Art therapy in diverse and stressed communities in inner city Johannesburg

Case vignettes from the Uhambo literacy programme

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Bio

Kate Shand is in her second year of a Master's in Art Therapy at the University of Johannesburg. She runs a ceramic teaching studio, The Melville Mud Room, and works part-time at an arts therapy NGO, Lefika La Phodiso. Her prior work experience is in communications in various sectors, including urban regeneration, arts and culture, heritage and tourism. Shand has a special interest in group work and has facilitated many arts-based workshops over the years. She is particularly passionate about working with clay and its ability to heal. Shand is also a writer and has published a book called *Boy* in 2013 Other qualifications include a Master of Arts in Heritage (Wits), Advanced Diploma Visual Art (Unisa), and Community Art Counselling (Lefika La Phodiso).

Abstract

This article is about the Uhambo literacy programme and the application of multimodal pedagogies in an art therapy 'open studio' after-school programme. Low literacy levels were identified by Lefika La Phodiso Community Art Counselling and Training (Lefika), an arts therapy organisation serving at-risk children from Johannesburg's inner city, as well as other communities through the application of community art counsellors after their training. A programme, Uhambo, was developed to support the aim of improving literacy among the children attending Lefika's after-school programme. Lefika's open studio provides a therapeutic and safe space for children from Johannesburg's inner city. The Uhambo programme incorporates elements of

the open studio, offering a focused integration of visual and verbal literacy. The two presented case vignettes from the programme explore how the groups were both therapeutic and educational, addressing emotional growth and improved literacy and learning using attachment theories and storytelling as frameworks. Drawing on attachment theories in psychodynamic literature, the article shows how adaptive art therapy programmes can give children the agency to make meaning, increase confidence and pleasure in their artmaking and storytelling, as well as improving learning outcomes and creativity.

Keywords: Community art counselling, group art therapy, literacy, multimodal pedagogies, open studio, storytelling

Introduction

This article explores how creative interventions located at the intersection between art therapy and multimodal pedagogies can deepen and advance literacies – visual, written, and verbal – while optimising mental health outcomes. Furthermore, the psychoeducational approach responds to the learning deficit in schools and the challenges regarding trauma and learning. A trauma-informed approach to teaching literacy, which is effective for diverse, multi-language, and stressed communities – a model that supports both literacy and emotional support – is urgently needed in South African schools and communities (Plumb, Bush & Kersevich, 2016). According to Zoe Moula (2021, p. 19), "There is growing evidence that embedding arts therapies within the educational system may contribute to addressing children's emerging needs and result in a positive impact on their well-being, bridging the gap between health and education", and Uhambo, with its application of psychoanalytic art therapy and pedagogic approach, has the potential to contribute to the dire need in the South African education system. The programme's creative storytelling approach to literacy is also supported by the therapeutic storytelling model developed by Trisha Waters (2010), which aims to offer therapeutic and educational support. Waters notes that this combination is rare.

In 2016, I volunteered at Lefika La Phodiso (Lefika), an NGO that started as a training institute to increase therapeutic capacity in post-apartheid South Africa.[1] Lefika's managing director asked if I could develop and implement

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1   *Lefika la phodisa* means 'rock of holding' in Soth. The Lefika facility expanded to offer multiple services in the broader community and is facilitated by those who have completed

a literacy programme for children with low literacy levels. It felt deeply synchronistic that I was reading about multimodal literacy then (Stein 2003a). I was able to say confidently, "Yes, I can". I had already trained as a community art counsellor at Lefika and understood the organisation's model of practice (Berman, 2011, 2017, 2018). I wanted the literacy programme to incorporate Lefika's psychodynamic group-based approach for training and practice, which includes an adaptation of art therapy's 'open studio', first developed in the United Kingdom in the 1940s (Berman & Nsenga, 2016). Lefika's open studio provides a therapeutic and safe space for children from Johannesburg's inner city.

