

Chapter # 3

UNLOCKING NATURAL ABILITY: EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR EMERGING PERFORMING ARTS ACTORS

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ABSTRACT

Natural talent makes the art industry richer with actors and performances. The study investigated the significance of creating opportunities for aspiring actors in the field of dramatic arts, emphasising the role of natural talent and structured training. The study adopts Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences as its theoretical framework. In the qualitative case study approach, twelve participants were purposively selected for the study. Data were collected through structured interview questions, which facilitated the identification of key themes through coding and thematic analysis. The findings reveal that, despite the significant challenges associated with pursuing an acting career, including intense competition and limited resources, various initiatives have emerged to support aspiring actors. Programs emphasising local theatre participation and community-based training provide essential skills and networking opportunities. The study recommends programs that prioritise raw talent and ensure accessibility in a supportive environment, where participants hone their artistic skills and develop critical life competencies, resilience, which could be essential for artists. The findings advocate for the expansion of similar initiatives that recognise and nurture natural talent in aspiring actors. The study concludes that there is a need to integrate performing arts education into community frameworks to cultivate future generations of artists.

Keywords: aspiring, creativity, dramatic arts, natural talent, opportunities.

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of talent in the dramatic arts has been a subject of considerable debate, with various models proposed to explain the emergence of successful actors, directors, and playwrights. Natural talent in the dramatic arts can be a powerful catalyst for aspiring actors, but it is often insufficient (Sparling, 2021). The journey toward a successful acting career requires not only innate ability but also the creation of opportunities that allow talent to flourish (Connell, Brown, & Baker, 2020). In today's competitive entertainment landscape, aspiring actors must navigate various pathways to gain experience and exposure. It may include engaging with local theatre groups, enrolling in acting classes, and participating in auditions for multiple productions (Sparling, 2021).

Moreover, the rise of digital platforms has revolutionised how actors showcase their skills (Connell et al., 2020). Many are now encouraged to create content through short films, web series, or social media performances. This proactive approach enhances visibility, allowing actors to define their artistic voice (Malafronte, 2021). As actors such as Issa Rae and Emma Stone have demonstrated, leveraging technology and creativity can lead to significant career breakthroughs (Lawal, Ibrahim, Ojodu, & Salvador, 2023). Ultimately, while natural talent is invaluable, the ability to seize opportunities and innovate within the industry truly empowers aspiring actors to succeed in the dramatic arts (Sparling, 2021).

These research questions guided the study:

1. How do aspiring actors perceive the role of natural talent in their journey towards success in the dramatic arts?
2. What opportunities do aspiring actors identify as crucial for developing their craft and advancing their careers in the dramatic arts?

2. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The field of dramatic arts has long recognised natural talent as a cornerstone of artistic excellence; yet, aspiring actors in South Africa face significant barriers to realising their potential (Yende, 2025). Historically, access to training and performance opportunities remained limited, particularly in underserved regions like the Eastern Cape, where socioeconomic disparities and geographic isolation hindered talent development (Delpont, 2025). Formal theatre programs, often concentrated in urban centres such as Johannesburg and Cape Town, overlooked rural talents, perpetuating inequalities in the creative economy (Booyens, 2025).

Talent identification initiatives emerged sporadically in the early 2000s, driven by cultural festivals and community workshops, but these lacked systematic support (Ferreira, 2024). Aspiring actors relied on informal networks, self-taught skills, and sporadic auditions, resulting in high dropout rates and unfulfilled potential (Yende, 2025). Studies have documented how natural aptitude—manifested in innate expressiveness, emotional depth, and improvisational flair—fades without structured nurturing, thereby exacerbating unemployment among young people in the arts sector (Delpont, 2025). Government policies on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 (quality education) and SDG 8 (decent work), have highlighted the importance of inclusive and creative pathways (Monaco, 2024). It is worth noting that implementation gaps persist in nurturing natural talent within the dramatic arts education. The current study on natural talent, which creates opportunities for aspiring actors in the dramatic arts, addresses these challenges.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1. The Role of Natural Talent in Acting

