



EFPTA Newsletter September 2009

Editor's note

This issue of the EFPTA's Newsletter focuses on the ATPS/EFPTA conference held in Edinburgh, Scotland, 17-18th of April 2009. There we had many interesting lectures and presentations and you can read brief summaries of them in the following pages. Here is also an article about the influence of psychosocial well-being on school drop-out, written by the new president of EFPTA, Hans Reijnierse. But we begin with a few words from the president.

I want to thank all those who have contributed to this issue of the Newsletter.

Harpa Hafsteinsdóttir, editor, harpah@mh.is



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President's Report

Dear Colleagues,

Last April the General Assembly of EFPTA has chosen a new board for a period of 2 years. You can find their names and pictures on the EFPTA website (www.efpta.org).

First of all I want to thank the resigning president Jari Honkala who served a four year period as president of the organization. Jari was one of the persons who started the EFPTA and has since then devoted much of his time to the organization. Without Jari's enthusiastic involvement the EFPTA would not have been what it is today. We want to thank Jari for all his good work and hope he will stay member of the board for a long time.

At the General Assembly I was chosen president, and I will try to make sure that EFPTA will grow in the near future and that we will find a way to get more funds the coming years. As it is the tradition that the new president introduces himself I will in four sentences try to do so. My name is Hans Reijnierse from the Netherlands. I have a doctorate in Psychology. At this moment I am involved in a research project concerning students' psychosocial well-being and school drop-out. I also teach psychology and I am a Health Psychologist within an institution for adolescents with psychosocial related problems.

In April we were the guests of ATP Scotland and I do want to express my thanks because they organized an excellent seminar.

This new board is committed to make sure that the EFPTA organization will grow in Europe and find more members. Furthermore it will try to find ways of getting funds so that more teachers can join us and our seminars throughout Europe.

Last June I was in Oslo and before the General Assembly of the EFPA I presented our request to become an affiliate member of the EFPA. After some discussion the members voted all in favor of the EFPTA. So it is now official and our website is linked on the EFPA website.

The steering committee of the Board met last August in Amsterdam and organized the next board meeting in Seville from 22nd to the 25th. of October.

We will try to get more attention and thus create more discussion about the subject that is so important for us: The teaching of psychology at pre-degree level. One of its examples is the newsletter which you have in front of you now. In this newsletter there are news items and articles related to psychology teaching and education.

We have some reports from the different speakers at our last Seminar in Edinburgh. It was very inspiring to listen to the different views on teaching and psychology teaching. Also there is a report from two students who entered Higher Education and started their study of psychology. In recent years I have seen many of my students fail in their attempt to study psychology at Higher Education. This is probably a common trend in the whole of Europe. At pre-degree level they did all right but the switch to

Higher Education seems too difficult for some of them. It is a concern for those teaching at pre-degree level. What can we do at our schools to make sure that students don't fail in Higher Education? Can we prepare our students in a different way from how we have so far? Maybe the key to this question is psycho-social well-being. In that sense I do agree with Dr. Carol Craig who underlined the importance of well-being in her talk in Edinburgh. How well have we trained our students to adjust in a new situation and a new environment? My article will look somewhat closer into this problem.

You can also find the first results of a survey that Renate Schrempf (Germany), Morag Williamson (Scotland) and Lenka Sokolova (Slovakia) started last year. It looks at the way psychology is taught in the different European countries.

And we have a winner in our midst. Dorothy Coombs has won the BPS award for Excellence in teaching.

Please enjoy these articles and all the other ones I did not mention. They are very worthwhile to read.

Best regards,
Drs.Hans Reijnierse
President EFPTA

Friday, April 17th. 2009
James Gillespie's High School, Edinburgh



Positive psychology: A common sense perspective

Dr. Carol Craig – Chief Executive,
Centre for Confidence and Well-being

Carol Craig explained the origins and the actual work carried out by the Centre for Confidence and Well-Being, from which she is the Executive Chief, focusing on challenges and risks arising when trying to understand and improve the construct of positive psychology and those concepts related with it.

In her own words, the lack of confidence that Scottish people display, repeatedly confirmed by research but also by her experience working with groups, was the first motivation for the Center creation and the subject of one of her books: *Scotland's crisis of Confidence*. Some arguments related with this book and with this evidence of lack of confidence were the Scottish tendency to be pessimistic or the fact that individuals' value is not taken for granted in Scotland culture but on the contrary, they have to demonstrate it.

Regarding the assumptions underlying the construct of positive psychology, the center relies on Seligman's approach and ideas. This means not only to enhance positive experiences but also to be aware of the negative bias of our representations. Positive emotions are related with the improvement and development of social relations and with the possibility to approach problems in a creative way. The paradox is that although to be positive is much more powerful, to be negative seem to be easier.

