

The Development Line

Helping the Poor to Grow: A Special Report on Solving the Poverty Crisis in America

by

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In 1903, historian, sociologist, public intellectual and activist W. E. B. Du Bois published *The Souls of Black Folk*. In it he stated a powerful truth and wove his story of the post-Civil War Negro around it. “The problem of the Twentieth Century,” he declared, “is the problem of the color-line” (Du Bois, 1903/2007, p. 9). Filled with the most profound detail and written in a style so poetic that it never fails to move me, Du Bois examines the limits to freedom for Black people in America *and* the subjective experience of being emancipated into a society that was largely ignorant, uncaring and incapable of embracing this nation within a nation.

The Souls of Black Folk was and remains one of the most brilliant chronicles of what Du Bois’ biographer David Levering Lewis called the “psychic subordination” of Black people (Lewis, 1994, p. 280). Du Bois’ color-line, after all, is not merely an objective divide in the larger society. It is the internalized line we can cross only when we, Black folks, develop the capacity to do so.

I am a developmental psychologist by training. I grew up poor in Chester, Pennsylvania, was the first in my family to go to college, went to graduate school in the 1970s and eventually joined a research laboratory at Rockefeller University while I completed my Ph.D. at the City University of New York, at the same time, raising my two children as a single mother. Throughout the course of my career, I came to reject many of the teachings of traditional psychology, including so-called Black psychology, but I have vigorously – some would say fanatically – pursued the question of development. What is development? How do people develop? How do communities develop? What is underdevelopment? Is development a social or individual process? Is that a meaningful distinction? And what does any of that have to do with being Black in the United States of America in the twenty-first century? Du Bois’ historic prediction turned out to be profoundly true. And today, building on his prophetic and profound declaration, I am adding that the problem of the twenty-first century is the problem of *the development line*.

The term development is often used in two ways. One is economic development. The other is psychological development, largely understood as an individual process that begins and ends in childhood. In this paper, I am sharing a new understanding of human development, which has emerged from a three-decade experiment of creating growth environments that engage and reorganize the lack of development in poor communities of color. This lack, or underdevelopment, is the result of isolation from the social and economic mainstream. Put another way, underdevelopment is a by-product of poverty. In the simplest terms, “development is expressed in the capacity of human beings, young and old, to make life choices, large and small, that allow them to grow. It is deeply connected to creativity and to the capacity of human beings to shape rather than simply react to their circumstances” (All Stars Project, 2009, p. 3).



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While this may sound straightforward, this understanding is actually a sophisticated challenge to traditional notions of human development. Middle-class, mainly white, children are by and large provided with experiences of and contact with the larger world that develops them and helps them to become learners. Poor kids, largely of color, are not. In writing this paper, I am hoping to stimulate a new conversation that clears up some of the confusion of social scientists and politicians who ponder the intractability of generational poverty in the Black community.

Simply put, America has not completed its task of integrating the African American population into mainstream America. My work now focuses on that completion. At the All Stars Project, the non-profit I co-founded in 1981, I raise the subjective and psychological consequences of growing up Black and poor in America with the young people and adults in our programs. Helping poor Black kids and their parents to “come out” as poor is a key aspect of re-igniting their development.

Over the past three decades leaders of the All Stars Project – my co-founder, the late Dr. Fred Newman, President and CEO Gabrielle L. Kurlander and youth program leaders Pamela Lewis, Gloria Strickland, David Cherry and Elouise Joseph – have created programs that engage the underdevelopment produced by being left behind, trapped in poverty on the outskirts of America’s society. The All Stars has been a thought and action leader on what must be done to help people in poor communities of color move beyond their experience as outsiders, to enter the mainstream and to continue their development. We believe the problem of the twenty-first century is the problem of the development line.

Change and Development

Du Bois offers some very profound and important insights into the question of change and development. In *The Souls of Black Folk* he suggests that certain institutional changes produced, for example by the Civil War, created *change* for American society and, in some respects, for Black people but did not produce development.

