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# The First Generation Community: What Does It Mean to be a Youth Member?

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THE FIRST GENERATION COMMUNITY:

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A YOUTH MEMBER?

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PIM 70/71

A Capstone Paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master of Intercultural Service, Leadership and Management at SIT Graduate Institute in Brattleboro, Vermont, USA.

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To my parents, for encouraging me.

To my partner, for being a supportive, listening ear.

To the members of First Generation: Thank you for your open minds, hearts, arms and spirits. You mean more to me than words can express.

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the impact of being part of the First Generation community on the youth members. The context of Springfield, Massachusetts and the culture of First Generation are explained. The role of The Performance Project, the nonprofit through which First Generation operates, is also described, as it pertains to the context. A literature review, with other youth programs' methodologies and findings of analyzing impacts in their programs, has been included.

Following months of work with First Generation and the literature research, qualitative interviews were crafted and conducted with members of the group. These anonymous interviews allow some insight into the impact of the program in their lives. The group members reflected on what being a part of First Generation means to them, their social connections, how they view themselves, how they communicate, and what could work better for them.

Overall, these interviews showed a high level of gain for the young people involved in First Generation, namely with regards to acceptance, family, and the creation of a safe space. In the course of the interviews, almost all interviewees realized something about themselves in relation to their growth through the program, indicating a need for periodic, in-depth reflection opportunities to become part of youth program evaluations.

## PERSONAL CONTEXT

A life-long love of theatre, dance and performing combined with a passion for people and community connection led me to pursue a practicum experience with youth and the arts. Getting involved in theatre in high school helped me through some difficult years, giving me a sense of community and a feeling of acceptance as myself. It seemed important to me to focus on this age group. In November of 2011, then, after meeting at The Performance Project office in Northampton, MA with Julie Lichtenberg, Executive and Artistic Director, and James Arana, Youth Programming Director, I felt I was in the right place. Getting hands-on experience in a small, nonprofit office, and working with young people in Springfield who were growing healthy connections with each other and creating theatre about their lives – all this seemed like a perfect match for me.

As I began working with First Generation, the main program run by The Performance Project, I noticed Springfield was quite different than Northampton, where I was then living. Though “urban” was a word that came immediately forward in my mind, I later understood that, according to researcher Kathleen Gallagher, “urban” carries the subtext of being poor, non-White and unruly. Her writing reminded me that as a researcher, I need to be very aware of my biases, prejudices and euphemisms and the implications those thoughts carry for a researcher (Gallagher, 2007). In response, I

decided to look at some of the statistical research existing about Springfield, in terms of demographics, poverty, and education.

## SPRINGFIELD CONTEXT

According to 2010 Census statistics, Northampton's population was 87.7% white and Springfield's population was 51.8% white. In Massachusetts as a whole, the percentage of population living below the poverty level from 2006-2010 was 10.5%. In Northampton, it was 13.1%, but in Springfield it was more than double that: 27.6%. High school graduation rates also differ greatly in these two areas: Springfield with a 75.9% graduation rate and Northampton with a 92.1% rate. Another drastic difference is the proportion of people age 25+ who had earned bachelor's degrees or higher. In Northampton, these rates were 51.8%, above the state average of 38.8%, whereas in Springfield, the same statistic was 16.9% (Census Bureau, Northampton, MA and Springfield, MA, n.d.).

## ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT

It is important to identify some of the contextual challenges facing the young people in Springfield with whom The Performance Project has been working in its 12 years of existence. The organization's office is currently in Northampton while a space is being renovated in downtown Springfield. First Generation meets in the community

room of an apartment building. The staff is small, consisting of Julie Lichtenberg, Co-founder and Executive and Artistic Director, James Arana, Youth Programming Director, and a small group of dedicated volunteers, accompanied by a smattering of student volunteers with a turnover rate of six-months to a year. In the midst of financial and structural challenges, the Project is currently working on restructuring and seeking new grant and funding sources. In addition to First Generation, The Performance Project runs The Mural Project, a visual arts and youth leadership program for court involved youth (Concept Paper, n.d., p 11), and Ubuntu, a summer arts and youth mentoring program (p 7).

The Performance Project began working in the Hampshire jails with incarcerated young people, holding visual artistic workshops. The need for deeper expression was evident and Julie Lichtenberg took action to start working on theatre and creating a safe space where these young men and women could begin to tell their stories. Years later, many of the early Performance Project members decided to form a theatre ensemble outside of the jails. This project began to evolve into what would become the basis for First Generation (“History”, n.d.).

## FIRST GENERATION CULTURE

Today, First Generation is an arts and youth leadership development program. They meet year-round, twice a week or more. All group members are “first-generation”

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in one way or another. They might be the first in their families to be growing up in the US, first to graduate high school, first to be incarcerated, first to *not* be incarcerated, first to openly identify as LGBTQ, among many other definitions.

All “First Gen” members, as they call themselves, are people of color, ages 15-22 and the group can have anywhere from 12-20 members at a time. Several of the youth in the program are in the Department of Youth Services (DYS) meaning they are or were in the court system, and some of them are involved with the Department of Social Services (DSS), meaning they are living in foster care homes. Some members are recent immigrants to the US and some of their families came to Springfield as refugees. English may be their second, third or fourth language. This diverse group comes together to form an artistic ensemble and they create theatre about their lives. As they describe in their own literature, “First Generation addresses the complexity of embracing individuality while honoring one’s family and community cultures” (Concept Paper, n.d., p 4).

