



# Silent group sandplay activates healing

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** This paper describes the effect of silent group Sandplay (SP) with early adolescents as observed and reported in circumstances of deprivation, neglect and abuse.

**Objective:** The objective was to explore with childcare staff, group SP as an intervention with early adolescent participants.

**Participants and setting:** Nine childcare staff participated in an in-depth SP exploration involving a series of six group SP sessions with five children at a child protection organisation in a resource-constrained context.

**Methods:** Group SP offered in a particular way in a protective child and youth care environment facilitated an opportunity for inner processing and self-discovery. In-depth semi-structured interviews with childcare staff conducted both before and after group SP provided descriptions of the SP experience for both children and adult participants.

**Results:** The before-SP reports of the children's behaviour and demeanour highlighted wounding and after-SP observations indicated healing patterns. The before-SP topics included overwhelmedness, vulnerability, constrained resources, the need for change and culturally appropriate, accessible interventions. Themed descriptions after SP included a newfound desire to play and activation of healing for both child and adult participants. Healing processes indicated a desire to play, cooperation, openness, increased awareness, adaptation, grounding and belonging. The implications are potentially far-reaching in terms of the accessibility, efficiency and cultural suitability of providing group SP in child protection and community-based settings, particularly in contexts of deprivation, neglect and abuse.

## 1. Introduction

This paper arises from group Sandplay (SP) informed research conducted in 2021 and is largely focused on the second aspect of the research questions namely what is observed in the behaviour and demeanour of early adolescent participants that experienced group SP (Redfern, 2022). Almost two decades ago in South Africa, Jungian Sandplay was described as a suitable therapeutic intervention given the country's context of multiple cultures and languages and the tremendous need for appropriate and effective therapeutic support in circumstances where long-term psychotherapy is not affordable, accessible or feasible (Davids, 2005). The political landscape of South Africa has changed; however, the need for emotional, psychological and developmental support is the same if not more urgent (Mokitimi et al., 2018). Although Sandplay is not unknown in South Africa it remains relatively unprescribed as a non-verbal group intervention despite its universal qualities that transcend cultural limitations (Ferreira et al., 2014; Kalff,

1996; Snelgar, 2018). South Africa is one of the most unequal socio-economic countries in the world and inadequate education and mental health provision contribute to a multitude of unmet needs (Mokitimi et al., 2018; Natal, 2020; STATSSA, UNICEF, & SPRI, 2020). Almost a third of the population is younger than 15 years (when a remarkable change in personality takes place) and the average age of school dropout is 13 (Adams et al., 2019; Jung, 2008; STATSSA, 2019). Group SP in South Africa is relatively unexplored despite reports of the effectiveness of group SP in other countries (S. Lee et al., 2023; Y. R. Lee et al., 2018; Olaniyi et al., 2021). The constrained and severely limited educational, organisational and social development structures in South Africa are less effective without the processing of the underlying issues of collective poverty, deprivation, violence and abuse. Child protection organisations operate in a realm of desperate need and severe constraints of both meagre human and capital resources. This leads to limitations in preparing young people to leave the care environment and transition to adulthood (Van Breda & Frimpong-Manso, 2020). There is

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an urgent need for programmes that build self-esteem, promote learning and reduce school dropouts (Children's Institute, 2020). The impact of poor or absent relationships results in a confused and disrupted sense of identity and belonging, including cultural and linguistic challenges, loneliness and disconnection (Roche, 2019). In short, the provision of appropriate psychological and emotional support is scarce and the window of opportunity is narrow. Once children leave protective care and school there is very little scope for intervention. Opportunities for personal development can give young people a chance not only to survive but to thrive and in the face of poverty and dire circumstances; the development of interiority has the potential to transform human behaviour (Ives et al., 2020; Schwartz et al., 2017). A dearth of literature on early adolescence and group SP in South Africa required further exploration of culturally suitable group SP in the transitional life stage of early adolescence when pubertal changes and increased consciousness, identity formation and self-reflection start occurring (Esnaola et al., 2020; Ferreira et al., 2014; Fomina et al., 2020; Freedle & Gita, 2020; Carl Jung, 2019; Snelgar, 2018; Van der Aar et al., 2018). The research was conducted before the Wiersma publication that suggests that SP is more effective when conducted in an individual format (Wiersma et al., 2022).

