

# The Developing Teachers Fellowship Program: Exploring the use of Improv Theatre for the Professional Development of Inner City Teachers

Carrie Lobman, Ed.D.

Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, IL: April, 2007

In a cultural climate where education is narrowly focused on the acquisition of knowledge and skills, an important question for many teachers, teacher educators, and researchers is how can educators fulfill those requirements and still relate to their students as learners—as people who are not just the passive recipients of knowledge, but who are active creators and developers of their lives and their learning. Is it possible for teachers to maintain a focus on the development of their students as creative, inquiring social learners, and still function within the confines of traditional school settings?

There are many teachers, as well as researchers and teacher educators, who are attempting to answer these questions in their daily practice in the classroom or through the development of teacher training or professional development programs. Among the varied approaches being developed and practiced are arts based approaches to teaching (Beardall, 2005; Davis, 2005), the development of pedagogy that is culturally relevant to children's lives (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994), and curriculum that acknowledges the place of subjectivity for learning (Egan, 1992). While these and other approaches vary, they all strive to create rigorous learning environments while maintaining a broader focus on student's development.

This paper provides a case study of one such attempt to bring creative development into urban public school classrooms through a program that provides teachers with training in an improvisational, Vygotskian influenced approach to teaching and learning. This program is based on the understanding that teaching is similar in form to improvised performances and to pretend play, and this paper examines the use of improv theatre workshops as a professional development tool for public school teachers. It examines the question of what is the impact of learning to improvise on how teachers see and what they do in their classrooms?

## Theoretical Framework and Literature

The approach that is the subject of this paper is grounded in Newman and Holzman's (1993, 1997) understanding of Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development (zpd). Newman and Holzman see the zpd as a creative, improvisational activity. It is the activity of people creating environments where children (and adults) can take risks, make mistakes, and support each other to do what they do not yet know how to do. From this perspective the zpd is not a technique, or even a distance. It is an activity. An activity that people engage in together. It is by participating in creating environments where learning can occur that people learn.

According to Newman and Holzman (1993) the creation of the zpd is not a tool for the development of the individual— it is collective activity and what develops is the collective's (i.e. dyad, group, class, etc.) ability to create zones of proximal development. The "more developed" partners do not create the zpd so that the "less developed" child can learn—the zpd is created by the improvised activity of its participants. This view of the zone of proximal development shifts the focus away from the learning that is occurring *in* the zpd and toward the active creation *of* the zpd. From this perspective, the zpd is not an

instrumental tool for learning particular things, but is more a “tool and result” activity (Newman and Holzman, 1993, p. pp. 86-89). The activity of creating the zpd, of creating the environment for learning, is inseparable from the learning that occurs.

If we see the zpd as the activity of creating both the environment for learning and the learning itself—in a non-dualistic, dialectical relationship to each other—then there is no longer a dichotomy between the content that teachers are required to teach, and the process of creating environments for student’s growth. Teaching then becomes the activity of teachers organizing themselves and their students to create environments for learning—the focus shifts from the products of those environments to the dialectical relationship between what is to be learned and the creating of the environment for learning. The question for educators to ask becomes—How are we going to do this together and “this” includes everything including state mandates and required assessments.

One tool that has been used to help teachers become more skilled environment builders is improvisation. A number of researchers have made the connection between expert teaching and improvisation (Baker-Sennett & Matusov, 1997; Borke & Livingston, 1989; Yinger, 1980, 1987). Sawyer (2004) has even called for the use of improvisation as the new metaphor for teaching. Improvisational teaching is emergent and jointly created with students. What happens in improvisational teaching closely resembles the pretend play of young children (Lobman, 2005; Sawyer, 1997). Indeed, teachers of improvisation speak of helping people to rediscover the creative and collaborative skills they had as children (Johnstone, 1981; Nachmonovich, 1990; Spolin, 1999). In improv, as in pretend play, a group of people collectively create an emergent scene or story building off of each other’s ideas and suggestions.

