From Passive Objects to Active Subjects: Young People, Performance and Possibility

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Among the varied perspectives on human development, those that view development as a social-cultural phenomenon are most consistent with innovative youth development practices. Among these practices, there is an emerging view of development that is related to human beings capacity to perform. In this view, performance, which simultaneously includes who we are and who we are becoming, can develop young people's collective capacity to become culture and community creators. The performance approach helps young people relate to themselves as producers and not simply consumers. Examples of youth development programs that put this approach into practice in US inner cities will be discussed: two after school programs developed by the All Stars Project, Inc. and the school-based mental health program, Let's Talk About It. The implication from the study of these performance-based programs is that performance is a tool that helps young people relate to themselves as active producers of their environments.

Social-cultural approaches to youth development view human beings from the moment of birth as social and active members of their culture who create and construct their learning, development and ways of living (John-Steiner, 2000; Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978). In this view, development does not *happen* to people, it is *created* by people. Among those who advance a socio-cultural view, Holzman and Newman posit the centrality of performance (in the theatrical sense) to human development (Holzman, 1999; 2000; Holzman & Mendez, 2003; Newman, 1996; Newman & Holzman, 1996; 1997).

Holzman and Newman's understanding of performance has influenced the development of a variety of practices, some therapeutic, others educational. This paper discusses the impact of the performance approach on young people in three youth development programs. The study is an in-depth look at the experience of participating in these programs.

The word performance is often reserved for the activity that people do on a theatre stage. Actors get up on a stage and perform as someone else. The theatre stage creates an environment in which people can be themselves and other than themselves at the same time. For example, no one questions whether Liz Taylor was actually Cleopatra. On the theatre stage, Liz Taylor has the freedom to be other than herself (Cleopatra). At the same time, the audience realizes that Liz Taylor is still Liz Taylor. We all have this capacity to be

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who we are and who we are not. According to some researchers and practitioners, Newman and Holzman among them, this capacity— critical to ongoing human development—needs to be nurtured.

The human capacity to perform is evident in children from the very beginning of their lives. In the first two years of life, children's development is remarkably fast. To Lev Vygotsky (1978), the pioneer of socio-cultural theory, young children learn and develop because they are engaged in joint activity with their caretakers, doing things they could not do alone; he called this environment a Zone of Proximal Development. In their explication of the significance of Vygotsky's work, Newman and Holzman (1993) describe the Zone of Proximal Development as a performatory environment in which very young children perform as speakers of a language. Children babble and their caretakers respond as if the children were speaking. Toddlers *perform* as speakers before they know that such a thing as speaking exists. Their parents encourage them to perform in this way. Parents don't insist that the baby speak as competently as an adult, yet they still relate to the child as a speaker. Parents and children create an environment together in which children can creatively imitate their caretakers and, thus, perform beyond themselves. In the process of performing as speakers, they become speakers. Performance, understood in this way, is developmental because it is about becoming.

Newman and Holzman (1993) demonstrate that once children get to school they are not typically supported to learn in this way; instead, they are socialized to speak only when they know the answer. Before they go to school, children essentially learn to speak, eat, draw, dance, etc. by performing beyond themselves; however, once they go to school, the kind of creative performance that got them there in the first place ends. In the school environment, children are often more encouraged to be who they *are*, to develop an identity, rather than to continue to perform as who they are *becoming*. Holzman (1997) points out that after early childhood, performing must be a conscious act: "Babies perform without knowing they are performing, but once we have performed our way into societally appropriate behavior, we have to *choose* to perform. We have to be directed to perform by others or ourselves" (p. 75).

The premise of the performance approach is that new ways to understand and to practice youth development are important to supporting young people's growth and development. Performance based programs recognize that young people need environments in which they can choose to perform creatively (Sabo, 2002). They also recognize the emotional and social growth that occurs when people create together theatrically on stage.

The three programs this article discusses have been influenced by the above perspective on performance and development. Two of the programs have been developed by the All Stars Project Inc. (ASP) located in New York City. The All Stars Project is a non-partisan, non-profit organization dedicated to promoting human development through the use of a performance based model. The two programs of the ASP discussed in this paper, the All Stars Talent Show Network (ASTSN) and Youth Onstage![1] (YO!), serve thousands of young people annually. The third program, "Let's Talk About It" (LTAI), is a school-based mental health program located in the health clinic of a New York City high school. Each program works in different ways, to foster emotional and social development through performance, both on and off the stage.

