Open Studio as a therapeutic model: Responding to the needs of inner-city Johannesburg children

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Short bios

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Kate Shand is an HPCSA-registered art therapist who qualified amongst the first cohort of students to study art therapy in South Africa. She has facilitated many creative group processes with adults and children over the years. She regularly hosts Making Healing Dolls workshops along with drama therapist Rozanne Myburgh. She runs a pottery teaching studio in Johannesburg. Kate is also a community art counsellor trainer and University of the Witwatersrand research associate, where she is running a project called The Meaning of

ISSN 2960-1614

Home with migrant children. Shand is a part-time programme lecturer at the University of Johannesburg's Department of Art Therapy.

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Dr Hayley Berman is a Group Analyst (IGA) and has practiced and taught as an Art Psychotherapist for 30 years. She is registered with the UKCP, HCPC and the HPCSA professional bodies. She has a PhD in psycho-social studies. She is the Clinical Lead of Woodford Children's Homes. Hayley is the Founding Director of Lefika La Phodiso (www.lefikalaphodiso.co.za) Community Art Counselling Training Institute in Johannesburg South Africa. Hayley works internationally with individuals, groups, and organisations. She is senior lecturer at the University of Johannesburg and the University of Hertfordshire, and affiliated to Goldsmiths University London, and Lasalle University in Singapore.

Abstract

Children from Johannesburg's inner city live in a context of multiple forms of violence, where the capacity of parents to provide safety, containment, and emotional processing is severely compromised. Lefika La Phodiso: Community Art Counselling & Training Institute (Lefika) is located on the edge of the inner city and facilitates an open studio arts-based programme, which aims to responsively meet the psychosocial needs of the children who attend. This research aimed to gain insight into how Lefika's open studio approach may contribute to creating a sustainable city for Johannesburg's inner-city children, with the participation of children as co-researchers in the project. This study used a qualitative approach, a participatory action framework within art therapy principles, and practises the open studio model. Data collection included meaningful discussions of participant experiences. Data analysis and interpretation were done collaboratively with participants using thematic analysis. Children's community experiences highlighted that

Johannesburg's inner city is no place for children, who consequently seek out safe spaces where they can play, be with their friends and have access to caring adults. Within this context, Lefika's open studio is responsive to participants' needs, promoting experiences of psychosocial well-being. Lefika's open studio model is of inherent value to participants, offering them the opportunity to resist the limitations posed by their inner-city environment. The findings confirm the applicability of the open studio model to inner-city children, and the authors advocate for the widespread replicability of the programme for children.

Keywords: Community art counselling, community experience, inner-city children, open studio, participatory action research, safe spaces

Representative images

Figure 1: Community map created by Lefika open studio participants and used in Session 1 to prompt discussion around children's experiences of the inner city, Lefika's archives, n.d.

Figure 2: Lefika La Phodiso represented as a building on the community map created by the Lefika open studio participants in Session 1, Lefika's archives, n.d.

Figure 3: Lefika open studio participants' images regarding experience and needs linked to Session 2, Lefika's archives, n.d.

Figure 4: Signage painted by Lefika open studio participant in response to the question posed in Session 3: Why come to Lefika?, Kate Shand, n.d.

Figure 5: Participant creating a treehouse representing Lefika as home in Session 3, Lefika's archive, n.d.

Preface

Hayley Berman, the founder of Lefika and the visionary behind the open studio programme, initiated the original research on this article and is therefore included as one of the co-authors. Dr Berman's insights and expertise were instrumental in shaping the study and ensuring its successful completion. The authors would also like to acknowledge the contribution of Sanchia Bignell, the research student who completed the data collection, transcriptions, preliminary analyses and draft write-up of the data, as well as the community art counsellors, particularly Humbu Nsenga, who assisted with data collection during the open studio sessions.

