

# Developing a Psychology that Builds Community and Respects Diversity

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To begin, I want to introduce myself and Lois Holzman. I am a social worker and social therapist with a practice here in DC, and Dr. Holzman is a developmental psychologist and researcher of humanistic and postmodern theory and practice. Along with dozens of our colleagues, we have worked for the past 25 years to create social therapeutics, a psychology that supports people to utilize their creative capacities to grow and develop throughout their lifetimes and that, simultaneously, builds community (Holzman and Mendez, 2003). Our experience indicates that to build community human beings need to develop, and to develop human beings need to build community.

Since the terms community and development have multiple meanings, it is important for me to make clear the meanings they have in social therapeutics. We approach community as a process—a collective, creative process of people bringing into existence new social units and sharing a collective commitment to their sustainability. Thus, while community is typically understood as an entity that is defined by membership, identity or geography, for us community is an activity, a creative, becoming, developing activity, open to all who want to participate.

Human development, according to mainstream psychology, is an unfolding, a series of stages human beings go through. It supposedly stops at certain point, and it is measurable. For us, development is an activity, a process of becoming, not something that happens to us, but something we create. People are not just who we are, but simultaneously who we are becoming (Newman and Holzman, 1997). Viewing and relating to people in this way, it seems reasonable to assume, comes closer to what people want and need than viewing and relating to them as objects to be fixed. Rather than being defined from the outside and by others, both community and development as activity are defined by those who create it. Their structure and activity are more improvisational than scripted or role and rule governed.

The development community I will be speaking about today currently involves

thousands of people from all walks of life in varying levels of involvement. Its centerpiece project is the nonprofit East Side Institute for Group and Short Term Psychotherapy, an international research and training center for new approaches to human development and community, headquartered in NYC. The Institute develops and promotes the psychological approach known as social therapy which, in addition to being a psychotherapy practiced by clinicians, has also been adapted and applied in the fields of education, youth development, prevention, health care and organizational development (Holzman and Mendez, 2003). The Institute has several postgraduate training programs and organizes seminars, onsite trainings and continuing education programs. Through these activities and its international conferences, books and articles, the Institute promotes a global community building practice for people from many disciplines and traditions who share a desire to find new ways to relate to human beings and social change. (See [www.eastsideinstitute.org](http://www.eastsideinstitute.org).)

We thank Luis Vargas for the opportunity to share this work with you today in the context of exploring relationships between innovative practice, service delivery and public policy. The psychology we are creating is relevant to public policy issues in the areas of mental health, health, educational and youth development. As time is limited, today, we decided to share with you some of the work being done with young people and to show the ways in which this work may address and impact on educational policy.

The specific public policy issue we are addressing is that school systems around the country are impervious to theory and practice that challenge their informational and acquisitional learning model. In particular, studies delineating the benefits to young people of participating in outside of school programs, especially those involving the performing arts, are virtually ignored in policy debates and decisions. Research conducted in the last ten years provides strong evidence that performance-based and development-focused learning is key to success in school and in life (e.g., Arts Education Partnership, 1999; Brice-Heath, 2000; Brice-Heath, Soep and Roach, 1998; Gordon, Bridglall and Meroe, 2005; Jones, 2003; Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1992). But for most young people, urban public school youth in particular, schools do not foster the kind of creative, risk-taking, and ensemble learning that the performing arts require and foster. The learning model dominant in schools and underlying all but the most radically innovative curricula and methods is an informational and acquisitional one, not a development one. Many educators share our view that this must change.

After initial attempts in the 1980s to create a model school based in

developmental performance as opposed to acquisitional learning—which ultimately failed to grow because parents succumbed to the pressure of test success—our development community has pursued what has proven to be a different path (Holzman, 1997). This path is the creating of outside-of-school programs. Conceptually, these programs are not merely outside of school but also “other than school” in that they do not in any way replicate school-based teaching and learning. After two decades of growing these programs as successful laboratories for the development of a new learning model based in developmental performance, they have begun to impact the mainstream.

#### The All Stars’ Programs

The programs are run by the All Stars Project, Inc., a non-profit organization that utilizes the Institute’s social-therapeutic approach. When I lived in NY years ago, I was an active supporter of the All Stars, as was Dr. Holzman, who is now a consultant to the organization. The All Stars’ learning model focuses on performance, creativity and development because of how they complement the acquisitional learning of the school day. Out of its educational and performing arts complex on 42 St, the All Stars currently runs three outside of school youth development programs: the All Stars Talent Show Network; the Joseph A. Forgione Development School for Youth; and Youth OnStage! (See [www.allstars.org](http://www.allstars.org).)

The All Stars Talent Show Network was founded 22 years ago to provide a positive alternative to violence for inner city youth. It involves young people between the ages of 5 and 25 from the poorest neighborhoods in NYC with opportunities to produce and perform in talent shows in their neighborhood schools. The children and teenagers are trained by peers with the support of adults to make every aspect of an All Stars production happen: the auditions, in which every young rapper, singer and dancer “makes it;” the performance workshops, in which trained theatre directors work with the young people to create skits about issues that concern them; and the shows, where they perform on stage and off, running the sound, stage managing, ushering and staffing security. All Stars youth leaders also recruit and mentor younger children from their neighborhoods. Through their involvement in building the All Stars Network, the young people learn all sorts of technical skills, but more importantly, they create new kinds of relationships as they learn experientially to relate to kids from other neighborhoods, to work with adults, and to interact with their community’s institutions—schools, churches, block associations — all the while doing something they love to do: perform.

