


# Implications for drama therapy in working single-mother households in the South African context

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## Bio

Nonkululeko Vilakazi is a Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA), Health and Care Professions Council (UK), and British Association of Drama Therapy-registered drama and movement psychotherapist. Vilakazi is particularly interested in African-informed and cross-cultural approaches to psychotherapy to ensure cultural diversity and inclusion within mental health services. With relevant experience in both the South African and British contexts, Vilakazi designed a module on African perspectives of drama and movement therapy. Vilakazi's research interests are in multicultural bereavement rituals and their psychoanalytical significance in grief-informed drama movement therapy, as well as trauma-informed drama movement therapy, with a particular focus on ethnographic and hermeneutic phenomenological studies on pain and rage. Apart from her roles as a therapist in private practice, she is a Dance in Education lecturer and a Master of Drama Therapy lecturer at the University of the Witwatersrand. Vilakazi is a founding member and managing director of iNkululeko Ye Africa (iNYA) Therapies, a not-for-profit arts psychotherapy and psychosocial organisation which offers school-based mental health interventions and supports communities in underserved areas.

## Abstract

Black women in South Africa are disproportionately represented in low-paying, insecure occupations, with a significant proportion being single mothers raising children in the absence of fathers (Sonubi, 2010). Despite the prevalence of single-mother-headed households, there is limited research exploring the developmental effects of father absence on children in this context, particularly regarding accessible therapeutic interventions. This study investigates the potential of drama therapy as a psychosocial intervention for children affected by paternal absence, focusing on the capacity of drama therapy to support identity formation, emotional regulation, and social development. Drawing on Western developmental psychoanalytic theory, attachment frameworks, and relational perspectives, the research integrates literature on child development with clinical applications of drama therapy, including role play, storytelling, and projective play techniques. Through illustrative case vignettes of children aged 10–17 years from a Johannesburg school, the study demonstrates how drama therapy facilitates the expression of unconscious and conscious experiences, enhances agency, and provides corrective relational experiences. Findings suggest that drama therapy is a culturally adaptable and developmentally appropriate intervention for mitigating psychological, behavioural, cognitive, and relational challenges associated with father absence in single-mother households.

**Keywords:** Drama therapy, single mothers, absent fathers, children, development

## Introduction

### *Introduction and background*

This article explores the psychosocial impact of father absence on children raised in Black single-mother households within the South African context, and considers the implications of these dynamics for drama therapy practice. Drawing upon both lived and professional experience, the article situates questions of parental absence, emotional regulation, and relational presence within the broader socio-economic realities of working single mothers. The inquiry positions embodiment, relational attunement, and performative

expression as central concepts in understanding how drama therapy might engage with these familial constellations.

### *Personal context*

As a single mother of two daughters, I have witnessed the nuanced emotional experiences that accompany paternal absence. My children's awareness of their father's absence often surfaced following his sporadic and unpredictable visits. These encounters tended to evoke prolonged emotional distress, communicative withdrawal, and indirect attempts at sense-making through identification with fictional characters who experienced similar loss. This prompted a personal and professional questioning: *Do children in single-mother households experience a form of ambiguous loss that remains unacknowledged yet deeply felt?*

I also became aware of the emotional costs of work-family conflict among single mothers in low-income employment. Extended working hours and economic pressures can constrain emotional availability, potentially shaping a child's attachment experience. In my own family and in my community-based work, I observed that many boys in single-mother households adopt protective or caregiving roles toward their mothers, an early assumption of responsibility that suggests both resilience and premature maturity.

### *The COVID-19 context and virtual presence*

These reflections deepened during the COVID-19 pandemic. South Africa's 2020 lockdown regulations confined individuals to their homes, disrupting visitation patterns and further destabilising contact with non-resident fathers. Yet, this period also accelerated the use of digital communication platforms, introducing new modes of virtual connection. This shift led me to consider whether virtual presence might serve as an alternative form of parental engagement when physical proximity is impossible.