Introduction

Johannesburg is the largest and most rapidly growing city in South Africa. It is a city of mostly migrant people looking for a place to live and who hope to create a better future for their families (Barbarin & Richter, 2001). Inequality,

poverty, and deprivation are pervasive in the inner city fuelling food insecurity, social exclusion, unemployment, economic exploitation, crime and violence in a "destructive cycle of impoverishment" (Crush, 2005, p. 81). Johannesburg is reportedly one of the most dangerous cities in the world, specifically in relation to social contact crimes, such as murder, assault, robbery, and sexual assault (South African Police Service Annual Report, 2022), resulting in the loss of connection and trust within its communities.

Children within inner-city Johannesburg are subject to harsh economic and social circumstances that rob them of their innocence and deprive them of their basic needs (Samson, Morenoff & Gannon-Rowley, 2002). According to one study, "children in inner-city communities experience the same amount of stressful events in one year as other children experience over their entire lifetime" (Gorman-Smith, Tolan & Henry, 2004, p. 140). Inner-city children and youth are at a greater risk for maladjustment, behaviour issues, and poor developmental outcomes (Kaminer & Eagle, 2012; Ozer, Lavi, Douglas & Wolf, 2017; Shields, Nadasen & Pierce, 2008). However, many children living in these inner-city communities show significant resilience to the adversity surrounding them. This resilience is evident in their active resistance to the risk factors that draw many to substance use, crime, and other high-risk behaviours.

Located in inner-city Johannesburg, Lefika La Phodiso (Lefika)[1] recognises the agency of children who attend the centre daily, actively seeking out safe spaces. This inherent strength within the inner-city community has been identified as a key source of intervention in rebuilding the community structure. The community has ultimately led to the establishment of Lefika's open studio by Hayley Berman (Berman, 2018).

Lefika La Phodiso's open studio model

Lefika's vision is to create safe spaces where creativity and containment engender psychosocial transformation (Berman, 2016). In psychoanalytic theory, the term safe spaces is used to describe external and internal structures that provide feelings of safety and a 'good enough' space that enables children to thrive and grow (Atlas, 2008). By creating safe spaces,

1 Lefika is an art therapy informed non-profit company situated on the border of inner-city Johannesburg. The organisation's core functions are to provide training in community art counsellors and offer arts-based therapeutically informed after-school programmes for children from the surrounding communities.

Lefika aims to provide symbolic extended family structures that can unlock inner strength, reduce the effects of violence and trauma, create stronger societal connections, and, in due course, create a safer society. These broad community-level outcomes are well supported in art therapy and open studio models (Block, Harris & Laing 2005; Ierardi, Bottos & O'Brein, 2007; Sutherland, Waldman & Collins, 2010; Wallace-DiGarbo & Hill, 2006; Vick, 1999), and play a crucial role in addressing some of the social and economic challenges that make the inner city an unsustainable place for children.

Set up in August 2014, Lefika's open studio groups offer an integrated therapeutic after-school space for inner-city children in Johannesburg. At the time of this research, the group sessions took place three afternoons a week with at-risk youth between the ages of four and 16. A typical open studio session starts with a snack, check-in, review of the group contract to establish safety, and then the demonstration of the art activity for that session. The next part of the session involves the creative process, during which community art counsellors facilitate the skill, witness the creation, counsel where appropriate, and keep time. The session concludes with the group congregating around the images and sharing their reflections and experiences.

The model relies on trained community art counsellors[2] (CACs) to create and maintain a therapeutic group atmosphere of trust and safety (Visconti, 2018). In Lefika's open studio, the communication of experiences occurs through the language of the creative process (Berman, 2011) and utilises actual objects as resources (Bollas, 1992, as cited in Berman, 2010). This creative process provides for the containment of emotions and the promotion of thought in the child while also promoting the processing and organising of confusing experiences (Berman, 2005). The model prioritises children's needs for safety and belonging and the need to address trauma as prerequisites for a child-friendly city that fosters inner-city children's capacity to reach their potential and become contributing community members.