I incorporated elements of Lefika's open studio, specifically dynamic administration, holding, and containing, with a multimodal pedagogies approach, which included a series of directive art activities to create a story. It was designed to take the children on a journey from, in broad brushstrokes, drawing a character, making a 3D version of the character, improvising a play with the character, writing a story, and making a book to contain the story. [2]

Multimodal pedagogies and storytelling was used for the design of the Uhambo programme, but its implementation is firmly based on psychoanalytic thinking. Multimodal pedagogies is an approach to literacy studies developed by Gunther Kress at the London School of Education (Albers & Sanders, 2010; Archer & Newfield, 2014; Kress, 2000, 2010; Stein & Newfield, 2003; Stein, 2003a, Stein, 2003b, Stein, 2008). It asserts that we learn best when we can explore different modes of communication, and it has become a mainstream methodology (Stein, 2003a). Storytelling is valuable as a pedagogical device for the development of literacy, language, and communication skills (Stein, 2008). It is a powerful way to build a community with children from diverse histories, languages, and backgrounds.

In this article, I present two case studies to show how the Uhambo programme and its psychodynamic frame of holding and containing strengthened the children's capacity for expression and imaginations. This article aims to show what happens at the intersection of art therapy and

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community art counselling training. Lefika offers an after-school programme for children from Johannesburg's inner city.

2   The programme takes the children on a storytelling journey and we called it Uhambo, which means 'journey' in Zulu.

multimodal pedagogies and how this can be relevant and applicable to art therapy in the context of community work in South Africa.

Need for a literacy programme

The Uhambo programme responds to a literacy and mental health crisis in South Africa (Davis & O'Regan, 2021; O'Hagan, 2021; Metelerkamp, 2022a, 2022b) by addressing very low literacy levels among a group of children.[3] According to a study by Deborah Gorman-Smith, David Henry, and Patrick Tolan (2004, p. 140), "Children in inner-city communities experience the same number of stressful events in one year as other children experience over their entire lifetime". Poverty and trauma are not conducive to learning. No child can learn on an empty stomach. No child who is traumatised can learn. Their thinking brains are hijacked by survival triggers because there is no time to think when your life is under threat (Kline, 2020). A traumatised body is always on high alert, vigilant, and ready for fight or flight. Trauma affects brain development and learning, and children who experience high stress levels cannot achieve their academic potential (Plumb, Bush & Kersevich, 2016). Every part of their lives is navigated through dangerous terrain – often, their home lives are unsafe, and their schools are understaffed places of violence and bullying. Traumatised children will manifest behavioural and cognitive difficulties and difficulties with social development (Van der Kolk, 2014). Traumatic events affect the psychological structure and "the systems of attachment and meaning that link individual and community" (Herman, 2015, p. 80).

According to a recent report, "81% of South Africa's Grade 4 learners cannot read for meaning in any of the 11 official languages" (Ndoda, 2023). This is up three per cent from a 2016 study which indicates that 78% of Grade 4 (9 to 10-year-olds) are illiterate in South Africa (BusinessTech, 2017). As stated above, poverty and trauma contribute to these alarmingly low literacy levels, but there is also a lack of resources at schools in poor areas and teachers who are ill equipped to provide engaging learning. It is often the poor areas where children experience the most trauma. Amid this uncertainty are pockets of support provided by NGOs such as Lefika, which provides safe

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3   Uhambo was developed in 2017 to address very low literacy levels among children attending an after-school programme in Johannesburg's inner city. The programme was designed by applying principles of art therapy's open studio and multimodal pedagogies.

and creative spaces for children and "encourages the use of artmaking within groups in order to enable expression, exploration, and understanding of the self, interpersonal relationships, community and society" (Atlas, 2009, p. 531).

My approach with the Uhambo programme was based on the work of Stein (2008), who, applying principles of multimodal pedagogies in a South African context, developed storytelling as a device for the development of literacy, language, and communication skills. Stories give young people an opportunity to develop and engage in sustained speech and to draw on available discourses and genres they already know. Storytelling strengthens the children's capacity to express their voice through their ability to reflect their own worlds back to them (Stein, 2008). The Uhambo programme combines multimodal pedagogy and art therapy practices within a therapeutic framework of a safe and holding environment. In this creative space, the children can actively participate in their own meaning making. In this way, the Uhambo programme speaks to democracy, power, meaning making, agency, originality, multiple modes, diversity, and social justice – principles and values central to Lefika. The programme nourishes emotional development and associated literacies, including writing, reading, and confidence in creating images and reflecting on them, as well as being able to talk about feelings.

