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The Voices of First Generation

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I. INTRODUCTION

Young people are challenged to find safe spaces where they are encouraged to be creative and self-expressive, and to think critically and engage in open dialogue. Too often they lack opportunities to work together, to build communicative and collaborative skills, which can transfer to academic and life skills. Schools' focus on standardized tests and meeting the status quo are counterintuitive to the true nature of learning, a learning based on interpersonal and intrapersonal growth, multimodal resources for inquiry and discourse, and meaningful experience. In the heterogeneous cultures that have taken shape with globalization, young people need the opportunities to engage in multiple modes of communication, and with diverse groups in order to better understand each other and themselves. The arts can provide these kinds of spaces and opportunities, and set the stage for gaining self-efficacy, self-esteem and self-identity. The problem is, our society is by and large either unaware of, or apathetic to, these contributions that the arts have made both in and out of school. We have lost site of the value of the arts, which were historically woven throughout the fabric of life across sociocultural and socioeconomic boundaries, taking form in objects of everyday use. Today, and for far too long, what is commonly considered art is seen as either unintellectual and frivolous, or overly intellectual and elitist—either way, typically not for the “common people”. This is due, at least in part, to the fact that art has been institutionalized and commoditized, and in turn, stigmatized. By and large, the arts have been downgraded in education, largely stripped of funding both in and out of the school context, placed on pedestals out of reach from ordinary people, and reserved for entertaining those who have enough capital. One might argue that not everyone is interested in participating in arts programs and I believe this is largely due to stigma and exclusivity.

This study focuses on the members of First Generation, a multiethnic and multinational theatre-based youth-leadership program spearheaded by the organization, The Performance Project, located in Springfield, Massachusetts. According to The Performance Project, First Gen uses theatre to create art that “engages the public in dialog about critical social and cultural issues” (performanceproject.org). Throughout the study, I refer to First Generation as “First Gen” as it is commonly referred to as by its members and affiliates. Members include people between the ages of 15-22 who are largely people of color, including African American, Puerto Rican, Haitian, Nepali, and many African countries. There has been at least one group member who identifies as Caucasian since the group was founded in 2008. The Performance Project describes itself as an “inter-generational, inter-cultural mentoring community” (performanceproject.org). It describes what it means to be “first generation” in the context of this program, to include, but not be limited to, the following:

- The first to grow up in the United States
- The first to graduate from high school
- The first to go to college
- The first to speak English as a first language
- The first to be incarcerated
- The first to NOT be incarcerated
- The first to be drug-free
- The first to be openly LGBTQ
- The first to question your faith
- The first to choose a different faith

- The first to break the silence
- The first to be an artist

The research examines the relationship between participating in First Generation and members' self-efficacy, self-esteem and self-identity. I examined what it means to participants to be part of this group, while also asking them what they care about in general in order to gain context for the study and a better understanding of their lives. Other questions guiding my inquiry include: How do participants feel their involvement may impact them academically and in terms of goals? What is its impact on participants' families and others in their communities? How do they perceive of how others identify them before and after their involvement? How does their participation shape their relationships with others, or does it?

Using a phenomenological approach, I conducted eight open-ended interviews—six with First Generation members, one with a previous intern, and one with the director of The Performance Project and First Generation. I observed First Gen workshops and other events, and reviewed videos and documents provided by the organization, as well as the website and Facebook pages. The theoretical framework to which I analyze the research findings begins with John Dewey's pragmatist and constructivist views about education and his concepts about the arts. It follows with a review of other ideas and programs related to arts-based learning and concludes by looking at Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*.

During the course of this study, the youth expressed having gained self-confidence, language skills, a sense of voice, artistic skills, communication and collaboration skills, a better

understanding of people of other ethnic groups and nationalities, and above all, a sense of community in a safe space. They also expressed frustrations regarding aspects of the program and events. My observations, review of program documents and website, and interviews with the two participants of the study who are not First Gen members offered further perspectives on the program and its impact on the youth. I recognize positive outcomes associated with participating in this program, while also acknowledging what I perceive to be some concerns. The study concludes by offering suggestions and raising questions as to how this program and other similar youth-leadership programs and/or school programs could be most beneficial to participants, particularly those that serve multicultural groups and/or groups perceived to be oppressed, as this program does.

II. BACKGROUND

The Performance Project began in September 2000 as a theater program for incarcerated men at the Hampshire Jail and House of Corrections in Northampton, MA. Between 2000 and 2004, co-founders of the The Performance Project, one a dancer/choreographer and the other a visual and theater artist who remains as the director of The Performance Project and First Generation, worked with incarcerated men to produce four plays (The Performance Project Concept Paper, 2008). They hired a professional lighting crew, who turned the jail's visiting room into a blackbox theater where the men performed for the Hampshire Jail's staff and administration, and for the men's family members (Goodwin, 2004; The Performance Project Concept Paper, 2008). Following the success of this program, The Performance Project led theater workshops with other groups, including women at the Hampden Jail in Ludlow and youth in local correctional programs. The organization refers to the ensemble members who were incarcerated during the program as the *Inside Group*, while referring to the ensemble members who had been incarcerated, but were no longer, as the *Outside Group* (2008; 2004).

Today, The Performance Project is focused on the following three programs for youth:

- First Generation
- Ubuntu Summer Arts Program
- The Mural Project

First Generation

First Generation has performed two productions: *Through the Eye of Bakok* and *Ripple Effect*. Venues include Northampton Center for the Arts, Hampshire College, Springfield College, and the Ko Festival of Performance at Amherst College. They have also participated in an *Undoing*

Racism® workshop in Springfield, MA, and have taught a workshop to members of the organization, Youth Action Coalition, as part of a “Diversity Week” workshop series at Brattleboro Union High School in Vermont (The Performance Project Concept Paper, 2008; The Performance Project grant proposal documents, 2008-2012). They have performed at a National AIDS Awareness Day event, collaborated with youth and artists from the local Bhutanese/Nepali communities to support their first cultural event in the area, and have participated in two community celebrations with a local Burundian dance company (2008-2012).

Many First Gen members have been recruited through project collaborators, representatives from immigrant and refugee communities, high school guidance counselors and family members (The Performance Project Concept Paper, 2008; The Performance Project grant proposal documents, 2008-2012). In addition, they have been recruited through the Department of Youth Services (DYS), which is the juvenile justice agency for Massachusetts, through Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), and through Big Brothers/Big Sisters (BBBS) (2008; 2008-2012).

Ubuntu Arts Program

For three summers since 2008, First Gen members have partnered with Rebecca M. Johnson Visual and Performing Arts Magnet School in The Performance Project's, Ubuntu Summer Arts Program. This program is described as an arts, literacy, and leadership project (The Performance Project grant proposal documents, 2008-2012). Here, First Gen members have worked as hired apprentices to mentor 3rd, 4th, and 5th graders, and have assisted professional artists and teachers for five weeks (2008-2012). They have provided support in workshops on theater, dance, poetry, visual art, and music, while also helping the Ubuntu participants with homework (2008-2012).

The Mural Project

Involvement in the court system is a theme that runs throughout several of The Performance Project programs. The Mural Project, which began in 2007, is geared specifically for youth involved with DYS (The Performance Project Concept Paper, 2008). Here, youth, age 14-21, work with professional mural artists and The Performance Project's Youth Programs director for six months, two to three times per week, to create large murals for public spaces (2008). First Gen members are also commonly hired to work as paid mentors to the youth participating in this program (2008). So far the participants have created four murals displayed in downtown Springfield, MA (First Generation and The Performance Project Activity Log, 2013).

III. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK & LITERATURE REVIEW

The topic

This literature review examines how participating in the arts can contribute to self-efficacy, self-esteem, and self-identity. More specifically, the research presented here demonstrates how participating in the arts has been linked to gains in interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, creative and critical thinking, communication and collaborative skills, community building, and even academic achievement and cognitive development. Art is a tool for learning and making meaning of what is learned, often outside of the genre of art per se. This learning in turn contributes to self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-identity.

This review also calls to attention the complexity involved in participating in and facilitating theatre and dance programs, particularly with diverse and marginalized people, and the complexity surrounding the concept of art and its value. The definition of art is subjective. In the context of this study, I define art as visual, audible, and/or gestural forms of communication that reflect creative thinking—dance, theatre, poetry, story telling, video, music, drawing, etcetera. Art can be anything as it is essentially a state of mind, but for the purpose of this study, it can most easily be defined as the forms I have described.

Theoretical framework

This review begins by discussing theories on education and the arts proposed by the constructivist theorists, John Dewey and Lev Vygotsky. For the purpose of this study, I build a theoretical foundation from the ideas of Dewey, while recognizing Dewey's and Vygotsky's influences in the theoretical discussion that follows regarding education, the arts, and the

relationships between the two. The discussion follows with a review of other concepts and programs related to arts-based learning, and concludes by looking at Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed and Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, making some comparisons to Dewey's ideas and the others I present.

The arts—why should we care?

Our society is by and large either unaware of or apathetic to the contributions the arts can make, both in and out of schools. Real learning is too often not taking place in schools and the focus on standardized tests and meeting the status quo is counterintuitive to the true nature of learning, a learning that is based on interpersonal and intrapersonal growth, multimodal resources for inquiry and discourse, and at least as important, meaningful experience.

The culture of our schools and our society at large has lost sight of the value of the arts, which were once woven through the fabric of life across sociocultural and socioeconomic boundaries, taking form in objects of everyday use. Today, and for far too long, what is commonly considered art is seen as either unintellectual and frivolous, or overly intellectual and elitist—either way, typically not for “common folk”. This is due, at least in part, to the fact that art has been institutionalized and commoditized, and in turn, stigmatized. By and large, the arts have been placed on pedestals out of reach from the masses and reserved for entertaining those who have enough capital. One might argue that not everyone is interested in participating in arts programs, and I believe this is largely due to stigma and exclusivity. My aim is to show how the arts are fundamental to learning and making meaning of our everyday lives, and therefore, should be more inclusive, appreciated and supported in and out of school contexts.

Why Dewey?

In my initial reading of John Dewey and his theories on education, I was struck by the notion that Dewey, who's contribution to the 1940's education reform in the US, earning him the title by the New York Times as "the father of American philosophy" (1952), and who's influence reaches internationally, was a firm believer that there exists a link between learning, and quite literally, cognitive development, and participation in the arts. More curious, if not startling, is the fact that this message, more than sixty years after his death, has largely been ignored.

Dewey's inspiration and foundation

Before discussing Dewey's views on the relationship between learning and the arts, it is important to highlight his theories regarding education and one of his major sources of inspiration, American psychologist, philosopher and pragmatist, William James (Westbrook as cited by Cochran, P.14, 1998). Dewey wrote that James saw the difference in the living and the mechanical, and called for recognition of pluralism and individuality (1998). These pragmatist views resonated with Dewey, as they emphasize, in his words, "feelings for the qualities and traits of that which live" (P. 20).

It should be noted that Dewey found James' ideas about pluralism and individuality at a time when behaviorism was the theory accepted by the mainstream as truth. Schools had shifted from an earlier more organic pedagogy to *rote* (repetitive) teaching methods, and evaluations based on standardized tests.

Dewey credits Jamesian psychology for placing importance on social categories, such as communication and participation (1998), two of the most important elements that became Dewey's pedagogy. He determined that when individuals are engaged socially and are able to participate and contribute to knowledge, they more affectively and naturally learn. I would add that while learners contribute to knowledge, they also learn by teaching, and begin to view themselves more capable, which leads to gains in self-efficacy, self-esteem and self-identity. Other learners then are likely to view their peers more capable, rather than look solely to an authoritative voice, such as a teacher, as having all of the answers. Dewey insisted that teachers should not be seen as all knowing (1998), a sentiment echoed by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, who criticized mainstream pedagogy for turning students into "containers" to be "filled" by teachers, a concept he refers to as "banking" (2000, P. 72). As a progressive voice for his time, Dewey became a leading figure in the philosophies of pragmatism, as well as *constructivism*, which I address in the next section.

Constructivist theory

In Dewey's *Experience and Education* (1938) he proposes "every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after" (P. 27). He argued that learners make *meaning* by using the knowledge they have gained in their own experiences to *construct* new knowledge, and thus, learning occurs more naturally. This phenomenon, that learning is best accomplished by using prior knowledge to *construct* new knowledge, is the main tenet of *constructivist theory*. Jerome Bruner, another constructivist theorist, later refers to this learning process as *scaffolding* (Merriam et al., 2007). Constructivist theorists who emphasize the importance of *social interaction*, in addition to

constructing knowledge from previously learned knowledge, are referred to more specifically as *social constructivists* (2007). As Dewey believed in the power of participation and that learners, including children, could, and should, learn from each other, he identifies with social constructivists.

Another social constructivist who was influential in education and saw great value in the arts was Russian philosopher of psychology, Lev Vygotsky, who claimed that every individual is inherently equipped with a set of tools for forming knowledge and meaning, which are gained through social interactions, and heavily influenced by culture and language (Efland, 2002). These tools, of which *language*, he says, is the most prominent, are akin to *symbols* that we assign meaning to and then transfer to others (2002). Vygotsky's message implies that we are equipped from birth with the tools for learning, yet it is through socializing that we are able to put those tools to use and make meaning of what we learn. This reasoning can point to why he places such importance on language as a tool.

Brazilian theatre director and social activist, Augusto Boal, also believed in the power of language and in his *Theatre of the Oppressed*, he shows how theatre can be used as a language (2005). This language, he said, crosses verbal language borders, offering a more inclusive, diverse and democratic approach to communication and education (2005).

Although Vygotsky and Dewey both stressed the power of social interaction and environment as catalysts for learning, Dewey placed less emphasis than Vygotsky on language, and more on the

embodied and aesthetic experience. Dewey says, “the senses are the organs through which the live creature participates directly in the on-goings of the world about it” (2005, P.22).

Dewey on nature, art and intelligence

Dewey was a lover of nature and art, and refers often to the human-nature-art relationship as an embodied one (2005). He drew connective lines between education, nature and the arts, and appreciated the *process* of making art as much as the end result. He considered the process to be an embodied experience as well as a cognitive one.

In his *Art as Experience*, Dewey professes:

Art is . . . prefigured in the very processes of living. It is proof that man uses the materials and energies of nature with intent to expand his own life, and that he does so in accord with the structure of his organism—brain, sense organs, and muscular systems. Art is the living and concrete proof that man is capable of restoring consciously, and thus on the plane of meaning, the union of sense, need, impulse and action characteristic of the live creature” (2005, P. 26).

Dewey’s definition of “art” can be found in his choices of reference throughout *Art as Experience* where he discusses and quotes several classic Western artists, including visual artists Raphael, Manet, Van Gogh, etc., as well as writers, Thoreau, Poe, Shakespeare, etc. (2005). In his statement above, Dewey emphasizes *meaning* and associates that meaning with *nature* and the *body*—*senses, muscular systems*, and at least as important, the *brain*.

Dewey insists upon there being a relationship between making art and the kind of thought process that requires intelligence. He proposes that artists think in “qualitative media” (2005, P. 15) because, in the process of making art, they perceive relationships between what they have already done, and what they need to do next, while being in control of the process (2005). In such, Dewey views the process of making art in the same way he views his constructivist pedagogy for formal education—to construct new ideas from previous ideas.

In response to claims that art is unintellectual, Dewey argues:

Any idea that the artist does not think as intently and as penetratingly as a scientific inquirer is absurd (2005, P. 47) . . . Observation and of the kind of intelligence that is exercised in perception of qualitative relations characterizes creative work in art (P. 52) . . . Any idea that ignores the necessary role of intelligence in production of works of art is based upon identification of thinking with the use of one special kind of material, verbal signs and words. To think effectively in terms of relations of qualities is as severe a demand upon thought as to think in terms of symbols, verbal and mathematical . . . Art demands more intelligence than does most of the so-called thinking that goes on among those who pride themselves on being “intellectual” (P. 47)

Although, Dewey makes references in *Art and Experience* as to what he believes qualifies as art, it is not clear where he would draw the line (if he would) between what he feels constitutes as art and what does not, and at what point he would consider the kind of thinking that is done “in terms of symbols, verbal and mathematical” may require more cognitive thinking than does making art. Interestingly, his reference to “symbols” is associated with *non-art-related* thinking,

rather than with *art-related* thinking, which comes as no surprise considering his references to artist are those who are not known for symbolism, as it is typically defined.

