

Addressing Mental Health in South Africa Using the Djembe Drum and Storytelling to Open up the Dialogue of Finding, Owning, and Using Your Voice in the Home as a Christian Woman

[FAITH BUSIKA](#)

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND

[ZANDILE MQWATHI](#)

ABSTRACT

Topics like mental illness, abuse, and chronic physical and emotional stress are not popular in the church, which is one of the biggest tragedies of all (Grcevich, 2018). However, we were recently invited into the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Christian domain to run a workshop for their women in addressing the subject of finding, owning, and using their voice as women in the home. The method used to address the above mentioned problem was the use of the djembe drum, together with other musical instruments and storytelling. The purpose of this article is to give a reflective account on the drama processes employed in order to address mental health and promote wellbeing in the context of the church.

INTRODUCTION

How can Drama Therapy address specific health concerns and promote wellbeing? We will be responding to this specific question in a reflexive way and consider a session that we recently co-facilitated as Drama Therapists.

We have chosen a non-traditional academic style of writing because we had an opportunity to reflect authentically as therapists and as South African Christian women who hold various roles. Our desire was that our authentic voice should not be lost in the academic jargon because of the very nature of the theme that we were engaging with: finding, owning, and using voice. Although it was initially an unconscious process, we came to understand that we too were exercising our voice after the process. In our own space, whilst driving back home, we reflected with no façade and we began to question what our stand point of finding our own voice was. During that process, our authentic voices started to emerge, where we could not hide behind the roles that we hold. We therefore desire for the reader to also reflect about their practice from an honest and authentic position. As we invite our reader to engage with this paper we ask that they hold the awareness that it is not about the messenger; it is about the message (Sandberg, 2014:1). To begin, we will then like to introduce ourselves.

Faith: My name is Nonkululeko Faith Busika and I am a black female, Drama therapist practising in South Africa specifically in the School context but I find myself in various spaces facilitating for parents and communities. In this specific space, I was with my colleague.

Zandi: And my name is Zandile Mqwathi, I am a Drama Therapist, oh! I am black and Christian and I work in the Higher Education sector in about 26 Public Universities in South Africa.

Faith: So, We would like to highlight this perspective of us both being Christians because, the case that we are bringing in the space that we worked in was within the context of Christianity and this is where we will articulate how the drama processes were able to address and promote mental wellbeing. Also, what is particularly interesting for us in Christianity is particularly in the South African context is that

Christianity and believe in God is often perceived as a context that holds holistic wellbeing and if one practices the rituals of it, one is almost assured that they will be well.

Zandi: You should be, in fact you should be immune to mental illnesses or other challenging things that can put you in the space where you can seek the support of a therapist in our case a drama therapist. Hence we used Marshall's (2002) definition of healing, "healing is not a cure. Cure is clean, quick and done-often under anaesthesia. However healing is often a lifelong process of recovery and growth, it requires time." We acknowledged that it will take time for the women to engage with their own voice.

Faith: So, we were invited to facilitate in this context because I belong to this domination of Christianity that is the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. This domination has various programs in it that teach individuals from primary children to adults. The program that we were working within is called the Relief Society program that holds women specifically. The programme is not just for South Africans but there are diverse women from Congo, Nigeria, Zimbabwe and Malawi. Although the Relief Society is founded on strong values of Christianity that really helps with spiritual wellbeing which both Zandi and I have great respect for because it is something that we too believe in. The Relief Society program, also acknowledges that there is a strong need to have these values running alongside skillful mental health support and information. The invitation therefore was an, ask for us drama therapists to design an embodied session where we could allow the women to begin dialoguing on the theme of finding voice. We will reflectively speak back to the methodology processes that we used, on how they addressed mental health and promoted wellbeing and we will speak back to space, storytelling, music, voice and embodied reflective exercises as to how they played out on our South African soil.

So, Ms. Zandi, if you could start us off by sharing as a practising drama therapist in South Africa, how was your experience of facilitating in a Christian context, being Christian yourself? Do you think that the space had an influence on your facilitation and in how the drama processes unfolded?

SPACE

Zandi: Facilitating in a Christian context being a therapist walking in the space; first of all I noticed the building. In a mysterious and a sacred way, I felt held by the building. It was in a Church, I felt connected to my maker, to God. I felt like I was in the right place; well, although it was a familiar space, it felt sacred. Although we spoke Faith and I about our participants, what I saw were everyday women, women who are like every other woman need to be heard. I saw women who are trying in the mist of today's technologically advanced world to pause and connect. This speaks to Sark's, author of *Succulent Wild Woman: Dancing with Your Wonder-full Self* that "the circles of women around us weave invisible nets of love that carry us when we're weak, and sing with us when we are strong" (Sark, 1997).