There is a strong multi-lingual focus and an emphasis on ritual. Before every meeting, group members welcome each other by saying a text about First Generation in many different languages. On a full day, Nepali, Hindi, Kirundi, Kiswahili, American Sign Language, Spanish and English were spoken in the opening circle. These circles

begin with a “check-in” and end with a “check-out” of highs and lows and how the youth are doing.

Between these checking points, meetings are filled with dance, vocal activities, writing, theatre games and exercises. Lichtenberg and Arana usually lead and they bring in a variety of guest artists when possible. During intensive rehearsal periods, the group can meet up to five days a week.

There is also a focus for the adult mentors on being there for more than just the meetings with the youth. “We provide on-the-ground support for our participants” (Concept paper, n.d., p 1). This might take the form of accompanying someone to a doctor’s appointment, attending a graduation, providing a referral for a social service, or simply meeting for a dinner to talk about problems at home or school.

As I began to engage deeply with this organization, I realized I had a lot of questions. What was happening because of these connections and moments the young people share during our meetings? What are the lives of these youth really like? What visible and invisible structures shape their lives? Some questions that began to intrigue me the most were: What are they getting out of coming here? How do they see First Generation? and How do they think it has shaped/is shaping them?

In the Concept Paper of The Performance Project, the group lists many outcomes of their programs for the young people involved, including growth in areas of cultural

competence, social identity development, commitment to learning, personal and leadership skill-building, creative and artistic training, critical thinking and community engagement (n.d., pp 3-4). I wanted to test these assertions and find out if the young people were aware of their areas of growth in these arenas.

In addition, during my time with First Generation, I was present for a conversation that revealed how First Generation is more than just a program – it is a living community. On more than one occasion I heard Lichtenberg say, “Once you’re a First Gen member, you’re always a member.” I witnessed this when a man who had been part of the Performance Project many years earlier visited a First Gen opening circle. He was deeply touched by the connection he felt with the group, even though he had only met a couple of the current members before.

I knew I needed to find out more about how these connections were possible and how the members saw the role of First Generation in their lives. It was obvious through the Concept Paper that some work had been done in the past to evaluate the impact of this program, but with the organizational restructuring happening around me, it seemed unlikely that there would be time for much in-depth evaluation in the near future. Furthermore, in January when I began working with First Generation, they started incorporating new members into the group. I watched them grow and felt myself growing in different ways with the group, too. I wondered if there were

differences in how the newer members and older members felt impacted by the group. I formulated the research question of: What is the impact of being part of the First Generation community on its members? The beauty of this research, its challenges, and the limitations of this question will be discussed in the following sections.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

While studying existing literature for this work, many sources influenced my work in terms of methodology and my understanding of the context. I came across some studies that were similar to the work I wanted to do. My search involved youth theatre programs that had examined the impacts of their programming on those involved. Some programs fitting this description, specifically aimed at young people in cities, had been studied, and these studies took into account some of the other important demographic information that was crucial to understanding the context of the situation, including race and class.

One of the studies that both helped shape my research design and provoked important reflection was *Theatre of Urban: Youth and Schooling in Dangerous Times* by Kathleen Gallagher (2007). Gallagher worked with a team of researchers who spent three years observing and interacting with youth in four different high school drama classrooms in Canadian and US cities. She sees research as a humble and humbling process and finds connection with creativity and studying our own lives. Many of her

findings relate to the impact of being involved with drama on the students' lives. She found that storytelling can be a powerful means of communication for youth through drama. Another finding from her work which is relevant to this study is that students' narratives of themselves could change in drama class because of their capacity for self-representation. In other words, the students could use the safe space of drama class to dispel myths about themselves. Gallagher also found that some students learning English as a second language felt they learned more English in drama class than in other classes because of the storytelling components and wide variety of topics covered in this way. According to her research, many students felt a sense of second family with their drama classes (Gallagher, 2007).

Asantewa Fulani Sunni-Ali, in a Master's Thesis at Georgia State University titled "IMPACT Repertory Theatre as a Tool of Empowerment: Black Youth Describe Their Experiences and Perceptions," looked at the IMPACT Repertory Theatre in New York City. Sunni-Ali's work examined historical components of oppression which are important to understanding the context in which the research takes place. Her work brought up important, big-picture questions like, "How can theatre promote individual and social change among Black youth?" and asked: How can theatre give these youth a greater sense of self? How does theatre impact their identities? (2010, p 6-8). She looked at the group members' perceptions of what they were experiencing and gaining from the program through focus groups (p 31).

Sunni-Ali identified several themes in the youths' experiences. The feeling that IMPACT was a safe space was important to many of them, while a sense of family in the group appeared to be connected to that safe space. There was also a strong awareness among the youth of the activism connection to their artistic work, which IMPACT calls "activism". The theme of self-discovery/self-transformation was also present in the focus groups Sunni-Ali conducted (2010, pp 51-55). Sunni-Ali also took into consideration other factors that were shaping the youths' experiences in life, besides the IMPACT program, and learned that the media and rap music play integral parts in their lives (pp 24-25). She also recorded detailed observations during the IMPACT group's work sessions: this would become important to my research as well.

