Play and Performance: Creating Life Spaces in which Learning and Development Flourish

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Abstract

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This thesis challenges dominant descriptions of the neurodiverse community by questioning the assumptions perpetuated by the medical model and other normative theories of human learning/development. Building off the revolutionary work of Lev Vygotsky (1987) and his insights on the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), this thesis explores how play and performance are being used to transform the ways in which neurodiverse communities relate to themselves and to others by engaging both who they are and who they are becoming. The research indicates that a shift in focus from *individualized behavior* to *co-created activity* promotes the creation of the ZPD, an activity which in and of itself *is* learning/development. Using a Holzmanian lens, this thesis explores several programs that are utilizing play and performance to subvert dominant ideas of what it means to learn and develop and concludes with offers/suggestions to keep building life-spaces in where learning/development flourish organically.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments

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Chapter 1

No Room for Revolution

The Stagnation of Western Education, Therapy, and Culture

In my work as a Registered Behavioral Technician (RBT), I am trained to assist children on the autistic spectrum in the acquisition of new skills as well as the diminishment of problem behaviors –that is to say, behaviors that do not fit neatly inside Westernized hegemonic views of normalcy—by applying behavioral therapy both in the home and in the classroom. By way of positive reinforcement (e.g., tangible rewards like iPad time, a bag of chips, or tickles), behavior therapists attempt to (re)shape behaviors by offering external rewards when a client successfully complies with demands. I adore working with the neurodiverse community; however, I find myself to be at odds with behavior therapy for its underlying premise is deficit based, (e.g., autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a problem that needs fixing) and carries with it undertones of disapproval and unacceptance. The diagnostic label itself is loaded and to my way of thinking extremely stigmatizing as the term *disorder* indicates that something is wrong and must be repaired. Viewing ASD as a medical problem in need of fixing creates a metaphor that disempowers people on the spectrum and empowers those who are not. It also places all the responsibility for healing on some of the most vulnerable rather than the whole of society. Sontag (1990) vehemently argued against illness discourses that relied upon metaphors of empowerment to suggest that people can fight illness through their will. Therefore, before we go much further, a few words about terminology.

Throughout this thesis, I have decided to utilize the terms neurodiversity and neurodiverse when discussing the community I work with. Others like Lisa Kramer and Judy Friedman Fask (2017), Peter Smagorinsky (2016), and Steve Silberman (2015) have chosen

terms like "disABILITY" which uses visual language to emphasize the often overlooked *abilities* of the neurodiverse community, as well as words like "neurodivergent" or "neuroanomalous" removing the Latin prefix *dis*[1] all together. The idea is to remove the stigmatizing language that perpetuates the idea that people on the autistic spectrum are *less than*. The term neurodiversity was coined by Judy Singer (1998), an autistic Australian sociologist, as part of a broader effort among people on the spectrum to assert their humanity in the face of the often debilitating assumptions that surround them (Singer in Silberman, 2015). The terms are intended to highlight that fact that different neurological wiring does not mean less capable.

Perhaps the most difficult part of my job has been watching the way the neurodiverse community is dealt with within the public education system. In 1998 Harvey Blum wrote a piece in the *Atlantic* suggesting that "neurodiversity may be every bit as crucial for the human race as biodiversity is for life in general." He went on to wonder who could possibly determine what type of wiring will best suit tomorrow's needs. "Cybernetics and computer culture, for example, may favor a somewhat autistic cast of mind" (Blum in Smagorinsky, 2016, p. 32). However, in Westernized public education, students are forced to learn a little bit about ALL subjects, but deeply about none. As Sir Ken Robinson (2010) suggests in his brilliant TedTalk *Bring on the Learning Revolution*, there are two things wrong with this practice. The first is that human talent is extremely diverse and that people have very different aptitudes. The second revolves around passion. Learning should be about what excites our spirits and our energy. Yet in public education, one is required to adhere to the practice of giving all subjects equal attention (the arts being the exception as they continue to be devalued). There is no time to immerse oneself in one's passions within Westernized public education.

[1] Dis is a Latin prefix meaning "apart," "asunder," "away," "utterly," or having a privative, negative, or reversing force

The lack of flexibility in mainstream education can be excruciating for people on the spectrum as they often tend to hyper focus on one subject for days, weeks, months, or years at time. I worked with a client who is obsessed with dinosaurs. He can tell you all their names, what they ate, where they lived, as well as who would likely win in a standoff between a T-Rex and a pack of velociraptors. He can do the same for sharks and whales, another topic he is passionate about. Another client I worked with is a whiz at math. Math is his language. He was doing long division and whizzing through multiplication flashcards in the third grade yet being reprimanded on progress reports for not drawing out Math Mountains (a visual teaching tool used in common core math equations) when he was doing addition and subtraction in class. Another client of mine is an amazing singer and dancer yet was constantly being scolded for not sitting still. Consequently, it is quite often the case that the obsessions cultivated by neurodiverse individuals are discouraged by parents, teachers, and therapists in an attempt to diversify young people's interests (no doubt to conform to how schooling is done). However, for obsessive compulsives (a trait often displayed by people on the spectrum) deep immersion in an activity not only complements their personality, but also gives way to deep understanding and higher levels of confidence (Smagorinsky, 2016). As a result of these schooling practices, my clients spend much of their time alone, unengaged, unchallenged, bored, and more often than not, otherized by their peers. Consequently, these scenarios can, at times, lead to behaviors that are often attributed to the student and their diagnosis, yet it is my assertion that such behaviors are a result of an educational system not built with the vastness of our neurodiversity in mind.

Instead, we ought to be making room for students who are wired differently and meet them where they are at, encouraging their passions and applauding them for their capacity to think outside the box, a process that enables us to revolutionize the world, to push at the

boundaries of our collective understanding in order to create something new. The current educational system ultimately focuses on compliance in order to churn out conformists by teaching assimilation into what *is* rather than making room for the exploration of what *can be*.

Robinson (2011) suggests that creativity is the greatest gift of human intelligence, and that the more complex our world becomes, the more creative we need to be. Yet, schooling makes no room for creativity. Robinson (2010) likens the educational system to that of the fast food industry where everything is standardized as opposed to a catered event where everything customized to the local circumstances. He claims we have "sold ourselves on a fast food model of education and it is impoverishing our souls and our spirits as much as fast food is depleting our physical bodies" (12:00). Furthermore, Robinson believes that we are enthralled by the idea of linearity in learning, that is to say, one starts their educational career in kindergarten, continues on, and if everything is done correctly, one is set for the rest of one's life. Yet, "Life is not linear, it's organic. We create our lives symbiotically as we explore our talents in the relation to the circumstances they help to create for us" (7:54). As I see it, the current educational system makes absolutely no room for exploring one's talents or one's passions. Development, growth, and learning for learning's sake have been stopped in their tracks.

In his powerful book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire (1970) describes what he calls the banking model of education in which students are seen as nothing more than receptacles for teachers to deposit knowledge into. In this model, teachers, situated at the head of the classroom, narrate content which they expect the students to memorize and file away for future use. Thus, the scope of action for students, perceived to be novices, is reduced to the receiving, filing, and storing of deposits. The action of the teacher, perceived to be the expert, is reduced to

instruction, assessment, and churning out grades in order to demonstrate competency (their own as much as their students).

This arrangement is strikingly similar to my work in behavioral therapy. I am the expert; my client is the novice. I give the instruction; my client complies. The more compliance I get (demonstrated through data collection), the better therapist I am thought to be. The more compliance given, the more competent my client appears to be. The practice of behavioral therapy (also known as applied behavioral analysis or ABA) has caused a lot of resentment within the neurodiverse community. Throughout my research, I have encountered many stories from adults on the spectrum decrying ABA as it has little to do with development and a lot more to do with compliance. Williams, an autistic scholar, writer and artist asserts that

> Compliance is not learning, because you do not connect with your own thoughts, feelings, or intentions. Compliance is mindless. Compliance may appear to achieve things in the short term, but the arrest in the development of connections to thought, feelings and intention many not only create extreme (generally compliantly repressed) chronic stress, but may ultimately result in physical, emotional, or mental breakdown if the effects of pervasive compliance are not properly addressed (Williams in Smagorinsky, 2016, p. 271).

The banking practice (whether practiced in education or in therapy) regards students/clients as manageable beings. According to Freire (1970), "The more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of the world. The more completely they accept the passive role imposed on them, the more they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited in them" (p. 82). As Freire puts it, a "teacher [or a therapist] cannot think for her students, nor can she impose her thought on

them. Authentic thinking, thinking that is concerned about *reality*, does not take place in ivory tower isolation, but only in communication" (p. 85, emphasis in original).

I believe it is the absence of collective *activity* and our focus on a final product or outcome (rather than the process or journey) that has put education and therapy on their rather *anti*-developmental track. As I see it, when we work within linear ideas of learning, standardization, and the dichotomy of expert and novice, we fail to create life-spaces in which everyone can take part in the revolutionary process of collective meaning making and development. Growth happens when everyone meets on an even playing field, that is to say, a space in which everyone is open to the idea of learning what they can, and teaching what they know, a space where passions are encouraged and talents are recognized, valued, and fostered.

In order to promote the type of learning and development that lends itself to the transformation of what *is* into what *can be,* teachers, students, and therapists alike must be liberated from the current conceptions about what it means to teach, to learn, and to know. For Freire, that liberation is found in praxis, that is to say, in the collective activity and reflection that human beings take part both *in* and *with* the world. This requires the banking model to be replaced the activity of dialogue in which the teacher/student, therapist/client dichotomy ceases to exist and is replaced by a jointly created process in which all will grow. In this scenario, "the students—no longer docile listeners—are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher. The teacher presents the material to the students for their consideration and re-considers her earlier considerations as the students express their own" (Freire, 1970, p. 89). Despite his incredible insights, little has changed since Freire's words were published five decades ago. Teachers and therapists continue to adhere to ossified modes of teaching, student's

performance/interest in school has continued to decline and everyone, including you, dear reader, suffers for it.

Robinson (2010), asserts that the reason that so many people are opting out of education is because it "doesn't feed their spirit. It doesn't feed their energy or their passion" (14:29). He goes on to say that we must step away from what is essentially an industrialized/manufacturing model of education which is based on ideas of linearity, conformity, and batching people, to one that is based more on the principals of agriculture. Robinson states that

> We have to recognize that human flourishing is not a mechanical process; it's an organic process and you cannot predict the outcome of human development. All you can do, like a farmer, is create the conditions under which it will begin to flourish (15:00).

I adore this idea. It seems to reflect the way a great many parents raise their children. Children are naturally curious, driven by their excitement about the world and the people in it. Before children begin school, many parents spend a large majority of their time creating opportunities for their children to explore, to express themselves, to create new activities and ideas. In doing so, children flourish. Yet as soon as children enter school, that fiery curiosity is put out, creativity and expression wither, and development stops.

This developmental stagnation is due to our misguided conceptions of evolutionary development, that is to say, the belief that *development leads learning* with development moving forward in a linear fashion, while learning follows along, stride by stride, through the various stages of one's life cycle (e.g., infancy, childhood, adolescence). Put more simply, the common belief is that an eight-year-old for example, can only learn certain things in certain ways and thus must be taught as such. Many people lean on this line of thinking when teaching children on the

spectrum. The diagnosis carries with it certain assumptions, like children on the spectrum lack imagination, are poor communicators, or cannot maintain relationships. While these assumptions are outlandish as anyone working with children on the spectrum could tell you, they still resonate throughout Western society. The consensus among many educators and psychologists that development-leads-learning automatically puts neurodivergent students on a separate educational track. And while the sorting or batching of students based on age (or in this case cognitive level) may seem to make sense pragmatically, all it really does is perpetuate dualistic notions such as "us" vs "them" while simultaneously robbing every one of the richness to be acquired by heterogeneous groups and collective learning environments.

The linear/evolutionary view of how children develop (e.g., stages) was made famous by developmental psychologist Jean Piaget (2000, 2002) whose conceptions of development have become deeply intertwined with education curricula and assessment practices. His research and declarations played a major role in the decision to divide and teach students by age. In addition, the medical-model/problem-solution paradigm prominent within Westernized cultures which situates points of cognitive difference as diseases, deficiencies, and problems in need of "fixing," has perpetuated the misguided idea that neurodiverse children should be contained in an environment/community of their own. In this situation, with no one but themselves to emulate/learn from, the environment/journey/process becomes idle, inactive, and static. In this sort of situation, void of the stimulation needed to excite and feed the spirit, students (and/or clients) do not take risks, and they do not grow.

Because human development studies are bound to an evolutionary framework, education has become a major testing ground for the types of epistemological questions philosophers have been asking for centuries. The linear/evolutionary foundation of child study coupled with

psychology's investigative practices of sorting, measuring, and quantifying by means of statistical analysis has produced many knowledge claims about how humans develop, learn, and grow. This foundation also seemed to provide an identifiable baseline which allowed any deviations from the norm to be identified. Thus, the ideas surrounding "natural" and "normal" became inextricably linked with evolution rather than say, revolution. Natural and normal came to be defined as linear and continuous. But, if evolution is tied to ideas of what is normal and natural, might that suggest that revolution becomes unnatural? It certainly feels that way.

By allowing people to violate social norms in ways that might elevate their development rather forcing them to adapt to perceived, normalized ways of thinking and doing, we highlight the ways in which *x* connects with *y* in a multitude of ways. My perspective is that neurological differences should be respected and that a focus on strengths rather than weaknesses may well support a better life for the whole of our citizenry. Steve Silberman's incredibly insightful book *NeuroTribes* describes several individuals, both past and present, who have revolutionized science, physics, mathematics, music, art, and more recently, the technological realm. He reminds us that even before autism was recognized as a diagnosis, people on the spectrum have changed our understandings of the world and how it works. The overarching message Silberman presents is that individuals who deviate from our conceptions of cognitive normality, when able to pursue their passions at their own pace and encouraged and supported by the people in their lives, add a richness to our current knowledge by way of their inherent nature to hyper-focus, to retain great quantities of information, as well as their ability to utilize their unique wiring to think outside the box and create something new and revolutionary.

Power Dynamics and Neurodiversity in the Classroom and Beyond

Freire states that "Education as the exercise of domination stimulates the credulity of students, with the ideological intent (often not perceived by the educators) of indoctrinating them to adapt to the world of oppression" (1970, p. 87). He goes on to state that in order to overcome oppression, people must first come to critically understand its causes, so that through transforming activity they can create a new situation, one that opens the door to a pursuit of a fuller and more inclusive humanity. The oppressed, in this case the neurodivergent community, must come to realize that the reality of oppression is not a closed space in which there is no escape, but rather it is a limiting situation which they can transform. However, due to the nature of their oppression, neurodivergent people come to believe that they can be little more than their diagnosis and thus perform their lives as such. As I mentioned above, the terms disability and/or disorder, in and of themselves reassert this notion not only to the individual, but also to society at large.

The history of "disability," deeply rooted in the concepts of eugenics, created a huge push to classify, control, and regulate the body. Foucault (1977, 1988, 2003, 2011) has written extensively about the ways the mentally ill are deemed as burdens to the state and become the subjects of governmentality; a cycle of collecting data, tracking inefficiencies, and educating citizens to optimize the self in service of attaining a healthy, productive citizenry. Vidali (2010) examines the role of disability in Lakoff and Johnson's popular ideas of cognitive metaphor and metaphor acquisition concluding that these theories perpetuate ideas of normalcy, that is to say, they reify the assumption that there are specific ways that "normal" human beings ought to physically and cognitively operate. Anything that deviates from these assumptions are deemed as inferior, strange, or burdensome to society.

