

RESEARCH REPORT

STRESS MANAGEMENT AND HISTORY SKILLS TRAINING FOR HISTORY TEACHERS IN THE LEJWELEPUTSWA DISTRICT, FREE STATE PROVINCE

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Introduction

On 11 and 12 July 2013 twenty History educators of the Lejweleputswa District in the Free State attended a two-day skills training workshop at Leseding Technical Secondary School in Welkom, Free State Province. This workshop formed part of an on-going community engagement project of the Department of History at the University of South Africa (Unisa), managed by an academic in the History Department and financed by the Unisa College of Human Sciences. It flowed from, and expanded upon, a similar workshop in August 2012, the proceedings and research findings of which were published in a previous edition of this journal.¹

Objectives

This community engagement project strives to empower History teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge to teach the current History and Social Sciences school curricula more creatively and effectively; to provide them with additional resource materials as well as didactical and emotional support; to network with both teachers in this part of the Free State and officials of the Department of Basic Education at district and provincial level; and to bridge the gap between academic historians and History teachers who carry the responsibility of keeping the historical discipline alive at ground level. In addition, the project strives to develop the emotional competencies of

1 HJ Lubbe, "Researching and developing the emotional intelligence of history teachers in the Lejweleputswa District, Free State (South Africa)", *Yesterday & Today*, 8, December 2012, pp. 47-61.

History teachers, often working under challenging conditions,² in the interest of effective self-management and career development. Moreover, the project includes a community-engaged research component which originally started as a personal initiative of the academic historian involved, but has subsequently been drawn into a broader, newly developed framework of community-engaged research at Unisa. Within this particular context, there is a growing emphasis on involving participants in all aspects of the research design and execution, to honour the principles of community-engaged research ethics, and to ensure that participants receive maximum and sustained benefit from the intervention.

Two key questions guided the research during the July 2013 phase of the project: “What are the stress levels of History educators in the Lejweleputswa District?”, and “How can these educators be assisted in coping more effectively with stress in their lives?”

Programme content and methodology

In order to achieve all of the above objectives, the first day of the workshop focused on stress management. The participants were first informed of the context and objectives of the workshop, the methodology that would be used (including photography and video photography³), and the way in which the research findings would be used and preserved. They were also encouraged to ask questions and were assured that they would be free to withdraw from the project at any time. The participants eventually signed a consent form⁴ which provided the necessary permission to proceed with the project as planned.

Participants were then guided through a variety of enjoyable interactive activities which enabled them to explore the difference between “positive” stress (eustress) and “negative” stress (distress), the main causes of stress, the potentially damaging effect of excessive stress on a person’s health, and popular methods of dealing with stressful situations. Interestingly, financial pressures were mentioned most frequently during discussions around the reasons for high stress levels in the group. This complements other stressors that were raised in the workshop of 2012 – factors such as overcrowded class rooms, lack of resources, the pressure on History as a subject, apathy among learners, the language issue, cultural diversity in the classroom, and lack of knowledge and skills on the part of the teacher.⁵

2 See Lubbe, “Researching and developing the emotional intelligence of history teachers...”, *Yesterday & Today*, 8, December 2012, pp.48-9,54.

3 The History Subject Advisor was subsequently provided with photographs of group activities and video footage on DVD for distribution among the educators and education officials. A video clip was also posted on YouTube.

4 Department of History (hereafter DH), Short Course File (hereafter SCF) 22: Consent forms.

5 See Lubbe, “Researching and developing the emotional intelligence of history teachers...”, *Yesterday & Today*, 8, December 2012, pp. 54-5.

The participants were also offered an opportunity to have their stress levels and levels of resilience (“stress fitness”) measured, their leaning towards a Type A or Type B personality assessed, and assisted in determining how balanced their lifestyles were through the completion of various questionnaires. These questionnaires were kindly made available by *Call on the Professionals*, a corporate company that specialises in human dynamics and emotional intelligence training, and supports this community engagement project free of charge.

Finally, participants were provided with a range of stress management techniques which should assist them in coping more effectively with stress in their working environment and other life situations. These techniques included developing the correct perspective on self, life, people, problems, time and inner life; improving “stress fitness”; changing Type A behaviour; creating a better balance in life; mending broken relationships; and applying practical techniques for coping with intense stress during emergency situations.