In the chapter, “Of the Dawn of Freedom,” Du Bois chronicles the work of the Freedmen’s Bureau, the Reconstruction-era government project founded in 1865 by President Lincoln, created to aid the “refugees” – former slaves who had to “adjust” to their freedom. Food programs, jobs programs, family reunification programs, a judicial system, an educational infrastructure and a bank were among its benefits, though it was despised by southern politicians and by much of the rural white South. It was not long before the Freedmen’s Bureau’s hands were tied by the backlash against emancipation. And thus, Du Bois wrote, “It came to regard its work as merely temporary and Negro suffrage as a final answer to all present perplexities” (Du Bois, 1903/2007, p. 34). He concludes, “So, the Freedmen’s Bureau died, and its child was the Fifteenth Amendment” (Du Bois, 1903/2007, p. 34).

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For me, this is a poignant and powerful observation because it suggests that post-slavery, post-Civil War America was able to effect legal change – in this case, the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments – and that these legal changes would resolve the “Negro problem” and allow Black people to adjust to and enter the mainstream of American life. But that did not occur, as we well know. In fact, as Reconstruction gave way to reaction, and the South turned to Jim Crow and the terror of the KKK, Black people continued to suffer the pain, torture and humiliation of second-class citizenship – the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments notwithstanding. Legal emancipation and social connectedness are two different things.

The civil rights, school desegregation and voting rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s refocused attention on the “problem of the color line” and replenished the cause of Black equality and empowerment, but even these movements and the legal changes they brought, including *Brown v. Board of Education* and the Voting Rights Act, did not address the underlying and festering reality of the Black condition – poverty, isolation and their impact on development.

Education is Not the Road Out of Poverty

If Negro suffrage, as Du Bois explains in *The Souls of Black Folk*, was thought to be the answer to the Negro problem at the turn of the twentieth century, desegregation and equality in the classroom were to be the answers to the Negro problem (by then the “Black problem”) at the middle of the century. However, as we now know, it was not.

No one in America worked harder to implement the passage of *Brown v. Board of Education* – the law that prohibited school desegregation – than my friend and civil rights attorney, the late Derrick Bell. As part of a team that included Thurgood Marshall, he handled hundreds of cases involving school desegregation in the South. However, as Gary Orfield and Chungmei Lee from UCLA point out, “Nearly 40 years after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., we have now lost almost all the progress made in the decades after his death in desegregating our schools” (The Civil Rights Project, 2007). On the 50th anniversary of the *Brown v. Board* decision, Bell (2004) declared that Black children would have been better off if the courts had maintained the separate but equal status of the schools and focused on the equal part. He talks about this in great detail in his book, *Silent Covenants* (2004). And, while his frustration at the ongoing segregation and failure of inner-city schools was understandable, it is highly unlikely that fairness would have ever been achieved, since the *Plessy v. Ferguson* separate but equal ruling was based on an assumption of Black inferiority. Also, in a public series in 2004 entitled “The Miracle of Motivation,” during which he interviewed me about my work as All Stars Project co-founder, Bell shared with me that former Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall had thought that the schools in the South would be desegregated in five years. I must admit that I was somewhat taken aback by Marshall’s naïveté.



Perhaps Bell and Marshall's positions as lawyers over-determined for both of them the power of the law and their understanding of what it would take to actually connect the African American community to America's mainstream. While I deeply admire and appreciate their work in fighting to both change and implement new laws – Bell is one of my heroes – history has taught us that these legal changes are but a step in transforming our society. While these laws are morally critical and have produced important changes, the issue coming out of the 60s was how America and the African American community would have to grow and develop in order to bring Blacks into the American mainstream (King, 1967).

Dr. Fred Newman, co-founder of the All Stars Project, in a 2009 address entitled "Can We Eradicate Poverty in the Twenty-first Century?" points out that:

One of the great mistakes that came out of the civil rights movement and the War on Poverty was the illusory notion that education was going to do it all, that education was all there was that would make everything work. But development, as we talk about it, is a whole different activity than education, not unrelated, but there has to be an appropriate context, a nurturing context or a tough context, where you can grow from the education that you've received. And where that experience can, if you will, re-motivate you to continue education. (Newman, 2009)

Poverty and Underdevelopment

Poverty, inequality and the wealth gap have grown dramatically in the last four decades. According to the United States Census Bureau, the poverty rate in the U.S. has increased every year since 2007. By their measure there are currently 48.5 million people living in poverty in the United States, which is 15.9% of the total population. The ethnic breakdown shows that 27.6% of all African Americans, 25.3% of all Hispanics and 9.8% of whites are poor (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011).

