

# The Awakening: Makudlalwe. How play awakens the inner child in black Indigenous African adults

---

Nomfundo Ncanana 

University of the Witwatersrand  
1105456@students.wits.ac.za

## Author's bio

Nomfundo Ncanana is a dedicated and dynamic professional with a Master of Arts in Drama Therapy from the University of the Witwatersrand, where she also completed her Bachelor of Arts, Postgraduate Diploma in Applied Drama and Theatre and an Honours in Drama Therapy. With a brief social work background and a strong psychology and sociology foundation, Ncanana has cultivated a diverse skill set that includes applied drama and theatre practices, project management, and community work. She is currently serving as a drama therapy intern. She is also a certified Listening Hour guide and Playback Theatre performing artist, showcasing her commitment to mental health and creative expression. Ncanana is passionate about fostering human connection through the arts and is currently involved in multiple initiatives to enhance mental health and personal development.

## Abstract

The concept of the inner child represents the emotional and experiential core of individuals, often shaped by early life experiences. This article is based on my drama therapy master's research study, which aims to explore how play, within the context of drama therapy, can be utilised to awaken the inner child to support the mental health of black South African adults. I argue that the exploration of play can foster connections within communities and promote emotional healing, particularly in a post-colonial, post-apartheid South African context where historical traumas and socioeconomic disparities persist and challenge South African (communities) mental health. The focus on the experiences of black South Africans acknowledges the intersectionality of identity, culture, and trauma. In 2024, as discussions around inclusivity and representation become more prominent, the discussions are a reminder

of the importance of understanding diverse backgrounds and experiences in therapeutic and educational settings. By awakening the inner child in black South African adults, utilising methods such as neuro-dramatic play and guided play, this study seeks to understand how play can serve as a therapeutic tool to reconnect people with their past, promote healing, and enhance personal growth. The context of play allowed me to use games such as Indigenous games, ritual games, and drama therapy games, with practice as research (PaR) being the methodology used to create and collect knowledge. The study ultimately seeks to contribute to drama therapy practice in South Africa by emphasising play as a vital process for self-discovery and emotional well-being.

**Keywords:** Adults, African, awakening, drama therapy, guided play, Indigenous, inner child, neuro-dramatic play, play

## Introduction

This article is based on aspects of my master's study and investigates how play can facilitate reconnection, healing, and self-discovery, particularly for adults who have experienced the legacies of oppression and trauma (Ncanana, 2024). This article aims to explore how play can be utilised therapeutically to awaken the inner child in adults, contributing to understanding play within the context of drama therapy practice in South Africa.

## Research Questions

- How do black South African adults benefit from consciously integrating play into their lives?
- How is play understood in the black South African community?
- How does play awaken the inner child in adults?

I argue that the exploration of play can foster connections within communities and promote emotional healing, particularly in a post-apartheid South African context where historical traumas and socioeconomic disparities persist.

## Background

The concept of the inner child refers to an individual's original or true self, encompassing the wisdom and creativity that can be accessed through

childhood experiences (Fox, 2017, p. 3). The inner child embodies the memories, emotions, and experiences of early life, which can influence adult behaviour and emotional well-being. A conversation with my mother about the fulfilment of positive inner child wishes sparked curiosity about how to engage and re-awaken the inner child in adults. As a young black drama therapist in training, I wondered if it would be possible to engage adults in play, particularly black African adults, because, from my own experiences, adults in my family and community tend to perceive play as childish. The idea of awakening the inner child in adults links to Carl Jung's proposal that children can connect to their environments through play, suggesting that similar methods might work for adults who were once children (Bradshaw, 2013).

