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## History Matters Exploring Intergenerational Trauma and Human Connection - A Community Engagement Project

LaToya Robinson

ltrunlimitedart@gmail.com

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**History Matters**  
**Exploring Intergenerational Trauma and Human Connection - A Community Engagement Project**

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

May 5, 2024

LaToya T. Robinson

Clinical Mental Health Counseling: Drama Therapy

Dr. Angelle V. Cook, PhD, RDT-BCT

## **Abstract**

Drama Therapy and trauma centered psychoeducation have been utilized as an intervention for groups in urban schools. The following research expands upon this foundation by exploring intergenerational trauma (IGT). The following research aimed to answer this question, *will learning about intergenerational trauma observationally improve adolescents' relationships to others?* For eight weeks, I engaged a group of male and female minority adolescents in an urban high school in Connecticut to explore IGT as an element of human existence. Drama Therapy tools such as utilization of the playspace, elements of DvT, the integrative five phase model theater games and poetic inquiry guided this exploration. This process highlights IGT as a global phenomenon many individual families choose to not discuss, despite IGT being a collective history needed as adolescents ascend toward adulthood. Participants displayed improved adolescent relationships with peers, but continued trepidation and avoidance of other adult figures in their lives. Student participants continue to yearn for human connection (Kulkarani, 2009) and have difficulty regulating their emotions and somatic reactions due to IGT (Cisler, 2017).

*Keywords:* Intergenerational Trauma, Collective Traumas, Trauma Centered Psychotherapy, Adolescents, Poetic Inquiry, drama therapy

*Identity:* Black/African American cis- gender Womaxn

# History Matters: Exploring Intergenerational Trauma and Human Connection - A Community Engagement Project

## Introduction

The focus of this paper is intergenerational trauma (IGT). IGT is the transmission of trauma experienced by one generation onto future generations by way of repetitive maladaptive behavior patterns (Sangalang & Vang, 2016; Isobel et al., 2019) IGT is defined as, "...the process by which parents with unresolved trauma transmit this to their children via specific interactional patterns, resulting in the effects of trauma being experienced (by their children) without the original traumatic experience or event (Isobel et al., 2019, p. 2). Research has shown, as children develop into adulthood, they begin to present behaviors based upon these specific interactional patterns modeled by their parents, due to their parents unresolved trauma (Cooper et al., 2019; Danieli 1982; Hesse & Main 2000; Iyengar et al., 2014; Leslie et al., 2023). Conducted through an Arts Based process, this paper will explore the effects of this transmission and how the phenomena, IGT, influences adolescent relationships with family members, peers, and other adult authority figures in their current lives.

Kulkarani et al., (2009) discovered adolescents with trauma yearn for relationships that make them feel loved and connected. In my professional experience, over 20 years working with adolescents, I've had many conversations with this population, and learned that many are unclear about historical collective traumas connected to their ethnic and cultural backgrounds, such as slavery, colonization, the holocaust, Chinese Internment Camps, the Vietnam War, or the usurpation of land and culture from the indigenous people in countries around the world. Though adolescents receive some historical information in school, many have found this education does not offer them a sense of personal belonging or an understanding of self.

Additionally, many have expressed that their families do not offer much information about their individual traumatic experiences and how their families coped and/or healed through collective traumas. Adolescents are grappling with behaviors and ways of being in their current lives that are directly connected to suppressed pain that has been passed down from generation to generation. Last year, The Washington Post published an article (Zimmerman, 2023) titled; “How does trauma spill from one generation to the next?” The article offered insight on how IGT is transmitted, why it persists and general coping strategies. This article’s placement in The Washington Post is evidence that interest in this topic is growing.

To gain further insight into this phenomena, this paper poses this question: does understanding IGT improve adolescents' relationship to others? This question’s relevance relates to the most important task during adolescence; which is autonomy; a sense of oneself as a separate, self-governing individual (Berk, 2014). Adolescents are tasked with striving for autonomy while also navigating relationships with family, peers and other adults who have roles of authority in their lives. This question assumes adolescents are having difficulties engaging in these relationships, which, in conversations, many have expressed can leave them feeling isolated. This arts-based research explores how offering this population a framework, IGT, can create a macro-level understanding of connectedness and universality; to help adolescents better understand, they are not alone on their journey to adulthood.

This research has been conducted through the New Haven Post Traumatic Stress Center’s Non-Profit Organization, the Foundation for the Arts and Trauma and its program previously known as ALIVE, currently Miss Kendra Programs.. The acronym ALIVE stands for Animating Learning by Integrating and Validating Experience. Among other offerings, ALIVE provides professional development workshops for teachers and groups for youth that include

psychoeducation on trauma and vicarious trauma, often employing theater activities and role play to help teachers engage teachers and students with the material in a fun and active way (Sajnani et al., 2019). For this project a theater group for adolescents was offered at a community high school in New Haven, CT. All student participants have experienced trauma in many different capacities, including domestic violence, gun violence, rape, and neglect.

Drama Therapy activities, theater games, poetic inquiry, and psychoeducation were utilized to gather information into the question; does understanding IGT improve adolescents' relationship to others? This research was conducted to explore whether or not learning about IGT would offer adolescents an understanding of historical collective traumas and the universal need to heal and live within their communities. There is sufficient research and literature to support exploring the large scale effects of trauma and specifically IGT have on this population, and the ways in which personal histories affect our present circumstances.