I also felt that it was a divine space to be part of and yet at the same time to create a mini-container. However, I was very much aware that as much as I was part of this beautiful container, at that time I was called upon to hold it and my experience of holding this container was very gentle yet, very difficult in the beginning because the theme that relates to wellbeing that we were invited to address was the idea of finding voice in the home, and I am saying idea because I think that somebody decided that because a group of specific people within the group were choosing to be silent during this meetings they were probably voiceless and I am not saying this in a negative way but I found it very problematic that one has to find their voice because I strongly believe that we only look for what we either do not have or have lost. However, what we found was that all of those women had a voice. This reminded me of *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*. In *Quiet*, Susan Cain (2013) argues that we dramatically undervalue introverts and continues to show how much we lose in doing so. Perhaps, within the Church the introverted women were being undervalued hence the invitation to facilitate finding their voices.

Faith: Zandi could you speak more to us about the notion of space and its influence on your facilitation as a drama therapist, in this particular context? You spoke a little bit about gentleness can you articulate further about that.

Zandi: I think the space, was very much gentle. It also had impact on

me as a facilitator and somehow assured me that all will be well which allowed for me to allow for my roles to shift and move easily. Like when one of the participants walked in with a baby, immediately, my role shifted to one of a mother because I too have a small baby. In that moment there was an immediate identification.

Faith: Would you then say that the space allowed you to be holistically yourself and to bring all parts of yourself, the roles you hold and that there was a fluidity in holding those roles within this space?

Zandi: Definitely! Although initially I wasn't aware that the space allowed for the fluid shifting of the roles that I hold and that I come with. Similarly, I wasn't uncomfortable with silence when the participants chose to keep silent at certain moments during the session. I also learned a lot about some of my expectations from the session. If I may now ask you Ms. Faith, how did the space affect your facilitation as drama therapist?

Faith: Firstly, I was very aware that I am one of the sisters who believes and is a member of Relief Society and I felt overwhelmed and compelled to get the task right. I was also crudely aware that this was the first time that I was bringing my Christian beliefs together with my professional beliefs. However, the moment we drove into the space I recalled that within my Drama therapy profession I am guided and held by the values from the space, the church. I remembered that my Christian role could come out fully in this space, an opportunity that I do not always have in the diverse spaces I work in. My rituals of prayer before the start of my work is what I often use in my private practice. Upon entering the Relief Society room where our session was to unfold, I felt at ease because the space was familiar on both the physical and spiritual level. I realised that even with mistakes that may happen in the process these participants that we were with, were my spiritual sisters in Christ and they saw us as sisters who were coming to contribute wisdom to this body of sisterhood. My insecurities as a professional were therefore held in this solid and sacred space that I value.

Richard Schechner (1975) in his writings about space argues that there is an actual relationship between spaces of the body and that the body moves through; human living tissue does not end abruptly stop at the skin. He argues that both human beings and space are alive. In the

workshop that we facilitated with the women in the church environment as our own bodies were familiar with the sacred nature of the space, the dialogue between the spaces and bodies appeared to be one that invited openness and deep listening from both the participants and the Drama therapists.

The ritual of us clearing up the space was also a form of symbolically creating the space for the “voice” of the women to begin emerging. Our process of starting in a circle was also symbolic of an open invitation for communal learning whilst emphasizing everyone’s voice being equal and of value. In a circle, everyone can easily see each other, which is equally cardinal within the African milieu where we often refer to the importance of really seeing each other *Taba di mahlong* which is a Sesotho idiom meaning the face is the index of the mind. What’s more, in the circle there is a sense of power being distributed in a democratic way. Through the arrangement of starting in a circle, the women’s voices were validated and an invitation on the possibilities of the value of their voices in their homes was presented and validated. Akin to King Arthur’s declaration in the movie *Merlin*:

Here in this circle, we give thanks to our Saviour for this deliverance, let this circle be a symbol of purpose, each man [woman] in it is equal to the other, each has a voice and each will strive to fight for truth and honour.

STORYTELLING

In our attempt to meet the workshops objectives of discovering, owning and utilizing voice, we chose to use the medium of storytelling which was familiar to this group of African women, so as to create room for them to use their agency in the choice of how they shape their voice. Power was therefore relinquished from the facilitators; the women could choose how to use their voice during the narration processes. This was critical, to create a safe space for the participants to use their agency and power in how their voice connects to their holistic well-being. The indigenous knowledge systems of South Africa, define indigenous knowledge as emanating from the human spirit; “they are life experiences which are organized and ordered into accumulated knowledge with the objective of being utilized to enhance the quality of

life and to create a livable environment for both human and other forms of life” (Masoga, 2005: 22). Storytelling forms part of the indigenous knowledge systems in South Africa and Africa as a whole.