From a Vygotskian perspective improvisation is valuable because it is, in large part, about environment building (Lobman & Lundquist, 2007; Holzman, 1999). In order to have a successful improv scene the performers have to continuously create the environment for the scene to take place. In improv there is no separation between the creating of the environment for the scene and the scene itself. It all takes place all the time. For this reason improv is a wonderful way for teachers to develop as zpd creators. Because improv is about taking risks, thinking outside the box, listening, and working collaboratively, it is effective in creating environments where teachers and students are able to go beyond what they already know, and learn and develop in new ways.

This Vygotskian inspired methodology has been used both in and outside of education to create practices that are dialectical and improvisational (Farmer, 2005; Feldman & Silverman, 2004; Gildin, 2003; Gordon, Bowman & Mejia, 2003; Holzman, 2000; Massad, 2003), and where people are supported to go beyond situational constraints and create developmental learning environments. In two previous research studies (Lobman, 2005; Lobman, 2006) it was found that when teachers improvised together they became better listeners, engaged their fear of losing or giving up control, and became more collaborative in their work with each other and with the children. Through the process of developing as improvisers teachers learned to see their class as a group and began to work with the group in new ways. Teachers reported that one of the most valuable aspects of participating in improv workshops was that the experience brought them closer to their colleagues, and created a more playful and supportive working relationship.

In addition, the teachers in these studies introduced improv to their students in the form of games and activities that supported team-building in the classroom. Participants spoke of being able to use improv activities to organize the children to be more supportive and helpful to each other and this then allowed the teacher to focus more on the learning needs of individual children.

The current study expands on this work. The subjects, 11 experienced inner city public school teachers from pre-k through high school, are participating in an intensive year-long training in improvisational teaching and learning that includes bi-weekly workshops and monthly on-site supervision in their classrooms. In their preliminary interviews the subjects described themselves as people who are already working creatively—using puppetry, games, trips, and performances—in settings that require them to work within a standard curriculum and prepare students for high stakes testing. The goal of the professional development program is to further develop these teachers' creativity, help them work more effectively with their class as a group, and provide a supervisory environment that is supportive of their further development.

### Program Description

The Developing Teachers Fellowship Program (DTFP) is a project of the East Side Institute for Group and Short Term Psychotherapy in New York City. The East Side Institute has been developing innovative educational projects since the late 1970's. From 1985-1996 the Institute ran a laboratory school, the Barbara Taylor School, an independent elementary school that practiced a Vygotskian, performatory approach. Since the late 1990's the Institute has offered short-term professional development trainings for teachers in schools and off-site. The Developing Teachers Fellowship Program is an experiment to see whether, with more intensive training and mentoring, the discoveries that have been made outside the mainstream public school system could be of use to and have an impact on New York City public school teachers and students.

The DTFP is a year-long training program for New York City area teachers who are already certified and are currently working in a public or charter school. DTFP receives no support or payment from the schools; it is independently supported by private donations and volunteer labor. Participants are selected through a process that includes a review of the person's resume, transcripts, and personal statement and an interview with the program directors. Each of the selected participants receives a \$2,500 stipend upon the completion of the program. The program requirements include participation in bi-weekly workshops on Saturday mornings and monthly on-site mentoring with trained Institute staff members. In addition, each of the Fellows is required to implement a final classroom or school demonstration project.

### *Teaching Fellows.*

There have been 11 Fellows in the program during the 2006-2007 school year. They are a diverse group. All of the Fellows are women. Six of them are White, four are African or Caribbean-American, and one is Hispanic. Six Fellows work in elementary schools, three in high schools, and one in a middle school. One of the Fellows is a preschool special education teacher. The Fellows have between 2-15 years of teaching experience.

### *Saturday Workshops*

The Saturday workshop is the core class of the DTFP. The Fellows meet every other week for a three-hour workshop led by the directors of the program. These sessions consist of improvisational theatre activities, philosophical dialogues, and teacher supervision, but not as discrete components of a given workshop. Rather the workshops are fluidly improvisational. For example, while the session may start with an improv warm-up activity like *Slow Motion Movement* this can easily lead into a philosophical conversation about the relationship between individuals and the group, and this could then transform into a supervisory discussion about an incident in a Fellow's classroom. The content of the workshops is emergent. Plans for a given session emerge from the activities in the previous sessions. Moreover, these plans are continuously being reshaped as each

three-hour session unfolds.

