Performing on a Wider Stage: Developing Inner-City Youth Through Play and Performance

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Performing on a Wider Stage: Developing Inner-City Youth Through Play and Performance

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ABSTRACT
This article reports on an ethnographic study of a youth leadership program that utilizes play and performance to support the development of inner-city youth. Participant observation and focus groups were used to learn about young people’s experience participating in the program and how they perceive its effect on their lives. The findings demonstrated that approaching the activities in the program as performances provided participants a way to practice being who they are not, a language for understanding their own development, and a way to become creators of developmental environments for themselves and others.

It’s a late afternoon in October, and 27 members of the Thursday class of the fall 2013 cohort of the All Stars Project of New Jersey (ASP of NJ) Development School for Youth (DSY) are in a chartered bus on their way from Newark to a multinational bank in New York City for their first off-site workshop. DSY is a free, after-school development program that brings young people ages 16 to 21 from poor communities together with executives from major corporations. It is sponsored by the All Stars Project, Inc. (ASP), a 35-year-old national nonprofit that provides performance-based youth development programs in six U.S. cities.

I’m riding along, watching the teenagers as they banter nervously, feeling excited and curious about what will happen in the next few hours. In the fall of 2013 I undertook an ethnographic case study of the DSY program and its participants. I am not a neutral observer of the work of the ASP. I have been a volunteer, a supporter, and an advisor to them for decades, and since 2010 have served on their national board. This relationship has grown out of a shared interest in play and performance, and their potential for creating social change and human development. I chose to study the DSY in New Jersey at this time for several reasons. First, it is growing—in 2013 ASP of NJ moved into a 9,000-square-ft community center and doubled the number of young people participating in the programs. I focused on the DSY program in particular because it is a performance program that does not primarily focus on traditional theatre training. In fact, at first glance the DSY programs appear similar to many other mentoring programs that connect inner-city youth with the business community. In the course of this article I hope to show what makes DSY a performance program, why this matters, and how it affects the young people who participate. I begin by sharing the story of the young people who rode the bus that afternoon and the business people they worked with, and then I use this vignette to unpack the practices and underlying theory of the program.

The bus trip is led by Jessica Nelson, the 21-year-old coordinator of the program who herself graduated from the DSY the year before, and Chrystal Franklin, an adult volunteer. As they pull out of the Lincoln Tunnel and into Manhattan, most of the Black and Latino teenagers crane their necks to see the crowds and the tops of the skyscrapers. Despite living only 20 min away, half of them have never been to New York City. The bus pulls over and the young people climb out. Several of them...
appear daunted by the traffic and crowds, whereas a few are playing around and calling out to
passersby. They walk through the revolving doors into a large lobby with high ceilings, marble floors,
and nine-foot-tall abstract sculptures. The young people are suddenly very quiet, looking up and
around.

After speaking to the security guard, Jessica directs the youth to go up to the 27th floor in sets of
nine. As we get into the elevator a girl, appearing surprised, says, “I’ve never seen an elevator with
carpet.” Her friend points to the mirrors on all four walls, and I show them that if you look into the
mirror you see an infinite number of reflections. A collective “Whoa!” is heard. As the elevator starts
its express ascent, skipping the first 18 floors, many of the young people put their hands over their
ears in surprised response to the change in pressure.

We get off on the 27th floor and are ushered into a conference room with a large oval table in the
center and tables with pizza and drinks around the perimeter of the room. The young people are
invited to take a slice and sit down. Five minutes later a group of 10 men and women in suits, all
White, enter the room. They also sit down and begin talking quietly with one another about work,
family, or sports.

Five minutes later Jessica comes to the front of the room. She begins by introducing the ASP,
explaining that its mission is to transform the lives of youth and poor communities using the
developmental power of performance. In ASPs, she continues, people learn new performances
onstage and off. They try new things; they become worldlier and begin to create new possibilities
for themselves and their communities. “To start,” she says, “we’re going to get you into a warm-up.
We’re going to do Crazy Eights. Everyone stand up.” Getting the youth and the adults into a circle,
she explains that the warm-up consists of shaking out each hand and foot to the count of 8 to 1,
eliminaring one number after each round and speeding up as they go along. One of the businessmen
jokingly calls out, “You do know that we are a banking firm, right? So we will have no trouble with
the counting … [a lot of laughter] but you will see some difficulties in moving and shaking [more
laughter].” Everyone in the room gets involved, and the adults are as loud as the young people. As
the activity concludes, the group claps and laughs loudly. When the adults and youth sit down, there
is a buzz of conversation and laughter throughout the room.

The second scene opens with the businesspeople working in pairs to teach groups of four to six young
people about credit and debt. In the group I am in, two men in their late 20s introduce themselves and ask
the teens to do the same. Greg, one of the workshop leaders, shares that he was “born in Silicon Valley
and just moved to New Jersey from Tokyo.” His partner, Eric, says that he grew up in Newark and went
to the high school many of the young people attend. The DSY students are impressed. Greg says, “Today
we are going to talk a little about credit. If I say, credit card. What do you guys think of?” Several young
people call out, “Easy credit” and “shopping.” The whole group laughs.

