

**Solving the  
Education Crisis in America:  
A Special Report**

**LET'S PRETEND**

by

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1.

Here is an idea for solving the education crisis in America. What if all the kids currently failing in school pretended to be good learners? What if all the adults – teachers, principals, administrators, parents – played along and pretended that the kids were school achievers, heading for college? What if this national “ensemble” pretended this was the case day after day, classroom after classroom, school district after school district?

We believe that if such a national “performance” were created, the education crisis in America would be over. Children, having developed the capacity to pretend to be who they are not, i.e., good learners, also develop the capacity to become the thing they are pretending to be. And, thus, if we could all together assist poor and minority kids in pretending that they are classroom achievers, they could choose to become that.

Is this idea as ridiculous as it might seem at first glance? At the risk of seeming ridiculous, our answer is an emphatic “no.” Because the most innovative researchers and practitioners have come to discover that pretending, or “creatively imitating,” or performing in social contexts, is how human development is produced.<sup>1</sup> Harnessing the uniquely human capacity to perform someone or something we are not, underachieving kids can pretend their way to growth. We have seen the repeated success of this approach – not only in our after-school programs at the All Stars Project, but also (perhaps unknowingly) in school settings now applauded as the most successful interventions into the “achievement gap” (so-called), like the Harlem Children’s Zone.

While there is much to say about good teaching, highly motivated administrators, strong discipline and auxiliary support (mentors, tutors, longer school days, parent engagement, etc.), we believe that projects like the Harlem Children’s Zone, the KIPP schools and many other charter schools succeed where much else fails because the teams running those projects are collectively pretending that the kids can become learners. In the process of that jointly performed “pretending” activity, the kids develop. And their development is a critical step on the road to becoming learners.

2.

Poor children fail in school because they are culturally, emotionally and experientially underdeveloped. Learning takes development, and if kids are underdeveloped, they do not become learners. Overwhelming evidence shows that the differential in school achievement between children from more affluent backgrounds and those who grow up in poverty derives

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1. This is central in the work of Holzman (2009), Brown (2009), Nachmanovitch (1991), Pink (2005), and Robinson (2001) and in recent literature on arts and learning (Eisner, 2005; Elkind, 2007; Hoffmann-Davis, 2005).



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largely from the differential in the richness of their outside-of-school developmental experiences.<sup>2</sup> Kids spend 80% of their lives outside the classroom.<sup>3</sup> And, children who in their home life are exposed to a larger, more engaged, more cosmopolitan world – the arts, travel, commerce, foreign languages, business and science – are generally motivated to become learners. Once motivated, they are open to being educated in the classroom. Children who live life in a narrow, confined and socially deprived environment do not develop that motivation. Consequently, they never develop to the point where they can become learners. It's no surprise, then, that they fail to learn in the classroom. And it is that “development gap” which must be closed if poor inner-city kids are to do well in school, not to mention in life. We have concentrated our efforts as educators and developmentalists in afterschool, with the innovative All Stars Project, rather than in the school system itself, because in our experience, development is more rapidly produced in outside-of-school settings. Inside the school system, as Harlem Children's Zone founder Geoffrey Canada will tell you, the pressure on everyone for the kids to do well on tests and to satisfy endless metrics used to evaluate progress leaves very little room for development, which is fundamentally a qualitative process, difficult to measure but obvious when it is present.<sup>4</sup>

But even with those limitations, Canada, KIPP founders Mike Feinberg and Dave Levin, and various high-performing charter schools approach their projects with a very specific posture, namely that young people from the poorest and most deprived life circumstances can develop and become learners if you pretend that they can! This attitude towards the young people has profound implications and is a most important piece of the scientific puzzle.

Many balk at the idea that this subjective component of success is scientific. Only objective measures, not subjective attitudes, should be counted as credible explanations for the success of education reform models. But this “objective” bias doesn't hold up. The more one looks at the features of Canada's Zone, the Eagle Academies, Eva Moskowitz' Success Academies, and the All Stars model in afterschool, the more one sees the following: the kids are actively related to as learners – even though they have not yet become that. When young people show up at these schools and programs, they are immediately integrated into a new ensemble performance where – literally and contextually – they can pretend to be something that they are not.