Natural talent is often viewed as a foundational element in the acting profession (Connell, Brown, & Baker, 2020). While some individuals possess an innate ability to perform, this talent alone does not guarantee success (Malafronte, 2021). Research indicates that natural talent may be complemented by rigorous training and practice to develop the necessary skills for effective performance (Lawal et al., 2023). Actors such as Jennifer Lawrence have demonstrated that while raw talent can provide an initial advantage, continuous learning and adaptation are critical for long-term success in the industry (Malafronte, 2021). The integration of innate ability with structured training allows aspiring actors to cultivate these intelligences, thereby enhancing their craft. Furthermore, research suggests that acting is not solely reliant on innate talent, but rather on a complex interplay between genetic predispositions and environmental factors, such as rigorous coaching, role-playing, and networking opportunities (Kogan, 2002; Sparling, 2021). Importantly, access to community-based performing arts education creates pathways for marginalised groups by recognising and nurturing latent talent, contributing to cultural enrichment and career opportunities (Poth, 2023). Therefore, the development of natural talent requires ongoing effort, external support, and strategic opportunities to actualise success in the dramatic arts fully.

3.2. Creating Opportunities through Education and Networking

Education is pivotal in transforming natural talent into professional opportunities (Piirto, 2021). Aspiring actors benefit from formal training programs that teach essential skills such as text analysis, character development, and emotional expression (Plucker & Peters, 2020). Additionally, networking within the industry may be crucial; relationships with casting directors and fellow actors could lead to auditions and roles that might otherwise remain inaccessible (Mohamed Hashim, Tlemsani, & Matthews, 2022). Community theatre or workshops could also enhance visibility and provide practical experience (Lawal et al., 2023).

Markos (2024) emphasised that formal training cultivates versatility by exposing actors to diverse techniques, from classical methods to contemporary improvisation, enabling seamless adaptation across genres and character types. This structured environment fosters professional discipline, including punctuality, receptivity to direction, and ensemble collaboration, all of which are indispensable for sustaining a career (Swargiary, 2024). Workshops build confidence through repeated performance exercises, helping performers overcome stage fright and refine physicality, vocal projection, and emotional authenticity (Hu, 2024). Networking extends beyond casual connections; alum networks and faculty mentorship from training programs often yield endorsements, collaborations, and access to industry showcases attended by agents (Fisher & Price, 2021). According to Bukhari, Oladimeji, Etim, and Ajayi (2024), community initiatives further democratise opportunities by offering low-barrier entry points for skill-building and peer feedback, bridging gaps for underrepresented talents. Continuous education sustains competitiveness amid evolving industry demands, ensuring actors remain adaptable and resilient (Kucuksuleymanoglu, 2025).

3.3. The Importance of Continuous Development

Continuous personal and professional development is vital for aspiring actors (Jensen & Kim, 2020). The acting industry constantly evolves, and staying informed about industry trends, audition techniques, and performance styles is essential (Hagen, 2023). Actors could embrace lifelong learning through classes, workshops, and self-directed study to refine their craft and adapt to changing demands (Malafronte, 2021). The commitment enhances actors' skills and increases their chances of being noticed by casting directors, ultimately paving the way for successful careers in the dramatic arts (Piirto, 2021).

Markos (2024) highlighted that ongoing training sharpens versatility by introducing advanced methodologies, such as improvisation for spontaneity or voice modulation for diverse dialects, enabling performers to tackle multifaceted roles across film, theatre, and digital platforms. Self-directed practices, such as script analysis and monologue rehearsals, build resilience against rejection, fostering a growth mindset that views challenges as opportunities for refinement (Swargiary, 2025). Workshops simulate real-world pressures, honing ensemble dynamics and directorial responsiveness, which are critical for collaborative productions (Nedaei & Jacoby, 2025). Mentorship pairings with seasoned professionals offer insider insights into career navigation, from mastering self-taping to developing personal branding through social media (Laurin, 2024). This proactive approach combats skill stagnation during downtime, sustains passion amid irregular work, and positions actors as adaptable assets in a competitive landscape demanding innovation and emotional depth (Sahu & Bhattacharya, 2025).

3.4. Empirical Literature

This part outlined the empirical literature for the current study.

3.4.1. Genetic and Interactional Perspectives

The study by (Hatami, 2023) provides a foundational understanding of the genetic and interactional perspectives in the development of performing arts careers. (Campbell & Muncer, 2021) The developmental model considers both intrinsic and environmental determinants, while Simonton's model, based on Lykken's behaviour-genetic research, emphasised genetic factors. The suggestion that genetic factors may play a role, environmental influences and individual decisions are also critical in acting (Hatami, 2023) (Kogan, 2002a, b).