Through observing First Generation and talking with Lichtenberg, the overall concept of working with the youth to create theatre about their lives is based in part on techniques outlined in Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1979). Boal worked on a literacy campaign in Peru that attempted to use theatre as a language for expression that could be accessed by anyone. "We tried to show in practice that theatre can be placed at the service of the oppressed, so that they can express themselves and so that, by using this new language, they can also discover new concepts" (Boal, 1979, p 121). Boal laid out several stages that make the transition from spectator to actor possible and these were employed in different ways by First Generation. Boal's stages are as follows: First stage, knowing the body; Second stage, making the body expressive; Third stage,

theatre as a language; and Fourth stage, theatre as discourse (Boal, 1979, p 126). The incorporation of these elements into the work of First Generation was apparent in observations and in the youth members' perceived impacts of the program on their lives.

This research also touched on the theories regarding the necessary elements for effective and empowering youth programs. The First Generation program is strong in many ways and this area of research allowed for some theoretical insight into why things worked well with this group. In terms of mentorship programs, having consistent, adult mentors there for at least one year who develop close ties with youth and have a regular schedule of contact are some of the components recognized in successful programs (Espejo, 2011, p 145). This is the case with First Generation. Julie and James are there and have been for over 12 years. Youth stay connected with them over a long time span and it is powerful to witness.

In contrast to these positive findings about mentoring programs, research in the mid-1990s showed that the Big Brothers, Big Sisters mentorship program provided little benefit to youth in emotional, social, academic and career development areas from (Espejo, 2011, p 144). This calls into question the effectiveness of mentoring programs. The mentors in the Big Brothers, Big Sisters program were present for about a year and

there was a fairly high turn-over rate from year to year. These factors were considered examining First Generation from a researcher's perspective.

Other research has shown that skill-building, education, action and empowerment are also essential components of effective youth programs in addition to mentorship (Jennings, et al, 2006, pp 34-44). These components are essential for beginning to understand the holistic view of what makes up a strong youth program. They can shape the impact on the participants. Looking at skill-building and learning were to become integral parts of the research I designed.

The full meaning of *impact* came into question during my research and in pursuit of answers as to how other researchers analyzed impact, I found the Full Frame Initiative methodologies. The Full Frame Initiative, developed by Katya Fels Smyth, was first published in 2006. Smyth identifies Five Domains of Wellbeing that are considered universal, interdependent and non-hierarchical. These domains are: safety, stability, mastery (self-efficacy), access to resources and social connections. According to The Full Frame Initiative, these domains apply at the individual, family and community levels ([www.fullframeinitiative.org](http://www.fullframeinitiative.org)). With the permission of Full Frame Initiative, I crafted some of my research questions based on these Domains of Wellbeing. (This paper, however, is not officially connected to the Full Frame Initiative.)

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The ideas of these questions will be elaborated upon more in the Research Inquiry Design section of this paper.

## RESEARCH INQUIRY DESIGN

This research design was greatly influenced by the literature reviewed above, and by interactions with the members of First Generation. The goal was to examine the real impact of being part of the First Generation youth community on the youth members. It was important to know from the youth's perspectives what they were experiencing through this program and to give them a chance for deeper reflection.

In designing the research, I talked with one of the First Generation members about the interview design, and we both agreed that individual interviews would elicit more genuine and varied responses from the group members, as opposed to doing focus groups. We were concerned about quieter members from more collective cultures or non-native English speakers' voices not being heard in a group environment. Despite these efforts in planning, this concern did resurface in some way later in the implementation of the interviews and will be analyzed in the Discussion section of this paper.

The original plan was to conduct interviews with 10-15 current and former First Generation members (though, as an ongoing community, all members past and present are considered "current"). I based many of my interview questions on the Five Domains

of impact as identified by The Full Frame Initiative. The questions asked in the interviews were as follows:

- What does it mean to you to be part of First Generation?
- What is your involvement like in First Gen? (How often do you come? How long have you been coming? Have you been involved in a performance here?)
- Is First Gen unique in relation to other youth organizations you have been involved with or heard about? How so?
- How has First Generation affected your social connections, like your friendships and relationships?
- How has it affected how you communicate?
- Has First Generation affected how you feel about yourself? In what way?
- How has First Generation impacted your ability to be yourself?
- How has being part of First Gen impacted your interactions and perceptions of different communities and other cultures in Springfield?
- What have you learned about yourself and what you can do because of First Gen?
- What can you think of that could be improved about First Gen? How could it work better for you?

These questions mostly focused on the domains of mastery (self-efficacy) and social connections. Because the domains are interconnected, the topics of safety, stability and access to resources also came up during the interviews.

There were some limitations for this research that related to who was involved in the interviews. Time was a major factor. There were delays in receiving approval for the interviews, which limited the opportunities available before my time with the group ended. It would have been difficult, though not impossible, to conduct interviews via phone or after several months of not working closely with the group. Trust could also have been an issue in relation to the time lapse. Continuity and comparison of the youth's responses would have been an issue if interviews were conducted over the span

of several months. For these reasons, I chose to reduce the scale of the interviews rather than spread them over a longer time.