The value of art—more than intrinsic, more than monetary

Vygotsky, like Dewey was interested in cognitive development and saw a parallel between making art and the functions of the brain (1971). Unlike Dewey, however, who placed more emphasis on the human-nature experience, Vygotsky places more emphasis on the psychological aspect of the arts. In his *Psychology of Art*, he claims, “art’s true nature is that of transtantiation” (1971, P. 243). His use of the word *transtantiation* suggests *transformation*, and is a term typically associated with the metaphor, *turning water into wine*. He makes a case for the value of art with the following:

Psychological investigation reveals that art is the supreme center of biological and social individual processes in society, that it is a method for finding equilibrium between man and his world in the most critical and important stages of his life” (P. 259).

His statement suggests the therapeutic value of art, particularly during “critical and important stages of life”. This could be interpreted to mean during *times of trouble* but it could also apply to *adolescence*.

Dewey also makes reference to the therapeutic value of art but emphasizes a more embodied relationship by saying:

When an organism shares in the ordered relations of its environment . . . it secure[s] the stability essential to living. And when the participation comes after

a phase of disruption and conflict, it bears within itself the germs of a consummation akin to the aesthetic (2005, P.14).

Dewey and Vygotsky are not only concerned with art for what may appear in the previous quotes as therapeutic benefits; they suggest the arts are a necessary condition for education. They both dismiss the notion that the arts are most useful as a source of entertainment.

Dewey argues, “an incredible amount of observation and of the kind of intelligence that is exercised in perception of qualitative relations characterizes creative work in art” (2005, P. 52). What Dewey means by “creative work of art” is, again, subjective, nonetheless, we can refer to art that he refers to in his *Art as Experience* to inform our assumptions—visual artists, such as Raphael, Manet, and Van Gogh, as well as writers, such as Thoreau, Poe, and Shakespeare (2005). What is clear is his stance on the relationship between making art and intelligence. He felt that those who do not see this relationship see too narrowly a view of intelligence as “one special kind of material, verbal signs and words” (2005, P. 47). He goes on to say “to think effectively in terms of relations of qualities is as severe a demand upon thought as to think in terms of symbols, verbal and mathematical” (P. 47). With this, he recognizes that intelligence is not bound to a narrow set of skills, but his claims are vague and leave us to wonder at what point, if any, Dewey would regard one level of activity more cognitive than another. Notably, he refers to symbols, including verbal symbols, as cognitive “material”—which, according to Vygotsky, are the most important “tools” for cognitive development (Efland, 2002). What may come across as ironic is that most of Dewey’s references to art are of the types that would classify as *fine art* or *high art*, which tend to be associated with elitism. Nonetheless, he mentions how art

was once part of everyday life for common people, and writes extensively on how art has been commoditized and stigmatized (2005).

Art as commodity

Dewey suggests that the reason art has been placed on a pedestal high above the mainstream culture is due to the establishment of museums and other nationalist and imperialist institutions (2005). He insists, “the growth of capitalism has been a powerful influence in the development of the museum as the proper home for works of art and in the promotion of the idea that they are apart from the common life” (P. 7). The objects that classify as art, according to Dewey, “reflect and establish superior cultural status, while their segregation from the common life reflects the fact that they are not part of a native and spontaneous culture” (P. 5). He points to examples of art that were once common domestic objects, such as pots, rugs, and cave paintings (2005).

More recently, as Dewey notes, objects of art and artistic practices “are a kind of counterpart of a holier-than-thou attitude” (P. 7) and “something to be explained away or apologized for (P. 5).

These sentiments are expressed in a study I conducted in 2012, examining how Hampshire College Art students felt about their experiences as art students. Each person I spoke with referred to the notions of art as elitist and something to be apologized for (Lopp, 2012). One person pointed to how inspired she had been while living part-time in Mexico throughout her life, where she said art was a natural part of people’s lives, rich or poor (2012). She explained how she was reluctant to study art once she returned to the US because it seemed financially irresponsible, and because of the “stigma” associated with the idea of “privilege” and art thought of as a “joke” (2012). These words echoed throughout the study, yet each person had chosen to

take the risk and pursue the arts because of a few other consistent threads—communication, community, and meaningful experience (2012). They each said they see art as a means to communicate ideas that are often difficult to translate in other formats, while one person specified, “it’s just the way my brain works” (2012). They each expressed identifying with, and enjoying the community they have found in art spaces, and they said it is more meaningful to them than any other academic or career choice at this point in their lives (2012).

It deeply affects the practice of living, driving away aesthetic perceptions that are necessary ingredients of happiness (John Dewey, 2005, P. 9).

Multiple Intelligences theory

Dewey refers to using “qualitative intelligence” to make art and suggests that those who do not recognize this relationship have a view of intelligence as “one special kind of material, verbal signs and words” (2005, P. 47). Another philosopher, who emerged later, who expanded on this notion is American developmental psychologist, Howard Gardner. In 1984 Gardner proposed his theory of multiple intelligences (Education for the 21st Century, The 21st Century Learning Initiative, 2001, P. 7). These include:

- *Linguistic*
- *Numerical*
- *Musical*
- *Spatial*
- *Kinesthetic*
- *Interpersonal*
- *Intra-personal*
- *Naturalistic*—Gardner added in 1997 (Bransford et al., 2000, P.101).

Peter Drucker appears to agree with the notion of multiple intelligences as he eloquently proposes, “learning is as personal as fingerprints—no two people learn exactly alike each has a different speed, a different rhythm, a different attention span” (Drucker as cited by Education for the 21st Century, 2001, P. 43). The notion of multiple intelligences should have sparked radical changes in education, and although an evaluation of its impact on policy and overall public opinion is beyond the scope of this study, it does not appear to have made much of a difference.

Multiliteracies and multiple identities

Multiple intelligences suggest multiple modes of learning. According to Gunther Kress, we can more effectively learn with multiliteracies using linguistic, visual, audio, gestural and spatial modes of meaning (as cited by Liaw, M., & Warschauer, 2006). Kress is Professor of Semiotics and Education in the Department of Culture, Communication and Media at the Institute of Education, University of London. He is best known for his work in multiliteracies, which I argue are the same and/or similar modes of expression and communication as are the arts. In other words, I find that there is a great deal of crossover between the two genres.

In an article in the Harvard Educational Review (1997), Kress and a host of other leaders in this ever-emerging field (most known in the US, James Gee, Professor of Literacy Studies at the University of Arizona) argue that multiliteracies enable people to access the “evolving language of work, power, and community” (1997, P. 1). Multiliteracies, which again, can be associated with the arts, widen the scope of learning, create spaces for shared knowledge, and foster meaning making. Examples of applying multiliteracies may include using music to teach poetry,

using dance to teach numeracy, using theatre to teach history, or using blogs to teach language. For example, a study examining an ESL class shows positive outcomes for ESL students using blogs to “bridge from a more colloquial style of writing to a more academic style” (Bloch as cited by Liaw & Warschauer, 2006 P. 6). In another case, an ESL teacher encouraged students to practice grammar and pronunciation by having them create imagery with photos based on their own oral narrative and written scripts (2006). These are examples of how people are taking learning into their own hands while making meaning from their experiences—exactly what Dewey, Freire, Boal, and others advocated for decades ago.

Arjun Appadurai, Professor of Anthropology and South Asian Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago, raises the idea of how media plays a role in transforming identity. “All over the world, migration, electronic media, and the work of the imagination of the great masses of the people have detached culture from place, creating new, polyglot, and heterogeneous cultural landscapes” (Appadurai as cited by Dimitriadis et al., 2001, P. 5).

Dimitriadis et al. make an argument for using postcolonial art in multicultural education that can be applied to the concept of using multiliteracies with the following:

By systematically transgressing genre confinement, by contesting social and epistemological hierarchies, and by operating in a plurality of registers, postcolonial art provides a paradigm of heterogeneous cultural origins that best models a pragmatics of pedagogy for our times (Dimitriadis et al., 2001, P. 5).

What they suggest is that by expanding genres or modes of communication and/or forms of expression, and by challenging institutional knowledge, postcolonial art, as it represents the heterogeneous identities that form with globalization, can help to create understanding about the discursiveness and complexity of identities, as expressed by the artists who created them.

Boal describes in *Theatre of the Oppressed* (2005), how people learn to communicate and make meaning of their lives using theatre, which today can be associated with multiliteracies. Further and more specific, regarding an earlier point Boal makes about language, he argues that theatre is a “a language capable of being utilized by any person with or without artistic talent and that by learning a new language, a person acquires a new way of knowing reality and of passing that knowledge to others” (P. 121).

I will add that imagery created with theatre and other visual modes is powerfully effective for forming and projecting identity—both self-identity and identity as perceived by others.

Professor of Media and Cultural Studies at the University of Wollongong in Australia, Chris Barker proposes that identity is “not only of self-description but also of social ascription” (2005, P. 222). In other words, one’s identity is not only in the form that she or he sees it to be, but is also in the form(s) that others see it to be. What more, identity is too often based on *myth*.

According to French philosopher and social theorist, Roland Barthes, meanings are based on connotations, i.e. cultural codes for forming meanings, and meaning is made in the form of *myths* (Barker, 2005). Another French philosopher and social theorist, Michel Foucault, calls this consequence a *regime of truth* (Hall, 2000, P. 49), i.e. an accepted truth based on society’s belief that it is true. Being able to form and project one’s own identity by using multiliteracy modes

and/or art offers a strategy for dispelling myths and mitigating the consequences of a regime of truth.

The arts and neurocognitive development

Other scholars who acknowledge the power of multimodality and/or arts, and share Dewey's and Vygotsky's views regarding sensory and physiological links to the arts, include current researchers in the field of neurocognitive development. Professor of Psychology at the Interdisciplinary Center in Herzliya, Israel, Son Priminger suggests that repeated experience in the arts may alter cognitive, emotional, and behavioral patterns as well as their underlying neural circuits" (2012, P. 1). She suggests the brain and cognition are capable of being transformed by artistic experience, and that we can take this knowledge into account to create art that generates transformative experiences with particular artistic or rehabilitation goals in mind (2012). Terms, such as *artistic experience*, are, again, subjective; however, research showing more specific relationships between art and cognitive performance include a study that shows how prefrontal regions of the brain are activated by performing musical improvisation (Bengtsson as cited by Preminger, 2012). What is encouraging about this phenomenon is that music is an art form that is by and large embraced globally, and thus, may be a more useful "tool", to use Vygotsky's term, for stimulating brain activity.

Research also shows links between improvisation performed by actors and stimulus of the prefrontal regions of the brain (Preminger, 2012). According to Preminger, improvisational practices performed by actors highly resemble classical neuropsychological assessments for prefrontal functions, and suggests that improvisation training in the performing arts, such as in

theatre and music, may be able to serve as training and rehabilitation for prefrontal functions (2012).

A report submitted jointly by educators in Canada and the US to the UNESCO planning committee for the World Congress of Arts Education regarding a high school arts program called *Learning through the Arts* also suggests that the arts enhance cognitive development and that “academic achievement across the curriculum is enhanced by arts instruction at all grade levels” (Eisner as cited by Irwin et al., 2006, P. 1). The study highlights how the arts are used as “integrated tools for knowledge generation and appraisal” as standard practice in Canadian elementary schools, and preferred practice in Canadian secondary schools” (2006, P.1). The educational practices of Canada go beyond the scope of this study; however, it is intriguing to consider that the US’s Northern neighbors are using the arts to “generate knowledge” and for “appraisal”, while in the US, the arts are still undervalued and underutilized in school curriculum.

The findings in the UNESCO study also site a relationship between the arts-based curriculum and teachers’ attitudes towards personally relevant professional development (Eisner as cited by Irwin et al., 2006). In addition, teachers reported that students who had participated showed improved self-esteem, better school attendance, and excitement for learning (2006). It makes sense that the positive outcomes for students described here would contribute to positive outcomes for teachers, which should be taken into consideration when evaluating the value of such programs.

The UNESCO program reported having a “modest but statistically significant positive effect” on math tests dealing with computation and estimation (2006, P. 3). Further, the researchers state that the program provided an opportunity to be engaged as a whole person—physically, emotionally, and intellectually (2006)—outcomes that Dewey would have likely foreseen in applying this pedagogy, as he claimed, “in aesthetic experience . . . there is completeness and unity and necessarily emotion” (Preminger, 2012, P. 4).

Studies most parallel to the First Generation experience

A compelling study of an arts-based program that closely resembles this thesis study is a study about a theatre program for middle school girls written by Debra Holloway, an Instructor at the State Department of Education in Wyoming, and Margaret LeCompte, Professor of Education and Sociology at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Holloway and LeCompte argue “the arts make it possible for children to imagine themselves out of their current identities and to try on new ways of being” (2001, P1.)

According to Holloway and LeCompte, it is critical for adolescents to develop a *voice* (Bakhtin as cited by Holloway & LeCompte, 2001), and the capacity to explore one's *agency* (Freire as cited by Holloway & LeCompte, 2001). Freire insists that when people “speak their word” they are able to “name their world” and to “transform it”, and that with dialogue, they are able to “achieve significance” (2000, P. 88). Holloway and LeCompte argue that this is especially critical for girls because as girls reach puberty, they suffer a loss of identity and experience a “crisis of confidence” (American Association of University Women [AAUW], Brown, Brown & Gilligan, Gilligan et al., Orenstein, Pipher, Rogers as cited by Holloway, 2001, P. 390). They

also point out that studies show how adolescent boys experience a loss of confidence (Pollack as cited by Holloway & LeCompte, 2001). According to novelist and playwright, James Baldwin, “the purpose of education is to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself, to make his own decisions . . . To ask questions of the universe, and then to learn to live with those questions, is the way he achieves his own identity” (Baldwin as cited by Dimitriadis et al., 2001, P. 49).

Holloway and LeCompte suggest that the arts offer a way for self-discovery in a healthy way and in a risk free environment while developing the previously mentioned voice and agency (P. 1). I would agree that the arts provide a space for self-discover, voice and agency, but I would argue that assuming that the space is inevitably risk free because it is a space for making art is too subjective of a claim and appears to be naïve. Nonetheless, their point in that young people need safe spaces for acquiring voice and agency is well taken.

Their study looks at a program they describe as providing instructions in the following arts: literary arts, dance, music, visual arts, and theatre (2001). The girls express learning such skills as collaboration, listening, empathy, open-mindedness, discipline, self-expression, and “centering” (2001, P. 401). They define centering as the act of focusing, and one participant is quoted as saying that learning to focus in this program helped her to focus in other academic areas, which improved her academic performance (2001, P. 402). The girls also reported gains in confidence and learning to express themselves, while the authors suggested they learned a sense of voice and agency (2001).

Holloway and LeCompte point to further research that implies arts programs can increase academic achievement, creativity, and self-worth (Burton et al. as cited by Holloway & LeCompte, 2001; Catterall et al. as cited by Holloway & LeCompte, 2001; Heath & Roach as cited by Holloway & LeCompte, 2001). They insist that these programs provide the kinds of opportunities students need to “articulate their frustrations with an educational system that makes success difficult” (2001, P. 1) in a society that “finds adolescent needs irrelevant, bothersome, and even dangerous” (2001, P.1). They assert that arts programming is sacrificed in schools, while students who may need these programs the most are being alienated by the current curriculum (2001).

Vygotsky, thirty years prior, concurs:

No interventions or scientific discoveries occur before the materials and psychological conditions necessary for their creation are at hand. This explains the disproportionate distribution of innovators and creative agents in different classes. Privileged classes yield an immeasurably greater percentage of scientific, technical, and artistic inventors because in these classes the conditions that are necessary for creativity are present (1971, P. 40)

In all, this study makes a strong case that theatre programs for youth, and I would argue, for any age, can offer opportunities for developing self-esteem, interpersonal skills, intrapersonal skills, and self-efficacy. These outcomes, in turn, inevitably lead to increased academic performance and life skills.

Similar findings are revealed in a study conducted with a university performing arts class that brings together college students and incarcerated men and women to produce and perform a theatre production. This study was written by Janna Goodwin, Associate Professor in the Department of Communications at Regis University, and Amie Dowling, Assistant Professor in the Department of Performing Arts at University of San Francisco, and notably, the former Co-founder and Co-director of Performance Project, the umbrella organization that runs the program of focus for this thesis study. Goodwin met Dowling while conducting a study of Performance Project's first theatre program, also with incarcerated people, which she submitted as her dissertation in 2004 to the Department of Communications at University of Massachusetts Amherst.