These frameworks highlight how genetic predispositions interact with nurture to shape performative aptitude, where innate traits such as emotional expressivity or spatial awareness emerge through practice and feedback (Campbell & Muncer, 2021). Twin studies reveal heritability estimates for creative and artistic abilities ranging from moderate to high, underscoring polygenic influences alongside shared family environments that foster early exposure to the arts (Dechaume, 2024). Individual agency manifests in deliberate skill-building, such as vocal training or improvisation drills, which amplify latent potentials (Dartey, 2021). Longitudinal research demonstrates that optimal talent trajectories arise from synergistic effects: genetic baselines provide raw capacity, while enriched contexts, mentorship, cultural immersion, and opportunity structures catalyse exceptional outcomes in dramatic arts careers (Oliver, 2025).

3.4.2. Environmental Influences and Opportunities

Environmental factors, such as access to quality training and mentorship, play a significant role in the development of aspiring actors (Cherian & Francis, 2021; Kearney & Levine, 2020). The heterogeneity in students' prior school and undergraduate experiences highlights the importance of providing diverse and inclusive opportunities for training in the dramatic arts (Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, Khalid, & Finster, 2021). Programs that offer a range of experiences and support can help nurture talent from diverse backgrounds, ensuring that natural talent is not the sole determinant of success (Malafronte, 2021).

Such programs counteract socioeconomic barriers by offering scholarships, outreach initiatives, and flexible scheduling that accommodate diverse learners from rural or urban settings (Ray & Chakravarty, 2025). Mentorship fosters personalised growth through guidance on portfolio development, audition preparation, and resilience-building in the face of industry rejection (Chaiwanichsiri, 2024). Family and community support systems further amplify opportunities by encouraging early arts exposure, such as local theatre involvement or cultural festivals, which build foundational confidence and networks (Schnyder, Wico, & Huber, 2021). (Kearney & Levine, 2020) highlighted that school environments enriched with drama clubs or interdisciplinary collaborations enhance performative skills alongside academic pursuits. These layered influences create equitable pathways, transforming potential into proficiency and enabling underrepresented actors to compete effectively in professional arenas (Mergen & Güven, 2025).

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences serves as a framework for understanding talent in the dramatic arts (McClellan & Conti, 2008). It identifies distinct intelligences, particularly interpersonal and bodily-kinesthetic, crucial for acting

(Şuruba-Rusen, Murăreţu, Murăreţu, Petre, & Teodoru, 2020). Interpersonal intelligence aids authentic character portrayal, while bodily-kinesthetic intelligence supports physical expression (Lawal et al., 2023). The theory suggests that actors can enhance their skills through targeted training (Chew & Mohamed Zainal, 2024) and promotes inclusive programs that recognise varied strengths, addressing equity gaps (O'Dell, 2025). Neuroimaging links specific brain networks to these intelligences, reflecting acting requirements (Bekkali, 2019). Gardner emphasises cultural context in nurturing potential, informing workshops that develop diverse abilities (Gardner, 2024).

5. METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research approach was employed to explore the complexities of acting talent and the opportunities available to aspiring actors (Maxwell, 2021). The method captures individual experiences, revealing how innate abilities interact with training and networks (Dartey, 2021), while uncovering barriers faced by individuals from diverse backgrounds, thereby informing inclusive frameworks (Dechaume, 2024). It is worth noting that factors such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and location can marginalise aspiring actors (Mkwanzani & Melis Cin, 2020), thereby affecting their access to auditions and training. The research promotes equitable landscapes in the performing arts (Collins et al., 2022) and emphasises ethical considerations to ensure participant safety (Kearney & Levine, 2020). By understanding individual experiences and systemic influences (Delpont, 2025). Stakeholders could work towards dismantling barriers and fostering a more inclusive acting industry (Kearney & Levine, 2020).

5.1. Data Collection and Analysis

Open-ended interviews were used to collect data, allowing participants to share rich narratives about their motivations for pursuing acting careers (Maxwell, 2021). The qualitative approach provided insights into the emotional and psychological aspects of acting (Hoemann et al., 2024). The unrestricted format enabled actors to express themselves freely, resulting in more nuanced narratives and a deeper understanding of their experiences (Kahl, 2019). Thematic analysis revealed both external factors, such as family support and education, and internal struggles, including self-doubt and the search for validation (Maxwell, 2021). Participants described their training as rigorous yet transformative, influencing their identities (Hatami, 2023). Many found acting to be a therapeutic outlet for exploring complex emotions, highlighting the balance between creative joy and mental health challenges (O'Dell, 2025).