Six of the proposed 10-15 interviews were conducted. All six interviewees were current members of First Generation. There are pros and cons to this reality. Because of the number of questions and the in-depth answers I got from most interviewees, the rich interviews provided more information than originally expected. The absence of “former” First Generation members’ perspectives and the small number of interviews, however, lessen the scope of the research. Nonetheless, the information gained from these interviews may still prove helpful for First Generation in working to better meet the needs of the current members. It also can allow the group to get a sense of the recent impact of the community on the youth members.

In the first interview, a few other questions arose that I added to subsequent interviews. One of these questions was “Do you have any mentors at First Generation?” Another important question arose about the initial impact of doing the interview. I realized it was not every day that the group members thought or talked at length about the impact of First Generation on their lives, so I began to ask everyone at the end of the interview if they had learned or realized anything about themselves or First Generation because of the interview. Most of the interviewees noticed something in themselves they had not seen or realized before in relation to their involvement in the group.

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It was important to me to look at how long and how deeply group members had been connected with First Generation in order to understand the impact of the program on their lives. It was important to Lichtenberg, with whom I consulted, to find out how the youth viewed First Generation overall and if/how they felt the program was unique. These interviews were also an important chance to get a snapshot of what the youth members wanted to improve about First Generation. This information has important implications for the group to improve its effectiveness and could provide other youth communities with vital feedback about youth needs, especially in terms of creative environments and groups working on strong community development.

Member participation in the interviews was voluntary and anonymous. In such a small group, the anonymity aspect was very challenging. I met with members in places they chose. Many members were excited to participate in the interviews, and consent forms and parental consent forms (when necessary) were filled out before any interviews took place.

Interviews were conducted outside of the First Generation meeting times. Most were audio recorded with interviewees' consent and, when not recorded, handwritten notes were taken. In accordance with standard procedures, these recordings and notes will be destroyed.

Interviewees were given the option at the end of the interview to choose a fake name for themselves to be used for their interview. There were also given the chance to describe themselves with any characteristics they felt were meaningful to their identity. This was modeled after the work of Kathleen Gallagher, who also allowed her interviewees to describe themselves. This was an effort to make the research more inclusive and collaborative with the students. Some of the members' self-descriptions will be used in the Presentation and Analysis of Data section of this paper. Some of their full descriptions could not be used because it would give away the identity of the interviewee to any First Generation member who may read this research.

After conducting the interviews, the notes or audio recordings were transcribed as close to verbatim as possible. The data was then consolidated, turning the sentences into key words and phrases. After that, the data correlation process began. Similar words, themes and experiences were highlighted, as well as experiences that were unique to each person (outliers). The flow of the interviews was observed and noted. The interviewees' ideas for improvements were also analyzed for themes and outliers. The findings of this analysis will be presented below.

## PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA

The presentation and analysis of this data will consist of several sections. It will begin with introducing the youth who participated and looking at the benefits and

challenges of who was involved. Next, the themes that emerged will be analyzed.

Included in the themes are the perceived skills gained through First Generation by the members. These skills will be analyzed with an expansion upon the Domains of Wellbeing as laid out by The Full Frame Initiative. Some surprises in the research that emerged, such as the value of storytelling within the group, various kinds of mentors and a few possible outliers will be discussed next. The final sections of the Presentation and Analysis of the Data will look at the importance of reflection for the youth members and their ideas for improving First Generation. Analysis of challenges will occur throughout the various sections.

### *Introducing the Youth*

It is important to know some information about the six First Generation members with whom I spoke. Their ages range from late teens to early 20's. They will be identified in this paper using the false names they chose for themselves. The following is a chart so the reader can begin to "meet" these amazing young people. It includes their pseudonyms, lightly edited self-descriptions, how long the members have been involved in First Generation, how they got connected with the group, and if they have performed in one of the group's theatre pieces or not.

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Pseudonyms and Descriptions	Time Involved in First Generation	How Members Connected with First Generation	Performed with First Generation (Yes or No)
Betty Lou, female artist	~3 years	Through another Performance Project group	Yes
Pearl, woman (in her late teens)	~1 year	Through a family member	No
Blossom	Less than 1 year	Through another Performance Project group	No
Khushi (means “happy”), proud Nepali person	~2 years	Through Nepali friends/Julie Lichtenberg	Yes
Notiq, performing artist, entrepreneur	~2 years	Through another Performance Project group	Yes
Sincloud, expressive artiste	~2 years	Through a family member	Yes

## THEMES

There were many themes that emerged from this small data set of interviews with current First Generation members. Developing an identity as an artist, feeling a sense of family with this group and gaining new skills are some of the key themes observed with these youth. Some of the surprising themes are the importance and impact of stories and mentors. There are also possible outliers in this study which are important to note.

### *Identity as an Artist*

Among the youth interviewed, those who have performed with First Generation felt that their experiences have largely had a positive impact. Their identities as artists

have been shaped by being part of this community. Several of them spoke poignantly about this aspect of their identity formation based on their involvement in First Generation.