Sources of Information

The author was trained in performance methodology at the East Side Institute for Group and Short Term Psychotherapy, an international training and education institute founded by Holzman and Newman. The performance methodology has informed and influenced community development practices in housing projects in which the author worked throughout New York City.[2]

Over the last 20 years, the author has been deeply connected to the three programs discussed in this paper in the following ways: as a volunteer for the All Stars participating in building the All Stars community throughout New York City; as a parent of children who have performed in ASTSN and YO! Productions; as a spokesperson for the All Stars performance-based approach; and as a housing manager of a large housing project close to the neighborhood where the LTAI program is located.

Several different sources of information were used in the preparation of this paper. In addition to reviewing literature from the field of youth development and materials on the three programs (e.g., websites, annual reports, needs assessments, journal articles), interviews were conducted with the directors of the programs, parents, students, former students and peer counselors. Time was spent in the school-based health clinic observing the comings and goings of the students in addition to participation in several LTAI groups. The author spent time at the All Stars facility as an observer and a participant, attending All Stars Talent Shows, workshops, theatrical productions and special events, and interviewing program directors, young people, parents and volunteers.

As the three programs discussed are highly innovative, conversations and observations from the qualitative interactions are interwoven into the text of this article in order to give the reader a broader and more sensuous view of the nature of the innovations.

The Challenge At Hand

Holzman's (2003) research on youth development is concerned with the social, emotional and psychological impact of a culture in which human beings do not see themselves as creators. She puts it this way:

> We have come to see people and things as separate and distinct entities. We tend not to see process or connections. We don't see that we, the people created and continue to create the stuff of the world, whether that be a box of corn flakes, a CD, a language, a 'drug problem', a family, a global economy, a political party, the Brooklyn Bridge, a love affair, a war, wealth, poverty or our emotions. Instead, we relate to all these things as having an independent existence, as if they came from nowhere and just 'are'. Seeing and relating to things in this way – torn away from the process of their creation and their creators- is the normal way of seeing things in our society. (pp. 24-25)

Thus, because we are not particularly aware that we create things, we rarely entertain the possibility that we might change things or that we might create new things. Young people, in particular, exist in a social framework upon which they often believe they can have no significant impact.

Increasing this sense of alienation is the consumerism that is characteristic of our culture. In our consumerist paradigm, our conversations, our politics, and our very thought patterns are reduced to who gets the most, who gets the fastest, and who gets the best. Michael Briand points out that consumerism substitutes "preference aggregation (the toting up of what different folks want)" for public collective decision making (1999, p. 25).

In our culture of competitive "getting" in which the individual's pursuit of "having more things" is so valorized, we lose the sense of our sociality as a species. Briand (1999) shows that in our consumerist society we often do not realize that we are part of a collective public; we do not see ourselves as decision makers, much less social, collective, public, decision makers.

Our consumerist culture has a profound impact on the development or, more accurately, lack of development of young people. As a result of being brought up in this environment, many young people are *under*developed relative to their understanding of themselves as

being producers and creators of their world. Too often young people are passive observers of life and their activities are reduced to manipulating the environment to "get" more. In poor inner city communities we see young people feeling humiliated because they may have less than their peers or we see them fighting over status objects. How do we help young people develop in such an environment?

Positive Youth Development Approach

For over 35 years positive youth development approaches have attempted to change the deficit paradigm that has contributed to the lack of empowerment described above. Before the positive youth development approach was framed in the mid-1970's, most approaches to dealing with young people focused on what was "wrong" with young people and ways of intervening on their "problems" (National Clearing House Report, 1996).

In contrast to traditional approaches that view young people as problems that must be fixed, the positive youth development perspective sees young people's potential as a resource and asset in community building (Blundo, 2001; Corcoran, 2005; National Clearing House Report, 1996). This perspective focuses on empowering youth to actively engage in their own development while contributing to the larger community.

The performance based approach locates itself within a positive youth development framework and shares with this framework the following key principles. Positive youth development approaches are asset based and build on the positive attributes of young people, such as their capacity to build community (Camino & Zeldin, 2002; Curnan & Hughes, 2002). These approaches value youth as cultural and economic resources.