***Improv Activities.*** All of the Saturday workshops involve the learning and practicing of improv theatre activities. Over the years, improv comedians have developed a repertoire of games that are used to learn and practice improv skills that also serve as performance pieces for an audience. In addition to traditional improv games, the program uses the activities from the forthcoming book ***Unscripted learning: Using improv activities across the K-8 curriculum*** (Lobman & Lundquist, 2007). The activities from this book are specifically designed to be integrated with a standard public school curriculum.

Improv activities serve at least four purposes: 1) building the ensemble of the Fellows in the workshop and creating a supportive learning environment; 2) teaching the skills of improvisation that are key in building the learning environment in the classroom; 3) giving teachers improv activities that they can use in their own classrooms; and 4) drawing attention to teaching and learning as performances that can be developed.

### ***Philosophical Conversations.***

A second component of the Saturday workshops is the philosophical conversations that have developed around topics such as the relationship between learning and development and the politics of teaching. These conversations are an attempt to uncover some of the assumptions that shape teachers and children's lives in school and out. At its most successful the class is not replacing one set of assumptions with another, but instead is attempting to create an environment where everyone can play or improvise with ideas and beliefs that are usually related to as either too complicated for teachers or as abstractions that have no connections to teachers' daily activity. Some of these conversations are based on an article or a book that the Fellows have read, while others emerge from the playing of an improv game or out of the conversations about practical considerations in the Fellows' classrooms.

### ***Supervision.***

The workshops are not organized formally as supervision of the teacher's practices and they are not evaluative. However, what has evolved is that in the course of learning an improv game or having a philosophical conversation the Fellows will bring up areas of their practice they want to work on to get better at, or questions about how to incorporate performance into their practice. When this happens the class works to create an environment where we can be helpful to individual teachers while using what they are asking to develop the group's work overall.

### ***Monthly Mentoring***

Each of the Fellows is assigned a mentor who has been trained in the Institute's performance approach to learning and teaching. The mentors visit their assigned Fellows once a month and also create a context for their Fellows to be able to talk to each other and to their mentor in between workshops. The mentor's job is to serve as a bridge between what the Fellows are learning in the workshops and their work in the classroom.

### **Learning to Improvise Improvisationally**

The curriculum of the DTFP is emergent—it is developed in response to what is happening in the workshops and we use the

offers that the teachers make to determine what to teach and when to teach it. As one of the Fellows says,

...a very interesting and refreshing characteristic of the program is that we are learning *about* improvisation, and we are *doing* it improvisationally. There is no separation between the content of what we are learning and the process by which we are learning it.

She added that this was particularly valuable because instead of leaving the workshop with a list of "how-to's" she is able to leave having had the experience of learning herself. In her past experience, professional development often involved learning about a new curriculum, method or approach, but the "process of learning about it did not appear to have any relationship to what was being taught."

During this same discussion the Fellows shared some of their experience of professional development workshop leaders. Lois asked them, "What do you think Carrie's (program director) performance has been as a workshop leader?" One of the Fellows responded by saying that Carrie works with whatever they give.

It's a fluid process and Carrie doesn't seem as focused on getting her point across as much as on doing something with us—she uses whatever we say or do, the experience is that the program is being created in response to what we [the fellows] bring to it.

One of the goals of the program is to help the Fellows to create supportive, playful learning environments with their students. However, rather than teaching them "seven steps to a supportive, playful environment." we approach that goal by inviting them to create such an environment with us and each other. Our understanding is that, while there is no guarantee of how they will make use of their development, if they themselves grow they will be in a better position to support their students to grow.

Using Improv to Teach Subject Matter

One of the premises of the program has been that it is possible to use improv activities to teach required curriculum content in creative and playful ways. In order to support this goal we have worked to create an improv laboratory in the Saturday workshops. In addition, to learning traditional improv games that are used by comedians or team-building experts the Fellows have taken on the challenge of adapting or creating improv activities of their own that could be used to teach specific subjects and grade levels.

