

PREPARATION FOR TEACHING PSYCHOLOGY: THE EXPERIENCE OF BEGINNING UNIVERSITY TEACHERS IN EUROPE

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Abstract: *This exploratory study focuses on the experience of beginning university teachers (both students and faculty members) with their preparation for teaching. Data were collected by online questionnaires in June 2009 in several European countries both from the point of view of beginning teachers (in particular) and department heads, all under the auspices of EUROPLAT - European Network for Psychology Learning & Teaching. Most of the respondents were PhD students. Teaching is usually not compulsory for them, but it is very common that they do at least some teaching. Results show that majority of beginning teachers in our sample do not receive enough training or support for carrying out their teaching responsibilities.*

Keywords: *teaching psychology, beginning teacher, teacher preparation, support, higher education, Europlat*

Introduction

A beginning teacher has to learn many things, e.g. lecture preparation, assessment, dealing with large groups, and acquisition of these competences require a lot of knowledge, effort and practice. Nobody is a good teacher straight away.

Anecdotal data suggest that many teachers have not received any formal training or have received a very poor formal training at the beginning of their career. Some of them became good teachers anyway, through their own effort and simply doing the job for a long time. Nevertheless many authors (e.g. Goss Lucas, Bernstein, 2005; Park, 2004) argue that, with some training and support more teachers could do a better job sooner, could avoid so many “hard knocks”, could feel better about their teaching, and offer greater benefits to their students, too.

After exploring the literature on support and preparation of beginning teachers (further just “BT”), it quickly became obvious that most of the authors come from the United States (e.g. Buskist, Davis, 2006; Griggs, 2002; Meyers, Prieto, 2000) and very few from Europe (e.g. Park, 2004; Lantz, Smith, Branney, 2008). The reason may be

that authors write more in their national languages and their resources are thus not available to English (or Czech) speaking researchers or the topic is simply not in a focus of current research interest.

Because of the lack of research on this topic in Europe, several members of the recently established European Network for Psychology Learning and Teaching (EUROPLAT - www.europlat.org) decided that there is a need of exploratory research of the current state of the art in teacher preparation in order to get the broader view necessary for future development. Another reason was the personal experience of the members of EUROPLAT (including mine) from their countries which generally said that BTs do not receive enough attention.

According to Buskist (2009) the “ideal” preparation and support should include 1-2 semester-long courses on university teaching which would primarily focus on effective course design (how to create and manage a course); effective classroom management and interpersonal skills; effective public speaking skills and giving feedback (immediate and assessment). The course should be interactive and include discussions, the opportunity for beginning teachers to deliver lectures and be observed etc. After the course, beginning teachers should be observed several times during their first teaching experience and receive feedback from a mentor or other colleague.

The “ideal” preparation described above is offered at about 40% of US universities (although enrolment is not usually required, or required only for BTs who will be teaching their own courses soon), and about 60% of good quality higher education institutions offer at least a one-day seminar program (Buskist et al., 2002; Meyers, Prieto, 2000).

The present exploratory study aims mainly to a) explore teaching and teaching related activities of beginning teachers (PhD students, new faculty members and MA students) in Europe and to b) find out how beginning teachers are being prepared for and supported in carrying out their teaching responsibilities.

Method

Procedures and participants

In June, 2009, emails were sent containing Internet links to online questionnaires (one for beginning teachers and one for department heads), along with instructions for completing them, to all EUROPLAT country representatives (one or more people from each European country & Turkey) and to all departments of psychology in the Czech Republic. The EUROPLAT representatives were asked to contact all psychology departments in their countries and to try to motivate people to answer the questionnaires. If there were too many institutions (e.g. in UK), a representative sample of departments (e.g. big, small, various quality rankings) was requested. Our goal was to gather as much data as possible from various psychology departments across Europe. Addressed departments were only those that teach future psychologists e.g. clinical, social, cognitive, and educational. All answers had to be submitted in English.