Performance based approaches also share the view of resiliency theorists who posit that youth are empowered to the extent that they are seen by adults as resources, can make contributions to the community and feel free of barriers to participation (Brennan, Barnett & Lesmeister, 2008).

The Performance Approach Rationale

Creativity and Development

In the area of the arts, it is understood that creativity is critical for innovation. The creation of music is a good example:

> If Louis Armstrong had simply followed the rules of New Orleans jazz as he learned it, there would be no swing. If Charlie Parker had only played what was known musically by Armstrong, there would be no be-bop. If Chuck Berry just played the blues, we wouldn't have rock'n'roll. If the young people of the Bronx had not begun messing with the funk beats passed on by James Brown, we would not have hip-hop. Music, as a creative activity, evolves through performance, not from a set of pre-conceived notions. (Friedman, 2003, p. 5)

The type of creative, performatory learning described in the quote above can help young people (and older people) experience themselves as capable of changing, growing and having an impact on their environment. In general, this is not the kind of learning that dominates once children are in school. School learning is often structured around the accumulation of information rather than the kind of creative developmental learning children experience before they get to school (Holzman, 1997). As children grow into adolescence they often develop an identity that labels them as either a good learner of pre-conceived information or a bad learner of pre-conceived information. These identities can sometimes progress in ways that pigeonhole young people, especially in those from poor communities, into negative categories, categories that in the language of the deficit model, (at risk, troubled, special

ed., slow, emotionally challenged), can inhibit their development. In the environment this language creates, young people often don't see themselves as creative beings. According to developmental psychologist and co-founder of the ASP, Lenora Fulani (2000), "In our culture, inner-city youngsters are typically over-identified with destructive behavior and defined by others as having nothing to give, and all too many of them adopt the appropriate identity and act out the expected roles" (p. 159). The notion of performance as "going beyond" encourages young people, particularly in poor communities, to transcend traditional categories. One of the goals of these performance-based programs is to relate to young people in advance of themselves, based on their creative capacity.

Community Building and Performance

> We aren't isolated individuals separate from each other; we're not even separate from our environment….Instead of two separate entities…there is but one, the unity 'persons-environment.' In this unity, the relationship between persons and environment is complex and dialectical: environment 'determines' us and yet we can change it completely (changing ourselves in the process, since the 'it'; the unit of 'persons-environment' includes us, the changers). (Holzman, 1987, p. 105)

The understanding that human beings are creators of environments and that the activity of creating those environments changes the human beings engaged in the process, is central to the understanding of community that permeates performance-based programs. Community in this approach is not a static thing as in a place, an interest group such as a trade union or professional organization or a racial or ethnic group. Community in the performance approach refers to its social, fluid, ever changing, and ensemble nature. The focus is on creating environments *that-are-becoming* (developmental) rather than on what already exists such as a community of place, ethnicity or interest. In the performance model, community building is a constant creative activity. Membership is determined by one's *active* participation rather than by a pre-conceived identity (Friedman, 2003).

The Performance Programs

The All Stars Project (ASP)

The ASP has created outside of school, educational and performing arts activities for thousands of poor and minority young people since 1981 (Gordon, Bowman & Mejia, 2003). The adult leaders of the ASP stress that its programs are funded by donations from approximately 5000 individual donors and hundreds of corporations and that the ASP does not accept government funding (Friedman, 2003; Gilden, 2003). This independent funding model, central to its youth development methodology, was created so that All Stars programs would not be vulnerable to the vicissitudes of government and foundation fund granting (Friedman, 2003). The All Stars is free to invent, experiment and create, in partnership with young people, new youth development models and programs without worrying about budget cuts. The independent fund raising model creates a system that is designed to flex and stretch along with the creativity of its youth development philosophy (Friedman, 2003; Gilden, 2003).

