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JOURNEYS TO PSYCHOLOGY: DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES ON PRE-TERTIARY TEACHING OF PSYCHOLOGY IN EUROPE

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Cover Abstract

In secondary schools in many European countries, psychology is a popular subject. Pre-university, or pre-tertiary, psychology education (PTPE) has become well-established and popular, as school students find it an interesting, enjoyable and useful subject. A proportion of school students go on to university to study psychology, while some study other disciplines, and others go into employment or training. Thus they experience different kinds of "journeys to psychology". Curricula and pedagogies in PTPE vary between countries too. Similarly, teachers of psychology make their way into this career via diverse routes, and this seems to be the case in psychology more so than for teachers of other subjects.

Psychology educators claim the subject has great value in terms of helping young people develop a wide range of skills as a sound basis for progression to higher education, training or employment. It is also asserted that learning psychology at school builds psychological literacy, such that students acquire 'life skills' which can support their mental health wellbeing throughout the lifespan.

In this symposium, we present research into different aspects of PTPE in Europe, using a variety of methodologies and involving a range of stakeholders: teachers, headteachers, psychologists, and pre-tertiary students, from several countries. Our findings add to the sparse literature on PTPE by providing insights into the diverse "journeys" experienced by psychology students and teachers in Europe's schools.

The student journey into psychology starts at school

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Abstract:

In several European countries, as well as in the United States and other countries, psychology has been a popular school subject for students in the 15-19 years age range, for many years. Many thousands of young people thus take their first steps on their journey into psychology by studying it at secondary school. Yet psychology academics and professional practitioners often speak of "psychology education" as something that starts only at university, and despite the popularity and long history of pre-university, or pre-tertiary, psychology education (PTPE) in schools, research in this area is sparse. The aim of the current research was to investigate awareness of, and attitudes towards, PTPE, amongst two different groups of stakeholders in Europe: psychologists' associations in several countries, and school headteachers in one specific country. Attitudes to PTPE were found to vary considerably, both across countries and within the single country, suggesting that psychology is not (yet) universally perceived to merit the status of a core subject in the school curriculum. The studies were supported by EFPA BEA and the British Psychological Association (Scotland) respectively.

Extended Summary:

1. Objectives or purposes.

The aim of this paper is to present findings from two studies of awareness of, and attitudes to, pre-tertiary psychology education (PTPE), firstly amongst national psychologists' associations who are members of the European Federation of Psychologists' Associations (EFPA), and secondly amongst secondary school headteachers in one country, Scotland, where psychology is widely offered as a subject in secondary schools.

2. Perspective(s) or theoretical framework.

In several countries in Europe, psychology has been a popular subject at school for students in the 15-19 years age range, including at the level required for university entry (EQF level 4), for many years.

Given its long history, popularity and success, it is paradoxical that PTPE has been given so little attention in research; the limited literature contrasts starkly with the extensive studies into university level psychology education. Some research does exist, on questions of curriculum, development of transferable skills, discipline-specific pedagogy, psychology teacher education, and the student experience of their psychology course (e.g. BPS, 2013; Jarvis, 2007; Radford, 2008; Sokolová et al, 2017). PTPE is seen (e.g. by Banyard, 2008) as an effective way of 'giving psychology away, following Miller's exhortation (1969).

A further concern is that psychology suffers perceived low status as a school subject (Sokolová, 2014): in many European countries it is not offered in high schools at all, and in countries where it is available, it is not compulsory, nor is it required for entry to university psychology courses. Availability of teacher education and professional development is variable and often poor (Williamson et al, 2011).

3. Methods, techniques, or modes of inquiry.

Study 1 comprised an online structured questionnaire to national psychologists' associations who are all Member Associations (MAs) of EFPA. Items required free-text responses, about the extent of PTPE provision in their country and the role of the Association (if any) in developing / supporting PTPE.

Study 2 consisted of an online quantitative survey of secondary school headteachers in Scotland. Questionnaire items asked about PTPE provision in their school as well as their perceived value of the subject to students, and perceived value of specialist teacher education in psychology.

4. Data sources, evidence, objects, or materials.
Qualitative responses from Study 1 were interpreted by means of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). From Study 2, the quantitative questionnaire responses were analysed statistically.

5. Results and/or substantiated conclusions or warrants for arguments/point of view.
Responses from the MAs showed that PTPE was available in a minority of European countries. The associations' involvement in pre-tertiary support and curriculum development was variable but in most cases limited. In the survey of school headteachers (Scotland) most respondents offered psychology courses in their school. Popularity of the subject was recognised but there was often difficulty in allocating specialist staff.

