

A Body-Based Group Intervention for Teacher Stress and Burnout in High-Risk Schools

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Abstract

Teachers in high-risk South African schools suffer from stress and burnout as a result of on-going violence and lack of student discipline. An evolutionary psychological approach to self-care was researched in a mixed-method pilot study of 63 teachers in schools in high-risk communities exposed to continuous traumatic stress on the Cape Flats, Western Cape. The before-after control research design comprised interventions based on tension and trauma release exercises (TRE) for primal brain response, transpersonal psychology for paleomammalian emotional brain functions, and transactional analysis for neomammalian cognitive brain insights. This paper considers qualitative findings of perceived benefits of TRE with a group of 17 male and female teachers, 45-50 years, for 15 hours over 10 weeks. These exercises were developed as an integrative neurophysiological approach that recognises the homeostatic and thus therapeutic value of this type of tremor in the human body under stress. Content coding analysis from workshop evaluation forms showed that the TRE intervention offered intra-individual tools, leading to self-understanding and body awareness. It was considered a self-help tool, effective for calm and relaxation. A bottom-up thematic analysis of focus group interviews post-intervention considered relationship with the self, with physical and emotional impacts, self-concept and thinking processes. It also considered relationships with others and the school. It was found that problem-focused somatic coping, with repetition of skills learned in TRE workshops, contributed to teachers developing a sense of self-control and optimism needed to cope better with stressors, thus promoting classroom competency and preventing burnout.

Keywords: Body-based group intervention; Trauma release exercises; Teacher stress; Burnout

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Citation: Johnson S, Naidoo A (2017) A Body-Based Group Intervention for Teacher Stress and Burnout in High-Risk Schools. Acta Psychopathol Vol.3 No.6:79

Received: October 27, 2017; **Accepted:** November 03, 2017; **Published:** November 12, 2017

Introduction

This paper considers tension and trauma release exercises (TRE) as a form of self-care, engaging the reptilian, survival brain in an evolutionary developmental group approach to healing. Participants were teachers in high-risk schools, among the most stressed and burnout professionals. They were exposed to multiple stressors, including continuous traumatic stress (CTS), a term coined by Straker and the Sanctuaries Counselling team [1] during apartheid, marked by gross human rights violations. The research context was the Cape Flats, Western Cape, described as "urban ghettos" comprising sandy, flat expansive areas south east of the city centre, demarcated for Coloreds and Africans in the previous apartheid era [2].

The Cape Flats has some of the most dedicated teachers, but "teachers can't teach learners who can't learn. A traumatised child whose brain is operating in survival mode is unable to learn" [3]. In considering the plight of teachers, this paper describes part of a pilot study that attempted to provide three different evolutionary psychological interventions for teachers in neighbouring high-risk secondary schools. In the original mixed-methods study, physical TRE, emotional transpersonal practices (TP) and cognitive psychological understandings in Transactional Analysis (TA) were applied in group psychoeducational workshops in three different schools, with a control group. The aim was to move teachers from avoidance and helplessness to renewed energy and focus, offering a self-supporting, self-managed context to better cope

with situations that once felt overwhelming. More details of the research stress interventions are in [4-8].

The body-based TRE intervention was developed by Dr David Berceci, after experiencing traumatic reactions in the bunkers in war zones of the Middle East. Berceci drew on his experience as a therapeutic body worker, realising that the startle response of the body contracting from the shoulders and hips inwards created tension in the flexion muscles. Releasing the tension, he surmised, could have many beneficial effects. His stress reduction studies conclude that "tremors are generated in the flexor muscles by performing a series of exercises that stretch the leg and pelvic muscles, evoking our natural ability to shake ourselves back to a state of tranquillity" [9].

These exercises are not aerobic, as they are not under direct control of the cortex, and they are unlike mindfulness techniques which slow heart rate and lower blood pressure consciously [9]. Tremors bypass the cortex and access the unconscious reptilian brain, manifesting body changes which could not otherwise be accomplished. By interrupting the hypothalamus-pituitary-adrenal axis, tremors create physical relaxation. They reduce stress without conscious control or awareness of the releasing process [9]. Published TRE research includes [10-15].