The Development School for Youth is an eight-year old leadership-training program for 16-21 year-olds. The program is designed to introduce inner city

high school students to the world of work and support them to develop socially and culturally by performing in new ways. The program runs weekly for three months; each session is led by executives from major corporations—all volunteers—who conduct workshops at their workplaces, which include financial institutions, advertising agencies and law firms, and sponsor students in 8-week paid summer internships.

Founded in 2003, Youth Onstage! (YO!) is the newest All Stars' youth program, offering young people, ages 14 to 21, the opportunity to perform on stage (and work backstage) in plays that have something to say about the world and its future. In its first year, YO! mounted four productions including *Crown Heights*, which looked at the violence between Blacks and Jews; *All Stars Hip-Hop Cabaret*; and *Casper Hauser (A Language Game)*, an experimental performance piece. In addition YO! runs a performance and theatre-training program for young people. The program is staffed by volunteer professional theatre artists and teachers as well as others who use performance in their work.

Together the programs involve several thousand young people, ages 5 – 25, with uniquely non-school like learning activities that are based in a developmental understanding of performance—both on and off stage—as fostering emotional and social development. Equally important, the programs emphasize the fostering of new kinds of partnerships between youth and adults. Critical to the running of the programs are youth volunteers who have participated in one or another of the programs, adult financial contributors and adults who volunteer.

**The All Stars' Philosophy and Psychology of Learning** Learning is a social and cultural process. It is not located in an individual's head, but in what people are able to do in their environments. Effective learning takes place in environments that 1) support some kind of development or transformation in the learners; 2) encourage them to take risks to discover and create; and 3) generate responsibility, ownership and pride in the learners. Learning takes place in these kinds of environments because people are creators, changers and performers. We are not merely who we are at a given moment in our lives. We are also who we are becoming. Growth, learning, change and transformation don't happen to us; we create them (Holzman, 1997; 2000).

Supporting young people to learn and grow involves helping them to “practice becoming.” Becoming involves doing what we don't know how to do, and doing what we don't know how to do involves being “other” than who we are. Each and every one of us did it in our infancy and early childhood—if we didn't do things we didn't know how to do, we wouldn't have grown up. Everyone has the

capacity to do things in advance of ourselves, to go beyond ourselves, to be who and what we're not, to perform as other. Babies who cannot speak perform as speakers. With their caretakers, they create environments in which they play with and learn language. They and their families perform conversations and, through this ensemble creative activity, they become speakers.

This capacity to perform—to take "who we are" and create something new—orients the All Stars toward reinitiating young people's capacity to create new performances of themselves and of their communities. In theatrical language, participating in creating the performance "stage" and performing on it is how youth can go beyond themselves to create new experiences, skills, intellectual capacities, relationships, interests, emotions, hopes, goals and forms of community. The goal of the All Stars Talent Show Network is to create stages on which young people can make their statement and in the process experience themselves as successful and as producers of things—and have their families and broader community share these experiences. The activity of creating their own lives, their own stages and their own successes is of tremendous support to young people and to their communities.

#### The All Stars' Strategy

Recently, the effectiveness of these programs has begun to be acknowledged by educators and community leaders, which is a key step in getting the issue of developmental learning, youth development principles and performance on the educational policy agenda. Researchers at the Institute for Urban and Minority Education at Teachers College, Columbia University judged the programs of the All Stars to be exemplary high performance learning communities that should serve as models for others to emulate (Bridgall, 2005; Gordon, Bowman, and Mejia, 2003). In his recent book *America Behind the Color Line*, Harvard Professor Henry Louis Gates Jr., wrote that the All Stars' programs have the "best demonstrable results – bar none" (Gates, 2004).

Another essential step in addressing policy is replicability. No matter how extraordinarily successful a program might be, if it cannot be shown to be replicable, then it is of limited importance—not only in policy debates but in the lives of people. And so, the All Stars was eager to have its programs replicated. To date, the All Stars' has expanded to Newark NJ, and non-profit and community-based organizations in Oakland, Los Angeles, Atlanta and Boston are developing programs with the All Stars' model. By increasing the number and visibility of programs for young people that complement the acquisitional learning model of schools, the All Stars' hopes to educate people

about the effectiveness of developmental performance learning and influence the public dialogue.

Key to expansion of these programs is how they are funded. From its beginnings, the All Stars has been completely independent, with financial support for its programs coming from thousands of individuals, and not governmental, university or other grants. Over more than two decades, many thousands of people from all walks of life and income levels have contributed to support youth and theatre programs, and many hundreds actively volunteer their time and skills to the growth of the programs. To give you a sense of how successful and expansionary a model the All Stars has developed, in 1989 contributions totaled \$250,000 (nearly all raised on the street or at the door by volunteer canvassers) and in 2004 over \$4 million was raised (by a small staff, some volunteer telemarketers and a large, active group of donors). This independent funding base has given the All Stars the freedom to create developmental programs rather than compromising on its philosophy and values to meet the mandates of a funder.

Last but not least in the All Stars' strategy of addressing educational policy is entering the mainstream educational system. The All Stars has been invited to negotiate a contract with New York City for a youth program as part of a new initiative for outside-of-school time programs. The proposed program, called The Production of Youth by Youth, plans to involve 120 14-18 year-olds from New York City public schools in learning how culture is produced through learning how to be producers of culture. It is an experiment in mainstreaming the All Stars' track record of innovation. It is also an experiment in accepting public funding and keeping the integrity of the All Stars' educational philosophy.

In summary, the route we have taken to challenging an educational system that fails so many young people has been to create programs that are other than school, to show their effectiveness, and to involve thousands of people in the creation, support, expansion and promotion—not only of the programs themselves but of the important issues their success raises for how schooling is done in this country and how it needs to change.

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