On the related issue of income equality, the gap between the rich and poor, according to the Census Bureau, has grown by 18% since 1967 (U.S. Census Bureau, 1996).

David Grusky, director of Stanford's Center on Poverty and Inequality, observes, "We're entering entirely new territory, a level of inequality that hasn't been seen since the first Gilded Age a century ago. It's not whether we care about the poor and the suffering; it's whether we can still run a productive economy and avoid a major social fallout when so many are cut off from opportunity" (Stanford University, 2012).

The Pew Research Center found that the declines from the recession created a huge gap between minorities and whites. The median net worth of Black households in 2009 was \$5,677 and Hispanic households was \$6,325 while the median net worth of white households was \$113,149. Pew identified the housing crises as responsible for this widening gulf (Pew Research Center, 2011).

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My decision to become a psychologist was shaped, as I said, by growing up Black and poor in Chester, Pennsylvania in the 1960s and experiencing the never-ending suffering and tragedies of the adults and kids in my family and in my community. Even as a young person I was struck by the fact that the adults never talked about their pain. They drank, they did drugs, they fought and they had emotional crises that led to stays in psychiatric institutions, but there was rarely conversation about how difficult or hard life was. They seemed to relate to suffering as a constant and obviously had not been given the tools or opportunities to relate to it in any other way. So, I went to college to learn how to do something about poor people and pain. I thought, as the first in my family to go to college – an opportunity made possible by the upheavals of the 60s – that my nieces and nephews were sure to follow. However, for the most part they did not; instead, they were swept up in the painful and destructive lives of growing up Black and poor in the decades that followed.

When I went to college in 1968, I was not looking for explanations or theories about the lives of poor people. Instead, I was interested in learning how to change their lives. I read and still do read a lot of the literature on the poor. Most of what I read about the statistics and descriptions of the poor communities I agree with. How could one not? However, I recognize that violence, teen pregnancy and father absence, rather than being the causes of poverty, are actually the consequences. What I find problematic in most of the literature is the ahistorical nature of the theories and explanations, the moralism that underlies so much that is written and the endless debates between conservatives and liberals that produce very little change. It doesn't matter how many years it's been since the passage of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts. America, including America's Black leadership and professional class, has not created the conditions by which overwhelming numbers of America's former slave population can make the connection to and transition into America's mainstream.

What Dr. King Saw

I believe that Dr. King understood the challenges of the Black poor making that transition. Three weeks before Dr. King's death, he announced a Poor People's March on Washington, D.C. that was to begin in June 1968. He called on poor people – Black, Latino, Native American and white – to set up camp outside of the White House in an effort to put America's poor on display before the national and international press in much the same way that had been done in the battle against Jim Crow in the South.

Dr. King recognized that America's poverty was not the shame of its poor, Black or otherwise. In the case of the Black population, he recognized the importance of connecting Black poverty to history and to the circumstances of slavery and the second-class citizenship produced by racism.

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Although Dr. King is a celebrated hero in our nation, his insistence on the importance of connecting the African American population to mainstream America seems to have been grossly overlooked in *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* “What is needed is a strategy for change, a tactical program that will bring the Negro into the mainstream of American life as quickly as possible” (King, 1967, p. 61). It certainly has not been accomplished, and the degree to which this disconnect is addressed, it is related to as a failure of individual poor people or their families to adopt middle-class values. But the disconnect from American society has real and tragic implications for poor communities of color. The reality is that Black kids see and experience the world differently than do white kids because of the elongated history of the dominant culture. White kids see themselves as insiders, as connected to the mainstream of American life. Black and Latino kids on the other hand see themselves as outsiders, as people trying – but not fully able – to get in. Wilson (2012) discusses how, as a matter of policy, the poor have been physically separated in low income housing in the poorest neighborhoods. It’s rare, if ever, that the literature about educational failure or violence in the poor communities ever considers the possible impact of this isolation or alienation on poor kids.

When it is discussed, as in a recent article published by *The New York Times* – “For Poor, Leap to College Often Ends in a Hard Fall” (Deparle, 2012) – it leaves people who care about these issues, and the kids themselves, with no understanding that the underdevelopment that produces the differences between poor and middle-class kids can be reorganized, that a methodology exists that makes it possible to do so.

