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We Need To Think Differently About “Non-Cognitive” Skills

Wednesday, January 16, 2013

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Thanks to the success of Paul Tough’s book *How Children Succeed*, the conversation in education circles has turned to so-called “non-cognitive” skills, such as 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, and we need to promote them through some form of “character education.”

Mike Rose, a professor of education at UCLA, takes issue with the way we’re framing the issue in this commentary in *Education Week*:

“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 [a limited view of what “cognition” is]. 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, 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 a 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, 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.” (Read more [here](#).)

Really important stuff here—I especially appreciate Rose’s final point, that “character” strengths often grow in tandem with knowledge and skill.

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One Response to “We Need To Think Differently About “Non-Cognitive” Skills”

1. [Meredith](#) says:
[January 16, 2013 at 5:03 pm](#)

This labeling problem with non-cognitive/soft/character skills is one of several reasons we settled on “superpowers” as our label. We figure that it’s just as accurate as any of those other labels (if not more so) and it’s more fun. These are powers that we haven’t yet found a way to easily test and measure, but we have a strong sense of how useful they are.

And as far as focusing on them in our club, we like how they change the nature of the problem. For instance, if one of our big-brained superheroes says they “need” a particular thing to solve a particular problem, saying something as simple as “Exercise your Adaptability superpower here” seems to immediately flip a switch in them. Whether it serves just as an increase in difficulty level or it actually makes them more aware of their inner selves, it’s hard to say. But it seems to get them to overcome a problem that they couldn’t overcome just two seconds before.

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