**Performing the Way to Positive and Developmental Relationships in Outside-of-School Programs   
  
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Relationships come first is a widely recognized pillar of outside-of-school time (OST) youth development programs and often held up as an important way to distinguish OST from in-school settings. For many, this relational focus positions OST programs as spaces for advancing social justice and equity for marginalized youth. Bulanda and McCrea (2013) highlighted *constructive relatedness*—“feeling connected to others, to caring for and being cared for by those others”—as an important feature of OST programs that strengthens youth’s wherewithal to move forward despite challenges of poverty, community violence, educational disadvantage, social exclusion, and racial discrimination (p. 103).

While programs and people can be celebrated for the support they bring to youth, researchers have also pointed out that they can function as sites of containment that reify deficit perspectives and racist discourses (Baldridge, 2019). Guiding Black youth in urban settings is often contradictory; youth workers and supportive adults are often tasked with simultaneously introducing youth to mainstream standards and striving to encourage personal, cultural, and creative expression. This speaks to the importance of attending to the “how” of relationship building: employing processes that can maximize support and the sharing of social capital in ways that reorganize rather than reproduce social inequalities.

The “how” of relationship building is a hallmark of the All Stars Project (ASP), a national nonprofit operating in the OST space and focused on transforming the lives of youth of color from places of poverty. ASP is grounded in an understanding that who we are (our identities) and how we relate (how our identities intersect with others) is societally overdetermined. From this perspective, a necessary part of building relationships is the conscious creation of environments that can disrupt that. It is key that everyone, no matter their status, is active in the creation of those environments. ASP’s program portfolio is diverse; however, in every instance participants are engaged in consciously co-creating a “community of development.” This is a space where it is possible for new things to happen, and for participants to relate and give to each other in new ways, including those that disrupt (or are not so overdetermined by) social hierarchies and divisions.

ASP has adopted and adapted the ethos and activities of improvisational performance as the tools for building developmental community environments. Improvisational performance practices focus on the ongoing creation of the ensemble, accepting and giving “offers,” making use of everything to create something new, and supporting and appreciating risk taking. Improvising together offers an experience of a new way of relating and tools for creating more equitable environments.

An illustration of this is Young Leaders for Change (YLC), an annual project that highlights how youth build ASP programs and lead development in their communities and in the world. YLC also encourages adults to become more involved as supporters and volunteers (“supportive adults”). Join us in stepping into YLC’s culminating ceremony for honorees, their families, and members of the community and local donor network. In the scene, there are moments where societal roles are playing out, where they are disrupted, and most important where improvisational performance affects environmental transformation and new forms of relating.

**Setting the Stage**

It is early on a Sunday afternoon, about 30 minutes before the ceremony at ASP’s center in downtown Newark, New Jersey. Most awardees and their families have arrived and are sitting in the waiting area under a large wall sign that announces, “A New Play for Newark.” Children are running in circles around teenagers, grandparents, parents, and other community and family guests. Everyone is dressed up. There is a friendly buzz. Donors and potential donors arrive, and ASP alumni youth give them brief tours of the center. Shortly, everyone is ushered into the large multipurpose space set up in several semicircles of chairs. Free to sit anywhere, the awardees and their families gravitate toward the front; most of the donors choose seats in the back.

YLC’s donor-sponsors, who are White, lead off with a welcome, including the event’s purpose: “for all of us to say thank you to our young people for all they do.” Gloria Strickland, the ASP New Jersey African American City Leader, follows. She talks explicitly about the diversity of the gathering and creating a “new kind of community to support our youth, to support Newark”:

We are going to have new conversations, unlikely conversations, and we are going to do this *together*, because doing this is a new play for Newark and it’s a new play that our people, that the young people in Newark need.

Using the language of theater, Strickland highlights the shared task of creating a conversation that—in its activity—supports youth’s leadership: “Join us today. Have some fun because we are going to do performances and play, so that we can support our young people and our community to grow.”

**Performing Together**

Craig Pattison, a White man in his 30s, is then introduced as ASP’s fundraising manager who is “going to lead us all in a performance activity.” There are sounds of surprise from some adults. Awardees and other ASP youth, however, are smiling knowingly. They are experienced in ASP’s performance practice. Pattison echoes Strickland’s invitation to create new kinds of conversations “with difference”; he adds that he’s going to help everyone build new conversational muscles to do so.

Some of that [new conversations] has already been happening. . . . We’re going to do a little bit more of that right now by playing together. We’re going to take that a bit further and then . . . continue with our celebration having exercised those conversational muscles.

He invites everyone to stand:

Take a look to your left and to your right. Get a sense of the folks around you. See some faces. Some are people that you came with, and some are faces you may have already spoken to. Then look behind you [laughter]. In front of you.

Pattison directs participants to find someone they do not know, “preferably not the same age as you, someone as different from you as possible, and briefly introduce yourself to them.” People move around, and there is a lot of excited talking. He continues:

So now we are going to take turns. Each person is going to ask a question—a *very* specific question. It can’t be like a serious question. It can’t be a question that one would be expected to ask. It must be something like, “What is your favorite junk food?” or “How do you feel about balloons?” It has to be something you wouldn’t think to ask somebody right away or maybe ever!

As people begin, there is a lot of laughter. The noise level and intensity of engagement rise steadily. Pattison directs everyone to change partners and ask another unlikely question. After two more rounds, he says, “We are going to have a completely different kind of conversation now,” and directs a physical activity in which partners clap, hop, wiggle, and quack with each other. When the activity ends, it takes a long time for the chatting and laughing to stop.

**The Relational Stage Emerges**

The seating arrangement is now a random, multiracial, multiclass mix of honorees, families, and donors. There is residual laughter and smiles, chairs are now closer together, and the overall environment is more relaxed. The ceremony continues with brief talks by the awardees about their leadership journeys, each punctuated by wildly appreciative applause. YLC honorees are noticeably open about their experience of growing up in their under-resourced communities. Awardee Makena highlights the impact of “being related to as someone who has something to give and able to create, even before I thought I could,” and continues, “All Stars is ours. And to me, and I think a lot of other young people, that feels like home, a place to belong to.”

The afternoon ends with snacks and mingling. Everyone is speaking with each other; there is laughter everywhere. Children are again running around, but now are being engaged in play by the donors. YLC awardees are serving as hosts and speaking to everyone.

**Conclusion**

We offer this scene as a modest example of how ASP uses improvisational performance to create an environment for conscious, creative relationship building across difference. We recognize that icebreakers are already in the practice toolkits of many OST practitioners. We have tried to show the potential for impact beyond “breaking the ice” and making people more comfortable. When carefully orchestrated, performance activities can provide the support that a diverse grouping of people need to go *beyond* their comfort zones, to stretch, relate, and give to each other in new ways.

Here, performance exercises were carefully integrated into the entire event. Every segment functioned as a performance, and all participants were treated as the ensemble that created that performance. The performance games are repositioned as empowerment opportunities, to co-create an environment of togetherness. We have found that this kind of carefully constructed environment has equity implications. It does not level the playing field (which is not possible), nor does it deny difference (which almost always values the dominant culture). Instead, it conveys to all the participants: “You are you *and* you are also a builder of this ensemble, which is something new. This small shift can change how you are seen and how you see yourself. It creates a space for new relationships to emerge.” We are encouraging OST practitioners to integrate performance more consciously into overall practice and find ways to invite and relate to everyone as the co-creators of the environment where new kinds of relationships can occur.

**References**

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