The All Stars Talent Show Network (ASTSN)

Scene

> It's 11 AM on a Saturday in a New York City High School in the Bronx. Young people and their groups are arriving to prepare for the big show at 3 PM. There are over 50 groups. The performers enter a big tent outside the school that says All

Stars Performers. Excitement is high. Smaller children have family accompanying them to help them with costumes and hair. Teenagers are starting to practice their moves. Everyone has performance jitters. At 2:35 PM, the street and lobby is crowded with parents, children, families and friends. Volunteers of every age, color and ethnicity wearing red All Star jackets are everywhere. One is surprised at how organized the environment is. The young volunteers are interspersed with the adults. Everyone knows their job. Some are on security, some are ushers, some are selling tickets and taking money. Everyone is friendly. The auditorium is packed, there are 1200 people, and the noise level is very loud. The audience is enthusiastic and on their feet. The Master of Ceremonies, a former All Star performer himself, Antoine Joyce comes on stage gives a short presentation about the All Stars: that it is independently funded that the young performers are not censored and they can make the statement they want to make, that the All Stars is not the "Apollo" or the "Gong Show" and no booing is allowed. The show begins. The young people rap, sing, dance and perform poetry. No one laughs at anyone, no one boos, and no one puts down a "not so talented" performance. It is an environment of respect. (observation notes)

The ASTSN is now over 20 years old and is well known throughout New York's inner city communities (Fulani, 2000; Gilden, 2003; Gordon et al., 2003; Holzman, 1997). Involving thousands of young people a year from the ages of 5 to 25, the program gives them the opportunity to produce and perform in talent shows in high schools throughout their neighborhoods. In their study of the ASTSN, Gordon, Bowman and Mejia (2003) explain how the program creates stages (occasions, environments) where young people from the inner city who are often over identified with destructive behavior and related to as having little to give, can "successfully present themselves," (p. 2) and, in the process, contribute to their own development**.**

The All Stars protocol is as follows: All Stars staff along with adult and youth volunteers go out into an inner city community and do outreach to inform the neighborhood that All Stars auditions will be held. A high school has already been selected and the people in the community are familiar with the literature and outreach work. Auditions are announced. There are usually from 50 to 90 groups and acts that appear for the auditions. A few weeks after the audition, the workshop takes place. Then there is the dress rehearsal and the final show with audiences of up to 1200 people. At the workshop young people learn about the All Stars and its philosophy and create improvisational skits on topics they feel are important to their community. At one workshop, ASTSN director, Pam Lewis, told the 400 young people in the audience, "if you can perform on the stage you can perform in your life." She explained that this meant that young people can make decisions about their performance in their lives even in the face of situations that do not appear to offer too many possibilities. The message that there are many possibilities of how to perform in life is reinforced over and over. The All Stars recognizes that particular kinds of environments are necessary in order to support young people in this way. The following are the philosophical underpinnings of these environments.

Inclusiveness

Central to the ASTSN philosophy is "radical inclusiveness" (Gilden, 2003, p.3). This is not only a program for talented young people. It is also designed for the ordinary child who wants to perform. Everyone who auditions for a show is accepted. All participants are related to as producers as well as performers (Fulani, 2000; Gilden, 2003). Young people can decide to perform on the stage or they can perform off the stage as part of the production team, doing lights, sound, equipment, back stage work, selling tickets etc. In

the process, they learn the skills of doing this work. All participants are required to attend the workshop. The workshops are led by former All Stars youth who have volunteered to work with the program. In the workshop, participants work in groups from different neighborhoods and create improvisational poetry and skits. Dr. Fulani explains:

> The All Stars builds on young peoples' strengths, including their connections to their communities…Every individual or group who auditions, no matter the age or the nature of the act, must create and perform a skit or performance piece on a subject that he or she thinks is important to their community. The creation of the skits not only gets young people articulating their views and experiences, it also helps them realize, in many cases for the first time, that they actually have something to say. (Fulani, 2000, p.159)

At the final show, all participants receive some kind of trophy. In contrast to the competitive environment of most talent shows, the All Stars stresses the importance of the ensemble. At briefings and trainings for the performers, young people are taught how to perform as a supportive audience. For example, some participants perform booing, and the audience practices drowning them out. Respect for every performance and every performer is emphasized.

Bridge building

Research in youth development has shown that the concept of youth/adult partnerships remains innovative in practice (Zeldin & Petrokubi, 2006). One of the key conceptions of the ASTSN is to help young people build relationships with supportive adults and with adult donors to the program who are very different then they are (Friedman, 2005). In contrast to traditional charitable institutions where money is the sole connector, the ASTSN goal is to build personal bridges between the young people and the sometimes wealthy, often white people who donate to the program (Gordon et al., 2003). To assist the building of these relationships, the ASP developed the Back to School program. Back to School brings the donors to the inner city high schools where the workshop and the final performance take place. Just as many of the young people have never seen where donors live, many of the donors have never been to an inner city high school (Gilden, 2003). The donors who participate in the workshops create skits and poems with the young people who will be performing in the show.