## **Literature Review**

Intergenerational trauma (IGT) is a global phenomenon. Cultures and ethnic groups across continents have had experiences with collective traumas due to wars, colonization, slavery, systemic oppression, religious occupation, genocide and more. This paper addresses a population of American adolescents, of mixed cultural and ethnic background, including those of the black diaspora (African American, Jamaican, Haitian,) Hispanic, (Latin American, Puerto Rican), Native American and one student who identified as part German. According to a 2023 American research study conducted by Palmer et al., over two decades of empirical studies on historical trauma, its effects, and modes of transmission have primarily been conducted among Holocaust survivors and contemporary Indigenous Peoples (Danieli, 1998; Evans-Campbell,

2008; Sotero, 2006; Whitbeck et al., 2004; Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018) with only one known study exploring historical trauma among African Americans (Williams-Washington & Mills, 2018). As such, it is of the utmost importance to address IGT with this population, as original studies did not address them. More studies have been conducted internationally.

In a Canadian study, one of the first (Jeyasundaram et al., 2020) for occupational therapists working with Tamil and Vietnamese refugees in Canada, researchers were interested in understanding how intergenerational trauma impacts the lives of second-generation Tamil and Vietnamese refugees; whose parents immigrated to Canada from Sri Lanka and Vietnam due to long-term conflicts and mass killings in each country. Researchers found that healing for these communities required macro and micro level interventions. The findings also indicated that healing is possible for survivors of collective traumas.

Iyengar et al., 2014 explored the construct of ‘reorganization’ as a factor involved in the attachment style of mothers with unresolved trauma, and how their unresolved trauma affects the attachment style of their offspring. Reorganization is the process of understanding how past traumatic experiences affect present day situations. Results from this study indicated that ‘reorganization’ has positive effects on the transmission of intergenerational trauma. The mothers who worked toward ‘reorganization’ had infants with secure attachment styles. This study indicates how early in development unresolved trauma directly affects the next generation. The children were assessed at 11 months old.

Koelsch et al., 2020 utilized the ‘Listening Guide’ (Gilligan et al., 2003, p. 1540) to create poetry based on the traumatic experiences of African American women who live in the “Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania” (p. 1540). All participants experienced disruptions in life connected to root shock and urban renewal, which had devastating intergenerational effects

on The Hill. The poems expressed the pain shared throughout the participants and the Hill community. The participants from the Hill also have collective trauma from slavery.

In *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome*, Joy Degruy (2005) offered insight into the legacy of IGT for African Americans. She carefully details the legacy of trauma slavery offered African American families. She wrote:

During slavery the black community was a suppressed and marginalized group. Today the African American community is made up of individuals and families who collectively share differential anxiety and adaptive survival behaviors passed down from prior generations of African Americans, many whom likely suffered PTSD. (pp. 103-104)

Slaves, oppressed by American chattel slavery, were not offered mental health services after emancipation. Nor were Indigenous groups who were colonized by others around the world. It was and continues to be necessary for oppressed groups to find ways of dealing, coping, and healing the stressors created by these collective traumas.

Cooper et al., 2019 conducted an arts-based process to empower two generations of Indigenous women and girls to conceive of a future without the added burden of the effects intergenerational trauma carry. Participants were “self-identified as First Nations and Metis and had daughters, nieces, or granddaughters” (p. 139). With a focus on harm reduction, researchers developed a series of workshops to explore collaborative art making. Results of this study indicated that the elder participants wanted to break the cycle of intergenerational pain they



experienced in their lives. Also, the young women envisioned a future that looked different than the lived experiences of their elders.

As this paper looks directly at adolescence, John et al., (2017) explored the possibility that emotional regulation plays in the role of mediator for adolescent females who have experienced child abuse. Researchers accurately hypothesized; “emotional regulation significantly mediated the relationship between child abuse severity and symptoms of posttraumatic stress and trauma” (p. 570). These results implicate the importance of teaching/offering emotional regulation skills to this population. Knowledge that became very important working with this group of adolescents who presented with severe emotional dysregulation and who expressed the negative impact it has on their ability to feel connected.

In 1998 Felitti et. al, released the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study (ACES); which found a direct link between poor health/early death in adulthood and traumatic experiences in the household during childhood, i.e., domestic violence, child abuse, parents who abused substances and alcohol, and sexual abuse. Adults with high ACE scores were more likely than others to have poorer health outcomes and higher death rates. The ACES study is important to note when discussing IGT as it speaks directly to the effects of maladaptive ways of coping in families and negative interactions between children and parents. The study did not consider macro level collective traumas such as racism, oppression, war and community violence. All collective traumas that have effects on family dynamics and ways of being. In a 2023 study (Leslie et al., 2023) conducted a study in an African American community that explored the links between caregivers with high ACE exposure and their children’s mental health problems. The researchers found that clinicians and researchers would be better able to assess and engage

with posttraumatic stress symptoms in children if there was an examination into the IGT and adult caregivers who grew up with high ACE exposure. This paper aims to make that connection through the lens of Drama Therapy (DT).

