

THE PROFESSIONAL NEEDS OF PSYCHOLOGY TEACHERS

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Abstract

In many European countries, similarly to Slovakia or the Czech Republic, psychology is not a compulsory school subject available for every student. In spite of its rather low formal status, the popularity and informal status of psychology are high. It is attractive for secondary school students; they find it interesting and useful for everyday life (Augustin, 2012; Sokolová, 2013). However, being a teacher of a subject of high popularity but low formal support might be difficult. We investigated the teachers' perceptions of the teaching of psychology as a school subject in Slovakia. In-service (n = 21) and pre-service teachers (n = 15) were interviewed. Both psychology teachers and student teachers find psychology as a useful subject with low methodological support. They lack innovative teaching materials and further education and also opportunities for networking and cooperation.

Keywords: *psychology teacher, teaching of psychology, professional needs*

1 INTRODUCTION

Psychology has been taught in Slovakia both in general and vocational higher secondary education (ISCED 3) since the 1960s (e. g. Homola & Žáková, 1968). Nowadays psychology is one of the most popular fields of university studies in Slovakia (Špitková, 2007), however, as a secondary school subject, it is available only in about 25% of general secondary schools (grammar school or "gymnasium") (Sokolová et al., 2013). In European countries psychology is taught usually as an optional subject, the availability is between 25 % and 100 %. The quality of teaching materials and further education for psychology teachers vary among countries, regions, sometimes even among individual schools (Williamson et al., 2011). The content, teaching methods and assessment depend on the preferred paradigm of psychology as a science. In Great Britain, for example, the focus of psychology teaching is on the experimental paradigm and the development of scientific and critical thinking. In Slovakia, the curriculum of psychology is more flexible. Psychology teachers prefer mainly social-psychological approach focusing on the development of self-understanding, experiential learning and the development of social skills. In the vocational education psychology is taught as an applied discipline (e.g. in the vocational training of health care professionals, social workers, pre-primary educators, and sales staff etc.). The curriculum is not academic-oriented or scientific-oriented. In the general secondary education in Slovakia the position of psychology courses and subjects is rather unstable and changing, often depending on the administration support for these subjects, the interest among students and on the approach and qualification of an individual teacher. Similarly to the Czech Republic (Vašutová, 2012), psychology is not taught only by teachers with psychology teaching qualification but also by psychologists without a teaching qualification, teachers of social studies, philosophy, religion or pedagogy.

On the other hand, the informal status of psychology is rather high. Students are motivated to choose psychology as an optional or non-compulsory subject or as a subject of their further university studies (Sokolová, 2013). Secondary students find psychology interesting, useful for everyday life, enhancing self-understanding and understanding others (Augustin, 2012). This gap between formal and informal status has focused research on the problems of psychology teaching in Europe and in the USA (see the survey results on www.apa.org, www.efpta.org, or www.psychologielehrer.de).

2 METHOD

As a part of the project KEGA “Teaching of psychology and personal development subjects – a set of teaching materials” we have conducted partial studies on the perception of psychology as a school subject among different target groups. To investigate the situation in the teaching of psychology in Slovakia from the teachers’ point of view we designed a survey consisting of two parts. In the first part, we analyzed the statistical data on the secondary school teachers in Slovakia. Based on these data we selected the sample for the second part – the interview survey. A semi-structured interview was used to collect the data on the perceived status of psychology as a school subject, the status of psychology teachers, their subject-specific competences, and their professional needs. The interviews were conducted by four different interviewers using the same procedure. The procedure was based on R. Atkinson’s framework of the life story interview (Atkinson, 1998) and consisted of obtaining the informed consent, providing the interviewees with the general information of the survey goals and purposes, narration describing interviewees’ work life, experiences and attitudes towards teaching psychology, and obtaining general demographic data on the interviewees. The interviewees were recruited to illustrate the variability in the teaching of psychology in Slovakia. The sample consisted of 21 expert psychology teachers, who taught psychology in higher secondary education either as a general or as a vocational subject; and 15 pre-service teachers (student teachers), who were being trained to teach psychology.