Shortly after beginning my drama therapy training in South Africa, I received a scholarship to pursue postgraduate study in the United Kingdom. This educational migration transformed me, paradoxically, into an absent mother, coinciding with the physical unavailability of my children's father. Yet, consistent virtual communication fostered an emotional closeness that had been more difficult to sustain when I was physically present but

emotionally depleted. This experience challenged conventional notions of presence, suggesting that emotional attunement can be maintained, or even deepened, across spatial divides.

### *Migration and feminised labour*

This personal shift illuminated a broader structural phenomenon: the feminisation of labour and poverty in South Africa. Many Black single mothers remain concentrated in low-wage, time-intensive employment with limited opportunities for advancement. Educational migration, what Riaño and Piguet (2016) term “degree mobility”, represents both an interruption of this economic cycle and an act of agency. My relocation to the United Kingdom for study reconfigured absence from a condition of constraint to one of transformation.

Reflecting on this, I recognised a paradox: while physically present in South Africa, my extensive work hours rendered me emotionally unavailable. In contrast, my physical absence in the United Kingdom was accompanied by greater emotional availability through sustained online communication. Drawing on Porter’s (2014) notion of multimodal presence, I began to conceptualise parenting as a form of attuned relationality that transcends physical space. Within single-mother households, this invites a re-evaluation of how time, space, and embodiment intersect to shape emotional connection.

### *Emotional regulation and communal support*

Initially, I feared that my absence would trigger emotional dysregulation in my daughters or exacerbate unresolved grief over their father’s absence. However, our ongoing dialogue revealed that they had internalised coping strategies rooted in earlier experiences of co-regulation and emotional scaffolding. The involvement of extended family members, a reflection of the communal model of child-rearing characteristic of many African families, further supported their resilience. This relational ecology provided emotional continuity and containment, aligning with systemic and community-oriented understandings of psychological well-being.

## *Professional reflections*

My previous work as an Applied Theatre facilitator in Gauteng townships further contextualised these observations. In mixed-gender facilitation settings, I noted that children from single-mother households often displayed distinct communication patterns. Younger children, regardless of gender, tended to seek emotional safety from female facilitators, while older boys alternated between female facilitators for personal matters and male facilitators for instrumental ones. These dynamics suggest that children's relational preferences and interpersonal styles are shaped by the gendered configurations of their home environments. Such findings resonate with Erikson's psychosocial theory (Naidoo, Townsend & Carolissen, 2016), which emphasises the social foundations of identity development.

These insights underscore drama therapy's potential as a relational space where children can symbolically explore and reorganise experiences of attachment disruption. The aesthetic distance of the dramatic frame allows for both projection and reflection, enabling participants to reauthor narratives of absence and belonging.

## *Artistic inquiry: Walking as metaphor*

Earlier performance-based research deepened these conceptual reflections. In a 2020 solo performance, I explored walking as a metaphor for paternal absence, inspired by Francis Alÿs's notion that walking can unfold socio-political and psychological narratives (Alÿs, cited in Schneider, 2012). The motif of walking became a means to interrogate how fathers "walk away", how movement itself becomes an act of communication and rupture. Initially, I sought to understand the embodied experience of the absent father; over time, my inquiry shifted toward the embodied experience of the one who remains.

This focus aligned with somatic and trauma-informed perspectives that view the body as a repository of implicit memory (Rothschild, 2000). The physical stillness and emotional constriction I experienced as a remaining parent mirrored what I came to understand as an embodied immobility, a freeze response to loss. Through repetitive, performative actions, I began to process these sensations, linking them to broader questions of relational rupture, care, and adaptation.

My subsequent migration reframed these insights: I became both the 'absent' and the 'remaining' parent. This dual position highlighted the complexities of mobility, attachment, and caregiving in transnational families. For drama therapy, such experiences invite reflection on how creative and embodied processes can support meaning-making within fractured familial systems (Bird, 2023).

Drama therapy offers a unique modality for exploring ambiguous loss, embodied absence, and emotional regulation through symbolic action (Bradley, 2024; Johnson & Emunah, 2020). Within South African single-mother households, these approaches can create spaces where mothers and children articulate loss, reconnect with resilience, and reconstruct relational presence through play, movement, and performance. By integrating personal narrative, embodied inquiry, and socio-cultural analysis, this article positions drama therapy as a practice capable of addressing both the affective and structural dimensions of parental absence. The article calls for a re-imagining of presence, not as mere proximity, but as an attuned, multimodal, and relational act that can sustain connection even across distance.