Collaborative discourse analysis on the use of drama therapy to treat trauma in schools (Sajnani et al., 2019) provides substantial information on utilizing DT processes with this population. The article discussed three forms of DT being used to address trauma in school settings, and programs that offer such interventions, such as ALIVE. For this project, students engaged in ALIVE's group stress sessions with theater games, psychoeducation, and poetic inquiry to explore what it is to encounter another, and to build a sense of group connectedness. This is part of the program's direct trauma work with students in schools. Conversations surrounding trauma and traumatic events are typically avoided in school settings. Many students find these topics to be difficult to have with families as well. Which is one of the reasons for exploring IGT and how it influences adolescents' connections to others. It will be important for the group to learn to trust each other enough, to be vulnerable and share their stories. This is a task that can feel unsafe and unstable for adolescents with unresolved trauma. Therefore, elements of DvT were utilized in this process.

In theory, DvT says life is unstable. According to the text, *Current Approaches to Drama Therapy*, DvT is based on Instability Theory which relies primarily on Buddhist, existentialist, and postmodern influences (Johnson, 2013). The primary axiom of Instability Theory is that experience is non-repeating. I see this as contrary to how we function together in society. In society we rely on routine and repetition. We create rules and structure. The K-12 school environment is organized as such. It is an environment where students are required to learn how

to follow structure; systems of reward and loss are embedded within. Their existence within the structure is continuously repeating. Therefore, offering elements of DvT and reminders of the primary axiom of instability theory, existence is non-repeating, to adolescent trauma survivors will be beneficial. Due to the rigid structure of the school environment, adolescents have, for possibly many other reasons as well, suppressed their traumatic experiences. According to Levine (1997), trauma is so arresting that traumatized people will focus on it compulsively. In my experience, K-12 schools do not have the manpower or resources to focus on unresolved suppressed student trauma compulsively. This group became a space where students could share their experiences with each other through a creative process.

Renee Emunah's (2019) text outlined many ways to build a creative process when engaging in group work. Emunah's Integrative Five-phase model offers a flexible structure to build an environment where encounter and embodiment are present. The Integrative Five Phase Model of drama therapy is a framework for both initiating an intentional drama therapy process and for tracking client's evolving needs and stages of readiness. Emunah goes on to say that the model is about fluidity, not rigidity (Emunah, 2019) ... "It is about meeting each individual client and group in their uniqueness and complexity and facilitating a process that matches their needs, strengths, limitations, personal and cultural sensibilities, and potentialities." (Emunah, 2019, p. 4). For this group, elements of phases one, two and five of the Integrative Five-phase model will be taken into consideration.

Phase one of the integrative five phase model is dramatic play. This is the most important part of the process for group work. Phase one is where the group begins to negotiate the relational pieces of the group dynamics. This phase is where group members can take risks, and

learn to build trust in themselves and others, all within the playspace, with minimal real-life consequences. Emunah wrote that some drama therapists incorporate existing theatrical scripts in Phase two or use elements of the drama therapy method Developmental Transformations (with training) to deepen the levels of play during phase one (Emunah, 2019). For this group, elements of DvT, and dramatic play within the playspace were offered to create a space where participants can not only deepen levels of play, but also notice their own reactions (or lack thereof) to others.

The aforementioned literature and research offers evidence of the existence of intergenerational trauma internationally. The literature has also offered insight into the macro and micro level interventions offered through arts based and evidenced based frameworks available to structures ways of connecting and healing for descendants of IGT and collective traumas.

## **Method**

The ALIVE program, now renamed The Miss Kendra Program, has a longstanding partnership with New Haven Public Schools. The program was created by David Read Johnson and a team of drama therapists who have conducted stress reduction sessions in urban schools for adolescents with familial, historical, and cultural trauma since 2008 (Sajnani et al., 2014). Over the past two and a half years, my placement has been in two high schools, conducting individual stress reduction sessions for students and staff, and engaging students in trauma centered Drama Therapy groups. This research was completed at one high school where the total minority enrollment is 89%, and 71% of students are economically disadvantaged. This data was an important factor for this study as literature has shown many minority groups are living with and

governed by the oppressive systems that have orchestrated collective trauma experiences (Degruy, 2005; Gilligan et al., 2003; Leslie et al., 2023; Williams-Washington & Mills, 2018).

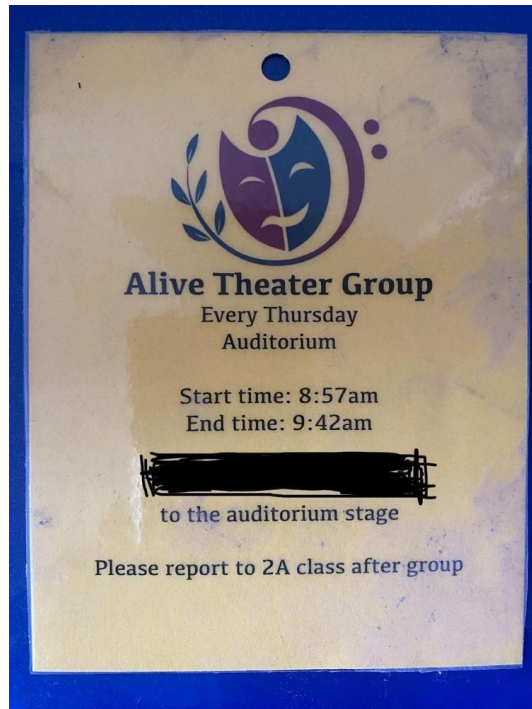
The American ACES study (Felletti, 1998) highlighted how traumatic experiences during childhood can cause life-threatening medical issues in adulthood but did not address collective traumas. This research addresses IGT directly, and serves to utilize DT techniques, such as of elements of DvT (Johnson & Emunah, 2019) and the Integrative Five Phase Model (Emunah, 2019) as well as utilizing the playspace to disseminate trauma-based psychoeducation in schools (Sajnani et al., 2019) as a guide toward healing and building human connectedness for this population.

