Getting off to a good start in psychology: benefits and limitations of pre-tertiary education in psychology

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Abstract

• Psychology is taught as a secondary school subject in many European countries, in various types of schools and with diverse content.

• Psychology teachers believe that: studying psychology at pre-tertiary (or pre-university) level contributes to students' preparation for studying psychology and other disciplines at university; it helps students develop critical thinking skills, understanding of self and others, life skills, mental health and overall psychological literacy; it also has a potential to bridge social studies, STEM and personal development subjects.

• On the other hand, the teaching of psychology faces many obstacles: the subject often receives limited support with a shortage of qualified teachers.

• The European Federation of Psychology Teachers' Associations (EFPTA) was established in 2004 to support pre-tertiary psychology education and teachers' networking and professional development.

• EFPTA invites colleagues interested in school psychology and cooperation between schools and universities to discuss their experiences and expectations about pre-tertiary psychology.

The round table will start with a brief overview of EFPTA research and activities followed by a semi-structured discussion.
A few words about EFPTA:

**EFPTA was formed in 2004** and it is a federation of national and regional associations of psychology teachers in schools and colleges in European countries.

Members are mainly involved in teaching psychology courses at lower and upper secondary levels at schools to students aged from 13 to 19. **EFPTA's focus is on pre-university psychology education**, and in the spirit of the Bologna Process it has established a network of psychology educators across Europe.
goals:

- promote psychology education at pre-university level
- share knowledge and experience of teaching and learning in psychology
- consider curriculum and assessment issues
- share teaching methods and resources
- consider issues of teacher education and professional development
- promote exchanges and joint projects
- support teachers to establish associations in their countries
- influence policies on psychology education at European level
- increase psychological literacy amongst the population
Iceland
PT association
PT: 45

Scotland
PT association
PT: 180

England & Wales
PT association
PT: 2500

Finland
PT association
PT: 600

Russia
no PT association
PT: N/A

Sweden
no PT association
PT: approx. 500

Denmark
PT association
PT: 800

Germany
PT association
PT: N/A

Luxembourg
no PT association
PT: N/A

Czech Republic
PT section in the PS association
PT: approx. 500

Slovakia
PT association
PT: 650

Spain
no PT association
PT: N/A

EFPTA member countries
Main EFPTA activities

- networking and collaborative projects
- international seminars and conferences
- research activities
- promoting and discussing pre-tertiary teaching of psychology
EFPTA textbook project

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ESPLAT 2019
Aims

• To compare school-level psychology textbooks from different European countries

• Responses from England & Wales, Slovakia, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Sweden, Denmark
Focus

• Curriculum content
• Key features
• Terminology
• Areas in psychology
• Research methods
Areas of Psychology

- Biological: 8 (88.9%)
- Social: 8 (88.9%)
- Cognitive: 9 (100%)
- Developmental: 8 (88.9%)
- Individual differences: 7 (77.8%)
- Learning e.g. behavioural: 8 (88.9%)
- Psychodynamic: 7 (77.8%)
- Humanistic: 5 (55.6%)
- Positive: 1 (11.1%)
Popular topics

• Obedience, interpersonal relationships
• Brain and neurotransmitters
• Memory and intelligence
• Childhood and attachment
• Personality and mental health
Areas of Psychology

- Key terms or words e.g. biological: 9 (100%)
- Main assumptions, concepts or principle: 9 (100%)
- Strengths and weaknesses of the areas: 6 (66.7%)
- Are the areas separated into topics? e.g.: 9 (100%)
- Are the areas linked to research examples?: 8 (88.9%)
- Are the areas applied to real world examples?: 6 (66.7%)
Applied topics

- Sport: 1 (11.1%)
- Criminal including forensic: 1 (11.1%)
- Gender: 2 (22.2%)
- Health: 2 (22.2%)
- Addiction e.g. substance or gambling: 6 (66.7%)
- Positive: 2 (22.2%)
- Child: 2 (22.2%)
- Relationships: 4 (44.4%)
- Environment: 3 (33.3%)
- Educational: 5 (55.6%)
- Organisational: 1 (11.1%)
- Consumer: 0 (0%)
- Media: 2 (22.2%)
- Cross cultural: 2 (22.2%)
- Religion: 1 (11.1%)
Methods and techniques

- Experiments: 8 (88.9%)
- Observation: 6 (66.7%)
- Self report e.g. questionnaires, interviews: 9 (100%)
- Correlations: 4 (44.4%)
Statistics

- Descriptive: 6 (66.7%)
- Measures of dispersion e.g. range, variance: 3 (33.3%)
- Graphs e.g. line graphs, histograms, bar...: 3 (33.3%)
- Probability and significance e.g. p<0.05: 1 (11.1%)
- Not included in the textbook: 1 (11.1%)
- Not really covered: 1 (11.1%)
- NA: 1 (11.1%)
Summary

• European school textbooks provide a framework for students to learn psychology
• They all cover the main areas of psychology
• Topics in applied psychology vary widely but mental illness studied in every country
• Teaching of research methods varies considerably
• Inferential statistics only appears in England & Wales
• Not all countries use native language textbooks e.g. Iceland
Wider points

A cross section of European school psychology curricula suggests all students need to show

• Knowledge and understanding of psychology
• The ability to critically examine, compare and reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of different psychological perspectives.
• The ability to use and apply psychological understanding
Other considerations

- Are textbooks available electronically?
- Do they contain activities for students to do that are wider than the curriculum?
- Do they provide exam advice and practice?
- Style of writing and presentation?
Do you think it is useful/important to teach psychology at pre-tertiary level of education? What should its purpose be?
What age do you think it is appropriate to start teaching psychology to young people?
What pitfalls might pre-tertiary psychology education have?
Who are the stakeholders we should engage in developing pre-tertiary psychology education?
How shall we promote qualified and effective pre-tertiary teaching of psychology at both national and European levels?
WHY SHALL WE TEACH PSYCHOLOGY?

- Development of Transferable Life Skills
- Preparation for Studying Psychology or Related Fields at University
- Development of Psychological Literacy
- Building a Bridge between STEM and Social Subjects
- Support of Mental Health
- Self-Knowledge and Personal Development
What should be the purpose of the pre-tertiary psychology curriculum?

- Preparation for university, both psychology & other disciplines; aid transition; diversity awareness.
- Develop a range of transferable skills: critical thinking; metacognition; research skills.
- Promote self & social development / identity; should be the norm; important for health.

What should the content of the psychology curriculum be?

- Topics should reflect "real life"; start with issues of everyday life; applied psychology.
- Content should reflect the discipline: psychology as science; research methods & skills; balance.
- It should fit well into the overall school curriculum; facilitate interdisciplinarity; theme-based integrated projects.
- Provide interest & novelty; "something different".
- Achieve scientific understanding of human beings.
- Preparation for life, as an individual & member of community; equips for new responsibilities; address/avoid problems.
- Should suit students' developmental needs; wellbeing, resilience, optimism, relationships; be relevant for young people.
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