Regarding related concepts, she addresses the two major concepts of self-esteem and well-being. As for the complex topic of self-esteem, which was qualified as toxic, the concern has to do with education. The need to develop self-confidence is placed in the core of the Scottish curriculum. Traditionally, self-esteem has been assessed through the individuals' self-perceptions, but these self-perceptions may be different from others' perceptions. Besides, there is no research evidence relating self-esteem with academic success. On the other hand it is important to be aware that low self-esteem is almost always related with other social issues as poverty or loneliness. Finally, Carol pointed out a frequent misunderstanding of self-esteem when relating it with

being happy and having only positive experiences. In this case, children's self-esteem is supposed to be related to avoiding negative experiences and frustration. This means for kids and adolescents learning that the way they feel about themselves is the most important thing and this implies a high risk for them. For Carol, this is one of the major issues in education.

Well-being, as one of the core concepts of the positive psychology, was the second concept which was analysed. The conclusion was that psychology interventions alone cannot provide the well-being by themselves. It was argued that well-being is a matter of politics and planners too and that although psychology can help to understand what well-being is, it is only a part of the jig-saw. Consequently, psychologists have to work with other professionals and disciplines in order to make possible people's and especially young people's well being.

Montserrat Castelló Badia

Happy Birthday Charles

FEBRUARY 12th 2009 is the 200th birthday of Charles Darwin. One of the best known and respected modern philosophers, Daniel Dennett has written -

“If I were to give an award for the **single best idea anyone has ever had**, I'd give it to **Darwin**, ahead of Newton and Einstein and everyone else. In a single stroke, the idea of evolution by natural selection unifies the realm of life, meaning and purpose with the realm of space and time, cause and effect, mechanism and physical law.”

2009 is also the 150th anniversary of the publication of “THE ORIGIN OF SPECIES.” Although Darwin could see that it was not logical to leave man out of the evolutionary picture he decided that the world was not ready for this in 1859. At the end of “The Origin of Species” he confines himself to noting that in the distant future “I see open fields for far more important researches.” It is very interesting to see that he then goes on immediately to speak not of the biological origins of Homo sapiens but of Psychology, a word that would have still been a novelty in 1859. “Psychology will be based on a new foundation, that of the necessary acquirement of each mental power and capacity by gradation.” Only then does he go on to say ‘Light will be thrown on the origin of man and his history.’

It is difficult for us now to appreciate the enormous shift in thinking that evolution produced in the western world in which the common view founded on biblical Christianity was that God created every species individually and that species were immutable. Darwin himself was brought up with this Christian world view and indeed was destined for the church had not the opportunity to travel on the Beagle intervened. He struggled for years to reconcile his religious beliefs with what he increasingly thought was the actual origin of living things and in particular their variability.

Despite this colossal upheaval in thought many people, including religious people, did soon adapt to the new way of thinking. Many religious people simply placed the causality a stage further back - God did not individually create each species but he set the evolutionary ball rolling in the first place. In Darwin's biography I was surprised to read that alongside the aristocratic and senior academic pall bearers at Darwin's funeral was the United States Ambassador, James Russell Lowell, in 'grateful recognition of the interest taken by Americans in Mr. Darwin's works.' And this in 1882!

Professor Robin Dunbar draws attention to the fact that evolutionary ideas did indeed play an important role in psychology during the late 19th and early 20th centuries but that early in the 20th century the focus shifted from questions of origins and evolutionary history to questions of mechanism. Schools of thought such as Psychoanalysis and Behaviourism began to take centre stage.

At first sight then it seems strange to date evolutionary psychology from the late 1980s which most authorities do. Before that there had been Wilson and sociobiology but one of the key differences between say 1900 and 2000 is the discovery of the evolutionary mechanism Darwin was looking for, molecular genetics. (Ironically Mendel was experimenting with his garden vegetables at the time that Darwin was writing.)

Until a few decades ago our knowledge of evolution was based largely on analysis of fossils and comparative anatomy which inevitably embodied a margin of error. Now with the sequencing of genomes Darwin's ideas have been wonderfully confirmed and the relationships between species can be read in minute detail. Our knowledge of the genetic basis of behaviour increases daily. Darwin can in many ways be seen as the father of evolutionary psychology, but also developmental psychology and comparative psychology.

Charles Darwin has changed the way we see the world and the way we see ourselves as human beings and opened the way to exploration of the wonders of the natural universe.

Joe Cocker

Research into cognitive developmental neuroscience: What are the implications for teaching?