Methods

Problem statement

The problem statement was: How do TRE impact stress and burnout of educators in high-risk secondary schools?

Aims

In considering this problem, the influence of the TRE on teacher stress and burnout and their effect on classroom competency were considered. In a mixed-method design, quantitative and qualitative data were gathered, with outcomes of the qualitative data in this paper being to examine the perceived benefits of teachers following the TRE intervention.

Participants

The TRE group (n=17) had an almost equal representation of women (n=9; 53%) and men (n=8; 47%), with the majority (n=11; 65%) described themselves as burnout. Of these, seven were women (64%) and four were men (36%). Most teachers were Christian (n=10; 59%), with 35% (n=6) being Muslim and the majority were married (n=12; 70%). Most participants were between 45-50 years of age (n=10; 59%) with five (29%) being over 50. Most teachers had taught for 20-30 years, with some 10 to 20 years (n=4; 23%) and 30 years (n=3; 18%).

Procedures

A mixed-methods approach in a pilot study before-after control research design was adopted to firstly compare the effectiveness of the TRE intervention against a control group and, secondly, to gain a better understanding of how the participants experienced the respective intervention modalities. The quantitative statistical data analysis of TRE, TP and TA revealed significant differences within and between groups on pre-and post-intervention stress

and burnout measures for all groups [8]. In this paper, qualitative coding analysis and thematic analysis are presented.

Findings

Coding analysis

There were six main impacts of the intervention listed by educators: Intra-individual responses - Impact 1: Body awareness; Impact 2: Calm and relaxation; Impact 3: Self-help tool; Impact 4: Self-understanding; and inter-individual responses; Impact 5: Tools for the classroom and Impact 6: Connection to others (**Figure 1**).

The TRE intervention offered intra-individual tools, leading to self-understanding and body awareness. It was considered a self-help tool, effective for calm and relaxation. Participants became more aware of their bodies, especially the stress and tension they were experiencing. Some were more conscious of the power of breath, while others started to understand the feeling of tremors and felt more in touch with themselves. With this perceived awareness came the recognition of the need for calm and relaxation: "If you (are) calm, everyone around you seems calmer". Educators also saw the potential for the use of exercises in the class: "I want to share this technique with my learners". Some participants enjoyed the interaction in the group: "Great platform to air one's views", while others gained theoretical insights from the information provided: "I gained knowledge about the functioning of the brain and where learners are developmentally". Educators felt trust both for themselves and for those facilitating.

Thematic analysis

A bottom-up thematic analysis considered relationship with the self, with the school and with others. In considering the self, teachers' responses to tremoring were divided between physical and emotional reactions, with impact on self-concept and thinking processes also taken into consideration.

Considering the impact on sport, the school coach linked tremoring positively to learner performance. He attributed this improvement to the process of becoming calm and grounded. During the tremoring process, focus was placed on the breath and this awareness led one educator to feel more in control of his life.

On an emotional level, tremoring helped some teachers to reconnect to a heart space and find important strengths from within. In terms of thinking processes, one teacher perceived that he was able to analyse his life better. It was important that participants could understand the physical process of tremoring and they wanted more intellectual background to the exercises. In terms of self-concept, tremoring allowed participants to perceive that they could "take off the mask" and to feel more whole. This sense of wholeness and connection with themselves seemed to occur on a profound level.

As far as relationship with others was concerned, teachers felt the need to be united as a team and felt that it was "ground-breaking" in getting staff together. Some teachers felt that safety in the group was important, which was a challenge. There were improved family relationships, and some teachers saw the