Table 1: Survey sample

	N	average age	No. of years teaching psychology
In-service teachers (men)	21 (2)	47	15
Pre-service teachers (men)	15 (3)	23	0
SUM	36 (5)	35	

Note: Further on the individual interviewees are referred to codes indicating whether they are in-service (I) or pre-service (P) teachers, the year of interview and the number of the interview within the year.

3 RESULTS

For the first part of the survey, we analyzed the data on teachers’ qualification provided by the Institute of Information and Prognoses of Education (ÚIPŠ) from 2009. Based on these data psychology was taught by more than 600 teachers within about 50 different subjects. The same analysis was done in 2014. The difference in the number of teachers (see Table 2) is evidence of the changing situation in the teaching of psychology. Even though psychology is taught mainly by qualified teachers in Slovakia, not all of these teachers are graduates of university training for psychology teachers, especially in vocational study programs they are often teachers of related vocational subjects.

Table 2: Psychology teachers in Slovakia (based on data published by UIPŠ in 2009 and 2014)

Subjects	No. of qualified teachers in 2009	No. of unqualified teachers in 2009	No. of qualified teachers in 2014	No. of unqualified teachers in 2014
Applied psychology	9	0	10	0
Pathopsychology	4	0	6	0
Pedagogy and psychology	26	0	3	0
Psychology	204	6	146	8
Psychology and communication	0	0	17	0
Psychology and pathopsychology	1	2	3	0
Psychology and pedagogy	54	0	5	0
Psychology and sociology	2	0	3	0
Workplace psychology and sociology	7	0	10	0
Psychology and social communication	5	0	4	0
Psychology and social education	57	2	38	2
Child psychology	0	0	2	0
Workplace and market psychology	113	5	76	5
Psychology, pedagogy and professional communication	65	0	81	0
Social-psychological training	45	0	76	1
Seminar in psychology	2	0	9	1
Social psychology	11	1	9	0
	605	16	498	17

Note: The table contains only selected psychology subjects.

The interviewed in-service teachers were representatives of the largest groups of teachers based on the data from 2009 – the teachers of psychology from general secondary schools (where psychology is taught as an optional academic subject) and from social and pedagogical academies (where psychology is taught as a compulsory vocational subject), the teachers of applied psychology courses from vocational schools (Psychology and pedagogy and Workplace and market psychology) and teachers of social-psychological training from social and pedagogical academies and grammar schools.

The general framework for the content analysis was based on the semi-structure of the interview. To abstract the sub-categories we applied the inductive category formulation and the method of similarities and contrasts. Each of four main categories (the perceived status of psychology as a school subject, the status of psychology teachers, subject-specific competences of psychology teachers, and the professional needs of psychology teachers) cover three or four content sub-categories.

3.1 The perceived status of psychology as a school subject

Teachers' answers underline the results based on the study of documents and foreign survey studies – the discrepancy between the formal and informal status of psychology as a school subject. Four subcategories were identified in the area of subject-status perception.

Both pre-service and in-service teachers highlighted **the importance of psychology for personal development** in young people.

“I am sure; it is one of the most important subjects. Of course, only if students do not learn just theory; if experiential learning is applied. It is a subject useful in everyday life such as physical education.” (I2012/1)

“I think, psychology is a very practical subject, if it is taught like this, it is very useful for everyday life.” (I2012/5)

Psychology is quite popular among young people. The **attractiveness of psychology** might be facilitated by the image of psychology in popular media, the image of the psychologist as a helping professional, or by seeking for self-understanding among adolescents.

“Young people watch films, read magazines or internet news and psychology is everywhere. It might seem interesting and attractive for them to study psychology.” (P2014/2)

“They are often full of questions about mind, emotions, and relationships. They simply look for answers.” (I2014/3)

Despite the positive outcomes, the interviewees reported on the **low availability of psychology courses** in Slovak secondary schools.

