

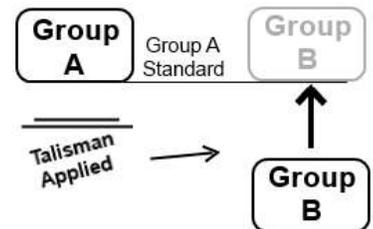
A Learning Gap

Dr. Jerry P. Galloway

The notion of a learning gap... herein known as “gap”... seems to be used to identify someone or a group that is learning below some standard. In this sense, the notion of a gap seems to be automatically considered a problem... a legitimate and real problem worthy of our attention. That is, any attention to such a gap seems to have an automatic and noble justification.

But, I have an objection to that under certain conditions. To use an analogy: one might refer to the poorer in society. But, unless everyone earns and possesses the same amount, then there will always be a poorer group. That is, someone will always have more and others less. Even if we find a way (such as extending daylight savings time) to increase earning or savings potential then it is likely that everyone will benefit and thus one group will still be poorer than another.

In this sense the notion of a gap being between one group and another (poorer vs. not poorer) is inevitable and natural unless one also adopts a socialist notion that everyone must have the same. Then, of course, financial standing fails to reflect individual efforts and talents which are not the same among all people and which, therefore, is another problem.



In other words, one use of the term “gap” seems to imply that all groups should be the same, score the same, learn the same, ... an effort to make the groups the same, etc. Otherwise, there will always be a gap – there will always be those who score, perform and achieve lower. If the difference between group A and B is due to a combination of geography, parenting, lifestyle, values, culture, goals, initiative, ... (we could list thousands), then attempting to close that gap with the application of a single talisman is to not understand the extensive nature of the many variables involved. Even if we find the ultimate talisman of learning (the magic twinkie), all groups are entitled and would similarly improve thus preserving and maintaining the gap. This becomes a study of society as a whole, of human nature and even more.

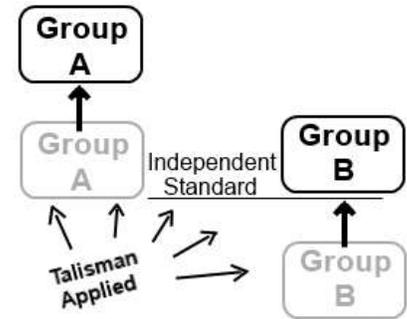
This is the nature of my objection in many cases to identifying a learning gap as a problem. This occurs when a gap is defined in terms of comparing group B with group A. It is like identifying gravity as a problem; it's just the nature of the world not being an ideal utopia assuming that would even be the utopia we could imagine it to be. In any event, not everyone scores, performs or achieves the same. Thus, it is inevitable and natural so long as human nature remains what it is and as long as we exist in any society as individuals.

Another useful analogy might be height. This writer is 6' tall while some people are shorter thus there is certainly a kind of gap between tall and short people. Some really tall people might bump their heads and think that is a problem. Indeed, bumping heads might lead one to think that low ceilings and low doorways are a problem, it is not the gap that is the problem. The gap is just another word for the fact that a difference exists in the population. One cannot identify the gap, itself, as the problem.

On the other hand... There can be a different use of the word gap. This is change in usage and meaning of the word as it then references something different. If the word gap refers instead to an independent standard then I have no issue. It simply becomes a casual (although perhaps unfortunate) description of a particular distinction in or attribute of group B - regardless of group A. That is, group B is like this, or like that, and has these and those particular characteristics (no reference or comparison to group A). Indeed, finding a talisman for learning (such as perhaps a good breakfast and good night's

sleep) may benefit everyone. That is, the application of some magic talisman – applied equally across all groups – might actually bring everyone above that independent standard and get everyone to where they need to be. Of course, the gap itself may continue to exist. Such a remedy is certainly a useful consideration and worthy of attention.

The point here is that referring to a learning gap for any group compared with a higher achieving group implies that there can be or should be no higher or lower learning groups. I reject this premise. I accept the notion that any group can achieve more and strive for higher standards and that much investigation is needed to find how best to influence that outcome. If it was really the gap itself that was the real issue, the real problem – and not relative to some other independent standard – then suppressing and limiting the achievement of the higher group A to no more than what group B accomplishes (like imposing a speed limit) would remove the gap and solve the problem.



A Racial Context

It may be that on occasion the two groups, A and B, are identified in racial terms. Of course, there are many contexts that may be considered for the two groups. For example, rural vs. urban, native vs immigrant, male vs female, black vs white, tall vs short, etc. It makes no real difference. The point explained above is the same regardless of how the groups are defined.

Even with something as absurd as tall vs short, there would be no way to fully account for the extensive range of experiences, encounters and reactions the two groups have in virtually every situation throughout their lives. The two groups are so incredibly different that in social sciences the full range of distinction can never be completely delineated nor controlled in research. Identifying the influence of any one factor will inevitably fail to consider the effects of another. Note that, although completely different in their experiences, there is no value judgment made about those differences. That is, tall persons may achieve as much worth and value as short persons regardless of how different their lives may be.

The same may be said of any of the other distinctions including race. To compare groups seems to miss the point. To say that group B is not like group A is to miss the point. What difference would it make to help group B to be more like group A if both are deficient and inadequate? If some application for group B could help them to excel to their fullest potential then what difference would it make where they stand relative to group A?

The reference to a gap is a most unfortunate, trite and over-used notion in education today. It is inevitably pointless, if not racist, to identify a gap in terms of whites versus blacks regardless of which may be in some preferred position at the time. There are many scales of comparison that could be made and not all groups are identical on those scales. Differences will always remain and it is the errand of an idealist to think otherwise. The point is not to make everyone identical so defining a gap in these terms misses the real point.

A so-called “gap” between where someone is and where they can be or between where they are and some independent standard identifies the real need but the term “gap” is misleading in those cases. One group does not need to be like the other. They need to be their best and that has nothing to do with a gap between them and any other group.