Goodwin & Dowling's study, which looks at a theatre course, *Performing Arts and Community Exchange (PACE)*, at the University of San Francisco (USF), took place in 2009 and is described as a course in which USF students and incarcerated individuals write and share stories of their lives, rehearse, and finally present those stories in a final performance (2012). One of the main objectives of the course is to provide a platform for the participants to access their own voices and to project those voices to the community and each other (2012). The students reported learning collaborative and communicative skills, creative thinking, commitment, listening and responding more effectively (2012). At least as important, they reported gaining a better understanding of those in the other group (USF students and incarcerated individuals), which changed the way they initially viewed the other, and some of them expressed that they experienced a positive transformation (2012). A response from one of the incarcerated participants was especially poignant:

My uncle, who has now passed away, had an opportunity to see this performance, and it was truly like he was blown away. It changed the way that we even relate to each other. I remember him saying, “I know that you are okay now. I really know that you can make it in the world. I’ve experienced you in that way, and I don’t see you as that checkered past—you know, going in between these two kind of light-switch places in your life. I really think you found yourself,” and that was really meaningful for me, and I don’t know any other way that could have happened (Incarcerated participant and performer in the PACE program as cited by Goodwin & Dowling, 2012, P. 65).

The participant’s story reflects the importance of his developing a voice and naming his world (Freire, 2000), by using theatre to construct and project efficacy and identity, which in turn, appeared to be transformational for both the participant and the spectator. As mentioned previously, Boal saw theater as a language for gaining a new way of knowing reality that can be passed on to others (2005), such as the performer’s voice and gestures used to dispel myths and transform perceived knowledge about himself.

Foucault asserts, “knowledge is linked to power, and that power assumes authority of truth and has the power to make itself true” (Hall, 2000, P. 48). By changing perceived “knowledge”, the power is shifted to those who change it, and an effective source for making that happen is art. With his performance, the participant quoted in the study changed his uncle’s knowledge, or what his uncle believed to be the truth about him, and it is possible that he, himself, believed a former truth about himself that was more negative, due to others’ perceptions of him. The net

could be casted more broadly to other audience members, changing what they believe to be true—what they know, or think they know—about the participant and others in the performance. For that matter, the students and the incarcerated participants also shifted their assumptions about what they believed to be true of each other (2012). The arts may be the most useful way to bring diverse groups, such as these, together to transform knowledge about each other and themselves.

According to Dimitriadis et al., we must abandon the “auratic status quo of concepts such as culture and identity” and recognize the “vital porosity” that exists among all people (2002, P. 119). With this, we must recognize that our differences—gender, race, and nationality—may be “starting points for solidarity's and new alliances” (P. 119).

Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal

Like Dewey, Freire considered the practices he found in mainstream education to be imperialistic and lifeless (2000). Also like Dewey, he felt that learners should contribute to their own knowledge, rather than being forced to operate in what he referred to as a *banking* system (Freire, 2000). Freire, however, took this idea further than Dewey by emphasizing the *oppressor/oppressed* relationship between the teacher and the learner, which he carried over in his work with the general public (2000). Freire maintained that learning (and social change) are only achieved through dialogue (2000), a notion repeated by others throughout this review. He proposed that a “systematic education” (which can be interpreted as both formal education and education outside of school) can be changed through “educational projects . . . carried out *with* the oppressed” rather than *for* the oppressed (2000, P. 54). He stressed the importance of equal opportunity in terms of contributing to knowledge so that the oppressed are able to establish

voice and agency. Further, he insisted that in “any situation in which “A” objectively exploits “B” or hinders his or her pursuit of self-affirmation as a responsible person is one of oppression . . . because it interferes with the individual’s ontological and historical vocation to be more fully human” (2000, P. 55). This point is similar to Dewey’s emphasis on how learners should be encouraged to contribute to knowledge and that learning happens by constructing new knowledge with the knowledge each individual already possesses, which he, like Freire, insists is a “human” way to learn (1938). However, Freire, more than Dewey, emphasizes the underlying oppression in power relationships in which all are not contributing equally, or one is exploiting the other (2000).

Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed* was inspired by Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and in this book, as well as in his work, Boal explains his philosophy and practices that demonstrate Freire’s influence, no less his stance on imperialism and oppression.

Art is imminent to all men, and not only to a select few; art is not to be sold no more than are breathing, thinking and loving . . . Art is not merchandise . . . but for the bourgeoisie everything is a commodity: man is a commodity (Boal, 2005, P. 109).

Boal suggests that Aristotle, Hegel, and Marx believed that art in any of its modes transmits a certain kinds of knowledge (Boal, 2005). That knowledge, according to Marx, Boal says, is often portrayed in the perspective of the sector of society that holds the economic power, “controlling with it all of the other powers and establishing the directives of all creativity . . . evidently

interested in the transmission of that knowledge which helps it to maintain its power” (Boal paraphrasing Marx, 2005, P.53). Boal later suggests that “feudal art” was to “immobilize society by perpetuating the existing system” (P. 55). These points are important to keep in mind when considering the notion of establishing voice and agency through the arts. On the one hand, the arts offer avenues for establishing agency and voice in a way that no other medium may be able to. On the other hand, oppression can exist in the character and process of making art, such as one person controlling another person’s art.

Conclusion

This theoretical review demonstrates how the arts contribute to improved self-efficacy, self-esteem, self-identity, and identity as perceived by others. It also shows how the arts contribute to creative and critical thinking, communication and collaborative skills, community building, academic achievement and cognitive development. All of these gains are triggered by using art as a tool for tapping into the multiple intelligences that each human being possesses, and its ability to help learners construct their own knowledge and make meaning of that knowledge. Nonetheless, these claims, which Dewey and others have cited here, have still largely been ignored.

I will conclude by adding that the ideas of Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal reflect in many of the ideas I present throughout this review. Although the main objective for Freire and Boal was to empower marginalized people and create revolution, an objective not voiced directly in the other ideas presented here, I would argue that the overall message in the ideas presented, from Dewey to concepts in multiliteracies, is that of social change—a change in the way we think about

learning and the arts, and the relationship between the two, as well as a change in the way we view the educator/learner relationship. We should keep these phenomena in mind as we try to establish and maintain a platform for developing voice and agency.

IV. METHODOLOGY

A Phenomenological Approach

This research uses a qualitative methodology. According to Rene Dubos, “sometimes the more measurable drives out the more important” (Peshkin, 1993, P. 23). Peshkin believes that focusing only on a theory-driven, hypothesis-testing, generalization-producing perspective is too limiting (1993). Qualitative research involves constructing data through a non-linear, often messy process of interpretation and does not privilege one methodology over another. It not only looks at the *what* in data but also the *how*—how data is presented. How an interviewee expresses information, means as much as what she or he says during the interview. As I wanted to explore the First Gen members’ experiences of the program, how they described the phenomenon of being part of First Gen in terms of their self-efficacy, self-esteem, and self-identity, a qualitative methodology is most appropriate.

Qualitative researchers who use phenomenological inquiry to investigate human subjects seek a holistic understanding of the experiences of those they study within a specific context. This approach investigates how the everyday intersubjective world (the life world, or *Lebenswelt*) is constituted (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). The goal is to understand how we interpret the actions of ourselves and others as meaningful and to "reconstruct the genesis of the objective meanings of action in the intersubjective communication of individuals in the social life-world" (Outhwaite as cited by Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, P. 192). Recognizing all of the elements in our “life-world” that may affect the information shared by the “other”, such as the relationship between the other and ourselves, is as important as recognizing “knowledge” as subjective and shaped by our own interpretation. Potter (1996) describes two concepts that can be applied to what Denzin and

Lincoln refer to as this reconstruction—*indexicality* and *reflexivity*. *Indexicality* indicates that the meaning of a word or utterance depends on the context in which it is used. *Reflexivity* indicates utterances not only signify meaning, but also create meaning. These concepts further suggest phenomenological research involves grasping how everyday life and social interactions are embedded in not only *what* we communicate, but also *how* we communicate. This approach is appropriate for my study focusing on members of First Generation, that stresses communication through multiple forms of text in written language, spoken language, and at least as important, body language.

I used phenomenological inquiry in my exploration of the impact of participating in First Generation on members' self-efficacy, self-esteem, and self-identity. I then searched for how the potential impacts, in turn, may or may not influence First Gen members' perceptions of their academic experiences and how they experience other aspects of their lives, such as relationships with family and within their communities.

Developing a Relationship and Work Strategy

I agree with Jo Reger that, as researchers, “we are not instruments that record data but instead are individuals bringing ourselves and our stories into our research” (2001, P.611). This is particularly true of qualitative inquiry, and as researchers interacting with those we study, we are in essence, part of the story. Just as it is important to capture the voices of those we study, it is important to point out that it is our voices as researchers telling the stories. According to Susan Krieger, “we need to link statements about those we study with statements about ourselves, for in reality, neither stands alone” (Krieger as cited by Reger, 2001, P. 611).

Before discussing the methodology I used for gathering data to address my initial research questions, it is relevant to the study to describe my journey in earning the program director's trust. The director is fiercely protective of First Generation members, whom I refer to throughout the study as "First Gen" members, as they call themselves. She is also protective of the practices within the organization. Earning her trust was critical for being able to observe First Gen workshops and accessing members for interviews. Although, more detailed information about the limitations of the study are explained in the "Limitations" section of the Methodology, it is important to point out in this section some of the limitations that are intertwined with the conditions for carrying out the methods of data collection. In explaining why I chose certain methods, or actions, it is helpful to highlight obstacles that influenced those decisions.

As the director and I negotiated a work strategy that we both felt was fair, being able to carry out this project meant reshaping aspects of my academic work outside of this study, such as writing a grant proposal for the organization and incorporating it into an independent study. I consider this process of negotiation, as well as the process of gathering data for the grant proposal, part of the method of inquiry for this study.

In January 2012, well over a year before officially beginning the study, I asked a Board member and former stage manager for Performance Project, whom I will refer to as Holly, to connect me with the director. Holly responded that the director would be happy to have a volunteer to provide transportation for First Gen members but there would be no time for other forms of

involvement. In April, when I had more time for working in Springfield, I emailed Holly again willing to volunteer. She responded enthusiastically but did not respond again.

In May, I went to a First Gen workshop with a colleague who had coincidentally become involved with the organization through a connection at Men's Resources International, a partner organization. I left with mixed feelings about further pursuing this group for my thesis work. On the one hand, the young First Gen members intrigued me. Their level of artistic sensibility while doing movement exercises and their willingness to speak openly and express a range of emotions towards each other was inspiring. On the other hand, I felt invisible to the director.

Reluctant to approach Performance Project again, I spent the summer of 2012 pursuing several other local arts-based youth and community development programs, hoping to forge a relationship in order to begin my thesis research. Performance Project and First Gen kept coming back to mind and through my colleague at school, I reached out to the co-director. Our email correspondence soon led to a conversation solely between the director and myself and I explained my interest in getting involved and producing something useful for the organization as a component of my thesis work.

Gaining Access—A Series of Events

In September, the director, co-director and I met in the Performance Project office and agreed to work together to figure out a way to benefit the organization and my research project. They were on board with my conducting a study for a research course that I was in at the time that I could later use as a pilot study for my thesis work the following semester. Meanwhile, I agreed to

manage the Performance Project's grant calendar, and the director agreed to contact First Gen members to ask their permission to give me their contact information so that I could talk to them about interviews.

Honoring my offer to produce something useful for the organization as a component of my thesis work, I agreed to work with the director to write a grant proposal. She loaned me two discs, one with a recording of the latest First Gen performance, "Ripple Effect", and the other showing a Unitas workshop, filmed in The Bronx in the 1980's. According to Performance Project documents, Unitas demonstrates the philosophy behind all Performance Project programs (Performance Project Concept Paper, 2008). The Co-director of Performance Project had participated as a teenager in the Unitas program and is featured in the video.

The Director emailed me several documents containing information about Performance Project and First Gen, but mostly about Ubuntu, the program she intended to fund if the grant proposal I was helping to write proved fruitful. In response to my concern over no recruitment for interviews, she emailed me seven names of First Gen members whom she suggested I interview for my study. I asked her if we were clear that she would contact the First Gen members to give them my contact information and ask their permissions to give me their contact information; she said we were clear on that. After four weeks of no recruitment from the time she had agreed to contact First Gen members, I sought another group for my then-current research course study, while continuing to stay in contact with the director in hopes of conducting my thesis study with First Generation.

I discussed with my academic advisor the grant proposal as what appeared to be a condition for gaining access to First Gen members. As I expressed a genuine interest and saw it as potentially useful professional experience, my advisor suggested I write the proposal as an independent study and agreed to supervise it. I informed the director of this arrangement and she agreed once more that she would contact First Gen members to discuss being in the study. After reassuring her five weeks later, progress on my study finally took a turn. While I was at her office, she called or texted First Gen members asking for permission to give me their phone numbers. Eight out of nine members agreed on the spot to her giving me their phone numbers and to be in the study. I had met two of these First Gen members when I went to the Performance Project's celebration of their new space. I contacted the members right away and agree to meet with them at a time and in a place that was convenient for them.

Data Collection

For this study, I used these three sources of data:

- 1. Interviews** with previous and current ensemble members, the director, and a previous intern
- 2. Document Analysis** of documents provided by The Performance Project, such materials for previous grant proposals, event programs, newsletters, a concept paper, and an activity log
- 3. Observations** of the following:
 - a. Current First Generation workshops and events
 - b. Interactions with the director (in person, by telephone, and by email)
 - c. Videos of performances
 - d. The Performance Project website
 - e. The Performance Project and First Generation Facebook pages

This strategy of using different types of data, from different types of sources, and from different points in time—multiple methods, or a *triangulation*—helps to gain a more complex understanding of the phenomena under investigation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, P. 5).

1. Interviews

Interviewee Criteria

For the study, I used the following criteria for participation as and interviewee:

- a. First Generation ensemble member, staff member, intern, or visiting artist/facilitator*
- b. Minimum age of 18 years*

In order to understand participants' descriptions of the phenomena of being involved in First Gen, and how their perceptions compare, it is useful to include members involved at different times and in different roles. Although the phenomenon I am seeking to understand is that of the first Gen members, I also consider any person who has been involved as a staff member, intern, or visiting artist/facilitator to have useful information for the study. The level of involvement for an individual to perform in any of these roles requires consistent participation, which would likely ensure a valuable understanding of the organization and its members. Also, by maximizing the number and diversity of participants, the chances for richer data are greater. Combining multiple methods (interviews, document analysis, observations) with empirical materials and perspectives adds rigor and richness to the inquiry (Flick as cited by Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

The age criterion for interviewees of the study is completely a logistical one. As it took a number of months to finally get my research off the ground, I set the minimum age for interviewees at 18 years, which is the age of an adult in the US, in order to improve my chances for a more rapid approval from the Institutional Review Board, and in order to avoid needing signatures from parents of participants, both of which could have slowed down the study.

As I perceived interns and visiting artists/facilitators to inherently offer a different view than ensemble members, and believe that their typically being older than ensemble members could add a more mature perspective, I interviewed two previous interns and attempted to interview a visiting artist/facilitator who has worked with the organization over several years. Coincidentally and rather surprisingly, one of those interns had become an ensemble member by the time I asked her for an interview and was no longer an intern.

Table 1. Core Participants/Interviewees

Pseudonym	Nationality	Current Education/Career Status	Place of Residency	Role / Dates	Performance Casted In
Ava	Nepal	Senior, West Springfield High School	West Springfield, MA	Ensemble Member 2009-Current (2013)	Ripple Effect; Undecided title for future 2013 performance
Erin	USA	Student, Holyoke Community College	Northampton, MA	Ensemble Member 2008-2010	Through the Eye of Bakok
Jane	USA	BA, Hampshire College (2012)	Northampton, MA	Intern 2012/ Ensemble Member 1/2013-Current (2013)	Undecided title for future 2013 performance
Kanchi	Nepal	Undergraduate Student, Springfield College	West Springfield, MA	Ensemble Member 2010-2011	Ripple Effect
Notiiq	USA	Program Coordinator, Out Now; Message Therapist; Applicant, Hampshire College	Chicopee, MA	Ensemble Member 2009-2011	Through the Eye of Bakok; Ripple Effect
Nyangeth	South Sudan	Undergraduate Student, Elms College	Chicopee, MA	Ensemble Member 2009-2010	Through the Eye of Bakok
Eva	USA	MA (interned as part of her thesis obligation)	Northampton area, MA	Intern 1/2012-6/2012	N/A
The Director	USA	MFA; Director, Performance Project	Northampton, MA	Director 2008-Current (2013)	N/A

The Recruitment Process

The participants of the study include six First Gen members, one of which, as mentioned, had been an intern previous to joining the ensemble, one additional former intern, and the director.