Three out of the four of those with performance experience through First Generation noted the impact of their performances on their audiences and also found varying levels of identifying themselves as artists. Notiq noticed that since performing with First Generation:

...friends in high school now see me and they're like, 'Oh, I saw you in this play,' 'You're always singing,' 'What are you doing now? Recording?' So it's like everywhere I go, now I'm identified as an artist and not just an ordinary person in the neighborhood. (Personal communication, June 6, 2012)

Sincloud shared this about her experience creating the group's main performance, *Ripple Effect*:

...[We were] coming up with the script, and I found myself loving performing and I was like, I can do this with my time, with my career, with my life. And it made me feel like, and it still is making me feel like, I'm an artist. And with teens and youth it's hard for them to like, find their selves and I feel like within First Gen, I found myself and I found my calling. (Personal Communication, June 11, 2012)

For Notiq, being an artist sets him apart from other community members, which, for him, is highly valuable. For Sincloud, finding a "calling" and finding herself through this artistic identity are important. Through Notiq and Sincloud's experiences, one can see the importance of their identities as artists both for themselves and how they are seen by their communities.

### *Sense of Family*

In line with the findings of Sunni-Ali and Gallagher and the different theatre programs they studied, First Generation has created a strong sense of family for the youth involved in this community. It was clear in the interviews that family is a large part of the youths' experience because it appeared frequently as the answer to a very open-ended question.

Five out of the six interviewees responded with various explanations of "family" to the open-ended question of "What does being part of First Generation mean to you?" Betty Lou said "In First Gen, there's just so many people with so many stories and we all connect and we become like a big family and it's never like, you feel like an outsider or somebody doesn't understand you" (Personal communication, May 31, 2012).

Sincloud said being part of First Generation means "to be part of a family. To be part of something small, but creating something big with our performances and making a difference in our communities, in our families" (Personal communication, June 11, 2012). Notiq said, "For me, to be a part of First Generation means being a part of a family, a larger community of people where we all kinda like, help each other expand our minds and help each other grow" (Personal communication, June 6, 2012). Pearl said "It means to be part of a family outside of my other family, like, a family that I can share anything with and like, that I can talk to about my other family, or a family I can just come to with anything- people that understand. They don't judge you" (Personal communication, June 2, 2012). In response to this question, Khushi said, "Family. When

I was so new, I didn't know much English, then I came here and it seemed like the right place to learn. They are my family and friends. I have a love, a really deep love for them" (Personal communication, June 4, 2012). It is an interesting observation that Blossom was the one member who did not respond with "family" as part of her answer and she had only been connected with the group for about 6 months at the time of the interview, whereas the others had all been connected for longer than one year. Her main answer for what it means to be part of First Generation was "Healing" (Personal communication, June 3, 2012).

The sense of family experienced by the youth members of First Generation is amazingly strong and can provide them with a safe space to share about their biological family members and home situations. It is powerful to see that "family" is what, in almost all cases, it means to be part of First Generation.

### *Skills*

In analyzing the perceived impact of the program on these youth members, all of them talked about different kinds of skills and major learnings they feel they have gained through First Generation. To present this data, an expanded understanding of the Five Domains of Wellbeing from the Full Frame Initiative is necessary. The following section will break down and categorize these skills into the Domains of

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Wellbeing: social connections, safety, stability, mastery, and access to relevant mainstream resources.

The Full Frame Initiative defines social connections as “The degree to which a person has and perceives a sufficient number and diversity of relationships that allow her or him to give and receive information, emotional support, and material aid; create a sense of belonging and value; and foster growth” ([www.fullframeinitiative.org](http://www.fullframeinitiative.org)). The most common self-perceived improvements related to this Domain noticed by First Generation members were: having better eye contact (Pearl, Blossom, Sincloud), becoming a better listener (Pearl, Notiq, Sincloud), an increased comfort in talking to new people (Betty Lou, Pearl, Khushi), and enjoying learning about other cultures (Betty Lou, Pearl, Sincloud). Other perceived gains by the interviewees were: increased communication abilities (Khushi, Notiq), increased comfort in speaking in groups (Pearl, Khushi), an increased understanding of others’ views (Betty Lou, Blossom), and improved articulation of thoughts and feelings (Betty Lou, Notiq).

Many of the members interviewed also identified skills they felt were connected with First Generation which relate to social connections that they did not have in common with other interviewees. Notiq noticed he gained the skills of being able to interact with kids through being a mentor at the Ubuntu Summer Arts program, and he can give feedback, express himself openly, and be honest with other people because of

his involvement in First Generation. Khushi started asking more questions because of being part of the group. Pearl feels her ability to give advice increased.

Because of the interconnectedness of the Five Domains of Wellbeing, many of these skills and lessons learned highlighted so far as being related to social connections are also related to other Domains. According to the Full Frame Initiative, safety is explained as being: “The degree to which a person can be her or his authentic self and not be at heightened risk of physical or emotional harm” ([www.fullframeinitiative.org](http://www.fullframeinitiative.org)). Using this idea, many of the social areas of perceived growth of the First Generation members might also be related to an increased sense of safety. Khushi might feel an increased sense of security both in speaking English and in belonging in the group, which can create a space for her to feel comfortable asking more questions. The increase of eye contact and improved listening highlighted by Pearl, Sincloud, Notiq and Blossom could also be related to a possible increased sense of maintained safety created through the First Generation community. It would be interesting to have another set of interviews with this group to ask why they felt these different skills improved. Data from this could be used to more clearly determine the Domains the members feel are most directly being impacted in their lives, rather than the researcher guessing at the main source of growth. However, for the purpose of this Data Presentation, the Domains are being used to help organize information, rather than to fully analyze.