“Psychology should become a part of the curriculum also in other types of secondary schools with more lessons per week.” (I2012/5)

“I think, psychology is underestimated, it is not taught in many schools – even in those training students for work with people. The attention is not paid to communication and creativity, for example.” (I2012/2)

As an optional subject taught by a limited number of qualified teachers, psychology gets only **low support and interest from the legal bodies**.

“Concerning grammar schools, I think, that the school administrations perceive psychology as a useless subject. And the teachers’ training center has not organized a course for psychology teachers for more than two years.” (I2013/6)

“As I could see during my teaching practice, new materials and textbooks are needed, but there is no help for psychology teachers from the Ministry of Education or any other legal body.” (P2014/3)

“We miss a complex conception of the psychology teaching in Slovakia.” (I2012/4)

3.2 The status of psychology teachers

Psychology teachers are teachers with double professional identity. They are often considered to be psychologists by their students and colleagues, or they work both as teachers and school psychologists in the same school. This **dilemma of professional identity** may cause intrapersonal role conflict in some teachers, for the others, it might have a facilitating and synergic effect.

„Psychology is a discipline for people and about people. Psychology teacher does not only teach psychology, he or she is also a psychologist, a helping professional. I think, many people around do expect that.” (I2012/6)

“I think students do not detect the distinction between a psychologist and a psychology teacher. For them, they are very much alike.” (P2014/3)

“My students are sometimes disappointed that I am not a “real” clinical psychologist or a psychotherapist.” (I2014/3)

It is quite common that we find just one or even no teacher of psychology in smaller towns. Psychology teachers often face **professional loneliness**. They have no colleagues to share with and discuss the ideas, problems, teaching tips and so on.

“I am the only psychology teacher in my school. At the beginning I needed some consultations, to be sure that I had been going the right way. But I had nobody to share with.” (I2014/2)

“Unfortunately, the teachers are a bit lonely. They miss something, or even someone to ask for advice, to share new ideas and facts.” (I2012/6)

On the other hand, both groups of teachers feel challenged with the **high expectations** towards their skills and knowledge.

“We are expected to have always the solutions for any problem. You should always be ready to give an advice, provide with help. But sometimes it is not possible. We are just people, too.” (I2012/7)

“People often think that psychology graduates have some “special” skills for problem solving, they always know what to do... I am afraid I will not be able to meet these expectations.” (P2014/3)

3.3 Subject-specific competencies of psychology teachers

The most important competence of a psychology teacher is a skill of **stimulating personal growth** and (inter)personal understanding among students. The interviewees find their subject a bit different from the other school subjects, they do not teach only facts; learning psychology should lead students towards psychological thinking, developing transferable skills and personal development.

“You have to teach students to think psychologically, not only memorize some facts... The most important thing is to motivate students for personal growth, self-understanding and psychological thinking.” (I2012/8)

“Psychology is a beautiful and interesting science; however, it loses its sense, when you lead students only to study the facts from the textbook. This might be the crucial difference; you cannot teach psychology like mathematics, you have to show them what it is all about.” (I2012/6)

Psychology teachers have to be able to connect the psychological theory with the understandable practice of everyday life. The most effective psychology teachers are able to **teach psychology through psychology**.

“Psychology is a subject about life. And talking with people about life is the very fulfilling career for me.” (I2012/7)

“Psychology is a science about people, their minds, behavior and emotions. The partial facts can be easily supported by everyday examples. And these themes are interesting and motivating for students.” (P2012/2)

“The purpose of psychology is to explain and understand itself, to understand me and the others.” (I2012/6)

Teaching psychological disciplines (especially the applied and training courses) can always bring a new issue or a situation. A psychology teacher is **never prepared enough** for his or her teaching profession. Both in-service and pre-service teachers mentioned quite good training in the theory of psychology, but they lacked practical training (using teaching methods, designing a training course, working with a group etc.). They had to study on their own and look for further education to feel more confident in their teaching practice.