The director recruited five of the six First Gen members I interviewed, which adds considerable risk of bias to the findings and is in part, why I attempted, with partial success, to recruit others who fit the criteria, and for whom I had contact information, such as two people who had been interns, one of which is now an ensemble member.

The chain effect is another method I used for trying to recruit more participants. I asked each of the participants whom I had already interviewed to ask other First Gen members to contact me, while also asking them who they recommend I try to reach. The chain effect, according to Mosselson, “identifies cases of interest from people who know people who know which cases are information-rich” (H. Russell Bernard as cited by Mosselson, 2006, P. 11). This method awarded me contact with the visiting artist/facilitator (who leads workshops from time to time with the First Gen members) and we agree to the interview but she had to cancel due to an emergency.

Each person I called agreed right away to meet for an interview. During my first call to each of them, I briefly described who I am, why I want to talk to him or her, what questions I will ask, and how long our meeting should last. I then asked for his or her email address and sent each of them a brief written description of myself and why I am interested in speaking with them. In an attempt to help interviewees feel more comfortable, I briefly describe myself, highlighting our camaraderie by pointing out some of the ways in which I am also “first generation” in my family.

The Interview Process

Table 2: Details of initial interviews

Date	Pseudonym	Approximate Length of Time	Location
12-22-2012	Ava	30 minutes	Public library, West Springfield
12-22-2012	Notiiq	2 hours	Participant's home
1-24-2012	Kanchi	1 hour	Teahouse, West Springfield
12-28-2012	Erin	45 minutes	Participant's home
1-19-2013	Nyangeth	1 hour 15 minutes	Director's home
1-20-2013	Jane	2 hours 30 minutes	Café, Amherst
3-9-2013	Eva	45 minutes	Skype call
3-10-2013	The Director	30 minutes	Director's home

I asked each interviewee, except for the director, to choose a pseudonym that others would not be able to recognize. I did not ask the director to choose a pseudonym, nor did I assign her one because information about this organization is publicized and highly visible. I refer to her throughout the study as “the director” in order to offer her a level of privacy.

I conducted semi-structured interviews, as this method, according to Rossman and Rallis, is consistent with phenomenological research because it allows for a holistic and exploratory approach to the data gathering (2012). I agree with Mosselson that semi-structured interviews encourage participants to “open up” and “express themselves in their own terms and at their own pace” (2006, P. 16).

After initial greetings, I began each interview by reading the consent form to each interviewee and asking if she or he had questions and still agreed to be interviewed. I then asked permission to record the conversation. Each interviewee agreed and I recorded our conversation with a small digital voice recorder.

With each First Gen member whom I interviewed, I gave each of them an option to start the conversation by drawing a life map, which I described to them as a visual map showing the events in their lives that are most significant to them. According to Griffiths et al., a life map can serve as a tool for improving communication between the participants of the study and the inquirer, and it empowers them with a voice, while also empowering the researcher with more capacity to analyze the findings (Griffiths et al., 2007). I showed the participants examples of life maps from a published article (Quigley et al., 2011, PP. 15, 16) and explained that by drawing a life map, they would have more control over what we talk about. Some chose to draw a life map while others did not. While I found it easier to ask questions directly relevant to the study when an interviewee did not choose to draw a life map, the maps were useful in several ways—in stimulating interviewees’ memories, in having a platform for comfortable dialogue between us, and for helping to balance the power relationship between he or she as the interviewee and myself as the interviewer.

In my findings, I have included direct quotes that I gathered from participants of the study in order to capture more accurately their character and experiences as a First Gen member. Including the words of interviewees offers them authenticity and, as I would agree with Rossman and Rallis, it helps to explain their intent and meaning (2012).

2. Documents Analysis

Many of the documents I use for analysis were provided by the director to be used for writing a grant proposal and include *The Performance Project Concept Paper*, newsletters, calendars, videos, program guides for performances, and materials that were used for writing prior grant

proposals. Rossman and Rallis refer to documents like the ones I describe as pieces of the “material culture” (2012, P. 196), or materials that can be helpful in understanding the culture of an organization. Throughout the study, I compared what these materials convey in relation to what interviewees have said, as well as my observations. While reviewing these documents, I kept in mind their purposes, for whom they are meant, and what messages I perceive them to convey.

As my research questions pertain to how the First Gen members perceive of the impact of participating in the program, and documentation of this information is minimal, I rely predominately on interviews and observations, rather than on documents for trying to answer these questions, and this reflects in the findings. Nonetheless, much of the information I gathered from documents was helpful in understanding the culture of the organization and the context of the data overall. I have threaded this information throughout the paper and it has proven particularly helpful for reporting the history of the organization, as well as for comparing data from interviews and observations.

3. Observations

While actively taking part in several First Gen sessions and other Performance Project events and meetings, I observed and then later recorded my interpretations of my observations in voice recordings and written notes. As an active participant at First Gen sessions, I observed activities that include the “open circle” at the beginning of each session, warm-up and dance exercises, theater exercises, and the “closing circle” at the end of each session.

I noted participants' body language, tone of voice and other characterizes I found useful for interpreting how they feel about their participation in First Gen. I also recorded my perceptions of the relationships and the environment of the program. I have included these observations in the findings, as I would agree with Rossman and Rallis, they are helpful for understanding the complexity in the social setting (2012).

Directly after each interview, First Gen session, meeting with the director, or other relevant event, I voice-recorded "notes" about my observations. This includes the setting and information said or done before, during or after the event that may be relevant to the study. I also noted my sense of the dynamic between participants of the study and myself. I chose not to write notes during interviews or while attending First Gen workshops as I felt it may create some discomfort and suspicion from members by appearing to be "studying" them and writing down information about them, rather than having a more natural conversation (during the interviews) or participating as a volunteer (during the First Gen workshops). Nonetheless, in each circumstance, I was clear with everyone present about my conducting the study. I followed up at least once with each interviewee by email, phone, or text message in order to ask additional questions or clarify information.

Throughout the duration of this study, no First Generation performances took place, and I had never seen a First Generation performance in person. I did see the full Ripple Effect performance on disc, although the recording was, as the director pointed out, of poor quality and often difficult to convey the expressions in the faces of the cast. Nonetheless, I was able to interpret the storyline most of the time and get a sense of the emotion and what I understood as

the messages in the piece, and to gain a sense of the quality of the performance, some of which I noted and analyzed.

The Performance Project's website and Facebook pages were valuable for gaining a more clear understanding of organization's history, objectives, and current and future activities.

Photographs on these websites also provided rich information regarding to the creative process and the quality of the performances of which First Gen members have been involved. The websites were also helpful in learning more about Performance Project's other programs.

Data Analysis

Qualitative methodologists tend to analyze data either by focusing on analytic categories, or by focusing on description, while recognizing that these two methods often merge (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). An example Rossman and Rallis use to show how to use both methods in analyzing and presenting data is to 1) create categories of life experiences and find common themes from those categories, and 2) create "mini-portraits" that capture each person's individual experiences and present those individual portraits in a separate section of the research paper (2012, P. 268). This practice of using both of these methods is what I used in my data analysis and presentation.

I transcribed the interviews, as well as several pages of my voice-recorded notes, almost verbatim, and began my analysis by searching for categories based on my research questions and my conceptual framework, which according to Rossman & Rallis, is a standard research strategy (2012). While transcribing the interviews and essentially, "reliving the moment", I noted subtle

messages in the participants' tone and word choices that I had not noticed before and noted those findings. After reading through all of the transcribed interviews, making notes and reading them again and again, I began to organize the findings into categories that emerged. These categories included those based on my research questions and conceptual framework, or “analyst-constructed categories” (Rossman & Rallis, 2012, P. 278), as well as “indigenous categories”, or those based on what participants had said (P. 278). By including indigenous categories, I am able to more accurately represent the participant’s meaning rather than imposing too much of my own meaning in what they have said (Patton as cited by Rossman & Rallis, P. 278).

I listed the categories in a Word document and then looked for themes that imply what those categories mean, while sometimes considering how their meaning relates to my research questions, and sometimes putting the research questions aside in order to try to see the more indigenous perspective. I then drew a concept map in order to better understand how different categories and themes relate to each other (Rossman and Rallis, 2012). From the list of categories and themes on the Word document in combination with the concept map, I began to understand the meanings and complexities within the data.

Limitations

In exploring the phenomenon of what it means to First Gen members to participate in this program, I was only able to include six First Gen members out of forty-three ensemble members total since 2008, and thus, this sample size does not present a strong representation of the members as a whole. Further, the director chose five out of six of the First Gen members whom I interviewed, causing potential for bias in the findings, and I was only able to interview three

additional people beyond those participants who fit the criteria for the study, leaving the total number of interviewees at eight.

As mentioned, gaining access to the program and its members was a long and complicated process. Even after I agreed to the director's request to write a grant proposal in exchange for her to explain the project to First Gen members and give them my contact information, I was unable to conduct the pilot-study with them that she and I had agreed to. While running into her long after our agreement, I told her that no one had contacted me and she replied that this was because I had chosen another group for the study. When I explained that I ended up choosing another group for the (pilot) study because I had gotten no response, she insinuated that she had never contacted the First Gen members and that she thought we had agreed that our working relationship would be reciprocal. I reminded her that by my working on the grant proposal and helping to find a venue for the Ubuntu program, I was reciprocating. Her response, as it had been on previous occasions, was that there had been a misunderstanding.

Once I did gain access, the time that I could gather data was limited, especially in terms of observations at the workshops. Each workshop I attended required approximately 5-6 hours of time, as it included the 3-hour workshop as well as 2-3 hours of time commuting 25-30 miles and picking up and dropping off several First Gen members. It would have been more difficult to negotiate my attending workshops if I did not agree to provide transportation, as other researchers/volunteers/interns in the past have had similar experiences. Interviewing the First Gen members also meant sometimes commuting the approximately 25-30 miles from my location to theirs but it was a small price to pay for their contributions.

Being a theatre-based program, it would have been helpful to be able to see a final performance in person, as it would have added depth and further context to my overall findings, and it would have allowed me an opportunity to observe the audience members' reactions to the performances and the relationship between the audience and the First Gen members. Further, my access to videos of the performances was also limited. For viewing both of the First Gen performances that members of the study participated in, I only had access the videos for a short amount of time. The video quality was poor for viewing one of those performances, *Ripple Effect*, and for the other performance, *Through the Eye of Bakok*, the only video available showed only clips of the performance. Lastly, the websites, where I gained a lot of useful information, were under construction during part of the study.

Positionality

During this study, I was aware of how participants' perceptions of me, and their perceptions of my relationship with the director, may play a role in their agreeing to meet with me. In my first conversation with interviewees over the phone, I told them that I am a graduate student conducting a research study, rather than an intern or staff member, in order to help alleviate any feelings of obligation on their part. In a following email, I told them that I am interested in this topic because I am a first generation high school graduate and college student, and because I have a background in the arts. I did this as an attempt to establish a level of camaraderie between participants and myself so that they may be more comfortable, as I agree with Rossman & Rallis, the comfort we feel in being with people we see as similar to ourselves can be powerful (2012). Nonetheless, I am aware that the differences between the participants and myself, such as age, ethnicity, dress, language, accents, level of education, and other perceived characteristics,

may impact participants' perceptions of me, as well as my perceptions of them, which could in turn impact the data. Further, I attempted to keep in mind my own biases that may influence how I approached the study and the data, as "authorship gives power" to the knowledge produced, and thus, *how* it is represented is essential (Rossman & Rallis, 2012, P. 331).

I see a lot of similarities in the experiences of First Gen members and what I experienced myself as an adolescent. My participation in the arts in high school, and the safe space I found there, I feel had a positive impact on my self-efficacy, self-esteem and self-identity, and throughout the study, I reminded myself of how my own experiences and perceptions should not overshadow those of the participants.

It should also be mentioned that I approached this study with a preconceived notion that theatre can educate and spark social change, after having observed the impact of theatre events as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Senegal that were conducted by local people and other volunteers. These theatre productions pertained to health and gender issues and although I did not personally witness clear behavioral changes as a result of these events, nor did I necessarily expect to, many local women and men alike actively participated, were enthusiastic about this mode of dialogue, and many voiced a change in attitude towards the topics addressed. Everyone present appeared to be engaged and enjoyed this approach to addressing these issues, and on a number of occasions outside of these events, local people approached me to discuss similar theatre events they had seen that had impacted them.

Ethical Considerations

As mentioned earlier, I included in my initial email to participants sections of the informed consent forms that I would ask them to sign at the interview, explaining the study topic, purpose, and confidentiality, while also describing myself. I met with interviewees where they chose to meet, and began those interviews by reading along with them the Informed Consent Forms, asked what questions they had, and reminded them that their involvement is voluntary. Further, with each interviewee, I received consent before tape-recording the conversation.

I made every effort to avoid asking questions that may make the participant feel uncomfortable, and with one participant in particular, who seemed very willing to talk about personal struggles that I felt may be inappropriate for the study, I tried to navigate the conversation in a way as to err on the side of caution.

In order to protect the privacy of the participants, I used pseudonyms, rather than their names, while recording information pertaining to them, and I did not discuss with anyone the information about them beyond seeking academic advising, in which case, only the director was identified, as she is a public figure. I also did not mention any of the participants to other participants of the study beyond my initial communication with the director regarding recruitment. I explained to participants that they could leave the study at any time and/or have information pertaining to them removed from the study, and informed them that they could contact me at any time if they had questions or concerns.

V. INTRODUCING FIRST GENERATION

In order to put First Generation members' voices front and center in this study, I begin by describing what I found by allowing them to introduce themselves. During the interviews, I asked them to describe themselves. This is what they said:

Kanchi: *I don't want to be like all the normal people—just go to college, come back home, have a family and kids. I want to do something extra. That's my dream. I don't want to be a housewife.*

Notiiq: *I'm a performing artist, a community organizer, and a licensed massage therapist.*

Ava: *I'm a fun-loving girl. I love to help people. I would love to travel the world.*

Erin: *I have to redefine myself. When you have a baby, you're not yourself anymore; you're a mom.*

Jane: *I am an artist and a human being. I am recognizing my own humanity through making art.*

Nyangeth: *My name is Nyangeth. I'm from South Sudan. There's so much to say.*

Before presenting the themes I found in the study and my responses to research questions, I feel it is important to offer a more thorough introduction to the First Generation members.

Kanchi

A lover of math and science, Kanchi is currently studying Pharmacy at Springfield College, although she is uncertain as to whether or not she will change course. At the time of the interview, she had lived in the United States, specifically West Springfield, for almost three years. Kanchi joined First Generation only six months after arriving to the US with her family as refugees. She describes herself before coming to the US as “a free girl” despite her parents being “so strict compared to other parent”. She says she did not have a lot of responsibilities in Nepal because she was young and her parents spoke Nepali. Kanchi now has a different role in the family, as she explains:

I have to make decisions because I speak English. I feel bad sometimes. My family feels weak. I am nineteen. My brother is twenty-three. He is helping too. He's not like other brothers. He understands.

Kanchi entered West Springfield High School as a sophomore, where she says she got an “A+ in everything” because she had “already studied everything” in her native country of Nepal. With her starkly highlighted hair that she wears in two ponytails, her black nail polish, colorful stockings and high-top sneakers, her image matches her playful personality and urge to push boundaries regarding traditional, conservative roles and attitudes.

Notiiq

Notiiq is a self-made human-rights activist, singer, dancer and gifted storyteller. Plagued by house fires throughout his childhood and adolescence, he and his family lived on the move between family members and shelters in Springfield and back and forth between Springfield and

Florida. Regardless of where he was at the time, he consistently performed in choirs and theater, and was offered scholarships on two different occasions in middle school to attend performing arts high schools. Nonetheless, he had to turn down those opportunities due to relocating and fulfilling his responsibilities as a caretaker in the family.