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2. Coleman (1966) presented some of the earliest research findings that children's experiences outside of school were as important, if not more important, than their school experiences in determining educational success. Subsequent research findings include Hart and Risley's (1995) study on the relationship between a child's experience of language and later abilities and Lareau's (2003) research on the impact that the “concerted cultivation” strategy of raising children in middle-class families, i.e., the planning and scheduling of countless activities to enhance development, treating children like apprentice adults, etc., has on academic success. Edmund Gordon identifies supplementary education – enrichment activities that are ubiquitous in the lives of children who grow up in privileged environments – as the “hidden curriculum of high academic achievement” (Gordon, Bridgall and Meroe, 2005). Robert Halpern's recent research points to the criticalness of outside-of-school apprenticeship experiences for the transition from high school to further schooling (Halpern, 2009). A 20-year study of Baltimore schoolchildren conducted by Johns Hopkins sociology Professor Karl Alexander and his colleagues Doris Entwistle and Linda Olson (2007a, b) concludes that about two-thirds of the academic achievement gap can be explained by what happens over the summer.

3. This statistic is presented on the website of Citizen Schools ([www.citizenschools.org](http://www.citizenschools.org)) and takes into account after-school hours during the week and weekends.

4. Tough (2008, pp. 133-137, 161-166) chronicles how improving test scores have driven Canada's organization and management of the Harlem Children's Zone Schools, even as he recognized the importance of development to learning. On this issue, see also Zelon (2010).



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3.

This approach mirrors the Vygotskian notion<sup>5</sup> of development occurring in children when they are related to as “a head taller” than they “really” are. While Canada, et al., are not Vygotskians (as far as we know), this feature of the experience is as crucial, scientifically speaking, as the effects of discipline, engaged teachers and a strong curriculum. Indeed, we would argue that having discipline, dress codes, engaged teachers and a strong curriculum are a part of creating the play where the young people can perform as learners, thereby significantly increasing the chances that they will become learners.

Vygotsky, with a law degree and a passion for art and literature but with virtually no formal training in psychology, made a set of extraordinary discoveries about the interactive and performatory nature of human development. He made an in-depth study of how young children learn to speak by interacting with adults – typically their parents – who “pretend” that the child is speaking when he/she is actually babbling (goo goo, ga ga, etc.). In that ongoing social exchange, conversations which are imaginary (the baby is only babbling, not speaking) eventually become real as the child becomes a speaker (the thing that the adult pretended he or she was). Thus, Vygotsky popularized (however briefly, as his new psychology was swiftly repressed by Stalin) the idea that development is both social and individual, an act of pretending that becomes reality. Vygotsky observed:

Every function in the child’s cultural development appears twice: first on the social level and later, on the individual level; first *between* people (*interpsychological*) and then inside the child (*intrapsychological*). This applies equally to all voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All the higher mental functions originate as actual relations between people. (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 57)

Over 30 years, using Vygotsky’s singular discoveries, we have pioneered the use of performance (a form of pretending) in re-igniting and sustaining human development for young people and adults. One of us (Newman) has studied how the creation of ensemble performances involving young people and adults in which the young people are taken seriously and given the chance to perform as community citizens helps inner-city kids become capable of learning and achievement. These discoveries are the foundation of what we do at the All Stars Project.

At the All Stars, which we co-founded in 1981, we have seen dramatic results among poor Black, Latino and immigrant kids. We place very substantial emphasis on communicating to them that there are a clear set of expectations for them, giving them the support they need to meet those expectations and pretending along with them that they are capable of performing at significantly higher levels (of “mental function”) than they have up to that point.

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5. Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) was an early Soviet psychologist and founder of cultural-historical psychology. His major works include *Mind in Society* (1978) and *Thought and Language* (1986).



4.

Many Americans, though, are cynical about the proposition that poor kids, who have been failing in the classroom for generations, can become learners. Why is this the case? Perhaps because they have seen a half-century of Great Society programs, funded to the tune of trillions of taxpayer dollars, fail to solve the problems of poverty and ignorance. But there is little understanding of the roots of that failure. For liberals, failure in school is mostly chalked up to the disabling effects of poverty. For conservatives, it is the idea that insufficient demands are placed on the system and the kids. Both are true, but neither points the way to a solution.

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For the last half-century or more, the efforts to bridge the gap (so-called) between America's best learners and our worst have, in our view, rested on a theoretical assumption that is ultimately unsustainable, namely that in the final analysis, learning and development are the same thing or at a minimum, closely or causally connected things. But they are neither. They are quite separate and distinct. And this misunderstanding has caused us to misspend millions of intellectual hours and billions of dollars and to subject two generations of inner-city young people to a subpar educational system.