Everything the young people do at the All Stars is related to as performance. Young people perform onstage and offstage, as well as work with experts in the field and with adult volunteers. In this bridge building and community building environment, young people can create new performances of themselves as they work to build with adults who are so different than themselves.

Youth Onstage

Scene

> The play is called Crown Heights. It is a re-enactment of the riots in 1991 between the Black and Jewish community in Brooklyn. There are 22 young people from 14 to 24 on a rehearsal stage. They are Black and Jewish. The Black actors are wearing the clothes of the Hassidic Jews of New York. The Jewish actors are wearing the clothes of Hip Hop culture in Brooklyn. The Black actors are singing a Jewish prayer for the dead. The Jewish actors are performing as young Black people in a kind of Greek chorus. They are furious at the "Jews" because a Jewish ambulance did not pick up a dying Black child after a Rabbi accidentally hit the

child in his car. The director relates to the young people as serious actors and is very demanding of them. After the rehearsal, the young people talk about their reactions to the issues in the script; there is some friendly horseplay and several of them go out together to take in a movie.

(Observation notes)

Youth Onstage (YO!) and the Youth Onstage Community Performance School, developed 5 years ago, provide performance and theatre courses free of charge to a student body composed primarily of inner city youth. Courses such as voice, movement, character development, improvisation, stage management and theatre history are taught by professional theatre artists who volunteer their time. The program produces shows and politically engaged plays with young casts, and also produces plays written, directed and designed by young artists.

YO!'s first production, Crown Heights, an exploration of the violence in Brooklyn, NY, between the Black and Jewish communities in 1991 was controversial, with some saying that it opened old wounds best left alone. Crown Heights engaged the young people and the audience around the relationship between two pivotal players in NY; the African-American and Jewish communities. One of the most interesting things about the production was that the Black, Hispanic and Jewish teen-agers who were involved in the process reorganized their own relationships by virtue of their participation, making the process a model of what the play was talking about. Few of the African-American and Jewish young people knew each other before the process and they became extremely close by the end of the 10 week run. The process of performing in the play engaged the young people in important dialogues about the nature of community. One 16 year old African American commented, "I've learned that community doesn't necessarily mean people who are like you; its people who you do something with" (Friedman, 2005, p. 9). Another 17 year old commented:

> Before YO!, community for me was just the people who live in your neighborhood, but I don't know anyone in my neighborhood really. Now I think that community isn't just who you live with, it's who you interact with, who you get along with. (Friedman, 2005, p. 9)

The productions that YO! mounts are not only plays for young people: they are plays with adult content and concerns that also relate to young people. The content of the plays are examples of the Youth Onstage philosophy of relating to young people who are in the process of becoming more empowered decision makers. At one 'Culture Talk' (a forum for the young actors and audience to discuss the issues of YO!'s plays) the young people were upset about a negative newspaper review of the play, Crown Heights. They had to consider the reviewer's reactions to the difficult issues the play raised even as they engaged their own reactions. In the process, they learned about the world and their connection to it.

A demanding environment

One of the volunteer directors of YO! notes that putting professional demands on inner-city kids of color is an extremely important part of the school's work:

> "It impacts that we are taking them seriously. Something is expected of them. They are expected to get here on time, to have things ready, and there are consequences when they don't…even the students that don't have what it takes to go on to be actors are challenged by doing something hard. It gives them a place to take risks.