Permission to run an ALIVE theater group was granted by the school's administrative team, including the School Principal and five Assistant Principals. Special permission was given by the administrative team to run the group outside of the school's allotted extracurricular time. For this to occur, I was instructed to have individual conversations with teachers who would ultimately give their students permission to attend the group. Students were recruited through referrals from assistant principals, guidance counselors, social workers, other ALIVE counselors, and student's on my own caseload who fit the criteria. Students were referred based upon stories shared with these trusted individuals; traumatic experiences, past or present, that are causing disruptions in their current lives.

Twenty-five students were referred. Utilizing techniques of the trauma centered psychotherapy model (Johnson & Lubin, 2015) I conducted an individual 15-minute interview with each student that included a trauma inquiry and questions about family. Students were asked to describe the traumatic experiences shared by those who referred them. In addition, there

was inquiry into their current lives, who they live with, who is close to them that they don't live with, relationship dynamics in their families, and if they were aware of the phenomena of IGT. These questions were followed by a very brief description of IGT; patterns of behavior and ways of being passed down from generation to generation due to unresolved collective trauma. The last question of each interview was 'would you like to join a theater group with other students to learn more about IGT. Twelve students said yes.

Once I knew who the students were, I followed through on the instructions given by the administrative team to reach out to their homeroom and second period teachers; informing them of the upcoming ALIVE theater group and asking if students from their classes could attend. I then met with all 24 teachers individually to discuss group and student participation. Discussions were had regarding how students would make up missed assignments, and how students would be trusted to transition smoothly from class to group, and back to class again. To assist in the smooth class transition, ALIVE theater group passes were created by the school's print shop.



*(Latella, A. (2023). [A photo of an ALIVE Theater pass].*

The 50-minute group sessions were held weekly on the stage of the school auditorium for 8 sessions. The school's theater teacher granted access to the stage during his off time. Each week I would arrive prior to the student's to organize the space for their arrival. I placed the chairs in a circle, set up materials, including a large 18x24in pad of sticky paper, 8x11in drawing paper, extra tape, markers, my computer and my cell phone to record each session. For the first three sessions, the front office allowed an announcement to be made at the appropriate time to remind students in the group to make their way to the stage. After three weeks, the administrative team found the announcement to be disruptive. Therefore, I was asked to instead create a group text thread for this reminder, which I did. Students were hesitant to be on a group chat with other students they did not know well. However, they were comfortable enough to share their phone

numbers with me. From weeks 4-8 I texted each student an individual reminder. Each week between 9-12 students participated in the group.

Each session followed the same design; warm-up/Drama Therapy theater games, IGT and trauma-based psychoeducation, discussion and closed with a group poem created by the students. After each session, I wrote reflective poetry or created a visual art piece to gauge my own understanding of the group's collective experience. Each session was recorded and transcribed (with the group's knowledge and permission). Each transcription was reviewed for themes that addressed 1) adolescent relationships with family members, peers, and other adult authority figures in their current lives; 2) their connection or disconnection with these individuals; and 3) their knowledge of IGT. Ultimately, I was looking to understand if offering adolescents an understanding of the phenomena of IGT and historical collective traumas would allow them to feel more connected within their communities.

This process was observed through an existential framework, and some of the core processes of Drama Therapy. "Existentialists believe humans need an accurate awareness of themselves to live meaningful lives and be psychologically well adjusted" (Comer, 2104, p. 65). As IGT is a transmission of maladaptive behavior patterns, I was interested in understanding how these patterns influence adolescents' awareness of themselves and others. Therefore, warmups and theater games chosen were relational, requiring students to work in dyads and groups. Throughout each session, I helped the students engage in the DT core process of active witnessing; "the process by which participants notice aspects of themselves; others in a group, or the drama therapist. At the same time participants are seen by the drama therapist, or other group members or invited audience" (Frydman et al., 2022, p. 8). I accomplished emotional



distancing by using projective material such as song lyrics and theater scripts. I paid close attention to embodiment, noticing participants' bodies in relationship to each other. I was looking to see if the students had direct eye contact with myself and others and how they utilized the space in relation to each other. Would they sit closely or far apart? Each week, I intentionally moved the circle of chairs closer together. I observed somatic activation; fidgeting, hair twirling, legs shaking, swaying while seated. I observed activation of any kind as well as total shutdown. I was interested in students' willingness to share their traumatic experiences and family dynamics in front of each other, and how open they were to hear the experiences of others.