Geraldine Jones
School of Health and Social Sciences,
Edinburgh Napier University

In her presentation, Geraldine Jones talked about the latest findings in neuroscience i.e. how we humans learn and the function of the brain. In the beginning she spoke about the problems some older theories brought, as the linear models of input – output and taught – learned. The functional development of the brain was believed to have bidirectional structure: Genes should control brain structure, which promoted brain function and affected our experience. The brain should be divided up in to eight main areas that were thought to develop in certain ways. These linear models are now rejected and the value of cognitive ideology is questioned.

Latest findings indicate that the function of the brain is very flexible and our environment is having great influence on it. Learning is pruning and reconstruction of synapses. The main pruning seems to take place in stages. First at the age of two or three years old there is pruning in the visual cortex. Secondly, at the age of eight to nine there is a general pruning of synapses in the brain. Finally there is, in the adulthood, a pruning in the prefrontal cortex.

Cortical structure is highly individualized and the cortex is continually changing through daily living. Thinking is not a linear flow from one neuron to another but an activation of the whole neuron-complex connected via synapses. Thinking and perception are run by our emotions. The brain seems not to be preprogrammed with anything at birth, except there is a sub-cortical interest in face-like objects that is probably having its origin in the brainstem.

On her second last slide in her discourse, Geraldine Jones concluded: “Brain development is not robotic, mechanical, stereotypical and rigidly programmed. Over-training leads to poor learning and a loss of normal organization in sensory cortex. Different parts of the brain may be ready to learn at different times. Some experiences have the most powerful effects during the sensitive period. Instructions and learning are very important parts of the child’s brain development but perhaps not because of inputs but active processing of experience. Optimal learning condition is relaxed alertness (the fear/pleasure centres in the brain need low threat and high challenge). Adolescents will have phases when their cognition is reorganized, especially boys.”

Finally, I would like to thank Jones for a didactical and interesting lecture.

Bjarni Guðmundsson

Scottish Higher students' experience of studying Psychology

Two ex-students, Eleanor Wigham and Bruce Port from Linlithgow Academy spoke about their experience of studying psychology at Higher level.

The students began by giving a brief history of Linlithgow for the benefit of those who were not familiar with it. The students then focused on how they found studying psychology.

There were numerous positive comments made by the students on studying psychology as a subject. They found it a "breath of fresh air" as it was so different from the more 'traditional' subjects they studied. They also liked the depth of the subject and the fact that it could be applied to real-life scenarios. They also found the subject matter highly relevant and enjoyed how it was taught. Lastly, they found that psychology complimented other subjects well, such as biology and other sciences.

The main criticisms the students had were that they found it hard to remember all the researchers' names and key dates and also they felt more choice was needed for the research topic as choices were too limited.

One of the students is going to continue to study psychology at university and the other student is going on to study veterinary science. The talk gave an interesting insight into a student's viewpoint on studying psychology.

Gemma Emslie

EFPTA Survey Project: Preliminary findings

Three EFPTA members are currently engaged in a survey project, with the ultimate aim of producing a database of information on pre-university psychology education in Europe, including such aspects as curricula, learning, teaching and assessment, teacher training and professional development. Renate Schrempf (Germany), Lenka Sokolová (Slovakia) and Morag Williamson (Scotland) completed the first phase of the project earlier this year; Renate and Morag reported preliminary findings to the EFPTA-ATPS conference in Edinburgh on 17th April 2009.

Early in 2009 EFPTA representatives and contacts were asked to complete an online questionnaire. By mid-April responses had been received from 11 countries or regions. Questions focused mainly on psychology courses at the level required for admission to university, such as the International Baccalaureate, A-level, Abitur, Scottish Higher, Matura etc; these are normally classified at International Standard Classification of Education level 3 (ISCED3).

Some key findings:

- Content of courses were mainly described as “academic” (93%); the remainder are of a vocational nature, and/or focus on the students’ personal development and well-being.
- In 60% of countries/regions, psychology courses last one or two years.
- In most countries/regions, courses are provided by a national awarding body (57%), or by a regional body (29%); in other cases, schools design their own courses.
- Minimum required qualifications for psychology teachers varied greatly, the most stringent requiring a university degree in psychology plus teaching qualification in psychology (29%), the least stringent requiring simply a degree in any subject (29%).
- Quality of professional development varied greatly (36% = excellent, 14% = poor), as did quality of resources available for psychology teaching.
- Only about 30% of countries/regions offering psychology provide courses at “junior secondary” level, ie 11-15 year-olds, and there was disagreement amongst respondents as to the desirability of courses for this age group.