In high school, he joined the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) because he was attracted to the "stepping" exercises. He moved up the ranks to become a Commander by his sophomore year and by his senior year, he was an ROTC Captain and said he felt obligated to join the army. He laughs saying, "I didn't realize how contradictory it was to be marching in anti-war demonstrations." He joined the army, he says "for the promise of a free education" but soon became disillusioned with all the talk of violence and people around him "with PTSD" who "would just switch channels." With the support of his friends at Out Now, "a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, two spirit, queer, questioning, intersex, neutral, and allied youth organization", he "went AWOL" (absent without leave) during basic training and started "doing anti-recruitment education."

Notiiq recently applied for a James Baldwin scholarship, a program at Hampshire College that supports underserved individuals in a one-year for-credit transition period between high school and college. In discussing it, he declares, "I *will* go to Hampshire. To Notiiq, "performing is an escape," and referring to students at Hampshire College, he says, "they live that dream—being an artist and a student. That's my next step."

Ava

Ava had just come from an interview at Hampshire College when I first met her at the Director's home office. She is also applying for a James Baldwin Scholarship. She said she had been comfortable because the person who interviewed her was young and had just graduated from there. Ava moved with her family to the US from her home country of Nepal just over three years prior to the study. She is an avid soccer player and loves dancing, martial arts, learning English, and meeting people. During our interview, I asked her what she wants to study at Hampshire College, to which she explains:

Human trafficking. I really want to do this because in Nepal there is a lot of trafficking—selling girls. Girls don't have rights so I want to focus on that and try to change the world and my country.

When I saw Ava after her interview at Hampshire College, she had mentioned wanting to be involved in theatre there. I asked her if she wants to incorporate theatre into her studies in human trafficking and she responded with “I love dancing” but “it's not the thing that I will do in my future. I want to join for fun.” I asked Ava during our interview if there was anything else she wanted to say—about herself, First Gen, her life, or her dreams. She responded:

My dream is to travel the world. I want to go back to my country and help uneducated people, help create hospitals and schools. We have a lot of poor people. I want to know them.

Erin

Attending a Waldorf school in Northampton from first grade through eighth grade, Erin describes going to a public high school as “a nice change” because in the public school, “they discussed media and things that are going on in the world—real stuff—so that was cool.” She explains how in her French class they talked about current events in France instead of, she says laughing, “just singing songs.” Of this experience, she follows with, “it was nice to be around other people of color” and with “different body shapes” because at the Waldorf school “I was the only person of color in my grade.”

Erin is one of four adopted siblings (five siblings total) of Caucasian parents. She says her other sisters are “from around the world.” She talks about going to Haiti six or seven times and what it was like to visit a twelve-year-old girl who would become one of her adopted sisters:

That was a cool experience for me. I guess I hadn't really seen poverty before and it changed the way I look at the world and I was only six. I was fortunate enough to travel to other places as well but I really loved Haiti because people have nothing but they are so kind.

Holding her baby, while we talk at her home, Erin laughs at her perception of herself as a “slacker” in high school. She chuckles as she says that she thinks she passed a lot of her classes “on charm” but then “something clicked” and she “decided to see if the myth is true that if you work hard, it pays off.” As an Education major at Holyoke Community College, Erin is says getting good grades while she juggles being a mom to 15-month old baby. After working for the Boys and Girls Club, her goal is to work in afterschool and before-school programs because

“there’s not enough emphasis on how important it is, especially with inner-city kids, to have that three hours with somebody who can help you with your homework and help you with your day.”

Jane

Soft-spoken, articulate and always smiling, Jane grew up in Ohio before earning a degree at Hampshire College in 2012. She speaks of her early years:

I had this vision that there is something better. The thing that stands out in my childhood is keeping my eye on the something better, whatever that is.

She laughs about how her family thought she was “crazy for doing homework all the time.” In hindsight, she speculates that her father’s sarcasm was likely a sign of feeling rejected by her spending time doing homework instead of with him. During the eighth grade, she says, she lived alone until her siblings moved in with her, and her father would drop in from time to time.

When I asked her how she and her siblings supported themselves, she laughs while describing how they used to dumpster dive and one sibling got a job at a food cooperative, while another got a job at a Wendy’s restaurant.

She gives me an example of things her family members would say that reveals she has changed her name. Pulling from her life map, Jane surprisingly tells the pieces of her often-traumatic story with remarkable openness and thoughtfulness in a rather matter-of-fact way. She even suggests I use her “real name”, though I do not. Through it all, she manages to sustain the slight smile that I so often see her projecting. She gives me the impression that she has spent a lot of time reflecting and making great efforts to heal and live a rich, full life.

In response to my question about what attracted her to acting during high school, Jane responds:

It was an internal and external process. I was detached from my body. I didn't feel like I had control over my voice. It's kind of paradoxical that I was really driven for years. Ironically, my dad wanted me to be an actress but he was probably the biggest obstacle to me being able to express myself on an emotional level and in an embodied way.

Jane describes her work at Hampshire College as “theatre for community empowerment and trauma and memory studies.” She has collaborated with other performing and visual artists in collectives throughout the Pioneer Valley, including the Mount Holyoke College theatre group, Center for Feminism.

Nyangeth

After living for several years in a refuge camp in Ethiopia and then Kenya, Nyangeth, who is originally from South Sudan, arrived in the US in 2005 as one of, he says, “5000 lost boys”. He was set to arrive in 2001 but says he was delayed by 9/11. Speaking with me from the Director’s home, where he lives during the summer months and holiday breaks from Elm’s College, Nyangeth talks about his “cousins” from South Sudan living throughout the US. He says the US had not been accepting families but only “lost boys”. Before arriving, he and his cousins were given a choice of living anywhere in the US. He chose Springfield because 1) it was the first place he came to outside of an airport, 2) several others he came with were staying in Springfield, and 3) although he had close relatives in other states who had come five years prior

and asked him to come and live with them, he wanted to be independent. He wanted to make it on his own. Nyangeth who had never participated in theatre before joining First Gen, now is proud to say all of the ways in which he is first generation:

The first to go to school . . . the first to go to college . . . the first to come to the US . . . and in my own personal thinking, the way I see things now . . . so I feel like I fit in . . . I want my kids to be born in a hospital. They will have their own birth certificate, which I do not have, and that's what I want to tell them.

VI. FINDINGS

After reading about Performance Project and First Generation on Performance Project's website, I was fascinated by this organization, beginning with its history of theatre programming with incarcerated people in the Northampton County Jail (The In Group), and then forming a theatre group for released prisoners (The Out Group), to more recently running arts-based youth leadership programs with a focus on culture, community and personal strengths. I was struck by the description of First Generation as a program for youth that engages in "inter-generational mentoring, research, self-reflection, and dialogue [to] form an artistic ensemble [to create] multilingual performances [with messages about] critical social and cultural issues" (<http://www.performanceproject.org/first-generation1.html>).

In researching how the program impacts youth in terms of self-efficacy, self-esteem and self-identity, what I found is that answers to these questions are complex and discursive. I found mixed messages when comparing the information on the website and in program documents to some of the interview responses and my own observations, and even mixed messages when comparing some of the interview responses to my observations. Some interviewees contradicted some of the program's claims, at least in part, while others responded very consistently with those claims. Most compelling is that even the responses from individual interviewees expressed mixed feelings about how they perceive of the organization's practices, and how participating in First Gen has impacted them and other First Gen members.

Despite the complexity, the themes that consistently emerged reflect self-efficacy, self-esteem and self-identity, which are intertwined. Other themes that emerged include creativity, activities

and/or values in regard to school, and a sense of community and/or family within the group. As would be expected in regards to a group that, by and large, sees itself as a family, I also found a significant amount of conflict, often in the form of miscommunication, or in the process for creating the content for performances as a theme. Finally, another rather prominent theme in this small study is that of oppression, which is either talked about directly or implied in interviews, and is implied in performances and documents provided by the organization.

As I want to put the voices of First Generation front and center, I begin the findings by presenting what the members either said or implied during our interviews and exchanges. I have categorized topics that emerged from interviews and observation, while highlighting the themes and sub-themes within each of those categories that frequently branch off into other categories, showing how it all connects.

Why Participants Joined First Generation

Performance Project and First Generation appeared to have different meanings for different members when they were initially introduced to the organization. Below I have presented the reasons they claim to have joined:

The Message in the Performances (Self-efficacy, Self-identity)

Notiiq describes learning about First Gen when he was sixteen years old and went to see a family member perform in *Walk with Me*, produced and directed by Performance Project but not a First Gen performance.

Notiiq: *I was like, oh my God! I never thought you would be in theater, especially cool-ass theater like this! Real-life stories. That alone just caught my breath. It was the very first time I saw theatre in person, and theater that tells people's life stories in a way that they did—talking bluntly, like this is what happened to me. This is the shit that I went through. This is why I am who I am today and this is what I'm going to do. I fell in love. I asked [the director] after the performance how I can be involved.*

According to Performance Project's website, *Walk With Me* (2005-2006) is about:

“The forms of imprisonment many of us experience long before actual incarceration: The imprisonment of racism, poverty and addiction; the imprisonment of being silenced; of not knowing your family history; the imprisonment of materialism; and the literal imprisonment of solitary confinement” (<http://www.performanceproject.org/history.html>).

Erin chuckles about being "dragged" to another "cultural thing" by her adopted father, which she could not remember the name of but said it was a Performance Project production.

Erin: *I really liked that [the director] enabled opportunities for people who . . . society doesn't believe in. Someone believed in them and that really got me! She turned around and showed us, wow . . . what they were saying needed to be heard . . . in Northampton . . . an uppity place, and they were not afraid to say what they want to say.*

Freire proposes that dialogue requires first having faith in “humankind” to have the “power to . . . create and re-create” (2000, P. 90). In this case, Erin felt that this performance displayed the director’s faith in “*people who society doesn’t believe in*”, and having conducted this study, I would agree that she does have faith in these people, although the dialogue that follows is not always clear, at least initially.

For Jane, a combination of factors drew her to First Gen. First Gen had performed at Hampshire College, where she was a student and she had been impressed that Performance Project paid the ensemble members. She was excited about “the vision” and was intrigued that another theatre student at Hampshire College, an intern from Performance Project, had given the proceeds from her own performance to Performance Project. Jane said she had been “blown away” by the First Gen performance, *Ripple Effect* and explained why.

Jane: I was grateful for the opportunity given to the young people to express themselves openly and candidly, and the trust that existed within the ensemble. There was a sense of community among them . . . bravery that was supported by that sense of trust . . . they were giving each other a gift . . . giving the audience a gift.

As a theatre student, Jane designed her own program, which she calls *Theatre for Community Empowerment and Trauma and Memory Studies*. She said that while watching the FG performance, she also pondered the question of how to facilitate such a performance. She saw it as a kind of deep process that is both therapeutic and artistically engaging.

Messages portrayed in the content of the performances and the way it was presented proved meaningful to Notiiq, Erin and Jane as they each found it directly relevant to their personal lives. Dewey would argue (1938) that meaningful experience is a critical factor in wanting to engage, which they did by becoming members of First Gen. Notiiq saw “real life stories” being told in a language that he could relate to, not only a language in terms of words, but a “system of representation” (Hall, 2000, P. 18) consisting of images and gestures that *spoke* to him in a way he could understand.

Based on further comments from Erin, she alludes to identifying with this performance because of her struggles with establishing her own identity as an adopted person of color in a White household in a predominately White upper-middle class town.

For Jane, this art form is the medium for which she lives her life and speaks to her own history, and so she it was meaningful to her. Further, as she herself has known poverty and the feeling of being silenced, she can relate to the performance on that level.

Notiiq, Erin, and Jane each saw the performers as people who are normally silenced, or unheard, who showed their strengths by projecting their own voices to an audience whom they may find intimidating. They each imply during the interview that they saw themselves in these performers and felt that if these people can do this, so can they.

According to Freire, the “lesson” about oppression “must come from the oppressed themselves and from those who are truly solidary with them” (2000, P. 45). Further, through theatre, they learned a new “language” and a “new way of knowing” (Boal, 2005, P.121) what these performers are capable of, and for Notiiq and Erin, a new way of knowing what theatre can be.

Community & Language (Self-efficacy & Self-identity)

Notiiq, Erin and Jane are US citizens and grew up in the US, although Notiiq identifies specifically as Puerto Rican. For each participant of the study who immigrated to the US, two of them, Ava and Kanchi, who moved here as refugees from Nepal, did not first see a production by Performance Project or First Generation before joining. They joined First Gen because they wanted to dance, have fun, and be with other Nepalese. What they found after joining is that not only were they connecting with other Nepalese but also their participation was improving their English skills more than by going to school. They both joined First Gen six months after arriving in the US. Kanchi implied that she was initially overwhelmed by the director’s expectations of her to speak so frequently and openly as they are expected to do, which I explain in more detail later in the findings. She said that soon after joining, she tried to drop out of First Gen but her “brother”, a friend, “forced” her to continue. In the end, she decided it was the best way for her to learn English so she made the commitment.

Unlike Ava’s and Kanchi’s experiences in First Gen, where they were expected to speak often and sometimes at length, they said that at school, and even in their ESL classes, they were not required to speak. Ava said she hardly spoke in class and Kanchi went as far as to say that she could simply speak Nepali with other Nepalis everyday throughout her entire ESL class.

Lev Vygotsky claimed that our most essential “tool” for forming knowledge and meaning is language, which is only gained through social interactions, and is heavily influenced by culture (Efland, 2002). The notion that high school students are allowed to disengage, and in an ESL class, speak only their native languages off in corners, is alarming, but what is more alarming is the reality that this is the accepted reality.

Three of the six First Gen members who participated in the study attended high schools in Springfield and/or West Springfield (public high schools) and reported that their classes were by and large lecture-based, or, as Freire refers to it, teachers depositing “knowledge” into students as if they are containers—“banking” (2000, P. 72). However, I will not assume that Ava’s and Kanchi’s experiences represent those of all high school students at Springfield and West Springfield public high schools, and an investigation of the quality of those schools goes beyond the scope of this study. What is clear, nonetheless, is that Ava and Kanchi, at least, are not, as they confirmed, engaging in the types of ESL activities advocated for by scholars and educators of Multiliteracies—linguistic, visual, audio, gestural and spatial modes of meaning (Liaw, M., & Warschauer, 2006). They were not using materials that are proving to increase academic performance, such as videos and blogs, to learn language skills as some ESL students are (2006). They were not engaging in, as Appadurai recommends, “electronic media, and the work of the imagination . . . of . . . people [who are] creating new, polyglot, and heterogeneous cultural landscapes” (Dimitriadis et al., 2001, P. 5). Those experiences could be very meaningful for these two young Nepali women who have been displaced from their homeland.

“The Right Thing to Do at the Time”

Nyangeth from South Sudan was invited to speak at a high school event about the genocide in Darfur, and there he met someone I will refer to as Kate, a collaborator with First Gen, who took him later to a Performance Project production. He said he did not have a clear vision of the meaning behind the performance but he enjoyed it. He understood it to be about overcoming struggle—“a lot of violence and how to get out of that violence.” He said he didn’t know the name of the piece but he knew it was [the director’s]. I was intrigued that he referred to the production as *hers* rather than The Performance Project’s production, but that could have more to do with nuances in language than with notions of ownership.

When I asked Nyangeth why he joined First Gen he said, “I didn't know what to do in the beginning because I didn't want to join and it was kind of frustrating and taking my time.” He explained how participating conflicted with his school schedule and added, “I was self-conscious because I didn't want to tell my story to people. [The director] was desperate to know what my story was about.” He said they spoke many times and she was very persuasive, insisting, “nothing will be outside . . . we just want to know the life you have gone through.” He went on to say, “I've gone through a lot [and] I was shy . . . finally I just did it because” . . . (he tapers off). I asked, “You did it because?” He responded, “I thought it was the right thing to do at that time . . . after we had a long talk . . . I said okay.” I asked him if he felt pressured to do it and he replied, “yes, kind of.”

A key factor in his agreeing to go through with it was Kate’s suggesting, as he paraphrased, “you know there are so many ways to tell a story . . . and theater is one of them.” He said he had no

experience with theatre and Kate said to him about his past, “that's far away . . . you're doing the right thing.” He concludes, “we took it from there.”