Apart from questionnaires – most of which contained scaled questions and represented the quantitative element in a mixed-mode methodology – participants engaged in pair work, group work activities and focus group discussions. These methods generated rich qualitative research data and had the added bonus of strengthening collegial relations and offering participants emotional support through reflection and mutual sharing of ideas, life experiences and feelings. Video and photographs⁶ of group activities visually captured the group dynamics as they were unfolding and served as a valuable tool in the transfer of learning to the workplace. Apart from visual evidence, participant evaluation of the session (see Point V below) generated written feedback (archival material) which is currently preserved in the Unisa History Department.⁷

Day 2 was devoted to History skills training in an attempt to address one of the stressors identified during 2012. The programme for the day included a practical session on historical writing during which participants experimented with practical techniques to teach extended writing in their classrooms, more particularly the writing of an effective introduction to a History essay and the planning of logically constructed paragraphs that would ensure logical flow of argument.⁸

In addition, participants were shown photographs of street name changes in Pretoria and encouraged to think of creative ways in which the material could be used in the classroom. Each participant received a full set of these photographs on a CD which also included sample assignments (designed around the street name photographs), resource material from the internet, assessment guidelines and marking rubrics, as well as suggestions for the use

6 DH, SCF 23: Workshop photographs and video.

7 DH, SCF 21: Participant feedback, Doc 1-11.

8 DH, SCF 25: Writing workshop documents, Doc 1 &2.

of the material in teaching oral investigation, heritage investigation, research skills, poster making, poster presentation, and extended writing.⁹

Research findings

The research findings generated on Day 1 indicated that only 10% of the group had an average level of stress, while 50% (10 individuals) experienced above average stress in their lives. More alarmingly, 40% of the group (8 individuals) reported an excessively high stress level which suggested a potentially serious health risk and therefore called for immediate action. To make matters worse, 38.9% of those participants who reported either excessive or above average stress, had predominantly Type A personalities. Fortunately, most of the educators in this group proved to be quite resilient – a characteristic that could certainly assist them in coping with their stressful lives.¹⁰

Some participants in the “excessive stress” category admitted that they had been unaware of the seriousness of their condition and appreciated the enhanced awareness that the workshop had created.¹¹ They also benefited from the compassion displayed by both their colleagues and the facilitators.¹² The History Subject Advisor of the Lejweleputswa District, Ms Cecilia Khoabane, who assisted with logistical arrangements for the workshop and is currently helping to sustain the impact of the project through cluster training and individual contact with the educators, was requested to help monitor the stress levels of those educators most at risk and provide them with additional emotional support. The rather disturbing research findings were further conveyed to the Education authorities via the Provincial Subject Coordinator, Mr MP Mofokeng, who joined the group on the afternoon of Day 1.

Participant Feedback

Participant feedback on the first day of the workshop was very positive and radiated deep gratitude – not only to the facilitator but also to the History Subject Advisor without whose perseverance and drive they “would have missed a treasure”. The stress management component was described as a “not-to-miss” workshop that was “well planned”, “informative”, “enriching”, “comprehensive”, and an “eye-opener” to those who had been unaware of how stressed they actually were. They found the stress management techniques empowering in strengthening their relationships with life partners, colleagues and friends and improve every aspect of their lives, including their own personality – in short, a “whole life weapon” that could be used very

9 DH, SCF 24: Street name photographs, sample assignments and other resources.

10 DH, SCF 20: Research results.

11 See, for example, DH, SCF 21: Participant feedback, Doc 1.

12 See DH, SCF 21: Participant feedback, Doc 2, 6 and 9.

fruitfully in the home, workplace and community environment.¹³ These positive experiences of the stress management component of the workshop were echoed by Mr Mofokeng who argued that all teachers – not only History educators – should be exposed to the program.

Due to lack of time, participants were unfortunately not able to submit immediate written feedback on Day 2 of the workshop. However, two appreciative SMS messages were received after the workshop: one celebrating the introduction of Unisa to their region and appreciating the practical session on historical writing;¹⁴ the other thanking the facilitator for screening and sharing the street name photographs and other resources on DVD, all of which he/she plans to integrate into a heritage assignment in 2014.¹⁵

Conclusion

The community engagement workshop of 11 and 12 July 2013 in Welkom clearly achieved much more than answering the two research questions. Not only did it reveal high levels of stress among History educators in the Lejweleputswa District, but it also provided participants with practical tools that can be used to lower stress levels and enhance quality of life. In addition, the workshop strengthened relationships among the participants and provided those who needed emotional support with compassion during focus group reflection and discussion. Moreover, the intervention reinforced trust between the Unisa History Department and the Lejweleputswa teaching community and opened up possibilities for the extension of the programme into other provinces of South Africa.

13 DH, SCF 21: Participant feedback, Doc 1-9.

14 DH, SCF 21: Participant feedback, Doc 10.

15 DH, SCF 21: Participant feedback, Doc 11.