- All respondents agreed or strongly agreed that pre-university psychology education was important, stating various reasons which included:
 - “Helps development of a range of skills, including critical and analytical thinking, research skills, numeracy”
 - “[Europe] needs individuals who are able to communicate, to work in groups and teams, to respect the common values”
 - “Students learn about themselves and their fellow human beings. Hopefully the knowledge they get will also make them better at coping in life”

In designing the questionnaire, the researchers were conscious of the need to ensure that items would be meaningful, and would effectively capture the desired information, across the many different educational systems in Europe. Even so, it is possible that interpretation of particular terms used in the questionnaire (which was in English) varied amongst respondents. In different countries, schools and courses vary enormously in terms of the academic / vocational distinction, compulsory and optional subjects, standalone (eg A-level) or cluster (eg IB) qualifications, and so on; some items may not have adequately reflected these variations. Such issues represent the main threats to validity of the data obtained.

In the next phase of the project, the researchers plan to address the weaknesses of phase 1, broaden the scope of the survey to look at curricula in greater detail, and identify common issues of concern to European psychology teachers.

Renate, Morag and Lenka are very grateful to all those of you who participated in the first phase of the survey – we welcome your comments and suggestions for the next phase of our investigation into pre-university psychology in Europe. Look out for the phase 2 questionnaire!

Morag Williamson

Saturday, April 18th. 2009
Our Dynamic Earth,
Holyrood Road, Edinburgh.



Reading Faces

Professor David Perrett,
University of St Andrews

As Psychologists we like to think that we ‘never judge a book by its cover’, however when it comes to human faces there are many assumptions that we do make. Professor Perrett argues that many of those assumptions are supported by evidence; faces do give us important clues as to personality, trustworthiness and health.

Professor Perrett gave his presentation in the impressive surroundings of The Dynamic Earth Centre in Edinburgh. Trustworthiness is something we tend to judge by behaviour rather than appearance, and indeed, early research by Michael Stirrat found that evidence gathered from static faces was unreliable. Further research, using economic games based on co-operation or exploitation, uncovered that slim faces were likely to be judged more trustworthy than more robust, wider faces. This correlates with evidence from ice hockey, that players with wide faces tended to spend more time in the penalty box. On the whole, it is male faces that are wider and this is linked to testosterone. Professor Perrett argued that human faces have evolved to become narrower as co-operation became more important for survival.

Research by Stephen, Coetzee and Law Smith found that perception of health is linked to colour cues in the skin. Of course, we know this already, all our grandmothers have told us we looked pale and therefore must be ill at some time or other. Women, use make-up to mimic good health; rouge on their cheeks and lipstick to mimic sexual attraction and arousal. Human skin colour is obviously linked to ethnicity and race, but there are some constants. Faces reflect health through skin tone. Some of the factors of apparent health are HLA immune genes, reproductive genes, body fat and lifestyle (sleep, exercise, diet). To investigate this experimentally, composite faces were made by blending several images to create average faces. These were then colour manipulated. Participants were asked to change the colour of the faces, using the computer mouse to make them look healthier. In the UK, South

Africa and Australia, participants added more red. Rankin, Coetzee even found this in African faces. When participants were asked to manipulate the blue/yellow axis, they added more yellow. So red/yellow faces are judged healthiest.

There are three factors that effect skin pigment; these are blood, melanin and carotenoids. Oxygenated blood is redder and this makes skin look healthier. Oxygenation of blood is improved by fitness training and influenced by reproductive hormones. Therefore exercise can improve the appearance of the skin, making an individual both look and actually be healthier. Tanned faces reflect the presence of melanin, people do tend to look healthier with a bit of a tan, however, remember your sun screen! Carotenoids are found in food, especially fruit and vegetables. It turns out that eating too many carrots really can turn you orange! Carotenoids are yellow-red pigments that aid the immune system, in some animals they are used in ornamentation for sexual selection (feather colour etc.) When participants were fed β -carotene over an 8 week period their skin tone did change. So eating more fruit and vegetables can not only make us healthier, but change our appearance for the better too. Skin really does reflect diet.

Of course, fashion and ethnicity are variables in preferences for faces, but the findings suggest that judgements of health remain constant. Perhaps the most important implication of this research is that it could be used to motivate people to live a healthier lifestyle. Telling young people that eating their five-a-day of fruit and vegetables will make them live longer, be less likely to contract certain illnesses in the future etc., is not effective, however, saying it will improve your physical appearance and therefore make you more attractive to perspective partners could well be.

Further references: - www.perceptionlab.com www.faceresearch.org

Deb Gajic
Chair of the ATP (UK)

Safeguarding the Rights and Welfare of Mental Health Service Users

Jim Connechen

Chair of the Mental Welfare Commission for Scotland

In this workshop Jim Connechen gave an overview of the work and remit of the Mental Welfare Commission for Scotland and discussed the innovative Scottish Mental Health legislation, particularly the “rights” based approach and the principle upon which the legislation is based.