My expectation for this group was that student's gain a general understanding of IGT and how IGT has an influence on their lived experiences. It was my goal for participants to feel they were offered space to discuss interpersonal issues that can be overlooked in the school environment. Lastly, my hope was for students to feel an improved sense of human connection with themselves and others through this experience.

## **Results**

Similar observable themes emerged during each session. The following section will list each theme and a description of corresponding observations made by me throughout this process, such as somatic activation, fidgeting, hair twirling, legs shaking, swaying while seated. Activation of any kind, as well as total shutdown. This section will also include my poetic and artistic reflections created post session each week. When referring to participants, pseudonyms were assigned

### **Themes:**

### ***1. Avoidance of 'all people' or The Bubble World***

The student participants continually offered information that suggested they would rather be away from 'all people' than where they were in the present moment. I decided to call it, *The Bubble World*. *The Bubble World* is a theoretical structure adolescents live inside of alone to protect themselves from the dangers of 'all people'. In the bubble, they are able to keep themselves distanced from others, necessitated by a distorted view that the world around them is completely unsafe. The bubble itself is expansive, flexible, sensitive, penetrable and transparent. The bubble allows adolescents to stick their arms out to reach for others, and others could possibly be invited in. However, throughout this process, students were very careful about how close they could get to others because the bubble can be popped, and that would reveal their greatest insecurities.

The Bubble World became apparent through our seating arrangement. We sat in a circle each week. I would place each chair equidistant apart from each other before the group arrived. When students began to seat themselves, they would move the seat further away from each other to avoid being too close. I observed this during the first three sessions. Session four I scattered the seats far apart before students arrived. They sat exactly where the seats were placed. Once they were seated I asked them to move in closer. They struggled.

Evidence of the Bubble World appeared during any exercises where participants were asked to 'choose a partner'. For example, during session two and session three, the students were asked to 'choose a partner' for theater warmups 'three changes' and 'two truths and a lie' (Farmer, 2007). Instructions included that you would work with the same partner for both games. Of the 8 students present, 6 completely froze where they were sitting. There was a sudden silence. The 6 avoided eye contact with everyone in the circle. I allowed the silence to linger.

Some began to fidget; legs began to shake. Trying to look at each other directly was extremely uncomfortable. In order to move forward I had to pair the remaining participants.

The Bubble World revealed itself to me as I recognized each student's need for my individual attention. For instance, one participant Ivy was present for session one, but did not return again until session eight. During session one, participants learned the definition of IGT, and the group engaged in a spectrogram to explore their knowledge of IGT and their own family histories. Statements explored regarding culture, ethnicity, family makeup and traumatic childhood experiences.

The last statement, "I've experienced neglect by parents/guardians" was triggering for Ivy. As students who could relate to this statement stepped into the proper placement, Ivy did not move. She began shaking her legs and looking down at her feet. I noticed this as students were moving into place. I did not force her to move. She asked to meet with me after session one. We did, and she disclosed that she was not ready to share this type of information with 'all people', only me. She did not come to the group again until session eight, which was a reflection session with some of the administrative team present. She let me know after that session she was present to reflect that her experience in the group was hard, but positive. And she is not ready for group work. We continue to meet, one on one.

There was one other student who wanted to invite me into their world regardless of being in the group with the other participants. Dottie would disrupt others if they felt the need to speak. Dottie would get up and walk around the room, begin touching items that they were not supposed to touch. Dottie would ask to have an individual session each week after the group. Dottie would only work with one other student but would ask me to join their group activity while the other students worked together. Dottie would talk about their family disliking them and

attempting to change the person they were. According to Dottie, all people are like their family. They did not want to be around anyone, ever.

The Bubble world also emerged when students were asked to share their phone numbers to create a group text thread. They asked me not to make a big group chat because they did not want other students to know their phone numbers. Therefore, each wrote their numbers down on one big piece of paper but did not put their names. That piece of paper ironically read AVOIDANCE on the other side.

## ***2. Disconnection from family***

All student participants expressed a disconnection from family at some point during this process. During session one, by use of the spectrogram, the group learned that out of the 9 students present, 8 live with their mothers only, 1 lives with their grandparents, 0 students live with their fathers. This led to a discussion about abandonment, which was a sentiment felt by the entire group. During session two, I posed these questions to the group; who in your family notices you? Who in your family notices what you're going through? A conversation was brought up, by one student Becca, who spoke about how her mental health issues go unnoticed by family. As she was speaking all the other participants were nodding their heads in agreement. Another participant shared how hard it is for her that her family doesn't notice her mental health issues on top of her going to school, getting good grades, holding down a job, and helping to care for other siblings, which is a lot for a teenager to do while still in school. There were more head nods in agreement. This discussion displayed the apathy students build when they see their worries, stress and overall mental health go unnoticed by their families. The group expressed the need to disconnect due to the emotional neglect.

## ***3. Desire to connect to peers***

The group of student participants ranged in grade level. Some knew each other before the group, but mostly the students met in the group for the first time. Each session there were moments where student's showed care for each other, and a willingness to be together. Dyads and trios began to naturally form as the sessions progressed.