### *Context and rationale for the study*

In postcolonial South Africa, the intersection of gender, labour, and family structure continues to shape the experiences of many Black women. Sonubi (2010) identifies a *feminisation* of labour, noting that Black women occupy 41% of elementary, low-paying, and insecure jobs while earning less than men in similar positions. They also remain the lowest-paid group across occupational levels compared with white women, white men, and Black men. Within this 41%, a significant proportion are single mothers who assume full financial responsibility for both children and extended family.

This socio-economic reality affects family functioning and child development. Manyatshe (2013) observes that in many ethnic single-mothered families, the silence surrounding the absent father prevents children from forming coherent meanings about his absence. Such unspoken experiences can lead to emotional confusion and assumptions that strain the mother-child bond. Even when relationships are strong, cultural and institutional reminders reinforce the absence within the family system, such as school forms requesting both parents' details. Manyatshe (2013) also highlights the stigma faced by Black single mothers, often rooted in

patriarchal cultural traditions and monotheistic beliefs. This stigma may intensify the mother's emotional and social burden as she navigates both caregiving and breadwinning roles. The resulting exhaustion and time scarcity can compromise emotional attunement, with implications for the child's sense of safety and belonging.

This study, therefore, explores how father absence within single-mother households shapes children's developmental and relational well-being. It focuses on children of Black single mothers working in low-paying occupations, where both financial insecurity and limited time may constrain emotional availability. Grounded in psychoanalytic developmental theory, the study assumes that early relational contexts, the primary caregivers, are foundational to personality formation and socialisation (Graham, 2016). Disruptions in these bonds can impair self-concept and social comparison, leading to developmental vulnerability. Within this frame, father absence is understood not merely as a social condition but as a psychological rupture that influences identity formation and attachment processes.

By engaging both developmental literature and drama therapy theory, the study investigates whether drama therapy might help mitigate the psychosocial effects of paternal absence. Through symbolic play, enactment, and role play, drama therapy offers a relational space where children can explore loss, re-imagine presence, and build emotional resilience (Frydman et al., 2022; Landy, 1992).

### *Content and contribution to the field*

This article proposes that integrating psychoanalytic developmental concepts with drama therapy's embodied and relational practices can deepen understanding of how children in single-mother households process father absence. The study positions father absence as an ambiguous loss, a condition of unresolved presence and absence (Boss, 2006), and argues that drama therapy provides a uniquely responsive modality for working within this ambiguity.

Although extensive research links paternal absence to educational and behavioural challenges (Freeks, 2017), few studies explore these experiences through creative arts therapies. There is a distinct lack of drama therapy literature addressing Black South African single-mother households, where economic precarity and cultural stigma intersect.

Drawing on Kail et al. (2019), the absent father is seen as “physically missing yet psychologically present”, sustaining emotional ambivalence that can distort identity development. Within this emotional tension, drama therapy’s embodied symbolisation offers potential for meaning-making and healing. Through enactment and play, children can externalise inner conflicts, experiment with new roles, and construct coherent personal narratives.

This research thus positions drama therapy as both a psychosocial and culturally grounded intervention, capable of addressing emotional wounds within the structural realities of South African families. It also extends theoretical discussions of presence and absence in therapeutic relationships, suggesting that imaginative and embodied connection can restore a sense of belonging where physical presence is unavailable.

In summary, the study contributes by framing father absence as an ambiguous loss requiring embodied, creative therapeutic attention; addressing an underrepresented context in drama therapy, the lived experiences of Black South African single mothers and their children; and proposing a context-sensitive and culturally responsive use of drama therapy to foster attachment repair, emotional regulation, and resilience. By integrating psychoanalytic understanding with embodied dramatic processes, this study advances a nuanced view of how creative arts therapies can engage the complexities of absence, identity, and relationship in contemporary South African life.

## **Theoretical and literature framework**

Children growing up in single-mother households with absent fathers, particularly in low-income Black South African contexts, face unique developmental challenges. Understanding these requires integrating psychoanalytic, attachment, and developmental perspectives, which inform potential interventions through drama therapy.

