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Using Participatory Action Research to Explore How Teachers Can Implement Drama Therapy Techniques to Aid in Nervous System Regulation in the Senior-Phase Classroom in South Africa

Wentzel, Leané

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Wits School of Arts

Drama for Life

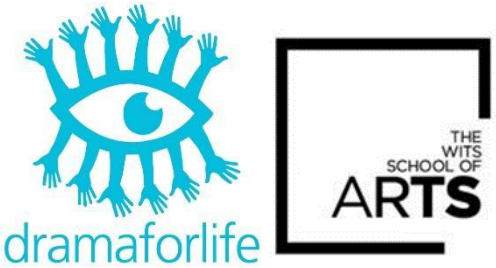
Masters Research Essay

Leané Wentzel

STUDENT NO: 2322047

RESEARCH TOPIC: Using Participatory Action Research to Explore How Teachers Can Implement Drama Therapy Techniques to Aid in Nervous System Regulation in the Senior-Phase Classroom in South Africa.

SUPERVISOR(S): Monique Hill



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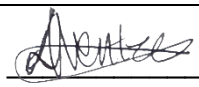
Signed: 

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Dedication

This is a long time coming. After 10 years of continuous studying and changing courses, I can finally say that with this, my Master's is complete. I would not be here without the support of my parents and fiancé, even though they understood very little of my research. I also have to give special thanks to my supervisor, Monique Hill; without you, I don't think I would have gotten this done in time! Thanks to my friends/colleagues Abi, Ally, Jane, and Nina for always listening to endless conversations about research and just being there throughout this entire year (which feels like 10) that was our MA! We did it, girls! Last but definitely not least, I want to give thanks to my heavenly Father, who has provided for me in the last two years, in more ways than one, everything I needed to make my dream of becoming a Drama Therapist a reality.

Abstract

This study investigated the use of Drama Therapy techniques within Ritual, Embodiment, and Dramatic Projection by teachers in the senior-phase classroom. The aim was to use the techniques to facilitate nervous system regulation in the learners in these classrooms. The participants were three senior-phase teachers teaching various subjects in a private school in Johannesburg. The research was conducted through Participatory Action Research workshops, where data was collected in the form of videos and participant journals. Techniques like breathwork, grounding, and embodied explorations had the most success in regulation, while others were implemented in the classroom to create a safe space (ritual and projection). This study was limited to one school and can not be generalised to all South African schools.

Keywords: Drama therapy, Ritual, Embodiment, Dramatic projection, Senior-phase classroom, regulation, Window of Tolerance, participatory action research.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Title

Using Participatory Action Research to Explore How Teachers Can Implement Drama Therapy Techniques to Aid in Nervous System Regulation in the Senior-Phase Classroom in South Africa.

Background to the research

Travel with me back to 2022, when a young teacher enters a classroom of 38 learners with her BA degree and a PGCE (Post-Graduate Certificate in Education) to help guide her in teaching these learners. This is her first year ever standing in front of a classroom of adolescents. This also happens to be the first full year that learners are back at school after the COVID-19 pandemic. During her year as a teacher, she often found herself stuck and feeling helpless because of the behaviour her learners were exhibiting. They showed impulsive behavioural traits, withdrawal, and disinterest in the content she was teaching. She quit her job and did her honours in drama therapy, where she came across various techniques that would have helped her in her classroom the year before. Thus, an interest bloomed. This teacher was me, now the researcher. This research is a continuation of the work I started in my honours research, with the added bonus of field work and data collection.

When learning about the techniques and principles of drama therapy during my honours year, ritual, embodiment, and projection stood out as techniques that could be helpful and beneficial in a senior-phase classroom. The techniques encapsulated within these terms used so often in the world of drama therapy would have been beneficial for me as a teacher to know and use, and my curiosity was sparked by the possibilities this could have held in creating and fostering regulated behaviours in my own classroom space. I was also introduced to nervous system regulation as a goal through drama therapy and how one could achieve, as Siegel would say, a “Window of Tolerance”. I will elaborate in my writing on this notion of tolerance and regulation later, as well as what embodiment, projection, and ritual entail. My question thus became, “How could I equip other teachers so they don’t have the same experiences I did?”.

Pillay, Patel, and Stlhare-Kajee (2023) investigated the amount of South African school teachers who were equipped to provide support to the learners in their classrooms on a psychosocial level. What they found is that many teachers did not recognise psychological risk factors in their classrooms, not only this, but they also did not have enough knowledge or training in psychosocial interventions (Pillay, Patel, & Stlhare-Kajee, 2023:8). They came to the conclusion that teachers could only be equipped through continuous training and by gaining new knowledge throughout their teaching careers to handle psychosocial issues in their classrooms (Pillay, Patel, & Stlhare-Kajee, 2023:8).

Van Der Kolk (2014:422) writes about schools being islands of safety at their very best. He continues to state that these are the spaces to teach children how their brains and bodies work and create the space for them to understand and deal with their emotional experiences. Emotional experiences like stress and anxiety influence the school experience as well as the learner’s overall ability to live a congruent and full life (APA, 2013). To Van Der Kolk (2014:422) the school plays a

significant role in instilling resilience that children need to develop to deal with trauma. Teachers play an integral role in this. Teachers have become the people with whom many children have the most contact. It has been found that interventions focused on practical day-to-day routines helping to alleviate disproportionate arousal can easily be turned into practical approaches and routines that teachers can use to transform the entire school culture on a daily basis (Van Der Kolk, 2014:423). After consulting with teachers in schools, he notes that they acknowledge that they cannot teach in classrooms where children experience distress. Van der Kolk stresses that teachers need to address behavioural issues before they can chase higher marks academically (Van Der Kolk, 2014:423).

This researcher proposed that drama therapy techniques can be used in classrooms to improve overall classroom performance by regulating their nervous systems. This could, in turn, lead to better classroom experiences and performance in the subjects. This study, working three with senior-phase teachers in a private school in South Africa, took a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach to investigate which drama therapy methods can be implemented in the classroom. PAR is a research method wherein the participants become active in the research process, and it aims to understand and improve the world through change (Baum, MacDougall & Smith, 2006:854). Investigating Siegel's (1999) Window Of Tolerance as a means to determine when arousal is disruptive to effective functioning will form a basis for investigating the benefit of the drama therapy techniques used in this study. The drama therapy techniques also stem from the work of Jones (1996) and his 9 core principles of drama therapy, specifically focusing on embodiment and projection. These principles lie at the core of drama therapy techniques and hold various practices that can be investigated and explored in the senior-phase classroom. Another focus of enquiry will be around the use of ritual, as explained by Emunah (1994:20-22), as both a dramatic act and one that can be implemented in the classroom.

Problem statement

School and the development of a young adolescent hold anxiety and stress due to major changes in their physical and mental development. The stressors of academics, the physical growth they experience, and the developmental stage they are in psychologically all contribute to feelings of stress and anxiety. Van Ameringen, Mancini, and Farvoldenet (2003) note that during adolescence, anxiety has a major educational influence, putting these learners at risk of leaving school early or potentially obtaining "poorer" qualifications. This was confirmed in a study by Strydom, Pretorius and Joubert (2012), where they state that mood disorders (like anxiety; social anxiety disorder, and generalised anxiety disorder alike) have been associated with substance abuse, the termination of tertiary education before they finish the full course, and these individuals tend to not proceed to obtain tertiary education. This study by Strydom, Pretorius and Joubert (2012) focused on Grade 11 and 12 learners and found that their sources of stress were schoolwork and uncertainty about future plans. They also found that 27,6% of these learners use substances as a coping mechanism, mainly cannabis, alcohol, and cigarettes, (Strydom, Pretorius & Joubert, 2012:86).

Anxiety is a cognitive and physiological experience within an individual which leads to a breakdown in their everyday functioning (APA, 2013), which also affects the classroom. One can argue that anxiety is a state of dysregulation learners experience in classrooms. Dysregulation is the inability to control or regulate one's emotional responses,

leading to outbursts, irritability, frustration, anger, and other emotional responses (Cuncic, 2023). Emotional dysregulation can also lead to problems with performance at school, interpersonal relationships, and effective functioning (Cuncic, 2023).

It would appear that Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) also have an influence on anxiety persisting throughout the person's adult life. ACEs are experiences of trauma like abuse, neglect, substance abuse, and many more linked to behavioural changes and mental health decline in children and adults who suffered from them in childhood (Byansi et al., 2023). Craig et al. (2022) studied ACE and the resulting effect it had on adult depression and anxiety. In their consideration, they noted that over half of the South African adult population had experienced ACE. Byansi et al. (2023) did a study in Johannesburg and found similar results. Both studies came to the conclusion that early childhood interventions on a universal and population-wide level are needed, especially in low-resource settings (Byansi et al., 2023; Craig et al., 2022). ACE is an important factor to consider when looking at which Drama Therapy (DT) techniques would be most suited for the classroom space (and that the learner could potentially implement outside of the classroom).

Stress and anxiety impact and influence learners' school work and performance. Other stressors like ACE also influence behaviour and arousal within the classroom space. This research proposed that drama therapy techniques can be implemented in the classroom to mitigate the influence it has on their mental health and improve their classroom behaviour. For the purposes of this study, improvements in classroom behaviour were determined by the self-reports from the teachers involved in the study, as well as how they see the learners achieve better regulation in their classrooms. Providing teachers with tools to help regulate these nervous system reactions could be valuable not only for the teacher but for the learner in the classroom as well. It is also important to note at this point that the study did not intend to make the teachers therapists, that is not within their scope of practice, the focus was on how DT techniques could be adapted and used by teachers in a non-therapeutic manner.

Aim & Objectives

Aim:

This research explored how teachers can implement and use Drama Therapy techniques in their classrooms in the Senior Phase to aid in achieving better nervous system regulation among learners using Participatory Action Research. The teachers partook in three workshop cycles, during which drama therapy techniques such as embodiment, ritual, and projection were explored and implemented in the classroom. Reflections from the teachers guided future workshops and were used as the data for the research. Phil Jones's (1996) core principles of drama therapy guided the arguments and perspectives used in the study. It also directed the content of the workshops.

Objectives:

To achieve this aim, I

- Conducted a literature review to provide background to the study and more information on the techniques used. This was done before and during the research.
- Ran drama therapy-focused workshops with 3 senior-phase teachers once every two weeks. Each workshop was two hours long.
- Used video recordings, journals, and field notes to collect data from the participants during and between workshops.
- Reflections from teachers were utilised after each workshop to adapt to the next workshop where needed.
- Reflections from the teachers were utilised in their self-reflections and observations of changes in behaviour they noted in the classroom where they implemented some of the drama therapy techniques.
- Finally, the reflective journals and reflections after each workshop cycle were compared to determine the benefit of the drama therapy techniques in the senior-phase classroom.

Questions

1. How can Drama Therapy techniques be adapted for use in the senior-phase classroom by teachers in South Africa using Participatory Action Research to help aid in nervous system regulation of the learners?

- What was the impact of the use of these techniques in the senior-phase classroom?
- How effective are these Drama Therapy techniques in aiding with regulation in the senior-phase classroom?

Rationale

This study sought to provide ways in which drama therapy techniques can be adapted to help aid teachers create safe and calming spaces for learning. As mentioned before, Van Der Kolk (2014:423) found that classrooms where learners are in distress (meaning their nervous systems are not regulated and in a state of calm) are not conducive to learning. This research sought to explore which drama therapy techniques could help aid teachers in regulating their learners' nervous systems in their classrooms to elicit calm and successful learning states.

This study benefited the teachers in their classrooms by providing them with the tools to create calm and regulated classroom experiences for their learners, and the learners indirectly benefitted from these new skills the teachers learned for their own regulation and learning. The schooling system and education as a whole could also benefit from the findings of this research in the way it broadens the techniques teachers can implement in their classrooms to elicit calm and organised learning. As a whole, possibly after years of implementation, this study and the techniques explored could lead to higher grades, better performance of the whole schooling system, and quality of learning in South Africa (that's the big dream and hope for this study, but small changes can have big effects in the long run).

In the world of drama therapy, this pilot study could also be highly valuable in determining the relevance and applicability of drama therapy techniques aiding in classroom management and the regulation of larger groups of learners. It also

brings new insight into the possibilities of ritual, embodiment, and projection as techniques that could be used in educational spaces.

