

Rest, Ritual and Reclamation: Reimagining Schools Through African Drama Therapy Practice

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THE ATLANTIC FELLOWS FOR HEALTH EQUITY IN SOUTH AFRICA, BASED AT TEKANO AND LIFE CHOICES

ABSTRACT

This practice-based article explores how theatre and drama therapy can reimagine the role of schools in contexts shaped by apartheid legacies, inequality, poverty, violence, and securitisation. It draws on my work at Life Choices, a youth development organisation working across schools and communities in the Cape Flats area, Cape Town, South Africa. Within this broader work, the Uhambo Lwam Drama Therapy Project, funded through The Atlantic Fellows for Health Equity in South Africa AFHESA based at Tekano, is implemented at Sophumelela High School in Samora Machel.

Learners navigate under-resourced and at times vandalised school environments alongside the realities of gangsterism and community trauma. In response, schools often adopt heightened security measures that create controlled and restrictive spaces, limiting emotional expression and relational connection.

I position theatre and rest as pedagogical responses to young people's psychosocial needs. These arts-based practices support agency, empathy, and imagination, enabling learners to rehearse more humane and expansive futures.



Image 24: Students pictured during moments of reflection and expression during an Uhambo Lwam Drama Therapy session.

INTRODUCTION

In South Africa, education sits at the intersection of hope and historical inequality. While some schools are resourced with libraries, laboratories, and extracurricular opportunities, many schools in townships and informal settlements, particularly across the Cape Flats in the Western Cape, remain shaped by infrastructural neglect, overcrowding, and limited access to basic resources (Department of Basic Education, 2018).

Of the 23,471 public schools nationally, more than 20,000 lack laboratories and 18,000 have no library facilities (DBE, 2018). In many cases, inadequate sanitation and weak perimeter security further compromise safety and dignity. For many young people, school is one of the few structured public spaces they consistently occupy. It can, and often does, offer stability, care, and opportunity. Yet when this

space begins to mirror the instability of surrounding communities through vandalism, overcrowding, or heightened security measures such as metal gates and armed guards, it takes on a different meaning.

These conditions shaped the central concern of this article. I became increasingly interested not only in how young people learn, but also in how they experience learning spaces, how they are seen within them, and what becomes possible for them in such environments.

SITUATING MY ROLE AND ENTRY INTO THE WORK

I write from my position as both the founder of the Uhambo Lwam Drama Therapy Project and a facilitator who is, at times, directly involved in programme delivery. In the instance described in this article, I was present as a facilitator observer within the school-based work. My first visit to one of the high schools we used to implement other Life Choices community based programmes marked a turning point in how I understood the work. The name of the school is not named in order to maintain its dignity and avoid reinforcing negative narratives that can easily attach to it.

The school is in a densely populated community shaped by high levels of gangsterism, crime, unemployment, overcrowding, and limited access to youth development opportunities. Unfortunately, many schools across the Cape Flats operate within similar conditions. During this visit, I was struck by an immediate sense of constraint. Corridors were crowded, movement was tightly controlled, and the presence of armed security shaped the atmosphere. The classroom environment reflected similar realities, with vandalised surfaces and worn infrastructure competing for attention alongside the learners themselves.

What stood out most, however, was not the physical environment but the emotional tone in the room. During a session which was facilitated by one of the programme facilitators, many learners displayed disengagement through their body language, interactions, and use of disrespectful language. I experienced this not simply as behavioural resistance but as communication, perhaps signaling unmet needs, frustration, or a lack of recognition. At the time, I understood this moment as an invitation to rethink what presence, engagement, and learning might mean in such spaces. It was from this encounter

that the Uhambo Lwam Drama Therapy Project began to take shape.

THE PROBLEM: POVERTY, VIOLENCE, AND THE EMOTIONAL LANDSCAPE OF SCHOOLING

My observations at the school were not unique. Instead, they reflected broader realities shaping the lives of many young people across South Africa's under-resourced communities. Schools in these contexts are deeply entangled with wider social conditions. Nearly half of South African children continue to live in poverty, often without reliable access to adequate nutrition, healthcare, or safe housing (Statistics South Africa, 2022). Many are exposed to violence and chronic stress both within their communities and, at times, within their homes. On the Cape Flats, these challenges are further compounded by gangsterism, unemployment, substance abuse, and longstanding social exclusion (Gibbs et al., 2018).

These realities inevitably enter the classroom. Learners do not arrive as empty vessels ready to absorb information. They arrive carrying experiences, responsibilities, fears, and hopes that shape how they engage with learning. For some, school remains one of the few structured spaces available to them. Yet schools are increasingly expected to respond to social challenges that extend far beyond their educational mandate. In response to concerns about safety, many schools have adopted heightened security measures, including controlled access points and security personnel. While these interventions may be necessary, they also influence the emotional climate of the school. Safety becomes associated with monitoring and control rather than belonging and connection.