Greg: Okay, any of you guys have a credit card? No! Really? Not yet, huh? [He seems startled.]
Um, have you ever heard the term debit card?
Monica: Yeah.
Eric: Well, what is the difference between a debit card and a credit card?
Monica: I’d say a credit card is your own money and a debit card is …
Greg: Actually it’s the other way around. A debit card is your own money …
Eric: And the difference between the two is important. A lot of times kids will go “Oooh, a
plastic card, free money, lets go spend it.” Okay, so a debit card is your own money, then
what is a credit card? Whose money is a credit card?

The scene continues in that vein for 15 min, with Eric and Greg asking questions and correcting
the young people if they have a misconception. The DSY youth eagerly participate, they are leaning
in, nodding, and most of the young people are taking notes. Everyone answers or asks at least one
question, there is very little silence, and although the young people are told at several points that they
gave the “wrong answer,” they do not appear upset or embarrassed.
In addition to the preceding exchange, where Greg was surprised that none of the young people have credit cards, there are several other moments where the adults appear startled by the students’ answers. For example, when Eric asks if any of the young people are in debt, they all say no. “No?” says Eric with surprise. “Wow. There is a statistic that says that on average a college freshmen, first year at college, has $1,000 of credit card debt, to say nothing of even a college loan.” Although Eric has been told that these young people are growing up in a poor community, and he actually grew up there himself, he is still surprised that they do not have access to credit cards or loans. A few minutes later when he asks them if there are any good reasons for going into debt, he is again a little thrown by their answers of “buying food,” “fixing cars,” and “paying hospital bills.” He quickly acknowledges those, but then says, “Or college, right?”

After 45 min Jessica calls out, “Cut, end of scene!” and Michael, who is the supervisor of most of the participants, calls the group back to the center of the room. He gives a brief oral quiz to the young people. They report back on their new knowledge about “good debt and bad debt,” the difference between debit and credit cards, and that “student loans are special loans that you can get help to get.”

Jessica returns to the front of the room and says, “Okay, time to get up again, because we’re going to do one more performance.” There is a small laugh, and everyone gets into a large circle. Jessica calls up two DSY students to assist her and introduces the performance activity I am a Tree.

Jessica: Basically we are telling stories. So, for example, if I step into the middle and say “I am a Tree” and stick my arms out and perform as a tree, then Marnie [Jessica points to one of the young women] is going to come in and add on to my scene.

Marnie: [walks on stage and stands stiffly] I am a leaf.

Jessica: And then [looking over at Marnie] we’re going to act it out …

Marnie: Oh yeah [she grabs hold of Jessica’s arm and hangs on] [laughter]. I am a leaf.

Jessica: Then Lakisha is going to come in and add on anything else to the story, anything she wants.

Lakisha: I am a bird on the tree [she sticks her arms out like wings and sort of crouches next to Jessica] [laughter and applause].

Jessica: So do I have any volunteers? Ok, Amelia, great. Any others? Any business volunteers? [No response]

At this point Michael, the supervisor, comes up to the front and pointing to Peter, one of his employees, says, “Do you want to volunteer?” There is a lot of laughter, and Peter gets up. The group claps loudly, and another businessperson quickly volunteers. Jessica explains the game again and then asks, “So who wants to start?” Several people call out, “Peter! Come on, Peter.”

Jessica: Peter, will you start?

Peter: [Steps into the center of the “stage.” He stands facing the audience.] I am a Ford Edge [laughter from the adults].

Jessica: Is that a car? [Peter nods] It’s a car. Okay. So what do you think a car should look like?

Peter: I have to act it out? [incredulous]

Jessica: Of course.

Peter bends down and puts his arms out to his sides and starts moving around the space. Everyone laughs, including Peter. Then Jessica says, “Okay, someone join in. How about you, Amelia?” Amelia hesitates and Peter says, “Okay, I’ll drive over to you,” producing even more laughter. She steps next to him and bends down and curls into a ball. “I’m the wheels?” Everyone claps, and then another adult steps in and stretches out behind Peter in her suit and says, “I’m the front seat.”

The game continues for three more rounds, and then Jessica ends the workshop by saying, “Cut!” and leads the group in a “huge round of applause.” One of the businesswomen says, “We should do
that before all our audits,” and everyone laughs. The young people and the businesspeople mingle for a few minutes before we leave.

**Performance and play**

More than 100 years ago Vygotsky (1978) showed how play supports, promotes, and pushes development forward. Looking through a dialectic lens he found that all play contains both rules and an imaginary situation. In the pretend play of young children the rules are created by the players in the service of the imaginary situation, and through this relationship, Vygotsky (1978) said, “Children are able to perform above their average age, in play it is as if they are a head taller” (p. 102). Play “provides a background for changes in needs and consciousness that is broader than the changes that come through traditional instruction” (p. 102). In this way, play is a zone of proximal development where the learning that occurs is inseparable from the overall development of the child.