Ethical considerations

The participant group (teachers) are experts in their field and do not form part of any vulnerable categories. To obtain ethical clearance, I submitted my application to the Drama For Life (DFL) ethics board and obtained permission from the school's principal. Each of the participants signed an informed consent form, and their identities were kept confidential. No identifying information of any participants was included in the report. I cannot guarantee confidentiality among participants as they will be working in a group format; thus they will be able to identify each other in the report as well as in conversation with one another outside of the workshops. The learners the teachers are observing were not directly involved in the study as the perspectives and the observations of how well the methods worked in the classroom were the focus of the study; thus, they are at no risk directly. Should the methods cause discomfort or dysregulation in the classroom, it was the teacher's responsibility to report this and stop the implementation of the specific method, and the participants were also informed of this responsibility.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This section looks at the framework from which the workshops will be designed for the participants: positive psychology. It then investigates writings about the Neuroscience of stress and anxiety symptoms and their prevalence among adolescents, followed by a written investigation into DT techniques and practices, specifically Embodiment, Ritual, and Projection.

Positive Psychology

Positive Psychology is the study of optimal human functioning, with the aim of discovering and promoting individual and communal health, focusing mainly on "what is right with people instead of what is wrong with them" (Wissing et al., 2014:4). Its focus is on individual, group or community strengths and the origins, dynamics, and enhancement thereof (Wissing et al., 2014:4; Lopez, Teramoto Pedrotti & Snyder, 2019:8). This field aims to enhance the quality of life of individuals to enrich life and promote optimal functioning by focusing on the strengths the client already has and their existing resources (Wissing et al., 2014:5) especially taking into account the uniqueness of their cultural background and what strengths stem from that (Teramoto Pedrotti, Edwards & Lopez, 2021:61). Gallagher and Lopez (2021:5) speak to how traits like hope and gratitude alongside Positive Psychology methods are used to improve the lives of communities and individuals. A central component of Positive Psychology is the notion that social relationships and relationships with other people matter (Wissing et al., 2014:29).

Higher subjective well-being has been linked with having good interpersonal relationships and daily interactions with happy people (Wissing et al., 2014:29, cited by Wentzel, 2023:13). Social engagement thus forms a critical part of the Positive Psychology framework in order to live a healthy and fulfilling life, in turn making the person an asset to the community and others around them. In the case where a person experiences social anxiety, they are less likely to engage with others socially (to be discussed in detail later) (Wentzel, 2023:13). All in all, Positive Psychology aims to better a person's well-being both internally and externally through resources and strengths they already have and building upon that to gain more internal and external resources (Wissing et al., 2014, cited by Wentzel, 2023:13). It becomes a process of growth and finding the true self through building on one's strengths and not focusing on the weaknesses (Wissing et al., 2014, cited by Wentzel 2023:13).

Positive Psychology holds forth that a person's strengths are most clearly evident during times of stress or challenges, and the field aims to help people acknowledge the psychological resources they have at their disposal to lessen the maladaptive behaviours they might exhibit during these times of stress or stressful events (Wissing et al., 2014:89). The presence of a supportive other helps people cope more efficiently with the stress and anxiety they are facing, social support also decreases the perceived amount of stressors a person faces in their daily lives and (Wissing et al., 2014:102). Alongside social support, positive emotions are experienced,

which produce patterns of thought conducive to better cognitive functioning like flexibility, creativity, and receptiveness to new information (Tugade, Devlin & Fredrickson, 2021: 21-22).

Adolescents are at a very vulnerable developmental stage in their lives, and psychosocial issues can lead to anxiety and stress experiences and possibly anxiety disorders, like ACEs, school pressures, and the physical changes the adolescent experiences (Louw & Louw, 2014:321, 328, 373). Anxiety, Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD), and stress could have life-altering consequences for the individual, including school dropout, substance abuse, and neglecting their education, if they are not addressed during the early years of onset (APA, 2013; Sheesley, Pfeffer & Barish, 2016; Van Ameringen, Mancini & Farvoldenet, 2003). Stress and anxiety also have resulting neuroscientific symptoms and physiological effects on the person (Wissing et al., 2014:89).

It is thus evident that Positive Psychology holds that social interaction and positive experiences form the person's perception and ability to cope with stress and stressors. This is also relevant in the classroom space, where adolescents spend most of their time during the week among peers and teachers, which could help foster positive experiences. This indirectly increases their ability to deal with and cope with stress and external stressors.

Stress and Anxiety

Stress

Lake (2017:106) defines stress as the reaction of an organism towards any demand that it perceives to be out of its control and with which it cannot cope (cited by Wentzel, 2023:19). Fear is classified as a present-oriented mood that motivates the person to escape or avoid a threat or danger (Lake, 2017:104) and is the first phase of stress (Lake, 2017:107). Stress requires change or adaptation from current behaviour as it is seen as the body's physiological response to a specific stressor (any event or change) (Barlow et al., 2017b:361). Depending on the body's ability to adapt, stress can be positive or negative, but the danger lies in the negative responses (Lake, 2017, 106).

Van Der Kolk (2014) writes extensively about the interaction between trauma and stress and the human body. He writes that ideally, your body should release stress hormones that provide instant responses to threats, whereafter it quickly returns to equilibrium (Van Der Kolk, 2014:35). Continued secretion of stress hormones, often expressed in panic and agitation, wreak havoc with a person's long term health (Van Der Kolk, 2014:35). Other effects of elevated stress hormones include: irritability, attention problems, and sleep disorders (Van Der Kolk, 2014:54). He further explains that the part of the human brain, the amygdala, serves the role of identifying information and determining whether or not that information is relevant to the person's survival (Van Der Kolk, 2014:70). The stress hormone is then secreted by the hypothalamus leading to responses from the entire body (Van Der Kolk, 2014:70, cited by Wentzel, 2023:19). The trigger from the amygdala (which reacts to perceived

threat) releases hormones like cortisol and adrenaline, which lead to increased heart rates, altered breathing, and blood pressure, all to prepare the body to fight or flee (Van Der Kolk, 2014:70). Chronic stress may result in permanent damage to the body or contribute to disease, and the body suffers breakdowns when stress is not managed properly (Barlow et. al., 2017b:362). ACE and classroom stresses could worsen this deregulatory experience and influence the executive functioning of learners in the classroom.

Perica and Luca (2023) studied the effect of stress on the inhibitory and excitatory markers of cognition and how it is affected by the physical development of the adolescent brain. They write that stress has the potential to impact neurodevelopmental trajectories when perceived as an environmental factor (Perica & Luca, 2023:2). They also note that, during adolescence, developmentally, there are changes to the person's stress response system, which could, in turn, make adolescents more susceptible to its effects (Perica & Luca, 2023:3).

It would also appear that sleep has an influence on the person's stress response systems (Uy et. al., 2022:1). Learning, memory, cognition, and decision-making making are all negatively affected by sleep deprivation, and an individual is more likely to experience physical and psychological health problems from a lack of sleep (Uy et. al., 2022:1). A study by Uy et al. (2022:7) showed that short/ insufficient sleep cycles exacerbate activations in the stress regions of the brain, implicating stress reactivity and increasing anxiety (Uy et. al., 2022:7). This shows the potential link between stress and anxiety (Wentzel, 2023:20).

Anxiety

Anxiety can be functional within certain limits as it is a future-oriented state of one's mood, which is accompanied by strong negative affect (Lake, 2017:105). It is often concerned with a future event that could have some level of difficulty and carries importance for the individual (Lake, 2017:105). Muscular tension, dry mouth, increased pulse, fidgeting and altered breathing are all physical symptoms originating from anxiety (Barlow et al., 2017a:158). Others include hypervigilance, dilated pupils, aggression, restlessness, irritability, poor concentration, fight or flight responses, avoidance and a decrease in appetite (Lake, 2017:106). Lake (2017) writes that "anxiety has a compounding, self-aggravating effect that may worsen the experience of its symptoms" (p105), and the only way to prevent this is if the individual breaks the cycle through relaxation techniques and cognitive monitoring (rational thinking).

Rapee et al. (2023:3) wrote of the impacts anxiety can have on children and adolescents. An impact on academic performance, poorer social performance, higher rates of victimisation, impairments in relationships, and a tendency to have fewer friendships are among those they mentioned.

When examining the brain structure of people who experience high levels of anxiety, Chaudary et al. (2023) note that the amygdala shows structural and functional changes. They also note that, compared to men, women tend to experience more severe symptoms of anxiety, with these symptoms also appearing to be longer-lasting. There also appears to be a correlation between the urban environment and anxiety experiences (De Castro, Cappa & Madans, 2023:85). Anxiety can lead to anxiety disorders, and there are many classifications of anxiety disorders

(Barlow et al., 2017a:157). Thus, if left untreated, anxiety can have long-lasting effects on a person's functioning and has the potential to become a chronic illness later in a person's life.

Neuroscience of Stress and Anxiety

The study of the brain and nervous system is called Neuroscience (Cambridge, 2023). Intense emotional experiences and experiences of threat, like stress and anxiety, activate the limbic system within the brain, specifically the Amygdala (Van Der Kolk, 2014:50, 70; Wentzel, 2023:14). The Amygdala acts as a warning centre within the brain, warning the body of impending danger which activates the body's stress response (Van Der Kolk, 2014:50). This activation signals the release of nerve impulses and stress hormones throughout the body, preparing the body for fight or flight by driving up our blood pressure, heart rate and oxygen intake (Van Der Kolk, 2014:50). This is a temporary reaction, once the brain perceives the threat to be over, the body returns to a normal state of functioning (Van Der Kolk, 2014:54).

The nervous system needs to be activated or de-activated, as is evident from the theories of neuroscience, based on the level of arousal experienced during stress or anxiety (Van Der Kolk, 2014; Porges, 2011; Siegel, 1999; Dezelic & Ghanoum, 2016). Each response requires a different level of regulation. Fight and flight responses both activate the nervous system, increasing heart rate, blood pressure and the release of adrenaline throughout the body (Van Der Kolk, 2014:54). A person experiencing this would need to calm down this activation to return to their regulated state. However, in a freeze response, the muscles tend to immobilise in collapse (Van Der Kolk, 2014:54), resulting in the person experiencing numbness -in emotion, the self, their drive to do anything, etc.- causing everything to feel like it slowed down to a very slow pace (Van Der Kolk, 2014:15). Someone who is caught up in the freeze response would need activation through movement and activation of the muscles in the body to reach a regulated state of being. Both these experiences in the nervous system inhibit or limit the performance of learners in the classroom.

The use of breath and the use of breath's neurological responses are also explained by Van Der Kolk (2014), where the sympathetic nervous system (which activates arousal) is heightened by breathing in, in effect preparing the body for action, whereas the parasympathetic nervous system (which regulates arousal) is brought on by exhaling breath. Both systems fall in the Autonomic nervous system, which is a regulatory system in the human body (Van Der Kolk, 2014). These seemingly simple neurological changes impact behaviour, social interactions, and the presentation of disorders, along with the regulation of the nervous system by incorporating the use of movement, voice, and breathing exercises (Wentzel, 2023:14).

Anxiety activates the sympathetic autonomic response in one's body as a form of a neurological reaction within the body (Levitt, 1967). It connects to brain structures like the Amygdala and the Temporal lobes (Stein, 2015). The Frontal lobe acts as the container for capacities like sitting still, using words (as opposed to acting out), planning and relating to teachers and classmates (to name a few) (Van Der Kolk, 2014:67). Stein (2015) links

anxiety to self-related processing. Self-related processing is the act of a person evaluating or judging something based on perceptual images or mental concepts of yourself (Christoff et al., 2011). Siegel's Window of Tolerance speaks back to these neuroscientific activations and ways of calming the nervous system.

Window of Tolerance

Neuroscience argues for three states of being. The first is highly reactive (hyperarousal and mobilisation), the middle-ground appears to be a "normal" state of functioning (the Window of Tolerance and social engagement), and lastly, a state of minimal reaction (hypoarousal or immobilisation) (Wentzel, 2023:15). When looking at autonomic arousal, I would like to look at the "Window of Tolerance" proposed by Siegel (1999).