Although, Boal would agree that theatre is one way to tell a story (2005), the method of discourse leading up to his agreeing to participate—being persuaded, as he said—defies the principles of Boal and Freire. Boal makes the connection between approaching people to discuss theater and approaching people to discuss literacy by insisting, “the very fact that the educator comes with the mission of eradicating illiteracy (which presupposes a coercive, forceful action) is in itself an alienating factor between the agent and the local people” (P. 127). Boal argued that this is why theatre should not begin with “something alien to people . . . but [should begin] with . . . those who agree to participate” (P. 127).

According to Freire, the pedagogy of the oppressed is a “pedagogy which must be forged *with*, not *for*, the oppressed” (2000, P. 40). What this implies is that unless Nyangeth plays an equal role in making the decision to tell his story—unless his decision is sincere—that decision can be seen as an act of oppression. Even if the motive of the director and Kate were to help Nyangeth *liberate* himself from what they may have perceived as oppression of withholding his story, by his not agreeing equally, the act of persuading him can be viewed as oppressive in itself. Further, I got the impression Kate had mentored Nyangeth in some capacity, and if so, Nyangeth may have felt that he owed it to her, leaving more power in her hands than his in this circumstance. However, whether she mentored him or not, and what the objection was of the director and Kate for persuading Nyangeth is speculative.

Participants' Perceptions of the Impact of First Generation

A couple of the participants of the study implied that some of their most meaningful experiences in First Gen include their own performances and the audience reactions. I will start where I left off in the last section with Nyangeth.

“When I joined, I didn’t want to tell my story . . . that was my weakness . . . First Gen has given me that”—Nyangeth

Nyangeth said that when they performed in front of an audience, people went up to him, embraced him, and told him that what he and the group were doing is a good thing, which made him feel as if he had been “doing the wrong thing by not telling [his] story.” I asked him if it took all the way to the performance for him to feel and he said that it did.

Vygotsky claims that “art’s true nature is that of transtantiation” (1971, P. 243), which means, transformation, and applies here in the case of Nyangeth. Nyangeth implies what Freire refers to as “speaking [his] word,” and participating in dialogue (with the audience) in order to “achieve significance” (Freire, 2000, P. 88). Although, Nyangeth refers more to the significance of the performance rather than going as far as to suggest he feels more significant as a human being as a result of the performance, the two are relevant and his experience appears to have been transformational.

He goes on to say that First Gen has taught him “to not give up, to do something to change the situation” and “to change [his] life” and the lives of his “people up by next generation to come.”

He follows by explaining how he sees himself as a role model in his family so he does not want to fail them. I suspect Nyangeth had the gumption before joining First Gen to face challenges head on but he sounds sincere in talking about what he has gained from his participation and I believe him when he says it has helped him to speak openly about it.

Nyangeth's story about the events leading up to his agreeing to perform and his sudden change in attitude after the performance was unexpected. He said the other members of First Gen were surprised by his story, as they did not know the history of the genocide but they were supportive. He was grateful that the other members were patient with him as he tried to articulate himself in English, sentiments I have heard from other non-native English speakers in First Gen. I have also heard from several sources and observed the "First Gen culture" of tolerance, which is frequently mentioned in the space.

To be clear, although I have only seen excerpts of the performance, *Through the Eye of Bakok*, in which Nyangeth tells his story, the performance did not appear as Nyangeth telling his story explicitly. The plot is rather abstract, using visuals, poetry, and other props. Other performers' stories are intertwined into the theme inspired by Nyangeth, which surrounds the concept, Bakok, a Dinka word that Nyangeth defines as being from place to place. Part of the piece consists of Nyangeth naming an impressive number of ancestors, which members have told me, surprised and inspired them. Although he implies that it was difficult to begin unpacking his story to the group, he said they were receptive and made him "feel good" to share it.

Notiiq, who, unlike Nyangeth, loves the stage and appears to always be ready to tell his story, spoke at length about how First Gen has helped him express himself artistically. He stresses “I” when he says, “how *I* want to express myself”, referring again to Freire’s insistence that when people speak their “word” they name their “world” and are able to “transform” it (2000, P. 88).

Further, Notiiq said First Gen helps to build skills one cannot learn from books. “You just go in with whatever you have and you can just sprout with that . . . [which is] how it helped me artistically; it freed me in a sense.” Dewey believed that with art, one could use “materials and energies of nature with intent to expand his own life” (2005, P. 26), which is what Notiiq implies. Dewey also believed that learners, to use, Notiiq’s term, “sprout”, by beginning with “whatever you have” and working with others to construct knowledge (1938).

Erin, who did not always see eye to eye with the director, appeared to experience extreme highs and lows as a First Gen member. She said it was not easy but she gained a new sense of commitment, as she said she had never finished anything, and she stayed in First Gen through the final performance. Part of what kept her coming back, she said, were the other group members, who she refers to as life-long friends. She also said that it was a great opportunity to work with artists and be able to “get creative and collaborate” and to go with the director and other group members to museums (at least once to Boston) and performances, as they were actually expected to do. Further, she said the experience heightened her communication and collaborative skills. Like Goodwin & Dowling’s study of the theatre course, *Performing Arts and Community Exchange (PACE)* at the University of San Francisco (USF), where the students reported

learning collaborative and communicative skills, creative thinking, and commitment (2012), Erin, expresses learning these same skills.

Ava raves about First Gen and says that being a member is not easy but she enjoys the challenge. When I asked her what she gets out of it the most, the first thing she says is “talking to them” (First Gen members and others involved). She goes on to say that going to the retreats and New York City was exciting. In New York, they went to classes, she said, which comes as no surprise, as the director seems to always have a full agenda for them. She said they learned theatre games but it was difficult for her to be explicit in English.

When I asked Ava what she has done for the first time at First Gen, she said proudly, “Make eye contact . . . Now I talk to people directly.” She comes across as very confident and at ease with me, making eye contact seemingly easily. It is unclear how much of her being more comfortable now making eye contact can be attributed to simply living in the US, considering she joined First Gen six months after arriving. However, it is clear in my observations and discussions with her and other First Gen members that making eye contact and being aware of, and learning how to control, facial and bodily expressions is critical in this group.

Ava’s struggle to make eye contact prior to joining First Gen may have to do with, as Holloway and LeCompte argue, the issue of girls suffering from a “crisis of confidence” once they reach puberty (American Association of University Women [AAUW], Brown, Brown & Gilligan, Gilligan et al., Orenstein, Pipher, Rogers as cited by Holloway, 2001, P. 390). However, it may also have to do with her being Nepali and having arrived here only six months prior from Nepal.

Kanchi proudly said what she has gained is being able to perform “in front of 400 people!” She was also proud to have told her story, which, like Nyangeth, was not easy for her to do. She told me that she was unaware that she would have to perform in front of people. This came as a surprise to me, as it was the first time I had heard this comment, however, it not the last. She goes on to say, “Now I can talk to people instead of having my head down sitting quietly, which is what I did before”. As with Ava, part of why she was less expressive before joining First Gen may be due to insecurity attached to adolescence (Holloway & LeCompte, 2001) but I would argue that it is also culturally-based, as she also joined First Gen only six months after she arrived. Nonetheless, just as the girls in the Holloway and LeCompte study claimed to have gained self-confidence and self-expression through theatre (2001), so too do Kanchi and Ava claim.

Jane said First Gen is the most stable thing in her life right now. Although she initially contacted Performance Project to see about being an intern after she saw a First Generation performance, she ended up joining the ensemble after serving as an intern for a few months. She said she had lost the foundation of school once she graduated from college and needed some moral support. When the director asked her if she wanted to join the ensemble, she thought it over and after considering all the ways in which she identifies as first generation, she joined for the support, albeit with hesitation because everyone else in the current ensemble with her is in high school and she is a college graduate.

Academic Achievement

Four of the participants of the study were high school students when they entered the First Gen program. These findings show my interpretation of how participants perceived of First Gen's impact on them academically, and includes my own observations.

Pro's and Con's

Despite Ava's and Kanchi's descriptions of their language obstacles in school, and implications of lifeless ESL classes, they both said their grades were quite good. They both credit the director, interns and other First Gen members for helping them with their homework. They also both claim that they can call the director anytime, with Kanchi specifying, "at 1AM and she will help us." Nonetheless, Kanchi also admits that being in First Gen meant that sometimes she had to forgo assignments when attending the retreat and other full-weekend workshops and events: "I couldn't say to [the director] that I'm not going because I don't have any reason to stay home except to do homework". She said the director would tell them to bring their homework to the retreats but there was never enough time to do it. Other participants agreed that the retreats are intensive and exhausting, even if they are fun.

Kanchi said she came here in the middle of her junior year and added that she got "an A+ in everything", was an honor student and got a scholarship because she had already covered the material in Nepal—perhaps the most alarming finding as far as what this implies in terms of the quality of the school she attended here, especially considering her low level of English skills at the time.

Peace of Mind and Identity

Notiiq said that he transferred from one Springfield high school to another during his sophomore year because he was failing at the former, yet graduated with honors from latter. This implies that either the high school he transferred too was much less challenging for him, or, for whatever reason, he was able to overcome his previous challenges. He did not elaborate and nor did I question him about it. I asked him if First Gen made a difference for him academically and he said enthusiastically that it did. “Performing was letting my stress go”, he said. According to Vygotsky, “art is . . . a method for finding equilibrium between man and his world in the most critical and important stages of his life” (P. 259). As an adolescent—and an adolescent who began to openly express his sexuality during this time—Notiiq identifies as someone who was then experiencing an important and critical stage of his life and who appreciated the arts for its therapeutic value.

Notiiq goes on to say, “at First Gen, I could write what *I* wanted to write about”, stressing “*I*” just as he did when he talked about how at First Gen he could express himself artistically the way *he* wanted to. He was doing as Dewey (1938), Vygotsky (Efland, 2002) and Freire (2000) argued he should be able to do in order to learn, which is to contribute to his own knowledge. Further, according to Holloway and LeCompte, it is critical for adolescents to develop a *voice* (Bakhtin as cited by Holloway & LeCompte, 2001) and according to James Baldwin, “the purpose of education is to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself [and] to make his own decisions (Baldwin as cited by Dimitriadis et al., 2001, P. 49). In the case of Notiiq, to be able to write what *he* wanted to write about at First Gen, he was in a sense, educating himself.

Identity & Multiliteracies

Erin, like Kanchi, said that participating in First Gen often made it difficult to do homework but admitted she rarely did her homework anyway. Reflecting on her school days in Northampton, she explained how she found her public high school experience to be more rewarding than her experience at the Waldorf School she attended up to that point because there were people of color and of “different body shapes” in the public high school. She said that the Waldorf School was all-White and too sheltered, and the Northampton high school was an improvement, however, one reason she joined First Gen was to connect with people of color. Holloway and LeCompte argue that arts programs, and point specifically to a theatre program for youth, provide the kinds of opportunities students need to “articulate their frustrations with an educational system that makes success difficult” (2001, P. 1). First Gen provided Erin with an opportunity to connect with people of color, which was one of her frustrations with high school. Further, the focus on social issues at First Gen registered with her more than the types of arts she had participated in before, and she even mocked the Waldorf School’s approach to art.

Erin spoke enthusiastically about being able to use media and discuss current world events in high school, and says laughing, “I thought okay we don't just sing songs in French class! You learn real stuff, so that was really cool!” What she implies is that, in the Northampton high school, she had the opportunity to engage in Multiliteracy learning, described by Kress as linguistic, visual, audio, gestural and spatial (Liaw, M., & Warschauer, 2006) and with those methods, she was more interested in learning.

Although Jane was not a part of First Gen during her high school career, her experience during that time is poignant. She said she got tired of doing schoolwork that was “unfulfilling”, and because she was otherwise always doing housework, she had no “creative time.” It’s unfortunate that the notion here is that schoolwork and creativity are separate entities, as Dewey (1938; 1998; 2005) and Vygotsky (1971) argued the arts and education have always been intertwined, while Vygotsky claims, the two “cannot exist independently” (1971, P. 253). Further, we can look to the report submitted to the UNESCO planning committee for the World Congress of Arts Education about the high school arts program, *Learning through the Arts*, that suggests the arts enhance cognitive development and “academic achievement across the curriculum” (Eisner as cited by Irwin et al., 2006, P. 1).

A straight A student, Jane claims that her theatre class was the most difficult, which came as a surprise to her because she thought art classes, including theatre, would be “less academically challenging.” Dewey argued against this notion when he proposed that making art uses the kind of intelligence that functions in terms of forming “qualitative relations” (2005, P. 52) and that “to think effectively in terms of relations of qualities is as severe a demand upon thought as to think in terms of symbols, verbal and mathematical” (P. 47).

Jane describes being “detached from [her] body”, including her voice, and feeling consistently nervous and awkward, navigating between two realities—the reality of knowing she could do it, and the reality of not remembering what she was supposed to do once she got up on stage. She said she had put up a wall around herself in high school to protect herself, as she felt alienated. Theatre, she said, eventually gave her the confidence to tear that wall down. Her response

echoes the responses of the girls who participated in the Holloway and LeCompte study, as they also reported gains in confidence and learning to express themselves (2001). Also, I refer again to Vygotsky as he claimed that art is the supreme center of biological and social individual processes [and] a method for finding equilibrium . . . in the most critical and important stages of his life” (P. 259).

Lastly, we may look to the research showing links between improvisation performed by actors and neurocognitive development, as these studies suggest that improvisation training in the performing arts may be able to enhance function of the prefrontal cortex (Preminger, 2012). This would imply a possible link between Jane’s participating in performing arts and her academic achievement; a link also supported by the previously mentioned study submitted to UNESCO (Irwin et al., 2006).

Nyangeth says the “kids” at First Gen learn leadership skills and a sense of responsibility. He argues that because there are first generation college students involved, the members in high school are encouraged to go to college. Nyangeth, himself, is one of the first generation college students, and there have been several interns involved who were college students at the time, such as Jane who is not in the ensemble. He follows that “a lot of the kids thought if they can make it, we can too”, referring to the college students, and points out that some First Gen members are encouraged by the idea of being *first generation to go to college*. First Gen members (mostly high school but some college students) and interns (mostly college students) participate in open dialogue and collaborate during each first Gen workshop. Freire insisted that learning (and social change) are only achieved through dialogue (2000). As First Gen members

change their attitudes towards college, they are creating social change. I would argue that by having some members in college, they are creating social change in terms of how their audience perceives them, as it is not only what they say on stage, but also their identities as ethnically diverse high school and college students working together to create a high quality work of socially conscious art that can spur social change.

Introspection, Identity & Oppression

Not every participant spoke directly or at length about exercises in introspection through theatre and/or involvement at First Gen. Nyangeth, however, argued that members learn a lot about themselves there.

Each First Gen workshop begins with a “check in” and ends with a check out” where members sit in a circle and one-by-one, say how they feel, what events are taking place in their lives, or whatever they want to say. In my observations in these circles, First Gen members who have been there longer are more inclined to speak as if they really know themselves, implying that the program encourages them to be more introspective, and/or better able to articulate their ideas.

Nyangeth explains how he is first generation—the first to come to the US, to go to school and then college, “to be born in war time”, and in his “personal thinking”—and for that that he is proud. He alludes the concept of being first generation as one he may not have been familiar with before becoming involved or did not identify with, and that now, after having joined first Gen, it is a concept he not only identifies with but is a source of pride. By participating in First

Gen, he implies that he now recognizes his *agency* (Freire, 2000) by identifying himself as first generation.

Notiiq said that First Gen, as well as another organization, Out Now, has helped him to “develop a political consciousness”, to become more aware of issues in his community, and to learn more about himself. In my observations at First Gen, activities include writing and participating in dialogue for developing theatre pieces that surround topics pertaining to personal, social and/or political issues. Notiiq goes on to say that First Gen has encouraged him “look further within [himself] toward the origins of some feelings.”

Jane observes that First Gen is all about being at an age where life is shifting dramatically, while the youth have a lot of questions. She said she feels as if she, as a college graduate “should have it figured out by now, especially in describing the organization . . . we serve at risk youth.” She explains her dilemma in now directing that gaze at herself: “to turn to myself and say, I actually classify as an at risk youth.” Accepting where she is in her life today, she says, is humbling.

Jane, who recently identified as a college student, implies that by now identifying herself as an “at risk youth”, especially as she also identifies herself as a college graduate, may be damaging to her self-identity, as it leaves her feeling as if she has less self-efficacy—less power—than she should at this stage in her life. To this, I refer to Foucault’s concept of the “regime of truth” or what counts as truth (Barker, 2005, P.102), and specifically to what Foucault refers to as the “technologies of the self, whereby individuals turn themselves into subjects” (P. 102). With this

notion, Jane refers to the discourse produced by the organization to determine her self-identity because she sees this discourse to be the “truth.”