As someone who has worked across educational, community, and correctional settings, I have become increasingly interested in how institutions respond to vulnerability. Too often, behaviour becomes the focus of intervention while the social and emotional realities underpinning that behaviour remain unaddressed. Learners learn how to comply with expectations, yet opportunities for creativity, self-expression, relational connection, and meaning making are often limited.

This raises an important question: What might become possible if schools were understood not only as sites of academic learning, but also as spaces where young people could process experience, explore

identity, and cultivate a sense of agency? It was from this question that the Uhambo Lwam Drama Therapy Project emerged. Rather than focusing solely on behaviour or academic performance, the project sought to create a space where learners could be recognised as active participants in their own learning, wellbeing, and development.

PRACTICE-BASED EXAMPLE: UHAMBO LWAM DRAMA THERAPY PROJECT

“The future will always be shaped by the sequence of present-day events.” - Steve Biko

Biko's words remind us that transformation does not emerge from a single moment or intervention. It is shaped through the everyday experiences, relationships, and opportunities that young people encounter. If the conditions of the present are marked by poverty, violence, exclusion, and emotional distress, then these realities inevitably shape future possibilities. Equally, when young people experience care, belonging, and opportunities for self-expression, these moments become part of a different future. It is within this belief that the Uhambo Lwam¹ Drama Therapy Project was developed.

¹ Uhambo Lwam meaning my journey in IsiXhosa



Image 25: Co-designing workshop with a group of learners from a few High Schools to help design the project content and focus.

The Uhambo Lwam Drama Therapy Project was co-designed with learners as an intentional response to the realities that many young people navigate daily. I was part of the facilitation team, and the work unfolded through collaboration between facilitators and learners. The project was grounded in the principle that young people are not passive recipients of programmes but active contributors to the spaces they inhabit.



Image 26: Two (2) learners from Sophumelela High School (implementing partner School) and Fezeka High School working together to design a project focused on addressing the youth challenges they are currently facing or witnessing in their communities.

During the co design process, learners shaped the themes, activities, and practices that would guide the programme. Across discussions, they consistently expressed a desire for spaces where they could speak freely, be heard, and engage without fear of judgement or consequence. Each session began with a check in that acknowledged learners' emotional arrival into the space. I observed that many carried multiple layers into the room, including pressures from school, challenges at home, and the broader realities of their communities. Grounding exercises helped support the transition from these external demands into a more contained and reflective environment.

From there, sessions moved into movement, play, storytelling, and creative expressions. In one of the early sessions, each learner received a journal and pen. This gesture was more than symbolic. It was an acknowledgement that their voices, experiences, and reflections mattered.

Across the programme, I witnessed gradual but significant shifts. Learners who initially appeared withdrawn or resistant began participating more openly through laughter, storytelling, movement,

and shared reflection. During an exercise exploring masks, learners reflected on the different roles they perform in their daily lives. The activity created emotional safety by allowing them to explore identity indirectly, without requiring personal disclosure.

It is important to acknowledge that many learners arrived at sessions without adequate access to food or other basic needs. In some instances, providing a nutritious meal was vital to enable meaningful participation. Within this context, meeting basic needs cannot be separated from ethical facilitation practice.

This work does not resolve structural inequality. However, it demonstrates that young people's engagement is responsive to the environments created around them. When learners are met with consistency, care, and opportunities for meaningful participation, disengagement is not fixed, but it shifts. In this way, the everyday practices within programmes such as Uhambo Lwam become part of the sequence of present-day events that shape future possibilities.



Image 27: Facilitators training, one of the sessions was facilitated by a colleague and fellow (Tendai Chisirimunhu). This session focused on decolonising mental health and why adopting this lens might be beneficial when working in our communities.

FACILITATOR TRAINING AS EMBODIED PRACTICE

Before entering the classroom, as facilitators, we all participated in facilitator training that was interactive and reflective. The training drew on drama therapy, hip hop music, and decolonial approaches to mental

health. Rather than treating mental health as purely clinical, we worked with African-centred understandings of healing as relational and embodied. Music, movement, and storytelling were used as ways of knowing, not only techniques. During the training, we were asked to reflect on identity, assumptions, and emotional presence. The aim was to prepare us not only to facilitate but to hold space and, more importantly, with an awareness of the context of why, where and how the work will unfold.



Image 28: During the facilitator training on using the arts in sessions.

In one exercise facilitated by Marelize Swanepoel from Sp(i)eel, we were invited to select scarves that resonated with us and translate them into free-flowing movement. As we entered embodiment, the energy in the room seemed to shift. People moved into role naturally. The space became animated with presence and imagination. I

understood this through Robert Landy's role theory, which suggests that identity is not fixed but expressed through multiple roles. In this moment, I observed how quickly we could access different aspects of self through embodied practice.

This reinforced my understanding that facilitation is not technical alone. It is relational and embodied.



Image 29: One of the project facilitators, Zinziswa Nogavu, leading a grounding exercise during the first session at Sophumelela High School, playing the uhadi, a traditional Xhosa musical bow.