The Window of Tolerance theory by Siegel (1999) also forms the basis of how the researcher will determine if the techniques have calmed the nervous system of the learners and achieved a regulated state to promote effective learning. Siegel (1999) proposes that a person can either be hyperaroused or hypoaroused, but the goal is to use breathing techniques and other processes to bring that person back into a state of regulation - the Window of Tolerance - wherein they can take on new information and integrate what they experience and learn around them. Siegel (1999) describes the Window of Tolerance as a state with boundaries. The Window of Tolerance differs for each person. The upper boundary he named hyperarousal, and the lower boundary is named hypoarousal (Siegel, 1999). He argues that when a person's arousal (either up or downward) moves beyond their unique boundaries, this disrupts their thinking and behaviour (Siegel, 1999).

Corrigan, Fisher and Nutt (2010) speak to how an individual has a window between hyperarousal and hypoarousal (refer to Figure 1 below for more detail) wherein emotion can be experienced and integrated in a tolerable fashion, and in a more socially engaged way into the person's life – the Window of Tolerance. The idea of this theory is to help people regulate their arousal, allowing them to move into the Window of Tolerance and successfully stabilise and regulate their current experiences (Corrigan, Fisher & Nutt, 2010).

Siegel (1999) writes that, especially in the early years of a child's development, the brain's development is "experience-dependant". One's neural pathways become strengthened by repeated memories or actions, however, once the activity is neglected or no longer performed, the brain "prunes" that connection (Siegel, 1999). The interplay between genes and experience is another factor that influences these synaptic connections (Siegel, 1999).

Threatening experiences lead to an array of cognitive, emotional and psychological symptoms like fear, negative beliefs about the self (intensifying distressing feelings), numb body sensations, overactive stress response systems, rage, shame, numbing of feelings, and intensified bodily responses (Corrigan, Fisher & Nutt, 2010). Hyper- and hypoarousal happen in response to these experiences as well as when the person merely anticipates this experience (Corrigan, Fisher & Nutt, 2010).

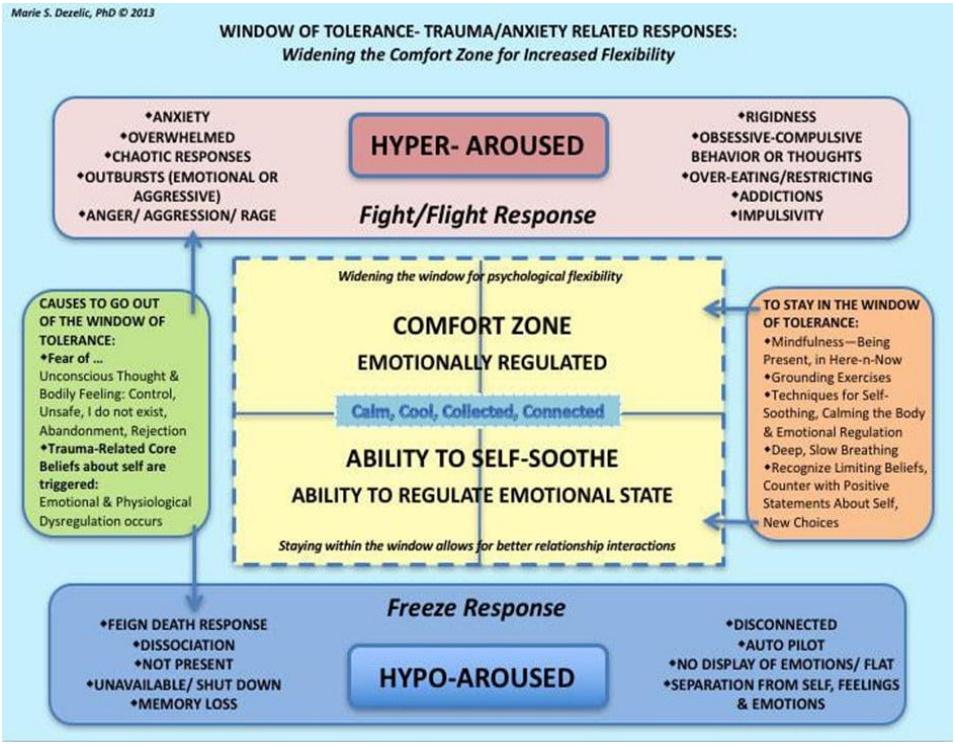


Figure 1: The Window of Tolerance explained through the use of graphics by Dezelic and Ghanoum (2016).

This researcher proposes that Drama Therapy techniques and tools could be used to maintain or re-establish an individual's Window of Tolerance. To understand drama therapy and how to mitigate stress and anxiety, we first need to define it.

Drama Therapy (DT)

DT is defined as the intentional and systemic use of processes from drama or theatre processes to facilitate growth and change on a psychological level by Emunah (1994:3). “The tools are derived from theatre, the goals are rooted in psychotherapy” (Emunah, 1994:3). “DT is the intentional or systematic use of processes involved in drama or theatre to achieve psychological growth and change” (Wentzel, 2023:16). This takes place through the psychotherapeutic relationship (Feniger-Schaal & Orkibi, 2020:68). DT is used for group therapy and individual therapy (Orkibi, 2018:104; Feniger-Schaal & Orkibi, 2020:68).

Drama Therapy with Adolescents

The majority of anxiety and stress cases develop during adolescence, with the main concerns in these individuals being self-confidence and the fear of being judged. Anxiety and stress are also factors these individuals are dealing with during their adolescent years.

Keiller et al. (2023) studied the use of DT and young people's perception of it. They found several themes in this study. Two that stood out for me were the freedom it gives to be creative and have fun and the way that DT is used to regulate emotions (Keiller et al., 2023). Aspects like embodiment, breath work and emotional expression seemed to support the participants in this study in a social experience setting (Keiller et al., 2023). Van Der Kolk (2014:257) speaks to how humans calm their distress through touch, hugging and being rocked – which, in turn, alleviates excessive arousal and helps us feel safe and in control. He continues to note how one's body becomes physically constricted when bound emotions are present in the body (Van Der Kolk, 2014:259). We expend a vast amount of energy suppressing the display of these emotions, accompanied by tightened shoulders and facial muscles (Van Der Kolk, 2014:259). Movement becomes the vessel through which we can release the tension within our bodies, allowing emotions to be released as our breath deepens and the body becomes freer and more expressive (Van Der Kolk, 2014:259). Stress and anxiety are emotional responses; thus, using breath, embodiment, and movement to allow for emotional expression helps the person alleviate the tension that these emotions cause within the body.

Van Der Kolk (2014:398) dedicated an entire chapter to the value of theatre and drama for people who experienced trauma. He specifically writes about his son, who, after being diagnosed with chronic fatigue syndrome, joined a theatre group and how playing different roles allowed him to physically experience what it's like to be someone else in a deeply engrossed way (Van Der Kolk, 2014:398; Wentzel, 2023:26). "Acting is an experience of using your body to take your place in life." is a quote that showcases the power of acting from his observations (Van Der Kolk, 2014:398). In this chapter, Van Der Kolk (2014) examines three theatre groups from different demographics and concludes that theatre is a powerful means of working through trauma and emotional experiences. He discusses how theatre is a means of conveying the truth and sharing it with the audience (Van Der Kolk, 2014:403). When referring back to a theatre group that works with adolescents, he found that the secret is to work slowly and engage them incrementally to initially get them to be more present in the room (Van Der Kolk, 2014:404).

Keiller et al. (2023) also note that young people, specifically adolescents, need to acquire a range of skills to become mature and confident individuals who can meet and overcome the challenges life may present. They note how adolescents are more receptive to learning social skills than their adult counterparts (Keiller et al., 2023). One aspect that is consistently emphasized is the creation of a safe environment for the client in DT; the writers, in particular, note that this is crucial for young people who experience anxiety (Keiller et al., 2023). Keiller et al. (2023) write, "calming the nervous system and supporting participants to remain emotionally regulated is something that drama therapists may wish to actively promote in their sessions" (para. 51), and they also note how this particular aspect needs to be researched even further as the research for this does not exist.

A study by Clonan-Roy, Gross and Jacobs (2021) sought to identify what adolescents needed to feel safe in schools and how these safe spaces can be created for them. In their study, the learners reported that their schools were highly regimented and emotionally restrictive environments, where their emotions were suppressed to maintain efficiency and rationality (Clonan-Roy, Gross, & Jacobs, 2021:330). They suggested creating a

homeplace – a space where learners feel free to rejuvenate and test out methods of resistance (Clonan-Roy, Gross & Jacobs, 2021:332). These spaces are characterised by trust, respect, and support and are designed for individuals to explore their frustrations within the social world and find liberation in constructive ways (Clonan-Roy, Gross, & Jacobs, 2021:333). These spaces also have the following in common: They are informal, have a supportive adult presence, are youth-centred and have a shared affinity (Clonan-Roy, Gross & Jacobs, 2021:346). These spaces being informal and breaking away from the typical classroom set-up is shown in their meeting in circles and not having the typical classroom behaviour like raising your hand or seeking permission to use the bathroom (Clonan-Roy, Gross & Jacobs, 2021:346). There is a necessity to create these spaces of non-judgement and emotional safety when working with the emotional experiences of anxiety and stress.

Studies that have implemented DT techniques in adolescents to help improve their self-confidence and reduce social anxiety include creative storytelling (Rizzi et al., 2020), the use of improvisational theatre (Felsman, Seifert & Himle, 2019) and school-based DT (Mayor &Frydman, 2021).

Emunah (1985) mentioned some resistance towards DT in adolescents. The first reason for this resistance, Emunah (1985:72) states, is that adolescents anticipate ridicule or failure because they are "enormously concerned about their appearance and have a strong need for approval and affirmation from their peers. While craving attention, they dare not risk disapproval by 'standing out'". Secondly, dramatic play is seen as childish, and adolescents want to set up their identity and way of being and make their "mark", by opposing authority (Emunah, 1985:72). The third reason, is the notion of becoming someone else through drama (Emunah. 1985:72). Being someone other than who they are is fearsome, because of their struggle and search for identity during this phase of life; thus they will resist this activity (Emunah, 1985:73). To work with these challenges and to navigate this constructively, Emunah (1985) proposed three phases for the drama therapist to navigate when working with adolescents. In phase one, the goal is to minimise resistance, phase two is all about getting involved in the drama and playing with spontaneity and enthusiasm, though some disruptions do occur, and the third phase is where the engagement is stable enough from the adolescents to maintain the therapeutic direction without the previous disruption or resistance (Emunah, 1985:73).

The following studies did work based on DT with adolescents and achieved great success:

While Rizzi et al. (2020) focused on building self-confidence and trust in adolescents, their intention was to provide these adolescents with tools to interact with peers and enhance their self-confidence. That is exactly what this study has achieved. They developed social skills through the use of a creative story-telling workshop (Rizzi et al., 2020:7). During adolescence, they noted a significant drop in self-confidence that can be observed, and they reiterated the fact that adolescence is a turbulent time in terms of the development of disorders (Rizzi et al., 2020:2). Thus they emphasized that this is a critical time to implement preventative measures and interventions to enhance mental health, coping strategies and resilience in their learners (Rizzi et al, 2020:7). Their study improved several factors involved in self-confidence, including learning and speaking (Rizzi et al., 2020:7).

Felsman, Seifert and Himle (2019) looked at the use of improvisational theatre training in the treatment of SAD. To them, improvisation is an activity that rewards the development of skills in interpersonal situations (Felsman, Seifert & Himle, 2019:112). The key component of improvisation is the intentionally uncertain nature of it and the way it focuses on what happens from one moment to the next, which makes it very applicable and valuable to promote mental health in those with SAD (Felsman, Seifert & Himle, 2019:112). It is very useful in reducing levels of social anxiety because of its exposure to experiences where social performance is required (Felsman, Seifert & Himle, 2019:112). Felsman, Seifert, and Himle's (2019:115)) study, "The Improv Project", showcased a reduction in social anxiety among participants, along with increases in social skills, hope, creative self-efficacy, comfort performing for others, and a willingness to make mistakes, and a decrease in symptoms of stress. Participants in this study also noted the usefulness of this intervention in various areas of their day-to-day lives and recommended the study to others (Felsman, Seifert, & Himle, 2019:115). While chronic absenteeism was present in their study, the students who expressed the most engagement showed signs of increased social skills, a willingness to make mistakes, and increased feelings of self-efficacy (Felsman, Seifert & Himle, 2019:116).