> Getting here on time, taking those long train trips (from the outer Boroughs), planning all this around their school schedules, is very hard to do. They get a lot out of doing that, putting in that effort." (Freidman, 2005, p. 11)

As in all of the All Stars Projects programs, the relationship between the adult theatre volunteers and the young people is an important part of the Youth Onstage community building process. As in much of community building, that process is often chaotic and uneven (Hustedde & King, 2002). Dan Friedman, Director of YO!, has observed that the theatre professionals are usually from different backgrounds than the students, and that bridging the gulfs of race, culture and class can be hard, messy work. Some students find it too hard and leave. A few theatre professionals leave. The majority of participants stay, however. The teachers report that the students respond most to being treated like professionals. As one 17 year old commented,

> The thing I really liked is that the people who were directing this treated us like real professionals. No matter what our background and experience, they treated everyone like an actor and that's what gave us the push to really want to do more and bring out what we had inside. (p. 10)

The program is set up so that young people must take responsibility from the beginning. As Dan Friedman, the YO! Director, says:

> The young people have to want to be there. We make this explicit: they are not recipients of charity here, the program is free but they have to build the YO community. And we relate to them as developing theatre artists. The professional theatre is a very demanding environment. It takes discipline and it's not always "cool." So the young people have to struggle with that. (personal communication, 2005)

According to Friedman (2005), Youth Onstage! is a number of things simultaneously. It is a supplementary education program that uses performance methodology to help young people develop, it expands the experiential, social and cultural horizons of the young people, it is a political youth theatre that produces politically engaged theatre designed to engage, provoke and create new cross-cultural conversations. It is a community building project, whose interest is in creating new kinds of community. Friedman says that he has the hope that the development of participants as socially and politically engaged actors, performers and theatre goers can impact theatre itself. Theatre is often not accessible to poor and working class audiences. YO! wants to send a new group of creative people grounded in the values of community building into the theatre of the future and in this way these young people can create a demanding environment for theatre itself to grow and develop. This hope reflects the capacity building values of the program; helping young people to develop as agents for change.

The above two All Stars programs are not for every young person. Some young people find the environment too demanding and some are not interested in performance. However, as Gordon et al. (2003) points out, the track record for All Stars youth programs in New York City is impressive in terms of building human resource capital and in helping young people from poor communities in New York develop "self understanding, self management" (p. 95), and the skills to present themselves successfully.

Let's Talk About It

> "We consider this room in the school…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." – A "Let's Talk About It" participant

"Let's Talk About It" (LTAI) is a school-based and group-based mental health program that existed for 13 years, and was recently reorganized under new hospital sponsorship. It is located in a Brooklyn, NY high school in a poor, predominantly African-American and Caribbean-American neighborhood. Unlike the All Stars programs, LTAI does not provide a traditional performance environment. LTAI students do not typically perform on the stage. Rather, students in LTAI are supported to create new "performances" of themselves in the school, in the program and in their lives.

The quote above is an example of how young people talk about the impact the program has had on their lives. It also demonstrates the key methodology of the program. "Let's Talk About It" relates to young people as partners in creating their own therapeutic program. Mental health in this model means emotional growth, and emotional growth means being committed to something larger than oneself and having ownership of something one has created. It means making new "performance" choices to "value the group more than our stupid arguments" (Feldman & Silverman, 2004).

LTAI's environment and contexts

LTAI is housed in Erasmus High School in a neighborhood known for its high levels of crime, AIDS, drug activity and exposure to community violence (Background Statement, 1998). Erasmus encompasses several separate schools serving 3000 students. It has a diverse student body, including a large majority of students who are recent immigrants from the islands in the Caribbean. Although the student body is diverse, there are ethnic tensions, for example, between Jamaican and Haitian students. Students in the school have a variety of psycho-social needs, relating to poverty, unemployment, domestic violence, HIV AIDS, drugs, gangs, language difficulties, sexuality issues, inability to connect to school, etc.

Learning to perform in everyday life

Students in the program are encouraged to understand performance as what they do and what they can *choose* to do differently in their daily lives. Participants in LTAI groups are treated as competent community builders while they are engaged in the process of learning to become (perform as) competent community builders. There is an emphasis on the adults they are becoming. The young people are challenged to go beyond themselves and to come up with new ways of relating to the sometimes dangerous situations in their lives. They are supported in their efforts to "perform" differently in the face of daily situations that often require different choices if they are to survive (Feldman & Silverman, 2004).

For example, all students must go through stringent security measures, including metal detectors, to get into school each day. There is a lot of tension between the students and security personnel. It is a constant source of conversation (and complaint) in the LTAI groups. In one group the young people were discussing a situation in which a student got into a serious argument with a security officer and was almost arrested. The group explored how the young man could make a different 'performance' choice in response to this officer; a choice that would not jeopardize his being able to stay in school; a choice that would allow him to be more powerful and not victimized by a situation that appeared to render him powerless.