Other perceived skills and lessons learned gained from First Generation might be related most directly with the Domains of Stability and Mastery. Stability is defined by the Full Frame Initiative as:

The degree to which a person can expect her or his situation and status to be fundamentally the same from one day to the next, where there is adequate predictability for a person to concentrate on the here-and-now and on the future, growth and change, and where small obstacles don't set off big cascades. ([www.fullframeinitiative.org](http://www.fullframeinitiative.org))

The Full Frame Initiative defines mastery as "The degree to which a person feels in control of her or his fate and the decisions she or he makes, and where she or he experiences some correlation between efforts and outcomes"

([www.fullframeinitiative.org](http://www.fullframeinitiative.org)). It seems the increased skills of artistic growth highlighted by Betty Lou, Notiq and Sincloud, might stem from a greater sense of mastery among these members. It is also possible that an increase in stability would allow the members to focus on their creativity. Another skill some of the members noticed in themselves was an increased ability to focus (Notiq, Sincloud). Blossom experienced an increased sense of kindness, self-respect and respect for others, all of which seem related to mastery and stability. Sincloud discussed how First Generation helped her gain the skills of becoming a leader and setting goals. Pearl noted an increased ability in herself to be sympathetic and to acknowledge everything- "the good and the bad" (Personal communication, June 2, 2012).

The fifth Domain is meaningful access to relevant mainstream resources. Pearl felt like First Generation had helped her with her skills of performance in school. Sincloud noted that it was because of First Generation that she was motivated to finish high school. They were the only two from the group who talked directly about resources in relation to First Generation. Part of this could be due to the fact that questions were not directly asked about access resources in connection to First Generation. It could also be that group members are not as aware of the subtle access to resources program leaders provide, like rides to doctor visits, GED tests or looking up a phone number. These were some constant happenings noted in my observations over the 6 months I spent with the group.

Overall, the youth identified a varying range of skills they feel they have gained from being in First Generation. The area where they identified the greatest growth was perhaps in social connections. As noted, however, the interconnectedness of all the Domains creates a challenge in using these as clear categories. It is clear though that these perceived skills are an important part of what the youth feel they are learning in First Generation and that they are able to take these skills into other areas of their lives.

### *Ability to be One's Self*

One question that was important to me in this research was "How has First Generation affected your ability to be yourself?" Almost all of the members felt to

varying degrees that being part of First Generation had helped them in different ways be themselves. Sincloud made a critical note by saying that at "...First Gen, always the model is you can be safe here, you can be yourself here..." (Personal communication, June 11, 2012). This important observation of safe space being connected with the ability to be one's self was highly valued by four of the six interviewees. Pearl and Betty Lou both felt that being involved in First Generation helped them to better understand themselves.

These findings also relate to those of Gallagher and Sunni-Ali and help demonstrate the ability of artistic communities for youth to become safe spaces where youth can learn who they are in a supportive environment. This environment was felt by many of the First Generation youth and they valued being able to be themselves in this group.

### *Stories*

There were also a few themes from this research that surprised me. Though I did not directly ask anything about telling one's own stories or listening to others' stories in the interview questions, many of the members brought this up as something that is valuable to them about being connected with First Generation. It is worthwhile to examine this unexpected theme.

Betty Lou and Sincloud appreciated telling their own stories through the *Ripple*

*Effect* performance. Betty Lou had this to say about that experience:

I never thought I could get on a stage and be in front of hundreds of people and be telling about my life and family secrets and you know, that was just like, well, everybody was like, 'People are being so impacted by this!' and I'm just telling a story, I'm telling MY story. I never used to look at it like, 'Oh my gosh, it's a big deal,' but like, we're changing people and you know, I always just thought, 'This is me and my friends telling our stories.' And it is powerful and it is amazing. (Personal communication, May 31, 2012)

Betty Lou, Pearl, Blossom, Khushi and Sincloud all felt like they experienced closer connections with First Generation members through hearing the stories of their friends. Khushi found a stronger connection with group members from Africa after hearing stories about their lives. Sincloud, Betty Lou and Pearl all pointed out that the hearing stories of other First Generation members, especially those from cultures different than their own, had a strong impact on their lives. Betty Lou shared this poignant reflection about the impact of being friends with and hearing the stories of the Nepali women in the group:

...understanding everything that they've been through and then looking at everything they've been through, even though I look at it as, they've been through so much more than me and they came out of it, and them not belittling what I go through and them saying like, 'What I went through is just as important as what you went through and we both got over it,' and that's one of the things I really, really appreciate about First Gen. (Personal communication, May 31, 2012)

The personal connections the youth formed in First Generation through their storytelling not only allowed them to connect with each other, but helped some of them connect with their audiences and their performances. The particular role of storytelling

in youth groups as a technique of empowerment seems to warrant further, in-depth research.

### *Mentors*

Another surprising component of this research was the importance of both youth and adult mentors in the group. The question about mentors surfaced in the first interview and was added to subsequent interviews. My initial hypothesis was that youth in the group would identify adults as mentors. This, however, was not always the case.

