

# The Gap: The Spaces Between in Education

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Christy Folsom

New York City is distinguished by a Gap store on nearly every corner. In many neighborhoods, it is a *very* short walk from a regular Gap to an underwear Gap and on beyond to a Baby Gap. As I pass the repetitive window displays in revolving colors planned meticulously at a distant central office, the ubiquitous Gap stores remind me of the wide gaps that exist throughout education. These abstract gaps about which we read and write, think and speak, are very real when they exist in the minds of actual children.

## Between Writing and Reality

I am suffering whiplash caused by a collision between the theoretical and the practical. I have just emerged from a six-year doctoral experience. Confined to my Teachers College student apartment, I quietly read, thought, theorized, and wrote. I endorsed the descriptions of educational reforms outlined in thick scholarly books and eruditely explained in a multitude of journals.

To guide my dissertation research, I developed a theoretical framework--Teaching for Intellectual and Emotional Learning--that helps create a landscape of teacher and student thinking that supports the practices described throughout the reform literature. For example, self-direction and self-organization are central features of a reformed educational system that would better prepare students for a world glutted with information. Most often in this surfeit of information, the skills of evaluating and applying that information are sadly lacking. Students are rarely taught in any explicit way to analyze information, set and use criteria to make decisions, make a plan for taking action, or learn the art of self-evaluation.

I now find myself directing a new charter school in East Harlem. Reach Charter School is in its third week—we got a late start due to construction—but it is becoming clear that bringing thinking explicitly into the teaching and learning process will be no easy task. The gap between what exists in education and the vision of better ways to learn and teach is a deep and yawning chasm.

Bureaucratic entanglements reaching upward from the chasm floor divert time and attention from ideas aimed at innovative ways to teach and learn. Regulations governing special education, English language learners, dispensing medication, bus behavior, serving lunch, managing recess in a playground a block away, and getting buses to the school on time, have the potential to relegate the teaching of teaching of thinking and self-organization skills to a dim memory.

## Between Theory and Practice

In addition, a staff of new teachers, many of whom are still immersed in teacher education programs and chopping through the red tape of New York certification, are negotiating their first steps over the rocky terrain that lies between theory and practice. Armed with educational theory but little practical application, these novice teachers are finding themselves in a world of challenging children who require

teaching in the basics of talking to each other, looking at each other, and playing with each other in a climate of respect and peace.

### **Between Teaching and Learning**

We are all learning to match teaching to the individual learning requirements of the students, as well as the staff. Connecting teaching to learning and learning to teaching requires a meeting of the mind of the student and the intentions of the teacher. Coaxing the mind of the learner toward the concepts being taught is an architectural task. Included in the design of such learning experiences is teaching the students about the learning strategies and thinking skills that are involved in specific learning tasks.

For example, often teachers assign projects by giving students a written description of the project that includes the due date, and the requirements of the project. The students are then left to work on the project at home where, all too frequently, the parents take over the project to ensure that the project is completed.

At Reach Charter School, we are using project work to explicitly teach the skills of self-organization. At the outset of a project the student is taught to think about how the project will look when it is completed. The teacher guides the students in setting criteria that outlines the requirements for the finished project. Next, she teaches the students how to plan the work over time by helping them write incremental due dates on their individual calendars. When the project is completed and orally presented, the original criteria serve as the standards by which the student evaluates his project.

### **Between the Intellectual and the Emotional**

Our school is a laboratory for observing the relationship between the intellectual and the emotional. The children are coming to us from many different schools in New York City. Few are coming because they had successful experiences in their previous schools. Many come from chaotic home environments that have contributed to those bleak school experiences. Others come from chaotic schools and their parents are seeking a haven.

One mother produced a sheaf of her child's documents including report cards from the previous school, social security number, health record, and birth certificate. Remembering the difficulty with record keeping for my own children, I complimented her on her organization and ability to find all the information. She answered, "We're desperate. We have to be ready."

There is no mistaking the links between social-emotional experiences and the stunting of the intellectual growth of our children. On the other hand, their difficult life experiences potentially create a deep well of empathy for others. As we focus on the capacities of the children to think, listen to their stories that reveal their emotional experiences, and set limits to guide their behavior, the bright intellects hiding behind poor academic skills are beginning to emerge. By uniting theory and practice, by more carefully connecting teaching and learning, and by being aware of the connection between the intellectual and the emotional, we hope to make progress toward closing the "Gaps" between low academic achievement and the capable minds of the children we are serving.

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Christy Folsom is an Assistant Professor in the Masters Degree Program in Childhood Education at Lehman College, City University of New York, Bronx, New York. Her teaching and research focuses on the intellectual and emotional infrastructure of teaching and learning, project-based learning that includes self-organization skills; transfer of learning from coursework to P-12 classrooms, and change in teacher thinking and practice evidenced in student performance.