According to Sapsağlam and Eryilmaz (2024, p. 2), the concept of a child-friendly city emerged from "the need for cities to become safer, healthier, and more liveable spaces for children while supporting their social and

2 Lefika offers a Health and Welfare SETA accredited programme to train community art counsellors. This course was developed by Lefika's founder, Dr Hayley Berman – art psychotherapist, former senior lecturer at Hertfordshire University and a visiting lecturer at the University of Johannesburg – in collaboration and input from various other stakeholders and continues to be offered by Lefika over two decades later.

cognitive development". Using an art therapy approach, Lefika's open studio addresses this need by providing a safe, accessible, supportive environment that promotes psychosocial well-being, resilience, and a sense of belonging while addressing trauma and building social and emotional skills. Central to the concept of a child-friendly city, and subsequently underpinning this research, is the view that children should have opportunities for meaningful participation in matters affecting their own lives and that their perceptions and experiences are of particular relevance in a study exploring children's accounts of their community and their experiences of Lefika's open studio.

With the participation of children as co-researchers in the project, this research aims to gain insight into how Lefika's open studio may contribute to creating a child-friendly city for children residing in inner-city Johannesburg. The open studio incorporates creative media and community mapping to explore their experiences, thoughts, and ideas on what constitutes a child-friendly city, as well as their perceptions of whether Lefika's open studio may contribute to this or not.

Methods

Study design

This study contributes to developing co-produced research where "children constitute themselves as autonomous, responsible, and choosing subjects" (Brown & Dixon, 2020, as cited in Bragg, 2007, p. 346). A participatory action research (PAR) approach is well-suited to the methodological aims of acknowledging children as active agents who have the capacity to make choices about what they do and to express their own valid and worthy ideas and perspectives about their community and experiences (Luttrell & Chalfen, 2010; James & James, 2012; Överlien & Holt, 2021). The PAR approach was applied to promote meaningful opportunities for children to share their perspectives of their communities while recognising that the communities in question are their homes and while acknowledging their agency as young people who grow up there (Thompson & Kent, 2014). The PAR approach was followed to the extent that participants provided guidance around methodological decisions in a preceding session and contributed to the interpretation of the data. This approach influenced subsequent decisions around the implementation of Lefika's open studio. However, the influence

was limited because the overarching research aim was predetermined. The researchers completed the final analysis and reporting of the data. Qualitative phenomenological methods provided a framework for understanding the children's accounts of their community and experiences of Lefika's open studio (Langdridge, 2007; Ormston, Spencer, Barnard & Snape, 2014; Smeyers & Verhesschen, 2001).

Intervention description

The research was conducted at Lefika, and over three (of the regular and ongoing) open studio sessions were held with the same children as participants. The researcher and facilitators transparently discussed the research with the participants during a preceding open studio session. The facilitators were briefed beforehand, ensuring they were equipped to answer any questions arising in their group. These facilitators[3] included Lefika-trained CACs, volunteers, and the researcher. The participants were divided into two groups following the same protocol.

During data collection, the typical Lefika open studio routine was closely adhered to using community maps and participants' art as prompts for the discussions and reflections. For the research, Session 1 included accounts of community experience using the community maps prompt. Session 2 focused on creating images that reflect what children perceive their needs to be. Session 3 focused on creating an image depicting why participants attended the Lefika open studio.

With consent from the group, the sessions were voice recorded and transcribed. Data was collected through the artworks created and the discussions held during the session. The researcher then transcribed the collected data after each day and briefly analysed for themes to recap to the children before the next week's session. This recap enabled the researcher to check for understanding and clarify misunderstandings with the children. In this process, the preliminary findings were continually reported to the children for their feedback and input, ensuring their authentic voices were captured. The final report was produced, and the children will present the findings to the community.

3 From this point on, the term 'facilitator' will be used to refer to the CACs, volunteers and researchers who assisted with the facilitation of the sessions.