Theoretic frame

The article draws on attachment theories in psychodynamic literature, such as John Bowlby's 'secure base', Wilfred Bion's 'containing', and Donald Winnicott's 'holding', 'transitional object' and 'potential space' (Bowlby, 1982; Berman, 2012; Colin, 1984; Winnicott, 2005). Bowlby's (1982) attachment theory refers to how we form relationships starting with the quality of our first relationship with our primary caregiver. The more secure our initial base – attunement, listening, and connection – the better chance we have of a secure attachment and feeling safe enough to explore the world (Music, 2017). Winnicott (2005) coined the term 'good enough' mother who can 'hold' her baby. Winnicott's holding is another way of understanding Bowlby's secure base, and in terms of group theory, it refers to the space provided for the group, including constancy, timekeeping, presence, and safety (Bowlby, 1982). Winnicott (2005) writes that playing takes place in the potential space. That is, when a person is relaxed enough, they will be able to engage in psychic work. Bion's (Barnes, Ernst & Hyde, 2017) containment refers to the primary

caregiver being able to give back the difficult and unmanageable feelings of the baby so that the baby can tolerate the feelings. In a group, containment is about 'thinking with' and reflecting back to the group or group members what might be going on – the difficult and unmanageable feelings – so that they feel heard, recognised and understood (Barnes et al., 2017). Lefika provides the possibility of an external safe space with an art studio and 'good enough' adults who care, and an internal safe space with consistency and commitment.

Along with the psychoanalytic frame, storytelling and its benefits need to be thought about in relation to the Uhambo programme. The programme is based on Stein's Olifantsvlei Fresh Stories project, which took place over three months in 2001 with a group of early literacy teachers of Grade 1 and 2 children from a semi-rural school in Johannesburg (Stein, 2008). The children lived in an informal settlement and came from poor families – many from households headed by single women or children. Stein (2008, p. 100) intended to provide a "relaxed and playful environment for making, which would allow the children to respond to the creative tasks with little or no intervention from the teachers". Her approach to multimodal pedagogy responds to the ruptures in the lives of many South African children. She describes South African children as being "like dispossessed migrants, moving in [...] confusion from one archipelago to another (home to school and back again), in a constant search for connections that make sense to them" (Stein, 2003a, p. 64). At Lefika, art therapy is one of the ways to bridge the dissociative gaps that trauma causes (Berman, 2012).

Programme description

Lefika provides an external safe space with an art studio and adults who care and an internal safe space with consistency and commitment. Dynamic administration involves setting up and maintaining the group (Barnes et al., 2017). At Lefika, this means that sessions take place in the same space, at the same time every week, with the same facilitators who follow the same routine. Lefika's open studio provides a containing function, with facilitators and group members providing a parental and sibling function respectively (Barnes et al., 2017). The participating children get a meal before and after each session, which also contributes to the consistency and frame (Berman, 2018). The Uhambo programme followed the standard Lefika open studio format. Each session started with the children sitting in a circle, checking in,

marking off the calendar (how many sessions are left?), and going through the group contract. The children then moved to their art activity. Near the end of the session, they met in a circle again to share their artwork and reflect on the session.

The Uhambo programme was different from Lefika's standard open studio format (above) in key ways: Uhambo included the reading of a story at the beginning of each session, a discussion of the term's theme, and a 'memory moment' to reflect with the children on the previous week's activity. Because Uhambo involved a series of progressive activities that built on each other each week, it was a 'closed' group – after the first two sessions of the term, no new children could join the group. The following is a standard model, but there were variations depending on how many weeks there were in a term:

Session 1:   Who is your character?

Session 2:   Draw your character (2D)

Session 3/4:   Make your character (3D)

Session 5/6:   Create a play using improvisation with the characters

Session 7/8:   Write a story

Session 9:   Create a book for your story.

In the final session, the children bind their own simple books with an illustrated cover and write their final stories into their books with pictures.