Eventually, I came to terms with the fact that I could not save my family. I could not reverse the impact and despair experienced by my six-year-old nephew and his brother who were taken from our family after my sister’s death, nor avenge the death of my 14-year-old niece who died unexpectedly overnight in a hospital from some mysterious and unexplained “illness,” nor rescue her sister from a life spent in a mental institution. I was determined, however, to discover what could be done to impact the lives and suffering of the Black poor.

So, I went on a search for people who were doing something innovative and unusual in their “study” of the poor.

What Dr. Newman Saw

It was in the 1970s when I met Dr. Fred Newman, a Stanford University-trained philosopher, therapist and tremendously skilled community organizer. Fred had grown up poor in a Jewish neighborhood in the South Bronx. He had an extraordinary empathy and an understanding of what it meant to be poor in America in the richest country in the world – not to mention what it meant to be one of its former slaves. Newman was the lead organizer of a group of social activists from a wide array of disciplines who were working to discover what it would mean to create solutions to some of the entrenched problems of the time – poverty, racism and mental illness – outside of the traditional institutions that studied these kinds of things.



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Prior to my meeting him, these activists had, in partnership with welfare recipients in the poor Black and Latino communities of New York, created the Unemployed and Welfare Council. The primary activity involved visiting welfare centers, signing up recipients into the Council and demanding that poor people who were serviced by the centers be treated with respect and dignity. In fact, Newman was so radical as to suggest that welfare recipients be granted collective bargaining rights. I joined Newman at the tail end of this effort and was deeply moved by the combination of Black and Latino poor people who had allied with mostly Jewish activists to create some new opportunities for their community.

It was at the request of parents who had developed as community leaders in the Unemployed and Welfare Council that we began the All Stars Talent Show Network, our first youth program – that continues as our flagship. The parents were very clear; the young people in poor communities needed many things, including and especially something to do after school. 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.

While educators and government officials have chosen to focus on in-school differences/performances between these groups, they have for the most part ignored the significant difference between the lives of the poor and the lives of more privileged families. Poor parents cannot afford to expose their kids (not to mention themselves) to the world. Well-to-do families bring their kids into the world at large as a matter of course. It's in those kinds of activities that kids become more sophisticated and more cosmopolitan. They develop as learners and as performers in the world. Pedro Noguera (2011) and others have similarly pointed out how policymakers have overlooked these differences and the impact of poverty on development.

Performance and Growth

Over the years, the All Stars Project has built on the talent show program and created a growing assemblage of programs and opportunities for inner-city kids that broadens their experience of the world. All Stars President and CEO Gabrielle L. Kurlander has led the organization since 1990, building a unique partnership with private donors and the business community that has provided \$80 million in philanthropic support for these development programs. But All Stars donors not only support this approach financially; they participate in it personally. Through hundreds of thousands of hours of volunteerism these relationships that are built between rich and poor are a crucial part of bringing poor youth into the mainstream, of making them feel included and wanted in the larger, more sophisticated and powerful world.



When the All Stars established a performance and development center in New York City in 2003, we chose to locate it on 42nd Street in Manhattan – the heart of New York City’s cultural and business community – to broaden young people’s sense of where they “belong.” Young people learn that they not only live in East New York or South Jamaica, or Harlem or the South Bronx but that they also live in one of the most cosmopolitan cities in the world. From our vantage point, key to reigniting their development (including their developing as learners) was their having access to what the city had to offer (All Stars Project, 2009).

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Over the years, tens of thousands of young people in New York City have travelled into Manhattan for the first time, meeting and interacting with young people and adult volunteers from other neighborhoods, with business leaders and CEOs from major corporations and with middle-class professionals. They have been a part of audiences and productions that included leading lights in theater and dance, among them Desmond Richardson from Complexions Contemporary Ballet, award-winning playwright Katori Hall, experimental theater artist Robert Wilson and founder of the New Federal Theatre, Woodie King, Jr. They have been exposed to and participated in avant garde, black and political theater at the Castillo Theatre, which is part of the All Stars Project, and they have attended lectures, workshops and conversations led by business professionals, academics and lawyers that dealt with subject matter that was way over their heads – all while performing as the kinds of people who do these kinds of things. Performance, as we make use of it in our work, is a powerful confidence-builder and plays a key role in helping inner-city kids to develop as learners. As I write this paper, I am proud that the All Stars Project of New Jersey, led by grassroots educator Gloria Strickland, has just opened a center for afterschool development in downtown Newark to extend this process to New Jersey’s poor communities.