SESSION ONE: BUILDING SAFETY THROUGH SOUND AND PRESENCE

During the first session at Sophumelela High School, we focused on building safety rather than focusing on a specific outcome. One of the facilitators, Zinziswa, played the uhadi, an indigenous instrument, to gently introduce sound into the space. She did not begin with questions or introductions. Instead, she first invited learners to listen. This slowed the room. Small shifts became visible: a learner leaning back, another making brief eye contact, quiet exchanges of smiles and relaxation. These moments were subtle but important. They showed the beginning of trust.

Theatre as a Space for Voice and Agency

Theatre offers a space where identity, story, and meaning can be explored collectively. Within African contexts, storytelling, song, and embodied practice have long functioned as knowledge systems (Odhiambo 2019).

In this work, theatre is not a performance for an outcome. It is relational space. It allows learners to rehearse different ways of being. Through co-creation, learners moved from passive participation to shaping the work itself. This shift disrupted traditional hierarchies between facilitator and participant.

Rest, Ritual, and African Ways of Knowing in the Classroom



Image 30: Grounding exercise moment.

Within African traditions, rest is not absence. It is practice. Ritual structures transition, restore balance, and create meaning (Harries 2020). During the sessions, grounding rituals became essential. As mentioned earlier, learners arrive carrying emotional and environmental weight. Ritual allows transition into presence.

Even small practices such as silence, song, repetition, or movement create shifts in regulation and attention. Over time, these practices build trust and relational awareness.

Reimagining the School

This reimagining is also connected to broader traditions of liberation and self-definition. Biko (1978) reminds us that one of the most powerful tools of oppression is the control of how people see themselves. Creating spaces where young people can tell their stories, imagine alternatives, and recognise their own value becomes an important act of reclaiming voice, dignity, and possibility. These reflections raise a core question. What kind of school are we building, and for whom? When schools prioritise performance without attending to emotional reality, they risk reinforcing inequality. Reimagining school requires expanding what counts as learning. Agency, empathy, kindness and relational connection must sit alongside academic achievement. Theatre and ritual offer entry points for this shift. They allow learners to imagine alternatives to their current realities.

CONCLUSION

In environments marked by poverty, vandalised infrastructure, gangsterism, trauma, and increasing securitisation, educational responses must engage the whole learner. Approaches that focus solely on discipline, compliance, and performance are insufficient in addressing the layered realities that many young people navigate daily. As this article has explored, theatre, drama therapy, and ritualised practices of rest are not luxuries or supplementary activities. They are essential practices that respond to the emotional, relational, and developmental needs of young people. They offer ways to restore dignity, foster agency, and create moments of connection within environments that are often characterised by fragmentation, surveillance, and control.

Through my work with the Uhambo Lwam Drama Therapy Project, I have observed that when learners are offered spaces grounded in presence, expression, care, and co-creation, their ways of engaging begin to shift. They move, even if gradually, from survival towards participation, from disconnection towards relationality, and from silence towards voice. While this work does not resolve the structural challenges facing schools or the broader inequalities that shape young people's lives, it does illuminate what becomes possible within those constraints. It suggests that even in under-resourced and complex

environments, schools can become spaces that are restorative rather than restrictive.

Ultimately, reimagining the school is not only about improving infrastructure, resources, or security, although these remain critically important. It is also about how we choose to hold space for young people, how we listen to them, and how we respond to their lived realities. As Biko (1978) reminds us, systems of oppression often work by shaping how people see themselves. Creating opportunities for young people to tell their stories, to imagine alternatives, and to recognise their own worth is therefore not simply an educational act, but a liberatory one. In this sense, theatre, ritual, and rest become practices of reclamation, enabling young people to reclaim voice, dignity, imagination, and the possibility of futures beyond the conditions that seek to define them.

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Zandile Mqwathi is a South African drama therapist and Community Programmes Director at Life Choices in Cape Town. She holds an MA in Drama Therapy from the University of the Witwatersrand and has over 16 years of experience in public health and social development across community and national contexts. Her work integrates drama therapy, public health, and African centred approaches, with a focus on HIV prevention, gender-based violence, and social and behaviour change communication. She uses arts based and embodied methodologies to support youth wellbeing, agency, and community led responses to healing. She has held senior roles across the sector, including Project Manager for Gender Based Violence Initiatives at the DG Murray Trust, where she led the Sukuthula GBV Initiative, and Social and Behaviour Change Communication Manager at Pact South Africa. She has also contributed to diversity, equity and inclusion work with the Clinton Health Access Initiative as a consultant and is currently part of a UNICEF related consultancy through Think First Hand Consultants. Her published work includes the ArtsPraxis article Addressing Mental Health in South Africa: Using the Djembe Drum and Storytelling to Open up the Dialogue of Finding, Owning, and Using Your Voice in the Home as a Christian Woman. She is also one of the contributors of the Rethinking Activism book developed through AFSEE and the Nelson Mandela School of Public Governance. She is the founder of Uhambo Lwam, a drama therapy and storytelling initiative supporting youth identity, healing, and belonging through embodied practice.