Based on positive verbal feedback from the children, the pilot programme in 2017 was deemed generative and successful by staff at Lefika. In anticipation of the rollout in 2018, the programme was tweaked: a theme for each term and different art modalities were introduced. This was to ensure variation and additional stimulation for the group members, who remained largely the same. In 2018, two Uhambo programme groups were established – a younger group (9 to 12 years old) and a teenage group (13 to 16 years old). Each group had approximately eight children (although this number was always in flux), and took place each week during term time. The children attended of their own accord, having heard about it from facilitators at Lefika and/or from their peers. In 2020, there was one group for Term 1, and it ended early due to COVID-19.

Methods

This article draws from a larger master's qualitative research study that used observational reports from the Uhambo programme (2017 to 2020) to develop the case vignettes. Ethical clearance was granted by the University of Johannesburg, based on Lefika's consent procedures and with the condition that no identifying material be included in the study. As part of the group facilitation and supervision requirements of Lefika, I wrote an observational report after each Uhambo programme session. My case vignettes are derived from these reports and photographs from the sessions. Based on most sessions attended, I identified two children for the development of the case vignettes – V from the senior group and M from the junior group.

Case vignettes

The case vignettes discussed below demonstrate how the multimodal pedagogical approach within Lefika's open studio frame can be beneficial to the children. Most, if not all, of the children who attend Lefika's after-school programme experience continuous trauma. Initially, the directive activities supported the development of ego strength in the children, encouraged confidence in their artmaking abilities and allowed them to play and explore their creativity. The repeated sequence of activities also contributed to creating a thread of connection, linking and reminding us of what happened the previous week and what would happen the following week. This created a structure (or scaffolding) and sense of predictability and safety for the children and myself. It had started out as a literacy programme, and yet over the months, it became about so much more. I watched in amazement what happens when a weekly group takes place at the same time for the same duration over months and then a year and then more than a year, with a core group of the same children. The group evolved, I evolved; I grew from anxious and controlling to soft and receptive. Over time, and as the group cohered and matured, the children were able to use the space and structure to explore and play, imagine stories, and write them.

"Can I be a cow boy?"

V is a 13-year-old boy from Zimbabwe. He moved to South Africa approximately five years before joining the Uhambo programme in 2018 and lived with his

aunt. He was not attending school. V initially presented as very withdrawn, introverted, and guarded, with low self-esteem, lacking confidence and deeply insecure. He attended the Uhambo programme for Terms 1 and 2. The theme for Term 1 was 'my hero' and Term 2 was 'autobiography'.

In Term 1, I noticed V often tried to make eye contact with the facilitators. It was very hard to read what he was looking for or trying to say, but it felt like he wanted affirmation that he was doing the right thing. When the group made puppets for their 'make your character' prompt, V did not seem to like his and needed much support to remain engaged. Over time he became more attached to his puppet (see Figure 1) and seemed pleased with the final puppet show, which he created with another group member. His partner wrote the story, and V's contribution was a magic charm that helped them fly and a song. The puppet show by the two boys is an example of how the group process supports the creative process. V was insecure about his writing ability and his friend 'saved' V (by writing the script for the puppet show) so that they could both fly metaphorically.

Figure 1: V with his superhero puppet

In Term 1's 'story writing' session, V was the only group member to arrive. I was disappointed that only one child arrived and wondered if V felt the same way. During check-in he indicated that he was sad that no one else was there. I managed to contain the difficult feelings of disappointment for both myself and V by keeping the session structure the same and giving him my presence, a safe space, encouragement, and affirmation. I was a 'good enough' facilitator (Winnicott, 2005), providing adequate holding and containing, and perhaps that is why he could stay in the space and not flee.