### 1.1. Early adolescence, an opportune period of development

Puberty occurs during early adolescence when cognitive disorders manifest and the ego frees itself from the collective unconscious and becomes more or less independent (Jung, 2019). It is a time of dynamic brain development that sets the scene for adult well-being and simultaneously it is a critical period for achieving human potential amidst many new stressors and psychological risks (Discovery, 2021; McGuire et al., 2019; Toska et al., 2019). The development of self-concept should be one of the major aims in early adolescence especially as self-perceptions are essential for psychological well-being (Esnaola et al., 2020). Traumatic experiences foster dissociation and psychopathology thereby creating disconnection in the mind-brain-body system which leads to emotional dysregulation, impulsivity and lack of effortful control (Scalabrini et al., 2018). When trauma happens before ego development this can be emotionally catastrophic and result in unmet needs, fear of separation, hunger for mother/father, depression and hopelessness (Mitchell & Friedman, 2021). Relationships and development are basic human needs that are interdependent and pertinent to the early adolescent tasks of individuation, separation, autonomy and cooperation (Albarelo et al., 2018; Zoja, 2018). During times of distress, early adolescents revert to concrete thinking and require support to negotiate between the abstract and the concrete (Lindo & Ceballos, 2020). In play the ego submits in service to creative imagination, freeing and allowing the self to emerge and the showing through of the self guarantees personality development (Kalff, 1996; Weinrib, 2004).

### 1.2. Creative activity and play

The psyche's capacity for self-regulation and increased well-being through expressive creativity is claimed (Pearson & Wilson, 2019, pp. 20–24; Punnett & Canfield, 2020; Roesler, 2019; Weinrib, 2004; Yahaya, Maakip, Peter, Kwan SamMee, & Kifli, 2019; Zoja, 2018). Creative activity and play is essential for inner processing, personal development and healing (Humphris, 2019; Mitchell & Friedman, 2021). SP incorporates both creative expression and play and is a suitable activity to initiate inner processing and healing, especially in early adolescence when self-consciousness and awareness are increasing (Redfern & Finestone, 2023). Play is natural and culturally universal, an activity of primitive identity in which omnipotence predominates through internal images and external objects (Axline, 1994; Fordham, 1985; Jarvis et al., 2014). In the hands of the child, the play object is a receptacle for internal potentialities (Jung, 2008). Only in playing can the child be creative and use the whole personality, and only through

creativity is the self discovered (Winnicott, 1990). Play transcends pre-verbal trauma and improves verbal and non-verbal communication (Ferreira et al., 2014). The opportunity for catharsis as a result of imaginative play supports growing awareness and the ability to improve expression as new consciousness develops (Dominey, 2021). Play helps with neural maturation benefitting higher executive brain development and is essential for well-being (Humphris, 2019; Jarvis et al., 2014).

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. A jungian theoretical perspective

This exploration was grounded and informed by the work and principles of Carl Jung and Dora Kalff. Jung's work was primarily devoted to the second half of life, whereas Kalff had a great ability to respond to children (Kalff, 2019). Jung viewed the self as the totality of a person including the conscious (ego) and the unconscious (self), the whole of the person (Franz & Jung, 1964; Jung & Hull, 2014). In addition, the individual is pre-formed by the psyche and nourished by the gradual awakening of consciousness during childhood, and from this, the ego arises (Jung, 1958, 2019). Consciousness/ego is a precondition to being in the world whilst the unconscious is powerful and plays a crucial part that cannot be ignored; fear of the unconscious impedes self-knowledge and is the gravest obstacle to awareness and understanding (Jung, 1958).

Kalff noted that the emergence of the self is the most significant starting point in personality development and that the self is the centre of the psyche, steering developmental processes (Akam & Yahya, 2018; Kalff, 1996; Ladkin et al., 2016). The self is discovered through the individuation process and when attained, the individual is considered whole (Akam & Yahya, 2018). In the journey toward psychic wholeness, Jung stressed the necessary role of the self archetype in integrating opposites, including the conscious and the unconscious (Jung & Hull, 2014).