Four out of the six members with whom I spoke talked about mentors. Betty Lou highlighted only other youth as mentors for her, Pearl only adult mentors, and Blossom and Sincloud both youth and adult mentors. One interviewee particularly emphasized the importance of the “women of color” (she used air quotes the first time she said this phrase,) as mentors for her in First Generation. She emphasized the strength she gained from seeing them and being supported by them.

It is interesting to note the variety of mentors experienced by First Generation members. Their ability to see one another as leaders and people to look up to speaks to the deep levels of mutual respect created in the group. This is also another area of possible future study.

### *Possible Outliers*

When analyzing the themes and overall flow of the six conversations, a few occurrences pointed to some differences in topic and flow. These instances will be analyzed as possible outliers to the data in the following section. While the reasons for these differences in topics or flow are not fully understood, suggestions will be shared.

There were only two times when race, discrimination or oppression directly came up in the six interviews. The first to note was the mention of “women of color” by the youth who identified with those women as her mentors. The second was when Notiq talked about social justice issues as the connected to First Generation. Here is what Notiq had to say:

With First Gen it's political in a sense that us as young people, you know we're expressing our struggles, our secrets of our everyday lives. The oppression that we face every day is something that a lot of the audience that see our plays, they don't see that every day and just teaching that and then touching people in that way and being young and being able to show a struggle that we're gonna go through for years and years to come, that's political in itself anyway (Personal communication, June 6, 2012).

It is interesting that these topics were not discussed more directly in the interviews. I wonder if the power dynamics of age and racial difference between me and the group members impacted this at all. I wonder if the group members talk much with each other about these issues. It is also possible that the interview questions did not lead directly to these topics.

Another possible outlier in this research relates to the flow and duration of the interviews. Khushi was the only Nepali interviewee and the only one with whom I spoke who was learning English as a second language. This interview was much shorter than the others in length. While sharing about the fun of learning to dance, play games and the challenges and joys of creating *Ripple Effect* with the group, she talked at length about comparisons of Nepal and the US in her answers. This led me to think that perhaps First Generation had actually served as a cultural bridge for her, if by talking about her involvement in the group, she was actually sharing about her transition to the US. Her short responses also made me realize that when designing the research questions, I did not put much thought into the complexity of language in such questions as, “How has First Generation impacted your ability to be yourself?” I did not take into consideration some of the different cultural or conversational norms that might make some of these questions challenging or even possibly uninteresting to Khushi. When asked if she had learned or realized anything about herself through doing the interview, Khushi responded with, “No, not really” (Personal communication, June, 4, 2012). If redesigning these interviews, it would be important to do more research around conversational norms of the different cultures in the group. It would also be helpful to work with some of the Nepali youth in planning the research questions.

These two sets of possible outliers in topics and flow speak to researcher expectations and research design. The expectation that oppression and other issues that are present in *Ripple Effect* would be discussed in the interviews was either not met or not asked about directly in the questions. Also, the challenge of designing interview questions that can go across cultures was not fully taken into account, being a possible cause of the outlier of flow with Khushi.

### *Importance of Reflection*

Many of the other interviewees felt like they learned a great deal about themselves through doing the interviews. They were often a bit surprised to be asked these different questions and surprised by what they had learned about themselves through their answers. Some of their responses and the things they learned follow.

When asked at the end of the interview about how it felt to reflect on all she had shared, Betty Lou said this:

It feels good...I think it's not really a day-to-day thing to like, reflect on a lot of things cause life is so fast and there's not enough time to do that, but it's amazing to be able to sit down and reflect on something that's happened over a period of time and just soak in it... (Personal communication, May 31, 2012)

Through the interview conversation, Sincloud realized in a new way how long she had been part of the group and how deeply amazing it was to create *Ripple Effect* with the group. Another interviewee said, "Talking to you today I feel like it's... I'm like listening to myself talk and I feel like I've gained so much strength and wisdom and

power”. This person went on to share about understanding more about the growth experienced since her earlier teen years and realized she felt like she was in the process of finding her voice through First Generation. Another interviewee shared about how the interview made the person realize how much was learned from the group and that it was okay to be attracted to people of the same sex. This person had not realized before the interview the deep impact the acceptance and love of First Generation had on this aspect of this person’s life. Though this interviewee included their sexual orientation in their self-description, it was not connected with the false name in order to maintain anonymity.

From realizing how much First Generation impacted their feelings about their sexual orientation, to seeing how it helped them find their voice, to appreciating a long-term, consistent support system and marveling at creating a performance with a group, it is clear that many of the youth gained so much from reflecting during these interviews. Having a chance to speak one-on-one with someone about their ideas and growth seemed to help many of them process their experiences in First Generation.

### *Ideas for Improvement*

The last section of the data to present is about the members’ ideas of things that could work better for them or be improved about First Generation. The three major themes are related to logistics, expansion, and communication/group dynamics. There

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was a wide variety of answers to this question among the participants. Most of the suggestions listed were each made by only one person; however, it will be noted if an improvement was suggested by two or more people.