In Term 2, most of the group struggled with clay, but V was at ease with the material and made a cow (see Figure 2). Next, he created an entire scene, including a *kraal* (enclosure for his cow), a person, and a tree. I watched V staring at his creation for the longest time, and then he asked his friend if he could be a 'cow boy'. He wrote tentatively, then scratched out his words, tried again, and eventually wrote, 'I am a cow boy'. He looked again at his creation and then wrote, 'I have 2 cows. I live in a farm' (see Figure 3).
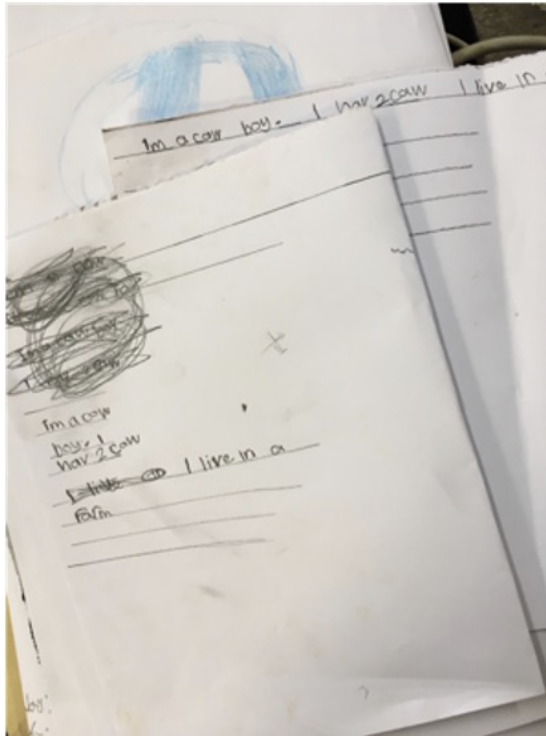

Figure 2: Clay cow

Figure 3: V's story

I noticed that V was able to express himself more. He checked in with how he was feeling, participated in reading the group contract, and was more integrated into the group. Even though V struggled with other aspects of the term's artmaking and expression, he could work with clay, which helped build his self-esteem and confidence to keep trying, especially with his writing. This is a valuable aspect of the multimodal approach. He was able to share this skill and help other group members. The therapeutic principles of group therapy were well illustrated in the story-writing session. When the setting is safe and supportive, group members find the courage to express themselves without fear of failure. In this instance, V could ask his friend for help, and then he could write. At the beginning of the group sessions, he kept himself very separate because he did not trust that he would receive support, but in this session, he asked for help. The group and the boundaries of the session were able to contain him. He continued to take social risks, sharing his feelings

during the opening and closing of sessions. V started his journey by anxiously watching me. As Judith Herman (2015, p. 198) describes it, this attunement of traumatised patients "to unconscious and nonverbal communication" from the therapist is "an attempt to protect [themselves] from the hostile reactions [they] expect". Over time, V stopped looking at me as if the safety of the group and the 'good enough' facilitator had, even if for a while, reduced his hyper-aroused state so that he could self-regulate and relax enough to start playing, even though tentatively.

I watched V transform from insecure and uncertain to a group member who was able to take social risks, and this included using his imagination to be someone different, a 'cow boy', asking for help and trusting the response ("Can I be a cow boy?"). V's writing without needing external prompts or support was a key moment. I managed to stand back, observe, and not interfere, and V could find his words. It was as if, through touching the clay, he was reminded of where he came from, a farm in Zimbabwe, and by recreating this place in the clay, a material that seemed familiar to him, he remembered who he was and that he had a story to tell. He could make connections between his present moment in the studio and with his past through the medium of the creation of the clay cow, and this gave him the confidence to write his first sentence, 'I am a cow boy'. V created a sign that read 'the cow', and it was imbued with identity, meaning, and connection.

"Ask me a real question"

M is a nine-year-old boy from Zimbabwe who had been coming to Lefika for about three years prior to Uhambo. He lived in a room in a flat with his family, the other rooms shared with other families, in the inner city with his family – mother, father, younger brother, and older sister. Facilitators described his behaviour in Lefika's open studio sessions as distracted and disengaged, and he was often difficult to manage. In Uhambo, however, he presented as assertive, confident, engaged, involved, cooperative, and quiet. He joined the Uhambo programme in Term 1 of 2018. M's journey was very different from V's, in that he almost immediately knew how to use the space, the group, and play, which he did with great earnestness. The structure of the sessions created a frame from which M could feel safe enough to play.