Pedro Mzileni and Vuyo Diko (2022) summarise and highlight the importance of play in the context of black children and communities, particularly within South Africa. They emphasise that play is a key activity that facilitates cognitive development and emotional growth. However, they also point out that children from disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly in townships, often face challenges in accessing safe spaces for play (Mzileni & Diko, 2022, p. 22). For many black South Africans, colonial histories have disrupted the natural expression of play and cultural practices, leading to a disconnection from their inner child. The study explores how play fosters community and social connections, which are crucial in the context of ongoing social and mental health challenges in South Africa. As the country continues to grapple with the legacies of apartheid, fostering social cohesion through shared play experiences can be a powerful tool for healing and unity among diverse groups.

While researching for my master's, I struggled to find literature that spoke directly to how play is understood or viewed in black South African communities (Ncanana, 2024). Although there is documentation on Indigenous African children's games, little has been written about the impact of play and how it is understood within contemporary black communities in South Africa. However, there were descriptions of how particular cultural practices have been used to navigate oppression.

This article specifically focuses on black adults living in South Africa, acknowledging the historical context of colonialist and apartheid oppressions, land dispossession, and the resulting impacts on black identity and cultural practices in South Africa. In addition, the article recognises the deprivation of

play experienced by black children due to various colonial factors, including apartheid and socioeconomic challenges, which have hindered their ability to freely engage in play and express their identities. Mzileni and Diko (2022) note that historical factors, such as colonialism and apartheid, have contributed to the marginalisation of black communities, affecting their ability to engage in play. They argue that play is not just a luxury but also a fundamental right that contributes to the development and well-being of children. They stress the need for a safe environment where children can freely engage in play, which is essential for their social and emotional development (Mzileni & Diko, p. 2022). Many adults may struggle with forming and maintaining healthy relationships due to past traumas or negative experiences to which many black South Africans have been exposed (Kaminer & Eagle, 2010).

My motivation for exploring this topic, particularly the impact of historical trauma on play in African communities, is that there are differing views on what play is, how it is engaged with, and how it is understood in black African communities. Play in the African context has not been sufficiently defined or valued within broader societal structures, which further complicates the recognition of its importance in childhood development (Mzileni & Diko, 2022).



**Figure 1:** Author in workshop facilitating a ritual game, photograph by Dr Disi, 2023

In a contemporary context, where mental health awareness is growing, this article underscores the need for culturally relevant therapeutic practices that resonate with the lived experiences of black Africans in South Africa. It emphasises the significance of integrating play into adult life to combat the effects of trauma and to promote well-being, resilience, and community connection.

The importance of play is underscored, as it is seen as a vital element for processing experiences and facilitating cognitive, social, and emotional development (Vygotsky, 1967). Engaging in play can facilitate emotional healing and help people process trauma and reconnect with their inner child, which is essential in addressing the mental health crisis that many communities in South Africa face today.

Black South Africans face many challenges in accessing and engaging in play due to historical and socioeconomic factors, particularly in a post-colonial context where traditional forms of play may have been suppressed (Mzileni & Diko, 2022). The value of play has often been overlooked as a result of oppressive legacies and lasting socioeconomic challenges faced by many black South Africans. This context highlights the need for culturally relevant practices that can help awaken the inner child within these communities. The importance of traditional play and its integration into the therapeutic context is emphasised as a means to reconnect with cultural identity and enhance community ties (Mzileni & Diko, 2022).

Play is essential for affirming life and self-experience (Vygotsky, 1967, p. 13). As part of my research, I engaged with participants in guided play, promoting conscious experiences of play to activate the inner child. Guided play is highlighted as a method that provides learning experiences while allowing for child-directed engagement under the guidance of a facilitator (Weisberg et al., 2016).

During my research, I noted that play in the South African context often involves cultural significance and community engagement elements. The participants in the study were encouraged to bring their cultural backgrounds into the play, which facilitated a deeper understanding of how play is perceived within their community. By using structured activities and rituals, the workshops explored how specific types of play, such as storytelling or collective games, could effectively evoke memories and emotions from

childhood. This exploration helped identify the therapeutic mechanisms at play, including creating a safe space for vulnerability and self-expression.