### *Improvising with Content in the Workshops*

One of the assignments in the workshops was for each Fellow to take an improv game that relates to their subject or grade level and teach it to the rest of the group. On the week that it was her turn to present Maria had come to the workshop prepared to teach a version of the improv game *What if* (Lobman & Lundquist, 2007, p.143). In this game performers create a scene about an historical event. The game begins with everyone (audience and performers) brainstorming all of what they remember about the event and then the ensemble begins performing it as an improvised scene. After the performers have established the scene the director stops the action and asks the audience to make a suggestion for what might have happened next. This suggestion does not need to stick with the original story. The players then continue the performance by incorporating the new suggestion into the scene.

Maria had prepared all sorts of curriculum materials to help the Fellows use the content from her lesson. The topic she chose to focus on was colonization and the story she used was Cortez's landing in the Yucatan and his meeting with the Aztec King

Montezuma. The Fellows performing in the scene struggled with their performances—some of them talked too softly, or talked at the same time, and did not pick up on and listen to their fellow performers' offers. The first time the Fellows performed the scene Maria gave a lot of direction that focused on the content of the story. In particular, she stopped the action frequently to remind the performers of what "really" happened. Even when she got suggestions for "what might have happened" from the audience, she picked those suggestions that were in line with the historical accounting. At the end of the scene Maria said that with her own students she felt equally concerned about letting them improvise and was worried that they would not learn the right material or get the right message.

This led to a discussion about the difference between directing theatrically and directing as a teacher. Carrie demonstrated how one might direct the Cortez and Montezuma *What if* scene theatrically by giving the performers direction on voice quality, blocking, and saying "yes, and" to the offers that were being made. When the scene was re-performed one of the things we discovered was that with theatrical direction the performers actually were able to use the content more than when they were being reminded of it. While the content of the scene was much more irreverent the second time around (Cortez and Montezuma got into a discussion about hair style and the Spaniards, upon being told they were not on their way to the Far East, were embarrassed by their mistake and considered leaving), everyone was engaged with both the "real" story and the playfulness of re-writing it.

During the course of the *What if* activity everyone, audience members and performers, learned something about the meeting of Montezuma and Cortez. It was not necessary for the scene to stick with the historical accounting for the participants to learn the "facts" of what happened in such a way that they could recall them on a test. By the end of the activity no one was concerned that a student would write an essay on the final exam that discussed Montezuma's reaction to Cortez's hair. To put it another way, by focusing on what was needed to perform the scene, the Fellows had the experience of creating an environment for learning that was inseparable from what was to be learned.

### *Improvising with Content in the Classroom*

Through the course of leading and participating in activities like *What if* the Fellows developed as improvisers and as improv directors. In addition, they have begun to see the content of their curriculum as material for the creation of improv scenes with their students. In the following vignette Maria describes the experience of adapting another improv activity, *The History Bus* (Lobman & Lundquist, 2007, p. 148) for use in her 9th Grade World History class. Maria teaches at a vocational high school, and her students are primarily Black and Hispanic boys, many of whom struggle with basic literacy skills.

*I attempted the history bus improvisational activity in order to assess the depth of my student's understanding of the key historical figures we had studied. The class created a "bus" with eight passengers and one driver's seat in the center of the room. To begin the activity I made index cards with the names of some of the figures we studied from September to the present. The stack of cards included the following historical figures: nomadic hunters and gatherers, Jesus Christ, Buddha, Confucius, Shi Huangdi, Akbar the Great, Martin Luther, Marie Antoinette, Louis XIV, a South Bronx monk, Medieval Knight, Machiavelli, the Pope, an Untouchable, Saladin, a Renaissance courtier, third estate citizen and*

*various Enlightenment thinkers (Hobbes, Voltaire, Montequieu, Locke). Eight students chose a card from the deck of figures. Each of these historical “passengers” then worked with a team of 3-4 other students to review the history of this character and generate ideas on how this character might act on a bus. After 5 minutes, the “characters” lined up to wait for the bus.*

*To remind the students to stay in character, I made the bus driver a Renaissance courtier, a character that many students were familiar with. Despite what the historical passenger said/did to the courtier, his job was to be the consummate gentleman. As the figures entered the bus, it was interesting to see their depth of understanding, even between figures that didn’t live in the same time period. For example, there was a verbal argument between Marie Antoinette and a third Estate citizen, hungry for bread; a discussion between Martin Luther and Jesus about what Jesus really intended for his followers; a disagreement between Martin Luther and the Pope; Machiavelli and Pericles; and Shi Huangdi and Voltaire.*

In this example Maria used improv to assess and reinforce content her students’ have already learned. However, unlike many assessments, this activity also allows students to continue to learn. An activity like the History Bus put a greater demand on Maria’s students to actively engage with the content, and simultaneously requires them to create with each other and with Maria. In this activity there are the obvious benefits of history coming to life and of giving students an opportunity to see things from multiple perspectives. It also demonstrates that even in high school with a traditional curriculum and a high stakes assessment at the end of the year, Maria is able to do something creative that supported the curriculum rather than competing with it.