In Term 1, M was very enthusiastic and knew exactly what he wanted to do to decorate his puppet. His puppet was his dad. He painted the face white

and made a crown. He worked slowly, patiently, and delicately. He spent time in the fabric box choosing his fabric carefully – finding satin-like textures – fit for a king. Instead of dressing his puppet, he dressed himself with it, draping the fabric around his body. Then, with a needle, thread, and scissors he went about cutting and stitching an outfit for his puppet, including sewing on buttons. He was completely absorbed in this activity and sat quietly on his own, working, stitching, and cutting.

I created a makeshift puppet theatre prior to the children arriving for the 'make a play' session. M undid the theatre and went about creating his own version of a puppet theatre, using fabric, ribbons, and balloons (see Figure 4). He decorated the puppet theatre to his own exacting standards and would not be distracted from this task. He was more interested in creating the actual theatre than he was in creating a puppet show for the theatre.
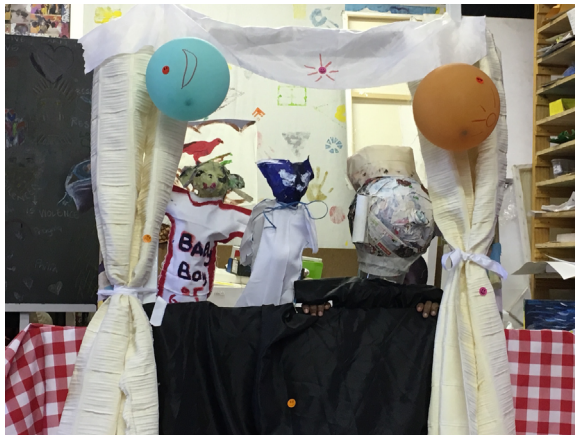

Figure 4: M's puppet theatre

Lenore Steinhardt (1994) explains that the theatre provides an integrative function that connects the making of the puppets and their stories in a spontaneous performance. While the other children conceived and wrote a script for their puppet show, M was creating a home for the group's puppets. He spontaneously participated in the puppet show and improvised along with the other children without needing a script.

I arrived early and created a ritual space for the final session of Term 1, and M (who was also early) saw me creating a centrepiece and immediately

set about making his own version. M scooped up my creation into his arms and removed it from the circle and packed it away, out of sight. M spent a long time creating the ritual space with great care and ingenuity (see Figure 5). M acted out a *sangoma* (traditional healer) in front of his altar, shaking shells in his hand and chanting incantations. Over the year, M became the guardian and creator of the ritual space. He went about the task at the end of each term, with the other children watching him work, sometimes helping, sometimes not. Upon reflection, it could be argued that he was dismantling the power hierarchy – the traditional hierarchy of teacher-student and therapist-patient – and shaping the container his way during the closing ritual (Lu & Yuen, 2012).

Figure 5: M's closing ritual

In the final session of Term 3, M arrived very early and created a celebratory space with a party table, which he decorated with found objects from the studio, and a canvas painting with a farewell to Term 3 sign on it. These parties continued at the opening and closing of the following term. They carried ambivalent feelings. On the one hand, the children wanted to acknowledge and celebrate the success of the term, but on the other, endings are difficult, and as facilitators, we must be aware of this and hold the pain of something precious coming to an end and the uncertainty of whether it will be repeated the following term. I allowed the parties to happen but also ended the group with a circle and a checkout with how the group members were feeling about the ending. The celebration of a successful group is acceptable as long as the facilitator is also able to create a space where the difficult feelings about endings, loss, and mourning can be faced and discussed, their own included (Barnes et al., 2017).

Part of this final session involved the children playing dress up. M found a box under a table with various princess costumes, and he started playing dress-up.[4] He delighted in his chosen outfit and in making the silver coins on his outfit tinkle. When the rest of the group arrived, I showed them the dresses and asked them if they wanted to dress up. They all dressed up, including one of the male volunteers. I was anxious they would tease M, but then they could not because they were also wearing dresses. Although the box only contained dresses, there was something extraordinary about the boys agreeing to wear princess outfits – after all they could have said no (see Figure 6).