A New Developmental Psychology

Another important aspect of our work is that “what grows is the group” not individuals (Newman, 1999, p. 174). This is both key to our success in helping young people to see new possibilities and important in our work in engaging the subjective aspects of poverty. It also gives the young people a sense of the importance of community. It’s not just all about them.

This understanding is very different from Jean Piaget’s concept of development that I was introduced to as a graduate student in the developmental psychology program at the City University of New York. Focused on exploring children’s minds through a series of experiments, Piaget developed a stage theory of intellectual development that has dominated the fields of education and child psychology for decades.

Initially, my attraction to Piaget’s work lay in his claim that the cognitive skills of his theory develop in *all* people: an appeal to the universality of the development of mental activities. It seemed that Piaget’s use of universality gave all children an equal chance. After all, according to Piaget, the development of cognitive structures had very little to do with what was going on in the world, only what was going on in children’s heads.

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This position of neutrality was very seductive at the time especially to those Black, Latino and progressive researchers who were challenging Arthur Jensen's (1969) position of genetic inferiority. However, as I point out in my dissertation, *Children's Understanding of Number Symbols in Formal and Informal Contexts* (1984), upon closer scrutiny it becomes clear that Piaget's neutrality is not so neutral after all. The problem with the neutrality – the acultural and ahistorical nature of Piaget's theory – is that the social and the historical have a real impact on children's development. It is important to note that when Black and poor girl children are taught, for example, that two plus two equals four, they are also learning through how they are related to by those around them both their location within and their relationship to that activity. For many of these girls, this includes subtle (and not so subtle) messages that they are not expected to excel in the subject, that they do not "think mathematically," or that it is not an important subject for them to pursue. *All* of that is, in my analysis, the activity of learning mathematics. Adding two plus two, arithmetic and mathematics are, after all, social and cultural activities that have a history and a location.

What does it mean to study the development of cognitive activities in Black poor children and leave out the very basis of how it is that they are organized into the activity of learning? The implications are important. If, as Piaget suggests, development is ahistorical and universal, a lack of development must mean something is wrong with the child who is failing. However, poverty, history and social context do matter. And if not considered, the question of differential performance can lead social scientists to choose among a genetic, environmental or interactionist explanation of behavior without ever engaging the history of "explaining" the achievement gap or the historical location of cognition and children's performance.

Of great value to our discoveries about development was Newman's training in the philosophy of science and methodology and the connection that he and other colleagues had to the cultural-historical and postmodern transformations taking place, not only in the field, but significantly also in psychology (Newman & Holzman, 1997; Holzman & Morss (Eds.), 2000).

It turned out that another psychologist, far away from the United States and from Piaget's Switzerland, was grappling with questions of human development and what kind of psychology could be created that would help people from all walks of life to develop. He was Lev Vygotsky, who lived and worked in the post-revolutionary Soviet Union in the 1920s and 30s.

In the early 1980s, as we were creating the first All Stars program on the ground, Newman, along with Lois Holzman, a developmental psychologist and one of his key intellectual collaborators, was engaged in studying Vygotsky's breakthroughs. They wrote of their unique understanding of Vygotsky's discoveries in *Lev Vygotsky: Revolutionary Scientist* (1993). (This groundbreaking book was recently released by Routledge as part of its Classical Edition series.)



In the book, they write:

Our fifteen-year collaboration has been a joint activity with the community in which we work, where our theoretical understanding of what human science has to be is continuously advanced by the very practical activity of creating environments that make the re-initiation of development possible. (1993, p. 3)

They further describe how this “very practical activity” in which we are engaged helped them to see some unorthodox and useful dimensions of Vygotsky, in particular his assertion of the socialness of learning and development:

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)

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How radical and liberating from the stagist theories of Piaget and others! And what possibilities it created for the poor – possibilities for continuous development attainable by what they and others do in the world together!