Object relations theory (Klein, 1946; Shultz & Shultz, 2017) emphasises that infants develop a sense of self through early relationships with primary caregivers, typically the mother. Infants internalise ‘good’ and ‘bad’ objects through mechanisms such as introjection, projection, and splitting, shaping later relational patterns. Klein’s paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions illustrate how children manage anxiety and ambivalence. In the depressive position, children integrate good and bad aspects of the caregiver,



developing empathy and reparation. In single-mother households with absent fathers, children may internalise unresolved loss or abandonment as 'bad objects', affecting self-concept and interpersonal relationships. Drama therapists can act as transitional objects (Winnicott, 2021), providing a relational space to explore attachment, play, and identity.

Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969; McLeod, 2025) emphasises that secure bonds with caregivers are crucial for maintaining psychological well-being. Father absence disrupts these bonds, potentially leading to maladaptive coping, anxiety, and identity difficulties. Drama therapy, through play, role-playing, and storytelling, enables children to explore and process both conscious and unconscious experiences, thereby supporting reparative relational work (Creevan, 2014; Jones, 2021).

Empirical studies reinforce these theoretical insights. Falana, Bada, and Ayodele (2012) found that children of single mothers exhibit cognitive and verbal delays, with long-term impacts on academic and occupational outcomes. Sylvester (2010) and Bojuwoye and Sylvester (2012) highlight the importance of male role models in adolescent boys' identity formation, socialisation, and discipline, while Thwala (2018) and Smith et al. (2014) report identity disruption among boys and girls lacking paternal guidance.

Paternal absence affects relational and cultural dynamics. Nathane-Taulela and Nduna (2014), Morwe et al. (2015), and Eddy et al. (2013) found that inconsistent father involvement contributes to material deprivation, emotional disconnection, and cultural alienation. Magqamfana and Bazana (2020) note inter-individual variability, yet emphasise that positive paternal engagement significantly influences identity formation. Behavioural and emotional outcomes include risky sexual behaviour, low self-esteem, and social maladaptation (Ntloko & Kheswa, 2018; Matlakala et al., 2019). Narrative accounts indicate that children develop both negative coping strategies (withdrawal, denial, and self-blame) and adaptive strategies (creative expression, journaling, and reliance on extended family) (Mdletshe, 2014; Tau, 2020).

Drama therapy offers a mechanism to address these impacts. Using play, role-play, and storytelling, therapists can provide children with opportunities to explore relational dynamics, process loss, and develop resilience (Johnson & Emunah, 2020; Pendzik, 2006). By modelling attachment, facilitating reparative experiences, and supporting the integration of conflicting

emotional experiences, drama therapy can strengthen self-concept and interpersonal functioning in children affected by paternal absence (Johnson & Emunah, 2020; Malchiodi, 2022). This integrated framework underscores the relevance of psychoanalytic and attachment-informed drama therapy interventions. Children's unconscious and conscious experiences of father absence can be expressed and explored safely, fostering psychological well-being, resilience, and the development of healthy relational patterns.

## **Methodological framework**

This study adopts a hermeneutic phenomenological orientation, exploring the lived experiences of children from single-mother households and those affected by father absence (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021). Participants, aged 10–17 years, were drawn from a school in Parktown, Johannesburg, with some referred specifically to drama therapy for challenges linked to paternal absence. The research uses vignettes derived from these real-life contexts as interpretive tools, allowing for a nuanced exploration of subjective experiences. Through drama and movement therapy, children engage in storytelling, role-play, and embodied enactments, enabling access to both conscious and unconscious processes. This methodology prioritises the children's perspectives, focusing on meaning-making, relational patterns, and emotional expression within their social and familial contexts (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021; Fuster Guillen, 2019). Hermeneutic interpretation of these vignettes informs both understanding of developmental impacts of father absence and the potential therapeutic contribution of arts-based interventions in fostering resilience, self-concept, and relational repair.

