

BACKGROUND

This research arose from a shared interest and collaboration between two colleagues in different academic fields. Neda Norouzi is a doctoral student in Architecture and Human Development, interested in how the physical environment affects intergenerational collaboration. Sarah Lyon-Hill is a doctoral student in Urban Planning, studying community-based theatre as an alternative approach to community and economic development. Both authors have theatre backgrounds due to their fathers’ professorial careers in script writing and set design. Understanding their common background and interest in building collaborative relationships among diverse groups, these authors turned to the growing presence and effects of intergenerational theatre programs (IG theatre).

IG theatre emerged from the community-based theatre movement, which focuses on building the capacity and voice of different and often marginalized groups within communities through intergroup collaboration and helping diverse groups find a shared community identity (Strimling 2004).

RESEARCH QUESTION

What are the effects of theatre on intergenerational connection among participants? We understand these relationship effects on three scales: the individual, one-to-one relations between participants, and the individual with the larger community.

PROGRAMS

The Intergenerational Learning Center (ILC) in Eagan, MN, is a cooperation between a child development center and an assisted living facility. The theatre program grew out of this collaboration. Since 2007, it has welcomed different age groups from the St. Paul metropolitan area to collectively produce an annual play.

Mind the Gap (MtG) in New York City, is a program sponsored by the New York Theatre Workshop. It began in 2009 and invites select applicants to a scriptwriting process during which youth and elders are partnered one-on-one. For the final project, each participant writes a 6-10 minute play inspired by the story or in the voice of their intergenerational partner.

SHARED GOAL = Both programs have a shared goal of encouraging intergeneration connection.

INSTITUTIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE = Prior to these programs, both institutions had strong connections with younger and older populations. Since then, they have built on that foundation.

PEER-TO-PEER COLLABORATION = Unlike many IG theatre programs that focus on passing down history from older to younger generations, these programs emphasize an equal status and mutual learning among peers.

THEORY

Contact Theory: encourages communication, increases understanding and reduces prejudice among diverse groups. A set of essential conditions to promote positive contact among members of opposite groups is required (Allport, 1954):

- **Equal group status:** both groups expect and perceive equal status in the situation,
- **Common goals of intergroup contact:** an active goal-oriented effort for all parties involved,
- **Intergroup cooperation:** attainment of the common goals needs to be an interdependent effort without any competition,
- **Institutional support:** intergroup contact will be more accepted with positive effects when it is supported by authorities, and
- **The opportunity for friendship** (Pettigrew, 1998)

Intergenerational Theatre: is a social art that fosters connections among elders and youth through the theatrical process. Benefits include:

Personal Benefits

- Self reflection
- New skills and knowledge
- A gained sense of empowerment (agency)
- More historical knowledge
- Play/Entertainment
- Self expression (artistic expression)

Community Benefits

- Trust
- Creation of a shared history or community identity
- Sense of connectedness
- Intergenerational relationships leading to stronger social networks
- Shared wisdom and knowledge

METHODS

	MIND THE GAP	INTERGENERATIONAL LEARNING CENTER	TOTAL
Interviews with Program Directors	1	1	2
Staff Questionnaires	2	5	7
Youth Participant Surveys	4	9	13
Elder Participant Surveys	20	4	24

Coded Interviews, Staff Questionnaires and Participant Short Answers for criteria and preferred outcomes outlined in IG theatre literature and Contact Theory (see Theory Section above).

Also scanned for other major trends that might arise in responses as well as compiled survey data.

Additional data: Mind the Gap had pre- and post-survey data of participant perceptions of other generations from previous years (a list of positive and negative adjectives), illustrating how those perceptions changed. We combined that data with similar data from our surveys. We calculated the average positive and average negative number of responses by individual participant in order to illustrate the average change in perceptions. (See Figure 1)