She is the only participant of the study who refers to the term “at risk youth” and nowhere on the First Generation website nor the Performance Project website have I seen that term. In fact, on the *Community Agreement* that members sign when they join, one of the conditions pertaining to what is considered acceptable language and conduct at First Gen reads, “Don’t call us youth; call us young adults” (Performance Project Benefit Concert Program, April 30th, 2011). Nonetheless, the director, the intern whom I interviewed, and even some of the members used the word “youth”. The term “at risk youth” is also used throughout the organization’s grant materials, which may be why Jane, who spent time as an intern, uses this phrase and thinks of the members as at risk. I am not sure how the other members think of themselves in relation to that term.

I ask Jane what her perception is of the program’s objectives and her response is that the program addresses oppression, which, she follows, can manifest itself in family life, school life, or otherwise. This is in line with the Performance Project’s description, as it reads in the concert program that I referred to earlier (April 30th, 2011), that the productions are about oppression and liberation.

As people participate more and more, Jane explains, issues are confronted by asking questions, such as, *if you could share a message with the world, what would it be?* I have observed current members sharing their messages to the world in response to this question. They were asked to

write their messages in their journals and then they shared them later in the closing circle at the end of a workshop I attended. Here are some of First Gen members' messages to the world:

Glory is not something we are born with; glory is gained through putting others above yourself.

Everyone should have something to live for and to die for.

I know so many people who come here (to the US) and try to change to fit in. Just be yourself.

People will respect you more when you are yourself.

I get a lot of ideas from TV, sorry [director]. We are most powerful when we're vulnerable.

These are all quotes from high school students at First Gen. As standard practice, sharing these messages was one of the steps for developing the narrative for the next performance. Jane says that other questions have included, *what experience has changed you*, and *what was a difficult time in your life*. Freire would agree that this method of inquiry, as it reflects in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000), stimulates dialogue that can lead to greater consciousness of issues surrounding oppression and liberation. However, Freire would argue that the dialogue and actions that follow must come from the participants on equal terms, and that the fight for the “oppressed” must be rooted in them (2000).

Educating the Public

Notiiq suggests that they are “educating the public”, and mentions what Erin and Jane point out later, which is that they usually perform for “middle-aged, middle-class White people.” He says that they get a lot of responses, such as, "I would've never known or imagined." Notiiq proposes:

We are . . . letting them know, this is our everyday life [and] there are people out here doing good stuff who go through all these things but can put on a beautiful performance that you are willing to pay to see.

Notiiq shows self-confidence and self-efficacy in not only being able to educate the public, but implies that with the content and quality of the performance, he and the other performers dispel myths that he assumes “middle-age, middle-class White people” believe about young, low-income people of color, for which the former creates meaning based on connotations or cultural codes that they attach to latter (Barker, 2005). If Notiiq is correct, Foucault would argue that by “educating” the audience, the power shifts within the two sectors in favor of the performers, as they are reconstructing knowledge about themselves, and that “knowledge is dissociable from regimes of power (Barker, 2005, P103). Notiiq suggests that the power also shifts within the two sectors in favor of his own because the other sector is willing to pay to see the performance.

“A lot of people are afraid to speak out”, he says, and that they are not only educating people, “they are acting as a voice for them”. They are, he argues, encouraging people like them “to tell their stories” and, as Boal would agree (2005) “encouraging them through theatre to make a change.”

Story Telling

While discussing with Notiiq how the stories begin to take shape, I asked him if the director consults with the members about their ideas. He responds, “yeah she's really good about that, like making sure if we want a certain piece *not* be in the performance, or ideas around the performance.” I tell him that she had just shown me a clip of Ripple Effect and pointed out something in the performance that was his idea, which she had admittedly resisted because she had entered into what she referred to as her “artistic director vision” and just wanted to get it done. I told him about how she had said he asked again to try the technique to which she agreed, and ended up loving it. He responds that there were several such occasions and describes:

When we are in artistic development work, I'm full of ideas, and it never fails, I'd throw my idea out there and we'd either use it or not. [The director] got into her tunnel vision, and said "no, we're going to do it this way, we'll try that in a minute, ok I like this, we're going to stick to this" and that was it. That was frustrating at the same time she's the director. It kind of made me want to be a director (he laughs). I'd be able to express my own artistic imagination.

On the one hand, this implies that that the director is acting as an oppressor (Freire, 2000) to the First Gen members by dictating the development of the performance, which defies the objective of the program and the messages in the performances about oppression and liberation. Further, because Notiiq seeks voice and agency in the matter, he considers how he can achieve it by being a director himself, taking the stance of the oppressor. On the other hand, the performance must go on by a deadline and her input may (or may not) improve the quality of the performance, to which he alludes to earlier as a source of pride.

On how performances came together, Erin laughs while she explains:

It got to the point where we would get so excited about something and work so hard to perfect it to [the director's] liking and then she'd change it. It almost felt like, whose performance is this? Why are we putting in so much work for it not to be what we wanted it to be? I know she has the theater eye or whatever, but I felt like we were led to believe that it was our show . . . I don't feel like it was our show.

I asked her if members present ideas for what they want in the show and she said they would come up with pieces for the show and the director “would either like them or not”, which Notiiq has expressed as well. She laughs as she explains:

She kept telling us she had a vision (stressing the word “vision”) . . . I don't know, I feel like the whole concept changed towards the end and it became Nyangeth's story, which I loved the story . . . (she tapers off).

Unlike how *Ripple Effect* was developed, which is the most recent First Gen performance and was created more from the ground up with stories from the entire ensemble, *Through the Eye of Bakok*, the production that Erin was in, had a full script drafted based on Nyangeth's story before other members were invited to join the ensemble, which Erin and Notiiq both mention during our interviews. I saw excerpts of *Through the Eye of Bakok* and observed many of the stories of members other than Nyangeth; however, the scenes in which Erin was a part were not in the video available to me. Nonetheless, what I perceive as an exaggeration on Erin's part about how

the performance “became Nyangeth’s story” appears to be based on her frustrations about her own story being edited to the point in which she felt her voice was being silenced, which again, is counterintuitive to the stated objectives of the program and to Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000) and Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed* (2005). Nevertheless, I have not observed, nor do I assume, that the director is influenced by Freire or Boal.

As Erin described the performance, I had the feeling she did not connect with it and wondered how much they as a group discussed South Sudan. Contrary to what she had told me earlier, she said that her piece was about adoption, while other stories included homosexuality, bullying, and an overbearing parent. When I asked her if her piece was incorporated into the performance, she said that she wasn’t sure how it related but [the director] made it work. She follows that she felt betrayed and angry towards the end. With Dewey’s philosophy in mind (1938), Erin would have found the production more meaningful and would have learned more from the process if she were able to access more of her own voice and agency, and contribute as much as she felt she should be able to.

While some members voiced frustrations at having their ideas whittled down, others were frustrated by the pressure to expand on their stories beyond their comfort zones. Like Nyangeth, Kanchi initially resisted the director’s pursuit of her personal background. While she was happy to share stories that portray happiness, she said the director asked her to also share, “a tragedy in your life.” She explains in a tone that makes her sound annoyed as she reflects:

I don't want to share my personal story with everybody and [the director] forced me to do that. People are like, "I'm so sorry" and I'm like, it doesn't matter because that's me. I have to face everything! I was shy and I didn't want to speak to [the director] either.

In this conversation with Kanchi, my third interview, I begin to see a pattern take shape on the notion of oppressor and oppressed, which I did not expect. I refer back to Boal's reference to Aristotle, Hegel, and Marx, and their claims that art transmits a "certain kinds of knowledge" and that knowledge according to Marx, Boal says, "is revealed according to . . . the artist or . . . [the] sector of society which holds the economic power, controlling with it all of the other powers and establishing the directives of all creativity . . . (1979, P.53). The director clearly holds the power in this relationship, based on her position, of course, but one could argue also based on her age and association with the sector of society that holds the economic power, especially in the perception of a newly arrived refugee.

Dewey would argue that if there is "no personally felt emotion guiding the selection and assembly of the material presented . . . there may be craftsmanship, but not art" (2005, P. 71).

This notion could apply to Erin, as well, since she did not seem to connect as much with the production because she felt her voice and agency were suppressed.

Kanchi said that the director interviewed her and she shared stories about Nepal and how she felt at the time. She spoke in Nepali while the director recorded it and had someone translate it.

As the director appears to insist on “tragedy” in more than one person’s account of how their performances have taken shape, it seems appropriate to relate it to how Boal describes tragedy. Boal describes Aristotle's intentions of the use of tragedy as not to have the “tragic characters possess all of the pity and fear, but rather have those emotions manifest in the spectators” (1979, P. 29). The spectator then is “linked to the heroes through pity and fear, because “something *underserved* happens to a character that resembles *ourselves*” (P. 29, 30). According to Boal, the tragic hero first appeared when the state began to use theater for propaganda purposes (1979).

When I asked Kanchi how she feels about it now, she says with enthusiasm, “Now I feel good!” She insists that because she told a lot of people her story, she “can tell it to everyone . . . I'm not like, oh I don't have to,” she says mockingly. Like Nyangeth, she appears to have experienced a transformation associated with performing, although she insinuates that hers was not as immediate.

When I asked her how she felt sharing her story with the audience, she said she was concerned about one family member in particular who was part of the story, but once she returned home and was not confronted, she felt “confident.” She said her mother cried a lot, although she could not understand what Kanchi had said in English, but because she had heard her name many times, which made her happy.

I later saw a copy of *Ripple Effect* and my only understanding of Kanchi’s role is that of a scene in which she talks about her mother’s love. While she speaks each line in English, Ava

translates it into Nepali. This is likely the scene that caused her mother to cry. In my perception, her image did not portray an oppressed person.

In Ava's response to what she finds challenging at First Gen, she says in an excited voice, "Performing . . . I get nervous . . . but then I just be myself and I speak for *me*", stressing *me*, which again, implies, as Holloway and LeCompte argue, that the arts, and their focus is on theatre, "offer a way for developing a voice in the sense of agency" (2001, P. 1).

I asked her what her family thinks about her performances and she says, "They say it's good and nothing more." She is not sure if they are proud and when I ask her if performing makes her feel proud, she says it does because she is doing something new and challenging herself in this way. In terms of how she feels about telling her story, she simply says she doesn't mind. I suspect the brevity of her answers is due to language, as she is very gregarious at First Gen and seems very comfortable with me, perhaps because I had met her a few times before but regardless, she comes across as very confident.

Jane joined the ensemble just recently but has participated so far in the journal-writing phase of developing the next script. She admits she is reluctant to discuss in this context what she has written so far in her journal because she believes it could be inappropriate for this age group. She also points out that the other members live with their parents still, and the notion that her story could spark emotions in another member who then must face returning home is a concern. When we last spoke, she was still unsure of what she would share with the group. Her comments raise

the question of what is appropriate and what is not appropriate in this context, and how these personal stories, which often include tragedy, are navigated in the group and at home.

Holding Back

Notiiq and Jane both express feeling held back from using their full potential at First Gen.

Jane, a Hampshire graduate of theatre, said that she feels as if she is not engaging in her full capacity as someone who could facilitate and mentor. She says she has facilitated projects before around difficult subject matter and feels confident that she could do it but is cautious because the director is very protective of the project and the ensemble. She follows that her position at First Gen is not one in which she feels her “voice can really go anywhere or be heard on a regular basis.” She told me about recommending to the director an activity for pushing the group further in the direction she felt like the director wanted it to go in, but then got the impression that the director already knew what she wanted. She said that it was the first time she was able to “muster up the courage to contribute her idea and the director was receptive,” although they hadn’t tried her idea at the time of the interview.

Again, Dewey insists that educators need to provide a safe space for learning to occur (1938).

Vygotsky would argue, Jane is outside of her *zone of proximity* (1978), the space in which the learner uses prior knowledge in combination with be further challenged, which Vygotsky believed to be the optimal environment for learning.

In a similar case, Notiiq, who had been a First Gen member for over three years at the time of our interview, argues that the director knows he can lead workshops but doesn’t give him the

chance. This, he says, is one reason he is anxious to go to college, specifically Hampshire College because “they live that dream . . . being an artist and a student . . . that's my next step.” Performing at Hampshire College and knowing interns at First Gen who were students there, he and the other members feel a connection.

Miscommunication

Notiiq talked about how members often thought he was being favored at First Gen because he expressed ideas and acted without needing explanations. Tensions started to build, he said, because he led some activities. Meanwhile, he and another member had been hired as mentors but neither they, not the director, mentioned their roles to the other members. Once they did, the other members resisted. They felt that they should not have to listen to him and the other mentor because they are not the director. He said it was always a struggle and he sometimes hated being a leadership position.

This appears to be as a missed opportunity to use art to build communication and collaborative skills, as the girls did in the theatre program Holloway and LeCompte talked about (2001). Instead, what resulted is a communication breakdown causing anger, anxiety, and all of the members of First Gen to feel oppressed, either by other members or by the discomfort of providing leadership.

Jane once said that the director has a habit of putting people in impossible positions, and told me about an intern who left very frustrated and exhausted. Erin concurred and added that volunteers and interns often do not want to be involved for very long.

Cultural Codes

I spoke with Jane about the retreat and asked her to describe the movement exercises they did there. As many of the members of her ensemble are new to this country (from Haiti, Ethiopia, and the Congo), I was especially curious as to how receptive those members were to these exercises. She described one activity involving people resting their weight on each other and balancing each other, using their hands but also, she says, “finding different places on the body that can be used to find that balance.” I asked her if people ever feel uncomfortable and if there is any discussion about who may or may not want to participate. She said they discussed it less than she expected and explained how they began with eye contact exercises, to which some people brought up the fact that in some cultures people are not used to making direct eye contact, or that it can be disrespectful. She said the director asked them what eye contact means to them and after each person said what it meant to them, she explained how in this context, it is a sign of respect and to do their best to which they moved into the exercises. Jane referred to it as a struggle for some people, and explained how later, when they got into physical contact, there was no prior discussion about it, which surprised her. She concluded by saying that her partner in an exercises that involved hip to hip contact, a Congolese male who had struggled with eye contact, ended up leaving the exercise and she believes it is because he was uncomfortable, rather than for the reason he said which was that he had a stomachache.

Here again appears to be both an oppressive situation as well as a missed opportunity to engage in meaningful dialogue in which members could learn more about each other, and perhaps come up with material that feels more safe to perform and is more meaningful to them. Meanwhile, the members of First Gen were forced to conform to a hegemonic approach to theatre.

Collaboration

Kate, who had recruited Nyangeth and works with the director from time to time, had flown in from the west coast and been at the retreat, as well. From what I understand, she helped to facilitate some of the movement work. I emailed her for an interview, to which she agreed but then had to cancel and return home sooner than she had expected.

Each member and I spoke at least briefly about collaboration with other organizations or professionals from outside of Performance Project. It appears there are two professional artists who collaborate on a consistent basis with First Gen. As far as I can tell, they are involved 2-4 times per year, such as at the retreat and/or during the final phases of the development of the performances, or with the Ubuntu Summer Art program. Considering there is another theatre-based youth leadership organization in Springfield that works predominately with minority youth, I asked members if they knew whether or not there had ever been collaboration between First Gen and that group. Most of the participants did not know of any collaboration, while Jane added, the two directors, in her opinion, work on “opposite ends of the spectrum” in terms of facilitation. She said the other director leads from behind, encouraging the youth to start with their own ideas and then steps in to direct them, whereas the director at First Gen, she said, directs, then steps back to allow the youth to expand on the idea, then she steps back in again to further direct. Jane describes it as “heavy facilitation.”

Community

Regardless of the anxiety, emotional breakdowns, and even explosions, which I was told, erupted on a number of occasions, these participants followed through to the final performance or longer,

and some of them did not necessarily even connect in the beginning with the organization's underlying objective—to produce high quality art while addressing issues of oppression and liberation (performanceproject.org). Why did they do it? Each of them had different reasons for following through, and the one factor I heard from each participant of the study is *community*. For certain, some of the participants became involved because of the organization's message and/or to express themselves artistically, or to learn English, but each one followed through and still feels a sense of connection and commitment to the organization and each other because of their sense of community. “Once you are First Gen, you are always First Gen” is what I heard on more than one occasion.