6. Scientific or scholarly significance of the study or work.
This paper makes a useful contribution to the literature on the important but neglected topic of PTPE, providing insights from two different groups of stakeholders. It appears that for many young people, the start of their journey into psychology is ignored or undervalued by psychology academics and practitioners. School headteachers appear to value psychology at least as highly as other school subjects, but the lack of suitably-qualified staff can make it difficult to meet demand from students. Both sets of results raise further questions that are in need of research, and both raise concerns over the availability of opportunities for young people to study psychology at school in future.

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Who are the guides on the journey towards psychology? Professional trajectories of psychology teachers in Europe

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Abstract:

Pre-tertiary teaching of psychology is considered to be an under-researched area. There are many differences in the standards and traditions of psychology teaching and psychology teachers training across Europe. However, only a few studies have been conducted to analyse various aspects of pre-tertiary psychology education (e. g. Williamson et al., 2011, 2015). Expert teachers of psychology from different European countries, where pre-tertiary psychology teaching has a long tradition, were asked to produce semi-structured narratives describing the stories of their journeys to the teaching of psychology. A general inductive approach was applied to analyse the narratives and to examine cultural differences in the professional trajectories, attitudes and beliefs among pre-tertiary psychology teachers, and to discuss advantages and disadvantages of concurrent and consecutive models of psychology teachers training. The study was supported by Slovak national grant agency VEGA (grant no. VEGA 1/0409/17).

Extended Summary:

1. Objectives or purposes: The aim of this study is to analyse the routes towards becoming a psychology teacher among expert psychology teachers from different European countries, to compare their motivation, initial teacher training, professional experiences, attitudes and beliefs about teaching psychology at pre-tertiary level.

2. Perspective(s) or theoretical framework: Teacher training qualification requirements differ across European countries. In the concurrent model, the professional education component is provided along with the study of the subjects the prospective teacher is intended to teach. In the consecutive model, students study their subject first and take a professional course in education after completing their academic degree (Eurydice, 2012, 2013). The tradition and the status of psychology as a school subject varies too (Williamson et al., 2011). Despite the diversity in the pre-tertiary teaching of psychology in many European countries psychology is very popular at universities (Dutke, 2017), however, students of psychology hold many stereotypes and misconceptions about psychological science and professional psychologists. The objective of secondary school teaching of psychology is to develop psychological literacy (Cranney & Dunn, 2011; Chrz, Nohavová & Slavík, 2015), transferable skills (Jarvis, 2011), to prepare students for studying psychology and related disciplines at university, and also to build a more realistic image of psychology as a science and profession (Sokolová, 2013). To fulfil these aims it is advisable to discuss the content of pre-tertiary psychology courses (Williamson et al., 2015) and also the qualification of psychology teachers who deliver the content.

3. Methods, techniques, or modes of inquiry: Semi-structured written narratives were used to get a deeper insight into beliefs and professional stories of psychology teachers. Participants to the study were recruited via European Federation of Psychology Teachers Associations (EFPTA) member associations from different European countries. Each participant was experienced and qualified psychology teacher based on national teaching qualification standards.

4. Data sources, evidence, objects, or materials: Written narratives were collected in English via e-mail communication. A general inductive approach (Thomas, 2011) was used to analyse the narratives and to examine cultural differences in the professional trajectories, attitudes and beliefs about pre-tertiary teaching of psychology among pre-tertiary psychology teachers.

5. Results and/or substantiated conclusions or warrants for arguments/point of view: Based on the previous surveys on psychology teachers (Williamson et al., 2011; Sokolová, 2014) there are cross-cultural differences in the teacher training and professional needs of psychology teachers. Despite these differences common trends were identified in psychology teachers' beliefs and attitudes. The concurrent and consecutive models in psychology teachers training are discussed.

6. Scientific or scholarly significance of the study or work: Pre-tertiary teaching of psychology is considered to be an under-researched area. There are many differences in the standards and traditions of psychology teaching and psychology teachers training across Europe, however, only a few studies have been conducted to analyse various aspects of pre-tertiary psychology education (Williamson et al., 2011). This study aims to contribute to the research area of pre-tertiary teaching of psychology with relevant data on the professional development of psychology teachers in Europe.

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The role of character strengths in the A-level psychology classroom

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Abstract:

A focus of positive psychology is that character strengths contribute to individual well-being and happiness (Lounsbury et al., 2009) and the suggestion that character strengths are malleable traits (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) encourages the idea that character can be developed and nurtured in schools.