## **Findings and discussion**

This section presents findings from three case vignettes, Precious (11), Ntebogeng (10), and Thabo (17), highlighting the varied experiences of children growing up with absent fathers in single-mother households. Drama therapy techniques were used to explore relational, emotional, and developmental dynamics, informed by psychoanalytic and object relations theory.

### *Case 1: Precious – intermittent paternal absence*

Precious was referred following a behavioural shift linked to her parents' separation, reporting anxiety about underpreparedness for school exams. Her father was between jobs and had gradually cut contact after separation from her mother. Precious' mother's work as a live-in nanny limited her availability. Drama therapy sessions focused on role play and storymaking to explore changes in family dynamics and the impact of paternal absence.

Integration of a single parent-child session allowed Precious and her mother to co-create narratives, strengthening attachment and communication. This aligns with object relations theory, emphasising that early relational patterns shape self-concept and expectations of caregiving (Klein, 1946; Shultz & Shultz, 2017). Drama therapy provided a symbolic rehearsal space for navigating ambivalent feelings toward her father and coping with limited maternal presence.

### *Case 2: Ntebogeng – sudden maternal loss and paternal introduction*

Ntebogeng had never known her father, and the sudden death of her mother created a profound relational void. She now lives with her grandmother and aunt, who provided stability, while her father initiated legal custody proceedings, introducing uncertainty.

An adapted empty-chair technique allowed Ntebogeng to explore relational roles and negotiate her questions regarding her father's sudden involvement. Non-directive play, including enrolling herself in abstract objects during storytelling, enabled her to experiment with distance from overwhelming emotions, reflecting Klein's concept of phantasy as a coping mechanism (Spillius et al., 2011). Drama therapy promoted agency, allowing Ntebogeng to process grief, negotiate relational boundaries, and regain a sense of control over her experiences.

### *Case 3: Thabo – adolescent paternal rejection*

Thabo self-referred following rejection from his father, experiencing tension between masculine and feminine energies in adolescence due to a single-mother upbringing. Drama therapy engaged projective play and seven-part

cartoon-based storymaking, allowing him to self-direct narratives and enact role reversals.

These activities facilitated exploration of identity, relational dynamics, and autonomy. He used the sessions to rehearse interactions with his mother, reflecting Winnicott's (2021) concept of transitional objects and the therapeutic play space as a site for practising agency and negotiating power dynamics. Drama therapy thus supported Thabo in reclaiming control, expressing unmet needs, and developing self-efficacy in relational contexts.

## Thematic analysis and integration

Across the three cases, drama therapy provided an aesthetic frame for expressing and processing relational, cognitive, and emotional challenges arising from father absence (Bird, 2023; Sweeney, 2023). Role play, storytelling, and embodied relational markers enabled the projection of internal conflicts, rehearsal of coping strategies, and integration of fragmented relational experiences (Busika, 2015; Dokter, Holloway & Seebom, 2012; Pitre, Sajjani & Johnson, 2015).

While all three children were reared by single mothers, the differences in paternal absence shaped their developmental experiences: Precious experienced intermittent paternal contact, Ntebogeng faced lifelong absence with sudden paternal introduction, and Thabo encountered active paternal rejection during adolescence. These nuances highlight the importance of tailoring interventions to the child's developmental stage and relational context. Drama therapy, grounded in psychoanalytic and object relations theory, allowed for conscious and unconscious exploration of self and relationships. Object relations theory elucidates the impact of internalised parental figures on self-concept, attachment, and relational expectations, while Winnicott's (2021) concepts of play and transitional objects provided a framework for therapeutic experimentation with autonomy, attachment, and identity formation.

The findings suggest that drama therapy offers a culturally and developmentally sensitive approach for children experiencing father absence. Techniques such as role play, storytelling, and the use of embodied relational markers foster agency, enable reparative processes, and support self-understanding, emotional regulation, and parent-child relational quality. This approach demonstrates potential for addressing the psychosocial,

behavioural, and cognitive impacts of paternal absence in single-mother households, reinforcing the value of drama therapy as a therapeutic intervention within the South African context.