Mayor and Frydman (2020) identified the core processes of DT within schools. These are: "dramatic projection, playing, role, embodiment, empathy & distancing, active witnessing, life-drama connection, transformation, and triangular relationship" (p. 1). When comparing these core processes with Jones' (1996) nine core principles, some differences that do occur in that Mayor and Frydman (2020;1) include role and triangular relationship, whereas Jones (1996) include interactive audience, personification and impersonation, as well as therapeutic performance process (Wentzel, 2023:29). These core processes acted as the basis for client change (Mayor & Frydman, 2020:2). DT in school-based programs has shown great success in treating developmental disabilities, children on the autism spectrum and students exposed to adverse experiences (Mayr & Frydman, 2020:2). Drama therapists also provide great amounts of socio-emotional support (Mayor & Frydman, 2020:3) which is something learners with anxiety, stress and SAD are in desperate need of.

Drama Therapy and Stress and Anxiety

Some specific studies regarding DT used with clients who experience stress and anxiety showed more promise than conventional psychotherapeutic approaches.

Mondolfi-Miguel and Pino-Juste (2020) conducted their study to determine the efficacy of DT in treating anxiety. Their DT intervention consisted of 20 sessions, each 2 hours long, where each session included a warm-up, action, and sharing the stage (Mondolfi-Miguel & Pino-Juste, 2020:1275). The warm-up was designed to create rapport and prepare the participants for the action stage, during which they had to role-play situations that caused them anxiety (Mondolfi-Miguel & Pino-Juste, 2020:1275). This was followed by the sharing stage, which, in essence, reflected the drama session (Mondolfi-Miguel & Pino-Juste, 2020:1275). These reflections aimed to uncover the deeper meaning behind actions and anxieties (Mondolfi-Miguel & Pino-Juste, 2020:1275). This intervention included various techniques, as mentioned in the article (Mondolfi-Miguel & Pino-Juste, 2020). Their

study found that these techniques reduced anxiety and depression, while also increasing physical well-being and improving communication competencies (Mondolfi-Miguel & Pino-Juste, 2020:1295).

Sheesley, Pfeffer and Barish (2016) noted the value of improvisational theatre and comedy DT for people with anxiety. They argue that there is a stigma associated with mental health treatment and mental illness and that improv wellness groups, focusing on comedy and comedic techniques, may attract more persons suffering from anxiety, who would not normally be forthcoming about their mental state (Sheesley, Pfeffer & Barish, 2016:159). Their therapeutic techniques focused on group therapy and specifically on individuals with social anxiety (Sheesley, Pfeffer & Barish, 2016). They concluded that improvisational theatre needs to be further explored with this group of clients, but that it may be beneficial to individuals dealing with anxiety in silence when used in a wellness group setting (Sheesley, Pfeffer, & Barish, 2016:176).

A study done by Abeditehrani et al. (2020:14) showed success in the reduction of the fear of negative social evaluation as well as other anxiety symptoms. Their study also focused on group therapy consisting of 12 sessions (2.5 hours each) where they implemented Cognitive Behavioral Psychodrama Therapy (CBPT) (Abeditehrani et al., 2020:14). These researchers used a protocol developed by Heimberg and Becker in 2002 for CBPT (Abeditehrani et al., 2020:8). Much like Mondolfi-Miguel and Pino-Juste (2020:1275), Abeditehrani et al. (2020:7), also followed the warm-up, action and sharing stages. They employed techniques such as double, role reversal, soliloquy, empty chair, role play, and mirroring in their therapeutic protocol. CBT, however, falls outside of the teacher's scope of training. CBT is a specialised technique used by psychologists in their practice (Wentzel, 2023:30). Therefore, this researcher further argues for the use of DT techniques and principles, as these are more closely aligned with the educational sphere and linked with the arts subjects already being taught in schools.

DT can be used as a tool to help the teacher support learners through co-regulation and social engagement in experiencing the Window of Tolerance (Porges, 2011; Siegel, 1999). DT techniques that could lessen the effect of these symptoms include body scanning, breathwork through vocalisation and sound, and grounding techniques (like focusing on their feet on the ground, feeling the textures beneath their hands and using their 5 senses to ground the learner in the space they are in), which all aid in slowing down a person's heart rate and help regulate breathing (Keiller et al., 2023). Simply moving one's body, or embodiment, also helps with regulation; Van der Kolk (2014:259) notes how movement helps the body release tension and become more emotionally expressive. These are some of the drama therapy techniques that teachers could potentially implement in their classrooms to aid learners in achieving a state of nervous system regulation, which, in turn, may enable them to achieve greater success in the senior-phase classroom.

DT involves techniques and principles and has been shown to be successful when working with adolescents (Wentzel, 2023). It has also been used to treat mental health issues like anxiety and stress. Notably, the need to slow down dramatic processes with adolescents is paramount, and practitioners and teachers need to keep this

in mind when using DT techniques with this audience. The various techniques would have to be carefully selected to fit the purpose or goal of the session and serve the goal set.

Understanding the context of the person in the therapy space is also an important component of therapy's success. Understanding the context of a client or individual will inform the processes or techniques used in therapy or interventions.

Why The Focus on Embodiment, Ritual and Dramatic Projection?

Phil Jones (1996) wrote about nine core principles within DT that are set to explain how a Drama Therapist structures their sessions and what the purpose of the particular exercise is. I chose to focus on two of those principles: Embodiment and Dramatic Projection. I also focus on Emunah's (1994) idea of Ritual within DT for this study. Jones' nine core principles include dramatic projection, therapeutic performance process, drama therapeutic empathy and distancing, personification and impersonation, interactive audience and witnessing, embodiment, playing, life-drama connection and transformation (Jones, 1996:99). To provide further context as to my choices, let's look at each of these concepts separately;

<u>Embodiment</u>

Embodiment is the physical expression of present issues through bodily movement and sculpture (Jones, 1996:113; Wentzel, 2023:24). By doing so, the client explores social, personal, and political influences and their impact on the body (Jones, 1996:115). The body is also often described as a means of communication between the self and others, on both conscious and unconscious levels (Jones, 1996:113). Physical changes, brought about by alterations in bodily movements, liberate individuals from their usual patterns and ways of being, thereby opening up new possibilities for being and relating to others (Jones, 1996:114). Thus, it is argued that behaviour can influence thoughts, and new behaviours can lead to new thought processes.

Ryu (2024:98) supports this notion with the idea of embodied cognition. Embodied Cognition posits that one's cognition (thoughts and consciousness) is greatly influenced by the body's interactions with the environment as well as the body's physical movements, shaping the interaction and perceptions of the person (Ryu, 2024:98). Ryu (2024:99) also notes how mirrors play a significant role when discussing embodied cognition and how a person develops embodied cognition through self-recognition. Mirroring and mimicking activities and techniques are proposed as a way to influence a person's emotional understanding through the feedback between the brain and muscles when copying another person (Ryu, 2024:102).

Armstrong et al. (2016:30) note that by encouraging clients to focus on bodily-felt sensations and experiences, they gain higher levels of positive change and experiencing of the content. They state that dramatic embodiment looks at physical expression specifically (Armstrong et al., 2016:31). Embodiment is the heightened or altered

use of the body, physically moving the body (Armstrong et al., 2016:30). By using dramatic embodiment, an element of sustained expression and processing is achieved (Armstrong et al., 2016:30).

Armstrong et al. (2016:30) also noted that both embodiment and dramatic projection are observable processes that can be found in many different forms of DT and may even occur simultaneously.

Dramatic Projection

According to Armstrong et al. (2016:31), dramatic projection refers to the expression of inner material. It is the way the client externalises an aspect of their inner experience onto dramatic material or objects (like dolls, puppets, masks, or stories). The engagement with dramatic projection is intentional and involves the use of imagination (Armstrong et al., 2016:32).

Jones (1996:101) defines dramatic projection as the act of projecting aspects of the self or experiences into enactment or other theatrical and dramatic materials. The goal of this projection is to externalise inner conflicts and generate a new perspective or representation of the clients' issues (Jones, 1996:101).In DT, this is achieved through play with small objects, the creation of scenery, enacting myths, or taking on a fictional role or character (Jones, 1996:101). Dramatic projection creates a new representation of the material the client is dealing with (Jones, 1996:101), externalising it and providing a new insight into the issue at hand.

Projective techniques allow for a distanced approach by using inanimate objects, giving the person freedom and a safe space to project their feelings, wishes, thoughts and fears onto the object (Landy, 1994). Projective techniques can also include letter writing, invention of characters or writing of stories (Rudel, 2020:19). Projective techniques create space for visual, auditory and tactile sensory inputs while simultaneously creating distance between the client and the chosen content being worked with (Rudel, 202:19-20).

Both these core principles (as well as the other seven proposed by Jones) find themselves held by the ritual of the DT space. But what is Ritual, and why does it play such a cardinal role in DT rooms?

Ritual

Jennings (1995:15) writes that rituals have dramatic and performative elements where people change roles within a set-apart space. it is a symbolic action (Jennings, 1995:15). "Ritual is society's larger-than-life symbolic representation of the world through multiple media. It can both stimulate and accommodate change" (Jennings, 1995:17). Ritual is the series of repeated actions which can range from our daily habits to engrained habits we unconsciously carry out as codes of behaviour (Schrader, 2012:34). Ritual becomes an important vessel to elicit safety, it is intrinsic to the way we live because of the consistency it brings allowing a safe space to foster (Schrader, 2012:35).

Emunah (1994:21) notes that dramatic rituals were ways in which communities confronted their fears, prepared for life events, spread hope, and celebrated joys, all while establishing a sense of control and empowerment. In DT, one of the most prominent rituals is starting and ending sessions in a circle, which connotes the cyclical stages within a

group setting (Emunah, 1994:23). It is also said to intensify the connection between group members and create a sense of unity (Emunah, 1994:23).

To me, ritual can be likened to routine. The Cambridge Dictionary (Cambridge, 2025) defines Routine as “a usual or fixed way of doing things”. This implies a chosen or learnt action that a person follows every day or with each particular activity. hence the addition to the study. This researcher is focused on the rituals/ routines the teachers can set up within their classrooms to facilitate a safe learning space. The ritual acts as a container for learning and also explores what rituals are used to mitigate stress and anxiety responses in the classroom.

In summary, DT has been studied and implemented in schools in previous studies; however, it has always been done by a qualified drama therapist. No studies showed teachers working with these techniques, not as therapists but in an adapted manner. These studies showed success in helping mitigate mental health concerns and helping the teenager adjust and become an integrated member of the school. I have to note that none of these studies were done in South Africa, and very few were done in developing countries. This research will focus only on dramatic projection, ritual, and embodiment techniques. The next chapter addresses the exact methodology this researcher followed.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This research was conducted using Participatory Action Research (PAR) with three participants over a period of three workshops. I approached the principal of the school from where my participants originated. The principal introduced the study to all her teachers and sent out the participant information sheet. From there, the participants reached out to me personally to participate in this study. The participants were both male and female teachers at the same school, teaching grades seven to nine. They teach varying subjects (English, Mathematics, Life Skills and Science). The participants also had different cultural backgrounds and ethnicities (White, Indian, and Black). For context, in the next chapters' discussions, Participant A (PA) teaches English (White male), Participant B (PB) teaches science and SEL (Social Emotional Learning) (Black female), and Participant C (PC) teaches Mathematics (Indian female).

Workshops were captured on a video camera, which acted as one source of data for this study. The videos were transcribed before data analysis. The second form of data collection was participant journals, which were collected on February 19, 2025. The participants were encouraged to journal daily about their classroom experiences, observations, and the use of DT techniques throughout the study.

PAR is a method used to facilitate research through active participation from participants involved in the study (Feekery, 2023:333). The participant becomes a novice participant-researcher, collaborating with the main researcher in the study to bring forth new data (Feekery, 2023:338). This research modality is unique in its collaborative nature wherein the research is initially planned, but the scope allows for adaptations and modifications of data collection methods and research questions as the context of the study plays a role in influencing these outcomes (Feekery, 2023:333). Its aim is to facilitate change through action while gaining a better understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Feekery, 2023:333).

PAR is premised on the idea that experience can be a basis for knowledge and that experiential learning leads to new knowledge, or knowledge that influences practice (Baum, MacDougall & Smith, 2006:854). PAR takes place in research cycles where a problem is defined, action is taken, observations are done on the action, a reflection of the action's benefit is done, and the problem gets redefined, and the cycle starts again from action onwards (Cornish et al., 2023). Its cyclical nature, allowing the researchers and participants to plan, test, reflect and re-plan or re-trial interventions or strategies to facilitate change (Feekery, 2023; Oosthuizen, 2002), was best suited to my research as I aimed to implement and test drama therapy techniques within classroom settings, hoping to minimise the feelings of anxiety among learners during their classroom explorations and experiences. Action research can have multiple cycles wherein a plan is turned into action, results are generated, and the reflection on those results indicates changes which will then be implemented, results generated and so on (Oosthuizen, 2002). This research followed this cyclical process through three workshops.