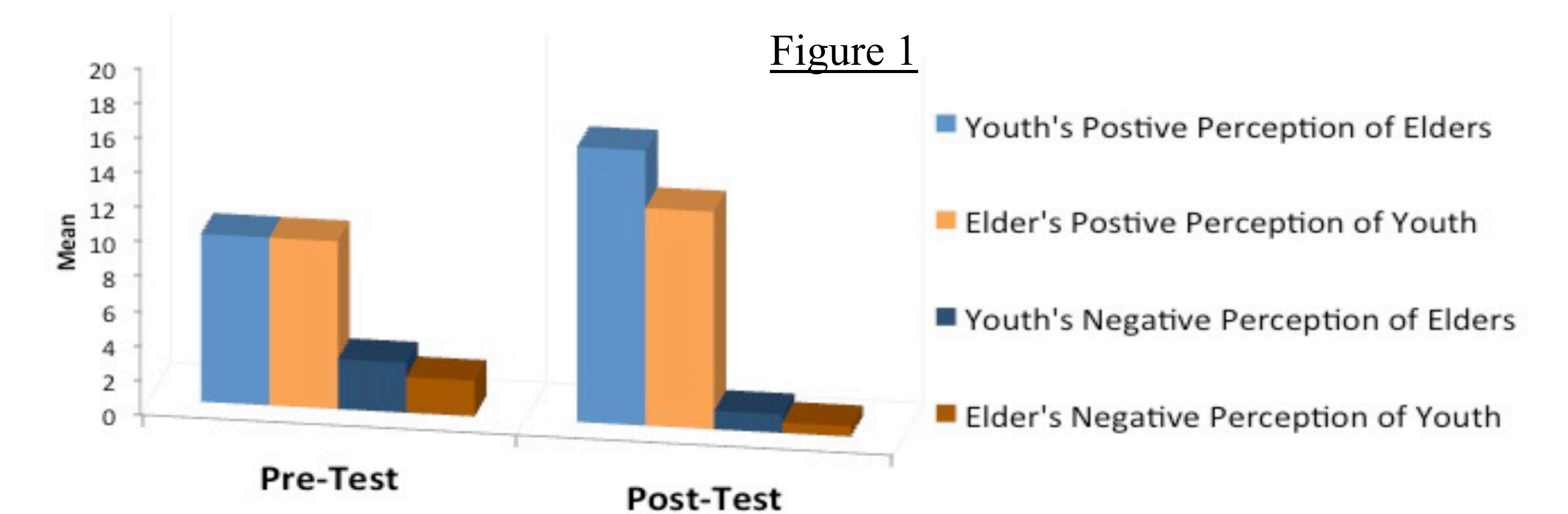
RESULTS

Effects of IG Theatre

Individual effects – Survey respondents agreed that they benefited by gaining a sense of empowerment, enjoying themselves and learning new skills and knowledge. Youth cited the opportunity for self expression, while older participants cited self reflection.

One-on-one relations – Staff and directors agreed that the programs are less about building one-on-one relationships (i.e. relationships lasting after the program) and more on the experience and developing a shared understanding as mutual peers, offering potential for future IG encounters. However, responses evidenced long term relationships developed among elders.

Individual with Larger Community – Interviewees and surveys described how participants changed their stereotypical perceptions of other cohorts by embracing a deeper understanding of each generation’s unique characteristics.



29 out of 37 participants agreed or strongly agreed that the program helped them to understand other generations more.

Contact Theory – Both programs fulfilled Contact Theory criteria:

- **Equal group status** – Both emphasized participant equality; however MtG’s application process entailed that equality also meant mutual responsibility among participants to engage in intergroup cooperation.
- **Common goals** – The majority of participants entering each program shared the goal of theatre participation rather than IG interaction.
- **Intergroup cooperation** – The ILC program cited more spontaneous instances of cooperation based on project needs whereas at MtG, intergroup cooperation was part of the program structure as a criteria for participation.
- **Institutional support** – Inherent. MtG was more deliberate in partnering different generations, while ILC created space for everyone to participant.
- **The opportunity for friendship** – Theatre naturally offers opportunities for people to engage, build understanding and become friends.

CONCLUSION: This research ...

- Illustrates how theatre can be used as a framework for IG interaction.
- Offers the notion of exploring alternative approaches to IG collaboration.
- Demonstrates the importance of understanding how the structure of an IG program and the theory embedded within impacts the quality of the IG interaction and participants’ eventual takeaway from the process.