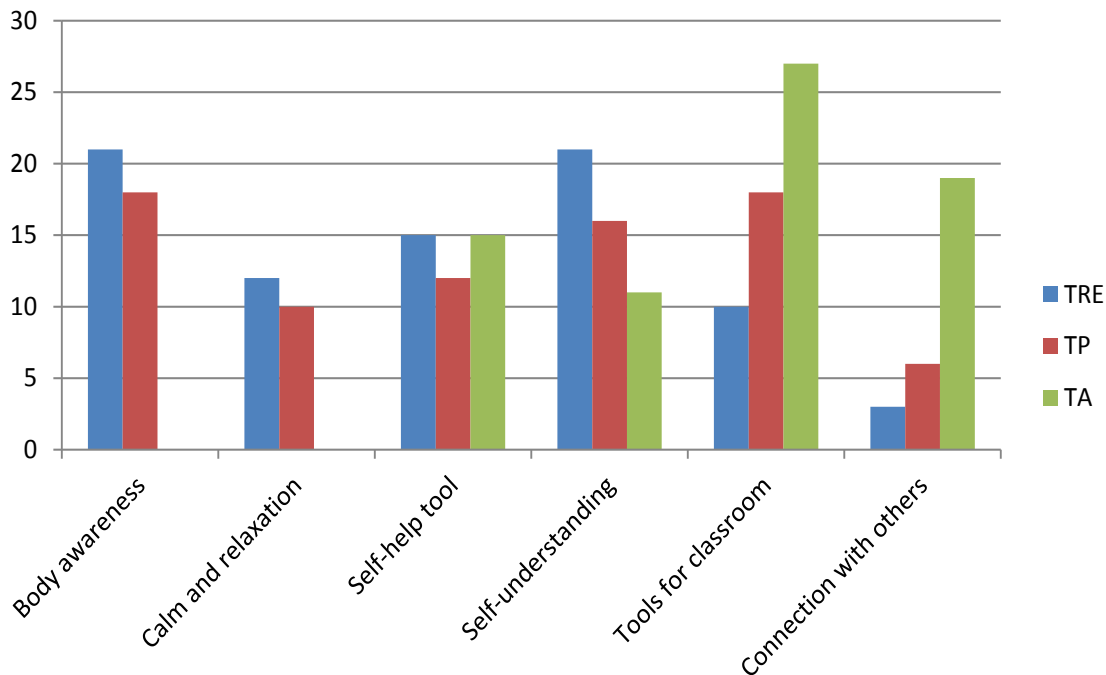


Figure 1 Summary of impact of interventions: Trauma Release Exercises (TRE); Transpersonal Psychology (TP); Transactional Analysis (TA).

potential of having better interactions with learners, parents at the school and staff.

In terms of school benefits, staff perceived that trembling allowed them to focus on core issues, such as discipline, in the classroom. They realised that they needed to be “real” with the learners, and that destressing would help them to relate to them better.

Limitations of the Study

Interventions were randomly assigned to schools, and all teachers who were in schools willing to take part in the study were invited to participate. Thus, the researcher relied on volunteers, which resulted in small sample groups and rendered the pilot study’s before-after control research design difficult to implement using random sampling.

Discussion

Interventions dealing with stress and burnout in contexts of CTS [16] are challenging to design and implement. Teachers are not only the victims but also the perpetrators of violence in schools, which takes place mostly in classrooms [17]. There is little time for teachers to focus on wellbeing, and limited psychotherapeutic resources available. This study highlighted the importance of a self-reflective space for educators to overcome perceived stress and burnout and the potential that body-based treatments such as TRE has for widespread teacher en-skilment.

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This pilot study adopted an evolutionary perspective to brain development, with stress and burnout interventions for teachers in high-risk schools based on phylogenetic stages [18]. TRE, related to primal brain responses, were taught in psychoeducational group workshops in high-risk schools, offering the potential of being an innovative way of dealing with psychosocial issues. In addition to the psychotherapeutic services offered by the WCED, teachers could include trembling as part of regular staff development wellness meetings.

Conclusion

TRE offered an evolutionary psychoeducational group approach to dealing with teacher stress and burnout in contexts of continuous trauma. This pilot study showed that perceptions of the threat and stress coping responses of teachers in high-risk schools can be positively influenced by focusing primarily on the physical release of stress as in the TRE intervention. In schools in low income areas with high levels of violence, with severely limited wellness resources, trembling exercises offer a relatively easy-to-implement, potentially effective solution for teachers to cope with continuous traumatic stressors and reduce burnout. It as a body-based bottom-up approach to healing. Coping change achieved through a physical response impacts emotions and cognitions [19]. Benefits in the classroom as a result of reduced stress and burnout could positively impact violence reduction through improved prosocial and emotional competency for both learners and teachers.

2 <http://www.capeflats.org.za>

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