Betty and Kyle disclosed to the group that they were best friends. When everyone else froze and avoided eye contact when they were asked to 'choose a partner', Betty and Kyle caught each other's eye, and nodded at each other. Betty made an enthusiastic announcement about their partnership. Eventually, Betty and Kyle admitted they learned there were things they didn't know about each other, especially regarding their family histories. The group work increased their intrigue to get to know each other more. Alice and Pam came to group together, sat next to each other, paired up, and left together. At our final session they shared that learning about IGT and hearing new stories about the other strengthened their bond. Chloe and Dottie became permanent partners. Trice and Ella would almost complete each other's sentences.

During our final session, we did another spectrogram by standing in a circle. Students responded to statements made about what they learned throughout this process. Responses were made by either stepping into the circle (Totally/Yes), staying in place (kinda sorta/somewhat), or stepping out of the circle (no idea/no). Upon hearing the statement, 'I feel a deeper connection to my peers after learning about IGT?' Students slowly moved into place. They were attempting eye contact with each, 6 of the 7 students present stepped into the middle, indicating they felt more connected with their peers through this process.

#### ***4. Distrust of authority figures***

Student participants shared a distrust of authority figures. This includes parents, other adult family members (aunts, uncles, grandparents), school administrators, teachers, school

security guards and police officers. This also included larger systemic structures such as the government. During session one, we completed the spectrogram by choosing areas of the room that corresponded to prepared statements. One statement, 'I know my ethnicity and culture', yielded great conversation regarding their collective distrust of authority based on the narrative told to them by family. Izel, who did know their ethnicity and culture, spoke about not trusting the government because of her grandparents' experience. Izel shared that their family is from Mexico; their grandfather was white, and grandmother was Mexican. According to their grandmother, at some time in history, Mexican law forbade interracial marriage, so the two had to flee Mexico to America to be together. Izel spoke about Grandma telling this story with disdain for the Mexican government. Izel has now formed an opinion that 'governments' do not create laws to help people.

During the same exercise the group learned 7 out of the 9 students present did not know their culture or ethnicity. Upon observation, they were all part of the Black/African diaspora. As a follow up, I asked, "why do you think some people on the Black/African diaspora lack this information?" Someone mentioned slavery. From there the group had a discussion of the Atlantic Slave trade. The conversation included stories heard from family and student participants' own beliefs. There was discussion regarding people being taken from their native lands, relics that were stolen from their mother countries. They talked about stolen culture and changed names. There was discussion about how once enslaved people had to take on the last name of their slave master/plantation owners. There were lots of uncomfortable giggles. I asked what emerged. There was lots of avoidance. No one would answer what came up for them. Instead, the conversation led to a distrust of government structures, the 'white man', and police officers.

Session six the group engaged in Augusto Boal's 'Game of Power' (Farmer, 34), afterward I led the group into a discussion about power. I asked the group who has 'power' in their lives? There was mention of 'the government', police, aunts, and school authorities. Kyle shared a story about school authorities who have abused their power. As students were calling out power roles, I wrote them down on a large sheet of paper. I wrote the words based on how loudly the students yelled their responses. Once Lee observed this, he asked me directly to write 'teachers' very small. I did. He smiled; others nodded in agreement. This led me to believe that writing the word 'teachers' small meant that this group of students believe teachers have less power in the school than they think they do.

#### ***5. Difficulty regulating emotions/somatic reactions***

All 8 sessions revealed how difficult it was for students to regulate themselves emotionally and somatically. During our conversation on conflict (following our spectrogram on conflict) students made it clear how difficult it can be for them to maintain their control when they are angry. Phrases such as "I'll pop off", 'they'll get straight hands', 'if you start problems, I'll finish them.' made it clear most students had the urge to physically fight if they felt threatened by someone else. There was also discussion about people 'pushing their buttons', and 'exploding'. I asked the group, 'what happens if conflict is not resolved in some way?' The responses ranged from someone going to jail, fighting it out, or somebody going to the hospital. All, which are scenarios students gave examples of experiencing within their families.

It was also clear that regulation was very difficult in the school environment. I asked the group, 'what happens if a teacher doesn't back away. The group spoke about pushing the teacher, yelling at the teachers, and disrespecting them verbally, possibly physically, if necessary.

#### **Poetic/Artistic Reflections (by session)**

## **Session One**

Truth.  
What does it mean?  
What are the gray areas in between?  
Black, white, blue, red?  
What should be said?  
What do I see?  
Who do I tell it to?  
Who will believe it?  
Why do I feel like I am always running from something?  
Truth?  
Mines or yours?  
Grandma's, Grandpa's, Daddy and them ho's?  
Possibly?  
Who sees the truth I see?  
Mama can't take care of me.  
Daddy been missing, but ....  
Siblings just keep showing up.  
Who will care for them?  
Me?  
Why should I give a fuck?  
Trying to stay sturdy on my feet.  
Dancing in the streets.  
I write to let my feelings free.  
I act, put on a role .. just so I can learn .... to .. be .. me.  
I draw – to ? I don't know. I just do.  
That's my truth.  
Should I tell more to you?  
If I do ...  
Will you leave me too?