The only deviation from the regular session routine was the addition of the presentation of themes in Sessions 2 and 3. These themes were derived from a preliminary analysis of discussions in the previous session and presented to participants for their input and interpretation. This process allowed the preliminary findings to be reported back to participants, ensuring that their authentic voices were captured according to PAR protocol. The resulting data was analysed for themes focusing on describing the lived experiences of the attending children.

After each day, the facilitators had a debrief session in which they discussed their groups with each other. Photographs were taken of each child's image after the session and then saved using their pseudonym.

Participants

Purposive and convenience sampling yielded a sample of 30 participants (20 female children, 10 male children) over the three days the research was conducted. Participants ranged in age from eight to 12, live in inner-city Johannesburg, and come from low socio-economic backgrounds. All participants are regular attendees of Lefika programmes.

Measurements and materials

The images created during the sessions facilitated adult-child communications (Brown & Dixon, 2019). Following Överlien and Holt's (2021) recommendations, specific questions were integrated into the group discussion and aimed to prompt participants to share their narratives sensitively. Visual and creative tools, such as community mapping and artworks created by the participants, were used to support the discussions. The participants' art acted as an accessible and familiar medium to communicate experiences and facilitate dialogue, from which key themes were extracted (Morrow, 2008; Christensen & James, 2008; Clark, 2005; Goldman-Segall, 2014; Plowman & Stevenson, 2012, as cited in Lipponen, Rajala, Hilppö & Paananen, 2015).

Procedure and ethics

This research, which encouraged collaboration and was intrinsically therapeutic, was closely connected to ongoing open studio developments and visual research methods involving the participants. The research

processes were reviewed with the participants, and their input regarding the execution of the project was noted. A facilitator fluent in the languages of the participants assisted in the process of transcriptions and interpretation of dialogues that did not take place in English.

Given that the research risked arousing memories of violence and other sensitive topics with a traditionally considered 'vulnerable population', ethical considerations were paramount. The research was granted ethics approval from the University of Johannesburg's Human Ethics Committee (REC-010039-2021). In accordance with Lefika's ethical protocols, guardian consent and assent forms were distributed to potential participants prior to the commencement of the research. Important considerations were given to the power relations of the child-adult researcher relationship (Myall, 2000, as cited in Greene & Hill, 2005), which led to a greater emphasis on the inclusion of the participants in the research process (where possible). These considerations were extended to the CACs, bearing in mind the limitation posed by participants having to share their perceptions and experiences of the programme with the facilitators of that programme. When this was discussed with the participants during the preceding session, the decision was jointly taken to continue the process with the CACs as session facilitators, as the participants reported feeling comfortable sharing their experiences openly with the CACs.

Pseudonyms have been used to ensure anonymity in order to protect the privacy and safety of the participants (Babbie, 2013). With consent, photographs of the images created after each session were taken and saved using pseudonyms. The data collection procedure did risk distressing the participants by asking them to provide detailed accounts of community experiences. A mitigating factor to this risk was that sessions were held within the therapeutic space by psychodynamically trained CACs, who are equipped and trained to contain potentially distressing emotions. Furthermore, participants were offered free counselling through a partnership with the Johannesburg Parent and Child Counselling Centre in the same building.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis as a qualitative method was utilised to ensure that the themes were "concerned primarily with lived experience" (Langdridge, 2007, p. 85). The focus was not to explain the participants' experiences but

rather to provide a rich description of the first-person subjective accounts of the community, Lefika's open studio, and the personal meaning given to these experiences by the participants (Langdridge, 2007). A preliminary thematic analysis was completed after each session, and the themes were presented to participants for discussion, refinement, and interpretation at the following session.