Ownership and responsibility

"I never had to take responsibility before I came into LTAI. Everything that happened to me was always someone else's fault. If I failed in school it was the

teacher's fault. If my home life was bad it was my mother's fault. But in LTAI if the group doesn't go well it's because we didn't put our best foot forward. That was the first time I felt I was responsible" (LTAI participant interview).

Participants have partnership responsibility for all aspects of the program, from picking the topic discussed to ensuring that conversations are respectful, to recruiting students for the groups, to developing the relationship between the program and the rest of the school (Feldman & Silverman, 2004). The young people are related to and perform as community builders and the community they are responsible for is their group. Ownership is possible because participants co-create the environment.

Several students said that LTAI had a reputation for being a place where students can talk about adult issues, including everything from sexual preferences, jail, abuse, drugs, dating, parents, politics, etc. without being censored. One former student told me he was most intrigued by this. He felt he wasn't condescended to; rather, he was challenged to try out new conversations and new ways of having those conversations.

The following comments exemplify the ownership of the group. The members of the group talk about themselves as a collective that has the power to transform itself:

"It's our group. We say what we want. It can get pretty intense."
"We break down barriers (in group) and we build things together."
"A lot of teachers don't know about the program. We (young people) have to get out there and publicize the group more. That's one of our goals."
"We are in the ghetto here and we have to make decisions all the time – hard decisions. We make the effort in group to help students make difficult decisions. It is a big responsibility."

This ownership responsibility is constantly engaged in the course of the work of the group. For example, an argument breaks out about someone breeching confidentiality. It almost turns into physical violence. Someone in the group suggests that whatever they decide, it needs to be in the interests of the group as a whole. The argument fizzles out. The young people are not passive observers here; they are responsible for ensuring that the group has what it needs to continue. The kind of environment where the young people take responsibility doesn't just happen. It takes enormous work to create. As Director, Barbara Silverman, explains:

I often challenge the young people to take responsibility in the face of emotionally charged situations that come up frequently in the group's work. It is also a challenge for me. It is tempting to want to control the group and play the authority card. The problem with that is that it decreases the group's capacity to take responsibility for itself. Together, the group and I have worked very hard to engage the issue of the group's responsibility when things get rough. (personal communication, 2006)

Peer counselors

LTAI had three trained peer counselors who came from the program (one of whom finished graduate school and became an MSW with LTAI). Peer counseling has played a key role by giving young people an important resource to go to when they need help and feel uncomfortable about going to "a professional." Director, Barbara Silverman, attributes the high level of self-referral in part to the peer counseling program. The peer counselors are trained to facilitate groups on their own, and they do supervised individual counseling and orient students to the LTAI groups. There is a lot of emphasis on not relating to youth as victims but as creators of new responses to often victimizing situations. Peer counselors

who are trained in the performance approach help students to understand that they can make performance choices in their everyday activities. They don't have to perform as victims; they can expand their repertoire and perform in ways they did not think possible.

The Dialogue on Youth Development in Mental Health

There are particular challenges in implementing youth development principles in mental health programs. Most young people, particularly young people of color in inner cities, have only had exposure to the deficit and/or medical model of mental health, which emphasizes the diagnosis and treatment of pathology (Blundo, 2001; Camino & Zeldin, 2002). In this model, people with mental health issues are dependent, sick and in need of "fixing." In contrast, asset-based approaches focus on how people can support and grow using their own resilience and organizing all the resources they have at their disposal. Since 1992, (Saleebey, 1992) social work has been undergoing a paradigm shift from deficit/ pathology to positive, asset-based principles (Andrews, Soberman, & Dishon, 1995; Botvin, 1995; Smith, Ridican, & Olsen, 1992). As in all paradigm shifts, it is a long, slow process and the two positions often butt up against each other, particularly when the new asset based approach exists in a traditionally deficit model structure.

The push toward a youth development approach is often attempted within traditional institutions. Whereas the programs of the All Stars are independently funded and therefore free to invent and create as the need and the creativity of its participants dictates, The Let's Talk About It Program has no such freedom and exists within a very traditional environment (a NYC school based clinic). The creativity of the program sometimes comes in conflict with the more narrow philosophy of the institutional system in which it exists.