### 2.2. Sandplay

Sandplay (SP) is a method of self-experience and psychotherapy developed by Dora Kalff (M. Kalff, 2019). Encouraged by Jung to work with children, Dora Kalff adapted Margaret Lowenfeld's technique and incorporated aspects of Eastern life views in the development of Sandplay (Sandspiel) (Kalff, 2019). SP is based on the premise that there is a fundamental drive toward healing in the human psyche that transcends ego consciousness (Jung & Hull, 2014; Kalff, 1996). Essentially, SP is a projection whereby the person's unconscious is projected onto the maternal container, the mother figure that plays the greatest role in their lives (Jung, 2008; Weinrib, 2004). Thus SP can be considered a psychotherapeutic process whereby the sand player creates three-dimensional scenes in a tray of a specific size, using sand, water and realistic figures. Interaction with the sand, water and miniatures allows the sand player to access the unconscious and give concrete expression to unconscious material through the creation of an image in the sand (Davids, 2005; Kalff, 1996; Ryce-Menuhin, 2015; Weinrib, 2004). The sand images and miniatures are representations or symbols that form a bridge between the familiar and the strange and can relate reason to passion, the past to the present and the present to the future (Ryce-Menuhin, 2015). Symbols (objects and images) can have a holistic embodied effect when manifested as a tactile sensation (Zoja, 2018). Experiencing the symbol in a safe and protected space is most important while language is not a barrier as non-verbal expression creates direct access to the unconscious (Ferreira et al., 2014; Kalff, 1996, 2019). Several meta-analyses report the effectiveness of SP in therapeutic settings; however, there is a dearth of research on early adolescence and group SP interventions particularly in community-based settings in the South African context (Koh & Ha, 2022; Roesler, 2019; Wiersma et al., 2022).

### 2.3. Silent group sandplay

This single case study investigation involved a group SP informed activity that deviated from the traditional SP therapy experience consisting of one patient and one qualified therapist. In this case, the SP informed group activity consisted of six 1-h sessions held in silence with five early adolescent participants aged 9-14 years-old living at a child protection home with fifteen other children in rural KwaZulu Natal. The participant children's individual, unique wounds or case histories were not disclosed to the researcher. The SP informed group sessions were facilitated by the researcher. This activity was unknown to both the children and the adult participants. A SP informed room was set up by the researcher in a converted shipping container at the child protection facility. The researcher had a deep interest in SP but was not a qualified SP therapist and had limited experience of personal sand tray sessions and no experience in providing group SP. A substantial collection of miniatures and five sand trays belonging to the researcher formed the basis of the SP informed room and activity. Each child was allocated a sand tray identified by a shape in the room with miniatures available for selection. Non-directed silent group SP was introduced to the children outside of the SP room through a brief discussion that included instructions for the SP informed activity. The instructions emphasised no talking, entering the room together, identifying individual sand trays, creating a world or picture in a tray using the sand, miniatures and water, allowing others to work in their trays undisturbed and leaving on completion. The researcher sat quietly observing the actions of the children as they worked with their sand trays. After the children had left, the researcher took photographs of each sand tray and recorded detailed descriptions of the images before dismantling each tray and restoring the room for the next session. The sand images formed the basis of a first paper arising from the group SP informed research (Redfern & Finestone, 2023). SP informed sessions were simultaneously experienced by the group of participants for six consecutive weeks. There were no restrictions in terms of which or how many miniatures could be used. The sessions were held in a purposefully created room, dedicated to the SP informed project. An intentional safe, private and protected, temenos (sacred) space was set up. During the SP informed project, the room was used solely for this activity and no one other than the researcher and the five children entered the room. Multiple layers of temenos included silence, the group, consecutive weekly sessions, with the same researcher as witness facilitator and no involvement or interference from the child protection staff. The only talking that took place was outside the room while waiting for group members to arrive for the SP informed sessions.

### 2.4. Interviews with adult staff

Nine childcare staff were interviewed before and after the six group SP informed sessions. The children were not interviewed and the adult carers provided insight through semi-structured interviews into the children's behaviour and response to the SP informed activity. Each before and after interview was about 1 h in duration and all eighteen interviews were recorded and transcribed. The childcare staff were experienced carers in child and youth care and had been employed at the home for three to eleven years, most having worked previously in the field of childcare. Included in the staff interviewed were the chairperson, educational psychologist, general manager and six carers. The carers live with the children 24/7; the children are never without supervision. The educational psychologist was based at the facility three days a week and the general manager lived on-site and interacted with the children and carers daily. All staff except for the chairperson live together at the protection facility. The chairperson would visit regularly once or twice a month for a week at a time and during Covid-19 would have Facetime calls with the children and staff.