Historically, most neurodivergent people lived apart from the rest of society, which meant there was very little interaction between people of "atypical" and "typical" makeups. In fact, until fairly recently, most neurodiverse people were destined to live out their lives in institutions, most of which were terrible places with crumbling infrastructure and staffed by professionals who exhibited little concern for the wellbeing of their patients. Consequently, such conditions lead to regression, depression, or complete withdrawal for those who were committed to such places, further perpetuating the notion that institutions were the best places for them to be. As the ideologies behind eugenics began to take hold in America and in Europe, many bold and despicable assertions about the neurodiverse community began to circulate within the medical and scientific fields, which in turn greatly influenced the general public.

In October of 1921, the National Research Council, along with the National Academy of Sciences, held a gala event at the American Museum of Natural History in Manhattan. The star-studded conference, backed by the moral authority of the country's most prestigious museum, was titled *The Second International Congress of Eugenics* and touted the progressive sounding slogan, "Eugenics is the self direction of human evolution" (in Silberman, 2015, p. 146). The overarching message at this conference was that it was the duty of scientists to "enlighten government in the prevention of the spread and multiplication of worthless members of society, the spread of feeblemindedness, of idiocy, and of all moral and intellectual as well as physical diseases" (p. 149).

The word eugenics, which translates to "the good birth," was used to bolster scientific and governmental support in the efforts to elevate conceptions of the "spiritual, intellectual, moral, and physical value of the Nordic race" (Silberman, 2015, p. 148). Assertions such as "food and medical care are not everyone's birthright but are properly earned by doing productive

labor" and references to disabled people as "useless eaters," "empty human husks," and "human ballast" (Silberman, 2015, p. 154) who consume precious resources without paying their debt to society, were cast into the world with fervor, rippling out to the general public who never took the time to question who was making such claims and why. Some professionals, like psychiatrist Alfred Hoche and penal law expert Karl Binning, went so far as to suggest that ending disabled people's lives was not only a socially beneficial act, but also the most compassionate decision (Silberman, 2015).

The hurtful rhetoric conjured up and cast into the world by people like Hoche and Binning found a very enthusiastic reception in a young and aspiring politician named Adolf Hitler who would later allow the co-authors to use his name in the advertisements for their book. Hitler and his regime would eventually be responsible for some 200,000 innocent children and infants with neurological and physical deviations (such as blindness, muteness, and schizophrenia) being murdered, used for experiments, dissected for research and anatomy drawings, and a host of other horrendous acts in the name of scientific progress. The list of indignities is as long as it is horrific. Of particular interest to me is that growing up, discussions of Hitler's terrible injustices seemed to focus mainly on the racism and homophobia that ensued during this time (which were equally horrific), but rarely did conversations center on the atrocities committed against the neurodiverse and physically different, despite the fact that this community makes up the largest minority population in the world. The United Nations (2018) estimates that over 1 billion people live with some form of disability and they are disproportionately represented among the world's poorest nations and are at greater risk of suffering from violence, disaster, poverty, and many other hardships.

On a macro level, eugenics boils down to discourses about authoritative power. Authoritative power, as defined by Charlton (2000), "is diffuse, ambiguous, and complicated" (p. 30). He asserts that there are many ways for the significantly empowered to exercise and maintain their positioning and that "all regimes have ruled through a combination of force and coercion, legitimation and consent" (p. 30). In the Western world, this power is most often accomplished through the general public's consent to the existing power structure. Charlton suggests that "the dominant classes and culture constantly and everywhere impress on people the naturalness and normality of their power and privilege" through a process called *hegemony* which projects itself multidimensionally and mutidirectionally. It is diffuse and appears everywhere as natural. "It (re)enforces domination not only through the (armed) state, but also throughout society: in families, churches, schools, the workplace, legal situations, bureaucracy, and culture" (Charlton, 2000, p. 31).

Consequently, hegemony results in the needs of the privileged being more likely to be met than those of the marginalized, leading to neglect. Tronto (1993) offers the concept of *epistemological ignorance* which suggests that those with privilege feel no need to conceptualize the needs of the marginalized and therefore feel no obligations to provide them with the appropriate attention, support, guidance, and care. As a result, the oppressed are vulnerable to the phenomenon of dualism "in which the life circumstances of social outsiders are constructed and represented as inferior to those of people from the dominant culture" (Tronto in Smagorinsky, 2016, p. 74). Dualism, as discussed here, has three major components that work to reify established social standing

> Through *inferiorization*, marginalized social groups are viewed as being in deficit to the norms, and thus to the inherent worth, of the dominant group. Inferiorization in turn produces *interiorization*, the manner in which oppressed people internalize the negative constructions to which they are

> continually exposed. The ultimate consequence is *othering*, the separation of society into dominant groups ('us') and subordinate groups ('them'), with the latter presumed to be essentially deficient and irreparable and thus a nuisance to society's good, unless they can bring themselves through individual acts of determination up to the standards of the dominant culture (Smagorinsky, 2016, p. 74).

Schooling, which cuts across many intersections such as race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and intellectual/physical difference, is a notable example of this process. It raises questions as to who gets to teach/learn, what should be taught, who gets to decide, and why? For Charlton, schooling serves two political functions: first is the narrow purpose of teaching assimilation into the existing power structure within the educational realm, and second, the broad purpose of teaching acquiescence into the hegemonic status quo and the expectations and disciplines of its workforce. Consequently, Charlton (2000) asserts that "Students with disabilities, as soon as their disability is recognized by school officials, are placed on a separate track" (p. 32). Once a child is diagnosed, labeled, and categorized by professionals, they are instantly transformed into someone of inferiority and are constantly told what they can potentially/expect to do and what they cannot/will not be able to do based on their diagnosis.

In my own experience working with children on the spectrum and in special education classrooms, I have listened to many tearful accounts from parents about educators and therapists alike telling both students and parents that "their child is never going to get it," that the best they can expect for their child on the spectrum is simply to "get through" school, and that they (parents) "should not rock the boat" by constantly fighting for better services and/or better placements which can annoy and hinder relationships with educators. Charlton (2000) asserts that

> Special Education, like so many other reforms won by the popular struggle, has been transformed from a way to increase the probability that

> students with disabilities will get some kind of an education into a badge of inferiority and a rule-bound bureaucratic process of separating and then warehousing millions of young people that dominant culture has no need for. While this process is uneven, with a minority benefitting from true inclusionary practices, the overarching influences of race and class preclude any significant and meaningful equalization of educational opportunities (p. 33).

Beyond the classroom, in both developed and developing countries, it is the tendency of most cultures to situate neurodiverse individuals as "disturbed, disordered … troubled … and in need of repair" (Smagorinsky, 2016, p. 26). In most Westernized societies there are two common assumptions about neurodiverse communities. First "there is one 'right,' 'normal' or 'healthy' way for human brains and human minds to be configured and to function (or one relatively narrow 'normal' range into which the configuration and functioning of human brains ought to fall)" and second, "If your neurological configuration and functioning (and as a result, your ways of thinking and behaving) diverge substantially from the dominant standard of 'normal,' then there is something wrong with you" (Smagorinsky, 2016, p. 26).

Consequently, this leads to people into believing that neurological variation is a disorder suffered by the individual and something to be treated by medical professionals. The medical model, prominent in Western society is cure-oriented and focuses on the sick individual. Thus, all efforts hinge on ways to *fix* and integrate said individuals into normalized ways of thinking and doing. Currently, interventions within neurodiverse communities are designed to assess and alter the neurological functioning on an individual basis. Yet this places all responsibility for adaptation on the individual, those most vulnerable and with the fewest resources. What is lacking are any attempts to address the *social settings* "in which the individual is considered to be abnormal, or sick, or disordered, or any number of other pejorative deficit conceptions" (Smagorinsky, 2016, p. 27).

Similar to Smagorinsky's assertions about inferiorization, interiorization, and othering, Marxist psychologist Lev Vygotsky suggested that because neurodiverse people are seen as deficient, they are at risk for experiencing what he called the "secondary disability" asserting that "people do not know that they are different until they are treated as such, [which is] often accompanied by the judgmental extremes of scorn and pity" (in Smagorinsky, 2016 p. 37). For Vygotsky, it is not the anomalous individual's points of difference that are the source of their troubles, it is the people around them who treat them as if they are of lesser social value which produces this secondary disability. This secondary disability results in feelings of inferiority and deficiency which turns out to be far more damaging than the initial source of difference itself. He argued that children with special needs should not be written off, remediated, or placed in schools/groups with only children like themselves because qualitative transformation (as opposed to rote learning) is a *collective* accomplishment, something that can only be achieved by working together within heterogeneous groups of people with differing levels of experience and abilities.

Focusing on human development within social, cultural, and historical settings shifts the attention from *deficit* or *cure* to one of "participation in meaningful cultural activities through which differences cease to be prohibitive in enabling engagement" (Smagorinsky, 2016, p. 27). This approach encompasses what Vygotsky calls a "roundabout" means of mediating social engagement. For example, Vygotsky felt that the goal is not to provide sight to the blind, but to provide those lacking sight with alternative ways of navigating and processing their surroundings, so as to participate more fully in socio-cultural activities. The goal then is to alter how people view and engage with the blind. While Vygotsky's work focused on physical disabilities, the general principle of seeking alternative means for participation within general

cultural activity remains central to considerations about the ways in which neurotypical social groups may treat neurodiverse individuals more inclusively both in the classroom and beyond.

As one of my favorite passages from Freire states, "Knowledge emerges only through invention and reinvention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other" (1970, p. 80). Our students, teachers, clients (and everyone else) deserve safe spaces in which to discover, interact, and try out new ways of learning, knowing, and developing if we are to transform/revolutionize our circumstances. Smagorinsky uses the term "positive social updraft" to "chart out the social channels through which neurodivergent people might be swept up into broader cultural streams such that they feel valued, appreciated, and empowered, and such that they direct their energies toward constructing social futures of promise and potential" (Smagorinsky, 2016, p. 38). Giving attention to the social environment of development shifts the focus from *behavior* and *deficits* to that of *activity* and *transformation*. It alters the language of disorder "to a conception of difference as a different order. It reconceives deficits as potential strengths through a process in which social judgements that produce secondary disabilities give way to enabling environments that allow new strengths and assets to emerge through social activity" (Smagorinsky, 2016, p. 40). It creates an environment where we can be more like Robinson's farmers, (re)planting the seeds of curiosity, sprinkling them with acceptance and inclusion, providing them with support and guidance in order for them to flourish, and then collectively cultivating the nourishment it provides for our souls.

In the chapters that follow, I will explore how play and performance are being utilized in a variety of contexts to propel the neurodiverse community forward and how we might emulate/continue to build with these offers. In chapter two, I discuss Lev Vygotsky and his

search for method. It also explores how *practicing* method rather than *applying* it enables us to create environments in which learning and development form a dialectical relationship and how enjoying *the process/journey* rather than focusing on/anticipating a *final product* facilitates the dialectical flow of learning/development. Chapter three delves into Vygotsky's "Zones of Proximal Development" (ZPD) and the way Holzman and her colleagues Newman and Friedman have pushed the concept beyond the more traditional understandings/interpretations into something quite new and revolutionary. Chapter 4 highlights several schools and various outside-of-school programs that have turned away from traditional ideas of teaching/learning/knowing by utilizing play and performance as an empowering/transformative pedagogical tool. Chapter 5 is a call to action—a wonder about where we might go from here. My goal is to explore the ways in which play and performance as pedagogy can revolutionize our understanding of what it means to be normal, to be educated, to be talented, and to be a critical part of society. I thank you, dear reader, for joining me on my journey.

Chapter 2

Questioning Methodology

The Marxist Psychologist and his Search for Method

During his short life, Lev Vygotsky continuously questioned the dualisms (e.g., biology and culture, behavior and consciousness, thinking and speaking, learning and development, individual and social) that he encountered in his search for a new method. According to Lois Holzman (2017), Vygotsky "refused to accept the foundational dualism of this kind of psychological conceptualization and argued forcefully against it, urging instead a method of dialectics" (p. 3). But what does it mean to be a Marxist psychologist? In their early writings, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels discussed the fundamentals of what they called *dialectical historical materialism*, a methodology he was developing that challenged not only the philosophical orthodoxy of his time, but also all of philosophy in general. They insisted that the starting point of science and history is *life-as-lived*, rather than mere interpretations or abstractions taken from it. According to Marx and Engels (1973),

> This method of approach is not devoid of premises. It starts out from the real premise and does not abandon them for a moment. Its premises are men, not in any fantastic isolation and rigidity, but in their actual, empirically perceptible process of development under definite conditions. As soon as this active life-process is described, history ceases to be a collection of dead facts as it is with empiricists (themselves still abstract), or an imagined activity of imagined subjects, as with the idealists (p. 47-8).

Marx insisted that the subject of human study ought to be the real state of affairs that humans take part in, that is, their *activity*, rather than some intellectual abstraction from which theories are constructed. Here, Marx exposes the dualistic and ahistorical nature of philosophy's foundations where its premises are understood separately from what follows them. For Marx,

history is the "living, sensuous, continuous, invisible totality of human existence, the complex yet describable 'process of development under definite conditions'" (p. 58). While the concept of activity was not unique to Marx himself, the specification of activity as revolutionary, practical-critical-activity did start with him. And while Marx applied these insights to his political-economic analysis of capitalism, Vygotsky advanced them to the area of psychology. For Marx, and thus Vygotsky, "revolutionary activity is overthrowing/transforming the existing state of affairs, i.e., changing the totality of what there is …the actual practice of method whereby the totality of what there is (the unity of history) both determines and is qualitatively transformed by human activity" (Newman & Holzman, 1993, p. 109). Vygotsky's explorations pushed him to question the method of scientific inquiry which, while working well enough for the study of natural phenomena, did not work when it came to the study of human beings. As such, his goal was to reformulate psychology according to Marxist methodology in order to develop a new psychology that focused on the essentialness of our historical nature (Holzman, 2017).

After the Russian Civil War, Vygotsky was at the forefront of creating a new post-revolutionary society. It was a time of great upheaval and enthusiasm in which Vygotsky spent the majority of his time exploring ways the new socialist state might succeed. Consequently, much of his time was dedicated to searching for what the proper object of psychological study ought to be. Vygotsky was a brilliant thinker, speaker, and builder, who was extremely passionate about philosophy, literature, and culture (Newman & Holzman, 1993). As Vygotsky applied Marx's theories and assertions about revolutionary activity in order to study how humans develop, he became increasingly curious about human *activity*, in contrast to the more dominant types of psychological explorations at the time (e.g., psychoanalysis, developmental psychology, classical conditioning). In fact, during the 1920s, Vygotsky and developmental psychologist Jean

Piaget, although never meeting face to face, were engaged in an intellectual debate about the relationship between language and thought in early childhood development. Because Vygotsky's work was suppressed under Stalin, the Western world came to embrace Piaget's research and evolutionary theories about how children develop, learn, and know rather than Vygotsky's revolutionary ones. Consequently, Piaget's assertions played a large role in how schooling came to be structured in the Westernized world (e.g., separating children by age/cognitive ability) as well as having deep impacts on the psychological study of human beings and how they develop (e.g., life stages).

True to his Marxist roots, Vygotsky (1987) emphasized the importance of our historical nature by stating that "the task of psychology … is not the discovery of the eternal child. The task of psychology is the discovery of the historical child" (p. 91). For Vygotsky, a child's development *is* history, likewise learning to speak *is* history. Newman and Holzman (1993) assert that one of Vygotsky's critical discoveries is the fact that the child's acquisition of speech not only occurs in a social context, but is itself history, that is to say, a historical-sociocultural human activity. This position is directly at odds with Piaget's arguments for the empirical validity of children's egocentric thinking and thought governed activity, in which the developmental characteristics of the child's thought arise from his/her egocentric nature. Piaget regarded egocentric speech (speech for oneself or private speech) to serve no communicative function and asserted that this type of speech (speaking behavior) was characteristic of children until the age of 7 or 8 when social speech began to emerge. For Piaget, egocentric speech was not intended for nor directed at others, and was a sign of cognitive immaturity. He believed that egocentric speech would eventually mature and develop into effective speech once the child has learned to communicate (Newman & Holzman, 1993).