This article begins with highlighting the literature that set up the context of engagement and understanding the research in which I engaged. The next section describes the methodology used in exploring the inner child. The following section clearly states the findings of the research and key insights. The conclusion then further substantiates the relevance of the study for drama therapeutic practices and gives future recommendations.

## Literature

Carl Jung (2020, p. 19) believed people have a collective unconscious, a universal reservoir of human experience that shapes their thoughts, emotions, and behaviour. The inner child can be described as our original or true self with wisdom and creativity (Fox, 2017; Jung, 2020). Furthermore, the inner child is linked to emotional intelligence and healthy psychological development. Moreover, the inner child influences adult behaviour, and trauma can negatively affect this aspect of self (Wacks, 1994). Our inner child carries parts of us that carry our deepest wounds, fears, and insecurities (Jung, 2020, p. 32). Overall, the inner child is portrayed as a crucial aspect of personal identity and emotional wellness, emphasising the need for adults to acknowledge and nurture this part of themselves.

Personal trauma resulting from abuse and neglect that we may have experienced in childhood may affect our resilience and coping mechanisms, which is why it is important to gain a greater understanding of the body and the brain within programmes for trauma transformation (Jennings, 1995). Robert Landy (2009, p. 78) proposes that drama therapy provides a dramatic space in which clients draw from, reconstruct, and reflect upon roles presented to them in everyday dramas. Character role-playing allows participants to reflect on their childhood compared to their current life to see if there were any connections. An adult's inner child is primarily concerned with fulfilling behaviours and satisfying the needs that this inner child has not had much experience with or fulfilment in (Jung, 2020).

Referencing Jung's (2020) exploration of childlike feelings and emotions, John Bradshaw (2013, p. 89) emphasises the need to engage with this inner child to access deeper emotional experiences and healing. Healing the inner child is crucial for emotional development, allowing adults to reconnect with

their childhood experiences and feelings (Bradshaw, 2013; Jung, 2020). It is suggested that when adults allow themselves to engage with their inner child through play, they can gain insights into their emotional pain, which can be a step towards healing past trauma.

The literature highlights that play is essential for adults, as it helps cultivate relationships and emotional well-being (Proyer, 2013). Play is not just limited to structured games; it encompasses various forms of creative expression, such as storytelling, song, dance, and Indigenous games, which are significant in the cultural context of black communities.

Play is a primary means of learning and expression for children and adults. In the context of therapy, play allows for a non-threatening exploration of emotions and past experiences, facilitating healing and growth (Kekae-Moletsane, 2008; Vygotsky, 1967). Phil Jones (2018) mentions play as a core process in drama therapy, whereby play is used to assist in connection and witnessing. Play is a core process within drama therapy, suggesting that incorporating play can enhance therapeutic outcomes for adults seeking to reconnect with their inner child and process their past.

When we speak of attachment and reconnection, we can refer to personal play as a lens from which to view attachment. Firstly, Güneş (2023) assumes that play is at risk of being transferred to future generations due to our consumption-based society, uncontrolled technology, and digital transformation. Personal play identity then refers to how we play and transfer the ways we play to future generations (Güneş, 2023).

Secondly, Güneş (2023) assumes that personal play identity is shaped by the sociocultural environment, economy, and technology. Our continuous interactions with these structures can influence positive and healthy developments that improve quality of life. This notion that play can improve life quality links to the ideas that Lev Vygotsky (1967) proposed in his theory of play. Vygotsky (1967, p. 8) posits that play is essential for cognitive, social, and emotional development, suggesting that engaging in play as adults could facilitate similar developmental processes.