## **Session Two**

Messages based on culture.  
Messages based on ethnicity.  
Messages based on society's expectations.  
Messages delivered to me.  
Messages about what I look like.  
Messages about how I feel.  
Messages about how I think.  
Messages about what I need.  
Messages about what I should listen to.  
Messages about what's revealed.  
Messages about what's concealed.  
Don't speak the truth.  
Don't speak of pain.  
Keep ya head held high through the storm, through the rain.



Through the thunder striking down.  
Which way do you go?  
Do you follow the sound ....  
Of the messages?  
Straight forward.  
Coded.  
Filled with emotions unnoticed.  
Goal implosions.  
Wondering when the messages received will be ....  
From the internal voice that knows the truth  
Within me.

### **Session Three**

Connect.  
With who?  
These bunch of liars.  
I tried.  
Then, decided, I'd pass.  
I tried to look them dead in the eye,  
But my body would start to shake.  
Quivering my disguise.  
Nope.  
They could see it.  
So, instead of further questions, I just said goodbye.  
Why would I try to get closer?  
Looking away is a more natural movement.  
Avoidance – though I don't feel it so included.  
Fuck it.  
I don't care.  
Who needs them anyway.  
They're avoiding their truth.  
So, what the fuck do you want me to say?

Connect.  
With who?  
Family?  
No thank you.  
They haven't told me one thing that's true.  
But keep sending me to school to learn what truth can prove.  
Hypocrisy.  
That's what it is.  
I just want to be a kid.  
A friend.  
A sibling.  
I want to grow beyond here.  
Stay connected to who I am inside my soul.

Avoiding all the things not in my control.

#### **Session Four**

Protection from lies.

Avoidance to

THRIVE!

I want to survive.

I need to be real.

Keep it a buck.

Express how I feel.

BECAUSE ...

THEY DON'T TELL ME THE TRUTH!

Truth about me.

Truth about life before I was here.

So much is unclear about that.

My past.

Where did I come from?

Jamaica, maybe?

Daddy and Mommy issues.

Aunty issues too.

Family ties.

Family lies.

Family divides.

Where do I fit in as the family multiplies?

Where do I find me?

#### **Session Five**



### Session Six

Where is ... everyone?

Late.

When will they appear?

Ok.

One, then two who made it clear,  
“at 9:30am we’re leaving.”

Ok, I see.

Hopefully, they stay to wait for #3.

Ok, here he is, followed by #4.

#5 went flying past.

Said, “Ms. I’ll be *right* back.”

So ...

We, the present, all take a seat to begin, then ...

There was a knock.

It wasn’t #5, as we all expected.

#6 strolled in; tired, dejected.

Moved slowly to their seat, but not before ...

Knock, knock, knock once more.

#5 was there, breathing heavily.

“Sorry Ms.”

I respond,  
“It’s ok.”  
She says, “I swear I wasn’t trying to get away.”  
And I know it’s true.  
We all sit.  
Then ...  
#3 got hit on the hip... buzz.  
The message: “#7 is coming, he was just flexin’.”

Once they all arrived my anxiety diminished.  
That dilemma was over.  
We speak of conflict.  
A spectrogram of peace and violence.  
Who has the power to speak up, and ..  
Who should remain silent?  
Why does everyone listen when Aunt Regina says ONE thing?  
Why do I feel like I have to scream for my family to listen?  
Why does my sister have everything she needs?  
Why don’t I have what I need for me?  
POWER –  
My mom?  
School?  
Authorities?  
Fuck ‘em all!  
Well, except for Grandma.  
She gets the respect she deserves.  
Other than that, I may throw hands.  
Don’t sit too close.  
My body don’t understand.  
Too much talk, my body reacts ...  
Tried to stay calm, but ..  
I just couldn’t do that.

Then ...  
#1 and 2 had to go.  
The air in all came down real slow.  
Anxiety curved accurately ... ?  
Poetry.  
Then class.  
Maybe?

### **Session Seven**

Intergenerational Trauma is something that I understand.  
Something I’ve known all my life  
Something I feel all night  
Something I will overcome

Something that's there forever  
Something that I believe isn't done  
Something that if it's there forever, does it mean that there is something wrong with me?  
Will this affect the future me?  
Is it something that people will see in me?  
Will this affect my destiny?  
Will the pain last forever?  
Will this affect my family?  
And, if so, can I change it?  
Will I be able to end it?  
Or break through it?  
Can I mend it?  
Or Can I numb it?  
Just pretend that the trauma is not there  
Just pretend like I don't care  
Pretend it doesn't fill me with despair.  
How do we end this poem?  
Do we just leave it right here?  
Do we look back on it?  
Or can we toss it in the air?

### **Session Eight (Final)**

Human connection.  
Disconnected by so much.  
Or is it really?  
Connected disconnection is what I felt from this group.  
Youth,  
who want to fit in.  
Somewhere.  
Anywhere.  
Living lives full of paradox.  
And they're unaware of what that word means.  
Youth,  
Grappling with their own existence.  
Yet insistent on living life; even though as they say,  
"Life just be life-ing sometimes..."  
And I know that's right.  
They're over-parentified, developing thick skin.  
Developing adult skills while puberty kicks in.  
"Cook for your brother."  
"Pour a drink for your mother."  
"Take the kids to the park, so they don't have to see us ... do .... Stuff."  
"Go to school."  
"Be good in class."  
"Bring home A's or I'll whoop that ass!"  
"Click on the burner."