Yet in his own research on Piaget's assertions about egocentric speech, Vygotsky's findings were quite different. For Vygotsky, egocentric speech was far from being functionless, purely expressive, or merely an accompaniment to the child's activity. Rather, it served as a guide or a plan of action in order to address/work through the task at hand (Newman & Holzman, 1993). Thus, egocentric speech for Vygotsky was/is not an asocial form of speech which gradually disappears as the child becomes social, but a critical component in the "historical transition from purely social speech … to inner speech and thought. When the child's activity *is* history rather than merely the functioning of an essentially 'egocentric' unit *in* history, the psychologist discovers 'the historical child'" (Newman & Holzman, 1993, p. 111).

According to Newman and Holzman (1993), the generally accepted theories of Piaget situate young children as lacking the ability to plan efficiently, to stay on track, and view them as easily distracted. Yet Vygotsky pushed against these assertions by emphasizing that for the historical child, thought and action are fused, emerging together and all at once, a dialectical process. "The historical child, unencumbered by any egocentric oak in her or his Kantian-Piagetian acorn is busy making meaning, changing the determining totality, letting his/her revolutionary activity create more revolutionary activity" (Newman & Holzman, 1993, p. 112). It is the capacity to reorganize what we have, rather than our ability to merely utilize what we have been given, that is the key to the historical child/adult. Many traditional Vygotskians mistakenly regard mediated action to be Vygotsky's central building block in his historical-sociocultural approach to the mind. While this might make sense from a societal point of view, it does not make sense from a historical point of view. For Vygotsky, the *historical unit* of analysis is *revolutionary activity*, not mediated action. Newman and Holzman (1993) assert that

> Tools such as language, used to carry out every day revolutionary activity could not possibly be instrumentalist mediators—although that is certainly

> what they are within 'alienated' society. But to see them only, or fundamentally, as such is to bias the very practice and form of psychological analysis in favor of a society and thereby to deny a *priori* the fundamentality of history and the dialectical dynamic that is history/society, the form and substance of the life space of everyday human performance (p. 112).

Newman and Holzman insist that human activity is not mediated at all because human activity *is* history. The dialectical interplay between mediated societal action and practical-critical, historical activity is what has come to inform revolutionary Vygotskians like Newman and Holzman. They assert that relating to their patients as "revolutionary requires relating to them as world historic in everyday mundane matters, that is, as social beings engaged in the life/history-making process of always becoming (assimilating 'all the wealth of previous development'). For what is history/making history if it is not the dialectic of what is/what is becoming" (Holzman & Newman 2004, p. 4).

Tools, Toolmakers, and the *Practice* of Method

For Newman and Holzman, Vygotsky has provided a way to bring Marx's dialectical assertions of history/making history into the service of helping people relate to themselves as historical makers of meaning which is all at once transformative and empowering. Vygotsky insisted that a scientific study of human beings requires a nondualistic method which in turn requires a nondualistic conception of method. Vygotsky asserts that

> The search for method becomes one of the most important problems of the entire enterprise of understanding the uniquely human forms of psychological activity. In this case, the method is simultaneously prerequisite and product, the tool and the result of the study (Vygotsky in Holzman, 2017, p. 9).

Here, Vygotsky is advocating for a radical departure from the accepted scientific paradigm in which method is a tool that is *applied* and yields results. In its orthodox form, the relationship

between tool and the expected result is linear, instrumental, and dualistic. It is a tool-*for*-result methodology. In contrast, Vygotsky proposes a qualitatively different approach to method not a tool to be applied, but an *activity* to be practiced, a tool-*and*-result methodology. In this form, the tool used for exploration and the result that is produced are not dualistically separated but rather elements of a dialectical unity. *Tool-and-result* methodology is neither objective nor subjective but something completely outside the dualistic box (Holzman, 2017). For Vygotsky, *practicing* method creates the object of knowledge while simultaneously creating the tool by which that knowledge might be known. Tool-and-result come into existence together and all at once. Thus, *practicing* method is carrying out *tool-and-result* methodology, whereas *applying* method is carrying out *tool-for-result* methodology (Holzman, 2017).

When discussing tools, Newman and Holzman (1993) make an important distinction between the kinds of tools that are mass produced (hammers, wrenches, and screwdrivers), and tools that are designed and produced by toolmakers, that is to say, unique tools specifically designed to assist in the development of other products (including other tools). They suggest that not everything humans want or need can be produced by simply using (or applying) the pre-existing tools of modern day society, for it is quite often the case that we must develop new tools specifically designed for creating what it is we wish to produce. Thus, "the tools of the hardware-store and the tools of the [toolmaker] are qualitatively different in a tool-for-result/tool-and-result sort of way" (p. 35). The methodological distinction they are making here is that hardware store tools (tools-for-result) like screwdrivers, (and likewise predetermined conceptual tools like paradigms) become identified and reified to serve certain functions and achieve certain ends, whereas the toolmaker's tool (tool-and-result), is not "categorically distinguishable from the

result achieved by its use. Explicitly created for the purpose of helping to make a specific product, it has no reified prefabricated social identity independent of that activity" (p.36).

Important to this assertion is the idea that the toolmaker's tools and the products that they create are inseparable. "It is the productive activity which defines both—the tool and the product (the result)" (p. 36). In contrast to the tools in a hardware store, the toolmaker's tool-and-result has no concrete or reified identity or purpose. "The inner cognitive, attitudinal, creative, linguistic tools developed from the toolmaker type of social tools are incomplete, unnamed, and perhaps, unnamable" (p.36). Put more specifically, a toolmaker's tool is inseparable from its results because its defining feature is the *activity of developing* the tool rather than its mere function for its function is inseparable from the activity of its development.

The assertions made by Newman and Holzman above are not to suggest that the specialized tools of the toolmaker serve no function, but rather, an attempt to establish the distinction between tools created for an expected result, and tools created alongside the discovery of the result. One serves a means to an end, the other highlights the extraordinary process of developing something new to suit our collective needs. Vygotsky rejected the causal and functional methodological notion of tool *for* a result in favor of the dialectical conception of tool-and-result within the study of psychology, something which was quite new and revolutionary.

To my way of thinking, utilizing tool-and-result methodology (practicing method by simultaneously creating the tools needed during the process) is a crucial component to working within the neurodiverse community. Practicing method (as opposed to applying it), shifts the emphasis from product to process and is extremely empowering and liberating. This is not to say that there ought not to be goals; goals are an important part of development and growth. However, focusing on a final product that is to be reached/achieved in some predetermined "one

size fits all" curriculum hinders learning for learning's sake. It generates too much worrying about *getting it right, making the grade, demonstrating competence,* and so on. For my students on the spectrum, their teachers, and their therapists, Westernized society's enthrallment with the final product (and the individuated means of getting there) is stifling. We ought to be making room (lots of room) for the inherent socialness of the learning process, recognizing the crucial role that being with/playing with others has on our development. In addition, we need to be malleable, recognizing the diverseness of human talents and aptitudes and accepting the idea that the tools we are using we will need to be altered, (re)shaped again and again, depending on the collective needs of the group. We ought to be focusing on the *process* of learning—the revolutionary, practical-critical *activity* of it. It is that *activity* that we will explore next.

Behavior to Activity and the Theory of Becoming

As indicated above, the disciplines of psychology took a very different route than the one Vygotsky advocated for and fashioned itself to resemble the natural and physical sciences. In doing so, it adopted the dualistic conception of method as something that is applied (tool-for-result) and rejected Vygotsky's insights about the practice of method (tool-and-result) thus rejecting dialects in favor of linearity and causality. According to Holzman (2017), this rejection promoted a conception of human beings that "combines a natural science view (we are a behaving species) with a technological metaphor (we are like machines)" (p. 11). Lakoff and Johnson (1985) have done extensive research on the Westernized use of technological/mechanical metaphors for the brain and indicate that machine like metaphors perpetuate certain conceptions about how the brain operates (e.g., on-off states, productive capacity, and operating conditions) that work to separate the mind from the rest of the body and human beings from each other. Having dualistically divided human beings as individuals that

are separated from themselves, each other, and the world in which they live, psychologists took to the task of trying to figure out how it is that humans socialized. In its struggle to emulate the natural and physical sciences, psychology decided that behavior provided an excellent unit of analysis as it seemed to be easily quantifiable and seemed to explain (well enough) why it is human beings do the things that they do. The study of behavior has become a huge part of psychological study ranging from the desire to gain insight into and thus curb violent behavior, attempting to locate and enhance learning behavior in order to produce better academic results, to my job as an RBT working with the neurodiverse community. Behavioral studies are everywhere.

Yet as Holzman (2017) points out, behavior as a psychological unit of study leaves much to be desired. “It ignores the socio-cultural-historicalness of individuals and groups of people. It obscures the continuously emergent and dialectical activity of human life, and denies that human beings are simultaneously agents and products (tools-and-results) of qualitative change” (p. 13). She goes on to assert that focusing on behavior (rather than activity) situates human beings as unchangeable, static beings despite the evidence to the contrary, namely that we routinely/frequently undergo various fundamental and qualitative transformations across the entirety of our lifespans (Holzman, 2017).

Furthermore, identifying behavior as the main unit of psychological study has had significant consequences across social, cultural, and political developments. Understanding humans to be little more than a behaving species is “an acceptance of alienation as a universal human condition” (Holzman, 2017, p. 14). Here, Holzman (2017) is using the term alienation as Marx did when referring to the separation of product and process. In this sense, alienation is not limited to material things alone such as cars and jewelry. Holzman asserts, that “it has become a

way of seeing and relating in contemporary Western culture" (p. 14). She goes on to indicate that behavior is a perfect unit of analysis within an alienated culture in which the process of production, not only of material items but also of human experiences of all types, are separated from their "'products' which are then reified (as 'natural') and commodified (as behavior)" (p.14). Thus, because of its enthrallment with behavior, psychology is ill equipped for discovering anything transformative about human beings, let alone creating new and revolutionary ways of being, doing, and relating. Behavior is a variable created by socio-cultural-historical conditions. Not a constant, but a contingency. Meaning is thus located in the human capacity to reorganize and alter historical totalities even as our lives are determined by them.

You might be asking at this point, so what is the alternative? Building off Vygotsky's insights on Marx, Holzman indicates that the answer is *activity*. Marx's earlier writings about the ways in which human activity was the social, dialectical, revolutionary characteristic of human life intrigued Vygotsky, who adapted and expanded upon them. He brought Marx's conception of activity together with his meta-theoretical explorations of psychology and his investigations of learning and development. According to Holzman, Marx led Vygotsky to the realization that

> Social in both content and origin, activity is a cultural-historical phenomenon that emerges and transforms along with transformations in economic and cultural production. It is how human beings transform the existing circumstances, develop as individuals and as a species, and create culture. Activity—the ordinary person's 'search for method'—is the human capacity to make tools-and-results (Holzman, 2017, p. 16).

For Holzman, Vygotsky's work was governed by his insights on the qualitative transformation of totalities and the *process of becoming*, rather than the *state of being*. This shift in focus from *behavior* to *activity* affords us the ability to redirect psychological inquiry from that of *what is,* to that of *what can be*. For me, this particular insight into Vygotsky's work is extremely important to keep in mind as I continue my

journey with the neurodiverse community. Relating to my clients as revolutionaries requires that I both engage who they *are* as well as who they are *becoming*. By encouraging things creativity, play, imitation, and completion (all of which will be explored in the following chapter), we activate a space in which students (and everyone else) are able to create new environments, try out new ideas, imitate their peers, and share in new ways of being and doing emulated by their peers that they might not otherwise have entertained. It is an empowering, healing, and revolutionary space that Vygotsky coined the *zones of proximal development* (ZPD), and it is this space (which is really more of an activity) that we shall explore in the next chapter.

Chapter 3

Zones of Proximal Development (ZPDs): Not a Place, but an Activity

Got ZPDs?

Perhaps one of Vygotsky's greatest discoveries was that of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The ZPD produces an activity in which learning and development happen together and all at once, subverting the idea that development must lead one's ability to learn. The ZPD is a focus on the collective activity of creating, and an attempt to situate creativity as a socially imitative and completive activity. In order to understand the revolutionary power of the ZPD and how it facilitates the dialectical process of learning/developing, it is helpful to examine some of the more traditional understandings/applications of Vygotsky's work, and how, according to Holzman, they quite often miss the mark. Holzman asserts that "Even though Vygotsky's ZPD is essential to his understanding *of the relationship between development, learning and play*, it has become, in our time, more narrowly associated with learning and the school-like acquisition of knowledge and skills" (Holzman, 2010, p. 2, emphasis in original).

According to Holzman, the ZPD is crucial in understanding Vygotsky's rejection of the popular evolutionary components/conceptions in developmental psychology. Vygotsky asserted that "instruction would be completely unnecessary if it merely utilized what had already matured in the developmental process, if it were not itself a source of development" (Vygotsky in Holzman, 2010, p. 2). He rejected the view that learning depends on and thus follows development by illustrating a new relationship between the two activities stating that "the only instruction which is useful in childhood is that which moves ahead of development, that which leads it … pushing it further and eliciting new formations" (Vygotsky in Holzman, 2010, p. 2). For Vygotsky, learning leads development. For Holzman, the answer to how this new kind of

relationship works depends entirely on how we understand and apply the ZPD. As stated above, in order to explore what she means, it is important to first examine some of the more traditional understandings and applications of the ZPD.

Common Misunderstandings of the ZPD

For many educators, the ZPD is a skill set or body of knowledge a student cannot do/understand yet on their own without guidance from a more experienced/knowledgeable person. Put another way, it is the skill level just above where the student currently is (Sarikas, 2018). The ZPD is often depicted as overlapping circles (like a target), with the center being the set of skills/knowledge the student can acquire on their own without any outside assistance. The next circle is the ZPD, the skills/knowledge the student would not be able to learn without the help of someone else. Beyond that are the skills/knowledge that the student cannot not do/understand yet, even with assistance (Sarikas, 2018). According to Holzman, this common view of the ZPD and how to apply it stems from several misunderstood passages from Vygotsky's work.

***Individual*.** One common misunderstanding of the ZPD is that it is a characteristic of, or the property of, an individual child. Holzman asserts that this misunderstanding stems from Vygotsky's assertion that

> The psychologist must not limit his analysis to the functions that have matured. He must consider those that are in the process of maturing. If he is to fully evaluate the state of the child's development, the psychologist must consider not only the actual level of development but the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky in Holzman, 2010, p. 3).

This particular passage has been translated into the ZPD being or producing a measure of the child's potential, that is to say, a tool-for-result measurement in order to evaluate what a child will potentially be able to do independently if given the right sort of direction and attention.

Dyadic. The ZPD plays a crucial role in Vygotsky's argument that learning and development are social activities and form a dialectical unity. It is the activity and the collaboration within a child's daily life that ought to be the focus of human study

> What we call the Zone of Proximal Development … is the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving, and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (Vygotsky in Holzman, 2010, p. 4).

Holzman asserts that the phrase "more capable" has led to the ZPD being understood as a form of assistance and directional guidance. So popular is this conception of the ZPD that "the typical college text book equates the ZPD with scaffolding and (incorrectly) attributes both terms to Vygotsky." Not only that, despite Vygotsky's mention of peers in this particular passage, many of the traditional understandings of the ZPD interpret "the aid" to mean a "single, more capable individual, most often an adult (termed 'expert' in contrast to the 'novice' child)" (Holzman, 2010, p. 4). Thus, in keeping with this dyadic interpretation of the ZPD, it is common for "social level" and "interpsychological" to be reduced to a two-person unit when attempting to apply the concepts in the following passage

> 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 higher mental functions originate as actual relations between people (Vygotsky in Holzman, 2010, p. 4).