Results

This results section presents the overarching themes that arose in relation to each of the three sessions conducted with the participants. Session 1 utilised community mapping to explore participants' experiences of inner-city Johannesburg, and the resulting theme was that "Johannesburg's inner city is no place for children". Session 2 focussed on creating images that depicted what participants perceived their needs to be, and the theme of "a child-friendly city has safe spaces" arose. Session 3 included the creation of images relating to why children attend Lefika open studio, and this resulted in the final theme that "Lefika's open studio model is responsive to the needs of children". These themes are presented briefly below, with some examples of the related data.

Johannesburg's inner city is no place for children

In the first session, the assortment of images relating to the community mapping activities prompted narratives detailing first-hand and second-hand accounts of violence and abuse in a variety of contexts, including public spaces, school, and home. The narratives of violence in public spaces included witnessing men physically fighting, a woman being pushed out of a building window, community vigilantism (stoning), child abduction, gangsterism, and rape (being the most frequent).

> I've seen two North Africans in a car that is black, they caught two girls, they said come and take the R50, and then those ones they said okay I'm coming, and then they said no not R50 only, 150 and then those girls came and then they said thank you and they throw them in and then they raped, they raped, they raped and then they throw them outside. We saw their bodies in front of our school (Participant V, Session 1).

It was disturbing to find that most experiences of violence in public spaces occurred either around these participants' homes or schools or on their journey between home and school.

> […] I'm learning on [name of school], so when I'm coming there, there was a, there was a fight […] I was going home so ma'am we are taking a transport behind the fast food […] So I saw another lady fighting another man […] Ja I was walking, he was here. Then I was walking and I saw the girl down here. Then there came blood here […] She falled down the window, falled down, the man did push her […] (Participant J, Session 1).

In the above instance and the below instance, many of the participants' experiences highlighted the gendered nature of violence that is pervasive in South Africa.

> Ma'am that girl was naked, that girl was naked running. Because they were they were wanting to rape her, ja, ja. She was running into her flat […] (Participant LI, Session 1).

The majority of participants had experienced at least one instance of violence in a public space, with a small number having experienced it on multiple occasions. These experiences extended to instances of being chased and beaten by security guards after playing in public spaces that were only discovered to be out of bounds afterwards:

> I play at where my flat, but we run around my flat, she knows, and […] The security chases us […] (Participant AV, Session 1).

This particular narrative raises the question of whether inner-city children would experience this extent of reported violence if they have access to more parks, sports facilities and recreational services, where responsible adults are in attendance to care for and protect children. Unfortunately, schools, which are mandated to provide a safe learning environment with caring adults, were also experienced as sites of abuse by all of the participants. As described by two participants:

> *The teachers sometimes, some days they are very mean to us* […] *By beating us and punishing us* (Participant Z, Session 1); and

> And here [pointing at art work] I'm sad because they are beating me at school[…] When she's [teacher] beating us with a belt, and […] jumping […] (Participant N, Session 1)

In addition to physical abuse, these young people also experienced emotional abuse by teachers and peers at their schools. The above responses show evidence of how these participants' experiences of abuse at school made them feel either angry or sad. Their experiences of violence at school were different from their experiences of abuse at home, which were also common, and made them feel confused:

> I'm confused that my family love me and support me but they still beat me (Participant N, Session 1).

The participants' narratives emphasise how pervasive violence and abuse are in their daily lives. It occurs across multiple contexts frequented by children and at the hands of peers and adults, some of whom are mandated with the care and protection of children:

> Yes, ma'am, because ma'am, ma'am when at your house they are abusing you, then when you go out the house they are abusing you again (Participant AB, Session 1).

The widespread experiences of violence and abuse that these participants encounter in their daily lives are consistent with prior findings of the polymorphic violence found across South Africa (Seedat, Van Niekerk, Jewkes, Suffla & Ratele, 2009). The findings demonstrate how these participants' exposure to violence is being internalised, which puts them at increased risk for mental health problems such as substance abuse, violence, and aggressive and anti-social behaviour (Mathews & Benvenuti, 2014). Thus, therapeutic interventions that help process the emotions and experiences of children who live in these environments have become a vital necessity. Where there are no interventions, the literature describes poor outcomes in developmental gains, educational achievements, self-esteem, emotional security, as well as cognitive and behavioural problems (Bateman, 2015; Wise & Meyers, 1988, as cited in Mosavel, Ahmed, Ports & Simon, 2015).