#### Seeing Performance

One way to understand both the *What if* and *History Bus* activities is that the learning that was occurring was more performatory than cognitive and that the Fellows and Maria’s students were developing as performers and creators of their learning. One of the objectives of the DTFP is to support the teachers to see themselves and their students as performers. From this perspective human beings are seen as active creators of their development by virtue of the capacity to perform, that is to be simultaneously “who we are and who we are not” (Holzman, 2006, p. ) In this understanding of performance, not only are pretending, playing, and imagining seen as essential to emotional, social, and moral development, but all human activity, including teaching and learning is understood as performance.

In the DTFP performance is presented both as a set of theatrical activities (including improvisation) that can be valuable for teachers to learn and practice with their students, and as a characterization of all human activity, that is as the ontology of life as lived (Newman & Holzman, 1997). While many of the teachers came to the program with some experience in theatrical performance, this additional philosophical piece was new to most of them and has been the material for an ongoing dialogue. On the first day of the program we played an introductory improv game where each person steps into the middle of the circle and makes a physical movement and says her name—which everyone else in the group then imitates. We followed up this activity with what could be considered a more traditional set of introductions—each person tells the group who they are and why they are

in the program.

We then talked about our responses to these two activities. While the first activity had been challenging, we had all managed to remember each other's names and the movement each of us had done. However, everyone agreed that in the second exercise it had been hard to listen to each other because most people were trying to plan what they were going to say when it was their turn. The Fellows said that they saw the first activity as a performance, but not the second one. When we deconstructed what was meant by this what emerged was that the first activity appeared to be a performance because we were standing up, acting "silly," and not speaking "truths" about ourselves. The second activity was not a performance because we were sitting, and it was "serious" and "real."

The class then tried a third activity where each person stepped into the middle and did a physical movement, while also telling the group something about themselves. After three people had a turn, Lois called out, "If you are thinking about what you are going to do when it's your turn step into the middle of the circle." Half the group stepped into the middle, and everyone laughed. From that point forward, people would spontaneously step into the middle if they felt themselves start to plan what they were going to say. The group noticed that these introductions were much more personal, unexpected, and easier to listen to and remember. All three activities together produced a philosophical discussion about performance that has continued throughout the program.

### *Is teaching a performance?*

In the course of these discussions we have discovered, nor surprisingly, that the Fellows tend to see themselves as performing in the classroom when they do something "out of the ordinary" like speak to the students in a funny voice or put on a different costume, but that they then return to being a teacher, which they do not see or relate to as a performance. There is their "real" teacher identity and then there is what they do when they wanted to be playful.

We (Lois and Carrie) have challenged them on this. We have shared with them that we believe a critical piece of developing as teachers would be to see themselves as performing all the time, because this would challenge them to not just rely on their well worn teacher performance as a default. If they were to see teaching as one of the many performances that they do in life, then they would have the option to further develop their serious, demanding, and even strict teaching performances so that these moments were more relational (i.e. have something to do with their students), effective, and creative. Seeing and developing performances makes it possible to continuously create choices about how to perform, instead of just automatically reacting in response to what students are doing or how you are feeling in that moment. In addition, by working to continuously display a growing repertoire of teacher performances, the Fellows can serve as role models for their students, who are often as stuck in what it means to be a student as the teachers are in being teachers.

### *Seeing Students as Performers*

In addition to seeing themselves as performers the Fellows have begun to also see their students as performers and this has impacted on the types of conversations they can create in their classrooms. In general, the relationship between students and teachers (particularly as children enter the middle grades) is often very scripted—the roles of teacher and student are clear and the range of responses allowed to either role is quite limited. Through the program the Fellows have begun to play with those roles, both in terms of how they respond to their students and in how they support their students to respond to them and other teachers. In the following example from her 4th grade class, Rachel uses an improv activity she learned in the workshops to support her students to be powerful rather than to be victims in response to teachers that they do not get along with.