The Mental Welfare Commission for Scotland was born in 1960, replacing the existing Board of Control and it took on major new responsibilities under the new Mental Health Act. Its role is to monitor the operation of legislation and to promote best practice and Jim leads a team which visits institutions to ensure that service users get the best care and treatment possible. They carry out investigations where a complaint has been made against care staff and will give advice to managers to help them to apply best practice.

The commission works for people with all types of mental disorder and its membership reflects the breadth of mental health stakeholders, including independent experts in applying best legal and ethical practice to care and treatment. Their role is to influence and challenge service providers working with people in a variety of setting such as hospitals, prisons and community facilities and their priorities lie with people who are under emergency detention, young people and those receiving compulsory treatment in the community.

Visits are made unannounced so that they see the “true picture” and they allow individuals to raise their concerns. Facilities are inspected so that the physical environment can be observed as well as the care and treatment being provided. They investigate issues such as unlawful detention, ill treatment or neglect and loss or damage to property. Formal inquiries can be carried out under “court-style” powers but to date this has never been necessary.

Jim explained that he sees his team as agents of “culture change” who encourage carers to put principles into practice by sharing expertise in a variety of ways such as publication of good practice guides and offering a telephone advice service.

After Jim’s presentation there was a lively discussion of ethical issues that may arise when treating people with mental disorders and it was clear that the delegates thoroughly appreciated his talk and were intensely interested in what he had to say.

Dorothy Coombs
ATP/EFPTA

Scotland's Mental Health First Aid (SMHFA)

Sandy MacLean

Centre for Learning Effectiveness, Scotland's Colleges

SMHFA both saves lives and improves lives. The training course is based on work pioneered in Australia and, after an encouraging Scottish pilot in 2004, the course has been adapted for Scotland and it is now being rolled out across the country. The course is based on the principles of physical First Aid Courses.

SMGFA is a training course that improves mental health literacy and helps people to recognize the signs and symptoms of someone with mental health problems; to respond to various mental health crises, engage with, support and signpost people to appropriate professional help.

So far it has been delivered to members of the Scottish public, employers and managers, especially frontline staff in local authorities, NHS staff, Scottish Prison staff and Jobcentre Plus staff. Costs vary between free to £150 depending on who delivers it and where. The course consists of four x 3 hour sessions.

This session was very well delivered by Sandy MacLean; she ensured full audience participation, by asking for opinions (showing that she is an excellent teacher) and answered all questions fully. The session was very informative and gave European delegates a real insight into mental health initiatives and policies in Scotland.

www.wellscotland.info/smhfa.html

Deb Gajic
Chair of the ATP (UK)

Changes to SQA NQ Psychology courses from 2009-2010

Marie Morrison – Principal Assessor, SQA Higher Psychology
Jonathan Firth – Setter, SQA Intermediate Psychology

At this year's Edinburgh conference I delivered a workshop together with Marie Morrison on changes to three major Scottish psychology courses. The most well known of these courses is the Scottish 'Higher' which is taken every year by approximately 3000 students in high schools and colleges, and we also discussed the 'Intermediate' exams which are at a slightly lower level of difficulty.

The courses have been going through what is officially termed a 'minor review', meaning that their structure will stay largely the same, but there are several important changes to the content and the assessment. The aim of the workshop was to help teachers and lecturers have a clear idea of these changes before starting to teach the courses in the summer of 2009.

To start with, Marie explained the rationale for the minor review. A particular problem that these courses have experienced is the large amount of mandatory content, leading to a level of difficulty which is unreasonably high compared to other courses. There has also been a heavy burden of assessments. These problems have been dealt with by removing some content from most of the topics, and shortening internal assessments from one hour to half an hour. It is hoped that these changes will give teachers more freedom to explore topics and increase the enjoyment for students, while maintaining a high standard of achievement.

We then went through the course content and structure, highlighting differences between the old and new versions. As it concerned Scottish courses, this workshop was mainly of interest to home delegates, but some of our colleagues from other countries also attended, and I hope the workshop helped them to understand more about how Psychology is taught in Scotland.

As this was the first time I had attended an EFPTA conference, I was impressed at how friendly and positive everyone was. As our workshop was on the second day, we had already had plenty of time to meet other delegates at the previous day's events, not least the evening entertainment - a Scottish 'ceilidh' in the city centre. This gathering – a traditional folk dance and party - is still very popular among Scots of all ages, and also went down well with the European delegates, who represented their countries very well with their enthusiastic and energetic dancing!

Having met so many interesting people from a large range of countries, I was sorry that we all had to say goodbye so soon – although at least the sun finally came out on the Saturday! I was very pleased to be involved with this year's conference, and I look forward to attending other EFPTA events in the future.

Jonathan Firth

Dorothy Coombs wins BPS “Award for Excellence in Teaching”

The Association for the Teaching of Psychology nominated Dorothy Coombs for the BPS award for excellence in the teaching of Psychology.