A child-friendly city has safe spaces

Shared public spaces are often promoted as a key to building a sense of community, which means strengthening meaningful interpersonal relationships and creating a sense of belonging. The core of how cities work is the public places where people come together. During the community mapping session, the participants' discussions clearly pointed to the need for community spaces centred on where children go to be with their friends. A second aspect raised in the discussions was the aspect of violence. Unfortunately, the narratives show that many of the open spaces where the participants play are unsafe:

> Yes, when the Bad Boys security[4] arrive[…] They beat us with a key holder […] They didn't want to see us outside […] (Participant JO, Session 1).

It also appears that sometimes the building where a child lives is not even a safe place to play with friends. The following experiences describe this lack of safety:

> *The flat, boring joh. Somebody play by the passages. Then security just come with a sjambok* [heavy leather whip] *and start beating up people* (Participant CA, Session 1).

A notable feature of the participants' narratives is that the only adults mentioned are adults who are aggressive, violent, or involved in crime and substance misuse. A lack of supervision by caregivers is a common feature of children's inner-city life (Ruiz-Casares, Nazif-Muñoz, Iwo & Oulhote, 2018). In the context of inner-city Johannesburg, which consists largely of low-income families where parents work long hours in low-paying jobs and cannot afford child care, children are commonly found to be unsupervised when they are not in school. Without mindful supervision, children are at greater risk of unsafe play, for example:

> We were just playing the cricket that you light it [firecracker], and then that dad I shiya goona [hit] I ran, I ran, he catch Mathew, he hit him [slap sounds] […] catch James [slap sounds], ah, he catch me with the jewellery gha. Joo joh (Participant LI, Session 1).

4 Bad Boyz Security is a security company operating in Hillbrow, Johannesburg.

Safe spaces are spaces where children feel secure enough to explore, take risks, and learn in an environment free from potential harm, judgement, and criticism (Djohari, Pyndiah & Arnone, 2018). Mindful adults help to create these spaces for children, as illustrated in this response about how, even at school, participants wish that they had an adult watching over them during playtime:

> Why don't they send some of the teachers at the playground? [...] Because people are beating each other, hitting each other, they are telling each other to not tell the teachers about the problem (Participant AI, Session 1).

In the discussion, it became clear that the absence of a sense of safety (as a result of widespread experiences of violence and a lack of safe spaces to play) negatively impacts participants' mental health. There were several comments in the discussions about this: *"I'm scared* […]" (Participant LI, Session 1); *"*[…] *I am lonely* […]" (Participant AI); "*Ma'am, I want to run away and forget"* (Participant MA, Session 1); "*Sad, I did want to go, I did want to go outside and have a fresh air"* (Participant NA, Session 1).

Participants' protests about the violence, lack of safe places, and absence of caring adults is unmistakably clear in their descriptions of where and how they play in the city, despite the many dangers that exist. The participants showed considerable resistance to the default position of being "*scared", "lonely", "sad",* and *"bored"* in their pursuit of safe spaces where they could be a part of a community and spend time with their friends. This resistance is what brought many of the participants to Lefika.

Lefika's open studio model is responsive to the needs of inner-city children

During Session 2, participants created artworks depicting experiences of safety and fun. The artworks often referred to Lefika in this context. During Session 3, the participants were asked to create their safe space, and they created homes – linking Lefika to the home that they had created, as suggested below:

> Participant CA: "This is a tree house, where I can be safe'
>
> Facilitator: "Okay wow, you have a little door there. [Reads sign on door] "Welcome to Lefika'.