*One particular performance game I led was the Relationship game. This is the game where the participants choose a relationship and a first line. Then the actors try several ways to perform the scene. We have played the game several times and the children love it. One particular afternoon, a student named Ariana came into class very upset with another teacher in the school. She was upset because she feels the teacher doesn't listen to her, is unfair, and doesn't let her use the restroom. The list goes on. I decided on the spot (which has been something I have been learning to do more often) to play this game with her and use the relationship of teacher-student. She chose someone to do the performance with her and we selected the first line of, "I need to go to the bathroom". Ariana performed the scene three times and every time we discussed it. The class pointed out that every time she performed it the words she used were different but the anger was the same throughout. The class suggested that the feeling in all performances was similar. Natalie, the girl who performed with her, attempted to change the tone of the performance but it was obvious that Ariana couldn't go with it.*

*This was fascinating to discuss with the group. We decided collectively to ask two different people to perform the same scene. The scene was performed three times very differently which led to more discussion on the power of performance in our lives. After we played the game, Ariana was still under the impression that her teacher would not be able to respond to any new performance she came up with. The class suggested that she would not know this unless she tried. I felt that the discussion that was created around our abilities to perform powerfully was very developmental. I am looking forward to further opportunities to be creative based on the needs of the environment.*

In this example Rachel is relating to her students as performers and creators of their lives rather than as people who are slaves to their reactions. She does this not as a lecture or a demonstration of their options but as a theatrical performance. In this case she uses a game that we had been playing in the workshops and adapted it to a situation with her students.

### *Classroom Creator v. Classroom Manager*

In coming to see themselves and their students as performers there has been a shift in how the teachers talk about and understand classroom management. Actually, an interesting element of the program is that for the most part the teachers do not talk about classroom management or discipline issues in the classroom as a problem. While they talk about difficult situations or children, they have introduced these issues from the vantage point of developing their repertoire of teacher performances rather than as trying to fix or complain about the children. Rachel's story can be seen as an example of what it means to accept offers in the classroom and to see performance rather than behavior. For one thing it opens up options of being creative when children are "misbehaving" or are not following directions. It creates an opportunity to be able to see what can be created in these moments instead of just reacting to them.

For example, during a discussion about ways that the teachers felt challenged in the classroom Heather, a second grade teacher,

asked for help in responding to a girl in her class who often had tantrums. The suggestion that came out of the workshop was that she could create a *Tantrum Theatre* where all of her students could have a chance to perform what they and others look like when they are having a tantrum. Rather than trying to get the individual child to stop or change her behavior, Heather and her students could relate to tantrums as one of the many performances that children (and adults) sometimes do, and as something that can be performed in an infinite number of ways. While the girl might still have tantrums at inopportune moments, Heather, the girl, and the rest of the class would all have a different relationship to the tantrum by virtue of having created something with it.

Heather has said dialogues like this one have challenged her assumptions about what to do in response to children's behavior and even what behavior is. She has begun to relate to what children are doing as offers and performances rather than as good or bad behavior. She may still prefer certain performances to others, or find some offers useful and others a nuisance, but it has opened up the option of being creative when children are "misbehaving" or are not following directions. The following is a story, told by both Heather and Gwen, her DTFP mentor, about an activity in Heather's classroom.

*Prior to the visit, Heather had told Gwen that there was a lot of fighting in the class and that she was getting worn down. There were a few students in particular who instigated things and the rest of the group got off track. Together we had decided that we were going to have the class do the basic improv storytelling activity of "Yes, and" where the class tells a collective story and each sentence (after the opening line) starts with the words, "Yes, and." Heather asked students to sit on the carpet and she reminded them of the rules of the game. The class made up a story titled "Fat Cat and Skinny Cat." Soon into the game about a third of the class was either chatting with each other in two's or fighting.*

*Gwen: Who wants to play the game? We don't have to play. It's really okay to say no. We'll find something else for those who don't want to play to do so they can support the group story telling.*

