The psychology curriculum in European secondary schools: What should we teach?

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1. Abstract

This paper reports participatory action research into the nature of psychology curricula for 15-19 year-olds in Europe. At a conference of the European Federation of Psychology Teachers’ Associations (EFPTA) held in Copenhagen in 2012, 48 psychology educators from 10 countries took part in focus groups on the purpose and content of the psychology curriculum at pre-secondary level. Qualitative analysis of responses revealed much common ground, as well as some striking differences in how curriculum is developed and controlled, and by whom.

2. Introduction

In many countries in Europe, psychological science is taught at pre-secondary level, including academic qualifications required for entry to higher education (HE). It is often taught as a discrete subject, delivered mainly to 15-19-year-olds in secondary schools and colleges, at levels 3-4 of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). Psychology is also taught – though often not named as such – within a wide range of other subjects, including biological, human biology, personal development, and vocational courses such as health and social care.

The European Federation of Psychology Teachers’ Associations (EFPTA) supports the aim of providing psychology education for all young people in Europe (Rowley, 2008). However, the academic status of school psychology varies enormously. In Finland an element of psychology is obligatory for all, whilst in France, Spain, Italy and many other EU countries the subject seems to be absent from the school curriculum.

The psychology curriculum may be considered from the perspectives of curriculum design and research, and in the wider educational context of debate regarding factors that impact on achievement, such as quality of teacher education; usefulness of international league tables (e.g., PISA) in identifying ‘what works’ in education; curriculum coherences (Schmidt & Prawat, 2006); central control versus school/ teacher autonomy (e.g., Coe & Sahlyahr, 2012). From studies of high-performing systems, Oates (2014) claims the key lies in a highly coherent, well-planned, teacher workforce and high-quality resources; a rigorous assessment regime has a role to play but is far from the whole story.

Research into pre-secondary psychology education (PTEPE) in Europe is sparse, compared to the vast body of literature on psychology at university level (Mampsey et al., 2014; Kittler, 2009). The report presented here is the first of its kind in the USA, in the UK (Rodriguez & Busby, 2009), and possibly in other European countries, as well as in other parts of the world.

In the current study, the focus group questions served as a starting point to discover European teachers’ views on the psychology curriculum, in terms of its purpose, content, and who should design and have control of what is taught. These questions arose both from the literature and from concerns expressed in professional dialogue amongst psychology educators.

This was a small-scale, exploratory study of a much-neglected though very important area of psychology education.

3. Method

At the EFPTA annual conference in Copenhagen in April 2012, roundtable workshops were held to discuss issues of the PTPE curriculum in Europe. Delegates’ consent was obtained for participation and audio-recording of discussions, and for recordings to be used as focus group data for the purpose of this research.

48 participants from 10 countries took part, in three parallel groups, each with a mixture of at least five nationalities, and each led by a facilitator (Table 1). Most participants were psychology teachers at pre-secondary level, a small number were involved in some other way in PTPE (psychology teacher educators, educational psychologists, and researchers in the field of psychology education). Discussion was prompted by a semi-structured schedule of open-ended questions on three related key aspects of curriculum:

- what should be the purpose of the pre-secondary psychology curriculum?
- what should its content be?
- who should be involved in designing it, in order to determine content and achieve agreed purposes?

Discussion was in English and lasted about 45 minutes. Some participants also made handwritten responses.

4. Results and Discussion

Thematic analysis was applied to collated data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A range of sub-themes emerged from responses to the pre-coded themes (the three discussion questions). Themes and inter-relationships are illustrated in thematic maps (Figs. 1 and 2).

‘Purpose’ and ‘content’ themes

In response to the first two questions on ‘purpose’ and ‘content’, considerable common ground appeared amongst prevalent sub-themes: the question on ‘purpose’ elicited responses emphasising student learning outcomes, and responses to the ‘content’ question appeared to constitute views on how to achieve those purposes. Across these two themes there was broad agreement on the value of pre-secondary psychology education for students, and on criteria for determining content.

5. Conclusions

Although participants came from 10 different countries, their perceptions of school psychology showed much common ground, suggesting comparability of national qualifications amongst European countries; this may help increase mobility of school students making the transition to HE. Such developments would facilitate internationalisation and reflect the principles of the Bologna process.

Participants clearly felt that dialogue and a collaborative approach amongst all stakeholders was essential to produce a ‘good’ curriculum, and thus ‘good learning’. A logical and informative next step in research would be to investigate views amongst these other stakeholders, i.e., students, academic and practising psychologists, government education agencies, awarding bodies, employers.

This study was modest in its aims and scale, and further research is urgently needed. It has, however, highlighted key aspects and concerns about pre-secondary psychology education across Europe, which should be addressed by education policy-makers and agencies.

References

- Barrett, L., Leung, R., & Schmidt, W. (2011). International perspectives on high-stakes national assessments, but should be a framework within which teachers should have some autonomy. In contrast to the disparities in the status quo, there was remarkable consensus on the importance of dialogue amongst all stakeholders, to develop high quality psychology curriculum with top-down control and teacher/school autonomy; design of the curriculum should not be left to any single body or stakeholder group.

Limitations of method:

- sample was small and representative of psychology teachers in Europe or even countries
- gender imbalance (F=43, M=5) was large though not atypical in PTPE
- researchers are all practitioners
- increased risk of subjectivity in interpretation of data
- discussion in English which was not the first language for 8% of the participants
- collation of two response formats for analysis (verbal and written) may compromise validity

Despite these limitations, the findings offer clear pointers for further research.

Table 1: Participants by country

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Focus group participants by country</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>England</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
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<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Netherlands</td>
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<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>Scotland</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>Slovenia</td>
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TOTAL: 48 (F = 43, M = 5)

**Basic knowledge of psychology should be the norm for all school-leavers (P30).**