**Figure 2:** Participant in workshop imitating a move to be reflected by others, photograph by Dr Disi, 2023

The inner child can be awakened through play in the drama therapy setting, which provides a safe space for adults to reconnect with their childhood experiences, emotions, and memories. The inner child is readily available in the body and communicates through feelings, movement, play, and the arts. Engaging in play allows people to express their needs and desires that may have been neglected in childhood. Through awakening the inner child, one can gain insight into the sources of emotional pain and begin to heal the wounds of the past (Jung, 2020, p. 66). The experiential nature of play activities allows for processing and releasing emotions that lead to a greater understanding of self (Jennings, 2011).

Therapeutic models, such as neuro-dramatic play and guided play, create a safe space for emotional exploration and healing. These drama therapy methods foreground the embodied experience of play, which can help people navigate and express their feelings (Jennings, 2011).



Neuro-dramatic play (NDP) is an attachment-based intervention focusing on the playful relationship between caregivers and children, particularly emphasising the early bonds between caregiver and child. Neuro-dramatic play is an approach in drama therapy that builds on early playful relationships, aiding in developing trust and self-exploration (Jennings, 2011).

By integrating sensory, rhythmic, and dramatic elements, neuro-dramatic play fosters exploration and playfulness, which can lead to emotional healing and the development of trust (Jennings, 2011). The sensory, rhythmic, and dramatic are exploration elements linked to what Sue Jennings (2006) theorised about projective play. Projective play speaks to how children explore the world using embodied and/or dramatic play in a narrative form that allows them to build new skills (Crimmens, 2006). Projective play can also assist in developing communication, confidence, and emotional regulation, and potentially, imagination (Crimmens, 2006). Neuro-dramatic play is significant in the context of the research because it is an attachment-based intervention that emphasises the playful relationship between caregiver and child, facilitating emotional and psychological healing (Jennings, 2011).

Overall, the literature establishes a culturally relevant framework for understanding how play can be utilised to awaken the inner child, highlighting the therapeutic potential of play within the context of drama therapy practices in South Africa.

## Methodology

This study employs a practice as research (PaR) methodology, incorporating participatory action methods to engage participants in hands-on activities that facilitate exploration and expression.

Practice as research is significant for knowledge creation as it allows for the exploration of the embodied experience of play and its impact on awakening the inner child. Practice as research emphasises the integration of practice and theory, providing substantial evidence of a specific research inquiry through creative forms such as workshops that engage participants in direct experiences (Nelson, 2013).

The practice as research approach is beneficial because it enables the researcher to gather knowledge through traditional academic means and lived experiences and interactions within the workshops (Nelson, 2013). My observations led to the discovery that engagement in play is a rich data source

that reflects the participants' understanding and experiences of play. This play data source is essential for understanding how therapeutic play can awaken the inner child, particularly for black South African adults.

Moreover, when applied within the practice as research framework, participatory action research methods empower participants by involving them in the research process, thus creating knowledge that is directly applicable to the community (Nelson, 2013). The participatory action research methods also foster a sense of ownership and engagement in the learning experience (Nelson, 2013).

The aims and objectives of the research study were explored through a series of workshops that utilised play, specifically guided play and neuro-dramatic play, to awaken the inner child in black Indigenous African adults. The workshops aimed to understand how play is perceived and explored the benefits of consciously integrating play into adults' lives. Each aim was addressed by focusing on various aspects of play and its impact on participants' connection to their inner child.

To recruit participants, I designed a poster detailing the workshop's intention – to awaken the inner child in adults. I also specified the kind of group I was looking for and the age required for participation. Participants could join the group by scanning the WhatsApp QR code on the poster. Upon joining, the participants were told that this was a research gathering space and were asked to fill in consent forms where they would circle and sign what they consented to in the sessions going forward. I collected data through observations, field notes, images, participant reflections, and analysis.