5.2. Research Design

A case study was employed to investigate individual experiences within the acting community. The qualitative approach focused on specific actors or acting schools, revealing how natural talent interacts with opportunities in the dramatic arts (Poth, 2023). Through interviews and observations, the study highlighted the influence of mentorship, training, and networking on artistic development (Maxwell, 2021). It captured the diverse backgrounds of actors and offered insights for educators and aspiring actors (Oliver, 2025). The findings can inform best practices and foster a more inclusive environment for emerging talent (Schnyder et al., 2021). The case study approach enhances understanding of the talent-opportunity relationship in the dramatic arts, paving the way for future research and applications (Hoemann et al., 2024).

5.3. Population and Sampling

The study employed purposive sampling with twelve actors to gain insights into the dramatic arts and the role of natural talent in career trajectories. This qualitative approach enables the selection of participants with relevant experiences, thereby enhancing the credibility of the findings (Poth, 2023). While prior research acknowledges the importance of natural talent, it often overlooks its interaction with training and other factors (Connell et al., 2020). Through in-depth interviews, the study captures the complexities of each actor's journey (Hatami, 2023), which is vital for understanding the multifaceted nature of the human experience in the arts (Poth, 2023). Ultimately, the research highlights the role of natural talent in shaping career paths, offering valuable insights for practitioners and educators (Maxwell, 2021).

5.4. Data Collection

Data collection for the study was conducted using a structured interview. The method was chosen for its efficiency in gathering comprehensive data and analysing trends and patterns related to talent perception and opportunity identification among aspiring actors (Poth, 2023). The interview questions consisted of both closed-ended and open-ended questions. Closed-ended questions provided quantifiable data, enabling researchers to assess the prevalence of certain beliefs about natural talent and the types of opportunities actors consider most beneficial (Creswell, 1999). The interview tool was distributed online to reach a diverse group of aspiring actors across different backgrounds and locations.

5.5. Data Treatment and Analysis

Qualitative data from open-ended questions were thematically analysed, focusing on talent development and opportunity creation. Thematic maps illustrated how aspiring actors navigate their careers, revealing the complex interplay between individual talent and external factors. Themes included mentorship, access to resources, and networking, all of which are vital for career advancement. The study also highlights the significance of resilience and adaptability in a competitive environment, indicating that successful talent development requires a nuanced understanding of personal abilities and systemic barriers in the performing arts (Lainson, Braun & Clarke, 2019; Creswell, 1999).

6. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This part discusses the findings of the current study.

6.1. Biographic Data

Table 1.
Demographic Profile of Participants.

Criteria	High School Learner	Frequency
Gender	Male	7
	Females	5
Average Age	18	2
	19	2
	21	5
	25	3
Pseudonyms for interview participants	YXA, YXB, YXC, YXD, YXE, YXF, YXG, YXH, YXI, YXJ, XYK, YXL	12

Table 1 indicates that the sample comprised high school learners of both genders, with 7 males and 5 females, suggesting a near-balanced gender distribution with a slight predominance of males. In terms of age, the participants ranged from 18 to 25 years, with the largest group being 21-year-olds ($n = 5$), followed by 25-year-olds ($n = 3$), and equal numbers of 18- and 19-year-olds ($n = 2$ each). This indicates that most learners were young adults beyond the typical school-leaving age. The table further shows that 12 learners participated in the interview phase and were allocated pseudonyms (YXA–YXL), demonstrating efforts to maintain confidentiality while enabling individual qualitative responses to be reported and compared within the broader demographic profile

6.2. Research Question and Themes

Table 2.
Research Question and Themes.

	Research Question	Research Theme	Sub-theme
1	How do aspiring actors perceive the role of natural talent in their journey towards success in the dramatic arts?	The Dual Nature of Talent and Training	1. Innate vs. Developed Skills Impact of Training on Performance
2	What opportunities do aspiring actors identify as crucial for developing their craft and advancing their careers in the dramatic arts?	Pathways to Professional Development	1. Networking and Industry Connections Educational Opportunities and Skill Development

The table displays the themes created, which are aligned with the research question.