“And then the self-education helped me to reach higher confidence in leading a social-psychological training.” (I2013/2)

“I had loads of theoretical knowledge, but I missed practical experiences and skills. [...] I relied on my inner intuition rather than professional knowledge. I think the university training should have been more practical because the intuition does not lead you always the right way.” (I2013/1)

3.4 The professional needs of psychology teachers

The main source of dissatisfaction and barriers of effective teaching are quality and availability of teaching materials. Both in-service and pre-service teachers lack **innovative textbooks and additional teaching materials**. They complained about the content, visual attractiveness, didactic and digital support of the textbooks.

“The psychology teacher is a “do-it-yourself teacher”. He or she has to create everything needed for the teaching. It seems like responsible bodies do nothing for the higher quality teaching of this subject.”(I2012/1)

“What do I need? Definitely, I need a good, modern textbook. The book we have is old-fashioned and does not cover all the topics we should teach.” (I2014/3)

“There are excellent materials available online, but unfortunately, the most of them are in English, which makes psychology teaching a bit difficult. I would appreciate having such a digital content (good online tests, videos, psychology labs etc.) also in the Slovak language.” (I2014/2)

As a small professional group psychology teachers do not have flexible opportunities for **continuing professional development meeting specific needs of psychology teachers**. They either attend courses for teachers of other subjects or choose courses for psychologists but these might be rather expensive. Courses and workshops for the teachers of psychology fulfill their need for continuing professional development and also support the **professional networking**.

“Interesting workshops are usually during the lessons and often they are not very cheap. I attend workshops and seminars very rarely.” (I2012/6)

“It is difficult to find a course focused on the teaching of psychology. In the past, we used to have more seminars and workshops. It was wonderful to meet the other teachers of psychology – this professional community is very important.” (I2012/2)

4 DISCUSSION

Each educational system has its own weak points and problems to solve. We compared the situation in the teaching of psychology in Slovakia with findings from the international survey conducted in 2009 and 2011 (Williamson et al, 2011). The online survey of pre-tertiary psychology education showed that one of the main concerns was the availability of teacher-training: both initial teacher education and continuing professional development varied across European countries. In the second stage of the survey the interviews and a focus group were conducted (15 participants from eight European countries). The findings suggest that in most countries availability of further education for psychology teachers was at least adequate and the best quality courses were provided by psychology teachers' associations in some countries. The initial teacher education for psychology was more problematic. In some countries, this type of training was not available or with some limitations. The availability seemed to be related to uninformed perceptions of psychology as an 'easy' subject, regarding deployment of non-specialist staff.

The need for adequate continuing professional development, the qualified teaching of psychology and the support from the legal bodies and school administrations for the teaching of psychology seem to be common issues of concern in several countries including Slovakia. The networking provided by national psychology teachers' associations may help to overcome the professional loneliness and the lack of further education. The quality of teaching materials or the dilemmas of professional identity, however, do not seem to be relevant in other European countries. These reflect more specifically the situation in Slovakia.

5 CONCLUSION

Psychology as a school subject may provide young people with a broad repertoire of skills and knowledge useful in their personal lives, further studies and professional careers. They may learn to identify emotions, to design a research project, to communicate effectively, to manage stress and to resolve conflicts, to take care of their relationships, to understand cognitive processes, to think critically, in general, to develop their psychological literacy. This process of personal growth is designed and facilitated by psychology teachers. The results of the content analysis mentioned above suggest that the educational reform in 2008 did not change the situation in the teaching of psychology and the status of psychology teachers in Slovakia. Based on our survey, we may describe the professional identity of a psychology teacher as a lonely DIY-professional challenged by high expectations and at the same time fighting the low status of his or her subject. Psychology teachers still miss a complex conception of psychology as a school subject, the innovative textbooks or further education. In closing, we believe they do not miss motivation, commitment, and creativity, which are very important for every effective teacher, and we hope that the international cooperation and networking will help to fulfill at least some of the professional needs of psychology teachers.

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