### 2.5. Quality and trustworthiness

To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, the researcher adopted several reflective processes throughout the project, one of which was to maintain a detailed reflective journal during the fieldwork. The researcher engaged in both academic and personal Jungian supervision. These sessions provided a space to discuss and reflect on the research process, receive feedback, and ensure alignment with Jungian principles. Regarding member checking, the study design included indirect participant validation through the insights provided by the childcare staff. Nine childcare staff members were interviewed both before and after the six group SP informed sessions. The before and after interviews allowed the childcare staff to validate and reflect on the observed changes in the children.

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Pretoria EDU058/21 and pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality and the preservation of the sacredness of the SPI process and resulting images (Redfern, 2022). Participation was voluntary and informed permission, consent and assent were obtained.

Notable limitations to replicability include the deep interest of the researcher in SP, the receptivity of the child protection home to the research project and that the SP informed activity took place during COVID-19 after a period of significant isolation and irregular schooling. In these unique circumstances the adult staff, children and the researcher had been deprived of interaction and stimulating activities.

The generation and analysis of data were iterative and simultaneously processed and interpreted. Detailed descriptions of sand images and SP informed behaviour as well as interview transcripts were thoroughly scrutinised, organised and manually coded revealing patterns and themes that highlighted both wounding and healing and the need for containment. The data generated from sand images, in-depth interviews, researcher experiences and reflections resonates and are supported by both Sandplay and Jungian authors (Kalf, 1983; S. Lee et al., 2023; Mitchell & Friedman, 2021; Olaniyi et al., 2021; Redfern & Finestone, 2023; Roesler, 2019; Ryce-Menuhin, 2015; Turner, 2005; Weinrib, 2004; Zoja, 2018).

## 3. Results

In the before-interviews staff highlighted and described the harsh realities of abuse, neglect and deprivation including the overwhelming and draining nature of child protection work. Wounding and overwhelming needs featured prominently with issues such as vulnerability and wounding, constrained resources, systems and support, the need for change, the need for culturally appropriate, accessible intervention, and unknown knowledge and experience of the SP informed activity.

The second main theme (the need for containment and expression) was indicated and addressed in the provision of the SP informed activity and the third main theme of psychological healing was highlighted in the after-SP informed interviews. Healing themes that emerged from the after-interviews include activated play, cooperation and sharing, open and responsive, increased understanding and awareness, centring and grounding, and belonging. Table 1 summarises and highlights the main themes of both wounding and healing and includes the group SP informed themes. The SP informed images indicated a process and progression from wounding (threat, conflict chaos) towards healing (creativity and containment) (Redfern & Finestone, 2023).

### 3.1. Before-sandplay informed interviews

The before interviews describe the background of the children and the circumstances in which the child protection home operates.

"They come in with a broken background. ... very confused, because they have been taken out of their ... known zone. To this unknown

**Table 1**  
Wounding and healing themes.

Main themes	Wounding: Overwhelming needs	Sandplay informed (SPI) themes	Healing: Energy activated
<b>Sub-themes:</b>	Vulnerability and wounding: Deprivation, neglect and abuse	SPI 1: Threats, conflict and chaos	Activated to play: Energy and desire to play, engagement in play and play at work
1			
2	Constrained resources, systems and support: Both material and human capacity	SPI 2: The need for protection and containment	Cooperation and sharing: Willing to comply with others, helpfulness, sharing, less bullying and less fighting
3	The need for change: Pressure from within and without	SPI 3: Revealed vulnerability	Open and responsive to others: Communication with adults and other children, less reserved, more interaction, less aggressive, more receptive
4	The need for culturally appropriate, accessible intervention: Cost-effective and sustainable	SPI 4: Progression and regression	Increased understanding and awareness: Consciousness (ego) strengthening, learning and growth, increased tolerance of the world and others
5	Unknown knowledge and experience of Sandplay: A new activity	SPI 5: Uniquely creative together	Centring and grounding: Calmer, more composed, present and focused, relaxed, showing through of the self-system and being more content
6		SPI 6: Containment, and activation of movement	Belonging: Together, family, kinship, adaptation/change, fitting in, absence of fighting

setting. They ... might know that the known zone is not healthy for them. But they ... still prefer.” (Tim)