6.3. Perceptions of Natural Talent in Aspiring Actors

To answer research question 1: *“How do aspiring actors perceive the role of natural talent in their journey towards success in the dramatic arts?”*

Participants’ responses to research question 1 suggest that, while natural talent is recognised as a valuable starting point, it is not viewed as the decisive factor in achieving success in the dramatic arts. Participant XYA, for instance, explicitly acknowledged possessing “some innate ability” but was quick to emphasise that “without consistent training, practice, and feedback, that talent does not automatically translate into success on stage or screen.” In this sense, natural talent is constructed as a foundation that must be actively developed through deliberate effort rather than a guarantee of success in and of itself.

“For me, natural talent matters, but it is not the only thing. I believe I do have some innate ability. However, I have learned that without consistent training, practice, and feedback, talent does not automatically translate into success on stage or screen.”
(Participant XYA: interview excerpt).

“I strongly believe that training and skill development outweigh natural talent in my journey as an aspiring actor. I have seen how structured classes, rehearsals, and critical reflection have improved my performance far more than simply relying on what I was ‘born with’” (Participant XYB: open-ended question excerpt).

“Networking opportunities are one of the most effective strategies for growth in this industry, in my view. Even if you are talented and well-trained, if you are not meeting casting directors, producers, and other creatives, your chances of being noticed remain very limited” (Participant XYC: interview excerpt).

“Hard work and dedication are more significant to me than talent. I have watched actors with average natural ability excel because they rehearse tirelessly, show up prepared, and keep pushing through rejection. At the same time, some naturally gifted people fall behind because they do not put in the same effort” (Participant XYD: interview excerpt).

Participant XYB highlighted that training and skill development outweigh natural talent in acting, as structured learning can significantly improve performance. Participant XYD added that hard work and dedication often allow average actors to succeed, while some naturally gifted individuals may fall behind without effort.

Participants highlighted that success in the dramatic arts relies not just on talent and training, but also on networking. For example, Participant XYC noted that building connections with industry professionals is crucial, as even talented actors can remain unnoticed without these relationships. Thus, while talent is important, sustained effort and strategic networking are crucial for aspiring actors.

To respond to theme 1: *The Dual Nature of Talent and Training*

Sub-theme 1: *Innate vs. Developed Skills Impact of Training on Performance*

The participants' responses highlight that natural talent is just one aspect of achieving success in the dramatic arts, emphasising its role as a starting point that requires emotional, technical, and relational growth. Participant XYE noted that emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills are “more important than raw talent,” suggesting that the ability to collaborate and respond to a director's vision is essential for believable performances.

Training is transformative for actors. A drama degree enhances credibility (Participant XYF), and online courses offer flexible learning (Participant XYK). Experience and relationships are key, with audition practice (Participant XYH) and community theatre (Participant XYJ) providing vital growth opportunities. Networking (Participant XYG) and mentorship (Participant XYI) are essential for career growth, highlighting the importance of talent recognition and access to social capital in an actor's journey.

“I think emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills are more important than raw talent for lasting success in acting. Being able to read people, manage my emotions, work well with a cast and crew, and respond sensitively to a director's vision helps me create more believable characters” (Participant XYE: interview excerpt).

“Obtaining a degree in drama and performing arts feels essential for my career advancement. A formal qualification not only builds my technical skills but also gives me credibility in the industry and exposes me to theory, history, and professional networks I would not access on my own” (Participant YXF: open-ended question excerpt).

“I consider networking events, such as industry meet-and-greets, crucial for my career development. These events allow me to introduce myself, learn about upcoming projects, and make personal impressions that a showreel alone cannot create” (Participant XYG: interview excerpt).

“Gaining audition experience is critical for improving my chances of landing roles. The more I audition, the better I understand how to interpret briefs quickly, manage anxiety in the room, and adjust my performance when given direction on the spot” (Participant XYH: interview excerpt).

“I view mentorship from established professionals as an essential opportunity for growth. Having someone who has already navigated the industry to guide me, critique my work, and offer practical advice helps me avoid common mistakes and stay motivated” (Participant XYI: interview excerpt)

“Involvement in community theatre productions is vital in honing my craft. These productions give me regular performance opportunities, help me experiment with different characters, and teach me the discipline of working within an ensemble and a rehearsal schedule” (Participant XYJ: open-ended question excerpt).

“Online courses and resources have been invaluable for developing my acting skills and my knowledge about the industry. They allow me to learn at my own pace, revisit complex material, and access insights from international practitioners that I would not otherwise meet.” (Participant XYK: open-ended question excerpt).