ZPDs Seen through a Holzmanian Lens

According to Holzman, Vygotsky emphasized quite clearly that the socialness of learning and development is collective, that is to say, the ZPD is not exclusively or even primarily a dyadic relationship. Rather, the key to the ZPD is that *people are doing something together*

(Holzman, 2010) as when Vygotsky states that "learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in [their] environment and in cooperation with [their] peers" (Vygotsky in Holzman, 2010, p. 5). The imperative of collective activity that Vygotsky advocates for was at the forefront of his approach to special education. Vygotsky argued that children with intellectual or physical "anomalies" can indeed develop and should not be written off or remediated, nor should they be segregated and placed in schools with only children like themselves, for qualitative transformation (as opposed to rote learning) is a collective accomplishment—a collective form of working together. (Holzman, 2010).

Vygotsky's assertion that learning and development are a dialectical unity ignited by way of *collective accomplishment* illustrates the fact that the ZPD is actively and socially created rather than the more popular conceptions which view the ZPD as something existing in psychological-cultural-social space and time. For Holzman (2010), "the ZPD is more usefully understood as a process rather than as a spatio-temporal entity, and as an activity rather than a zone, space, or distance" (p. 5). Holzman interprets (in a very tool-and result kind of way) ZPD activity as the simultaneous creating of the zone (environment) and what is created within it (learning/development). Consequently, if we are to use a Holzmanian lens to create the revolutionary life-space/activity that is the ZPD, there are several components that we must consider in order to promote the type of life spaces in which learning/development are allowed to flourish organically in ways that nourish the spirit and the soul (much like Robinson's agricultural model discussed in chapter 1).

Heterogeneity and the Importance of Mixed Age Groups

To my way of thinking, heterogeneous groups that vary such as in age, gender, neurological wiring, sexuality, race, and physical make up/abilities, are crucial to creating the ZPD. As Holzman (1997) indicates, she takes learning to be social, relational activity. "As such, learning does not sometimes require 'the other'—it entails 'the other.' The critical elements that create a ZPD, as Vygotsky told us, are made manifest the more heterogeneous the environmental elements of which the ZPD is built (p. 101). As discussed in chapter 1, public education separates children into batches, grouping them by age and/or (perceived) cognitive level and then "teaches" them accordingly. Daniel Greenburg, one of the founders of the Sudbury School (discussed more in the following chapter) once asserted that on one hand, learning from adults can be difficult for young children because as models, adults can seem "too far away," that is to say, too far removed from the child's experience. On the other hand, grouping children by age or developmental level puts all the children in the same boat with only each other to emulate.

Think for a moment about how babies learn to speak. If caregivers only engaged their babies in one-word phrases, how would they ever learn to speak? If children in team sports did not attempt to imitate the more established players in their environments, how would they ever hone their skill? The beauty of heterogeneous groups and age mixing is that the two extremes (the expert and the novice or the stagnation of homogeneity) are bridged by children that fall somewhere in the middle. Heterogeneous groups create a rich pallet of interests, talents, and experiences for the group to draw upon and create with. The possibilities for imitation, completion, creativity, and play are endless. To my way of thinking, without heterogeneity and age mixing, a ZPD there cannot be.

Creativity

Holzman (2010) asserts that the concept of ZPD activity provides a new way to understand human development by putting creativity center stage. This creativity is not attribute-based nor is it a focus on the process of creating *special things* but rather the creativity involved in the ordinary/mundane and everyday life-as-lived. It is found in our extraordinary ability to learn and develop without knowing how, or as Holzman would say, that we "become epistemologists without employing epistemology" (p. 6). She suggests that Vygotsky seemed to recognize this paradox of human life and understood that developmental activity does not require knowing how. It is this ability to move from what we are able to do, to what we are not, that holds the key to the creative activity of learning/development (Holzman, 2010). "Development from this perspective, is the practice of a *methodology of becoming* [a tool-and-result, non-epistemological, activity-based method]—in which people shape and reshape their relationships to themselves, each other, and to the material and psychological tools and objects of their world" (Holzman, 2010, p. 7).

Imitation

But what does a non-epistemological method look like? How is it practiced? What does it mean to create the ZPD activity of becoming? Holzman asserts that it requires a new perspective on imitation. For Holzman, imitation is a crucial part of creativity in general and for the creation of ZPDs in particular. Drawing from Vygotsky's assertions that "a full understanding of the concept of the zone of proximal development must result in a reevaluation of the role of imitation in learning" (Vygotsky in Holzman, 2010, p. 8), Holzman points out that children do not imitate anything and everything like parrots do, but rather, children imitate that which is beyond themselves. For Holzman, imitation is fundamentally creative and thus helps to create

the ZPD. To illustrate, she directs us to once again to Vygotsky and his insights on the kind of language play that typifies conversations between young children and their caregivers.

A child, just learning to speak by employing single words is still exposed to fully developed speech within their environment. While the child speaks in one-word phrases, their caregiver talks to them in language which is already grammatically and syntactically formed while using a diverse vocabulary. Vygotsky referred to this adult language as the "developed form" or the "final ideal form" while referring to the child's form of speech as the "primary or rudimentary form" (in Holzman, 2010, p. 9). For Vygotsky, the greatest characteristic feature of child development is that it is achieved through interaction with the environment, where the "developed form," which is supposed to appear only at the end of the process of development already exists in the environment interacting, exerting, and influencing the primary form. Thus, "*Something which is only supposed to take shape at the very end of development, somehow influences the very first steps in this development*" (Vygotsky in Holzman, 2010, p. 9, emphasis in original).

Because both developed and rudimentary language are present at the same time, the environment thus cannot be fixed in space or time nor can it be separate from child and caregiver. Holzman (2010) asserts that "the environment must be both what it is—the specific socio-cultural-historical conditions in which child and [caregiver] are located—and what is coming into existence—the changed environment being created by their language activity" (p. 10). Thus, the environment is both activity and context and this sort of activity—the developing of the child as a speaker, meaning maker, and language user—is that which creates the ZPD. To put it more simply, when a baby is learning to speak, his parents, grandparents, siblings and others do not tell them they are too young to learn to speak or reprimand them for being wrong.

Nor do they hand them a dictionary or a thesaurus for them to study. Instead, they relate to babies as capable of doing far more than what they currently doing. They relate to them as speakers, as fellow speakers and makers of meaning.

Completion

Alongside imitation, the activity of completion is an important piece in the creating of the ZPD. Vygotsky's understanding of the relationship between thinking and speaking challenged the expressionist view of language, that is to say, the view that our language expresses our thoughts and feelings, by asserting that speaking is not the outward expression of thinking, but rather part of a unified and transformative process

> The relationship of thought to word is not a thing, but a process, a movement from thought to word and from word to thought…Thought is not expressed but completed in the word. We can, therefore, speak of the establishment (i.e. the unity of being and nonbeing) of thought in the word. Any thought strives to unify, to establish a relationship between one thing and another. Any thought has movement. It unfolds (Vygotsky in Holzman, 2010, p. 11).

According to Holzman (2010), in this passage Vygotsky delineates the thinking/speaking process and rather than separating the two realms of privately thinking and socially speaking, he brings them together in a unified whole (speaking/thinking) in which speaking completes thinking. She goes on to suggest that "if speaking is the completing of thinking, if the process is continuously creative in socio-cultural space, then the 'completer' does not have to be the one doing the thinking. Others can complete for us" (p. 11). After all indicates Holzman, children would not be able to engage in language play before they know how if the activity of thinking/speaking were not a continuously socially completive activity in which others were completing for them. Together with imitation, these two activities make up much of the language play that transforms the total environment out of which new speakers emerge. If we only spoke in one word phrases

to our children, how would any of us ever learn to speak? If the child artist was only exposed to scribbles, how would they ever develop their skill? If we only ever made peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, how would anyone ever learn to cook filet mignon? It is in the heterogeneous learning environment and the practice of imitation that we are able to be both who we are as well as who we are becoming.

Play

Another crucial piece in the creation of the ZPD is the activity of play. It is through play that Vygotsky asserts that children (and in Holzman's opinion, adults too) are able to be a head taller than themselves (Holzman, 2017). Being a head taller than you are suggests that you are (to paraphrase Holzman's words) performing beyond who you are by exploring who it is you are becoming. Play, both the structured type (like board games and team sports), as well as the unstructured type (like children's imaginary play), offer loads of opportunity for creativity, completion, and imitation, although it is in the realm of childhood play that Vygotsky saw endless potential for growth and development. All play, according to Vygotsky, creates an imaginary situation and all imaginary situations contain rules. However, the relationship between the two changes with different kinds of play.

In later childhood play, the rules are overt, usually constructed in advance, and dominate the imaginary situation (tool-for-result). A good example of this sort of play can be found in the board game. When playing checkers, the rules are already known to all players and the rules dictate how the players perform. In contrast, during early childhood play, that is, the meaning-making environment of pretend play, it is the imaginary situation that dominates rather pre-established rules (tool-and-result). In fact, Holzman asserts, "the rules don't even exist until the playing begins, because they come into existence at the same time and through the creation of

the imaginary situation…they are rules created *in the activity of playing*" (Holzman, 2010, p. 13, emphasis in original). In this type of play, both old and new meanings are present in the environment. Vygotsky felt that

> Though the play-development relationship can be compared to the instruction-development relationship, play provides a much wider background for changes in needs and consciousness. Action in the imaginative sphere, in an imaginary situation, the creation of voluntary intentions, and the formation of real-life plans and volitional motives—all appear in play and make it the highest level of preschool development (Vygotsky in Holzman, 2010, p. 14).

Although Vygotsky was focused on young children, Holzman indicates that the activity of play within the ZPD is developmental for *all* people, regardless of age, race, gender, sexuality, or neurological/physiological points of difference. She suggests that it is a feature of our culture to relate to very young children as creative and then gradually stop doing so as they grow. "We bifurcate learning and playing, trivializing play in the process, and have created institutionalized structures to maintain the bifurcation and trivialization. We introduce the concept of work. In nearly all schools the elements of ZPD-creating—freedom from knowing, creative imitation, and completion, are absent" (Holzman, 2010, p. 15). In addition to devaluing play as children grow, we also tend to start to conceptualize imitation as copying. What was once crucial to a child's development is now to be avoided/reprimanded.

So What?

The power of the ZPD lies in its focus on human *activity* (as opposed to the accumulation of knowledge or the focus on behavior as discussed in chapters 1 and 2), its interrelationality, its heterogeneity, its acceptance of imitation, its recognition of the power of completion, and its emphasis on play. The ZPD is particularly relevant to neurodivergent communities as they exhibit a different sort of neurological wiring which demands a different style of

teaching/learning. When reviewing the history of revolutionary advancements made in science, mathematics, technology and art, many of the people responsible for these advancements exhibit neurodivergent attributes. What becomes strikingly clear is that those who were able to succeed despite their points of neurological difference were those who were able to work outside the systematic box with the support/understanding to do so (see Silberman, 2015).

The ZPD offers students on the spectrum (and everyone else) a new way of engaging and collaborating with their peers, teachers, and families—a life space in which learning leads development. When we remove dichotomies such as expert/novice and relate to one another as revolutionaries, we create an environment where students are able to bring what they have to the table without the fear of *getting it wrong, not fitting in,* or *making mistakes.* In my work with the neurodiverse community, I have witnessed firsthand the transformative power of the ZPD. There have been days when a student/client, shy and/or seemingly uninterested in a particular group activity has jumped in with gusto by the end (after a bit of observation and some gentle nudges/offers to participate). At times, one can actually see the confidence building with each interaction/engagement. Once they realize that there is not wrong answer and that everyone's contributions are accepted and valued they are much more willing to take risks, to act silly, to try out new ways of being and doing, and to relate to themselves and to others as revolutionary makers of meaning. As Holzman (2017), building would Vygotsky would say, they are performing a head taller than themselves.

A Few Words about Performance

Vygotsky asserted that in order to fully understand the ZPD, we must reevaluate the role of imitation in learning. He dismissed the idea that imitation had nothing to do one's own mind because for him, imitation was an "active, creative, and fundamentally social process that was

essential to creating the ZPD. Children do not imitate anything and everything like a parrot does, but rather, what is beyond them in their environment/relationships" (Holzman, 2017, p. 30) Creatively imitating what others do during their daily lives (saying what others say, dancing to music, writing a poem or story) "is relating to oneself as/being related by others as/performing as a speaker, a dancer, a writer, a learner, a human being. It is how children are capable of doing so much in collective activity" (Holzman, 2017, p. 30). Thus, creative imitation is a type of performance. Recall our discussion about how babies learn to speak. As babies learn to speak, they are performing as speakers. They are becoming speakers through the activity of performing beyond themselves.

Vygotsky stated that preschool children "can be somebody else just as easily as he can be himself" (Vygotsky in Holzman, 2017, p. 32) attributing this gift to the child's lack of recognition that they are an "I." For Holzman, the emphasis on young children's performance ability has greatly informed her understandings of Vygotsky's work as a "theory of becoming." The downside to this is that as children perform their way into cultural and social expectations/norms, their performances become rigidified and they take on roles as this type of person who does these types of things. By the time children reach middle school, so routinized are their roles, that they stop creating new performances of themselves. In other words, they stop developing. This can be particularly relevant to the neurodiverse community as it is often the case that a diagnosis carries certain expectations (both for the self and from others) as to how one should/is able to perform. Playing and performing, that is, the engaging in the collective activity of becoming (the ZPD), opens up new ways of being and doing in the world. As other people in their environments began to relate to them as who they are becoming rather than who their diagnosis might suggest they are, one is exposed to a multitude of possibilities they may not have

otherwise entertained. They began to realize there are a multitude of way to perform themselves, regardless of labels, expectations, or perceived limitations.

To my way of thinking, without the activity of the ZPD within the classroom and beyond (e.g., the work place, at home, etc.), public education will continue to degrade, neurodivergent communities will continue to fall through the cracks, and our culture at large will continue to feel alienated, traumatized, and confused. In the chapter that follows, I explore several alternatives to the public education system, as well as several afterschool and therapeutic programs that utilize the ZPD in order to work outside the institutionalized, systemized, and dualistically-driven box. Using a Holzmanian lens, I investigate the ways in which these alternatives recognize and utilize the components of creativity, imitation, completion, and play discussed in this chapter when creating learning/developmental environments. While a complete conceptual reorganizing of our current educational system is beyond the scope of this thesis, in the concluding chapter, I will build with/offer ideas and wonder with you, dear reader, on how we might create ZPDs in the classroom and beyond.

Chapter 4

Play and Performance in the Classroom and Beyond

Play and the Transformative Power of "Yes, and…"

In his courses on play, and development across the lifespan, Tony Perone (2014) emphasizes that in Westernized societies, play is most often thought of as an activity meant for children. And while play is widely recognized as an important developmental tool for children; once they enter school, play is replaced by work and is increasingly devalued as we move into adulthood. However, Perone and Göncü (2014) argue that playing is a developmental activity that people continue throughout their entire lifespan even though many may not recognize what they are doing as play or may call playful activities by another name (e.g., leisure activity). In order to investigate how older children and adults play, Perone and Göncü explored the similarities of social pretend play in childhood to that of improvisational theater (improv) during adolescence/adulthood. According to their study, the two activities "reveal striking similarities between them with respect to their cultural, definitional, and performance features, their psychological origins, social/dialogic functions, and developmental consequences" (p. 4). Play, in the form of improv, affords us the opportunity to base theater games and improv activities off our own life experiences, much like young children do when they incorporate their own experiences, families, and communities into their pretend play.