The sub-themes of wounding and overwhelming needs were vulnerability and wounding, constrained resources, the need for change and the need for culturally appropriate and accessible intervention. In the before interviews it was reported that the children had been placed at the home by the state for temporary protection from different traumatic backgrounds, that the home operates with a severe constraint of resources and is not well supported by the government despite the desperate needs. Added to this, the scarcity of resources is exacerbated by a lack of staff capacity and children are placed in protected care for not longer than two years. Case social workers push for reunification with families and staff feel pressure to equip the children for when they are discharged back to their home communities.

In addition, it can be difficult to know what is going on internally and how to reach and communicate with the children at a deeper, more meaningful level. The children often exhibit body language and behaviour that is different to what they are saying. Their inner world has its own story. Access to specialised, culturally appropriate psychological or psychiatric services is scarce and private services are not affordable. Talk therapy intervention is limited. Not all the children speak isiZulu while some children battle to express themselves verbally regardless of their home language. There is an urgent need for cost-effective appropriate and accessible interventions.

The need to try something new and culturally appropriate was highlighted. Another factor is the lack of privacy for children. In child protection facilities, most activities occur communally and under constant (day and night) supervision by childcare staff. A protected, private and safe space in which individual children can express and process their inner worlds is sorely lacking (Gwandure, 2010). In addition to the challenges associated with trying to provide suitable support, the staff identified a need for stimulating, safe and engaging activities.

As an activity, SP was mostly unheard of and had never been experienced nor witnessed by any of the participants. Curiosity and interest were expressed in the new activity. Adult participants wondered if this activity was suitable for black, African culture but liked that the children would be using their hands in the sand and hoped that the activity would make the children feel special. Tim highlights concern about the suitability of SP informed activity for black children in protective care.

“... what I’m struggling with is their context. That the sand play is coming to these kids with such a background. ... how is the sand play going to relate with the kids of this culture? The kids who are coming from this broken background. ... because I want to believe that bringing it to a black culture, and please listen carefully, bringing it to a black culture to this kind of a broken background child is unique.” (Tim)

In the child protection environment childcare workers mainly

provide monitoring, shelter and nourishment, seeing to the basic needs of the children. Descriptions of the children’s challenging behaviour and mood included bullying, crying, fighting, running away, grabbing, not sharing and being uncooperative. The situation is additionally overwhelming when childcare workers themselves require support. As such, overwhelming needs require intervention and the need for containment and expression is considerable, not only for the children but also for the adult childcare staff. Immediately after the before-interviews, the five early adolescent children attended six weekly SP informed group sessions with the researcher as facilitator.

### 3.2. After-sandplay informed interviews

After the final SP informed group session had taken place, the researcher had no idea how the sessions were received as there had been no engagement and discussion with the staff or children beyond having acted as a witness facilitator in the SP informed room during the six weeks. The sand images and actions indicated a process but whether this had translated to shifts in behaviour and attitude was unknown. Nervous trepidation accompanied the researcher to the after-SP informed interviews that were to provide insight into the children’s behaviour and responses during and after the weekly sessions of the SP informed activity.

Interviews indicated that the children responded positively to the SP informed sessions. Notably, the children’s enjoyment and connection with the SP informed activity ignited in them the urge to play and to engage deeply in play. The desire to play was a significant behavioural change in the children. Before the SP activity they had not played in the same way and this activation and release of energy were tangible and attributed to the SP informed activity as described by childcare staff Nancy and Tracy.

“I think they were not good on playing together. Before. Now, they’re, good at playing together. That is what I have noticed. ... since they started this sand play, they are now good. Even to talk to each other, they talk to each other, in words.” (Tracy).

“They are now able to play well with each other rather than before. They can share their toys. ... Yes, sometimes before they used to argue and fight for the toys, but now they know how to play together and share. ... [One of the participants], she used to like to play alone. But since they’ve started this she is now with the other girls. They play together now.” (Nancy).