M's dressing up and culminating in the princess outfit reminds me of a child playing dress-up at home. I would argue that Lefika's open studio is like a home. With its safe frame, 'good enough' parents (the group facilitators), and the invitation to explore internal reality, Lefika provided Winnicott's (2005) potential space for the development of agency and the serious business of play. Putting on different outfits and exploring different roles throughout the year, M might have been exploring his identity, asking questions, such as Who am I?, How should I look?, and What is my role? (Knafo, 1996). How do M's different outfits represent his inner world? His dad, a smart man, dressed in a suit; a merman, Poseidon, king of the sea with his trident; an Indian princess dress; and finally, a turbaned prince, Maharaji. Another aspect of the dressing up was the creation of the group boundary. According to Siegmund Foulkes

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4   Lefika received a donation of a box of Disney princess dresses.

and Elwyn Anthony (2003), things that would not happen outside of the group can happen in the group. In this instance, all the boys were wearing princess dresses.

Figure 6: Dressing up

The children made houses for the 'my street' theme in Term 4. In the final session, an actor was invited to join the session and the children created a street with their houses. The actor went from house to house as a TV presenter interviewing the 'homeowners'. M spent time wrapping himself in various pieces of fabric – eventually creating a large turban on his head. He said his name was Maharaji. He sat in a very composed way outside his house while the actor interviewed the children. When the actor got to M, he asked, "So what are you doing?" and M retorted, "What does it look like I'm doing!" The actor then asked, "Tell me about your house?" and M said, "Ask me a real question". The actor made an effort to engage more specifically, and M became more responsive and shared briefly. Lev Vygotsky (Haen & Weil, 2010, p. 44) writes that "In play, a child is always above his average age, above his daily behaviour; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself". M seemed a head taller than in previous sessions when he responded to the actor. Sigmund Freud (Knafo, 1996, p. 3) wrote that "every child at play behaves like a creative writer, in that he creates a world of his own, or, rather, rearranges the things of his world in a new way which pleases him". This is what M did throughout the Uhambo programme, from rearranging the puppet theatre and creating his own ritual centrepiece to dressing up and finally arranging the end-of-term celebration and decorating the table. Winnicott (2005, p. 73) writes that "It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self". Through playing, M seemed to discover, recover, and explore all the parts of himself until, at the end, he could dress as he wanted to, in a princess dress.

As demonstrated in the case vignettes, the multimodal pedagogic model with its series of activities provided the foundation upon which the group could develop tentatively at first, and then with more confidence as together we learnt to trust the group. The activities were a kind of scaffolding for me and for the children. Importantly, the activities were not discrete; rather, they created a sequence of steps, each connected to the previous activity, supporting the formation of the group and a continuity of being. The activities were also steps building towards a story. Whether that story was written or not, the sense of the therapeutic value of storytelling was always present in the group through the artmaking, the dressing up, the group rituals, the reading, and the bookbinding.

According to Stein (2008) and Waters (2010), multimodal pedagogies and therapeutic storytelling, respectively, have been indicated to improve literacy in children who are struggling to read and write by opening up possibilities for children to access their creative potential and agency. Herman (2015, p. 55) notes that "Traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning". The case studies also demonstrate that when children become active participants in their own meaning making, they develop confidence, a profound sense of the possibility of their own agency, and a source of creativity that is their own.

Conclusion

I contend that young people cannot adequately learn to read and write, and deal with many modes of education, unless they have a sense of themselves as beings in the world with at least a suggestion of agency rather than being mere victims of a social crisis. In the context of scarce resources, I present this model as relevant to the development of art therapy practice in South Africa, which needs to be adaptive to meet the needs of so many children in crisis. It is a group-based, short-term, trauma-informed model that supports emotional well-being and literacy. I believe the contribution of Uhambo – as presented by the case vignettes – is of creating conditions in which reading and writing are more conducive through the provision of a safe holding environment. Further research is indicated to measure the impact of this approach on literacy levels.

Initially, I implemented the Uhambo programme instinctively and experimentally. At the time of writing this article, I am fortunate to have the opportunity to formalise the programme in a school setting. I am facilitating a series of Uhambo programme groups at my clinical placement site, a primary school serving a predominantly immigrant community. I will be working closely with teachers, and the school's expectation for the programme is that it will simultaneously strengthen literacy and mental health.

Acknowledgements

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