The BPS gave this award to Dorothy, the first time that it had been given to a teacher of pre-degree level psychology.

The presentation was made to Dorothy at the 2009 Annual BPS Conference in Brighton.

ATP member nominated for Teaching Excellence award

In my experience we teachers tend to be sceptical of awards and prizes for doing our job. We value intrinsic rewards: the satisfaction of a lesson that goes well, the progress evident in students' work, positive relationships with our charges. The odd expression of appreciation - whether in the form of comments from a manager, or a 'thank you' card from a student – certainly goes a long way, but we don't expect glittering prizes, and in any case very few such rewards exist for teachers. So when the ATP Committee were invited to make a nomination for the British Psychological Society's annual Award for Excellence in the Teaching of Psychology, we seized the opportunity. In the past, the criteria for the Award have related mainly to teaching academic psychology in higher education, however more recently the BPS has emphasised that nominations are welcome from all areas of psychology education, including pre-degree level. The key criterion is that “...the work of a nominee has made an unusually significant contribution to education and training in psychology within the United Kingdom” (from the guidance for nominations; see the BPS website for full details of the Award: www.bps.org.uk).

The Committee unanimously decided to nominate Dorothy Coombs for the Award. For many years Dorothy has been well-known to members through her role as Chairperson (2004-07), her work on the Helpline, her conference presentations and Newsletter articles. Possibly less well known is her behind-the-scenes work in representing the ATP on various other bodies, including BPS committees, the Higher Education Academy Psychology Network, and the National Science Learning Centre, as well as her articles published in 'The Psychologist' and the 'School Science Review' journal. In her role as Vice-President of the European Federation of Psychology Teachers' Associations (since its inception in 2004) she promotes collaborative projects between psychology teachers throughout Europe. These extensive activities in support of pre-degree psychology education, along with Dorothy's successful career in psychology teaching, were described in the submission for the Award.

Morag Williamson

Higher education and school dropout.

How can psychosocial well-being influence school drop-out
in the first year of higher education?

Drs.H.Reijnierse

Introduction

Why would we discuss an article about higher education in the newsletter of an organization who is mainly concerned with teaching at pre-degree level? The answer is simple. Maybe the key to lower drop-out rates lies in the approach we have on teaching and coaching of our students at pre-degree level.

In the last decade there has been a peculiar trend in higher education in the Netherlands. A growing number of students are quitting their study shortly after starting. Higher education in the Netherlands is offered at two types of institutions: research universities (*universiteiten*) and universities of applied sciences (*hogescholen*). Universities of applied sciences include general institutions as well as institutions specializing in one of seven sectors: agriculture, engineering and technology, economics and business administration, health care, fine and performing arts, education (teacher training), and social welfare. (bron HBO raad 2009)

Especially the dropout rates within their first year of education are causing a lot of problems for the universities and for the universities of applied sciences. The HBO raad, an organization which monitors all trends in the Dutch higher educational system, especially concerning the Universities of Applied Sciences, is stating that the number of drop outs in the first year increased from 15.2% to 17.5% in the last two years. The research universities lose about 10% of their population in the first year (VSNU 2009) The figure for non-Western students who finish their study successfully is about 55.8%. The native students do better in this sense. Their score lies at about 72.1%. (Facts and figures HBO raad 2008)

These figures are a reason for great concern for all who are involved, universities, students, parents and the government. If students drop out, universities are losing money because they are paid for the number of students who succeed in finishing their training after starting at a certain university.

Also the society is losing money because the universities are government paid, therefore it is a waste of taxes, and then there are the students themselves who lose because they have invested in time and money with no results at the end.

Educated people are looked upon as capital that is needed to assure the standards of living in our society. (Andriessen, 2004) Loss of capital has to be minimized at all costs. So there is the problem in a nutshell. We cannot allow ourselves to lose that much human capital. In the end it could turn out to be a very grim situation. The Netherlands could lose our position globally as the knowledge centre that we like to think that we are.

When the dropout rates are staying on this level there are the problems for the universities concerning staff employment, finance and logistics. Universities are still faced with enormous numbers of first year students that leave the University in their first year.

The question of what causes these dropout rates is rather complex. There are a lot of different factors that influence these dropout rates. In the literature the following main factors emerge; the choice for a study has to be made at a relatively very young age. Students who drop out claim that they are, in fact, not ready for such an important life decision and therefore just choose a subject in which they might have some interest. There is also the well-known complaint that once started it is far from what they expected. Furthermore low markings and all the frustrations that accompany this dysfunction within their education career, are given as a reason for a dropout or the move to a another course. On top of everything personal problems can also be at the root of the decision for school dropouts in the first year. Living on your own, for the first time in your life, can take a great toll of your organizing skills and can lead to a feeling of great discomfort.