The second healing theme noticed by childcarers was that the children were more cooperative both with each other and with the adult staff. They helped one another as well as the younger children and they started sharing. There was also less bullying, crying and fighting and there were no reports of any untoward behaviour at the home during the six weeks of the SP informed activity.

The third healing aspect was evident in the children being more open and responsive to others. Their capacity to receive or take in as well as

the ability to give or to respond was increased. Communication with each other, as well as with staff, improved. The children were overheard excitedly sharing their SP informed actions late at night discussing what they had made and planning what next to make in the sand.

The fourth healing theme is increased awareness and understanding reflected in the children's discussions and actions with adults and with each other. Their capacity to learn and understand was evident in the completion of chores and homework before playing and in displaying curiosity, interest and engagement. Increased ability to focus and concentrate and no complaints about the children involved during and after the study suggested signs of the healing self in self-regulatory actions and balance as it relates to the ego (Mitchell & Friedman, 2021; Weinrib, 2004).

Childcare staff indicated that they too acquired new knowledge and insight as a result of the children's involvement in the SP informed activity. Staff noticed the children's responses to this creative activity and had the opportunity to reflect on the children in new ways and to think about their role as childcare workers. This had evidently been a learning experience for both the sand players and their carers.

The fifth healing theme of centring and grounding was indicated by the children's ability to be in the present and by their behaviour being more appropriate, calm and reasonable. This included composure, a more relaxed, less 'hyped' state and being content to perform daily chores and help each other. The general manager, Tim reported that there was agreement from all staff that a shift had occurred:

... the kids that were coming to the therapy. There is something that is happening in their lives. ... each time I interact with them, they're different. I am not buying your eyes but there's something new, something is happening, something different. (Tim)

Repeated descriptions of the children after the SP informed activity included the words 'happy' and 'happier' indicating more contentment.

The final healing theme that emerged was a sense of belonging featuring inclusion and kinship. In this instance, belonging was highlighted with references to family, togetherness, teamwork and adaptation. Childcarers referred to the increase and improvement in the togetherness and cohesiveness of the children who had been involved in SP informed activities. Children who previously had played alone were seen playing with the others. Another characteristic of belonging is reflected in the concept of family. Family is the first place of belonging in the world; it is part of the sense of home. In the context of the participant children, it is also tragically the place where the wounding occurred. When the children start identifying with the child protection facility as a place where they belong, this suggests a shift towards healing and moving away from woundedness. The deepening of family bonds amongst the children was reported by several childcare workers.

One childcare worker commented on the family bonds of the children:

*You can feel that brother-sisterhood thing among themselves. Maybe there is a button that needed to be pressed and now maybe we've managed to press that button. They know now that, okay we belong together now.* (Sam)

To become a part of something, to belong, requires adaptation, adjustment and integration. On one level you can belong to a biological family or a school but not necessarily feel like you belong. Adaptation requires flexibility and the ability to evolve. Further to this, adaptation is illustrated by a shift or change, indicating a difference that has occurred. Childcare staff affirmed the uniqueness and the universal applicability of the SP informed activity that touches the psyche beyond culturally defined borders and highlights the common archetypal foundations of the human experience (M Kalf, 2019). After the SP informed activity Tim reflects on his initial enquiry about the suitability for black children.

"I asked you some questions in the beginning related to the sand play. ... it's bringing something different in our society. And I think the questions that I had in terms of how is it going to relate within our

context, you know, a black child context, and you gave me those answers and the fact that I didn't even know that it was universal ... So I don't have questions except for keep on begging if you could prolong ... carry on with the sand play ..." (Tim)

#### 4. Discussion

Gradually the realisation grew after repeatedly listening to and pouring over interview transcripts that the six weeks of silent SP informed group activity had surpassed expectations. Initially, childcare workers had outlined the overwhelming needs and wounding of the children and after six weeks of contained purposeful SP informed group activity, positive shifts were reported. Most notably, activation of a desire to play was observed.

SP informed activity offered in multiple layers of *temenos* including the group and silence highlights the value of additional containment for vulnerable children. The regulating effect of silence and the group cannot be underestimated and lends impetus to the value of a series of SP informed groups as a supportive, identity-forming bridge between early adolescence and early adulthood when inner attunement assists with increased awareness and improves outer interactions (Redfern & Finestone, 2023).