From a definitional standpoint, the social pretend play of childhood and social activity of improv in adolescence/adulthood are both emergent, fluid, social activities in which the *present* gains a heightened, imaginative significance. From the performance standpoint, children's pretend play and improv are continuously emergent, and neither one requires an audience. While it may appear as if there is a division between audience and performers within the realm of

improv activities, the truth is the relationship is always fluid, that is to say, the performers and the audience rely on one another in order to bring the experience to fruition. “In this sense, the different kinds of roles adopted by the actors and the audience in improv can be likened to the performance roles as actors, directors, and spectators freely adopted by children in pretend play” (Perone & Göncü, 2014, p. 4). Despite the fact that the roles of the audience and of the actors may look/feel quite different, what is important is that everyone is participating in the co-creation of the activity regardless of the roles they are playing.

Psychologically speaking, the aspects are twofold. First, Perone and Göncü (2014) build off Vygotsky’s insight that “play is more nearly a recollection of something that has actually happened rather than imagination. It is more memory in action than a novel situation” (p.4). They offer anecdotes of improvisers in order to illustrate that “taking part in improv activities provides an opportunity to “re-create and give new meaning to personal experiences” (p.4). Second, psychological features of social pretend play in childhood and improv activity in adulthood yield important developmental benefits among different domains of psychological functioning. “Becoming something or someone other than the self results in cognitive, affective, and linguistic benefits” (p. 5).

In regard to the dialogical aspects of improv, not only are both imaginative play and improv activities almost always performed with others, they both provide strong evidence of an innate desire to construct intersubjective and imaginative worlds

> The conversational strategies to construct and maintain shared imaginative activities manifest remarkable similarities. Young children in play through their turnabouts and adults in improv through their ‘yes and…’ statements are implicit and explicit tools, respectively, for children and adults to agree with and build upon verbal and nonverbal offers made available by their play partners (p. 5).

In both instances, players acknowledge the offers made by others in the group and then add a new offer to build/continue the experience. For example, "if either a young child or an improviser says, 'I am a watermelon' the response to maintain the play episode would be expressed in a partner's turnabout (or 'yes and …' statement) acknowledging, agreeing, and building upon the initial verbal statement" (Perone & Göncü, 2014, p. 5). As an ABA therapist, I have worked hard to incorporate the "yes and…" philosophy of improv into my sessions.

While it may sound easy enough, it can actually be quite difficult, especially when working within a field that is very much tool-for-result in which instructors are expected to maintain instructional control and a dualistic expert/novice sort of relationship. For example, my client and I had been creating videos in order to play with what it meant to have certain characteristics such as kindness, fairness, and trustworthiness. We decided to turn the characteristics into super heroes (played by dinosaurs) that would come and assist other dinosaurs who were struggling with certain scenarios like territorial disputes and food shortages. The process entailed us creating a script and then having the dinosaurs act out the scene while I recorded them. One day, my client wanted to add the element of a strong wind (due to the giant fan that was keeping us cool in the living room) and at first I tried to discourage his offer by telling him it did not really fit within the story we had created. I immediately realized that I was blocking his offer, and quickly changed my tune. "Yes! It is windy! And, Mr. Fairness is going to have to work extra hard to fly to his destination! He might need some turbo power!"

Acknowledging the offers made by my clients and building upon their suggestions invites my clients to share their voice, to become co-creators of our learning and development rather than having someone dictate how activities ought to be done. Perhaps the most rewarding part for me is the fact that this practice allows me to be a learner too. My clients teach me more about

empathy, hard work, perseverance, and dedication than any textbook or lecture ever could. When we open ourselves up to the idea that *everyone* is creative/has talents, we open ourselves up to infinite possibilities, experiences, and connections. Not everything that is worth *knowing* can be found in a textbook or a quick google search. As discussed in chapter 3, learning/development is a *social* act which *requires* the other, regardless of age, gender, race, or cognitive makeup.

In addition, the "yes and…" offers or "turnabouts" that occur in play help to keep the players in the moment rather than focused on a final destination, product, or outcome.

According to Spolin (1963),

> It stands to reason that if we direct all our efforts toward teaching a [destination], we stand in grave danger of losing everything on which we have based our daily activities. For when a [destination] is superimposed on an activity rather than evolving out of it, we often feel cheated when we reach it. (p. 40).

When taking part in improv activity, the people involved must be present, that is to say, they must open themselves up completely to the environment and the people in it if they are to collectively create something new. The nature of improv requires one to sharpen and use one's entirety of their sensory equipment. One must "shake loose and free oneself of all preconceptions, interpretations, and assumptions...so as to be able to make direct and fresh contact with the created environment and the objects and the people within it" (Spolin, 1963, p. 46). Being present in the moment is itself an art, and when practiced collectively through playful activity, translates into real world benefits such as an elevation in flexible thinking, sharpened reciprocal and expressive communication skills, listening, and the ability to interact with others across differences.

The art of being present is particularly relevant to the neurodiverse community as many of these skills can be quite difficult for people on the spectrum. In fact, the majority of the work I

do with my clients is meant to expand these skills in order to prepare them for future employment and adult interaction within society. Consequently, play and performance are excellent tools (in a very tool-*and*-result sort of way) for the development of these skills as taking part in the collective activity of play and performance naturally and organically facilitates the development of such skills. In play (and in improv) we are not focused on the outcome, but the journey. We are busy relating to ourselves and others as who we/they are and who we/they are becoming. We are busy making new tools (being toolmakers) and collectively transforming our determining circumstances. In the next section, we will explore several educational models and outside of school programs that are attempting to bring play and performance and the ZPD into the classroom and beyond.

Unique Programs Using Play and Performance to Transform Lives and Communities

In their groundbreaking book *Creative Collaborations through Inclusive Theater and Community Based Learning* (2017), Lisa Kramer and Judy Freedman Fask use play, performance, and community based learning (CBL) to assist students with varying disABILITIES (to use their terminology) in the transition from high school to higher education/the workforce by assisting in the development of soft skills. “One of the main objectives for the transition-age youth who are ‘at risk’ and/or have disABILITIES is preparing them for meaningful, competitive, and gainful employment” (p. 215) with the majority of the focus being placed on one’s ability to perform particular job *tasks*. However, as the authors indicate “there is more to getting and keeping a job than just knowing how to do specific job tasks” (p. 215). I agree. Interacting the world/keeping a job requires far more than knowing how to do certain tasks. It requires the ability to connect and communicate across difference.

For Kramer and Freedman Fask (2017), their collaboration affords the transition students the opportunity to "learn more than just job tasks; they also can practice [activities] that influence them in the world of work" (p. 215). And it is not just the transition students who benefit, the college students gain valuable skills/insight as well. The entire group is involved in the activity of learning things like "how to communicate across differences, presenting oneself in new and unfamiliar situations, being open to unique ideas and differing perspectives… For both groups, theatre works in very similar ways, meeting them where they begin, and catapulting them forward" (p. 215). And the collaborative process does not stop with the students. There are also many faculty, alumni, and other community members involved as well. Many of the transition youth learn to use public transportation (which can require lots of collaboration/communication) in order to participate. The project also requires the students to engage with the community in many different ways in order to bring their final performance to fruition.

So, what does a collaborative session look like? While each session is a chance to work toward their final production, the final production is not the emphasis; it is the learning/development that occur throughout the *process* that is the focus. To facilitate learning/development, sessions include improv games, costume making, music, movement, and reflection. In addition, there is an emphasis of acceptance, that is to say, an acknowledgement that

> each group and each individual within the group come with skills that they can offer to the project as a whole. Successful interactions arise when we ask participants to take on 'the mantel of the expert' about things that they

> are expert at—and allow them to grow in confidence by exploring those roles (Kramer & Freedman Fask, 2017, p. 211).

By referring to the students as experts in their own socio-cultural-historical lives as lived, they became more comfortable in bringing what they had to offer to the group and gained confidence in doing so. For example, one participant was designated the expert in sign language and thus assisted the group in learning the proper signs for certain words which expanded the ability to communicate for the entire group. To my way of thinking, the activity of teaching the group to sign is an excellent example of facilitating the participant as who they are (a deaf student with expertise in sign language) and who they are becoming (a teacher to hearing students).

Furthermore, the authors emphasize the importance of being flexible and recognizing that the process can get a bit sloppy at times. In a very tool-*and*-result way, they discuss the fact that while having goals is important, one should not get too wrapped up in worrying about the final destination or outcome. Similar to Spolin's assertions discussed in chapter 3, they assert that focusing on a destination sets everyone up for disappointment as well as distracting the group from the moment, which is where all the magic is happening. Setting up a foundation for success rather than a potential for failure is a crucial component of their program.

Perhaps the most exciting/moving part of their work is reading about the spontaneous and developmental interactions Kramer and Freedman Fask (2017) encountered throughout their weekly sessions. They observed college students working to ensure the safety of everyone involved and noted heightened levels of confidence displayed by most of the transition youth who normally shy away from interaction. They watched as these usually shy students organically and enthusiastically participated and created with others. They were moved as students who were normally quiet during discussion contributed vocally throughout an entire session and celebrated

as both groups adapted to the needs of the other in order to ensure everyone could be involved to the fullest extent.

So, are they creating the ZPD? Are they using tool-and-result methodology? Are they embracing imitation, completion, play, and creativity? Despite having to work within the systematic box that is public education, Kramer and Freedman Fask present their work by focusing on the qualitative and transformative *process* of the project rather quantifiable data/results/outcomes. They are adamant that their work is *not* a how-to manual (a tool-*for*-result), but rather, an exploration of collective activity/collaboration, an invite to keep building, and a reminder that we must continuously (re)shape the tools we use to facilitate development (a tool-*and*-result) Their use of anecdotal evidence presents a richly qualitative mosaic in which the transformative powers of play, imitation, completion, and creativity are on full display—a collective work of art that moved me to tears on more than one occasion.

While they are still beholden to assessments and grading (for the college students) and Individual Education Programs (IEPs) created by public school districts (for the transition students), I think they are doing a pretty good job. Still, this begs the question, what would a learning environment like the one described above look like in a non-institutional setting? What if there were no assessments, grades, or IEPs? What if rather than meeting weekly, the two groups collaborated daily? Would students still learn/develop if left to their own devices? In order to explore these questions, it will help to look at some learning environments/models of education that have made it a point to work outside the institutionalized box.

The Sudbury School Model of Education

The original Sudbury School was founded in 1968 in Framingham, Massachusetts by Daniel Greenberg, a former physics professor at Columbia University and his wife, Hanna

Greenberg, who was studying biochemistry at the time. Upon having children, the two decided that they did not want to send their children to any of the schools that currently existed. They observed that even schools that claimed to be different were really all the same—teachers situated at the head of the classroom depositing knowledge (see chapter 1) and doling out grades. Perhaps most important to the Greenbergs is that they observed *no* happy children. As such, the two decided they needed to reconsider what school should actually be and then create one of their own (Greenberg, 2016). Thus, the Sudbury model of education was born. While there are many schools across the country that call themselves Sudbury Schools, they are not tied together in anyway and there is no official list of practicing Sudbury Schools. Still, across the United States and in a handful of other countries, people looking for alternatives to mainstream education are putting the Sudbury model to work and with amazing results. In this section, I examine several different Sudbury Schools and draw on experiences from interviews, articles, and blogs composed by various Sudbury staff, students, and parents.

Imagine a school where students are able to arrive late or leave early as long as they spend at least five hours a day on campus. Imagine classrooms where predetermined curricula and student assessments (tools-*for*-results) are absent and where no grades are given or standardized tests taken. What would such a school have to offer? How and what could students possibly learn in such an environment and why would a family choose such an alternative to public education? How does the Sudbury model of education help my child learn/develop? According to Collins (2011), "The fundamental difference between a Sudbury school and any other type of school is the student's level of responsibility. In a Sudbury school the students are solely responsible for their education, their learning methods, their evaluation, and their environment" (Collins, 2011, para.1). This is an unconventional/radical idea in Westernized

education as it gives students agency, that is to say, the ability to act in/with/upon their environments. In traditional educational settings we do not trust that children will do what they need to do in order to learn/develop. Furthermore, placing the responsibility of the student's education into the student's hands drastically differs from traditional public schooling in which the state is responsible for most aspects of a student's education including the curriculum and assessment practices.

In most traditional public and private schools, it is the school administrators who take on the role of determining curriculum rather than the state. This can differ to some extent. For example, some private schools take on the responsibility for assessment and evaluation, while others administer state mandated tests and assessments. Either way, the students have little responsibility other than to sit quietly and work at storing information. According to Daniel Greenberg, one of Sudbury's founders, there are four assumptions within the traditional view of learning: "that there is someone who knows *what* ought to be learned by people, *when* it ought to be learned, *how* it ought to be learned, and by *whom* each thing ought to be learned" (in Holzman, 1997, p. 96). Public (and private) schools shift the responsibility of learning away from the students and place it into the hands of people most of the students will never meet or interact with.

Alternatively, the Sudbury model of education places the range of responsibility for learning/development with the student which then extends outward to the parents, the school, the community, the state, and finally the federal government. Sudbury schools refer to this as the Responsibility Spectrum indicating that

> Educational options with a compulsory curriculum (e.g., most public schools) tend to be on one end of the spectrum. Private schools span a large portion of the spectrum, with the school's specific educational philosophy determining exactly where it falls on the spectrum.

> Homeschooling also spans a large portion of the spectrum, with the parent's specific educational philosophy determining the student's level of responsibility. A Sudbury school is the only educational option where all the responsibility is with the student (Collins, 2011, para. 5).

As a result, students at Sudbury schools have complete control over what they learn, how and when they learn it, the environment in which they learn it in, and the ways in which they are assessed (most often by way of self-reflection). Under the Sudbury philosophy, students are able to select their own method of instruction, and they choose, through a completely democratic process, how their learning environment operates. Sudbury educators believe that children are perfectly capable of taking on these responsibilities. More than a mere pedagogical tool used to motivate students, the responsibility is real. "The students absolutely have the ultimate say in their education. Giving real responsibility to the students allows them to gain experience making decisions and handling the consequences of their choices. In this way, students gain experience and maturity" (Collins, 2011, para. 7).

In traditional schooling, there is much effort spent on trying to motivate students to learn. At a Sudbury school, such efforts are not needed as Sudbury educators believe that the desire to learn is a characteristic that all children possess. To their way of thinking, external motivation is only required when someone else is deciding what a student should learn. When a child is put in charge of their own learning, such coercion is not required. In addition, Sudbury educators assert that current research shows "when people determine for themselves what to learn, they retain the subject significantly better than if someone else determines what they should learn" (Collins, 2011, para. 9).

As indicated in chapter 2, children on the spectrum are quite often hyper-focused on certain subjects. In a traditional classroom, children with ASD are often forced away from their

interests as they do not fit within the standard curriculum—the result of which can be "behaviors" that are *problematic* and *disruptive* to other students. Yet, if children on the spectrum were able to pursue their interests, to take part in the activity of exploring/sharing their passions with others while in their learning environments, I believe that such "disruptions" would be few and far between.

Of course, none of this is meant to imply that there is no order at Sudbury schools or that there are no rules—quite the contrary

> In order for the students to be able to be totally responsible for their education, they must have—or at least share—the responsibility for creating their learning environment. This means that Sudbury schools are run as a participatory democracy. All of the students and staff (together known as the School Meeting) are part of the democracy and all of the students have an equal voice in discussions and an equal vote in decisions. In other words, a 5-year-old student has the same voice and power in the school as a staff member. The staff have no veto power of decisions made by the school meeting. The only limit placed on the School Meeting is that they cannot make a law that would violate local or state laws and they cannot make a rule that would put the school community at risk (Collins, 2011, para. 17).