“Hold this one too.”  
“Get Uncle D some baking soda.”  
“Put on some tunes. We gon’ be here for a while.”  
Youth,  
Searching for truth.  
“Why do I live with you?”  
“Where are my parents?”  
“What did they do?”  
“Why don’t I hear from them?”  
“What did I do?”  
“Hope it wasn’t me that made them leave.”  
“I swear I’d be better if I believed they would come home.”  
“Don’t they know I don’t like being alone.”  
“Maybe a baby would make me feel whole?”  
“Someone I can hold and love.”  
“Feel accepted.”

And, together in this group they did.  
Learning about the transmission of generational trauma offered insight into the humanness they all hold.  
Sharing stories of families; past and present.  
Hearing each other’s similar questions, issues, confusions.  
Slowly processing something different than what they believed all along.  
They are not alone.  
They are developing adolescents in a systemic cycle of pain.  
Traumas that don’t belong to them, but they’re living them all the same.  
They can break it though.  
I promised them that truth.  
By continuing to read and learn their individual histories.  
Accept that relationships can rupture and be repaired.  
By expressing their emotions without any fear.  
By being aware of the messages passed down; from families and systemic structures created for them to drown.  
By being kind to themselves; offering themselves grace.  
As they grow into adulthood at the proper pace.  
Pay attention to their bodies.  
How does it connect with their thoughts?  
Find love and joy through life.  
I shared with them that I find it through art.  
And they can too; by any means necessary.  
As life bends and turns,  
Flips and burns, they can always reignite the light.  
Find their way through, connected without paradox and living their truth.

## **Discussion**

This study was conducted to offer adolescents a space to learn about IGT and explore if this knowledge would allow them to better connect with the people in their current lives. Throughout this process, I was interested in observing whether understanding IGT and collective traumas would observably improve adolescents' relationships with their families, peers and other authority figures. The study was conducted in a group setting, utilizing drama therapy techniques, theater games, and trauma centered psychoeducation. The participants were adolescents between the ages of 14-17, enrolled in grades 9-12 in a community high school with a large minority population. Results indicate that this arts-based approach instilled a desire for this group of adolescents to have more improved relationships with their peers than the adult figures in their lives.

There were several expectations for this research project. The first expectation was for the student participants to have a basic understanding of IGT; and for them to learn that previous research concurs that trauma in general can be transmitted intergenerationally through several methods (Palmer et al., 2023), many which have been unclear and/or ambiguous to them. This group offered a sense that historical narratives told to them by family and through their schooling filled with gaps, and they have been filling them with curiosities of their own identity and sense of belonging. This lack of information has become evident to me throughout my professional career working with adolescents. I've learned many adolescents have significant individual trauma histories, and additional trauma schemas embedded through family narratives and maladaptive coping strategies. These adolescents have been unaware of how events in their parents and grandparents lives have effects on their current life circumstances i.e., food insecurity, homelessness, substance use in families, and unresolved mental health issues. IGT offered insight, for this group of adolescents, into these dynamics of their lived experiences.

Another goal was to create a ‘safe enough’ space within the school environment for students to engage in these difficult conversations. The study expands upon the foundation created by the ALIVE, currently Miss Kendra program; addressing trauma in schools utilizing theater, play and projective techniques. For instance, the Boal inspired ‘game of power’ (Farmer, 34) offered many instances where students were able to discuss how power dynamics show up in their relationships with those who they saw as powerful presence, like principals, teachers, and parents. Additionally, as a Drama Therapist invested in group work, the principle of universality (Yalom & Leszcz, 2020) guided my mindset to offer a space where adolescents could experience an improved sense of self and others by way of learning their shared histories and currently life stressors as “there is no human deed or thought that lies fully outside the experience of others” (p. 16).

There were limitations to this research worth noting. The first emerged during the process of organizing and scheduling the group. The school administration did not want students to lose instruction time for an entire course, therefore student participants were dismissed from the last half of one class, and the first half of another (homeroom and 6B). This was confusing for all involved. The ALIVE Theater passes were created to alleviate the confusion. However, some teachers expressed concern that this movement was a disruption to class. It would be ideal to change this if this research is to be recreated. Also the inability to utilize more personal information and/or direct language of the participants was a major limitation to this study. I believe this information would have added substance to the information gathered through observation.

This project contributes to the DT/Expressive Arts community as it is an expansion to the foundation ALIVE has created to address trauma in urban schools. Expanding the model to discuss IGT offers a macro level view other Drama Therapists can build upon. As a Black African



American Drama Therapist, it is my goal to continue to engage in group work for adolescents and minorities. This project offered insight into how I can combine and contribute DT techniques and trauma centered psychoeducation with my 20+ years of administrative, didactic, and artistic experience working in K-12 schools, mostly in urban communities, serving black and brown minority, low-income, underrepresented, new and first-generation immigrant students. I recommend Drama Therapists of all ethnicities and backgrounds to consider IGT as a framework when working with minority and adolescent populations.

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**THESIS APPROVAL FORM**

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**Date of Graduation:** \_\_\_\_\_ May 5<sup>th</sup>, 2024 \_\_\_\_\_

In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

*Angelle Cook*

**Thesis Advisor:** \_\_\_\_\_