The primary research aim was to examine the associations of character strengths with school satisfaction, academic self-efficacy and academic performance in psychology in an English school. Secondly, to examine which character strengths pre-tertiary students use to improve academic performance and thirdly to examine the developmental aspect of character strengths. A sample of 36 A-level Psychology students aged 16-17 years completed three surveys: the VIA Inventory of Strengths for Youth (VIA-Youth), the Brief Multidimensional Students' Life Satisfaction Scale (Seligson, Huebner, & Valois, 2003), and the Academic Self-Efficacy Scale (Jerusalem & Satow, 1999). Academic performance was operationalised using grade point averages (GPA).

The strongest predictors of school satisfaction were Prudence, Honesty, Hope and Self-Regulation. Academic self-efficacy was predicted by Hope, Zest and Love of Learning whereas Fairness was the strongest predictor of academic performance. A model using character strengths and academic self-efficacy was found to predict improved academic performance. The findings support the strength of Social Intelligence as an important factor in the maturational process.

Character strengths in the teaching of psychology show much promise through the use of active learning strategies and may help teachers to understand psychology students from the broader perspective of positive psychology.

Extended Summary:

1. Objectives or purposes.

The purpose of the present research is to show the associations of character strengths with satisfaction with school, academic self-efficacy and academic performance. Secondly, to investigate which character strengths A-level students use to improve academic performance in schools. Thirdly, to build on and extend previous research, so that the developmental aspect of character strengths is highlighted.

2. Perspective(s) or theoretical framework.

The science and practice of positive psychology has great promise for education and seeks to promote healthy individuals and communities, for example children and schools. If schools could teach both the skills of well-being and the skills of achievement, positive education would occur (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich & Linkins 2009). It is thought that through life experiences and our environmental setting, strengths can be shaped (McCullough & Snyder, 2000) and this encourages the idea that character can be developed and nurtured in schools. Similarly character strengths can help young people to thrive and are associated with the smooth transition to adulthood (Park & Peterson, 2009). Those character strengths that help pre-tertiary students to flourish serve as a key resource in schools and can be used to develop a model that may allow the prediction of academic success.

3. Methods, techniques, or modes of inquiry.

A correlational design with a cross-sectional survey methodology was used. The sample was 36 A-level psychology students aged 16-17 years old from Watford Grammar School for Boys, England. The VIA-Youth was completed online and the BMSLSS and ASE pen and paper surveys were completed on a single occasion during a lesson. October and April assessment grades formed the academic performance data. Partial correlations, stepwise multiple regression analysis and discriminant function analysis were used.

4. Data sources, evidence, objects, or materials.

Students completed the VIA Inventory of Strengths for Youth (VIA-Youth), the Brief Multidimensional Students' Life Satisfaction Scale (Seligson, Huebner, & Valois, 2003), and the Academic Self-Efficacy Scale (Jerusalem & Satow, 1999). Academic performance was operationalised using grade point averages (GPA).

5. Results and/or substantiated conclusions or warrants for arguments/point of view.

Patterns of partial correlations across school satisfaction, academic self-efficacy and academic performance in psychology show that character strengths such as Hope, Perseverance, Self-regulation Prudence and Love of Learning appear to be the most valued.

Overall, the regression analyses found that the strongest predictors of school satisfaction were Prudence, Honesty, Hope and Self-Regulation. In terms of academic self-efficacy, Hope, Love of Learning and Zest were found to have significant predictive value. In the case of academic performance, Fairness was the strongest predictor. The findings from the discriminant function analysis were that Fairness, Perspective, Creativity, Social Intelligence, Judgement, Humour, Forgiveness, Beauty, Love of Learning, Bravery, Hope, Teamwork, Humility, Gratitude, Kindness and Academic Self-Efficacy formed a model to predict improved student academic performance between October and April.

6. Scientific or scholarly significance of the study or work.

From the perspective of positive psychology, the processes and predictors of flourishing are becoming more fully understood in the context of society. Schools are uniquely placed to reach out to teach positive psychology and good character is seen as supporting the important positive adaptation process of children and adolescents in schools through positive education (Green, Oades, & Robinson, 2011). An awareness of character strengths and how to use them when learning psychology has positive implications for the mental health of our students and develops their mental health literacy.

These first findings on this topic in this age group may help teachers to understand psychology students from the broader perspective of positive psychology. This is helpful as it shows that good character in the context of schools has important implications for the teaching of psychology. Learning occurs not just within people but among them, and character strengths can facilitate the process of active learning.

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