Because Vygotsky wrote those words, many of his protégé have discussed play and its role in the development of young children. However, the dialectic in Vygotsky’s analysis has often been pushed to the background in favor of a view of play as a mechanism for socialization and adaptation. In sociodramatic play, “children enter actively into the world of human relations and appropriate for themselves … the societal human functions, as well as the societally elaborated norms and rules of behavior” (Leontiev, as cited in Duncan & Tarulli, 2003, p. 276).

The importance of play for the development of “norms and rules of behavior,” and in particular self-regulation, has received renewed attention in recent years alongside an educational climate where children are expected to “control themselves” at an increasingly early age. Through play, children learn the rules and roles of the culture they are growing up in, and they develop more generally as people who can follow rules. The relationship between rules and the imaginary situation is seen primarily as an instrumental tool whereby children are able to conform to constraints, or self-regulate when they play (Bodrova, Germeroth, & Leong, 2013). Once that occurs, children are ready to move on to playing games with predetermined rules, and perhaps more critically, they can begin learning within the structured rules and roles of traditional schooling.

But is that the whole story? Although there is ample evidence that play helps children to self-regulate, and no question that this is useful to success in school and in life, it is only part of what happens when young children play. Vygotsky (2004) said that a child’s “play is not simply a reproduction of what he has experienced, but a creative reworking of the impressions he has acquired. He combines them and uses them to construct a new reality” (p. 13). Anyone who spends time with small children knows this to be the case. This is part of why we take such joy in the 2-year-olds who are clomping around in mommy’s boots, carrying her briefcase, and “talking” on the cell phone. The child who is pretending to be mommy, no matter how uncanny the imitation, is not passively mimicking, but is cocreating and coauthoring her performance (Stetsenko & Ho, 2015, p. 227). She is not just learning how to be a mommy, or how to follow rules; she is also learning that she can, in collaboration with other people, create new performances of herself. In play, children do not just become rule followers and role adopters; they also learn/discover that they are rule and role creators (Newman & Holzman, 1993/2013).

But does this end with early childhood? As Brian Sutton-Smith (2009) pointed out, “Play is seen largely as what children do but not what adults do; children play but adults only recreate; play is said to be important for children’s growth but is merely a diversion for adults” (p. 7). Vygotsky (1978) himself described how games with rules supplant pretend play in the lives of school-age children and adolescents. The activity of being rule- and role-creators becomes subordinated to the following of the rules of sports, board games, and school.

Rule-governed activities, although enjoyable and valuable in their own ways, do not continue to provide the experience of being rule- and role-creators. In games and sports, the careful following of
predetermined rules that are separated from the creative activity of the players is valued. This is clearly
the case in games, and it is also the case for ordinary life activities. Holzman (2009/2017) gave an
example of this when she described the transition from playing school to going to school. “When they
play school [children] are the least like teachers and students because teachers and students are not
playing at being teachers and students, but rather acting out their societally determined roles” (p. 52).
She went on to say, “How once having learned to follow the rules, it is difficult to continue to play
with the rules” (p. 52). However, it is not inevitable that pretend play fades away; young adults can
continue to experience themselves as rule- and role-creators in activities that, although appropriate
to their age, still bear a resemblance to the pretend play of early childhood.

There is growing evidence that people of all ages can and do continue to engage in activities where
they can break out of role- and rule-governed identities and stagnated ways of behaving, thus opening
up opportunities for creativity and new possibilities across the lifespan (Göncü & Perone, 2005; Perone
Vygotsky’s dialectical understanding of play by drawing attention to the relationship between the
pretend play of early childhood and the performance activities of older children, adolescents, and
adults. As previously described, when children engage in pretend play they are who they are and who
they are not. The same is true for adults when they perform. We do not tell a playing 4-year-old that he
or she is not really Spider-Man, and we do not tell an actor that she is not Lady MacBeth. In both cases
we embrace the creative dialectic between who the child/actor is and who she/he is performing.

When they perform, adolescents and adults can have the role- and rule-creating experience they did as
babies and young children—when imitation was linked to creativity. There is a growing body of evidence
documenting the developmental value of performance (e.g., Arts Education Partnership, 1999; Author,
Mahoney, Larson, & Eccles, 2005; O’Neill, 2008). By taking on multiple roles, both on and off the stage,
persons come to see themselves as “capable of acting outside and beyond the expected” (Heath, 2000, p. 39).

Examples of the impact of performance on development have been noted across populations. In
her work with children and adults from diverse backgrounds in Brazil, Liberali (2017) found that
performance “allows the conscious and intentional performance of the conquest of power over oneself, the understanding of the role and the paramount importance of the other” (p. 6). Similarly,
researchers examining the use of theatre with children diagnosed on the autism spectrum (LaCerva,
2016; Murray, 2011) have found that when they are engaged in theatre activities, the children are
able to develop performances that are more socially acceptable without losing the characteristics that
make them unique. Actually far from losing themselves, participants in performance activities say
that they have more choices about who and how they want to perform.