The first workshop took place on 26 November 2024, with the aim of introducing DT and the three main concepts (ritual, embodiment and projection) as well as starting the planning process for implementation within the first few weeks of the new school year in 2025. The layout of the session was as follows:

1. Introduce the journals and expectations of how to journal

2. Discuss what Rituals they currently employ in their classrooms and how well they deem them to work. Plan different (or similar) rituals to implement in the new school year.
3. Embodied exercise: how do learners typically enter into, behave in and leave your classroom? How would you like them to behave? What does the ideal scenario look like? Embodied exercises or explorations imply that the participants physically embodied actions, they involved their whole body during the exercise or exploration, enrolling themselves in the play.
4. Watch videos of classroom behaviour and ask them to note the behaviours. Have a discussion on what they noticed and how often they see this in their own classrooms.
5. Discuss the behaviours from the videos. Do they notice the anxiety and stress responses from the learners in the videos? Explain that these are the behaviours the researcher wants them to journal about and note when implementing DT techniques.

The 2nd workshop took place on the 5th of February 2025, three weeks into the new school year. This workshop's focus was on explaining the Window of Tolerance theory and identifying DT techniques that the teachers could implement in their classrooms to help bring their learners into the Window of Tolerance. The workshop was laid out as follows:

1. How have the first few weeks been with the new rituals? Have they worked or not, and why?
2. What would you like to do differently, and how well (on a scale of 1-10) did you feel you did when implementing these new rituals?
3. What does a regulated child look like to you (embodied exploration through role play)?
4. What anxiety or stress behaviours have you noted in your classrooms these last few weeks? Did you notice different behaviours in neuro-divergent learners? Neurodivergence is a term to describe the different ways in which people process information and typically refers to people with diagnoses of ADHD, autism and learning disabilities (Baumer & Frueh, 2021)
5. Using the graphic from this paper, explain the Window of Tolerance theory.
6. Discuss what they have been using in their classrooms to regulate the learners.
7. Experiment with and experience DT techniques that could help facilitate the Window of Tolerance in their classrooms (breathing exercises, grounding exercises, projective techniques to track understanding and comprehension, or to note memory capabilities, mirroring, body scans)

The third and final workshop, which took place on 19 February 2025, focused on reflection and feedback from the participants about the techniques they implemented and how well they worked (or did not work) to achieve the Window of Tolerance or regulation for their learners. This session also provided the participants with the opportunity to provide feedback about how they adapted the techniques to suit their classroom spaces and the demands of their subjects.

Finally, the researcher used thematic analysis, as specified by Braun and Clark (2006), to identify the themes discussed in the next chapters. Thematic analysis is a method used to identify, analyse, and report themes (or patterns) within a data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The steps include the following: 1. Familiarise yourself with the

data, 2. Generate initial codes, 3. Search for themes, 4. Review themes, 5. Define and name themes, and 6. Produce a report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes were found in the transcripts of video recordings as well as the participants' reflective journals. The researcher then followed the steps as laid out by Braun and Clarke (2006) in their article to synthesise themes (frequently occurring thoughts and ideas, or reflections linking with the research questions) from the data collected and link them with relevant literature in an attempt to answer the research questions. The journals and transcribed data from the videos were analysed, and themes linked to the three DT techniques studied—Ritual, Dramatic Projection, and Embodiment—were identified. Each of these is discussed over the next three chapters, with reference to new and relevant literature.

Results:

This study found three main themes: 1. The use of ritual, embodiment, and dramatic projection in the senior-phase classroom, and 2. The importance of space, and 3. Regulation. Most of the coding for the regulation theme came from the journals, while space and the use of the techniques' coding came from the videos and journals equally. In the next chapters, I will discuss each theme and the sub-themes identified within each from the data analysis. Chapter 4 will discuss the use of ritual, embodiment, and dramatic projection in the senior-phase classroom, Chapter 5 will discuss space, and Chapter 6 will discuss the efficacy of the techniques regarding regulation.

Chapter 4: The Senior-Phase Classroom and the Use of Ritual, Embodiment and Dramatic Projection

This study explored the use of Ritual, Embodiment and Dramatic Projection in the senior-phase classroom. Ritual and Embodiment seemed to have more success in the classroom than Dramatic Projection, and the consensus was that they were easier to implement and integrate into their classroom spaces. The discussion that follows elaborates on how these techniques found their way into the classroom space.

1. Ritual in the senior-phase classroom

Ritual in the world of DT helps foster a sense of safety and containment for therapy to take place, according to Emunah (1994:21). It forms the basis for rapport and builds a safe space for the client to freely explore their concerns or why they came to therapy. This researcher explored the role of ritual in the senior-phase classroom and how it could potentially foster safer learning environments.

Ritual in the form of class rules

In schools, many teachers have class rules to maintain order and to set expectations for the learners for their classroom spaces (Haas, 2024). When workshopping around the idea of ritual and what that would mean in the teaching space, a lot was said about classroom rules. The rules the teachers lay out at the beginning of the year and instil in their learners to follow throughout the year. These teachers have their class rules that they formed from their years of experience. The workshops did elicit conversations about how these rules and rituals have influenced classroom behaviour;

> PC: “I wanna do some sort of thing where at the end of the lesson, almost like how you said, you have a summary that you really put on the board, but some sort of five minutes that I allocate in my lesson because normally you're finishing and then they leave. Where they can say, what did they learn in that lesson? And then even if it's a small, something, whether it's gonna be a constant book that they keep, or they write a paper that I've acted in at the end of the lesson, what did you learn today? Write it down and give it to me.”

> PB Journal: “Pupils seemed a bit more organised and knowing what to do on entering the classroom.”

These two excerpts speak about classroom expectations, like writing down areas of coursework they struggle with (the learners) and how the class rules dictate how they enter and leave the class. It also helps the teacher maintain a routine within the class and create safety within the routine by setting up these class rules. Similarly, in DT, rules create safety and containment for the games played (Jones,1996:177). Playing and playfulness ultimately need rules to create safety in play and to set boundaries for how far the play could go. Similarly, in the classroom space, rules form the container for a safe learning environment and open interactions to further enhance the learning experience for the learner.

Establishing rituals in the classroom

Something worth mentioning is that the participants had already established routines before the research commenced. At the time of the first workshop, the learners were all writing their end-of-the-year exams. So, in effect, there were about five weeks of implementation of new rituals or adapted rituals in the new year. This did result in workshop discussions revolving around how much time is needed to establish new rituals (for the teacher themselves and the learners), especially when some of the learners are very much used to the way they have “always done things”.

The workshops did allow for the participants to re-evaluate and assess their “status quo” and experiment with new ways of doing things, as PC reported;

> PC: “So I've actually… in maths, you always start the lesson with a checking moment. So, I've done it completely differently this year. I haven't yet checked homework. It changes the whole mood because you don't get angry. The child is not feeling intimidated at all, because right in the beginning, you check homework, and

> then they haven't done it. The whole lesson, they are like, they're hiding in themselves, and they're feeling embarrassed, or whatever. So I've changed it… I have collected books and marked. Because they're fine to give you that. Because then they're giving it to you, and you're seeing it on your own… Now there's no like, fear that I do come in, they do want to greet me, they do want to be in my class. Like that, I feel just a little bit different."

This removal of "pressure" by changing the way homework was checked in the maths classroom resulted in learners having a more positive attitude and experience in the classroom. By removing elements that cause stress and anxiety, one can easily change the atmosphere in a particular space (Bledsoe & Baskin, 2014). PC's response above clearly shows this result.

PA wrote in his journal;

> PA Journal: 15 Jan. 2025 "I explained that I would like them to come inside and sit down immediately. This might take some time." 16 Jan. 2025 "I had to remind them of the expectation to come inside, sit down and take out their books immediately. this will probably take some time."

This shows how rituals can take time to become rituals. In the beginning, they are a set of expectations or habits, but with time, they become a ritual, an expected part of everyday existence in a particular space (Davis-Floyd & Laughlin, 2022) much like PA wrote, it took time for his learners to establish the entrance ritual into his classroom. It is safe to say that rituals need to be established with purpose and by continual reminding of expectations and actions within the classroom. and sometimes, re-evaluating the "norm" can result in positive changes within the classroom space.

<u>The ritual of entering and leaving</u>

From this study, it became clear that the way the learners entered and left the classroom had an impact on the quality of learning they experienced in the classroom. if it was disorganised, chaotic and frantic, the learners themselves had those feelings throughout the class. However, as can be seen in the quotes below, when there is an intention behind how learners enter and leave the class, the entire atmosphere changes. I quote PA's responses on the matter as he started implementing the same "entrance" rituals that the other participants have been using and found the following results;

> PA: "They come inside straight away and sit down. And I have, like, some extra time at the end. So then I can wrap things up nicely. They can all pack up nicely. And then, I ask them to stand at their desks. And wait to greet me at the end."

> PA Journal: "My classes are starting to settle in very nicely. the entering procedure is quite well established now."

> PA Journal: "I am noticing that I consistently have five minutes at the end of the lesson to summarise the main points and end off calmly. I think the new entering and exiting procedure has helped greatly with this. The way they leave makes such a difference."

For PA, the way the learners entered and exited his room became much more controlled and calm. Though it took time at the beginning, the learners found themselves in a space where they knew how the class would start. The end of class was no longer a surprise announced by the bell, and they had the opportunity to integrate the new knowledge in a calm fashion. Having that time to integrate new knowledge in a calm and controlled manner correlates with memory and the ability to recall the information at a later date (Van Der Kolk, 2014:248).

Though I did not explicitly name all the rules and rituals the participants used in their classrooms, it has become clear that some form of ritual existed before the study began; it was merely seen as rules or procedures previously. Renaming them as rituals did not change the function they serve in the classroom and their ability to create a safe space for learning. Through exploring the rules teachers set up in their classes but intentionally reframing them as rituals for this study, I noticed that the shift gave different meanings to teachers' use of the rules in their classes. Rules have long formed an integral part of classroom management, but reframing them as rituals elicited conversations and thinking about the intentionality behind the ritual. It no longer became a list of rules to follow but rather intentional rituals implemented with the goal of creating more regulated classroom spaces.

2. Embodiment in the senior-phase classroom

Embodiment proved to be one that flowed very easily into the classroom space, as PA noted: “Breathing, shaking out… those for me felt very intuitive and natural, and maybe just like slight changes on some things that you may have done in the past or just introducing them in a different way to the way you’ve done them in the past”. Embodiment techniques were familiar to the participants to some extent, and the aim of the workshops was to determine which techniques would work best in the senior-phase classroom. Embodiment also leaned greatly toward techniques that could be used spontaneously and bring calm and regulation into the classroom. This was quite evident, as is discussed in the following section

Embodied explorations for stress and Anxiety

This study’s main focus was on the reduction of stress and anxiety symptoms through the use of DT techniques to facilitate nervous system regulation for the participants’ learners. What was quite prominent in the data was the use of embodied processes like breathing and shaking out limbs when dealing with tests or results of assessments;

> PC: “...the shake out helps because I get their tests back, I did that, and they get their test back, and then they're all so anxious before they leave because they're worried… that kind of relieves it, it's okay, the moment is over, okay you're writing another test you will be fine…”
>
> PA Journal: “I had the kids close their eyes and do some calming breathing. Longer exhales than inhales. This definitely helped to bring them into a calm space before handing back their speech rubrics.”
>
> PC Journal: “Test given back. nervous. used the shake-out method. learners stood, deep breath, shake out hands and feet. Get over anxious feeling.”

Van Der Kolk (2014) extensively writes about the benefits of breathing and moving the body to alleviate anxiety and stress responses within the person’s nervous system. It is also clear from the quotes above that these techniques were easily implemented, with success in the classrooms during moments that could elicit anxiety or stress responses in the learners.

The body and breath

Breath had great benefits in alleviating stress and anxiety when the learners received marks or results for assessments. This study also showed that breath has more benefits in the classroom. As reported below, breath was one of the easiest embodied techniques that the teachers were able to implement in their classrooms to bring their learners into a Window of Tolerance.