The question arises how can we deal with all these problems? A lot of suggestions have been made by different researchers and organizations. In a research project by the Institute of Employment Research (Davies & Elias, 2002) the authors state that 24 % of the respondents see a mistaken choice of course as the main reason for their failure. Personal problems were identified by 14 % of the respondents and 18 % gave financial problems as a reason for their drop out from higher education. It is interesting that a majority of the students were aware of the existence of personal tutors but were very critical of the support they received from these tutors. The suggestion was made by Davies and Elias that better advice should be made available for students who are the threshold of higher education

Loyens (2007) states that, although there is a relationship between some constructions of constructivists learning (cooperative learning, self-regulated learning and problem based learning) and study activities, this seems certainly not to be the key to the solution of the dropout problem. It is possible that when a student is in control of his own performance he can expect a certain degree of self-control but this is no guarantee to academic success. She holds a plea for specific training and instruction programmes that will help students in this respect. Maybe the answer to reducing school dropout lies in the question of the study choice and preparation beforehand.

According to Entwistle et al. (1991, p. 259), students with disintegrated perceptions of their learning environment “seemed to lack a commitment to their new academic environment, and associated confusion with their purposes in studying”. It is quite logic to assume that those students will drop out in an early stage.

Pintrinch (2003) beliefs that self-efficacy is the key element in the student’s academic performance and therefore should be taken very much into account when thinking about assessment strategies. Self-efficacy is highly responsible for motivation and cognitive processes activated during students’ performances. But he also recognizes the simple fact that this is not the only issue concerning academic performance.

Peer group collaboration could prove to be very useful in preventing school failure. To be involved in a group assignment, and to be partly responsible for the outcome of an assignment, does lift the self-esteem of students and reduces the risk of lack of involvement and therefore drop out. (Mercer, 2005)

All these assumptions have led to the belief that action is very necessary to solve the still growing problem of school dropout.

The Dutch minister of Education, R. Plasterk just recently (2008) signed a covenant with the schools of higher education that propose the following measures:

1. A better connection between the levels of secondary higher level education and the research universities and universities of applied science.
2. More differentiation in and between the courses.
3. More and consistent use of knowledge of the principles at the core of the education process
4. Stimulation of the knowledge community. (small-scale and new forms of commitment and binding)

Of course all measures are important for reducing dropout figures to a minimum but especially the last one seems like a new approach. There are some specific studies like law, economics and psychology which have turned in to mass education organizations with large numbers of students.

Maybe the key lies somewhere in the area of commitment. It will certainly not be a one line track, but there could be this one central issue in all these approaches, a kind of binding factor that could maybe lead to better results.

A comparison between therapy and SLC (Study Learning Coach)

There is a general belief that therapy, cognitive or psycho-analysis is more fruitful when the relationship between therapist and client is one of trust and feeling safe within the process.

Research has shown amazing results concerning the quality of the relationship between client and therapist and the success of therapy. In 1999 there has been excessive research initiated by the American Psychological Association Division of Psychotherapy that showed that the relationship between therapist and client is one of the most important factors in success. (Steering Committee 2002 pag.441-443; Lambert 1999 pg. 531-577). Some patients who considered stopping with their therapy went on because of the relationship they had with the therapist and therefore later benefited from this decision.

Huibers (2008) suggests that although there is a theory at the base of every therapy, there is no proof what psycho-therapy actually does. One could state that it changes the way patients think about certain situations and that it brings out repressed wishes and thoughts. But he strongly underlines the therapeutic power of a good relationship between the patient and the psychologist.

Maybe there is the connection between school dropout and psychosocial wellbeing of students. Is the hypothesis, that students who feel well at home within higher

education and therefore have a higher score on different factors of psycho-social wellbeing and produce better school results than those students who don't have high scores on psycho-social wellbeing, a correct one?. Social integration has proven to be the key word in many situations and is without doubt one in the school environment. A student who is integrated and has different relationships on different levels within his school system has much more opportunity to benefit from this community.

In this respect what could be the role of the SLC (student learning coach)? In the majority of higher education institutes student coaches have been given a key role in coaching students through the whole period of their study. The problems that are addressed are mainly issues concerning their study progress. There are some universities however that recognize the growing demand for intervention concerning personal issues that could be on the agenda of the meetings between student and SLC. The question that arises is twofold. One, is the SLC equipped to deal with such matters and two, is this an approach that can be successful in reducing the number of dropouts?

Research has already shown that school, family, behavioural, social and personality variables could all predict school drop out in secondary education (Janosz & Leblanc, 1997) There is no doubt that the quality of social and emotional development and the feeling of well-being has an important role in the whole of school success. It would certainly be interesting to know if there are other factors which are even more important than psychosocial well-being. One could think about family and socioeconomic factors. There have been some studies which point in this direction for children in primary education (Jimmerson, 2000)

Do the same variables apply to students in higher education and what exactly do we mean when we are talking about psychosocial well-being?