Self-exploration and inner processing appear to initiate healing, facilitate increased awareness and enable more positive interactions with peers and adult childcare staff. This inner resilience in the face of wounding is remarkable and testimony to the self-regulatory function of the psyche in a conducive environment (Kalf, 2019; Weinrib, 2004; Zoja, 2018).

Already in temporary protective care, the additional support and provision of a series of SP informed activity within a purposefully created and protected space, suggests the facilitation of inner processing and the development of resources as reflected in positive behavioural and demeanour shifts (Redfern, 2022).

The inter-relatedness of inner and outer is noteworthy. The inner world is reliant on the outer circumstances to provide a conducive space while the outer world is better placed for sustainability in the hands of attuned and aware individuals. A series of silent SP informed group activity in early adolescence facilitates internal processes that enable positive relationships with the self-system and with others and instils a sense of unity and belonging.

Caution is advised when considering the results given the limitations of the study and the researcher's lack of SP training at the time of the research. It is not known to what extent the results of provision of these SP informed groups can be attributed to the SP informed intervention alone given the care, shelter and protection provided by the child protection home. The results reported and observed are considered within the context of this particular case and setting including the occurrence during the COVID-19 period, the receptivity of the children's home to the study and the researcher's deep interest in SP. Nevertheless, it is hoped that this paper will add to the call for suitable group, community-based therapeutic interventions for vulnerable children and adults in resource-poor communities thereby supporting the creation of free and protected, conducive environments to facilitate healing (Kalf, 1996). Further investigation of the effectiveness of silent SP informed groups being purposefully offered by interested and trained facilitators in community-based settings is recommended to assess the potential in addressing the overwhelming needs.

#### 5. Conclusion: follow-up two, three and six months after the final sandplay informed sessions

A follow-up interview with the general manager of the child protection facility provided insight two, three and six months after the final SP informed series. Three of the children (Olivia, Maddy and Toni) were reunited with their families a few months after the final SP informed

session. Although the childcare staff would have preferred the children to remain longer for further healing and development, the case social worker had deemed them ready for reunification with their families.

When Olivia, the oldest arrived at the home she had no identity and had been rescued from dire circumstances in which an old man had taken her for marriage. Through the SP informed activity, Olivia experienced aspects of childhood she had previously been denied. Notably, Olivia, requested additional opportunities to play even after the SP informed sessions had ended.

The youngest group member, Maddy, left the home with a stronger sense of self. She had arrived emotionally unstable and her SP informed sessions coincided with her court case. The educational psychologist noted that Maddy seemed unfazed by the court proceedings after her SP informed sessions.

The third child, Toni, arrived withdrawn and isolated, living with HIV and Aids. When she left the home, she was more responsive and open, better integrated with the other children and the staff, and her condition was well managed.

The remaining children, Simon and Nelly, continued to show progress six months after their final SP informed sessions. Simon excelled in all activities and became more assertive in both sports and games. Nelly, initially almost excluded from the SP informed activity due to her uncontained behaviour, showed significant improvement. She became coherent, progressed at school, and found her place within the group. Nelly no longer showed violent behaviour, or excessive crying and making up stories. She could now talk about her changes and maturity, and she was also content to sit quietly with staff.

## 6. Final reflection

The Silent Group SP informed project was a humbling and heartening experience for the researcher given the initial unknowns. What was noticeable was that the children were content not to discuss their SP images, they had no questions and despite the researcher being available they did not wish to talk about their SP informed sessions and they were very excited and happy for their images to be shared so that other children could potentially participate in future SP informed groups. It is hoped that the momentary reprieve by the SP informed activity from the realities of the children's outer worlds provided them with connection. Parallel experiences of increased awareness and growth for the researcher, the children and the adult participants had a profound impact on the researcher.

Finally, repeated requests for Silent Group SP to become a permanent offering at the child protection home resulted in the establishment of a dedicated Silent Group SP room a year after the research was concluded.

"I wish maybe they can carry on ... the sand play. ... I recommend it. It can make a big difference. It can help us as childcare workers. ... It stimulates their thinking, their brains will grow up quickly and it's helped us childcare workers, for us to do it easier." (Ken)

## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Lindi Redfern:** Writing – original draft, Visualization, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Michelle Finestone:** Supervision.

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## Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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