> PA: “So, did a bit of that, um, methodical breathing… But, even right from day one of teaching, it's just like breathe. Like, take a second, and everybody just close your eyes, and just breathe, for a second. All the little ones, always then, go like (deep nasally breath, exaggerated over-the-top breath in, and loud exhale out).”
>
> PB: “So I did do the breathing exercises, but it’s part of because I’m teaching SEL. So that’s my grade sevens that I teach.”
>
> PC Journal: “Breathing- controlled. Helped settle.”

It was also one of the techniques that the learners accepted and could integrate easily. PB said, “They were like ‘Oh ma’am, we know breathing exercises’, so I asked them why they don't use them more often…” when asked about how well it worked for the learners during a workshop. What also became evident was that the teachers were aware of some of the breathing techniques but had struggled (or forgotten) to implement them in their classrooms before the study. I would argue that the workshops created a space for the participants to explore the use of breathing exercises more intentionally, resulting in calmer, more regulated learners in their classrooms (to be discussed further in chapter six). This once again echoes writing by Pillay, Patel and Stlhare-Kajee (2023;8) which state that teachers can only handle psychosocial issues (like anxiety and stress) in their classrooms through continuous training.

Van Der Kolk (2014) and others (Draper-Clarke, 2022) write about the power of breath to activate and calm the nervous system. These two functions seem perpetually linked, ,so it makes sense that introducing breathing

exercises in class would result in the collective student body (in that classroom at the time) being more regulated and finding some form of grounding or calm. This would result in lessons where both the learners and teacher are in a regulated space to teach and learn new content.

Energising the body

One of the key elements in Siegel's (1999) theory of the Window of Tolerance is the idea of hypo-arousal. A state where the individual is "zoned out", apathetic, uninterested and "not fully there". In those times, Seigel (1999) calls for the activation of the nervous system as a way to "wake up" the individual into the Window of Tolerance to fully integrate new knowledge and experiences.

On several occasions, the participants spoke about using different techniques to get their learners more involved in the lesson at hand. Here are some examples where the teachers used bodily activation as a tool to get more engagement in their lessons and bring more learners into a state of active participation in the lesson;

> PB: "Or, just changing the activity. Um, I was doing an activity with grade sevens, they were, it was the last lesson, they were tired, they were, they were not present, so, so what I, I did with them, was, I gave them a different activity, where they had to get up and run around the class. Yeah. And then, afterwards, then they were able to sit down and concentrate."

> PA Journal: "I had the grade 7s stand up and shake out their limbs before reading. This seemed to help, and I had a couple more reading today".

> PA Journal: "I was reading with my one grade 8 class, and I felt I had to get some energy into them. I made them all stand, shake out their limbs and make funny noises with their mouths. then we did some energising breathing. I think this definitely lifted the energy in the room and improved the quality of the reading and thus their marks."

Playing games and using them as a tool to get to know the learners or to create a change of pace in the teaching realm also worked well in the senior phase;

> PB: "When I said, okay, let's go outside. Let's go play a game. They've got a different. And then outside, depending on the type of game, if it's fun, then they enjoy it. And they don't want to stop. There is no stopping them once they enjoy something…When they are playing the game, you have to wait until the next lesson to say, okay, what did we do? Do you remember that game? And then you, what did you notice? And then you can discuss it. Not in the same lesson. Yeah. It's impossible."

> PB Journal: "We played a game to get to know each other, and the pupils seemed to get a burst of energy. They even carried on playing after the bell rang, and I had to stop them."

Playing as a core principle proposed by Jones (1996) became evident in this theme. Playing as a principle holds space for exploration with different objects, toys and games (Jones, 1996:117). Its link to the person's developmental and expressive continuum is noteworthy (Jones, 1996;116). Playing is also not just for children; it might appear differently in adults' expressions of play (Jones, 1996:115). By playing games, the body gets activated, but with the specific purpose of playing the game at hand. It created a change in the "normal" class routine while serving a purpose in the classroom for the teacher at that point in time.

As is evident in the quotations, the participants found value in encouraging their learners to move their bodies and finding different ways to bring them into the classroom space mentally and physically. This allowed for better teaching experiences and provided a fun and interactive way for learners to interact with the teacher and the content at hand.

Embodiment to explore subject content

PA and PB journaled about the use of embodiment as a way to explore and teach subject content;

> PA Journal: "I had all the kids stand up and try to embody different emotions with their body posture. Some kids are quite hesitant. others fully embraced the task. As the emotions go on, the kids seem to loosen up a bit."

PB Journal: “Pupils completed the worksheet and practised and performed their dialogue using non-verbal communication. It was a lively and interactive lesson.”

PB Journal: “There was time in the lesson to practise mindfulness. We did the 4-2-6 breathing exercise.”

These responses were for SEL and English subjects, which led me to think that some techniques fit better into certain subjects. Others, like maths and science, proved to be challenging when implementing embodied explorations of content. This reminded me of an Applied Drama modality developed by Dorothy Heathcote called Process Drama. The premise of process drama is learning through dramatic play (Dunn, 2016: 128). The notion of using the learner’s own body and experiences to facilitate learning through embodied exploration has shown to be effective in Heathcote’s work, as well as through this study where the “dramatic” was used to teach in a mainstream classroom. PA’s journal entry upon reflecting on the workshops and this study shows that this is a tool that could continually be useful in the classroom space;

PA Journal: “Reflecting on all of the workshops, I can say that I will certainly continue to adapt the following things in my classroom… embodying moods, concepts and other things with body language.”

Exploring subject content through embodiment also reminds me of Jones’ core principle of interactive audience and witnessing. Interactive audience and witnessing be broken down into two parts. Witnessing is the act of being an audience to yourself or others when interacting with dramatic material (Jones, 1996:112). In the case of this core principle, the audience is not a formal observer who stays out of the dramatic moment; rather, the audience member is interactive (Jones, 1996:112). This principle thus brings the notion forth of witnessing others, witnessing the self and being witnessed by others all at the same time in a therapeutic space (Jones, 1996:112). The explorations of emotions and non-verbal communication in the examples provided by the participants held both these ideas. The learners could witness each other while integrating new knowledge for themselves about these concepts. This, I believe, added value to the learners’ learning experience and broke free from the “status quo” as well.

Embodiment during workshops to explore classroom behaviour

The research workshops were designed to be interactive, using the techniques in the workshop itself before the participants went and applied them in their classrooms. One of the embodied explorations we did in the workshops was to look at behaviours they observed in their classrooms. Here are some of the workshop moments noting that;

PA: “(1. slouching over the table, uninterested. Leaning his head on one arm. Fiddling with objects on the table. Grabbing his pen and writing something with the free hand./ 2. turning around pretending to talk to a friend behind them).”

PB: “(1. moved her chair closer to the desk. Sat with her head on top of her hands, arms on the table. Her hands become a headrest/ 2. turning around in the chair facing away from the teacher/ 3. tapping the kid next to her, trying to get their attention/ 4. embodying a child getting up and looking for their bag, verbalising the search for the bag) ‘Where's my bag?’ You're teaching. The lesson has started... They've already taken out the books, but somehow. Still looking for something.”

PC: “(slouching backwards into the chair. Hands hanging by her sides. Staring up at the ceiling.) There's that learner that always, like (looking around), making eye contact with others, looking at others. Never just their own space.”

These embodied experiences showcased how learners would typically enter the classroom or sit down before the class starts. It showcased a wide range of learners, as is normal in the classroom. It also did a very good job of showcasing Siegel’s (1999) Window of Tolerance theory in terms of behavioural traits. Hyper-arousal traits can be seen in fidgeting, looking at peers, talking to others and not paying attention, and searching for books and other things, while hypoarousal can be witnessed in behaviours like slouching, not taking out books, apathy, leaning on the table or sleeping, avoiding eye contact.

When asked to embody the “ideal” learner in the classroom, this one interaction between the therapist and PA stood out;

PA: (walking into the class from the door, confident, pep-in-his-step) Hello, ma’am (sits down and places books on the table, all the while confident with a smile. The researcher -as the teacher- and A had a bit of dialogue):

R: Good morning.
A: How are you?
R: Good, thanks and you?
A: Good.
R: That's good. Is your homework done?
A: Yes, of course. (fiddling with the pages ever so slightly, setting the book down “perfectly”)
R: Was there anything you struggled with?
A: Only one question, ma'am.
R: And how did you handle that?
A: I left it out. (avoiding eye contact, staring at the ceiling)
R: You left it out. Did you try, though?
A: No, I left it blank. I thought I would just ask in class.
R: Okay, that's fair. But the rest of the questions were they fine?
A: It was good, they were easy.
R: Okay.

This interaction showed how the ideal child appears grounded, they did their best with their homework and came into class with a positive attitude. Inadvertently, this is the teacher’s expectation of how all learners should act. It is the ideal. Is it realistic? No. Not all learners will be as this example shows. But that makes them human. What is evident is that this learner was an active participant. Eager to learn, full of energy. This showcases what Siegel (1999) calls the Window of Tolerance, wherein learning can take place.

3. Dramatic projection (DP) in the senior-phase classroom

This proved to be the most difficult and least intuitive core process and technique to implement in the classroom space. It only ever found efficacy in the shape of a metaphorical check-in in the senior phase classrooms of my participants.

DP as a check-in

Dramatic projection as a core process (Jones, 1996:100) requires the client to take on different roles or play with objects as a way of creating distance between the content and the person. Creating safety. This researcher wanted to explore the distance that metaphors and reframing could give the teacher or the learner to express moments of stress or anxiety, potentially even difficulty with subject content.

PA had the most success in using DP as a tool to check in with his learners, though, as he noted below, it mainly worked best in a group setting, but he could not reach each client on an individual basis;

> PA: “Difficult one for me was like check-in as they come in the door on an individual basis. So, I found it easy to do as a group, but on an individual basis, it would just take way too much time. And yeah, maybe the way I did it that was maybe just felt a bit ineffective. Like I wasn't getting an accurate read on each child.”
>
> PA Journal: “I asked the classes to tell me what animal they would be if they could choose any and why. I find this to be a nice ice-breaker at the beginning of the year.”
>
> PA: “I have like asked them to describe how they are feeling like with the weather or something like that. But I can't say that I've done anything major when it comes to their work and assessing their, or gauging their, level of understanding, which is something I should do more of because I'm just sitting here thinking about it like every time I come to the end of a concept or a chapter or whatever.”

As mentioned in the last quote, PA found it difficult to incorporate DP during class time and for the exploration of content. PC used a “requests bottle” for her learners as a form of checking where she needed to help with subject content but never elaborated on how well it worked (or didn’t) for her learners;

> PC: “I got a bottle… and I tell them that they must write down a note. If they don't want to talk… And then, write down what's their problem or if they need something repeated, and put the letter into the bottle. So then that's where you actually get to check it.”

As it stands from this research, DP is not an effective tool for classroom regulation. As discussed in chapter six, the participants never used DP to facilitate regulation in their classrooms. The check-ins acted as measurements for them to determine the mood and general feeling within their classroom and the group of learners in front of them.

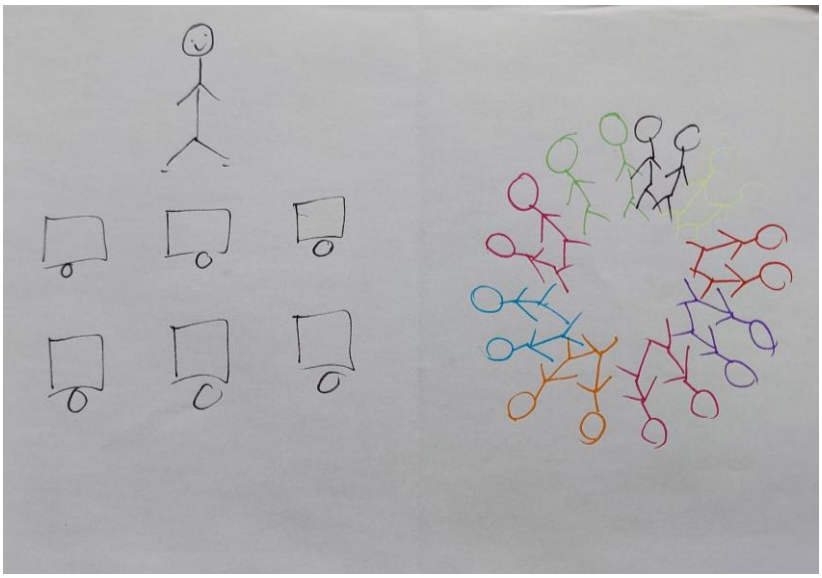
The researcher hoped that DP would be a tool to facilitate Dramatherapeutic empathy and distancing (Jones, 1996). Drama therapeutic empathy and distancing act as vehicles to broaden the client's perspectives on others' experiences and to make sense of their own (Jones, 1996:106). These elements are seen to be crucial elements in emotional engagement and disengagement within the therapy space, at the same time allowing for gaining access to and creating perspective towards the selected material (Jones, 1996:105). The "emotional and physical distance" created by the teachers during the check-ins did, to some degree, foster safety in the space and acted as a measure to determine the mental state of the learners in the classroom. While this is useful, it did not aid in regulation.