The LTAI model offers a fresh perspective on adolescent mental health (Feldman & Silverman, 2004). One example of this fresh perspective is that groups are heterogeneous and are not organized according to a designated problem. Another example is that most young people in LTAI self-refer for services. This is unusual in mental health programs because of the stigma associated with rigid diagnostic categories and labels. Young people will generally not seek help because they fear the stigmatizing labels of traditional deficit models (Feldman & Silverman, 2004; President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health, 2003). But because the program has been developed as a partnership between the adult professional and the young people, because it has empowered young people to make decisions about what *they* need and because the program has stayed away from stigmatizing labels, the young people want to be there. In the area of group work, which has "traditionally been aimed towards ameliorating certain pathological conditions" (Feldman & Silverman, 2004, p. 3). LTAI offers a unique practice. Young people in LTAI determine what it is that is talked about in the groups. The director, peer counselors, and social workers do not decide the topics that the young people discuss, nor do they censor what the young people say. Rather than a group leader directing the discussion into the one s/he thinks is best for the young people, the group members of LTAI must take responsibility for the discussions with help and support from the group leaders.

Is Youth Development Dangerous?

All three of the programs discussed in this paper pose important and provocative questions for the youth development field. How can you help young people become creators instead of passive observers if they are never given the chance to create? How can you ask young people to make choices if they are not given the chance to choose? How can you ask them to make decisions if they never practice making decisions and how can you ask them to take responsibility if you never give them any responsibility? The risk in giving young people the chance to do these activities is that adults won't like what they

create, or the choices and decisions they make. But if we are interested in young people developing as creators, producers and changers of environments, the issue is not what decision they make but that they become "decision makers." The All Stars policy of not censoring the young people's performances and LTAI policy of not imposing the topic young people talk about and not censoring the way they talk about it, are examples. The no-censor policy gives young people opportunities to make creative choices that they then must take responsibility for in terms of people's reactions to those choices.

Summary

The three programs discussed are examples of youth development practice in which performance is put to use in developing young people. All three programs emphasize that young people can choose their performance even in the face of difficult circumstances in their everyday life. In the programs of the All Stars young people learn that performance is not just for the theatrical stage but that 'stages' or places to perform) can be created in their own lives. In the case of LTAI, young people learn that they can be producers of their mental health by being a part of creating their mental health community i.e. their group. The Let's Talk About It Program provides a fresh perspective on youth development within the field of mental health because of its heterogeneous groups and non-labeling approach that works to lesson the impact of stigma.

The two programs of the All Stars Project, the All Stars Talent Show Network and Youth Onstage Community Performance School, have the freedom to experiment and create the youth development approach that best suits their needs because of the Project's independent fundraising model.

Conclusion

The work of the All Stars Talent Show Network and Youth Onstage! has important implications for the future of supplementary education. In the ongoing debate in the field of supplementary education, there is the issue of whether supplementary programs should look like school or be substantially different from school (Arts Education Partnership, 1999; Brice-Heath, S., 2000; Bridglall, B.L., 2005; Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1992). In his study of the ASP, Gordon et al. (2003) proposes to add new criteria to successful programs for youth, namely to "provide opportunities to contribute to the community" (p. 99). These two ASP programs have something to teach us about the role of performance in helping young people develop as community contributors.

The LTAI model has important implications in the field of school-based mental health because of the way that performance is used to help heterogeneous groups of young people become active producers, (in partnership with professionals), of their mental health program. This is particularly interesting in light of the programs' success at lessening the impact of mental health stigma.

Further study of performance as a tool to help young people relate to themselves as active producers of their environments would be useful. The theoretical work the three programs are informed by is based on a socio-cultural understanding of learning and development. The premise of these programs is that performance is developmental because of its focus on "becoming." As such, the programs provide young people with opportunities to perform as community builders, choice makers and culture creators. Through participation in these programs, young people in poor communities are related to and begin to relate to themselves as having the capacity to creatively develop. This has important implications for young people and for us all.

Notes

1 The ASP sponsors other programs including the Development School for Youth, the Castillo Theatre, Five Points Productions and the Production of Youth By Youth. See www.allstars.org.

2 See Esther Farmer (2005), Community Development as Improvisational Performance: A New Framework for Understanding and Reshaping Practice, in *Journal of the Community Development Society*, 36(2): pp 1-17Need page numbers or URL here

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