Three workshops were conducted, utilising guided play and neuro-dramatic play techniques to awaken the participants' inner child. The workshop example presented here is from the second workshop conducted with adult drama students at the University of the Witwatersrand. Some participants were born into the apartheid era, and some were born into the democratic era. The age of the participants ranged from 25 to 42 years. At the time, I was 25 years old and born after apartheid. My relatability was grounded strongly with those my age as I noticed that all of us born during the democratic era relate better to the ritual games introduced. This relatability may have been a challenge in engagement for those not familiar with the game as they may not have felt as closely related to what was being introduced. This experience may

also have influenced their experience of play in a place where play is meant to be free expression.

This differing experience of play resulted in a need for me to particularly observe the difference in stories of expression when people spoke of their experiences. One of the participants was a Zimbabwean national, another was a Mozambican national, and the rest were South African. Regardless of the participants being from different countries in Southern Africa, all the participants grew up in South Africa. The main language of communication was English. However, the use of English was easy and allowed the participants and me to speak in a tongue we felt comfortable conversing in. Some participants reside in the inner city, while others reside in townships. As isiZulu is spoken both in the city and township, there was an easy understanding when slipping into isiZulu now and then.

The workshops involved various play activities that encouraged participants to engage with their memories and feelings associated with childhood. Activities like storytelling and role-play helped participants reflect on their past and connect emotionally with their inner child. The sessions included discussions and reflections on the concept of the inner child, allowing participants to share their experiences and understand the psychological importance of playfulness. This importance was reinforced through activities that required creative expression, helping participants realise the benefits of accessing their playful side. My role in the sessions was mainly as a guide and facilitator. Therapeutic elements were included in the play; however, I did not play the role of a therapist in these sessions. In the first workshop, I was enrolled as a storyteller; in the second session, I was enrolled as a teacher; in the third workshop, I was enrolled as a guide. My roles in these sessions allowed me to be reflexive as I played with the participants while collecting information.



**Figure 3:** Author in the workshop after playing balloon game with participants, photograph by Dr Disi, 2023

By focusing on embodied play and the collective experiences of the participants, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the cultural meanings and implications (Nelson, 2013) of play in the South African context. Using our mother tongue can serve as a tool that allows us to reconnect to our past and lay out emotions and experiences in an unfiltered and honest way (Matoane, 2012, p. 105). There were also limitations in embracing the mother tongue because a participant spoke a language that no one else in the room understood. In response, I put the language interpretation aside and placed expression forward. This versatility in not relying on language is crucial for developing culturally sensitive practices relevant to the community's needs.

The study utilised various types of games, which included:

- **Indigenous games:** These are recreational activities that originate from specific cultural groups or communities and are traditionally played and developed by local or native people in a particular geographic region or culture.

- **Drama therapy games:** These involve drama and theatre techniques, including role play, story-making, movement, props, and masks, which are fundamental to engaging in play.
- **Ritual games:** These structured activities include specific cultural practices. These practices, like the Me Toca game, involve rhythmic movements, moving together, and repeating songs, fostering participant connection and engagement.

Participants were encouraged to engage and participate actively to express their emotions through body movement and interaction to promote physical activity and enthusiasm. These are vital aspects of play that resonate with the inner child. Emotional exploration was evident as the games often led to participants recalling both positive and negative past experiences related to their childhood. Such exploration is essential for healing and reconnecting with the inner child. The games encouraged creative expression, such as through the creation of stories or movement, a natural mode of expression for children. This creativity is a key aspect of play that can help adults reconnect with their playful and imaginative selves.

The games were chosen as they facilitate playfulness, connection, and emotional expression, allowing participants to engage with their inner child through various forms of creative expression. The games had clear rules, flexibility in execution, and a strong collaborative effort among participants. Overall, these games provided a playful framework that facilitated emotional release, social interaction, and reconnection with the joys and traumas of childhood, which were instrumental in awakening the inner child in the participants.