“I see success in acting as a combination of training, hard work, networking, and emotional intelligence, rather than natural talent alone. This might be different for each person, but in my case, I feel that building experience and professional connections is what will move my career forward” (Participant XYL: interview excerpt).

Participants like XYL emphasised that success is a "combination" of natural talent and factors such as training, hard work, networking, emotional intelligence, and experience. XYL emphasised the importance of professional connections, suggesting that while talent is valuable, it must be complemented by skill development and reflective practice to be truly effective.

7. DISCUSSIONS

The findings emphasise the foundational role of natural talent in the dramatic arts, while understanding the necessity of training for success. Participants viewed innate abilities as a crucial prioritised skill development, aligning with Connell et al. (2020), who argue that talent alone is insufficient without rigorous practice. This dual nature mirrors the genetic-environmental interplay (Kearney & Levine, 2020), where genetic predispositions, such as emotional expressivity, require coaching to manifest professionally. In South African contexts, resource constraints exacerbate this issue, as raw talent from marginalised communities requires structured outlets to compete, supporting Sparling (2021) in highlighting the importance of environmental supports. Networking and educational opportunities emerged as key pathways, where the need for valuing workshops, mentorship, and community theatre was indicated. These findings align with Hatami's (2023) findings on the benefits of formal training in building versatility across genres, as supported by Kearney and Levine's (2020) findings on the effectiveness of workshops in overcoming stage fright through repeated exercises. Empirical studies, such as Lawal et al. (2023), highlight the role of local theatre in skill-building for underrepresented actors. Participants consistently downplayed natural talent as a standalone predictor of achievement, instead emphasising the importance of training, hard work, networking, emotional intelligence, formal education, mentorship, audition experience, community involvement, and online resources. The themes

align with the principles of reflexive thematic analysis (Mkwananzi & Melis Cin, 2020), where open-ended responses and interview excerpts reveal nuanced, participant-driven insights into career trajectories in a competitive field (Monaco, 2024; O'Dell, 2025; Oliver, 2025).

7.1. Talent vs. Deliberate Development

Participants overwhelmingly positioned natural talent as a mere "starting point" rather than a determinant of success. For example, Participant XYA acknowledged innate ability but stressed that "without consistent training, practice, and feedback, talent does not automatically translate into success." At the same time, XYB asserted that "training and skill development outweigh natural talent." Similarly, XYD observed talented actors faltering without "hard work and dedication," and XYL integrated this view holistically: "success in acting [is] a combination of training, hard work, networking, and emotional intelligence." The perspective aligns with talent development literature, which suggests that innate gifts require cultivation through structured practice (Schnyder et al., 2021). In the performing arts context, it counters romanticised notions of genius, aligning with grounded theory explorations of actors' psychological well-being, which prioritise resilience and effort over raw ability (Şuruba-Rusen et al., 2020). These findings challenge excellence gap models in creative education (Yende, 2025), suggesting that aspiring actors in resource-constrained settings value agency through practice, much like migrant youth who leverage collective agency for their aspirations (Mkwananzi & Melis Cin, 2020).

7.2. Interpersonal and Emotional Competencies

Emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills emerged as pivotal for "lasting success", with Participant XYE emphasising abilities to "read people, manage my emotions, work well with a cast and crew, and respond sensitively to a director's vision." This theme emphasises the relational demands of acting, where empathy facilitates the creation of believable characters and promotes effective ensemble dynamics (McAvoy & O'Connor, 2022). Such views align with broader research in the performing arts on psychological well-being (Mkwananzi & Melis Cin, 2020) and emotional resilience (Oliver, 2025). In diverse industry contexts, these skills mitigate barriers like rejection and burnout (Schnyder et al., 2021; Şuruba-Rusen et al., 2020), paralleling participatory theatre frameworks for diversity management (Mergen & Güven, 2025). Participants' emphasis here reflects a mature understanding of acting as socially embedded, beyond technical prowess (Yende, 2025).