Within the community environment, the participants described how they often feel lonely and bored because friends are prohibited from visiting and/or playing in the buildings where they live. This experience in the community was contrasted when the participants expressed that one of the special features of Lefika's open studio is that they get to spend time with friends, as described below:

> Participant AB: Open studio is special because most people are there, open studio, and I always see many people coming here.
>
> Facilitator: Okay so you see a lot of, a lot of your friends come here.
>
> Participant AB:"Yes.

Not only did the artworks of the participants depict Lefika as a safe space where they can connect with friends, but the related discussion also highlighted that they felt cared for by the facilitators:

> Participant MA: Ma'am I feel happy because you are, many teachers [facilitators] are kind here.
>
> Participant JO: You are the only people that are kind here in Jozi [Johannesburg nickname].

A clear example of the participants' positive experiences of the facilitators was expressed in the following discussion:

> Participant MA: Ma'am can you please be my play play mother.
>
> Participant UN: Also me ma'am. Also me ma'am.
>
> Participant CH: I love Miss 'Humbu' (facilitator) she's like my mom.

The participants' perceptions of the facilitators as parental figures are significant, suggesting that even though they may not receive support at home, the participants have secured a place where they can receive support and have their emotions contained. In order to escape the violence, they have found an "island of safety" (du Plessis, Kaminer, Hardy & Benjamin, 2015, p. 87). Lefika responds to the participants' needs for parental warmth and care through the caring facilitators, whom the participants perceive as kind, mother-like figures. The facilitators provide the participants with a good-enough experience that they can internalise, which will enable them to seek

out and identify other good-enough experiences when they encounter them in the real world (Nicolaides, 2016).

In addition, the participants tend to seek affirmation or have their work acknowledged by the facilitators, and this is indicative of their desire to be witnessed, heard, and validated. For example:

> Ma'am, mama you see my book? It's beautiful neh? (Participant VI, Session 3).

This desire to be witnessed was particularly evident during the discussion about the participants' community experiences. Many participants voiced that their parents often dismiss or disbelieve their accounts of their experiences. This dismissal leaves them feeling unheard and un-witnessed. At Lefika, the sense of safety enables communication and validation, as well as the subsequent self-growth (Moon, 2000, as cited in Green, 2012).

In addition to responding to the need for emotional containment and support, Lefika responds to the need for safe leisure activities. The accounts by the participants of their community indicated a lack of and need for safe leisure activities. For example:

> It makes me feel comfortable [being at Lefika]. Because I have teachers, friends. I love teachers because they teach me how to draw and write (Participant AV, Session 3).

The participants value Lefika's open studio, offering them a space to have an enjoyable alternative experience from their daily lives.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal the multifaceted challenges faced by inner-city children living in poverty and violence. Their experiences reflect that the inner city of Johannesburg is no place for children and that their resulting need for safety and belonging demands therapeutic interventions that adapt to the complex trauma that is pervasive in their lives. In this context, Lefika La Phodiso's open studio approach emerges as a source of responsive support.

Lefika La Phodiso's open studio offers an adaptable approach within challenging contexts. Its core principle of accessibility dismantles barriers to care, reaching children who might otherwise fall through the cracks of traditional support systems. Lefika's emphasis on individual exploration and

peer interaction fosters a sense of community and belonging, reminding children that they are not alone in their journeys. As they witness each other's artistic expressions, a tapestry of shared experiences is woven, fostering empathy and resilience within the safe haven of the open studio. By providing a platform for unspoken narratives to be heard and understood, it has the potential to provide vulnerable children with the opportunity to rewrite their own stories.