The workshop therefore made use of the medium of storytelling to get the participants to use their voices in the narration of their home experiences. The storytelling exercise of “mingle, mingle” where the women were asked to walk around the room and get into groups of a number which the facilitator called out and to begin to mingle on a topic that the facilitator gave to them. This created a space where the women’s voices were validated. As the exercises expanded to bigger narrations which focused on how women are currently utilizing their voice in their homes. This specific exercise created a space for thinking, listening and empathy. As the women narrated they were also able to name their struggles in terms of using their voice and simultaneously they were able to validate themselves that they have a voice that is strong, however they pointed out that often that voice is not necessarily expressed vocally but is expressed in other ways. The medium of storytelling therefore opened up for dialogue on culture and how voice is expressed in various African homes.

During the story telling session, most women shared that they were making meaning of their voices in the context of their homes. Most of them also pointed out that there is often an assumption that women have no voice, however they shared that they have a voice, it might not be expressed verbally because most of the times, they feel that they are not being listened to authentically and simultaneously they too don’t listen to their children. The women were thus able to point out that their inability to listen and be listened too in their homes could be the reason for them not being well. This was specially heightened during the mingle exercise where they were surprised as to how and what listening authentically did in relation to the use of their own voice. Rogers & Farson (1957) emphasizes the importance of being listened to and what the relationship to the voice is, *“When I have been listened to and when I have been heard, I am able to re-perceive my world in a new way and to go on”* many of the participants said they would choose to listen better and to simultaneously ask to be listened to when they return to their homes. This exercise of storytelling also created space for the women to show and experience empathy towards each other. This was evident reflection, where they

shared that their connections with the women they were paired with and how their story sharing enlightened their understanding of using voice and at the same time the bond of sisterhood was shared. Rogers & Farson further express that *when we listen effectively we are better able to express our feelings, thoughts through our voice in the most effective way (1957)*. The women's response to these stories and the sharing thereof was therefore on several levels; physical and corporeal, affective, cognitive, imaginative and metaphysical (Jennings, 1994, p. 95).

MUSIC



Figure 1: Participant A checking-in

In the centre of the room, the djembe drum, small shakers were placed to set the scene for the check-in moment. The Djembe is a beautiful and special drum with powers to empower any drummer, dancer and listener. It is also referred to as a "Healing Drum". The women stood in a circle listening to the facilitator who explained the check-in; "each of

us are going to share how we are tonight and then you are going to select one instrument in the centre of the circle to demonstrate how you are currently using your voice in your own home. The women started giggling amongst each other while the facilitator demonstrates. The white African woman boldly went straight for the djembe drum and made a big banging sound. She is standing next to the black African women who steps into the centre and confusingly moves between the Djembe and shakers making sounds. This woman steps out and says I am not always sure, of my voice because of being a single woman who constantly has to address her children with a shouting voice and sometimes a gentle quiet voice.



Figure 2: Participant B checking-in

The musical instruments begin to resemble the potential and depth of the women's voice. The Djembe acts as the transport that moves the women's consciousness from the conscious thinking level into the unconscious and the imagination where possibilities are imagined. The Djembe and the musical instruments also begin to create space where the women's stories begin emerging.

During the session, music also allowed for the women to express

themselves in a safe and distance way and ensured no judgment as every sound was invited and welcomed. As the music has an unusual ability to influence well-being, and the influence is usually positive. All throughout history and in all known human cultures, music has been used to promote health and well-being (Gouk, 2000; Horden, 2001). Also in South Africa, music and song are often used during times of celebration, mourning and petition.

EMBODIED REFLECTIVE EXERCISES

The “secret spot exercise”, is introduced to the women, the facilitator asks the group to get into groups of five and to hold hands. Once the groups are holding hands the facilitator then asks the group members to individually “choose a secret spot” without letting the rest of the group members know. The women are then asked to communicate to each other in the non-verbal way. In their groups they are invited to move to their individual secret spots without any talking and while still holding hands. The women begin to demonstrate pulling of the groups into different directions. Eventually the women show exhaustion and they begin negotiating in a non-verbal way to travel to each other’s secret spots in a sequential manner rather than forcefully pulling at each other. As the exercise seizes and we return to the circle to reflect, one black African women shouts out; “I am strong! I am strong!” she begins to share that although she appears to be quiet in the public space of the church she is not weak, she has control over her voice, it’s just that she does not use her voice in a vocal way but her body in this exercise could show that she is strongly has a voice, and she can utilize it.