## Contribution to the field – significance of this study

This study explores Western developmental psychoanalytic literature and its application to children reared by Black single mothers with absent fathers in South Africa. It also examines drama therapy techniques to consider their potential as social and emotional support interventions for the developmental effects of father absence. While extensive literature exists internationally on absent fathers' social, psychological, behavioural, and developmental implications (McLanahan, Tach & Schneider, 2013; Agllias, 2017; Polak, 2019), there is a paucity of research in the South African context addressing both the impact of ambiguous parental loss and the application of drama therapy as an intervention.

Drama therapy, understood here as the use of theatre and dramatic techniques to facilitate therapeutic change (Johnson & Emunah, 2020), offers a platform for addressing psychological, behavioural, and cognitive challenges. It allows children to acquire developmental skills in a psychosocially supportive context while exploring internal conflicts associated with absent fathers (Berghs et al., 2022; Malchiodi, 2022). The primary research question guiding this study was: *Can drama therapy support identity formation and mitigate psychological, behavioural, and cognitive dysfunctions in children of absent fathers?*

## Implications for drama therapy

Drama therapy's use of play, role play, and storytelling aligns with psychoanalytic concepts of free association, enabling unconscious material to emerge in a non-threatening way (Corey et al., 2021; Irwin, 2005). Role play allows children to externalise internalised experiences, experiment with relational interactions, and rehearse dialogues with significant others in a metaphorical space (Jennings, 2014). By enacting scenarios with therapist support, children can explore resistance behaviours, practice coping strategies, and gain insight into their emotional and relational responses.

Winnicott's (2021) relational theory underscores the therapeutic potential of play, providing a "good enough" relational container where children can repair or rehearse parent-child dynamics safely. Drama therapy facilitates identity exploration, agency, and autonomy by enabling children to embody multiple roles and perspectives. Play and storytelling also foster problem-solving, self-awareness, and reflective capacity, bridging therapeutic experiences with real-world relational skills (Hoey, 2005).

## **Conclusion**

Children raised in single-mother households with absent fathers in South Africa experience psychological, behavioural, cognitive, and relational challenges shaped by paternal absence, socio-economic pressures, and gendered role expectations. This study demonstrates that drama therapy offers a culturally and developmentally responsive intervention, providing a symbolic, relational, and imaginative space for children to process internal conflicts and explore identity. Techniques such as play, role play, and storytelling allow children to externalise emotions, rehearse dialogues with absent or significant figures, and practice autonomy within a safe therapeutic environment. The study highlights the importance of positive male role models, whether real or represented symbolically, in supporting identity formation and self-concept development. Integrating psychoanalytic and relational theories, drama therapy facilitates both conscious and unconscious exploration, enabling children to engage with emotional, cognitive, and behavioural experiences holistically. By bridging therapeutic experiences with real-life relational skills, drama therapy can mitigate risk behaviours and enhance psychosocial resilience. This research contributes to the field by positioning drama therapy as a viable intervention for children affected by father absence, offering practical guidance for clinicians in South Africa and similar contexts.

## **Research limitations**

Literature specific to Black single-mother households in South Africa is limited, particularly regarding therapeutic interventions for children of absent fathers. Existing research often conflates socio-economic status and single-parenthood variables, and few studies explore psychoanalytic or drama therapy-based approaches in this context.

## Recommendations

Building on Bion's concept of maternal reverie (Gooch, 1998), I propose the notion of virtual parental reverie, integrating digital platforms to facilitate relational connections and therapeutic engagement when time-space constraints prevent direct intervention. Future research should explore virtual drama therapy approaches, as well as holistic interventions that include absent fathers, enabling relational reintegration and supporting children's psychosocial, cognitive, and behavioural development.

## Disclaimer

This article is based on the author's Master of Arts dissertation, *Implications for drama therapy in working single-mother households in the South African context*,<sup>1</sup> completed in 2020 at the University of the Witwatersrand. Readers are encouraged to consult the original dissertation for a comprehensive account of the study's methodology, analysis, and findings.

## Declaration of AI use

AI was used to improve readability and language.

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1 The full master's dissertation by Nonkululeko Vilakazi is available through the University of the Witwatersrand institutional repository at <https://wiredspace.wits.ac.za/items/a9b5251c-29cc-4ef7-b3a8-1bb82657ad87/full>

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