust and intellectual, intimately connected to character and social development, and directed toward the creation of a better world.

---

*Mike Rose is on the faculty of the graduate school of education and information studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. He is the author of Back to School: Why Everyone Deserves a Second Chance at Education (New Press, 2012).*