Each week during the School Meeting, the day-today operations of the school are discussed and voted on. Meetings are run like a town hall meeting, run by the School Meeting chair, and minutes taken by the School Meeting Secretary. The School Meeting chair and secretary are usually students who have been elected by other students and staff. The School Meeting has the final authority over all matters of a Sudbury school's operation with the exception of decisions about the yearly budget, staff pay scales, graduation requirements, and open campus policies which are left to the senior staff (Collins, 2011).

Another important aspect in Sudbury philosophy is its heterogeneous groupings of students, which is to say they do not separate students by age. They believe that there are great

advantages to be found in allowing students of all ages to freely interact with one another, stating that

> There are emotional, social, and educational advantages to allowing different ages to mix. Emotionally, older students can play the role of big brother or sister to the younger students. Younger students gain security and comfort in this relationship. Age mixing provides a safe environment for students to work on their social skills. Students that are not confident in their social skills can practice them and work to improve them by interacting with other students; whether older, younger, or the same age. Students of all ages can look to more mature students or the staff as role models (Collins, 2011, para. 15).

Consequently, it is quite common to observe students learning with and from other students—imitation and completion in action. Of course, facilitating this type of environment requires teachers/coaches to trust their students. Unfortunately, as mentioned before, it is the general consensus within contemporary Western societies that if left to their own devices, children (and neurodiverse children in particular) would never learn anything at all. Yet Sudbury's history tells a different story, one in which many students—when left to pursue their own interests and in their own way—are able to set life goals for themselves with much more conviction and assuredness. In order to illustrate this, Collins (2011) tells the story of a young girl who showed an exemplary talent for writing. Many of the staff felt that they ought to encourage the young girl to pursue this talent yet adhered to Sudbury philosophy and left her to do as she wished. For the first few years, the girl spent all of her time socializing and produced very little in the way of writing.

From the outside, an unknowing observer might mistakenly suggest that she was wasting her time and potential. Yet, after several years of social engagement with her peers, the young girl began to write more frequently, this time with far more depth and understanding, especially in terms of human relationships and emotionality. Upon reflection, the staff decided that "if they

had forced, or even subtly encouraged her to spend her time writing, she would probably have improved the mechanics of her writing skill, but would have lost the depth and feeling that her writing developed by being able to socialize with and understand other people" (Collins, 2011, para. 10). Thus, under the Sudbury philosophy of learning, no educator will ever tell the students what they need to learn or how they need learn it. This philosophy does indeed result in the students spending lots of time socializing, but Sudbury educators believe that time spent socializing is an invaluable component to educational growth. Socializing sets the stage for creativity, imitation, completion, and play.

At this point, you may be asking yourself, what if a student has no interest in learning at all. What if all they want to do is play? According to Collins (2011), one of the most frequent questions Sudbury schools encounter is "what if a child decides they do not want to learn how to read?" Their answer is, "this simply doesn't happen" (para. 12). He asserts that because reading is such an important communication tool in American society, and because people are inherently motivated to expand their ability to communicate, this inherent motivation will result in children learning to read. At a Sudbury school, reading is not taught the way it is in traditional schools, however

> Reading is part of the culture—just as talking is part of the culture. Students learn to read, and largely teach themselves to read, because they want to be able to more fully participate in the world. The original Sudbury school, the Sudbury Valley School, has been in existence for 36 years. During this time, they have had thousands of students. No child has ever failed to learn to read in the school's entire history, and yet they have never had a formal reading class. The same experience is seen in learning other 'basics,' such as writing and math. The students learn them because they recognize that they need to lean them in order to survive and prosper in the culture (Collins, 2011, para. 12).

As such, it is not unusual to have some students wait until nine or ten before they decide it is time to learn the basics like reading, writing, or arithmetic. When they are ready, students are able to solicit help from older students or members of the staff if they so choose.

For Sudbury school staff members, what is meaningful to a student is easier to learn than something that is not meaningful to them. If they are excited about learning a particular subject, they learn it much more quickly and retain it far better. Consequently, Sudbury school staff members are not concerned with the fact that many children spend very little time doing what looks like academic work, for they believe that children are perfectly capable of acquiring those skills whenever they decide they want/need to.

As such, there are no formal evaluations at Sudbury. There are no grades and there are no tests. Success is not measured by the acquisition of knowledge taught at certain stages along one's educational path. Sudbury school staff members believe the best people to evaluate what the students are learning are the students themselves, for it is the students who know best if they understand a concept or skill. In addition, Sudbury educators indicate experience has shown that when students self-evaluate, they often have much higher standards for themselves than when someone else is doing the evaluating.

Examining the Sudbury Model through a Holzmanian Lens

Do Sudbury models embrace/create the components needed to create the ZPD? To Holzman's way of thinking, Sudbury model schools serve more as a rejection of traditional pedagogy rather than a positive creation/practice of a new educational method. From a relational, activity-based, nonepistemological perspective, the Sudbury model has the potential to be developmental in that it is not learning centered, it promotes creative activity, and demands personal and collective responsibility through its democratic process. However, Sudbury's

underlying philosophy, according to Holzman (1997), is "less than developmental; in theory it is nonepistemological … the isolated individual located in a dualistically divided world, the primacy of the mental process… are not even opened up for questioning, much less abandoned" (p. 102). Thus, the interrelationality, the activity of collectively making meaning and performing new ways of being and doing is subsumed under the individualized notions of self-advancement in leaning and development.

Recall Holzman's assertion (discussed in chapter 3) that learning does not sometimes *require* the other, it *entails* the other. What seems to be lacking within the Sudbury philosophy is Vygotsky's (and Holzman's) assertions about the inherent socialness of learning/development. Despite its democratic, student-driven environment, the emphasis appears to favor/focus on the abilities/transformation of the individual rather than the group/community. For neurodiverse students, while this learning environment is no doubt more suited to variances in neurological wiring/aptitudes/talents, it also seems to favor a more *independent* process/journey which can negate activities such as collaboration, imitation, and completion all of which I believe to be crucial components to creating the ZPD.

Thus far, we have explored several different programs/models that are attempting to work outside the box. The first example, while being more collectively/community driven than the second, remains beholden to the institution and therefore tethered to assessments, grades, and IEPs. The second example, while far more student driven and democratic, seems too focused on the individual and what said individual can accomplish if given the opportunity/trust/life-spaces to do so. Next, we will explore a school that worked to combine the best of both projects/models in order create a learning/developmental environment where play, performance, and the democratic process of collective meaning making came together to form a community of

transformation, trust, and, the recognition/engagement with both who the students/staff were, and who they were becoming.

The Barbara Taylor School: The School with the Performative Heart

One of my favorite sections of Holzman's book *Schools for Growth* (1997) is the introduction to the Barbara Taylor School (BTS). It begins with a description of a situation Holzman encountered one day involving a young boy (age 11) who had been diagnosed with several learning disabilities and had a history of "problem behaviors" throughout his short educational career. As Holzman entered the school that day, she found the young boy lying on the floor, shirt hiked up around his neck, one of the adult learning directors holding a cylindrical piece of paper above his belly button, and several children looking on in anticipation. When she asked what they were doing, they replied that they were performing an operation, a *surgical removal of immaturity* (Holzman, 1997).

Later that day, the young boy and the learning director performed a commercial break during a circus scene that was created and being performed by another student. During their commercial, the two walked onto the stage and the learning director stated that the young boy would not be going to speech therapy that day. At that point, the young boy fell onto the stage and started screaming, kicking, and throwing a tantrum. The learning director looked out at the audience for a moment, pulled some wadded up pieces of paper from a manila envelope she was holding and, tossing them toward the flailing boy proclaimed, "The miracle cure—'Matchore Partz' (Mature Parts)." The young boy then "swallowed the pills," stood up, and the two started the scene anew. This time, when the learning director told the young boy he would not be going to speech therapy today, he simply stated "Oh well. I guess I'll go home then." The audience cheered (Holzman, 1997).

The significance of this description lies at the heart of Holzman's activity-based, performatory approach. In Holzman's view, the young man described above is a performer. We all are. For Holzman, performing is how we develop. It is through performance that we learn to do what is beyond ourselves. It circles back to Vygotsky's assertions about the way small children perform as speakers. Performing is a way of taking who we *are* and creating something *new*. The young boy mentioned in anecdote above was at an emotionally developmental standstill, that is to say, he continued to do what he knew how to do (as well as what he believed others to expected him to do)—throw a tantrum. What had not occurred to him was that his initial emotional response to change was something "jointly and socially constructed by himself and others… it did not (perhaps would not and could not for whatever reason) occur to him that there is an infinite number of things one can do or say upon learning that the plans have changed" (Holzman, 1997, p. 108).

By creating an environment where the young boy could perform both his tantrum and something other than a tantrum, developmental activity was jumpstarted. The environment/activity within it, allowed him to perform beyond his typical behavior and to socially create other responses. His performance allowed him to alter his location and relationship to his emotions, and helped him to create, with the help of the group, new ways of *doing* his emotions. Performing new ways of being and doing is extremely empowering as it reminds those involved of their capacity to be social makers of meaning. For Holzman, "the difference between [the young boy] performing his temper tantrum and his typical behavior of having a temper tantrum is the difference between developing and not developing" (Holzman, 1997, p. 109). Thus, BTS was, at its heart, performatory[2]. It was conceived and operated using

[2] Performatory is a noun form of the word "perform" created by Holzman

Holzman's socio-cultural, performatory, nonepistemological, therapeutic approach to understanding human life. To state it more simply, the underlying idea is that children become successful learners by performing as learners. In order to facilitate this performance, there must be a performatory environment, most often a stage, and if the current environment is not conducive to performance, it must be reshaped into one that is, "not just once, but continuously" (Holzman, 1997, p. 109).

The BTS, founded in 1985, emerged from the joining together of two progressive movements: the African-American community school program and the (mostly White) free school movement. Prior to its creation, Barbara Taylor, founder and principal of the St. Thomas community school in Harlem, had already worn many hats in the field of education. Taylor was dedicated to assisting poor children develop and grow. After several years at St. Thomas, Taylor went in search of a new methodology in which she might better assist her students by creating an environment where the children would be challenged and supported to be successful learners rather than mere test takers. It is at this time that Taylor met Holzman and their collaboration began (Holzman, 1997).

For the first six years, the BTS focused on creating an environment where the students were emotionally supported and challenged in their learning. There was much time spent on revealing and minimizing the kinds of abuse that is commonplace in traditional schooling, that is to say, the way teachers mistreat students, students mistreat each other, the insistence on rules that are meant to control, the absurdity of teaching to test with no regard for the learning process, and the classism, sexism, racism, and the homophobia that perpetuated in traditional school environments (Holzman, 1997).

Taylor began this project/model by asking the students how they felt she was abusive to them. The students made comments about "that look" she gave them (p. 112). From there, the conversation moved to how the students were abusive to her, the other teaching staff, and each other. By asking the question "what can/should we do about abuse," the group (students and learning directors) created a series of policies and improvisational activities in response. A crucial part of this process was that the adults were willing to hear what the students had to say and to allow themselves to be vulnerable with the students rather than trying to take control. "What was inseparable from this was their skill in organizing the environment for this to happen" (Holzman, 1997, p. 112).

During these years, the school attempted to use a standard curriculum in innovative ways while focusing on developing the children as learners. The majority of the classwork was interdisciplinary and the school utilized peer teaching. The student body was also very active in their community, often participating in demonstrations or marches. By traditional standards, the school was a success with BTS students' achievement scores exceeding their traditionally educated peers (see LaCerva, 1992). Still, Holzman and Taylor found themselves eager to push the boundaries even further, that is, to create a school environment which supported continuous and overlapping ZPDs. Thus, the transition of the BTS to a "Vygotskian laboratory" started in 1991 (Holzman, 1997, p. 113). Taylor and Holzman named their new approach Children Helping to Educate Another Training (CHEAT).

The structure of the revised Barbara Taylor School was unique in that it simultaneously came into being with its activities. Its methodology was improvisational, activity-based, and radically democratic. Like Sudbury models, there was no curriculum, no schedule, and no fixed groupings of students. Where it differs is its focus on the *group* or as Holzman would say, its

groupness. At the start of each day, both students and adults decide what to do together. The task of the learning directors (called such because they function more like theater directors than teachers) was to "lead the students and each other in the creative relational activity of creating a developmental learning environment—performing the school anew each day. They [had to] perform beyond themselves as directors of continuously emergent improvisational life scenes rather than behave as teachers, disciplinarians, or even facilitators of learning" (Holzman, 1997, p. 114). Thus, their task was to create developmental opportunities by utilizing their experience as learners, explorers, musicians, writers, and artists in order to excite and galvanize the students in their environment. Unlike traditional teachers, who start with a preconceived notion of what should be taught and how, the learning directors encourage the students to "perform ahead of themselves (to create their learning) and then support them in whatever they wind up doing" (Holzman, 1997, p. 114).

To illustrate how BTS worked, Holzman provides an example of a typical school day in which a young student (age 7) and a learning director were sitting on the floor in a quiet room. The learning director placed two fingers in the palm of the students hand and asked if they could guess what number it was. "Two" they said. When the learning director asked if the student knew by looking, they replied that no, they had their eyes shut. The conversation then moved to a discussion about how blind people read. The learning director told the student about Braille, paper with bumps on it that allow blind people to read words. The learning director then entertained the idea of getting some paper and creating some Braille, but things did not go that way. Instead, another student that had been listening to the conversation began walking through the room with his eyes closed, pretending to be blind. Soon a handful of children were wandering

around with their eyes closed, bumping into things and one another, and saying things like, “I know where I’m going even though I can’t see” (Holzman, 1997, p. 115).

When asked how it was that they knew where they were going even though they could not see, one student replied that he could hear the movie in the next room. After about 30 seconds, all the children fell into a heap, laughing and wrestling with one another while the learning director began singing *Three Blind Mice*. As things got louder and sillier, they decided to move their activity outside. Once outside, the learning director asked them all what they wanted to do now. A game of “deaf” basketball ensued. They dribbled, shot baskets, and moved around “the court” with imaginary balls before the game finally fizzled out and the children went off to play ocean tag in which the shark was it (Holzman, 1997, p.115).

As one can see, in this situation, even though the learning director had entertained taking the process in one direction (creating Braille), it did not go that way. But rather than forcing the students to do what she wanted them to, she followed their lead and allowed the group to create the learning moment. Her activity with the group emerged in the moment and came to define itself. Her introduction to Braille was not developed as the students went somewhere else with the moment (pretending to be blind). Letting go of her offer, she went along with what the children were doing and drew their attention to another part of being blind—the heightening of other senses. Rather than scolding them for being rowdy, she related to them in character by singing the song *Three Blind Mice*.

The question that usually comes up at this point is “So what are the children learning?” This of course is a natural wonder, and Holzman replies with “I think it isn’t answerable, not only in this situation but in traditional, formal lesson situations as well. Do we know what children are learning when they, for example, are in science class and told the definitions of the

five senses or, in a more hands-on class, *instructed* to imagine what it might be like to be blind or deaf?" (Holzman, 1997, p. 115, emphasis in original). To her way of thinking, it is the systematic nature of those lessons, conceived beforehand with specific goals and objectives in mind, that lead us to think we know what children are learning. She indicates that perhaps learning is not that systematic, and asserts that thinking we need to know what is being learned might actually hinder the learning process

> Human development and learning—as relational activities—do not require understanding (i.e. cognition, and appraisal). This is our claim. Developmental leaning is unsystematic, in the sense that it is best understood in terms of itself—as a form of life—rather than in terms of (any) models of science and reason (Holzman, 1997, p. 116).