Another insight of Vygotsky’s was that learning needed to be developmental to make a real difference in the lives of children. When we are very little, learning and development occur together. We transform when we learn to speak. New worlds open to us. According to Vygotsky, “the only learning worthy of the name is learning that leads to development”. (1978, p. 89) We can’t learn without development and we can’t develop without learning. Vygotsky (1978) wrote about play in profound ways. He said that when children play it’s as if they’re “a head taller” than they are. In play they pretend – they’re both who they are and who they are pretending to be. This meant to us that the treatment of children as simply who they are, without the recognition that they are themselves “process” (who they are and who they are becoming), imposes a limitation on human growth. We came to see that one of the most devastating impacts of poverty was “subjective,” the way in which it confined the fundamental human capacity to create.

In *Let’s Pretend*, a white paper Newman and I (All Stars Project, 2011) wrote together, we describe the foundation of what we do at the All Stars Project based on two Vygotskian discoveries:

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. (2011, p. 4)

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 or achievement. (2011, p. 4)

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This perspective helps to clarify why, for example, education and schools, which in America are based on the assumption that learning and development are the same thing or are at a minimum very closely or causally connected, were not (and still are not) making significant headway in bridging the disparities between Black people in the inner-city and the rest of America. It also explains why traditional anti-poverty approaches focused on material needs – food, housing, economic assistance – have failed to make a significant difference. Neither touched development nor nurtured young people’s capacity to create.

A big part of what it has meant for me and my colleagues at the All Stars Project to discover how and that you can reignite development (and therefore learning) in poor Black kids was to literally disconnect ourselves from the never-ending assumptions that are spoken about endlessly by many educators and psychologists who work with poor kids in this country. The conversations are not serious – not because people are uncaring – but because the same descriptions, methodology and inadequate solutions are repeated over and over again.

Sadly, the majority of educators are not being exposed to the most innovative and meaningful approaches now being hammered out among psychologists, scientists, community organizers and intellectuals around the world. These conversations and approaches go far beyond “remediation” and challenge some of the foundational assumptions on which the entire American education system has been based. These include serious discussions about the impact of the loss of creativity on the development of children and society (Robinson, 2010) and the discovery of the “magic” that occurs when children are freed from the individuated bias of traditional schooling and given the opportunity and the tools to collectively create “self-organizing learning environments” (Mitra, 2003). These discussions are rich and full of potential, and yet they have not made a dent in the dominant model of American schooling.

Lowered Expectations

Trained as a social therapist (this is Newman’s brand of therapy, a radical approach to human emotion and healing that does not locate our suffering or our development in our heads. See: Holzman & Mendez (Eds.), 2003), I developed my skills in helping poor people to speak about the crises in their lives and to make sense of the emotional and social destruction of poverty. I think of my favorite uncle, Uncle Ned, whose wife went out to the store one day to buy food to make his lunch and never came back. Her body was found, decapitated, tied to a railroad track. Rumor had it that a group of white men had raped and killed her; there were whispers about this in the family. I must have been nine or ten when this happened. My uncle eventually came to live with us, and like almost all of my uncles and my father, became a working alcoholic. He was one of the most decent adults in my family. Kids know these things. He died when I was 21. He tumbled off of our front steps, hitting his head on concrete – never regaining consciousness. I wish that I could have helped him to give expression to his grief and invisibility, an experience explored by A.J. Franklin (2004) in his therapeutic work with Black men.



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In many ways, the success of our work at the All Stars Project with young people from poor communities of color was influenced by the subjective experiences of poverty for me and for Fred Newman, his in the Bronx in the 1940s in a Jewish community-in-transition, and mine in a Black community in Pennsylvania in the 1960s.

Newman often spoke about the immediate experience following his father’s death of not only becoming welfare poor, but of also being related to in the ways that poor people are, the painful experience of people no longer having expectations of him. He shared his later experience of working in government-funded, anti-poverty programs that had no expectations for the people they served and an attitude towards the participants that whatever was done for the poor was good enough because poor people don’t deserve the best and should be grateful for whatever they get. This “vision” accompanies the myth that being poor in America is an expression of individual failure (Newman, 2009).

The vision of the All Stars Project programs instead operates with the politic and on the assumption that in order to mount an actual and successful “War on Poverty,” the poor Black and Latino communities must be supported to connect with the mainstream of American life and be exposed to the very best approaches to education and human development.