7.3. Networking, Mentorship, and Experiential Strategies

Networking is a key strategy in the arts, with Participant XYZ emphasising its value in connecting with industry professionals. At the same time, Participant XYG finds "industry meet-and-greets" beneficial for personal connections. Additional growth factors include mentorship (Participant XYI), audition experiences (Participant XYH), community theatre, formal degrees (Participant YXF), and online courses (Participant XYK), all of which provide crucial growth opportunities. These strategies align with perspectives in performing arts management (Mkwananzi & Melis Cin, 2020) and alum networks (Fisher & Price, 2021). Mentorship models, such as the virtual CASE framework (Kahl, 2019; Kearney & Levine, 2020), and community interventions support mid-career sustainability and address exclusionary barriers in inclusive education (Collins et al., 2022), aligning with the dramatic arts' role in special education.

7.4. Implications for Dramatic Arts Education

Collectively, the study findings advocate for a holistic training paradigm that integrates technical, emotional, and networked development, as summarised by Participant XYM: "Continuous learning, audition experience, mentorship, and strategic networking truly shape an actor's journey." This supports reflexive thematic analysis in qualitative arts research (Mkwananzi & Melis Cin, 2020), urging drama curricula to prioritise experiential learning over talent myths.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommendations are based explicitly on the profound gaps in talent nurturing within South Africa's dramatic arts sector, particularly in the Eastern Cape, where socioeconomic barriers have hindered the development of innate abilities among young people. Recommendations thus emerge not merely as prescriptive actions but as interconnected strategies to foster sustainable ecosystems for artistic growth. Educational institutions and theatre academies could prioritise talent scouting programs in rural schools, integrating improvisational workshops and mentorship schemes that recognise innate expressiveness over formal credentials. Such initiatives, informed by the study's findings, could enable actors to partner with local festivals to create pipelines from community stages to professional auditions in schools and local communities, thereby democratising access. Policymakers may bridge the implementation gaps between SDG 4 and SDG 8 by allocating dedicated funding for dramatic arts hubs in underserved regions and incentivising collaborations between government, NGOs, and industry stakeholders. These hubs would offer subsidised training, digital platforms for virtual auditions, and entrepreneurship modules to transform raw talent into viable careers, reducing youth unemployment.

Community leaders and artists hold pivotal roles in sustaining momentum through volunteer-led talent identification drives and alum networks, ensuring cultural relevance and inclusivity. Ultimately, these discursive pathways require a collective commitment to nurture natural talent, unlocking the dramatic arts as a catalyst for social cohesion and economic vitality in post-apartheid South Africa.

9. CONCLUSION

The current study illuminated aspiring actors' perceptions of natural talent as a foundational yet insufficient element for success in dramatic arts, emphasising the primacy of structured training, hard work, networking, and emotional intelligence. Participants, purposively sampled from high school learners aged 18-25 in the Eastern Cape, revealed through thematic analysis of structured interviews that innate abilities, such as expressiveness, required refinement through formal education, community theatre, mentorship, and audition experience to navigate competitive landscapes marked by resource scarcity and urban-rural divides. Grounded in Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences, findings aligned with literature highlighting interpersonal and bodily-kinesthetic intelligences as cultivable through environmental supports, countering essentialist views of talent.

The study highlights the need for professional development pathways for underrepresented youth in South Africa through the integration of performing arts in communities. It calls for reforms to include drama curricula in rural high schools and partnerships with local theatres to create equitable opportunities. Policymakers should fund training hubs that combine in-person and digital resources, allowing community members to

offer mentorship and help build resilience in young artists. These efforts aim to empower youth, preserve culture, and elevate the dramatic arts as a societal asset, with future research suggesting the examination of long-term impacts.

10. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Future research on natural talent in the dramatic arts should extend beyond Eastern Cape high school learners to include longitudinal tracking of career trajectories and the impact of training and networking on long-term success in a volatile industry. Comparative analyses across South African provinces could highlight regional disparities, contrasting rural initiatives with urban academies to develop scalable models that utilise digital platforms for auditions and virtual mentorship. Quantitative methods, such as surveys and talent aptitude metrics related to Gardner's multiple intelligences, would complement qualitative insights, exploring themes like the role of emotional intelligence and dropout predictors, including socioeconomic barriers. Interdisciplinary studies could examine the interplay between psychology and dramatic arts, assessing their contributions to SDG 8 in creative industries. Collaborative projects with industry stakeholders might test subsidised hubs for portfolio development and gig economy engagement. Additionally, international comparisons, such as with Nigeria's Nollywood, could reveal strategies for decolonising talent pipelines and amplifying underrepresented voices. Ultimately, participatory action research is essential for empowering aspiring actors as co-investigators in advancing equitable performing arts education.

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