*Approximately a third of the class opted out of the storytelling. Gwen suggested that those who don't play listen to the new story we're going to tell, and draw a picture about it. After Gwen made that suggestion another third opted out. So we had about 7 story tellers on the carpet and about 14 kids drawing (intently and enthusiastically).*

*The group on the rug told a new story. Mid-way through Gwen asked the drawers to show everyone their pictures and none of them were about the new story we were telling. In fact they were all of Fat Cat and Skinny Cat.*

*Gwen: Okay, we've got these great pictures to go with our story. What can we do with the story and all the pictures? Let's perform it!*

*Lots of hands went up to volunteer to perform. Heather picked one child, that had caused a lot of trouble earlier in the class but who was drawing intently, to play Skinny Cat. Another played Fat Cat and Gwen played the pizza man. We*

*all stood in front of the class and Gwen asked the class for our lines. They fed each of us lines. Another student who had been quite disruptive was one of our most active script writers. We got the lines and acted them out. We even got words and a tune for a finale song. Each of us sang the last verse separately as we walked down the road and exited the stage one by one. A great performance! Heather wrote the lines of the play on a flip chart.*

In this instance, the children's actions were making it difficult to teach them the "Yes, and" storytelling activity in its traditional form. Rather than either giving up or punishing the children for not behaving, Heather and Gwen decided to use everything that was going on to create a new activity. The first step in this was to make it possible for children to leave the rug and do something else without this being seen as a penalty, and then they were able to use what the children were doing at the other tables as part of the storytelling activity. All of the children could have the experience of not only contributing to the group activity, but of actively shaping what the activity was going to be. Finally, by turning the whole thing into a written play they were able to incorporate literacy and other skills that are important for Heather to be teaching.

## Conclusion

At a time when half of all urban teachers leave the field after less than five years (Rowen, Corenti & Richard, 2002) it is imperative that we explore new approaches to teaching that can help mitigate the effects of the negative working conditions in many urban schools (Haberman, 2005). We need to find approaches that can give teachers the tools they need to work creatively within a system that does not often support innovation. The improvisational, Vygotskian training described in this paper has provided the Fellows with a methodology that supports them to work creatively under sometimes very constraining conditions.

The methodology of the DTFP is based on the understanding that learning involves being "who you are and who you are not"—in other words performing. This is how babies and very young children are related to before they come to school and it has everything to do with why they are such good learners. The program helped teachers learn to reshape their classroom environments, to the extent possible, into ones that support the development of their students as good learners.

Teachers are trained to think of environments as something that they put in place at the beginning of the year so that they can move on to teaching. To the extent that the classroom environment is mentioned at all, teacher education programs prepare teachers to think about the physical design of their classroom, and to have a plan in place for managing student behavior. The methodology of the DTFP does not make a separation between the creation of the environment and the teaching and learning that occurs. In Vygotskian terms the creating of the environment for learning is both a "tool and a result" of the learning and as such it is continuously being created.

Throughout the program we supported the teachers to develop as skilled environment creators, both by modeling that in how we taught them, and by teaching them to see themselves and their students as creators and performers. Improvisation has proved to be an invaluable activity in the Fellows' development. By becoming improvisers they have started to relate to themselves and their students as creators of an ongoing learning play—a play that is constantly recreated and reshaped in response to new challenges. They have started to use everything, from the world history curriculum to 2nd graders bickering and fighting as material from which to create the learning environment in the classroom.

In providing teachers with new understandings of learning and teaching and with specific, practical tools consistent with these

new understandings, the DTFP allowed teachers to challenge the methodology of most schools—one based on a sequential, linear understanding of learning as the acquisition and demonstration of knowledge. Rather than creating the environment where risks can be taken, where students can “be who they are not,” where students can co-create the environment for learning, schools tend to be environments where doing what one *knows* how to do is valued and rewarded. One of our discoveries this year is that it is possible to bring creativity and playfulness into schools that are governed by standardization and testing. We are more convinced than ever that learning to see themselves and their students as performers is what is needed for teachers to be successful under the current constraining circumstances so many of them face.