Through the talent shows and our other youth programs we were able to build on the kids’ love of performance to help them to develop and grow! One thing apparent in many of the “academic” debates – both left and right – is the degree to which the voice of the poor is absent.

What does all of this – these talent shows, our acting programs and others – have to do with development? Here is how I answer that. Decades of discrimination and poverty, along with the impoverished environment that millions of African Americans live in, have constrained their growth. Black people in our inner-cities and in the rural South inhabit, for the most part, a narrow and ghettoized world in which they are organized into very limiting roles and identities. Poor Black kids who are underperforming in school are not failing to learn. The problem is actually much worse. Because of their life circumstances, they have failed to develop as learners. The young Black men involved in gangs and gun violence on Chicago’s South and West Sides cannot see any possibilities from the street corners of their neighborhoods, which have been devastated by poverty and where hopelessness, anger and fear thrive. And that’s also true for the “good kids” in those neighborhoods who have never picked up a gun or joined a gang. What I am pointing to here is a connection between one’s access and relationship to the world and one’s capacity to learn and to navigate one’s life and the broader society.

Our location in the community made it possible for us to discover the larger problem of the lack of development – to see, there wasn’t much development going on in our poor communities – not for young people, not for older people, not for anyone.



Dr. Newman coined the term “radical acceptance” – a therapeutic and pragmatic activity in which people and groups come to accept where they are in their development and who they are in the world as a prerequisite for continued growth. It’s an activity of enormous value that can continue throughout one’s lifetime. What would it have meant, historically speaking, for the civil rights and Black power movements if their leaders, along with our Jewish and white supporters, had stepped back for a moment to evaluate the enormity of the task to connect the poor Black masses – who had been liberated by laws but damaged by the inhumanity of slavery and racism – with mainstream America? What demands would that have placed on the leadership, on the community, as well as on our country? Slavery not only damaged the slaves. It damaged the slaveholders and the fledgling nation that permitted it. What a growthful moment that might have been and, in my opinion, still could be.

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Talking About Poverty

A key focus of my work at the All Stars has been in teaching the kids and adults in our poor communities that they are poor and creating the conditions for them and our mostly well-to-do and white donors to talk together about their poverty and their privilege. This makes it possible for both groups to give what they have to give – their poverty and their privilege – and creates the possibility for much growth and success in our mission to grow the city, grow the community and grow the poor.

At the beginning of each semester I meet with the new classes who have come into our after-school programs. My work is to help them to have new kinds of conversations – to help them to develop their voice as they grapple with the overwhelming experience that is their life. An important part of what I do is teach them that they and their families are poor and what the historical significance of that is and help them talk about their poverty. I also share my experience of growing up poor and Black in the 1960s.

The initial response to my raising the issue of their poverty is simultaneously a gasp and immediate denial. In what is often a room of more than 100 kids, I ask for those who are poor to stand. Usually a third to a half of the students will stand. I then ask the young people who have remained seated why they don’t think that they are poor, given that we do our outreach in the poorest communities and schools in the city. The responses include things like:

“Because I am not homeless.”

“I know that sometimes our electricity is turned off, but we make out okay.”

“We live in the projects, not on the streets.”

“We live across the street from the projects.”

“We are not always on welfare.”

“Poverty is just a state of mind.”

I then ask the kids who stood up to say why they think they are poor and then create a conversation among them – a conversation about their lives that they’ve never had before. No one has ever spoken to them about their poverty, what poverty is and what its historical roots are. The young people and adults who I’ve engaged in these conversations eventually



come to experience talking about poverty as a relief and often articulate the ways in which coming to terms with who they are in the world has aided in their development. In a recent conversation with All Stars alumni I asked them to tell me the difficulties they face in their lives. They gave me a list, which did not include being poor. When I asked them why being poor wasn't on the list, they said, "Because if we're poor, people label us as failures and as stupid, people look down on us and we look down on each other." A few said, "I don't think of myself as being that far down."

I pointed out to our kids that it's very important to know who they are in the world and how and why people may be relating to them the way that they do. If they were blind and tried to live in the world as if they could see, that would obviously be problematic and create all kinds of issues. Being poor and not radically accepting that as a starting point is problematic because it creates havoc. In addition to the absence of proper food and health care, which obviously has an enormous impact on our families, there is also the psychological and emotional weight of being related to as America's failures in school and in life. They know about this. They and their classmates are designated the problem children of public education! This is the achievement gap, writ large!