Augusto Boal (1994) in his book the aesthetics of the oppressed expresses that the body is able to capture that which words cannot capture. In this context, the women’s body could demonstrate her own strategies of expressing and owning her voice in the room. The women begin to dialogue about their cultural differences within the culture of Christ. One white African woman shared that she thought that being vocal in her home demonstrated that she has a voice and that she can use it. I have never thought that being non-verbal could be another powerful way of expressing your voice. The room begins to be still as the women begin to think deeply about the value of the use of voice in

different cultural spaces. This creates a space for the women to begin to reflect deeply on how they choose to carve their voice in the context of their home in a manner that allows wellness to exist in them as women and in their home. Landy (2008) in his writings about role-method and narradrama states that, expanding ones' role repertoire and exploring different roles can open ways of thinking and relating to others in healthier and preferred ways.

Silence is now not necessarily perceived as something that is non-expressive and unwell but rather that there, is deep wellness in being silent and listening carefully before responding in a verbal way. "The individual is not one thing but a multitude of roles that exist in relationship to their several counter parts. Thus the secret spot exercise that is an embodied projective exercise, which allows for critical reflective dialogue about voice expressions that are healthy within a cultural context that is complex.

CONCLUSION

Apart from giving us an opportunity to record our drama therapy session, which in turn created a space for us for reflection, aided the process of considering themes, patterns, key occurrences and interactions within the work (Jones, 1996: 317). We also had a beautiful experience facilitating, we were also captured by the sacredness of the space and it allowed us as therapist to tap into our higher power that governs our work. We have come to be aware that although the church or religious spaces are rarely ever entered into for dialogue on critical matters of mental health, there is a need for this. We also learned the power of drama therapy techniques and tools whether with space, music, and embodied reflective exercise can be employed in addressing complex and sensitive topics in diverse spaces such as the Church.

Faith: What can other practitioners learn from this? We learned that it is ok and that some spaces are valuable to us, that they do place you in a vulnerable space and the vulnerability not being something weak but the vulnerability of being authentic in terms of connecting with the people.

Zandi: We also found that we too ended up identifying with the theme

of finding; owning and using voice as African women whose voices are often not heard, generationally. We therefore desire for the reader to also reflect about their practice from an honest and authentic position.

Faith: We also want other practitioners to be truly reflective and continue to ask themselves questions that interrogate their choices when choosing to undertake work, how honest am I. As most of us in the South African context find themselves in the human development work, and sadly sometimes we fail to reflect on where are motivations for doing the work coming from and as a result, we unconsciously project our own stuff on participants.

Zandi: We want to invite other practitioners to begin and to continue to engage in truthful conversations. As a practitioner, where am I and what is informing my work?

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper was because of The Relief Society invitation on “Finding your voice in the Home” workshop which was held on the 15th May 2019 at the Jesus Christ Church of Latter-day Saints. The authors acknowledge with great appreciation the invitation that allowed them to engage with this sensitive topic within the church.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Busika, F., & Mqwathi, Z. (2019). Addressing mental health in South Africa using the djembe drum and storytelling to open up the dialogue of finding, owning, and using your voice in the home as a Christian woman. *ArtsPraxis*, 6 (2), 54-67.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Nonkululeko Faith Busika completed her honor's degree in BA Dramatic Arts at the University of the Witwatersrand in the (2011) and went on to finish her Master's in Drama Therapy (2014). Faith is a registered Drama Therapist who has been practicing in South African schools for the past 4 years. Faith is registered for her PhD studies at

the University of the Witwatersrand (2019). Faith is currently an academic manager for the honours year, a Lecturer and a storyteller. Faith has recently performed as the only female in a play called Egoli at the market theatre in (2016). Faith has performed as a storyteller at professional levels; South Africa UNAIDS Conferences, Land Act project held in Gauteng. Faith has directed a Diabetes play "Blood Sugars" (2017) that toured to the UK. Faith has also travelled and presented in various countries, Sweden, Norway, New York, Bristol and Brussels.

Zandile Mqwathi is a drama therapist, life coach, programme coordinator and former community radio station presenter from South Africa. Zandile has worked as a Programme Facilitator for the Soul City Institute, Zakheni Training and Development Centre and Themba Interactive Theatre and the Higher Education and Training HIV/AIDS Programme (HEAIDS), where she used Applied Drama methods to facilitate peer education training and self-care workshops in Institutions of Higher Learning around South Africa. Zandile's current passion and expectation of her contribution is to facilitate authentic relationships within the home environment and within the workplace. Zandile is currently consulting as a life coach/drama therapist.