Almost all of the participants I spoke with, albeit, a small number, describe First Gen, not only as a community, but a family. The only one who did not refer to it as a family is Erin, but she did say that life-long friends were part of her greatest gains.

Notiiq said he sees the director as an aunt. He spoke warmly of her when he said she is ready to help him with his own work outside of First Gen, although he does not approach her often because he sees her as being overwhelmed in work.

Ava and Kanchi were both expressive about how they see the director as a second mother to them. Ava, who's mother has passed, mentioned the director filling out school forms for her and coming to school to act as a guardian when she needed an adult who speaks English to speak with school staff.

Nyangeth, as he spoke about his performance, said that each one of them has a piece of the story and recommended people join because they will find a community there. He insisted the director and the co-director, who is involved to a lesser degree in First Gen, are “good people [and] even if the kids give them a hard time, they know this is what they have to do to help those kids change.”

Jane mentioned how new arrivals to the US who hardly speak English need a place where they can speak and people are patient. Each non-native English speaker I spoke with also mentions First Gen as the one place where people are patient with them as they learn English. After my interview with Jane, she looked at me reflectively and said that the most important aspect of First Gen “is the love”.

One aspect of the sense of community that I have observed in the workshops is how they try to communicate in a way that is clear to everyone. There are always new people each year, and, as many of them do not speak English very well, people speak in a way that makes it easier for everyone to understand. Admittedly, there is a drawback to this, as those who are members for more than one year sometimes have to censor themselves or refrain from expressing themselves at their full capacity. If they were to do so (and sometimes they do) not everyone would understand. There are two members who seem to always be thinking, “how can I say this in a way that everyone will understand.” Although this is inhibiting, they are communicating and collaborating, as well exercising empathy. There is also an issue of wanting to express a thought, and either not knowing the English words, or there are no English words to convey it. Thus, there is a lot of language navigating going on in this group.

Eva's Perspective

A recent intern, Eva, told me that what she feels First Gen members get most out of their involvement is the social benefit of having a space where they can be heard and can be vulnerable. Members also expressed this notion, and even Erin, who felt that her voice was sometimes suppressed, said that she felt as if she could be open and be herself at First Gen without being judged.

Eva told me about some of the reasons people have left early, which includes the time commitment one must make to be in First Gen. She also talked about how several members became distraught at the Ko Festival, perhaps to the point of no return. It was “an emotional disaster”, she said, with people crying and arguing, and what spurred the conflict, she claims, was a “disconnect between the youth and the director” about what pieces to perform.

When I asked Eva to identify the main objectives of the program, she said, “self confidence, relearning how to build healthy relationships with people, [and] learning how to see yourself and others in a new way through art.” As a graduate of the School for International Training, I was curious to know how Eva felt about the movement exercises and how they are facilitated and received in this culturally diverse group, but she said she had not been present for that phase of artistic development.

In response to how the content of the performances is negotiated, Eva repeated the same process as the First Gen member-participants of the study, that the director interviews them one-on-one, while tape recording, gets it translated, then “picks or talks to [the members] about which parts of the story are most exciting to [them], then uses her own opinion and pieces it together.” I

asked her if it is important for there to be sad stories in the performances and she said that the members just have sad stories and so those are what they tell. She went on to explain how the “newscast” piece in *Ripple Effect* came about because the group felt that the performance overall was becoming too sad. I have seen the “newscast piece” and was impressed by how informed the performers appeared to be as they, one-by-one, and sometimes while overlapping, recite “headlines” from around the world, depicting stories from Bhutan, Rwanda, local news, and other locations, while also including some material from commercials, such as a piece of the signature song from a State Farm Insurance commercial, which adds a touch of comedy. So in order to “lighten up” the performance, as Eva said, they developed the newscast piece by using improvisation.

When I asked Eva if it is important to include the sad stories, she said she feels that “their sad stories are more powerful than their happy stories” and that choosing depends on who they want to reach. She said that when going in front of an audience of “mostly upper-middle-class White people, they need to know these stories that they might not otherwise hear.” Foucault would argue that these representations of the performers, if their stories are altered by an authoritative voice, do not necessarily represent the *truth* but rather perpetuates the “regime of truth” (Barker, 2005).

After Eva mentioned the tough lives of the members, I asked her why she thinks the director has chosen this path and puts so much into it. She told me about how Performance Project Board members and friends had advised her to take some time off but her response was that she needed to always be available for the youth because they depend on her. Eva went on to say that it is strange for herself to now be working with youth in a different organization and at a different

capacity, with restrictions and boundaries. She said on the one hand, it is easier as she can go home and not always be on call, but on the other hand, she feels as if the youth view her as just another caseworker, whereas at First Gen, it is more like a close community.

The Director's Perspective

When I asked the director how she arrived where she is today, working with youth in this capacity, she told me about how she had worked as a high school art teacher in Chicago with students who “had been kicked out of their other schools.” She said she worked there for eight years and took the students to museums and artists studios, helping them to build a network with professional artists.

Later in Connecticut, she landed a job as an art teacher in a prison and worked there for three years. She said when she arrived that first day and drove up to the gate with its barbed wire spiraling along the top, she was reminded of concentration camps. She has told me before that her mother is a Holocaust survivor. She described stepping in to the prison and being overwhelmed by “how many brown people were there.” She began working with the men making visual art, and proudly showed me photos and actual pieces of art she has in photo albums and on the walls of her office made by the men there.

With a theatre background, she eventually began forming a theatre group with these incarcerated men. As one of them, she says laughing, “used to always say things like, ‘I was walking to the store and . . . boom! . . . I ran into Joe . . . and boom!’” Based on this person, she decided the

appropriate name of the group would be *Boom! Theatre*. She showed me photos of Boom! Theatre in action, and some of the poetry the men had written.

The director said she has always worked in the arts and activism and while working in the prison, she immediately began thinking about “the system” and how these men fit into it. She felt that trauma, racism, lack of resources, and lack of structure were all part of the system that failed them and attributed to their being there.

She says that people have implied that what she is practicing is “voyeurism” in her work with youth and people of color, as she is identified as White. She argues, “If there were Jews who were still oppressed, I would work with them, but there aren’t so I am working with people I see as oppressed.” She declares, “racism is genocide” and that we, as a society and as a world are all in this together, that we are all part of the system, and we should do something about it.

PERSONAL RESPONSE

I had mixed feelings throughout this study as I spoke with participants and observed some of the workshops. It seemed that their personal feelings, whether shaped by culture or perhaps events in their lives, were not being fully considered during the workshops, and their contributions, whether based on their comfort levels or creativity, were often undermined. Erin's question kept coming to mind, "who performance is it anyway?"

I was taken aback to hear Kanchi say that not only did she feel forced to share a tragic story, which she resented as she did not want her peers to pity her, but that she was tape-recorded and a stranger had then translated the interview. Fortunately, in the end, she seemed happy to have gone through with it and said she is now "with First Gen forever." I interviewed her after only interviewing Ava and Notiiq, and while I genuinely sympathized with Notiiq's criticisms regarding what he referred to as the director's "tunnel vision", my interview with Kanchi marked an abrupt turn as far as what I saw as ethical dilemmas. I followed by interviewing Erin, whom I felt rightly expressed frustration towards the director for having too heavy of a hand in her work. Then I was shaken by Nyangeth's story about how he, who had suffered so much while fleeing South Sudan, was persuaded to tell his story, and to tell it on stage. Jane was the last First Gen member I interviewed and she touched on issues that had not even come up that I found disturbing, such as how the movement exercises are carried out.

Questions lingered in my mind—what are the director's motives in encouraging First Gen members to tell their stories? Why did she (and Kate, in the case of Nyangeth, at least) push some of them so far? Is it because they think it would be therapeutic for them? Is it because

their stories would likely pluck the heartstrings of audience members and thus, make for a more powerful performance, which they feel would make the program shine? Even if they felt it would make the First Gen members shine, is it worth it? Is it worth it to *them*? Were they hoping funders would see or catch wind of these often tragic stories and send money so that these *poor souls*, who had gone through so much, could keep speaking *their* voices—keep making *their* art—that *they* wish to share with the world? Why are people agreeing to become members and do these things? Is it because they have become dependent on the director?

I found it ironic that a head of an organization claiming to provide a platform for youth to exercise *self*-expression and voice, and with a mission of addressing oppression, would push someone to tell a more tragic story than the one she chose herself, or persuade someone to participate, particularly someone with such an extraordinarily difficult story to unpack, such as Nyangeth. At the end of the day, however, I recognize that each participant of the study, somehow, regardless of the circumstances, was glad to have participated, was glad to have told his or her story, and felt like a stronger person for having done so.

One phenomenon I considered while conducting this study is whether or not people followed through with the demands placed on them because they are dependent on the organization and/or the director, and that in turn, she depends on them to complete the performances, resulting in an interdependent relationship. For example, beyond what the participants have already conveyed, the director has been several times to court with and/or for members of First Gen and/or The Mural Project, another Performance Project program, and has taken them to doctor's appointments, and some of them have even lived, or still live, part-time in her home.

Regardless of whether or not the relationship is interdependent, the members appear to have gained self-efficacy, self-esteem, and improved self-identity, which shows in their speaking more openly and directly, performing, and believing they not only should, but are able, and will, go to college. Meanwhile, what they all seem to have gained most is a community, which most of them describe as an extended family.

VII. RECOMMENDATION

I begin the recommendations for the program with the recommendations from First Gen members. Not every participant of the study voiced recommendations but for those who did, I have included them here.

Jane recommends that the director delegate responsibilities and communicate better with First Gen members, interns and everyone else involved so that each person knows what his or her role is. Kanchi recommends adjusting the schedule in order for members to more easily be able to do homework and manage other commitments outside of First Gen. Notiiq suggests that the program should reach out more to a people who would identify with First Gen—people between the ages of 15 and 22, who are predominately low-income and of minority race—to come to see the performances. He follows that the performances should be for everyone but that if more young people were to see the First Gen performances, they may want to join instead of getting involved in activities that could get them into trouble.

I would agree with Jane that improving communication is critical, and add that better collaboration, particularly more flexible negotiation between the director and the members about narrative development and representation to be conveyed in the performances is essential.

Allowing members to have more control over the process and development of the narrative and other aspects of the performances would mitigate the anxieties that I heard from them as they talked about how their stories were developed. It would also likely help them to build self-efficacy, self-esteem and self-identity, as they would be able to take more ownership of the work.

As the program describes itself as a group of young people coming together with mentors and

community members to engage in dialogue and to produce art that addresses issues of oppression, it is only appropriate to eliminate what I perceive as oppressive practices existing within the program. Instead of encouraging them to develop stories specifically about their home countries and pressuring them to include tragedies, the director and the members would benefit from the members being enabled to develop self-representations free from the director's assumptions, which appear to often represent tragic figures. I would agree with Dimitriadis et al. that with globalization, identities have become more heterogeneous (2001) and educators and leaders of programs who work with diverse groups, such as First Gen, should recognize this and encourage young people to access "new ways of envisioning self, other, and community that exceed modernist narratives of nationalist educational imperatives" (2001, P. 17). I recognize that the director's hand likely enhances the quality of their performances, which benefits the group members, as they feel proud to create this art form and to be able to perform in the venues in which they do, nonetheless, I argue for more equality in the process and execution.

To complete Jane's points, I would also agree with her that it is important for each person involved in First Gen to know what his or her role is. As there have been conflicts surrounding roles within First Gen, I would go further to point out the importance of each person knowing what the roles are of others through clear communication. This could be achieved by having an open dialogue about what those roles mean and how each person feels about his or her role and the roles of others. Further, I would encourage more effort to communicate and collaborate with partner organizations, and to be open to the ideas of those in other programs regarding administration and artistic development work. There are several arts-based organizations available for First Gen members to work with as partners, and although they have worked

together on occasions, members have expressed an interest in expanding collaboration, which I believe would open up “new ways of envisioning self, other, and community” (Dimitriadis, et al., 2001, P. 17).

Kanchi raises a valid concern regarding the time commitment required of First Gen members. I would suggest adding a time slot for completing homework assignments at the beginning of each workshop and multiple-day event. This way, members would have more opportunity to be successful students, it would send a message about how important it is for them to meet their academic requirements, and by placing expectations on them to do it, they may be more motivated. I would also encourage discussion about blending school assignments with the creative work at First Gen in order to help them make meaning of their academic experiences, a cross-disciplinary approach to art and academics strongly supported by many of the theorists and educators I have presented in this paper (Bransford, 2000; Dewey, 1938; Irwin et al., 2006; Dimitriadis et al, 2001; Goodwin & Dowling, 20012; Holloway & LeCompte, 2001; Liaw & Warschauer (2006); Preminger, 2012).

If the First Gen program were to become less time consuming, it would also become more inclusive in terms of who is able to join and who is able to remain an active member. I would advise that veteran members, a group that could grow under less time restraints, have more opportunities to guide newer members, an idea supported by Dewey (1938) and Vygotsky (1978). While it is important to make sure these roles are clear and open for discussion, it would allow more experienced members to have broader space for leadership and artistic growth, it would allow for a wider range of ideas, and if orchestrated effectively, it could lighten the

workload for the director and encourage better communication and collaboration between members. Further, the members would be encouraged to look to each other and within themselves more often for ideas, rather than relying as much on the director for ideas.

I support Notiiq's idea that the program should work to build an audience who identifies with First Gen to come to see the performances. More young people then may be encouraged to participate, and like some of the participants of the study, some may gain a new way of seeing theatre. Boal discusses how Bertolt Brecht believed artists who were interested in social change should abandon performance halls and go to the communities where people are marginalized and want to change society (2005). First Gen has performed in venues that range from public schools in low-income communities to concert halls in wealthy communities. I would strongly encourage more activity in low-income neighborhoods, while recognizing that First Gen members take pride in performing in concert halls and should continue to do so, as it appears to boosts their self-esteem, self-identity and sense of self-efficacy. Further, as part of First Gen's objective is to create a dialogue with its audience and encourage social change, I suggest the group explore the methods used by Boal in his Forum Theatre and invite audience members to actively participate in the dialogue that emerges on stage (2005).

Another suggestion I have for the program is to explore the ideas of Dimitriadis et al. (2001) regarding post-colonial art and consider how those ideas can be applied to theatre. As they suggest, post-colonial art encourages us to look for "new and prefigured terms of identification and association" (P. 25). As these artists use multiple cultural codes that express their hybrid-

identities, their art forms cause us to question the connotations we form about the *other* and what it means to be associated with the different cultural groups of which they represent.

More than one First Gen member has mentioned that the audience member who come to the performances are by and large “upper-middle-class White people.” They have either said directly or implied that these audience members, because they are White, are more privileged and would not understand their struggles. I would also assume that the majority at least of these audience members enjoy a higher level of income and education, and likely do not know the same level of hardship as most of the First Gen members and their families. However, this is not always the case and regardless, the stereotype is oppressive on each side of the color line. By welcoming more White participants to join First Gen, the program would help to breakdown these stereotypes and provide for a much needed dialogue between these two groups, while also challenging the notion that poverty, which is one of the main issues addressed in the performances, and oppression exists among White people.

In the Goodwin and Dowling study of the theatre program between college students and incarcerated men, participants reported gaining a better understanding of those in the other group and changed the way they initially viewed the other (2012). I believe more inclusivity within First Gen would do the same. We should recognize the “vital porosity” that exists among all people (Dimitriadis, 2002, P. 119). With this, we must recognize that our differences—gender, race, and nationality—can be “starting points for solidarity's and new alliances” (P. 119).

Theatre as a language is one way we can begin to form these new alliances.

Perhaps the most important recommendation, at least from my point of view, is that those who are working in this program and other programs in which participants are asked to dig deep into their histories and to write about and voice some of the struggles they have faced, or even tragedies, to use the language of more than one participant, need to consider the consequences of doing so. Exploring these events can be painful and perhaps damaging, and writing about these events and sharing them with others, especially with the public, may upset family members and put the participants in danger (as one participant voiced concern over). Even if in the end, telling their stories makes the storytellers feel more powerful, as the participants of this study have all claimed, it may also leave them more vulnerable. We as educators and proponents of programs that empower participants need to recognize that our responsibilities do not end at the doors of our offices and program facilities, and at the end of each session, or in this case, performance. We need to consider the big picture and do all that we can to make sure participants are safe.

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