

Creating Our Own Development

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“You just don’t understand”, he said, fuming with rage and humiliation. “He dissed me”, the young teen continued. “You’re right”, said that the therapist, “the teacher treated you in a racist way. Now what?”

The therapist is asking a philosophical question. The performance approach s/he is using is called Social Therapy, and is helping young people move around and about the adult authority in their lives by helping them to perform something beyond what they feel capable of doing. Responding performatively means relating to young people and ourselves as having performance choices. At any moment, we can choose how we want to perform, to create our life.

The example above comes from *Let’s Talk About It*, a school-based mental health service located at Erasmus High School in Brooklyn, New York. It is unique in school-based services in being a group therapeutic program in which the young people have been partners in creating the program. This program focuses on emotional development (rather than on the diagnosis and remediation of emotional problems.) The program emphasizes promoting the strengths of young people who co-create the program along with the professional facilitators. Together they create an environment in which the students can get help with their emotional problems. *Let’s Talk About It* has successfully de-stigmatized mental health services in the Erasmus school community, i.e., it has taught the students at Erasmus that it is not only OK, but “cool” to participate in the activity of talking about and doing something about the daily stresses they face with peers, school staff and family: stress associated with emotional and academic difficulties in urban communities (poverty, racism, family and community violence).

We think that *Let’s Talk About It* represents a very promising model for fostering emotional development within the traditional school environment, indeed helping to make the traditional school environment “more developmental.” We see development as an activity of becoming, the relationship between who you are, and who you are not. We are more focused on the process than the outcome. We use the concept of performance, our human capacity to perform beyond our selves and to utilize this capacity in the service of continuous emotional growth. This performance approach to mental health has helped young people to experience themselves as performers in

everyday life and experience their behavior as a series of performance choices.

Traditionally, in schools, emotionality is related to as a remedial component, often as something to get rid of because it's seen as problematic to the classroom. We recognize the positive emotions from joy to happiness that are a critical part of learning and creating. Learning to play together, whether children, adults, or adolescents, gives birth to a certain kind of cultural experience which enhances one's identity as a creator.

One of program's teen co-creators said, "This is *our* place, This is our room. I had a fight with this girl and we came down here and worked it out. We did it for the sake of the group-not because she wanted to be my friend or I wanted to be her friend. Because we valued this group more than we valued our stupid arguments."

"Valuing the group, having a place in school that is "our place," making a choice to do something with fighting which is other than fighting. These are ways that the adolescent co-creators in "*Let's Talk About It*" speak about the difference it has made in their lives. Simultaneously, the young people's words articulate the key methodological features of this unique school-based mental health program. In our view "mental health" means emotional growth. Emotional growth means being committed to something bigger than yourself, such as "valuing the group", It means having ownership of something you've created, such as "our place". And it means learning to create options for how to be, such as "making a choice" (Feldman & Silverman, 2002).

The *Let's Talk About It* program meets daily during lunch. The students choose to participate or not. Current members recruit new students as part of the activity of building the group. The approach raises a philosophical dialogue with the youths on many methodological issues, such as: where do programs come from? Does a program have to have rules? Who makes the rules? Who enforces the rules? How can we create together? How do we function together? What do we do if we don't like what's going on? These are mundane philosophical questions with direct implications and impact on their day-to-day lives. The activity of creating their own therapy, their own youth program simultaneously creates their conditions for their development. The experience of creating teaches important social and life skills. This is the way we teach philosophy, methodology and logic as a component of helping them create, to build their community and their lives.

Reference:

Feldman, N. & Silverman, B. "The Let's Talk About It" Model: Engaging Young People as Partners in Creating their Own Mental Health Program, Civic Research Institute, NJ. (in press)