Like Sudbury Schools, The Barbara Taylor School was also democratic. However, it went beyond the Sudbury model in that collectively setting policies and voting on them were taken as part of the overall and continuous activity of creating an environment of inclusion. In other words, the practice of democracy is part of the overall developmental activity. For Holzman, "radical democracy refers to the collective activity of people *governing and transforming themselves*" (1997, p. 116, emphasis in the original). Thus, the basis for making decisions includes what is best for the school and the development of everyone therein. For example, if a student is spending all their time on a computer learning about sea animals, whether or not they continue to do so is determined by what they *and others* think about it, including whether or not the students believe the activity supports the school's development. When discussing such a situation, things like fairness or what is normal (e.g., what someone their age ought to be doing in school) are an inevitable part of the conversation and often lead to rather fascinating discourses and activities (Holzman, 1997).

This radically democratic process means that anyone, be it child or adult, can call a meeting at any time in order to discuss an issue. It is the *process* of creating an environment where everyone, even a four-year-old or a student on the spectrum, can hold the floor that Holzman believes is most valuable. For her, "it is the ongoing relational activity of the group, not the behavior of the individual child, that is the tool-and-result of developmental learning" (Holzman, 1997, p.117). In other words, the unit that learns developmentally is the group, not the individual. To Holzman's way of thinking, when the group develops, everyone learns but when individuals learn, no one develops.

> The development of the group, in Vygotskian terminology, depends on the continuous creation of ZPDs … Moreover, Vygotsky's discoveries about the characteristics of the environment of early childhood that supports children to become language makers and language users, when transformed into a nonepistemological, therapeutic modality, suggest a second 'axiom' of developmental learning; *We must continuously create the environment even as we learn in it* (Holzman, 1997, p. 117, emphasis in the original).

Because of the central role performance plays at the Barbara Taylor School, the greatest challenge arises when students resist performing. Resistance can happen for a variety of reasons. While younger children are masters of performance, older children may see it as silly, stupid, or embarrassing. Thus, there were many conversations as to what to do when a child decides they do not want to perform. The bulk of the work done at BTS went in to creating a performatory environment and when situations such as a student not wanting to perform, it is worked on collectively and all attempts are made to include the nonparticipant in whatever ways they can, into the performance. For example, if a group of people are busy doing a particular activity and one of the students is constantly interrupting or hindering the process, the learning director might say "let's play the interrupting game" where everyone talks at once. Or, they might ask the

student to perform their interruption. Or, the group might stop what they are doing and have a discussion about what they think ought to be done about the interruption and how they feel about it. And "sometimes," says Holzman, "nothing works" (Holzman, 1997, p. 118).

Despite the Barbara Taylor School's best efforts to include everyone in the performatory environment, there have been times when it simply does not work out. Holzman recalls a young boy of ten who transferred into the school after being in a rather restrictive environment in a public school due to *behavior issues*. For three months the students and the staff worked with the young boy to help him develop (through performance) other ways of *doing* his emotions. The circumstances (often intensely hostile and disruptive to the group) were finally deemed to be too much and it was the students who eventually decided he was too much of a disruption to stay in the school. They claimed to have tried everything they could think of to help the young boy, but it seemed as if he did not want help and as such his stay was cut short (Holzman, 1997). As discussed earlier in this chapter, despite our best efforts, when practicing method (tool-*and*-result), our lessons/sessions/projects do not always go as planned. Things get sloppy. Sometimes people do not wish to participate. Still, the fact that the group did everything they could think of to help this young boy says a lot about the group/environment and the collaborative/performative heart that was BTS.

True to Vygotsky's work, another key aspect of the BTS was to relate to children as speakers, writers, mathematicians, artists, scientists, and so on, encouraging them to perform these roles even though they may not yet have known how. As I have mentioned in previous chapters, referring to people as who they are and who they are becoming is crucial to an environment in which learning/development are able to flourish. "This is especially important with children who have a history of failure to learn in previous schools and classrooms, because

such children typically have neither learned very well how to learn nor identify very strongly as learners" (Holzman, 1997, p. 121). Teaching a child who feels that they are "not good at math" by repeatedly teaching the mechanics of math typically falls short of real learning. However, encouraging the child to perform as a mathematician frees them up to explore without the worry of doing it wrong or failing in some way.

She gives an example of a young man who was struggling with this very activity. The young man and a learning director sat down and began discussing what they each knew about math and what they wanted to learn as well as who in the school might help them to do so. "This framed their activity as learners, rather than as knower and non-knower" (p. 122). Thus, the learning director was not looking to determine the young man's developmental level as a math student so she could teach to it, but rather she related to him as a learner and invited him to create their performance of being good at math together. The next day, the two sat at a table with another young student doing a puzzle. The young man claimed that the younger student was not doing math, because all she was doing was putting together a puzzle. A conversation then ensued about different kinds of math like geometry. It was then decided that doing a puzzle could indeed be "doing math." A bit later, the conversation shifted gears and the learning director started showing the young man some of the interesting patterns to be found in math like when one multiplies by nines. As he began to recognize the patterns and the ways they could be used to help him solve problems, he became quite excited and upon arriving home after school, enthusiastically reported to his mother that he was learning math.

The point of this example it to highlight the ways in which creating babble (like babies do when learning to speak), in this case, math-talk, is crucial when relating to students as revolutionaries. "Formulaic ways of speaking and concern with correctness ('the right answer')

come to dominate the discourse that occurs [between teachers and students] stifling the kind of language play, it would appear, is critical to learning a mathematical concept … Just as meaning-making is a necessary precondition for learning to speak language, making mathematical meaning is necessary for learning mathematics" (Holzman, 1997, p. 124). The same can be said for all learning subjects. What was so revolutionary about the BTS was the way students learned that all subjects are learnable and that learning is something that all human beings do. According to Holzman their task was

> to help children develop, that is, to *create new ways of being*. We have constructed an approach that is postepistemological, by which I mean a practice that rejects the [traditional] belief that knowing of any sort is the path to a better life/or a better world (progress or growth). Developmental learning is an attempt to give up the alienated activity/instruction of knowing in favor of the noncognitive, nondualistic activity of performing (Holzman, 1997, p. 126, emphasis in original).

Thus, Holzman believes that when students are guided by emergent and continuous activity rather than by a need to know or what outcomes are expected of them, an environment is created where students come to grow/develop rather than simply know/acquire knowledge.

So, how does a school like BTS assist/facilitate learning/development for neurodiverse students? In the introduction to this section, we discussed a young boy who had thrown a tantrum at school upon learning that plans had changed. Yet, rather than condone his *behavior*, the students/teachers/group focused on his *activity* and wondered *with* (as opposed to *for*) him how he might perform his emotions differently. In addition, relating to neurodiverse students as not only who they are, but who they are becoming (e.g., writers, public speakers, mathematicians, artists, dancers, directors, paleontologists, or marine biologists) and inviting them to perform as such, not only removes the fear of getting it wrong, but also empowers them by validating their passions/interests/experiences.

Recall my earlier discussion in chapter 3 about my client's obsession with dinosaurs/marine life. That young man could talk about those subjects at great length and with profound accuracy/detail. Yet, force him to do a book report on President Lincoln, and he would shut down. Why not engage him in history/math/science/art utilizing the subject matter he loves? I imagine that in a school such as BTS, one that allowed him to pursue and share his passions with the group as they in turn shared theirs, his confidence would grow substantially. And with the help/engagement of the group within the ZPD, he might even decide to explore something new one day as he learns to take risks and perform beyond himself.

Because BTS was built on an anti-institutional foundation so as to remain free from institutional constraints such as state mandated curricula, assessments, and grades, it relied heavily on a bottom up approach for funding. Being that many of the students were from poor families who had difficulty paying tuition, the school was financially unstable. In addition, a school with such a radical approach often has to contend with certain expectations from family, friends, and the community which can be a tricky part of this work. Programs and schools that are *qualitative* in nature may not lend themselves well to *quantifiable* results. Unfortunately, within Westernized society, the enthrallment with data/measureable results runs deep, and not only dictates which schools/programs get financial support and which ones do not. Additionally, the BTS philosophy was difficult to sell to parents who were being told by other schools that their children needed homework, lesson plans, and more direction. Running a school, especially one as revolutionary as BTS is difficult. For the reasons stated above, BTS shut its doors in 1997 (Holzman, 2017).

While trying to create and maintain a school like BTS or a program within traditional education settings like Kramer and Freedman Fask's can be extremely difficult, there are other

ways to create life-spaces in which learning/development can flourish. Fortunately, there are many successful *outside*-of-school programs that are using play and performance as pedagogical tool-*and*-results to facilitate learning/development and it is to these programs we turn to next.

Unique Outside of School Programs using Play and Performance as Pedagogy

Shakespeare and Autism. In her article "Shakespeare and Autism: Reenvisioning Expression, Communication, and Inclusive Communities" (2016), Robin Post discusses The Hunter Heartbeat Method (HHM), created by Kelly Hunter. The HHM is a theatrical performance-based program designed for neurodivergent communities featuring a series of games that "bring the unique characteristics of and interactions between Shakespeare's characters into focus as children on the spectrum portray the characters and tell the story of the selected play" (p. 158). This program transforms the complex nature of Shakespeare's plots into a series of games that are specifically adapted to address the communicative challenges prevalent in individuals on the spectrum. It works to develop and strengthen the communicative and interactive skills of individuals with ASD in very similar ways Kramer and Freedman Fask's work with transition youth and college students. HHM's method is flexible and adaptive and "makes possible for those on the spectrum to explore various modes of communicative expression that facilitates social interaction. Additionally, the work leads to greater access, familiarity and ease with a wider variety of cultural activities" (p. 159).

The pedagogy and structure of the HHM both require and result in the creation of a safe social space where individuals involved utilize Shakespeare's text, rhythm, and storytelling to playfully explore vocal, emotional, and physical expression. An emphasis is placed on the children's own heartbeats which helps to "ground their use of Shakespeare's verse in their own organic rhythms" (p. 160). The existing research on the HHM explores how the program

increases social and adaptive functioning, emotional facial recognition and expression, and verbal skills. The intent of the program is to hone in on the communicative and social skill obstacles that can be experienced by the neurodiverse community such as eye contact, spatial awareness, turn taking, leading and following, receiving and giving, emotional recognition and expression, and verbal skills.

One key element of the HHM is structure. "Structure provides the boundaries within which it becomes safe for [HHM] participants to explore" (p. 169). This structure provides a sense of safety and reliability in which participants feel free to explore play. Post asserts that without this structure or order, chaos is likely to result, and while this assertion applies loosely to anyone engaged in play, it is particularly relevant to children on the spectrum who often feel more comfortable if they know the specific rules of the environment in which they are to function. It is important to note that having a structure does not take away from the process by attaching an expected result to the end product, but rather, assists in building a safe space for people to engage, relate, and create an environment together where everyone feels comfortable.

The opening exercise used in HHM, the "heartbeat hello" is a good example of both the workings of the HHM as well as the dependency on structure. The opening activity that starts each session is titled the "heartbeat hello" and serves to connect group to each other and to the environment in which they will engage. "The rhythm of iambic pentameter, the metrical line Shakespeare used to write his plays, is very similar to modern day speech patterns" (p. 178). For this activity, all participants take part in tapping out their heartbeats, an action that conveys to everyone the session is beginning. This warm up activity includes an acknowledgement of each individual's internal rhythm and an attempt to sync up with others. "All participants share in an awakening of the internal, emotional, physical, and vocal life and what may appear as a

seemingly simple activity can actually be quite profound, equalizing, and empowering for all involved" (p. 179).

Post offers an example of this needed structure by recalling a young boy named Nicolas who had taken to sitting next to her during sessions. One day, while waiting for the other children to arrive, Post attempted to break routine and engage the children present in conversation about some of the situations that had come up in the previous week's session. Because she attempted to start this dialogue before engaging in the opening heartbeat hello activity, it was met by Nicolas with a stern "NO" and a physical gesture that suggested, "This is out of bounds." Nicolas was not comfortable changing the structure of things, and Post moved quickly to honor his feelings. This is not to say that Nicolas could not demonstrate adaptive creativity; the text illustrates he most certainly could. It simply points to the fact that children on the spectrum rely very much on routine and order and if we are to truly meet people where they are at, feelings such as this must be respected.

I see this in my own work when trying to utilize play and performance. The children I work with are far more open and accepting to trying new things as long as they know the activities are coming, and also, that they will end. Visual schedules are very common in my therapy sessions, although as time goes by, they begin to change from day to day as I encourage my clients to co-create our schedule for the session based on what we think we would like to build that day. As indicated in chapter 2, this simple action gives my clients a sense of empowerment as it is not their instructor telling them what to do and when to do it, but rather a plan of action we create together, one in which everyone's feelings, needs, and desires are addressed.

Another key component to the HHM is praise. “Praise is embedded in and repeated throughout the process. Guides (the facilitator and the therapists working with the children) are encouraged to praise their child partners consistently throughout their work together and very specifically when a child masters a specific task” (p. 181). This praise ranges in emphasis from a simple “thumbs up” to a more sophisticated “You’ve done a wonderful job waiting for your turn to speak” to a group praise such as “Let’s give ourselves a round of applause.” This praise provides a meta-experience that enables social comfort and confident performances in the future. “The HHM games create an environment where children, facilitators, and guides come together and receive the same set of criteria to practice play and connect with a shared sense of meeting in the middle … [this] diminish[es] the internalized sense for someone on the spectrum that he or she is ‘deficient’” (p. 187).

Actionplay. In his article “We Don’t Want to Fit in: A Reflection on the Revolutionary Inclusive Theater Practices of the Miracle Project and Actionplay for Adolescents on the Autism Spectrum,” Aaron Feinstein (2016) defines his company Actionplay as a program that “focuses on the idea of being a community with rules and ideas defined by the performers, outside any methodology, and routed in revolutionary practice” (p. 265). Actionplay engages teenagers and young adults on the autistic spectrum in improvisation and performance. Originally, the intention for Actionplay was an inclusive drama group for teenagers in New York City with an emphasis on play and creative improvisation, rather than a focus on creating a final production. In a very tool-*and*-result way, Feinstein resisted defining the groups projects or employing any specific (tool-*for*-result) methodologies. He wanted to make room for the group to decide what its goals were and the paths they might travel to get there. He indicates that “without a clear goal or

direction to head in, [they] were in for a far messier process. It meant the group actually had to come up with their own ideas and ways of working together" (p. 266).

Although Feinstein never pushed the idea of creating performances, almost every group wished to relay their Actionplay experiences by creating a community performance. He admits to being a bit wary of creating such productions at first. The expectations from family, friends, and the community during such a performance can be rather stressful. In addition, many of the performances that occurred offstage expressed pain and sadness. Feinstein worried that creating a performance for the community would result in a pressure to present something uplifting and the reality of the intimate, off stage performances would not be honored. He goes on to indicate that many of the youth he works with have been ridiculed and bullied throughout their lives due to their unique interests or because of their "disorders."

Bullied himself as a youth and eventually finding solace/community within drama club, Feinstein recognizes the importance of building a safe space for communities of individuals that feel *othered,* to come together and build something new. Feinstein believes that points of difference conceived by others as "disorders" can actually be strengths. He discusses the fact that many of the youth they work with at Actionplay have been through ABA therapy and come to resent it for the very reasons I discuss in chapter 1. Actionplay's solution to addressing the culture of compliance is grounded in comedy. Feinstein quotes Orwell who suggests: "A thing is funny when it upsets the established order. Every joke is a revolution" (Orwell in Feinstein, 2016, p. 214). The Actionplay team decided upfront that all ideas, activities, and intentions, however divergent, would be completely accepted, and by employing the improvisational tradition of "yes and…," would serve as the groundwork for their performances.