Table 1: Sample characteristics

gender		age				focus mostly on			degree studied			type of PhD	
fem.	male	M	SD	min	max	research	teaching	half	PhD	MA	finished	employed	not em.
111	39	30	6,7	21	59	68	8	20	109	27	12	78	11

A total of 151 responses of beginning teachers from 73 institutions in 16 countries were valid (+ 28 from department heads or deputies). Several respondents did not finish the whole questionnaire, but finished at least some of the non-demographic questions (I counted these as valid responses). The majority of respondents were from the UK, Norway, the Czech Republic, Portugal, Belgium, Sweden and Turkey. Several respondents were from Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Austria, Ukraine, Liechtenstein and Iceland. Approximately 50 % of those who clicked on the LOGIN of our online questionnaire filled it out.

The timing of the data collection was not ideal because of the exam period at many departments. This was probably one of the reasons for our relatively low response rate. Another reason was certainly the online data collection format, which usually leads to lower response rates (Birnbaum, 2004).

Instrument

There were two versions of the online questionnaires. The beginning teacher questionnaire had 37 questions (both open-ended and closed). Several questions were inspired by the “Postgraduates who Teach Survey” which was conducted in the UK (Lantz, Smith, & Branney, 2008). The department heads (or deputies) version had 16 questions (both open-ended and closed). Apart from demographic questions, both questionnaires focused mostly on teaching (face-to-face, seminars) and teaching related activities (e.g. marking; correcting). The results presented here focus on teaching (exclude teaching related activities) from the perspective of beginning teachers themselves. Each participant in the survey automatically received an anonymous ID number. Participants were assured that survey results will be presented in summary form only and that the names of institutions will be anonymised after data collection. Participants did not have to respond to questions they did not want to answer and they could select an answer from a pre-established list of response options or could generate their own answer.

Results

Cumulative and relative frequencies were counted only from those respondents who answered a particular question. Results thus present only a valid percent and a valid N.

In relation to the question about their general teaching experience, a total of 56 % of participants (N = 61) chose the response option that said: *“I had to do everything by myself. Nobody guided me and nobody observed me during lectures. When I asked I received some advice.”* A total of 36 % (N=39) chose the option that said: *“*

I got some advice, but mostly had to do most things by myself. I was observed once or twice during lectures. I was guided but not very much. If I asked I was helped.” Only 9 % (N=10) of the participants chose the third option, which said: *“I received valuable advice from other people. I was continuously observed during lectures as well. I was continuously guided and offered advice.”*

Table 2 shows that at various departments it is very common that “most of students” teach or “some students teach and some do not teach”. (MA students teach exceptionally and faculty members do teach because it is their job to do so – that is why they are not included in the table.) Nevertheless, this does not mean that they have to teach. A majority of ph.D. students reported that teaching is not compulsory for ph.D. students (65 %; N = 46). We can see that department heads’ answers are slightly higher, but we have to be careful interpreting this result because of the small sample and varied number of students from each department.

Table 2: Estimated frequencies of ph.D. students who teach at various departments (students’ and department heads’ answers)

How many PhD students teach	%		N	
	students	dep. heads	students	dep. heads
most of students	37	48	40	12
some students do, some don't	32	28	34	7
it's exceptional	11	12	12	3
no students	6	-	6	-

Most of the BT's have never (or just once or twice) been observed in a teaching role (see table 3). A total of 66 % of those who were observed (N = 38) reported they have received a valuable feedback after observation.

Table 3: Observation of BT in teaching role (students’ and department heads’ answers)

Observed in teaching role	%		N	
	students	dep. heads	students	dep. heads
continuously	4	4	4	1
sometimes	15	38	15	9
once or twice	26	8	26	2
no	55	50	56	12

Many BT's report they had to learn everything by doing it and from occasional advice given by colleagues. Systematic guidance and advice or a worthwhile teaching course was reported just couple of times (see table 4). Each respondent could choose more than one alternative. A total of 43 % of those who had attended a teaching course reported that it was very valuable, while 44 % said it was somewhat valuable (44 %) and 13 % said it was not very valuable.