Several key themes and observations emerged from the workshops:

- **Diversity in play experiences:** Participants came from varied backgrounds, which influenced their interactions with play. For instance, some had experience with Indigenous games, while others were familiar with games played at schools. This diversity highlighted how contextual factors impact play and the awakening of the inner child.
- **Awakening of the inner child:** The research found that engaging in play facilitated the awakening of the inner child. Participants expressed excitement and showed engagement during activities, demonstrating a

connection to their playful selves. The dynamics of competitiveness and collaboration in the games pointed to a rejuvenation of childlike qualities.

- **Therapeutic potential of play:** The workshops demonstrated that play could be a therapeutic tool. Through play, participants connected with their emotions and past experiences, allowing for personal insights and healing. For example, one participant's experience with a childhood trauma regarding dogs surfaced during play, showing how the inner child carries unresolved issues.
- **Cultural context and language:** The significance of cultural context was evident, as participants expressed a preference for using their mother tongue during play. This inclusion fostered a sense of belonging and encouraged deeper connections among participants.
- **Challenges in engagement:** Not all participants were equally engaged in play. Some hesitated or felt uncomfortable, reflecting the concept of the 'under-held child' who may struggle with anxiety and trust in social settings. This variance in levels of engagement highlights the importance of creating a safe and supportive environment for all participants.
- **Physical and emotional responses:** The findings indicated that physical engagement in play corresponded with emotional responses. Participants who were initially hesitant became more expressive and active as the sessions progressed, suggesting that physical movement can unlock emotional expression.
- **Collective trauma and healing:** The research acknowledged the impact of collective trauma in South Africa due to its history of apartheid. Participants' engagement with play served as a personal exploration and a collective healing process, allowing the participants to reclaim aspects of their identity and cultural heritage.



**Figure 4:** Participant in workshop reflecting a dance to other participants, photograph by Dr Disi, 2023

## Ethical considerations

The Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of the Witwatersrand School of Arts approved the ethics for this research. All the participants signed a consent form agreeing to be part of the research study, and anonymity was guaranteed in the report as pseudonyms were used. Participant identities remain anonymous in this article, other than photographs where participants gave written permission for their photographs to be used.

## Findings

The research aimed to explore how play awakens the inner child in black South African adults, aimed to understand the perception of play within the black African community, and aimed to identify the benefits of consciously integrating play into their lives. Below is a summarised overview of how the research questions were answered.

### *How does play awaken the inner child in adults?*

Play awakens the inner child of adults through various activities such as storytelling, role-play, and games. Participants reported feelings of nostalgia and excitement that reflect the awakening of their inner child. For instance, participants engaged in storytelling and created narratives that allowed them to reconnect with past experiences, revealing repressed emotions and memories. Overall, play was observed to facilitate a return to a more playful, imaginative state, helping participants recognise and express aspects of their childhood selves.

### *How is play understood in the black African community?*

Participants indicated their understanding that play in the black African community is often associated with clear rules, a strong sense of collaboration, and a collective spirit. Participants expressed that play is not only about enjoyment but also about community bonding and shared experiences, which is reflective of the African philosophy of Ubuntu. The rituals introduced in the sessions fostered a sense of belonging and connection among the participants, demonstrating the value the participants place on communal play.

### *How do black African adults benefit from consciously integrating play into their lives?*

Play benefited the participants through their conscious engagement in building emotional intelligence, enhancing social connections, and healing from past traumas. Many participants noted that play provided a safe space for vulnerability, fostering resilience and community support. The participants reported that play helped them reconnect with their inner child and that the reconnection will potentially lead to improved mental well-being and communal relationships.

## **Relevance of the findings**

The findings from the workshops are particularly relevant today as they highlight the importance of play in awakening the inner child of adults, which can foster emotional healing and personal growth. The study demonstrates how culturally relevant play, especially in the context of drama therapy, can



serve as a therapeutic tool to address the impacts of historical trauma and systemic oppression that many people in South African communities face.

Moreover, the findings advocate for a re-conceptualisation of play, not just as a childhood activity but as a vital aspect of adult life that can enhance social relationships and emotional intelligence. This re-conceptualisation of play as vital is increasingly important as people in society today navigate complex emotional landscapes shaped by historical and ongoing societal challenges.



