

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Challenging the Mindset

“**M**ind the gap!” The plane parked at the Jetway at London’s Heathrow Airport. The engines shut down. “Welcome to the United Kingdom,” greeted the flight attendant. “Take caution when you exit the plane. There is a gap between the level of the jet bridge and the floor of the plane. Don’t get your shoe caught. Mind the gap!” The flight attendant was calling our attention to the difference in levels between the floor of the plane and the Jetway.

This story is a good metaphor for the purpose of this book, which calls attention to the gap between what we claim that we value as 21st-century educational essentials and what we value in our assessments of teachers, students, schools, and even nation’s educational systems. As we examine the many lists of desired learnings to prepare our future citizens for a life of problem solving, uncertainty, and globalization, and given the access we have to information through technologies, it becomes apparent that the keys to learning are dispositional in nature. Intended in this discussion, and for our purposes, when we say dispositions, we are referring to thinking dispositions—tendencies toward particular patterns of intellectual behavior.

Our practices of assessment, however, now and planned for the future, focus on the student’s ability to provide correct answers (Dean, 2010). Teachers report that such testing has an impact on their teaching. Unfortunately, they tend to spend

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more time covering material in class that will appear on standardized tests and worry that they won't cover everything before the tests are administered (Ferriter, 2013). These types of measures are no longer sufficient. If students are to achieve their full potential, they must have opportunities to engage, develop, and demonstrate a much richer set of skills and dispositions (U.S. Department of Education, 2013, p. v). This book calls attention to this gap.

We need to align our curriculum with the stated needs of students in their future lives. This book is intended to raise awareness of the need for dispositional teaching and learning, to provide rationale for transforming our educational system to value and to assess growth in dispositional learning as valid educational outcomes.

We are not suggesting that we abandon nor should we diminish the teaching of basic skills and knowledge of significant, relevant content and conceptual understandings. These, too, are essential for our students' future. Dispositions not only direct our strategic abilities, they also help activate relevant content knowledge as well, bringing that knowledge to the forefront to better illuminate the situation at hand (Ritchhart, 2002). Thinking dispositions develop resourcefulness (capacities) for expanding that knowledge and those skills and capabilities. Dispositional thinking informs and mediates that knowledge and those skills and capabilities (Feuerstein, Feuerstein, & Falik, 2010, p. xviii). Intelligent action in the world is what counts most. Knowledge of content is only a part of performance. Of equal importance is becoming alert to occasions for the application and the inclination to put skills and knowledge into play. Dispositions become the patterns of a student's exhibited behavior over time (Davidson, 2013).

Furthermore, the processes of acquiring content knowledge have changed drastically because of technology. Ask students to compare ancient Egypt with Mesopotamia, for example, and their first move is to the computer to "Ask Jeeves," query Wikipedia, search Google Scholar, or enlist a response to the question on a social network. (To search the Web well, however, requires the dispositions of flexibility, persistence, and the use of clear and precise language [O'Hanlon, 2013].) We are suggesting, however, that if we believe that 21st-century dispositions are also essential, that they, too, become the subject of curriculum, instruction, student

assessment, and even teacher evaluation. We will need to reframe our assessment of successful students, which in turn influences how we assess successful teachers and even successful schools (Costa, Garmston, & Zimmerman, 2014). Might we give equal attention to students' reading skills as well as their love of reading; their knowledge of scientific principles as well as their curiosity, intrigue, and wonderment about scientific phenomena; their knowledge and application of mathematical processes as well as their persistence with complex problems? Might we teach not only "right" answers, but also teach our students how to behave when they are confronted with problems the answers to which are elusive. Both are essential. We suggest that well-chosen, intriguing, rich, relevant content serves as a vehicle for experiencing the "joy-ride" of learning. The focus is not only learning *of* the content but also learning *from* the content.

We draw on our 20-plus years of experience implementing skillful thinking, self-directed learning, and the Habits of Mind—one subset of dispositions—in schools and classrooms around the world. We've learned a great deal about teaching students to become more effective thinkers, what works and what doesn't. We've researched and reported on the positive effects of these efforts and, therefore, have a burning desire to spread dispositional teaching and learning to an even greater number of schools and classrooms.

We've worked to define what it means to be an efficacious thinker—the efficacious thinker is not only skillful, but also motivated to employ skillful thinking (Swartz et al., 2007). Knowing the benefits of effective thinking, they are alert to situational cues that signal when it counts; they are conscious of their mental energies and problem-solving strategies; they know when it is appropriate to use skillful thinking, and they reflect on and continually strive to improve their cognitive processes. Being "good" thinkers means they are not only skillful but they are also inclined, disposed, and compelled to employ good thinking.

We've also worked with schools that wished to embrace dispositions—to become "Homes for the Mind" (Costa, 2004). We have learned that it takes time, a shared vision of the staff, and a commitment to building a school culture in which dispositions are the norm—the way we do things around here. We have found that it is much more likely that students will internalize and continue

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to grow the dispositions if they are consistently and often taught, modeled, reflected on, and reinforced by the entire school community. This is consistent with studies of the brain that show a correlation between frequency and duration of practice and the amount and extent of activity and density of connections (dendrites and synapses) and myelination in the brain (Willis, 2013). We refer to this frequency of encounters as “Dispositional Density.”

The three essential questions that will guide the work of this book are the following:

1. *How do we make dispositions come alive in the minds of students?* Once you’ve named them, the question is how to give them meaning, build capacities, sensitize students to situations, give them strategies, help them see the value, build commitment to improvement, and move to action that circles back to assessment.

2. *How do we produce a paradigm shift in the thinking of educational leaders, parents, the public, and our political decision makers?* We’ve learned that to change educational practices there must be a corresponding change in thinking, beliefs, values, and perceptions.

3. *How do we reclaim the role that education must play in protecting our democracy?* The many debates about what is right in education are most often defined by what is good for the economy. This debate becomes polarizing rather than seeking the common good. Thomas Jefferson put this standard forward clearly in stating that the way to protect democracy is by having an educated citizenship. We seek to define how education lives up to that task in the 21st century.

Minding the gap means paying attention to our intentions, aligning theory and practice, and constantly monitoring for congruity. This will require a reframing of our mental maps about what education is for, what are the attributes of “intelligent” human beings, and what needs to go on in schools and classrooms that are dispositionally oriented. It will require a new language with which we communicate about educational purposes, assessments of student progress, and excellence in teaching and learning. We hope this book will help. *Mind the gap!*

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