Table 4: What helps BT improve teaching skills?

What helps students improve teaching skills?	Percent	N
Nothing. I had to learn it myself by doing it.	31	49
Reading books about this topic	16	25
Occasional advice given by other colleagues	34	54
I was systematically guided and received advice by others (e.g. lecturers)	7	11
I absorbed a lot from a whole teaching course	12	19

As for the value of teaching, BTs said that if they did not teach they would miss a lot of knowledge about psychology (32 %, N = 62), enjoyment (30 %; N = 58), a good break from research (16 %; N = 30) and extra money (12 %, N = 24). On the other hand they also noted that there would be some benefits of not teaching, e.g. more time for their own research or less stress (details in Table 5). Each respondent could choose more than one alternative.

Table 5: What would be better if BT did not have to teach?

Better if BT did not have to teach	Percent	N
I would have had more time for my own research	45	68
I would not waste my time with t. and preparation	5	8
I would not be so stressed	21	32
I would not have to read so much	2	3
I do not think it would be good if I do not teach	25	38

To the question “Is there any training in teaching you feel that you need? (tick as many you want)” quite many BT’s reported to have “need of training” in at least some of the areas (see Table 7). Each respondent could choose more than one alternative.

Table 6: Training in teaching BT feel they need

Training needed	Percent	N
lectures and lecture preparation	20	46
dealing with difficult students	19	42
working with large groups	8	17
working with small groups	15	34
assessment and marking	14	17
improving motivation of students	25	31

Most of the BT’s were either quite satisfied or not very satisfied with the available trainings and courses in teaching. This could mean that courses were not available or not very high quality (see Table 8). Each respondent could choose more than one alternative.

Table 7: Satisfaction with available trainings and courses in teaching

Level of satisfaction	Percent	N
Very satisfied	6	9
Quite satisfied	21	32
Not very satisfied	25	38
Dissatisfied	11	16

Finally I would like to illustrate some of the major problems BTs have to deal with by quoting from some open-ended questions. These three illustrations focus on quality and quantity of the courses and receiving feedback and I don't think they need any commentary.

„There is a teaching course required for PhD students. It's by far the worst course I have ever taken in my whole life! But I did get a very clear impression of what NOT to do and how I DON'T want to be as a teacher.“ (40, female, PhD student)

„Very often there is no real feedback from teaching activities. It would have been good to have had a structured learning and specific feedback on how and if the work was improving. Also, the relationship with students doesn't provide an accurate feedback, thereby, the first years of teaching can be a very isolated learning process, highly dependent on the social network and the abilities young teachers have to seek help and information in these networks.“ (31 years, female, PhD student)

“I enjoy teaching very much, but I feel disappointed at the lack of training provided for post grads who teach. I think the students that we teach would be shocked if they knew how little training we had!” (52, female, PhD student)

Discussion and Conclusion

As the results show, most of the beginning teachers report they were not guided (or not guided enough), received just occasional support when they asked for it, did not attend any training in teaching, had only poor training. Department heads' reports were slightly more optimistic, which is quite common in similar research (e.g. Myers, Prieto, 2000) but we have to be careful interpreting it, because of the small sample and varied number of students from each department.

If we take the results as they are, those could be very upsetting findings. However we have to be cautious in evaluating these findings. First, even if majority of BTs do not receive sufficient training and support, we do not know if the situation is getting better or worse, because we do not have any data to compare our findings with. Secondly, because it was a non-probability sample and we have mixture of responses from various countries and various departments (and various numbers of answers from them), it may happen that our respondents come from those departments who do not “care” about teaching preparation so much. That may indeed have happened, but on the other hand, we now know (or at least have a strong belief) that at least a large portion of BTs will probably be in very same situation. We can also expect that those who responded to this questionnaire will probably be those who are more motivated to answer and maybe more motivated about their teaching as well.