I owe theatre a lot, and acting, performing. I’m definitely more open. As far as who I think I am goes, I keep my
options open. I don’t let myself believe one thing or the other. It’s not black and white. I see different shades
and I am letting those shades go wild. (A sixteen year old girl as quoted in Holzman, 2009/2017, pp. 75–76)

The current study aimed to deepen an understanding of performance as a tool for continued develop-
ment through a close examination of the methodology and practices of the DSY program of the ASP of NJ.

**The All Stars Project, Inc**

The ASP was founded in 1981 in New York City and currently has programs in six cities in the United
States and several affiliated projects around the world. In addition to the DSY, the ASP programs
include Youth Onstage!, which gives young people 14–21 years of age access to free training in the
performing arts under the direction of volunteer theatre professionals; the All Stars Talent Show
Network, where young people produce and perform in hip-hop talent shows in their neighborhoods;
Operation Conversation: Cops & Kids, which brings police officers and young people of color together
to play theatre games and do improv and, in the process, create an environment in which they can
begin to build new kinds of relationships; the Castillo Theatre, which produces socially engaged theatre...
with young people and adults; and UX, a free school of development where the classes, workshops, and cultural outings are open to people of all ages. The programs touch more than 40,000 people a year. The All Stars is open to everyone regardless of her or his school status, grades, or financial need, and all of the programs are free of charge (http://allstars.org/who-we-are).

The ASP builds “stages”—both in and out of the theatre—such as the credit/debt workshop, that support participants to play and perform and through those activities, develop, and learn. This methodology has developed over the past three decades through discoveries made in the process of on-the-ground, grassroots community organizing. The All Stars has served as a laboratory for developing approaches to youth and community development in an effort to impact on the damaging effects of entrenched and generational poverty. In this environment the use of performance emerged organically. The first activities of the All Stars were community talent shows that came about out of a request from parents to give their children something positive to do. It was seeing the impact of these early talent shows that has led to the ongoing development of programs that make use of performance.

The All Stars remains focused in the outside of school arena in recognition of the difference between the outside of school experiences of affluent and poor children and the impact of this difference on young people’s development. Lenora Fulani, a developmental psychologist, cofounded the ASP in 1981with Fred Newman, a philosopher. Fulani pioneered both the DSY and Operation Conversation: Cops & Kids. She explains the ASP’s focus on after-school this way:

In our work over the years we’ve taken great pains to identify the very significant differences between how white and privileged kids and young people from poor communities spend their time after and outside of school. During the ordinary course of their young lives, privileged kids are shown the world. These young people travel, go on family vacations and are introduced to theater and museums. They have very active after-school lives—from ballet to gymnastics to sports. These experiences are key to their development. In contrast, many inner-city kids rarely step outside of the twenty-block radius in which they live. (Fulani, 2013, p. 8)

In response to this opportunity gap, the All Stars has built programs that provide young people growing up poor with experiences that aim to “help them become more worldly and cosmopolitan, i.e., to perform their way from the margins into the mainstream of American society” (Gildin, 2014, p. 428).

The All Stars is funded privately. In 2015 the organization raised more than $10 million, with 70% coming from individual donors. According to Gabrielle Kurlander (2008), the organization’s president and CEO, this private funding has played a significant role in the development of the methodology of the programs.

The All Stars Project is 100% privately funded and we take no government money. Our private funding allows us to create a direct partnership between professional people, the business community and inner city youth. This kind of funding is crucial to our success because we are free to innovate and create the very best for young people without bureaucratic restrictions, and by giving money in this way, our donors are helping to transform social relations between the “haves” and “have nots.” (para. 4)

The relationship to the donors is not just financial. Many of them become volunteer partners in creating “stages for development.”

Research methods

Following traditional ethnographic techniques, I immersed myself in the culture of the ASP of NJ, spending time with and building relationships with all of the participants. The purpose of the study was not to evaluate the effectiveness of the program on an external measure, but to get a qualitative understanding of the performance methodology and its impact on the participants. From September to December 2013 I was a participant observer for an average of 3 days a week. I returned in February and March for follow-up focus groups. The data collection techniques included participant observations of all of the DSY activities, informal interviews with youth and staff during and after activities, and semistructured interviews and focus groups with youth, staff, and volunteers.
All interviews and focus groups were recorded using the digital recorder embedded in an iPad and supplemented with written notes.

To gather a wide range of responses, a combination of random, convenience, and judgmental sampling was used to choose the participants for interviews. Semistructured interviews were completed with all program staff, including Gloria Strickland, the founder of the ASP of NJ and its current City Leader, as well as with the volunteers who were responsible for facilitating the onsite workshops at the business partners’ sites.

Informal interviews took place with youth before and after the workshops and other events. While the youth were arriving I spoke briefly to as many of them as I could and asked them if they were willing to speak to me after the event. At the conclusion of each event I sought out participants who were particularly active or inactive.