**Figure 5:** Participants in the workshop reflecting while having a play tea party, photograph by Dr Disi, 2023

### *Significance of neuro-dramatic play*

The study highlights the value of neuro-dramatic play in the following ways:

- **Emotional connection:** Neuro-dramatic play fosters a sense of trust and safety, allowing people to explore their emotions and experiences in a contained environment.
- **Embodiment:** Neuro-dramatic play promotes the development of the brain-body connection, which is crucial for emotional regulation and processing.
- **Healing trauma:** Neuro-dramatic play is particularly effective for people who have experienced trauma, neglect, or abuse, as it helps in building self-esteem, identity, and social relationships.

- **Facilitating play:** Neuro-dramatic play provides a structure for play that can awaken the inner child, allowing adults to reconnect with their playful side and explore their experiences.
- **Cultural context:** Neuro-dramatic play can be adapted to fit the cultural backgrounds of participants, making it relevant and effective in diverse settings.

Neuro-dramatic play is significant as it integrates play with therapeutic processes, helping people navigate their emotional landscapes while fostering a sense of community and belonging through shared experiences.

Neuro-dramatic play is beneficial for clients, including those who have experienced trauma, as it encourages independence, self-reliance, and a sense of identity. The process comprises three developmental stages: creative care, therapeutic ritual and storytelling, and theatre of resilience, allowing participants to engage in various forms of play that affirm their identities and build social connections (Jennings, 2011). The literature suggests that neuro-dramatic play facilitates the development of a body-self, allowing people to live in their bodies securely. It also highlights the importance of role-playing as a method for clients to explore their identities and experiences through a dramatic lens (Jennings, 2011).



**Figure 6:** Participant in workshop reflecting a dance performed by other participants, photograph by Dr Disi, 2023

Play (including neuro-dramatic play) must be contextualised within the cultural backgrounds of clients. This sensitivity to cultural context means understanding how various communities perceive and engage in play, particularly in relation to trauma and healing (Trammell, 2023).

### *Key insights of the findings*

- **Awakening through play:** Participants reported a resurgence of joyful memories and a reconnection with their playful selves during the workshops, indicating that play can effectively awaken the inner child.
- **Cultural significance:** Participants reported that the integration of Indigenous games and culturally relevant activities fostered a sense of belonging and community among them, reinforcing the importance of cultural context in therapeutic practices.
- **Challenges and resistance:** Some participants exhibited hesitance and anxiety towards engaging in play, reflecting the impact of past trauma and societal pressures on their willingness to reconnect with their inner child.

The findings suggest that play is a powerful mechanism for awakening the inner child in adults, facilitating emotional expression, fostering community connections, and promoting healing from past traumas. The research emphasises the need for culturally sensitive approaches to play that acknowledge the diverse backgrounds and experiences of participants. The research contributes to the body of knowledge in drama therapy and may inspire further exploration of the role of play in various cultural contexts, reinforcing the notion that play can be a powerful method for self-exploration and healing in diverse communities.

In summary, the study showed that play significantly contributes to the awakening of the inner child, is perceived as a communal activity within the black African context and offers various psychological and social benefits when consciously integrated into adults' lives.

## **Conclusion**

This study delves into the implications of the findings for both the participants and the broader field of drama therapy. It highlights the necessity of creating safe, supportive environments where black South African adults can engage in play without judgement. The therapeutic potential of play as a means to

process trauma and facilitate healing is emphasised, alongside the importance of cultural sensitivity in therapeutic practices.

Play is a vital component in awakening the inner child in adults, serving as a pathway to healing and self-discovery. The findings indicate the benefit of further explorations of play in therapeutic contexts with black South African adults and advocate for the incorporation of culturally relevant practices in drama therapy to better serve the needs of diverse populations.