The results also show that teaching seems to be quite beneficial for BTs. They say that they would miss a lot of knowledge about psychology, enjoyment, a good break from research, and extra money. On the other hand there would be also some benefits of not teaching, e.g. more time for their own research or less stress which corresponds with findings from UK (Lantz, Smith, Branney, 2008). I think that the majority of drawbacks

could certainly be reduced if there would be more systematic approach to BT's preparation and engagement (especially the amount of teaching) of PhD's in teaching (Hickson, Fishburne, 2005; Park, 2004).

If we try to compare our findings with USA findings (with all limitations in mind), we find, that the situation in the USA seems to be generally somewhat better (e.g. mentoring programmes, offer of courses) and the "ideal" preparation and support is quite rare in the USA as well as in Europe (Buskist, 2009; Buskist et al., 2002; Meyers, Prieto, 2000).

The good thing is that we can learn a lot from many good examples and do not have to invent what are the efficient ways how to prepare BTs for their task (Park, 2004). This situation gives us a great opportunity to do something and make things better.

What are the possible consequences if we continue to allow BTs to have no preparation, or inadequate preparation, for teaching? According to Wimer and Prieto (2004) these consequences include a) a decline in future faculty development, b) impaired teaching effectiveness (undergraduates may be less well-prepared) and c) a loss of interest in teaching among BTs. These are serious consequences, so the obvious question is why there is so little interest in and efforts to support beginning teachers in psychology?

The survey's results do not offer an exact answer, but we can speculate about some of the reasons:

- 1) Nobody cares. Neither BTs nor their students protest, and department heads have other things to do that they feel are more important.
- 2) Nobody is aware of this problem. Many teachers do not have own experience with training and support and many potential mentors do not have any experience with mentoring.
- 3) Lack of teacher preparation is not a real problem because each BT has the opportunity and right to develop his/her own teaching style and may ask for help if he/she needs it. (This is a Darwinian argument that, in light of the consequences listed above, does not seem to be a strong one.)
- 4) There is strong pressure for students to develop excellent research (which is certainly desirable) and nearly no pressure to develop excellent teaching skills (Hickson, Fishburne, 2005). I hear this argument from many people from different countries across Europe, and it applies in the USA, too.

I hope that these research findings might serve to stimulate discussion of how we can all help to change the BTs preparation situation. Even if the situation is not as bad as we fear it is, and if we missed learning about some really great departments that provide high quality teacher preparation (I am happy to see more and more of these across Europe), there are undoubtedly many beginning teachers who get too little, or no, support and training and we should think more about how to help them, and how that help can indirectly satisfy their students who desire and deserve good teachers. Just as in business and industry, departments of psychology must invest into their workers. If not, we know what happens...

PŘÍPRAVA NA VÝUKU PSYCHOLOGIE: ZKUŠENOSTI ZAČÍNÁJÍCÍCH UNIVERZITNÍCH UČITELŮ V EVROPĚ

Abstrakt: Tato explorativní studie se zabývá zkušenostmi začínajících univerzitních učitelů (studentů i členů katedry) s přípravou na výuku. Výpovědi z pohledu začínajících učitelů (zejména) i vedoucích kateder byly sbírány online dotazníkem v několika evropských zemích pod záštitou EUROPLAT - European Network for Psychology Learning & Teaching v červnu 2009. Většina respondentů byli doktorští studenti. Učit je pro tyto studenty velmi běžné a obvykle není povinné. Výsledky ukazují, že většina začínajících učitelů z našeho vzorku neprošla dostatečným tréninkem a neměla adekvátní podporu pro plnění úkolů spojených s výukou.

Klíčová slova: výuka psychologie, začínající učitel, příprava učitelů, podpora, vyšší vzdělání, Europlat