At the completion of the data collection period I conducted three focus groups. All the youth who had completed the program were invited to participate, as well as alumni, donors, and adult volunteers of the program who were suggested by the program staff. Twelve young people and 10 adults ultimately participated in the focus groups. For the purposes of this article I focused primarily on the statements of the young people.

Interviews and observational notes were transcribed and electronically stored, organized, and analyzed using the Dedoose web-based mixed methods software. Analysis of the empirical data to construct the case study followed a process of categorical aggregation analysis outlined by Stake (1995). The formal analysis began with an examination of the entire data record with the aim of identifying key programmatic elements, methodological and theoretical features of the program, and the impact on the participants.

Not surprisingly, given the ASP’s mission to “transform the lives of young people and poor communities through the transformative power of performance,” performance emerged as a key programmatic and methodological theme; therefore a second round of analytic coding was conducted in order to develop a more nuanced understanding of what is meant by performance, how it is utilized in the program, and what the impact of that appears to be on the participants. Once I had completed that analysis I searched for key moments in the course of the program that could illustrate the methodology.

The careful creation of stages for development

The ASP of NJ is located in Newark, New Jersey. As of the 2010 census (Quick Facts, 2010), Newark had a population of a quarter of a million people: 52% African American, 34% Latino, and 11% White (non-Latino). The median household income is $34,000, with more than 30% of the population living under the poverty line. The public schools in Newark have been under state control since 1995. As of 2013, only 68% of Newark students graduate high school, compared to 87% statewide (Astudillo, 2013).

Newark was the first expansion of the ASP from the New York City headquarters in 1999, and for almost a decade it was housed in a small rented office. In 2013 the ASP of NJ completed an expansion campaign and moved into a 9,000-square-ft community center located in the business and cultural center of the city. The programs doubled in size and attracted new business partners. The staff at the ASP of NJ also expanded, adding young adults to an existing staff, many of whom had helped found the New York programs decades before. The ASP of NJ currently offers the All Stars Talent Show Network and the DSY programs.

The ASP of NJ recruits for the DSY in Newark and the surrounding towns through school visits and referrals from graduates and educators. In 2013 approximately 200 young people applied to the program. Everyone who applied was accepted, and the young people were then divided into fall and spring cohorts. The 85 participants of the fall 2013 cohort were 90% African American or Caribbean American, and Latino. Eighty percent were attending high school, 8% were in college, and 12% were not attending school.
The 2013 Fall DSY program began when the applicants were asked to come to the All Stars Center for an interview dressed in business attire. Many of the young people were surprised to discover that the interview was being conducted with a group of 20 to 30 other applicants. The “interview” featured a series of improv activities and culminated in the young people creating scenes on the topic of development. A second surprise for many of the youth was that at the conclusion of the interview everyone was told that they were accepted into the program. Already the young people had received messages that ensemble performance was valued and that this was not about competition.

At the preorientation the 85 young people had a conversation with Gloria Strickland, the director of the program, on the importance of creating “a stage” where she could support them to take risks, “step out of their comfort zone,” and “do what they don’t know how to do.” Gloria told them that their job was to “support me and the rest of the staff so we are able to push you. I want you to give to me so that I can make some things more difficult for you.” The young people responded in varying ways including talking openly about how scary it was “to do things you do not know how to do when your stomach gets all tied up in knots and you are afraid of being laughed at.” Strickland added,

Just like in the theatre, each of you can only succeed if the ensemble is strong. So can we all agree to at least give that a shot and try and create this environment for us to step up and be uncomfortable? Create a stage where our ensemble can take risks.

For the remainder of the preorientation the young people prepared for the orientation that would include guests from the business community. The preparation took the form of a rehearsal, which included practicing the performance of networking and giving tours of the All Stars Center. A week later in the orientation, the young people, who had only been at the All Stars for 2 weeks, served as the hosts for the business partners.

After the orientation the fall cohort was divided into three ensembles of approximately 30 young people. Each of these ensembles participated in 14 workshops at the All Stars and at partner businesses and corporations in New Jersey and New York City, as well as several cultural outings. Some of the workshops focused on traditional workplace skills including resume writing, proper attire, and interviews, and several—like the one described at the opening of the article—introduced young people to some of the more complex aspects of corporate America such as mergers and acquisitions, hedge fund operations, and long-term real estate planning.

The workshop (revisited)

The workshop described at the top of this article occurred 2 weeks after the orientation and was the first off-site trip for the Thursday night ensemble. The location of the workshop, at the corporate headquarters of a multinational bank in Manhattan, is strikingly different from what the youth are used to, and one that is not known for being welcoming of Black and Latino youth. As one of the young people said in a postworkshop interview,

When I first walked in the building some people gave us looks like, “You’re a certain type, what are you doing here.” I mean it’s a big bank, a big corporation … and people just don’t expect to see us there.

He concluded by saying, “I was out of my comfort zone … way out.”