DP in the workshop space to explore changes in the classroom

DP was used in the workshops as a method to spark conversations on certain topics and for the researcher to gauge where the participants are in terms of the study and the techniques. During our final workshop, I asked each participant to do two drawings, one depicting how they saw their classroom and their learners before the workshops started and the 2nd to depict how they see them now. These were their responses:

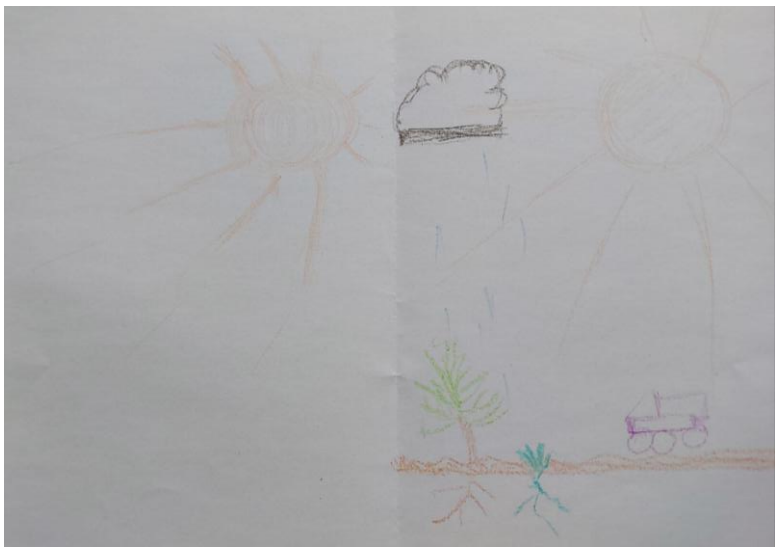


PA: "My before was basically the blue lines, the order that I was trying to have in the class, that I was trying to impose on the children, almost. And the little bubbly spirits of their sweet, beautiful souls that are bubbling outside the lines. They can't be contained. And that I put this goal in front of them all the time. I think this is also maybe more like a long-term journey thing about when I started, you know. But like a goal of excellence. Whereas now, I think I try and put the process and the order in front of them and try to help them visualise it instead of putting it on them. And this is me trying to harness all the energies and we grow and move together. And then there may be still some outside the lines."



PB: "So I think I've been on this journey for two years now since I started teaching SEL. So I had my sort of like a set way of looking at things. So you can see there was order. And it's black and white. Either there was no middle ground there. And then since I started on this SEL journey, I had to really look at the way that I do things in the classrooms or I see the situation. And it's almost like it changed completely how I look at things. Or how I even do things. So, from this orderly way of doing things, sometimes it's okay. And even more fun when there's a little bit of chaos. So, as long as there is a lesson in that chaos and in that fun. And I'm actually finding my lessons now, even with the seniors and the science classroom, they're a little bit more, for me now, a

little bit more relaxed. Not as intense as they were before. And I'm actually also not as stressed as I was before. Because I'm looking at things differently now. And even the way I interact with the learners has sort of like changed. So that's why this is more colourful. And even though there's still some order. Because there will still be some order. But it's more random. And it's more fun. Yeah. Using what I've learnt. Yeah. And changing the way I'm thinking and doing things. And trying to understand all these different personalities. Meeting them where they're at."



PC: "So mine was just, my happy place is the classroom. I love being in the classroom. So, just light. And everything was fine. I don't know whether that was meant to often be growing up. Or whether it's your effect on us. Or whether it's just the classroom in general. At the point before and after. So I just did the classroom before. Which is always my happy place. And then I just, at the moment, you said there are two days now. I put in a whole lot of other things. Because I feel there's so many other factors. That we can look at now. That when we originally started in the classroom. I'm always happy with the learners on day one. And then, as time goes, there's so much of other factors. So, I just drew in a whole lot of other factors. Showing all the different things that can cause our days to go differently… Some of them are so grounded. It's also how they're brought up at home and their routine. And some of the kids that come with no books, or they don't have a bag, or whatever… It's all the external factors. So some are rooted, grounded, and it's what's coming from home."

These responses showed significant shifts in the ways these participants viewed their learners, teaching and the uniqueness of all their learners. Drawings often elicit unconscious content (Jones, 1996:106), and this exercise showed the participants how far they had come. It gave me, as a researcher, hope that the continual use of DT techniques in the classroom and education of mental health concerns for our educators will be vital in learning spaces in the years to come.

Chapter 5: The Importance of Space

When it comes to the notion of space, DT always considers its safety (Cassidy, Gumley & Turnbull, 2017). The physical, emotional and psychological safety of a space plays a vital role in exploring personal content. In this study, I found three main themes relating to space: physical spaces, the context of a particular space or context as a space to consider, and how much metaphorical space there is within a particular subject for DT techniques.

1. Space in the physical sense

The first consideration in terms of space was the physical classroom. This study showed a unique dilemma that the participants face within their classrooms; they are all travelling teachers. They do not have a classroom that is theirs, and all their learners come to them for class. The learners travel between classes and the teachers as well. This is not the norm, as most teachers in mainstream schools have their own classrooms and do not rotate between classes as well.

> PC: "...also not having a venue because you're constantly walking in and leaving with them or coming in with them. So I'm worried about getting to the venue on time and setting up the whole day. But I'm feeling like I haven't yet connected with some of them… I teach in two different venues."
>
> PA: "I teach across four different venues."
>
> PB: "I've got three"

The consistency of space is vital in creating a safe environment in which learning can take place (Bledsoe & Baskin, 2014). The learners seem to be consistent in where they receive each subject, but I feel it is important to note the shift in spaces for the teachers and their ability to create coherent spaces for learning to take place. In DT, we note how it is equally important for the therapist to feel calm and grounded in their space as it is for the client (Draper-Clarke, 2022). It's safe to say the same would apply to teachers.

This issue also seemed to be a big challenge for the grade seven learners who came from the primary school where they stayed in one class, and the teachers rotated to now rotating between classes and having teachers rotate with them.

> PA: "Especially the little ones… sjo, any deviation from the routine of the day throws them."
>
> PC: "...like the grade 7s are coming to us, and they are like new, and it is, it's quite a bit for them."

The teachers note that the transition from primary school to high school is a big shift for grade 7 learners. This correlates with research done by Curson, Wilson-Smith and Holliman (2019), wherein they write that transitioning from primary to high school can be stressful and elicit anxiety responses in these young learners. To add to the stress of transitioning to a new school, the added change of rotating between classes could be quite a shock to the learner's system.

Another spatial factor that needs to be considered is the size of the class group. Bigger groups of learners vs smaller groups of learners per class influence the teacher's ability to have more embodied activities, the ability to build rapport and relationships with the learners in the class and their ability to notice behaviours linked to stress and anxiety.

> PC: "Sometimes, like for days, I would want to talk to a specific child because I'm also starting to get to know, like learning to get to know them… days will go by, and I'll remember, okay, I wanted to talk to that child. But you don't even get to them, yet you're seeing them every lesson."
>
> PB: "With smaller groups, it helps… Like, there's usually, with science, a class with all the smart kids. So the pace is much quicker. You get a lot more time."

PC: “There was a smaller class there, and it was fine to do it because they were all almost getting there at the same time. With the bigger classes and the bigger grades, some of them take so long” (this was referring to greeting all students at the door as potential ritual).

This proved to be a large variable for this study as all three participants had varying sizes of class groups and expressed this concern during the workshops. Building rapport and relationships is one of the biggest challenges teachers face (Moosa, 2018:49), and this study showed that larger classes play a role in their ability to do so. Which in turn makes it harder for them to notice and respond to stress and anxiety signals. Other contextual factors also play a role in the allowance for DT techniques to have space in a classroom. These factors include the curriculum, time allotted per period and the teacher's proficiency in the techniques (these elements came out during their reflections in the last workshop).

2. Space as a contextual consideration

Context is something we, as drama therapists, have to consider, especially when working with different clients. Context plays a role in how the client is brought up, how stressors are dealt with, and where they seek safety and containment. The school itself becomes a major contextual factor that needs to be taken into consideration, especially for the success of DT techniques in the classroom. During this study, some contextual factors played a role:

PB: “I see them twice in a cycle. And since we started, I think I've seen them twice. And there have been disruptions. There was the gala…”

PA: “...because we have 45-minute lessons, 50-minute lessons and 55-minute lessons. One day, some lessons are 50 minutes, and some are 55 minutes… there's no consistency. And it's never the same day, the same day.”

PA: “...been absolutely chaotic. You know, it was Valentine’s Day…”

PB: “And SEL is when they go to therapy and they do, everything that needs to be done has to happen in that time.”

Another contextual factor that seemed to play a role is the developmental stage of the senior-phase learner. Where the learners find themselves developmentally during their early teenage years. The development of the adolescent is described as a turbulent time and a stage wherein they have to make many choices for themselves on what to integrate into their being (Louw & Louw, 2014). One major element of their development is their self-image and how they deem others see them (Louw & Louw, 2014), as is also evident in PC’s responses;

PC: “It's also image, I think because they're so, they're constantly worried about other people seeing them… they're so constantly worried, because even in maths, like, ‘am I going to get the wrong answer?’ ‘What happens if the next person sees my answer?’ Like, you know, they're constantly because of social media…”

PC: “...like little kids would do the activity more freely because they don't care, but the bigger kids would”

This developmental context plays a vital role in the learner’s freedom to participate in “silly” activities. Emunah (1985:71) also speaks to this when she wrote about doing DT with teenagers. She mentioned resistance to free play and that it is likely due to their developmental stage and their concern for their image. Thus, it is safe to say that adolescents are more hesitant to participate in activities that could potentially make them “look bad” or “silly”. They would not want to participate in activities that go against their pre-conceived perceptions of what they should look like or how they should act based on societal norms and their developmental stage.

3. Space within particular subjects

Lastly, from this study, it became clear that some subjects allow more freedom to implement DT techniques while others have larger curriculum constraints for them. This study only explored Maths, Science, English and SEL as subjects, and this is what the participants said during our workshops:

PB: “...with SEL, I can do that. Okay. Just change the activity give them something. Um, either to give them energy or to calm them down.”

PA: “It's a very different experience for me being an English teacher because I think we do have the liberty of having a little bit more fun sometimes. And we have the huge benefit that we don't have the same mental block. The only thing I can really think of sometimes is speeches. Children will have a huge mental block against the speech or something. But not against the subject as a whole. Like you never hear a child think like, 'I just can't do English.' Like they will with maths or with science. So that's not a hurdle I have to overcome.”

PB: “...some of them, they're stuck in ‘the subject is so difficult’. And ‘I can't do it. It doesn't matter how hard I try’. So some of them are too used to trying because of that. And their parents force them to be there.” (referring to science)

PC: “And almost all of them are forced. I know for maths as well.”

Subjects like Maths, Science and Accounting are subjects which have been shown to elicit the most anxiety among learners (Madwantsi, 2024). These are also subjects with large content loads and strict time schedules to get through all the content in time. Leaving very little room for the introduction of DT techniques, which ended up taking time away from the period the teacher had planned. Other subjects, like English and SEL, seem to have more space and freedom for the teacher to implement DT techniques within their classroom. The freedom of these subjects, which inherently focus more on dramatics and less stringent curriculum guidelines, allowed for deeper exploration of DT techniques in their classrooms.