How could something so abstract impact so much on something so concrete? It turns out the practical implications of this theoretical misunderstanding are enormous. The guiding premise in public education since the 1950s has been that commonality or equality of classroom situations and teaching efforts would equalize the opportunity for achievement for our youth population. Schooling itself, not life circumstances, would be the determinant of classroom performance because the classroom would put all children on a level playing field. The empirics, however, deny this assumption, though there is little understanding as to why. The "why" is inseparable from the distinction between learning and development.

As referenced earlier, the more privileged of America's youth, even by a very early age, have had a host of developmental cultural experiences, which leave them to varying degrees and in varying ways, open to learning. Our lower performing children have not, and moreover, have grown up within cultures which often relate negatively or conflictedly to learning. These children must be helped to grow (develop) if they are ever to begin the learning process and to function in the same classroom environment as the more developed children. The remedy cannot be "education" pure and simple. A system which presumes that classroom learning can substitute for, or override, a lack of development has failed to deliver.

Does this have racial connotations? Of course. There is nothing in American life and culture that doesn't. And a significant proportion of kids failing in the classroom are in inner-city areas and are Black and Latino. But that does not mean it cannot be remedied. However, the remedy cannot be remediation. It must be development.



5.

The All Stars is a school for development, not for learning. It is not that there are no tests, though in the traditional sense there aren't. Rather, the tests are for growth, not for learning.

Tests for growth, unlike tests for learning, have far more to do with cultivating one's ability to perform, e.g., to listen, more appreciatively. Vygotsky encouraged having groupings of children working together to come up with the answers to questions and problems so as to make possible not only getting the right answer but to enable and make visible the collective process by which it was obtained. This way of working cultivates a collective appreciation and an appreciation of collectivity which does not come from learning.

A fundamental  
tool for  
education  
reformers  
is the  
tool of  
performance.

We have borrowed this approach rather directly (with modification) in the All Stars. We spend as much, or more, time on how the audience performs its response at our talent shows, than on the talent or skill of the onstage performers. The young people and their families and friends who show up to watch a talent show in, say, Bed-Stuy or Far Rockaway, number in the many hundreds. These audiences are told that every act is a winner and asked to applaud loudly and expressively for each performance. A "congratulations chorus" says, in unison along with the audience at every All Stars audition, "Congratulations!" to every performer. And everyone, young and old, has the collective experience of appreciating the work of the young performers. Appreciating is but one aspect of development. It is both complex and critically important, but if our young people are ultimately expected to appreciate learning, they must first of all be helped to appreciate.

One of us (Newman) led and performed in an improv comedy troupe in the 1990s called The Gaygles. At the start of each show, when the players were all introduced, a special appeal to the audience would be made. "Laugh your asses off," Newman would say, "at whatever the appropriate moments might be. That way, you'll relieve us of the burden of having to be funny. Chances are, we'll be a lot funnier." Of course, the audience laughed out loud at this proposition, in which they were being given a role in the show as central as that of the actors. They played that role and almost invariably, the show was hilarious. The hilarity, in the Gaygles model, was a joint performance. And everyone was entertained by collectively appreciating – and thereby, helping to create – the humor.

"Appreciation" is a sophisticated developmental skill. It is highly subjective, in that we might all have varied objects that we appreciate. Yet, appreciation itself takes a common form in the culture. And here's what's important. Appreciation is fundamentally performatory. Like pain, it is individualistically experienced by the person in pain, yet it is commonly performed. We learn to express pain in fairly common ways (ouch! groaning, screaming) even though all of our pains are different. The same can be done with appreciation. And mastering that performatory ability is but a part (albeit a large part) of our ability to perform, indeed be, in a common culture.



## LET'S PRETEND

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It's very prevalent to think that if young people are appreciated, they will do better in school and in life. However, there is almost no thought given to teaching young people how to appreciate, i.e., how to engage with others (adults, for example) in active and self-expressive ways. That ability is fundamental to being/becoming a part of the larger culture. When poor kids do not have that capacity, they are alienated, isolated, and unmotivated. In a word, they are underdeveloped.