For many of the young people, “getting out of your comfort zone” is one, if not the, defining characteristic of participating in the All Stars. In the many informal interviews and the three focus groups conducted during the research, the phrase “out of my comfort zone” was used more than 75 times, and in 78% of those it was unsolicited. Why is this important and potentially developmental? There are many situations in which being uncomfortable is a result of humiliating or unsafe circumstances. When youth of color step out of their prescribed societal roles, they often get the message that they are out of line or unwanted, in addition to the pressure many of them may feel from their peers to stick to “keeping it real.” Creating environments where getting out of their comfort zone can be developmental takes effort and attention.
The focus on the creation of an environment for development has a particular importance at the All Stars where they are bringing together groups of people (predominantly Black and Latino youth and White executives) whose societal locations are radically different, and where the preconceived notions each group has of the other can have a conservatizing effect on everyone. As one young woman said after hearing she would be meeting adults who lived in the suburbs surrounding Newark, “Really, from there? They’re coming from that town? I didn’t think, well I guess I thought those people were all, how should I say it, well, snobs.” The young people have had many experiences of being related to as “not the right kind of person,” as one young man put it, and of being looked at askance because they do not have the “right kind of clothes or for going to the wrong school.”

The DSY’s approach to the biases the young people are likely to face is to help them build a strong ensemble that positions them to be active creators of the environment (Fredricks & Simpkins, 2012; Kirshner & Ginwright, 2012) and supports them to take the risks the workshop requires. From their first day in DSY the youth are carefully coached on how to be a supportive audience. By the time they arrived at the credit/debt workshop, 4 weeks into the program, they brought this experience into the process of building an ensemble with the businesspeople. The young people led the ensemble building with the bankers through performance activities like Crazy Eights. On the bus ride home, one of the young people shared, “This was the first time I did anything like that with people like that, you know, who work in business or even just white people in general. It made everybody seem, I don’t know, kind of regular.”

When Crazy Eights ended, and the workshop proper began, this was not, I argue, a break from, but a continuation of the improv games. The fact that the young people attend as a performance ensemble transforms the experience. An outside observer might describe the adults and youth as merely playing out their societally determined roles—upper-class adult knowers and compliant underprivileged students. However, when we examine the activity through a performance lens we see the dialectic of adaptation and transformation as we did in the pretend play of small children. Yes, the young people are performing the societally acceptable role of student; indeed, given that several of the young people are at risk for leaving school or have already dropped out, they are playing the role quite well. And by this time through their work with the DSY team, they have begun to experience imitation and pretending as tools for creating new roles and to experience the creation of new roles as powerful.

During the banking workshop there were multiple levels of performance and discovery going on for the young people. First there was the discovery that there is something called credit and debt and a way of talking about it. Second, this is something they are able and entitled to do. As one graduate of the DSY said,

What the All Stars does is give you a vision that you are entitled to navigate those worlds. So you have a vision that you are entitled to play this role. I now recognize that you are going to run into being uncomfortable in those situations where you don’t have the proper background and where people want you to leave, but if you see yourself as having a right to participate in that environment you are still going to have that nervousness but then you will have the vision of being able to create a performance of you that can be in that situation.

This young woman’s statement, taken together with the engaged and curious performance of the young people in the workshop, points to a third discovery for the youth—that creating new roles is something they themselves can lead. Although the adults were leading the workshop in a traditional sense, it was the young people who were trying out new performances.

The young people continued to perform as leaders, but in a different way, when the banking lesson ended and they taught the adults the improv performance game of I am a Tree. The business people were clearly out of their “comfort zones,” nervous and unsure about participating. Yet with encouragement, and a little good-natured coercion from their boss, the bankers not only participated, but threw themselves into the activity with humor and gusto.
Although not the focus of this article, the DSY is also a development program for the adults. They come to see the young people in new ways, and come to see themselves in new ways. As one of the businesspeople said after the workshop,

One of the hardest things in the corporate world is to be able to step outside yourself and do and say and act in a way you would never do if you were just being yourself. Working with DSY, well really playing with them, and having to get up and perform with the kids, I’ve just had to question what I think I am capable of, what I think my limits are. It’s been eye-opening.

Moving in and out of very different activities where all were invited to try out new performances, the participants had the opportunity to create with each other and glimpse their capacity to be active creators of new kinds of relationships and lives.

**Beyond the workshop: Becoming stage builders**

Did this experience carry beyond the workshops? How do the young people see the totality of the 14-week experience and its impact on their lives? To explore those questions, I conducted focus groups with young people who had participated in the 2013 DSY, as well as recent alumni of the program and adult volunteers. Twelve youth attended, half of whom had participated in the credit/debt workshop. The youth were asked a broad range of questions to elicit how DSY has affected them.

Throughout these conversations the youth used the language of performance to grapple with the challenges of growing up as poor, young people of color (Evans & Kim, 2013; Fulani, 2013; Yoshikawa, Aber, & Beardslee, 2012). This language, given them by DSY, appears to provide a way into a more complex understanding of who they are in the world, and how they are seen, and provides a tool for navigating the complexity of their lives and communities.

Several of the young people shared that being a part of DSY had pushed them to engage in new activities. They described being put into situations that were unfamiliar to them, where they interacted with people who were different from them.