The logistical improvements one of the members suggested were to find a stable funding source and to provide consistent transportation. The one improvement that could be considered either logistical or related to expansion is that two of the interviewees wanted the group to have its own meeting space (rather than being in the apartment building community room). The other expansion improvements different members suggested were to have more workshop options, to have more people be part of the group or to have other sets of youth meeting like First Generation in Springfield and beyond, to have more fun and family events, and to talk more directly about oppression. One person suggested it would be helpful to receive training on how to run a workshop so that when youth are asked to lead each other in warm ups, for example, they will feel ready. This person also felt that this kind of training would be helpful for when First Generation hosts a visiting artist, as the group would have a deeper understanding and more respect for what the artist is going through to lead them.

In terms of group dynamics and communication, one member thought it would be good to use the particular strengths of individuals more through having youth members lead activities or workshops they are passionate about or already have some

skills in. Another member thought there should be more space made in the group to talk about the Community Agreement- a document youth members will sign that explains what it means to be part of this community- and about the relationships of the First Generation members. Three group members felt like there were different areas where communication was lacking. One felt the purpose of the group needed to be more clearly explained to members who were just joining. Another felt there were communication issues in the group that caused a gap between the youth and the adults. Another member felt there were some communication issues between members and felt it necessary to always approach the other members if she wanted to engage in conversation and that other members did not often come to her to talk.

These themes spanned quite a range, from looking at who is seen as the mentors for the First Generation youth, to identity development, to what members want to see improve about the group. The strong importance of the sense of family for the group remains as the most consistent theme and is supported by other experiences the youth have shared together through First Generation, like sharing stories and learning new skills. All of these themes also likely support the youths' ability to be themselves in this youth community.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This research could benefit the members of First Generation in promoting discussion and reflection for the group. It anonymously places the youths' ideas for areas of improvement out into the open for group discussion, bypassing a potentially difficult beginning of a conversation. More importantly though, it allows all members to see how the youth members view the impact of this community on their lives.

This research may also benefit other youth arts programs or youth programs that also consider themselves more like communities than programs. It could benefit people starting or already engaged in youth theatre organizations. It could help youth workers who are exploring new ways of analyzing impact to find out about Full Frame Initiative. It also allows Full Frame Initiative to see how another researcher interpreted their theories.

Looking at this data, some conclusions can be drawn about the First Generation members' perceptions of the impact of the program on their lives. It seems that for most of the members, First Generation provides a sense of family and deep connection, which is powerful and positive for these members. In addition, First Generation is consistently described as a safe place for these members to be themselves. Many interviewees talked about not feeling judged there, which suggests it is a space of belonging and acceptance.

Notably, this echoes some of the key findings in the literature review from Gallagher and Sunni-Ali.

Strong social connections created in the group were evident in the interviews and were discussed along with the skills that helped the youth to make those connections, like becoming better listeners and working on eye contact. The extension of these skills to use outside of the group was mentioned by four group members. This shows considerable growth for the youth to trust themselves to try these social skills outside of the safe space.

It seems that identity development may be connected to First Generation for some of the members. Three of the group members talked about identifying as artists and some even chose to use that identity as a part of their self-descriptions. The sharing and telling of personal stories and creating performances with those stories were discussed as being impactful for three out of four of the performers interviewed. The intercultural/international aspect of the group was connected to this story sharing for three of those members. Khushi's connection to the group was also important for her identity development and adjustment to living in the US. This shows the significant impact of intercultural connections on the First Generation members.

Through this research, many ideas have been generated for further questioning and research. Looking specifically at my study, I would have liked to talk with more of

the current members for a larger sample size. It is also important to note that in the First Generation community, adults are also considered members. It would be interesting to interview Julie Lichtenberg or James Arana to find out the impact of being part of the group for them and to see how different or similar their answers are to the youth. I am also curious about what impact they see in the youth members because of their closeness and immersion with the group.

This study also brought up questions for me about mentorship and what it means to be a mentor to someone, both knowingly and unknowingly. I wonder how much the adult and peer mentorship in First Generation impacts the group members. I also wonder if the peers who some interviewees listed as mentors realize they are seen as such.

Based on the interview with Khushi, the curiosity to deeply analyze the impact of being part of First Generation on the group members who are moving to the US from other countries arises. Does this group actually become a bridge for young people coming as immigrants from other nations, allowing them to connect in a healthy way with their new home? It would be fascinating to interview or have focus groups with the group members from other countries in First Generation and to work with them to design the research questions.

If research of this kind were carried out by members of the Full Frame Initiative, I would be intrigued to see what different findings would result. I observed the interviewees finding impact in all five of the Domains of Wellbeing in their lives, though I wonder what different approaches and interpretations Smyth and her colleagues would be able to apply to this data. It is also worth investigating further to see what different methods of inquiry in assessing impact may be used by the Full Frame Initiative group.

The conclusion from this work that feels most significant is the impact of periodic reflection, either through interviews or another method for youth in a community like First Generation. Though a reflective processing takes place after group performances, which is no doubt beneficial for the youth, the one-on-one nature of the interviews and the opportunity to elaborate on personal experience seem to lead to deeper awareness. Three interviewees explicitly mentioned how they had learned or realized something important about themselves in the course of the interviews. As a further tool for organizations and professionals working with youth in community contexts, one-on-one interviews that encourage specific yet open-ended reflection on group membership, skills learned, and the process of self-realization, may prove to be of great value.

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