Thus, in our view, a fundamental tool for education reformers is the tool of performance. The act of pretending to be something other than you are, used self-consciously and collectively, is a tool for growth. Ensemble performances that include casting poor kids in the role of learner before they know how to learn, ensemble performances that teach a community (including young people) to appreciate, are tools for growth that embody a developmental approach. This term itself, though, needs some clarification. In traditional psychology and education lexicons, "development" tends to mean something socio-economic or quasi-psychological. That is not the sense, or meaning, of development that we employ. Here "development" refers to the growth of a collective, an ensemble, an audience, a classroom, a community, even a country in which all perform and each develops. As Vygotsky says, "cultural development appears twice: first on the social level and later, on the individual level."

When it comes to the prospects for education reform, there is no doubt that one thing that makes it so difficult (as the popular documentary on education reform, *Waiting for Superman*, chronicles) is that everyone, every interest group, every institution, is playing a pre-determined role in a not-very-good play. America itself could use some new performances. We could start pretending that change is happening. And if we do, and if we involve our kids in that performance, it could end the learning crisis in our country.



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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Fred Newman, Ph.D.**, co-founder, All Stars Project, Inc., received his Ph.D. in analytic philosophy and foundations of mathematics from Stanford University in 1962, where he was mentored by the renowned analytic philosopher Donald Davidson. He taught at several colleges and universities before dedicating himself to community organizing and the creation of independent education, health, mental health, and cultural projects in New York City.

Dr. Newman has been a practicing psychotherapist for more than 30 years and is the founder of Social Therapy. As principal trainer at the East Side Institute for Group and Short Term Psychotherapy, Newman has mentored and supervised hundreds of practitioners in this approach. Newman has also been a pioneer in the development of independent politics in the United States since the late 1970s. He had a major hand in the creation of the Independence Party of New York, and played a key role in the party's endorsement of Mayor Michael Bloomberg in 2001, 2005, and 2009.

Newman is a director and playwright who has authored over 30 plays and musicals. Four of his plays were written expressly for production at annual conventions of the American Psychological Association. Among his books, co-authored with Lois Holzman, Ph.D. are *Unscientific Psychology: A Cultural-Performatory Approach to Understanding Human Life*; *The End of Knowing: A New Developmental Way of Learning*; and *Lev Vygotsky: Revolutionary Scientist*. He has also written two books for a popular audience – *Let's Develop! A Guide to Continuous Personal Growth* and *Performance of a Lifetime: A Practical-Philosophical Guide to the Joyous Life*.

Combining his pioneering work in human development with his deep commitment to community development, Dr. Newman co-founded the All Stars Project in 1981 to bring the new science of development to the lives of inner-city young people. He is the chief designer of the All Stars Project's performance-based development approach. He served as artistic director of the ASP's Castillo Theatre from 1989 until 2005. He is currently the creative designer of UX, the All Stars Project's newest initiative, a new forward thinking university-style development institution that is free and open to people of all ages and backgrounds who want to grow and develop.

**Lenora B. Fulani, Ph.D.**, co-founder of the All Stars Project, Inc., graduated from Hofstra University with a major in psychology, and pursued graduate studies in the field at Columbia University's Teachers College and the City University of New York, where she earned a Ph.D. in developmental psychology. She worked as a guest researcher at Rockefeller University from 1973-1977, specializing in the interplay of social environment and learning, with a particular focus on the Black community.

In 1981, she co-founded the All Stars Project with Dr. Fred Newman. Over the years she has worked closely with corporate volunteers, CEOs and partners in Fortune 500 companies to build All Stars Project's innovative programs, including the Development School for Youth, which she co-directed from 1997 to 2006. She is the dean of UX and is also the founder and director of Operation Conversation: Cops and Kids, a series of dialogues and performance-based workshops with police and inner-city youth to help them develop their relationships and impact positively on community tensions.

Dr. Fulani has long been active in creating change through political action. She has twice run for president as an independent. In 1988 she became the first woman and first African American in U.S. history to appear as a presidential candidate on the ballot in all 50 states. In 1994 she co-founded the Committee for a Unified Independent Party, a national strategy center for independent voters which currently has networks in more than 40 states. She is a founder of the Independence Party of New York State.

Dr. Fulani has been a featured guest on numerous TV and radio programs including Henry Louis Gates' PBS documentary, *America Beyond the Color Line*, *Crossfire*, *Hardball*, *Fox News*, *Inside Politics*, *Larry King Show*, *Washington Journal*, *Tony Brown's Journal*, *BET's Nightly News* and *The McNeil-Lehrer Report*. Her social commentaries on a wide variety of topics have appeared in newspapers nationwide including: *USA Today*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Washington Times*, *Boston Globe*, *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, and New York's *Newsday*.