Pietra: All Stars allowed me to become a new character because you really don’t have a choice [but] to step outside of your comfort zone because you are always going to be pushed and challenged and with every challenge you are going to learn something new about yourself. Like I would never [have] thought I would work with Indian people or White people for 6 weeks in the summer and I discovered that I am someone who really likes to work with lots of different people.

Pietra concluded, “Performance allows you to become a new person.” And then she paused for a moment and looked thoughtful: “But not entirely new because it’s still me doing those new things.” This 17-year-old’s appreciation for being able to create new versions of herself without losing herself is shared by researchers who have found that developing a repertoire of “identities,” and being able to code-switch between them, is a strength for young people of color (Craig, 2008; Delpit & Dowdy, 2008; Wheeler & Swords, 2004). In fact, postmodern scholars have argued that the concept of a single, static identity has become obsolete and does not characterize or meet the needs of people living in a pluralistic, rapidly shifting world (Gergen, 2001). Understanding the dialectic being who you are and who you are not simultaneously (Holzman, 2009/2017; Newman & Goldberg, 1996) opens the door to continuing to create new ways of being in the world, without the conservatism that comes from being scared of losing who you are.

In environments that are creative, playful, and co-created, young people are most able to experience the fluidity to successfully move around and about widely varied societal environments without being stifled by the racism and classism that continues to be endemic (Delpit & Dowdy, 2008). DSY interrupts the isolation of poverty by giving inner-city youth the same opportunity to learn how to move between different social and cultural environments as their more middle-class peers do (Fulani, 2013).
In this process the DSY explicitly taught new performances—many associated with being and acting White. Although the value of being able to code-switch seems unassailable, the young people live in a world where “acting White” can be heavily censured (Neal-Barnett, Stadulis, Singer, Murray, & Demmings, 2010; Ogbu, 2004). In the focus group conversations, the young people actively engaged the relationship between how they choose to perform and how others might judge them.

Trevor: If people have a certain notion of African Americans then because I’m an African American I’m going to do what you are expecting me to. Most people do what others expect of them. But if you are able to flip that script or prove them wrong, they are going to be, “Oh we are wrong and we should accept this person into society.” That’s what I think it means that the world is a stage.

As he continued, Trevor overtly grappled with the dilemma of reconciling his desire to have people “get the right idea” about who he is and his belief that he is trying to be who he wants to be.

Trevor: The world is a stage and people are constantly looking at you, like you have to, not that you have to make a fake person of yourself, but make sure that you are representing yourself well, representing yourself how you want to or I guess I mean how I want to. Then people get the right idea of who you are and you don’t have the stereotypes dictate your actions.

Trevor uses performance language to talk about his experience of racial stereotypes. Academics call what Trevor is describing stereotype threat—when people are impacted on by the fear of confirming stereotypes (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Trevor’s response shows a young man struggling with how he might respond to the predicament.

The word fake came up a number of times in the focus group conversation, and as the interview continued I asked them to speak directly to what they meant by the word fake and their understanding of the relationship between performance and “being fake.” As they responded, the young people found a way beyond the untenable dichotomy between knowing that certain ways of acting will help them get ahead and experiencing the pain and injustice of having to be “fake” to make it in a White world.

Kelsey: I don’t think it’s being fake at all. I think that everybody has those different sides that you show to different people. Of course you are going to act one way at work, it might not be completely different from how you act at home but there are differences and there are also some similarities.

Kelsey went on to say that “performance teaches you how to do that. How to create different yous [sic] all the time.” She credits the All Stars with teaching her that it was okay to do that.

Kelsey: Before I came to the All Stars I didn’t know you could do that—that you could choose your performance. I was more passive. Or maybe I thought that nobody should tell me how to act.

Kelsey challenges a commonly held position that the most important thing in life is to be your “true self.” It might be useful to return to the young child who is constantly pretending to be other than who she is. We all seem to recognize that it would be ludicrous to tell 2-year-olds to stop pretending and be who they are—it would limit them in so many ways, and we do not think that when they pretend they are not being themselves. The young people in the DSY program shared that the All Stars has given them back that experience—with the addition of a growing consciousness of what it takes to create environments where people can grow.

A few moments later Trevor makes a further distinction between what he calls “fakeness” and performance.
Trevor: I think of it like this—we build this fakeness when you don’t want people to know who you really are. So we create a fake personality to try and get people to think this is who you are. We act fake when we are uncomfortable or are too concerned about what the other person might think about us.

So according to Trevor, being fake involves being uncomfortable, but what about performance?

Trevor: But performance isn’t like that to me, performing is being able to be uncomfortable because you are doing something new, but not so much worry about what other people think, but instead be open to other people and cultures, and be open to trying new things and when you do that then people are going to get the sense that we’re all human beings.

Trevor’s comparison of faking it and performing is nuanced. Trevor and the other young people have begun to explore how performance and performance language can give them a way to embrace the paradox of being authentic and refusing to be boxed into a particular identity.