Psychosocial well-being

If the hypothesis is true that students who feel well at home in higher education and who have been able to adjust to the academic life have a much higher chance of success than the ones who are experiencing all kinds of barriers in these areas, then this should be the target of further research.

In this respect the concept of the phrase "psychosocial well-being" could be useful. To get a clear grip on what we mean by psychosocial well-being we should first of all get a clear definition

The psychosocial workgroup from Queen Margaret's University College in Edinburgh came up with a definition with respect to three core domains: human capacity, social ecology and culture and values. Human capacity is all about the health, knowledge and skills of an individual. While the importance of mental health and, particularly in work with children and adolescents, development of skills is widely accepted as a contribution to psychosocial well-being, social connection and support has increasingly been seen as an important complementary dimension of experience. There is strong empirical evidence linking mental health outcomes to the presence of effective social engagement. So next to self-esteem, belonging could be one of the major factors for continuance of the first chosen school career.

Rural background and city background.

There is one other issue we should look at. Could there be a difference in attitude between adolescents who grew up in more rural areas, like the Zeeuwse islands and those students who have an urban city background like in Rotterdam. Is it for the latter easier to adjust in a new urban environment or more difficult to concentrate on the choice for the certain school career once made?

MacClauglin e.a.(2006) states that there are some drawbacks for students who come from rural areas to study in higher education. There is less emphasis on an academic achievement and students often have to move to a different environment. Whether or not this is also the case for students from rural Dutch areas still has to be looked into. Maybe this could result in a different approach in the secondary higher education in Zeeland concerning academic achievement.

Conclusion

There have been a growing number of students that have dropped out of higher education in the Netherlands the last few years. A lot of different reasons have been given by a lot of different researchers. Factors that play a role are self efficacy, cognitive skills, racial aspects, academic attitude and social engagement, different learning approaches, etc. (Entwistle, 1991; Pintrinch, 2003; Looyens 2008; Mercer 2005). Probably they all have a part of the solution. But the measurements taken so far have not resulted in any success. Maybe the new Minister of Education of the Netherlands will have some positive influence with his new program on school dropout in higher education. Of all the measures he has proposed there is one that is particularly worth trying: "Stimulation of the knowledge community" (Small-scale and new forms of commitment and binding). The new forms of commitment and binding especially are very intriguing. Is it the case that binding with a group of people (students) or with one person (study coach) can lead to better results? Is the comparison with therapy a just one? If one feels awarded and recognized will this lead to psychosocial well-being and therefore better school results?

Research has to find evidence for the correlation between psychosocial well-being and school success and dropout. The school experience variables could be the strongest predictor for school dropout. The role of teachers and study coaches could well be the key for a lower dropout rate.

Furthermore one should look at the possible differences between adolescents in higher education from rural areas (for instance Zeeland) and urban areas (for instance Rotterdam). Maybe there is a difference in self-esteem and academic attitude or other variables that could be responsible for psychosocial well-being.

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EFPTA-Board meeting in Seville, October 22nd to 25th, 2009

Provisional Agenda

Day	Time	Agenda	Comments
Friday	09.00-10.00	Registration, welcome, introduction	President Treasurer
	10.00-10.30	Introduction to the workshops	President
	10.30-12.00	Workshops	N.N.
		(1) Teaching of psychology – survey Report by Renate Schrempf , Morag Williamson and Lenka Sokolova	
		(2) The "Ideal curriculum" – just a vision ?	
		(3) Qualifications for Teaching of psychology profession	
		(4) Defining standards of "Higher education" across Europe	
	12.00-12.30	Short reports of work parties	
	12.30-13.30	Lunch	
	14.00-16.00	Agenda of board meeting:	
		1. Constitution (1)	
		2. Annual conference 2010: Bratislava	15 th -17 th ,April
		3. Conference preparation group for Bratislava	
		4. Topics for Bratislava	
		5. EFPA-Congress 2011: Istanbul	
Saturday	09.00-10.00	6. Constitution (2)	
	10.00-10.30	Coffee break	
	10.30-11.30	7. Examples of best practice-experiences	
	11.30-12.00	8. Baccalaureate in Europe	
	12.00-13.00	Lunch	
	13.00-14.00	Considerations according to future work:	
		(1) Enhancement of administrative work	
		(2) Policy of EFPTA	
		(3) Fostering publicity	
		(4) Budget	
	(5) Website		
	(6) Publications		
	14.15-15.00	Last meeting of working parties	
	15.00-15.30	Coffee break	
	15.30-17.00	Last issues and closing	