This does not mean that DT techniques have not found their way into more stressful or anxiety-inducing subjects. In the next chapter, I discuss the techniques that all the teachers managed to implement in their classrooms and how they served to help aid in the regulation of the learners and fostering a Window of Tolerance in the classroom space.

Chapter 6: To Regulate or Not to Regulate That is the Question

This study's focus was on how DT techniques could be implemented to achieve nervous system regulation for senior-phase learners in the classroom. Three DT techniques that aided nervous system regulation stood out from the journals and workshops: movement of the body, breathwork, and grounding techniques. Other DT techniques were implemented in the classroom space (as is evident in chapter four); however, these three seemed to be most effective in achieving nervous system regulation within the classroom space.

1. Breath

Breath and breathing exercises have been known to aid in regulation and have a great influence on the nervous system (Van der Kolk, 2014). This technique found its way into the classrooms seamlessly, and all the participants spoke about how it worked in their classrooms. I would like to highlight PA's response during our last workshop;

> PA: "I did a lot of breathing. Not so much breathing to get excited. I don't think I pulled that much of that. Mostly like breathing just to calm down or like reach a neutral pace again. Like a steady neutral…I use that daily… Even just that has really made a big difference."

This response links with Siegel's (1999) idea of the Window of Tolerance, in this case referred to as a "neutral pace". Siegel (1999) also noted that breathing is a key technique to achieve a Window of Tolerance and to bring the nervous system back into some form of balance where optimal functioning can take place.

I would also like to refer back to the use of breath during embodiment in chapter four as a mechanism to calm anxiety and stress responses among the learners, as reported by the teachers. This links directly with the calming of their nervous systems and thus creates regulation through the use of breath. I do have to ponder if breathwork can be seen as a decidedly DT technique, as many other fields use breath as a mechanism to help regulate the nervous system (Van Der Kolk, 2014; Draper-Clarke, 2022). What this study did show, however, is that breath will always be a tool and mechanism used by therapists, teachers, health professionals, etc., because it is incredibly effective. It aids in regulation for classwork to commence, to alleviate anxiety and stress during exams or when receiving results, and it is a technique the teachers are familiar with, albeit that they do not use it as often as would be beneficial.

2. Change the way the body moves

Embodiment, one of the core DT technique groupings explored in this study, yielded some promising results. The techniques used were discussed in chapter four, but here, I will focus on the effect they had on the learners' regulation, as reported by the teachers.

> PA Journal: "I had the grade 7s stand up and shake out their limbs before reading. This seemed to help, and I had a couple more reading today".

> PB Journal: "I told them to pack up… and to take a walk each pupil by themselves quietly on the field and look around at the trees, clouds, birds in the sky…most followed instructions and were calm when we went back to class… the lesson went better after the walk/run, and we were able to complete the work."

What is clear from the Journal entries is that simply changing the "status quo" of sitting down at your desk and immediately getting to work has promising results. Both participants had their learners change their body memory by having them do something out of the norm. The result was that the learners actively participated in class. They were removed from the "disconnected" element of hypo-arousal (Siegel, 1999), and their nervous systems were "woken up" in order to be active participants in their classrooms, potentially resulting in better intake of class content.

At this point, I also want to refer back to chapter four and the discussion there on using embodied actions to alleviate anxiety and stress in learners, both during tests, when receiving marks, and after tests. The body has the capacity to bring the learner into a space where they can receive new information and effectively incorporate that into their knowledge system (Van Der Kolk, 2014:292).

3. Find the grounding

Grounding exercises like "5-4-3-2-1 senses" and physically feeling the floor or body scans are tools used in DT to bring the client back into the space when working through difficult content or stressful or anxious responses. This was the hope for these techniques in the classroom as well, and as is evident from the workshops and journal entries, these techniques had similar effects in the classroom, leading to calmer and more settled reactions and responses from learners.

> PC: "...especially the grade 9s, it was, you know, the one where you said 'put your feet on the ground and your hands on your desk' …to bring them all into your space… and then we did the one about looking at things in the room but it was, I gave them a letter specific I think I said 'b' or something and then they were able to find something around them and bring them all focus…"
>
> PB Journal: "We also practised identifying things you can see, taste, touch and feel."
>
> PC Journal: "Focus using - come to room, feet firmly on the ground, feel the desk, sit upright, two hands on table… learners felt calm, and worked better in lesson."

Often, learners come back from a break or a difficult subject, potentially even from a test, and they find themselves in an unregulated state. The participants shared that these grounding techniques helped calm down the learners, bring them focus, and allow them to participate successfully in their lesson. This again links with Siegel's (1999) ideas on the Window of Tolerance, where hyperarousal encapsulates those stress and anxiety symptoms and "off the walls" behaviours we often see in clients experiencing stress. This was also something that seemed to flow seamlessly into the classroom space and was fairly easy for teachers to implement for their learners. The main reason was that it did not take up too much time during the period, and the teacher could easily take five minutes to do a grounding exercise with the learners and then continue teaching.

It is also important to note the influence regular implementation had on regulation and its ritual aspect. How often the participant used the DT techniques played a role in how effective they were in facilitating regulation for the learners in their classroom. As well as when these techniques were, in fact, implemented. The participants noted during the last workshop;

> PA spoke to a ritual he implemented where he would finish a class 5 minutes early, allowing for time to pack up and get ready to leave once the bell rang. "Much more calm. Much more like unified for me. Also, have more time at the end. My timing is better this year. So that thing of having five minutes at the end is really, really nice. So everybody can just pack up calmly. We can all stand up together, say goodbye… I think I can count them on my hand; on one hand, this year, instances where the bell was going and I'm still speaking, which is nice. So yeah, more calm…"
>
> PC: "I'm very bad with that. So, um, yeah, but I know… the day you're doing it or the time you're doing it, they are definitely more focused. They're being much more 'there'."

This showcases that regular implementation of conscious actions like ending early or actually using some DT techniques in the classroom does help with the ease of the learners' movement from one subject to the next, and even within the subject from one concept to the next. It helped the learner find a state of regulation from where they could concentrate effectively. Some teachers did end up using the techniques as a "last resort" and not as the first response or ritual when anxiety or stress-like symptoms and behaviours showed up in their classrooms. Rituals form the "safety" for a client (or learner) in that they know what to expect and know when to do certain actions to achieve a desired result (Davis-Floyd & Laughlin, 2022:3). The teachers that used DT techniques regularly reported learners who would enter their classes in a regulated manner or even find their regulation easily during the period with the aid of the teacher.

Did the teachers achieve a form of regulation within their classrooms? I would wager that yes. Both hyper- and hypo-arousal states were managed and brought back into the Window of Tolerance, resulting in better teaching experiences, potentially better learning, and more regulated learners overall in the senior-phase classroom.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

This study explored how teachers can use DT techniques in the senior-phase classroom to aid in nervous system regulation for the learners they teach. It also had a Positive Psychology focus and was guided by what resources the teachers have and can use. The researcher focused on Ritual, Embodiment and Dramatic projection techniques to help alleviate stress and anxiety symptoms and experiences in the classroom space.

Through PAR, the researcher found that teachers can adapt and implement these techniques in the classroom. The workshops served as an experimental ground for the participants to explore and "tweak" the techniques, which they then implemented in their classrooms. Techniques like check-in, breathing exercises, grounding exercises, embodied explorations, and games showed great success in adaptability in the senior-phase classroom. Throughout this study, I, as researcher, kept reflecting on how valuable these techniques would have been in my own classroom, had I only known back then.

These techniques successfully facilitate a Window of Tolerance (Siegel, 1999) for the learners in the participants' classrooms, resulting in regulated and active learners. Breathwork and grounding exercises showed promise in calming learners and alleviating hyper- and hypo-arousal, while embodied actions and games led to active participation in class and lifted learners out of the hypo-arousal states the teachers experienced. These observations were evident in the participant feedback, while not observed by the researcher in the classroom itself, the teacher self-reports are promising.

This study's exploration of Ritual also showcased how the intentionality of rules and entering and exiting the classroom space builds safety for the learners and facilitates some semblance of regulation for them. While this study does not know the impact of the more regulated learners on their marks and test scores, the classroom experience seems to have become more enjoyable for both the teachers and the learners after implementing the DT techniques.

This study also showed some value for the teachers themselves as a platform to revisit techniques they may have been familiar with or to reimagine their classroom spaces. The participants took risks, changed their own ways of teaching, and came back with positive results. The workshops also served as a way for teachers to sound-board ideas with other teachers and provided an opportunity for them to learn from each other.

It is safe to say that some DT techniques did end up finding their way into the senior phase classroom, with varying success. The participants reported changes and shifts in their classrooms regarding regulation, which is a positive sign. As mentioned in Chapter Five, the space for these techniques is somewhat limited, but the breathwork, grounding, and embodied explorations showed significant improvements in the learners' regulation, thus achieving the beginning of a longer journey towards a sustained Window of Tolerance (Siegel, 1999).

Limitations

This study had limitations that need to be considered in future research. One of these is that it only had three participants from the same affluent private school in Johannesburg. The study did not investigate other school settings and teachers within these schools. As discussed in the previous chapters, the subjects limited the efficacy of implementing DT techniques in the classrooms, and not all subjects were explored in this study to give a clearer picture of which subjects DT techniques could be used in.

The study also relied on self-reports from the participants and no direct observations of the learners were done during this study. This is due to ethical reasons and the integrity of the study. It is important to consider the possible impact of learner behaviour an "outside observer" could have had on their "normal" classroom behaviour.

The study also took place at the end of the school year (during exams) and at the start of a new school year. This limited the ability to measure the efficacy of the DT techniques on the same group of learners as a study done later in the school year would have done.

The final limitation was the consistency with which the participants journaled. The participants were expected to journal daily to properly track shifts and changes within the classrooms, but this fell short. Some journaled only five times throughout the whole study, while others journaled 3-4 times per week.

Future considerations and recommendations

In future studies, it is recommended that participants be selected from different schools, and a larger participant pool would be beneficial. The use of journals did elicit personal reflections and on-the-day feedback on the usefulness of the DT techniques, though the consistency was a data hurdle. Different methods of data collection could be considered.

This study also has the potential to become a larger project, given that more time and resources are needed to investigate broader school settings and the role that might play in using DT techniques in the classroom. The participants also mentioned using the techniques with their FET-phase learners (grades 10-12), which provides an opportunity for this research to be done on larger samples of learners as well.

This study also holds the potential to further focus on Heathcote's work in Process Drama and how that links with DT techniques in this type of classroom setting. For this research, the connection to Heathcote's work came after the fact during analysis, and there is potential for that notion to be studied further.

Should this study be expanded on a broader scale and classroom observations be made part of the data collection, the impact of an outside party on classroom behaviour should also be considered. The learner's "normal" classroom behaviour might be influenced by outsiders, leading to "best" behaviour or further withdrawal or a host of other reactions that do disturb the authenticity of the observed behaviour. This would have to be carefully considered and acknowledged in future research.

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Addendum A:

SCHOOL OF ARTS ETHICS COMMITTEE
CONSTITUTED UNDER THE UNIVERSITY HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (NON-MEDICAL)

CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE **PROTOCOL NUMBER: WSOA20241016-16**

PROJECT TITLE Using Participatory Action Research to Explore How Teachers Can Implement Drama Therapy Techniques to Aid in Nervous System Regulation in the Senior-Phase Classroom in South Africa.

INVESTIGATOR Ms. Leane' Wentzel 2322047

SCHOOL/DEPARTMENT OF INVESTIGATOR WSOA – MA Drama Therapy

DATE CONSIDERED 09 October 2024

DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE Approved unconditionally

RISK LEVEL MINIMAL RISK

EXPIRY DATE Date of submission of the project Research Report

ISSUE DATE OF CERTIFICATE 31 October 2024 **CHAIRPERSON** _____
(Dr Sibongile Bhebhe)
(Prof Brett Pyper)

cc: Supervisor: Monique Hill

DECLARATION OF INVESTIGATOR

To be completed in duplicate and **ONE COPY** returned to the Chairperson of the School/Department ethics committee.

I fully understand the conditions under which I am are authorized to carry out the abovementioned research and I guarantee to ensure compliance with these conditions. Should any departure to be contemplated from the research procedure as approved I/we undertake to resubmit the protocol to the Committee.

_____ _____/_____/_____
Signature **Date**

PLEASE QUOTE THE PROTOCOL NUMBER ON ALL ENQUIRIES