This posture toward the poor is woven into the fabric of the poor communities and has enormous psychological and emotional consequences. Poor people bear these consequences as if they are personally responsible for their poverty – even if they deny that they are poor. And, yes, some people are able to use the weight of that misery as a motivation to push themselves to do better in life. Yet most people don't and can't because the circumstances that created the conditions of their poverty require the kinds of investment and opportunities and infrastructure that Dr. King was calling for. Poverty is not a personal characteristic. It is social, it is political, it is one of the ways the world is organized, and it has a history.

Radically accepting the poverty of one's own life and community while simultaneously depersonalizing it makes possible a certain kind of growth/development.

Radically accepting the poverty of one's own life and community while simultaneously depersonalizing it makes possible a certain kind of growth/development – especially if one is simultaneously involved in activities that engage the underdevelopment that accompanies poverty. As I referenced earlier, privileged kids are exposed to and involved in a range of cosmopolitan experiences that poor kids don't have. Karl Alexander (in-preparation) and his colleagues documented this in detail in their 20-year study of Baltimore school children and are continuing to unpack this "long shadow" of poverty. *The New York Times* has highlighted studies that show that kids from more well-to-do families have 1,300 more hours of outside-of-home experiences by the age of six than do poor kids from the inner cities (Tavernise, 2012). Obviously, middle-class parents have more resources and access to the world than do poor parents, as well as a better sense of how schools and the world work. It is because of the differences in these experiences and the underdevelopment that these differences create in poor kids of color that all of our programs and activities at the All Stars Project have been designed to expose young people to the world in new ways. We help them navigate all that gets raised for them in doing what we identify as stepping outside of their comfort zone – whether it involves recruiting, producing and participating in talent shows



for their parents and peers in front of audiences of 500 people, or visiting corporate offices in midtown Manhattan, Chicago or San Francisco, or going golfing, or visiting museums or the libraries. The world becomes their stage, and they learn new performances and new ways of performing.

The transformation of these young people is almost magical. They are able to open up and share with others more about their actual lives, to shed the weight of their shame, to see themselves as the kinds of people who can do all kinds of things if given a chance, and they begin to grow and develop their voice. And while these activities do not and cannot end their poverty – that’s a political/economic issue – they do reignite their development and enable them to work with others to actively and creatively engage the social, political and economic issues surrounding poverty that keep poor people out of the mainstream.

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“Intelligence and Sympathy”

Poverty, racism and inequality have been the longstanding concerns of Black leadership in America. No one can question that. But for me, the question of development has been too absent from the discussion and the activity. Perhaps, like the young people in the All Stars programs, we too are afraid and ashamed of our own poverty and underdevelopment. Two of the most important things that I learned from Fred Newman were, one, that I was poor, and two, I had to learn from white people. I realize how controversial a statement this is. And no, it does not mean that we as Black people have nothing to teach whites. It does mean, however, that this is still, in many ways, a white world, and in order to impact it so that all people can grow, we must have a sufficient understanding of how it works. As leaders of the Black diaspora, we cannot allow our fears and our humiliation or our arrogance to hold us and our people back. The problem of the twenty-first century is the problem of the development line. It affects and afflicts all Americans, not just African Americans, at every level of society and at every level of development.

Let me leave you then, for now, with these words from W.E.B. Du Bois from the chapter, “Of the Sons of Master and Man,” in *The Souls of Black Folk*:

It is not enough for the Negroes to declare that color-prejudice is the sole cause of their social condition, nor for the white South to reply that their social condition is the main cause of prejudice. They both act as reciprocal cause and effect, and a change in neither alone will bring the desired effect. Both must change or neither can improve to any great extent. The Negro cannot stand the present reactionary tendencies and unreasoning drawing of the color-line indefinitely without discouragement and retrogression. And the condition of the Negro is ever the excuse for further discrimination. Only by a union of intelligence and sympathy across the color-line in this critical period of the Republic shall justice and right triumph.

“That mind and soul according well,
May make one music as before,
But vaster.” (2007, p. 123-124)



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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 the All Stars NYPD partnership program, 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*.