Once at Lefika, the open studio provides a safe space for children to express their lived realities on their own terms. The non-verbal nature of community art counselling addresses the limitations of traditional talk therapy, particularly for children struggling to articulate their trauma. Through artistic expression, they can externalise their complex emotions and experiences in a safe and non-threatening way. The open studio fosters a sense of community and belonging. Shared artistic exploration encourages empathy and understanding between children facing similar challenges. This peer support network transcends individual struggles, creating a collective space for healing and resilience. This collective space is particularly impactful for children navigating isolation and a sense of disconnection within their broader communities. The open studio becomes a safe haven where they can find solace and strength in shared experiences.

When children actively engage in creating their own understanding, they gain self-assurance, grasp their capacity for agency, and tap into their own creativity (Shand, 2023a). While acknowledging the pervasiveness of violence, the Lefika open studio model encourages us to move beyond the simplistic label of 'victim'. By recognising the agency embedded within these children's narratives, we can empower them to heal, find solace in the community, and advocate for systemic change. In a city devoid of safe public space, the safe space provided by Lefika's open studio gives these children the opportunity to experience connection, meaning, and agency, as well as, most importantly, a sense of hope.

Limitations

The limitations of the research include a possible response bias as one-time participants cannot be asked why they did not return, which may be because the programme did not meet their needs. It is also important to bear in mind that the knowledge of the participant's experiences was constructed

in conversations between them and the facilitators, based on the image created by the participants in response to a provided prompt (Waller & Bitou, 2011). As a result, the findings are inevitably inferential, partial, and relational, dependent on multilevel interpretations and co-constructed both temporarily and culturally (Greene & Hill, 2005; Luttrell & Chalfen, 2010). Along similar lines, another limitation is that of reliability. Social demands may have influenced the exchanges between the researcher and participants, who may have responded in ways they believed to be pleasing to the facilitators rather than truthful (Greene & Hill, 2005). Finally, there are limitations to the degree to which the research was participant-led. Greene and Hill (2005) and Lomax (2012) point out that regardless of all possible attempts to achieve true PAR, research will always be fundamentally constrained to existing research agendas.

Although there are benefits to Lefika's model, it is crucial to acknowledge the complexities inherent in such open-ended approaches. The lack of structured interventions might not be suitable for all children, particularly those requiring more intensive therapeutic support. Additionally, the potential for re-traumatisation through peer interactions needs careful consideration and requires skilled facilitation from Lefika's community art counsellors. While acknowledging the need for ongoing research and refinement, the model undoubtedly holds immense promise for supporting vulnerable children in navigating the harsh realities they face.

Conclusion

For children living in contexts of poverty and violence, the concept of 'home' often loses its inherent promise of a sanctuary and a secure base. The findings from the study highlight the daily realities that these children and their families face, namely economic hardship, food insecurity, and the omnipresent threat of physical or emotional harm. We may not easily escape our societal restraints, but within them, we can make meaning that is of value to us in communities of practice if we are given the right context (Stein, 2008). In these bleak landscapes, the need for safe spaces transcends mere physical refuge. The safe spaces become emotional havens where fear can be replaced by solace, hope, and self-expression. Lefika's open studio, with its safe container, provided the context in which the children could explore, reflect, connect, and create their own images. Herman (2015, p. 55) notes,

"Traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning". However, when the setting is safe and supportive, group participants find the confidence to express themselves, even if it means risking mistakes (Shand, 2023b).

Lefika's open studio model is 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. The model is group-based, short-term, trauma-informed, and supports emotional well-being.

This article explored the community experiences and needs of children from inner-city Johannesburg and their experiences of Lefika's open studio. It is evident from the findings that pervasive violence makes the inner city an unsafe place for children. The participants' narratives highlighted that inner-city children actively seek safe spaces to play and to be with friends. Lefika's open studio responds to this need and facilitates containment and development of internal resources in ways that help inner-city Johannesburg children process their experiences.

Acknowledgements

A special thank you to the participants, whose willingness to share their thoughts about the research and experiences of Lefika and their community has made this research possible.

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Declaration of interest statement

There are no conflicts of interest.

Funding details

This research was not funded.