Feinstein recalls a particular performance created by the group over a few months of building together that honed in on the group's extreme distaste for compliance-based therapy. In response to their discussions, the group created a play in which the mighty God Zeus had cast a spell, turning everyone into statues because he worried their unique abilities would make them more powerful. Each "actor" was given the opportunity to create their own version of a god self which ranged from the God of rock, to the God of zombies, depending on each child's interests. In the play, Zeus's spell wears off, and the ancient Gods who had slumbered for so long awaken in modern-day New York where they were overwhelmed with the sensory overload of a busy, bustling city. As they moved about their new world, they met the villainous leader of a mega corporation named Martin Whitebox who sang a song about the importance of "fitting in." The performer playing the evil Martin Whitebox actually wrote the song himself and included phrases like "quiet hands" a common program taught in ABA therapy to curb hand flapping, a common sensory controlling mechanism utilized by people on the spectrum. His song highlights the tension this young performer felt during his own encounter with ABA therapy and he often told his fellow actors is was fun to play the part of the "evil villain." The final song was titled *We Don't Want to Fit In* which includes the lyrics "So we're not the same, it's our uniqueness. Difference isn't weakness! We don't want to fit in!" (p. 218). I was very struck by this young man's story and the final song he and the group wrote together. The fact that he and his co-creators felt frustrated enough with ABA therapy to write an entire performance about their aversions really made me question my role in behavioral therapy. If my desire is to elevate my clients, it was becoming clearer and clearer that ABA therapy is not the way to do it.

The positive social updrafts created by Post and Feinstein engage neurodiverse communities in the co-creation of life-spaces in which individuals become valued members of a

co-created community rather than clients/individuals in need of fixing/repair. Within these life-spaces, they find *strength* rather than weakness in their differences and build meaningful relationships as they engage in the activity of learning/development. In this chapter I have explored several different ways people are trying to bring the transformative and developmental power of play and performance into the world. Whether it be within the current education system, creating a new school all together, or creating programs outside of school, all of these play and performance pedagogies I have discussed empower their students, provide them with a sense of belonging, and facilitate a heightened ability for flexibility for everyone involved. So where do we go next? What do we do now? Well, dear reader, as you will see in the following chapter, the answers to those questions are completely up to us. In chapter 5, I will wonder with you how we might keep building.

Chapter 5

Not a Conclusion but an Invitation

Perhaps the most difficult part of writing this thesis has been trying to figure out how it should end. Originally, I had planned to construct some sort of template or lay out a set of rules for educators/coaches/therapists to use within their learning/therapeutic environments. Yet any attempt to describe or provide such a thing would be overly emphasizing of tool-*for*-result methodology, the very thing I am arguing against. *Practicing* method rather than *applying* can be quite tricky for several reasons. First, one must recognize that every interaction with the group/community one is engaging with will be different depending on the local circumstances of said group. Even within the same group/community, the tools developed for the different tasks the collective is addressing will need to be shaped and reshaped and the environment arranged and rearranged continuously. In order to practice method, we need to be toolmakers, not just tool users.

Second, the practice of method can be a bit sloppy. While one might have a destination for the group in mind, the route taken to get there will consist of many surprising twists and turns. As much as one tries to plan ahead, the final product/destination of tool-*and*-result methodology is unplannable and unknowable. As I mentioned in chapter 1, not planning ahead does not mean there are not/should not be goals. What it does mean is that planning for/expecting a particular outcome can leave one rather frustrated or disappointed when things do not turn out as one planned. So how does it end? When can one say that they have accomplished what you set out to accomplish? How can one tell if they have created an environment where learning/development are flourishing? The answer is (insert dramatic musical cue), I alone do not

have the answer, nor do I need to. That is probably not what you were expecting to hear at this point in a graduate thesis, but here we are.

This chapter then is not a conclusion, but a call to action—an invitation for you, dear reader, to explore how the ideas put forth in these pages can be put to work within the communities in which you live, play, learn, teach, work, heal, and grow. Recall in chapter 1 Robinson's agricultural model of learning. He stated that no one can gauge the outcome of development, all we can do is create environments in which it can flourish. If my experiences working with the neurodiverse community and my research have taught me anything, it is that *everyone* has something that they are bringing to the world, regardless of neurological/physical differences. Hector Aristizábal (2018), founder of *ImaginAction*, an organization built to help people tap the transformative power of theater once said, "A real teacher [should] see, not punish. [Should] bless, not curse… all of us are creative, all of us have gifts. Every single being, not just those who have access and privilege" (Aristizábal, 2018, 2:08). He goes on to assert that education should teach us about virtues, collaboration, empathy, love, and about how to become a better human being. He believes we must transform our education/learning environments into life-enhancing and life-serving communities where we connect with each other and the world. If we are to break free of the rather *anti-developmental* education slump we currently find ourselves in, we must work on recognizing the capacity within one another to be revolutionary co-creators of history, culture, and the world. A good place to start is by being and becoming a lot more like Vygotsky's toolmakers.

Toolmakers, and the toolmaker's tools explored in chapter 2, give us the means to *practice* method rather than *applying* it. This is a difficult concept to wrap one's head around to be sure, especially given that we have been conditioned to think in very dualistic ways about

ourselves, other people, the way we learn, and how we develop. Tools-for-result, that is, tools that are created and then applied to reach certain/particular ends, are everywhere. Yet, as discussed, humans do more than simply utilize predetermined tools to achieve particular ends, we also create specialized tools (the toolmaker's kind of tools) in order to transform what we have been given. All of us possess the capability to be specialized toolmakers regardless of neurological/physical difference. When we shift our focus from behavior to activity, we reconnect our everyday activities to our socio-cultural-historical-ness and make room for us to explore who we are becoming—not only as a person, but as an entire species. It is empowering to realize that history is not something that has happened but a co-created activity that is *happening*. Practicing tool-and-result methodology allows learning/development to flourish organically by meeting everyone where they are at, accepting what they have to offer, and then using the wealth of collective experiences, aptitudes, and talents, to build something new and revolutionary together.

The practice of method—that is to say, the *activity* of it—is where growth happens. For activity-ists like Holzman (1997, 2010, 2017), Lobman (2015, 2018), Perone (2014), and Vygotsky (1987) suggest that activity *is* the ZPD. In chapter three we discussed some of the more traditional understandings of the ZPD which morph Vygotsky's brilliant ideas into practices like scaffolding or dyadic relationships, rather than the intensely social "theory of becoming" that Holzman believes he was developing. For Holzman, learning/development does not simply sometimes *involve* "the other," learning/development *entails* "the other." In order to (re)ignite our development, we must free ourselves from dualistic and individuated styles of learning/developing and instead, embrace the dialectical and social nature of our species. The beauty of the ZPD is that the relational activity that emerges when we bring together the

components needed to create it (e.g., heterogeneous groups, creativity, play, imitation, and completion), we naturally, organically, and simultaneously create the dialectical interplay that is learning/development.

While writing this thesis, I have taken a new job at a school that was created for children with autism and other "learning disorders." The school is a unique blend of ABA therapy and academia. While the school does indeed batch the children by age and/or cognitive ability, they also encourage a lot of collaboration and engagement between groups as well as the teachers, coaches, therapists, administration, and facilities. It has been interesting to watch the students interact with one another and the faculty. In just the few short months that we have been in operation (this location is new as of September, 2018), I have seen many students make significant social progress simply by the level of interaction encouraged by the staff and the administrative team. I have had the pleasure of teaching art club on Friday afternoons where I am bringing as many aspects of the ZPD into the group activities as I can. For Halloween, we co-created a mural out of black paper and chalk. I encouraged students to add whatever they wanted to the mural and assured those who felt hesitant or unsure that there were no wrong answers. I admit, I had a vision in my head of what I wanted it to look like, and the process was a bit messy with many students drawing on top of what other students had added before. Some students lost interest rather quickly and decided to play with one another or dance and sing to music instead, others spent 20 minutes adding to the paper, some imitating the more advanced artists/dancers/singers, others making it up as they went along, and all of us bouncing ideas off of one another as to what we might do next. I did my best to facilitate the session in such a way that whatever direction it took (whatever the group decided it should be), was accepted and built with. The completed project was amazing despite the fact that it was not necessarily our entire

focus. Each student's expression of self/community shined through and came together in a fantastic co-created mural. But more than that was the feeling in the room. It was one of community, of safety, and the joys of social interaction. The point here is, in the absence of a rigid plan of action, learning/development happens, and in much deeper and more profound ways than our current educational system can provide.

In chapter 4, we explored a few schools/programs and outside of school programs that are attempting to utilize play, performance, and applied improv as pedagogical tools in order to reshape the way we currently approach/conceive learning/development. As discussed, improv resembles imaginative play on several levels, and play is a crucial component to learning/development, not just for children, but across the entire lifespan. In play, both old and new possibilities (who we are and who we are becoming) exist in the same moment. Play allows us to try on new ideas within a safe, co-created space and alongside others which opens us up to a multitude of ways of being and doing within the world. In addition, through play and performance we can put ourselves in someone else's shoes and walk around for a while, entertaining what life may be like based on their experiences and interactions of/with the world. If learning/development requires the other, play and performance are very powerful conduits.

As discussed in chapter 4, the beauty of using improv within the neurodiverse community is that it naturally lends itself to the development of the "soft skills" needed to enter the workforce that many people on the autistic spectrum struggle with. Concepts like being present, eye contact, flexible thinking, communication across differences, emotional regulation and recognition, collaboration, and self-advocacy are all "soft skills" that can be developed through the socially engaged activity of improv. As Lois Holzman (2017) once said, "if you can perform on stage, you can perform in life" (p. 76). As students become more comfortable with themselves

and with one another, so too does their confidence in interacting with others. They begin to perform as comedians, singers, dancers, and the group relates to them as such. It is such a joy to witness.

In the first few weeks at my new job, I brought in a board game to play with the group of students I was assigned to in the mornings. The board game is an interesting mix of charades, singing, movement, art, and group interaction. As you move around the board, you draw cards that have activities the players must take part in if they wish to move forward. Activities included things like turning to the person on your right and having a 30 second staring contest, singing *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star* in a baby voice, or moving backwards around the group while giving high fives to every player. At this point in the school year, the students were still very shy and awkward around one another. Most of them interacted more with the adult staff than with other students. They were hesitant to play at first, and some of the students had a difficult time recognizing if people were (to use the student's words), "joking around" or if they were being "obnoxious and rude." However, as time passed, and the students engaged with one another more and more frequently, they have actually started to enjoy the game. As such, I decided I would step it up a notch the next time I had the opportunity.

On the day before Thanksgiving break, I found myself assisting in the room with the same group of students (and a few new faces!). As the group was getting ready to transition to their next activity (a well-deserved pizza/movie party), they became restless and quite loud. I seized the moment and invited everyone to join me in a circle to play a game called "Pass the Energy." The game is quite simple; one member of the group begins the game by transforming a pretend ball of energy into any form they choose and then passing the energy (in its new form) to another player which in turn transforms the energy again. In order to illustrate how it worked, I

began the game with my hands cupped together as if I were holding a ball and immediately dropped my hands to the floor as if the ball were extraordinarily heavy. I than drug the "ball" along the floor and passed it off to the next member of the group who enthusiastically made the energy his own.

The students' offers were so creative and fun but what was especially magical was watching the interaction *between* them. Witnessing the boy who barely spoke to any of the other students at the beginning of the year playing and joking with his peers was extremely moving. Watching the young man who had, at the beginning of the year, been quite a stickler for the way things "ought to be" and often became quite upset when people "did not follow the rules," let go of his "expectations" and play/co-create with the group was absolutely beautiful. While the majority of the group, including the one-on-ones for the students participated, there was one young man who did not join us in the game. He stood just outside the circle observing us. I, and several other faculty attempted to bring him into the activity several times, but each time he politely declined. He never stopped watching us though, and to my way of thinking, that communicates interest. Even if he is not quite ready to jump in, he is still performing.

An important part of this work is acknowledging and respecting people's refusal (which is as much an activity as participation is) while continually offering them openings to participate in whatever capacity they are willing. One of the many benefits of being a toolmaker and practicing method is that doing so affords us the opportunity to revise our activities and offer variations to better suit the group's needs. Perhaps next time the activity is offered, everyone in the circle might start with a ball of energy (as opposed to just one player at a time) and the young man standing outside the circle could offer/call out the "transformations" and the group could perform them together. Having adjusted the activity a bit, the student, despite his alternative role,

is now busy co-creating with the group. Now that I think of it, the role of "transformer" could become a rather sought out position with everyone in the group wanting to give it a try.

An Invite, not a To Do List

So here we are in chapter 5 and you might still be wondering, "How does it end?" Well, my dear reader, my hope is that is does not. This chapter serves as an invitation to keep building with the wonders/offers that I have presented/made throughout our journey thus far. I believe, like Robinson does, that no one can predict how development will happen, and that all we can do is create environments where learning/development can flourish. With this assertion in mind, I use this final section to share some of the insights I have gained while researching/practicing this work and invite you to wonder along with me how you might put some of these insights to use in your own work/communities/environments.

Being flexible is a big one. Contrary to what one might think, being flexible can actually be quite challenging, especially when first beginning this work as the pressure to *produce results* (imagined or not) is quite stressful. While writing this thesis, I was invited by Dr. Tony Perone to co-create a session with an Adult Development class at the University of Washington Tacoma. I recall being quite nervous at first and I took to the task of planning out a series of activities that I hoped would achieve a certain end. I then realized that my thinking/preparations were rather tool-*for*-result, the opposite of what I was trying to create. I had to continuously remind myself that the practice of tool-*and*-result methodology is messy and unpredictable. Being flexible and keeping in mind that it is the process/journey rather than the final product/destination that is important is essential to creating an environment where people are willing to take risks and try out new ideas. Thus, as a facilitator, when thinking about goals (not to be confused with final products) for groups/sessions/projects, it can be helpful ask the group themselves what activities

they wish to create in the world. What changes do they wish to see in their families, schools, and communities? Offers might include discussions/performances about how to be more inclusive or empathetic, how to embrace and create change rather than simply reacting to it, or how to communicate our emotions to others in ways that are beneficial and kind rather than hasty or possibly hurtful.

Another important insight I have gained while exploring this work is that you must trust that the group can and will do what they need to do. The group must also trust each other. Luckily, this trust develops rather organically when we honor the revolutionary stance of improv's "yes and…" philosophy. Due to the fact that all activity/offers brought to the group (whether verbal, gibberish, or gestural) are honored and built with when using "yes and…" philosophy, each member of the group is/feels valued and appreciated. Meeting people where they are at and honoring what it is they have to give is crucial when creating environments where learning/development can flourish.

It is also helpful to have structure (not to be confused with control), especially when working with the neurodiverse community. Having a structure, with distinct activities at the beginning, middle, and end throughout the sessions/school day helps everyone know what to expect, much like the Shakespeare and Autism program does by starting each session with the Hunter Heartbeat Method. As previously discussed, structure can greatly assist people on the spectrum feel more comfortable and thus more willing to take risks. The middle part of the session is where the flexibility comes into play, the place where the group is busy making meaning and collectively co-creating revolutionary activity. At the end, it helps to conclude with a closing activity such as a group check in or performance of what has been created during that day so that everyone has a chance to regroup and reflect.

Finally, it is important to recognize that you have an ever-growing foundation of support. The play and performance community is a global one, with play and performance activity-ist co-creating playful activities all around the world. In September of 2018, I had the honor of presenting at/participating in the Performing the World conference held every two years in New York City. The conference was packed with people utilizing paly and performance in a multitude of ways such as in therapy, education, cooperate training, and health care. The energy and connection between everyone there was something that I am still not able to put into words. I was moved to tears during several workshops and made connections with people (like Lois Holzman, one of the organizers and Lisa Kramer, who just happened to be attending) that I will forever cherish. And the conversation continues. After the conference ended the organizers made sure to create forums for presenters and attendees alike to continue discussing/building together. So, as you continue to wonder/build/create/ and practice tool-and-result methodology, keep in mind that the learning/development revolution is growing and that you are supported on your desire and passion to cultivate the life-spaces in which learning/development flourishes and nourishes our spirits.

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