## References

- Baker-Sennett, J. & Matusov, E. (1997). School “performances”: Improvisational processes in development and education. In K. Sawyer (Ed.), *Creativity in Performance*, 197-212. Greenwich, CT: Ablex Publishing Company.
- Beardall, N. (2005). Dance the dream: Reflections on an Eighth Grade Dance Class. In M. C. Powell & Speiser, V. M. (Eds.), *The arts, education, and social change: Little Signs of Hope*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Borko, H. & Livingston, C. (1989). Cognition and improvisation: Differences in mathematics instruction by expert and novice teachers. *American Educational Research Journal*, 26, 473-498.
- Davis, J.H. (2005). *Framing education as art: The octopus has a good day*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Egan, K. (1992). *Imagination in teaching and learning*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Farmer, E. (2005). Community development as improvised performance: How a New York housing project turned around. *Progressive Planning*, Spring 2005, 163-168.
- Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, & Practice*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Feldman, N. and Silverman, B. (2004) The let's talk about it model: Engaging young people as partners in creating their own mental health program. K. E. Robinson (Ed.), *Advances in School-Based Mental Health, Best Practices and Program Models*. New Jersey: Civic Research Institute.
- Gildin, B. L. (2003). All stars talent show network: Grassroots funding, community building and participatory evaluation. *Youth participatory evaluation: A field in the making*, Special issue of *New Directions for Evaluation*, no. 98, 77-85

Gordon, E., Bowman, C. & Mejia, B.(2003). *Changing the Script for Youth Development: An Evaluation of the All Stars Talent Show Network and the Joseph A. Forgione Development School for Youth.* Institute for Urban and Minority Education, Teachers College, Columbia University: New York.

Haberman, M. (2005, July 29). Teacher burnout in black and white. *Educationnews.org*. Retrieved July 30, 2005, from <http://www.educationnews.org/teacher-burnout-in-black-and-white.htm>

Holzman, L. (1997). *Schools for growth: Radical alternatives to current educational models.* London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Pub.

Holzman, L. (1999). Life as performance. In L. Holzman (Ed.), *Performing psychology: A postmodern culture of the mind.* New York: Routledge, pp. 49-69.

Holzman, L. (2000). Performative psychology: An untapped resource for educators . *Educational and Child Psychology* , 17(3), 86-103.

Holzman, L. (2006). *The Performing Art of Human Development: From the Theatre Stage to the Life Stage.* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Jean Piaget Society. Baltimore, Md.

Johnstone, K. (1981). *Impro: Improvisation and the theater.* New York: Routledge.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). Towards a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 32 (3), 465-491.

Lobman, C. (2005). Yes and: The uses of improvisation for early childhood teacher development. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education*, 26 (3), 305-319.

Lobman, C. (2006). Improvising with(in) the system: An interactive dialogue with 3 inner city teachers. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, CA.

Lobman, C. & Lundquist, M. (2007). *Unscripted learning: Using improv activities across the K-8 curriculum.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Massad, S. (2003). Performance of doctoring: A philosophical/methodological approach to medical conversation. *Mind/Body Medicine*, 19 (1), 6-13.

Nachmanovitch, S. (1991). *Free play: Improvisation in life and art* New York: Penguin/Putnum.

Newman, F. & Holzman, L. (1993). *Lev Vygotsky: Revolutionary scientist*.  
London: Routledge.

Newman, F. & Holzman, L. (1997). *The end of knowing*. London: Routledge.

Rowan, B., Corenti, R, & Richard, R. (2002). What Large Scale Research Tells Us about  
Teacher Effects on Student Achievement . *Teachers College Record*, 104<sup>(8)</sup>, 1525-1567.

Sawyer, K. 1997. *Pretend play as improvisation: Conversation in the preschool  
classroom*. New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Sawyer (2004). Creative teaching: Collaborative discussion as disciplined improvisation.  
*Educational Researcher*, 33<sup>(2)</sup>, 12-20.

Spolin, V. (1999). *Improvisation for the theater* (3rd ed.). Chicago, IL: Northwestern  
University Press.

Yinger, R. (1980). A study of teacher planning. *The Elementary School Journal*, 80,<sup>107-</sup>  
127.

Yinger, R. (1987). *By the seat of your pants: An inquiry into improvisation and  
teaching*.  
Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Washington, DC.