The young people interviewed during the focus group have come to understand the power of creating stages for their development and taking the risk of doing what they don’t know what to do. Juan compared the environment at the All Stars to being thrown into the ocean without knowing how to swim, but having “people holding you up so you don’t drown.” He shared that, because of this support, he has been able to get to know people he would “never even see normally.”

Creating stages everywhere

As part of the focus group, the young people and I explored the impact that coming to see themselves as performers has had on their lives outside of the All Stars. The young people spoke about how they now see themselves as “stage creators” in their lives. One of the consequences of coming to see themselves in this way is a growing recognition that they are not just the recipients of the experiences at the All Stars, but they have learned a process for being proactive and powerful in expanding their own lives.

Trevor: I’ve learned that you are the person that sets your own stage. Experiences are the material for you to build your stage and the amount of material you have determines how big your stage is going to be or how big the potential you have to grow as a person. At All Stars I’ve had all these different experiences, different material and people that I’ve met and places that I have gone. I’ve learned that you can expand your stage, move around, plan differently where you want to go and that leads you to having a bigger performance, a bigger life.

If we return to the dialectic of adaptation and transformation we can see that similar to the child pretending to be mommy, the young people in the DSY are discovering that there is such a thing as a performance of business, they are learning to do that performance, and they are discovering that they can be the co-creators of many new performances.

The young people went on to talk about their desire to bring the discoveries of performance and stage building to others. One young man shared that the neighborhood he grew up in is not safe. Many of his friends have become involved in “negative behavior,” and since the DSY program he now thinks about “creating a stage where I am trying to influence them to not be as negative.” Trevor said that, for him, “creating a bigger life,” had led to “wanting to lead people and try to spread the message of helping others build their own stages.” The young people had discovered that in addition to being able to create environments that support their own development, they can also impact on others’ development. This speaks to the totality of the experience going beyond learning to perform a particular role, to learning that you are a creator of environments, of ensembles, and of roles.

I want to end with the words of the young people, who were so generous in giving their appreciation of the environment that supported them.

Juan:
You get to enjoy that environment once you are in it and you long for it afterwards and you strive towards getting into that environment again. And you realize that you have to create it other places. That’s kind of what the All Stars has done for me.

**Conclusion**

Among the many discoveries of the past decades is the recognition that play is an essential part of human development, not just for young children, but for people of all ages. Not only does play allow for a healthy adaptation to the world as it is, it is also a critical ingredient for personal and societal transformation. As Vygotsky (2004) pointed out,

> If human activity were limited to reproduction of the old, then the human being would be a creature oriented only to the past and would only be able to adapt to the future to the extent that it reproduced the past. (p. 15)

Human beings are capable of more than reproduction or even adaptation to the current conditions. We are, through imaginative, creative, playful activity, capable of creating new performances where we are who we are and who we are not (Newman & Holzman, 1993/2013). It is by collectively creating the environments where people are supported to be who they are and who they are not that individuals, communities, and societies can continue to develop. From this perspective, development is understood, not as a set of stages that a people pass through on their way to adulthood, but as the collective creation of stages (environments) where people can perform who they are becoming (Holzman, 1997a).

Given the material challenges faced by young people of color—unemployment and drop-out rates that are almost double their middle-class and affluent peers (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2016), and the isolation produced by generational poverty and racism (Bureau of Labor Force Statistics, 2016), it is imperative that we find new approaches to supporting their development. As with the young children who creatively and actively imitate the people around them, the young people in DSY are not passively adapting themselves to the culture of the corporate world. They are transforming themselves, and perhaps the adults who are working with them, through the active and collective creation of stages for development.

Success in the 21st century requires an ability to improvise, a fluidity of “identity” that allows for the moving between different sociocultural environments, and a cosmopolitanism that provides a sense of oneself as a citizen of the world (Appiah, 2006). Most middle-class and affluent families recognize this, that is why they spend increasing amounts of money providing their children with outside of school experiences (Snellman, Silva, Frederick, & Putnam, 2015). Poverty does not allow most families to provide young people who are growing up poor with experiences that can provide these tools. In this way, the DSY program is a provocation. It arms young people with the tools of play, performance, and creative imitation and provides them with experiences that are creative, performatory, and cosmopolitan. In doing this the young people do not learn just the performance of corporate America, but the performance of being role-, rule-, and stage-creators everywhere.

**Notes**

1. Aside from the director of the program (Gloria Strickland), all names are pseudonyms.
2. There have been other qualitative (Gildin, 2014; Holzman, 2009/2017) and evaluation (Gordon, Bowman, & Mejia, 2004; Granatir, 2013) studies of the All Stars that have highlighted its effectiveness in supporting the development of inner-city youth. All Stars is currently engaged in a multiyear project with the Center for Research and Evaluation at the Annette Caldwell Simmons School of Education and Human Development of Southern Methodist University to develop a methodology and set of evaluation tools to accurately and responsibly explore impacts of its program and of “developmental afterschool” for young people. This will be followed by an evaluation across all ASP sites.
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