## Recommendations

Future research should aim to expand on the findings by exploring the long-term impact of play therapy on emotional well-being and resilience in black Indigenous African adults. Additionally, further studies could examine the role of community-based play interventions in fostering social cohesion and cultural identity.

## References

- Bradshaw, J. (2013). *Homecoming: Reclaiming and healing your inner child* (pp. 60-110). Bantam.
- Crimmens, P. (2006). *Drama therapy and storymaking in special education*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Fox, K. (2017). Writing popular anthropology. In *The character of human institutions* (pp. 53-68). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315131207-6>
- Güneş, G. (2023). Personal play identity and the fundamental elements in its development process. *Current Psychology*, 42(9), pp. 7038-7048. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-021-02058-y>
- Jennings, S. (2011). *Healthy attachments and neuro-dramatic-play*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Jennings, S. (2018). Trauma work in play and drama therapy. In B. Huppertz (ed), *Approaches to psychic trauma: Theory and practice* (p. 389). Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Jones, P. (2018). Opening play: Research into play and dramatherapy. In A. Brock, P. Jarvis & Y. Olusoga (eds), *Perspectives on play* (pp. 248-268). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315288574-10>
- Jung, C. (2020). *Healing the inner child*. Chen Xianghui.

- Kaminer, D. & Eagle, G. (2010). *Traumatic stress in South Africa*. Wits University Press. [https://doi.org/10.26530/OAPEN\\_626383](https://doi.org/10.26530/OAPEN_626383)
- Kao, S.M. & O'Neill, C., 1998. *Words into worlds: Learning a second language through process drama*. Praeger.
- Kao, S. M. & O'Neill, C. (1998). *Words into worlds: Learning a second language through process drama*. Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Kekae-Moletsane, M. (2008). Masekitlana: South African traditional play as a therapeutic tool in child psychotherapy. *South African Journal of Psychology*, 38(2), pp. 367-375. <https://doi.org/10.1177/008124630803800208>
- Landy, R. (2009). Role theory and role method of drama therapy. In D.R. Johnson & R. Emunah, *Current approaches in drama therapy* (Vol. 2, pp. 65-88). Charles C Thomas.
- Matoane, M. (2012). Locating context in counselling: The development of indigenous psychology in South Africa. *Psychotherapy and Politics International*, 10(2), pp. 105-115. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ppi.1263>
- Mzileni, P. & Diko, V. (2022). Landlessness as a negation of black children's right to play. In A. Keet, N. Perumal, & V. Goliath (eds), *Critical social work studies in South Africa: Prospects and challenges*. Mandela University Press.
- Ncanana, N., (2024). *The Awakening: Makudlalwe. How play awakens the inner child in black indigenous African adults*. University of the Witwatersrand (master's thesis).
- Nelson, R. (2013). *Practice as research in the arts: Principles, protocols, pedagogies, resistances*. Springer, pp. 18-90. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137282910>
- Proyer, R. T. (2013). The well-being of playful adults: Adult playfulness, subjective well-being, physical well-being, and the pursuit of enjoyable activities. *European Journal of Humour Research*, 1(1), 84–98. <https://doi.org/10.7592/EJHR2013.1.1.proyer>
- Trammell, A. (2023). *Repairing play: A black phenomenology*. MIT Press, pp. 3-17. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/14656.001.0001>
- Wacks Jr, V.Q. (1994). Realising our inner elderchild: Toward the possible Huxman. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 34(4), pp. 78-100. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00221678940344007>
- Weisberg, D.S., Hirsh-Pasek, K., Golinkoff, R.M., Kittredge, A.K. & Klahr, D. (2016). Guided play: Principles and practices. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 25(3), pp. 177-182. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721416645512>
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1967). Play and its role in the mental development of the child. *Soviet Psychology*, 5(3), pp. 6-18. <https://doi.org/10.2753/RPO1061-040505036>