

História

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International Developments and Challenges in Educational Psychology

Desenvolvimento e Desafios internacionais em Psicologia Educacional

Desarrollo y Desafíos Internacionales de Psicología Educacional



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In the course of the past 20 years I had many opportunities to meet with colleagues who practise as educational psychologists in other countries, mainly in Europe. So in my contribution to this Debate Forum I will first speak about a few developments and challenges in Spain, France, Germany and the U.S.A., and will then focus on school psychology practice in Switzerland. I use the terms *Educational Psychology* and *School Psychology* as synonyms. 'Educational Psychology' is more used in Great Britain, in Ireland, Spain and Portugal, whereas in other European countries and in the United States of America, the term 'School Psychology' is often preferred. Public policy will be an essential topic of my presentation, since functions and activities of educational psychologists in different countries are very much influenced by legal regulations and by policies of governments, district administrations, and school boards. However there is a common understanding that is quite independent of all these regulations: It is generally agreed that a major task of

educational psychologists is to promote children's and young people's psychological well-being (Nastasi 2006; ISPA 2015).

Let me first say a word about Psychology Associations in Europe. There are 46 countries on the European continent. Not all of them are members of the European Union, but most of them have a national psychology association that is a member of the *European Federation of Psychologists' Associations EFPA*. EFPA has been very strong in advocating for our profession. This federation represents about 300'000 European psychologists, and these professionals and scholars have many common interests. A major achievement of EFPA is the *European Certificate in Psychology*, the *EuroPsy* (OPP 2015). This is a qualification standard that helps the public to identify competent psychologists. The EuroPsy requires a university education in psychology of at least 5 years, and at least 1 year of supervised practice. All certificate holders have signed a statement that they will act in accordance with the ethical rules of the profession. One aim

of the EuroPsy is to facilitate the mobility of psychologists, so they can practise in any European country that recognises the standard as equivalent to the national training standards.

Some recent developments in Spain, France, Germany, and the U.S.A.

Let's turn to *Spain*. As you may know, the economic situation in this country is challenging. Especially among young people, the unemployment rate is high. Many educational psychologists are trained at Spanish universities, but the number of schools where they can work is very limited. In the schools their position is not called 'psicólogo educativo' but rather 'orientador educativo'. The functions of *orientadores educativos* are similar to those of educational psychologists. Unfortunately, a training in psychology is not required for working in this position, so many *orientadores educativos* are ordinary school teachers with some knowledge in psychology (Pérez Solís 2011; see also Forster 2012). Their training does not adequately prepare them for the tasks they perform in the schools: they provide consultation and conduct psycho-educational assessments of students with special educational needs. This is a very critical situation for the pupils and certainly for the many unemployed school psychologists as well.

The need to employ educational psychologists in Spanish primary and secondary schools became more and more evident. In the year 2010, an initiative was launched with the aim of convincing the Ministry of Education of this need. Delegates of National and of Catholic Parents Associations, of School Directors Associations, and of Psychology Training Programmes at Spanish universities came together and signed an agreement (COP 2010). This agreement advocated the urgent employment of educational psychologists in all public schools. - The aim is not achieved yet, but to join forces with parents' organisations was an excellent way for Spanish educational psychologists to increase their public visibility and to demonstrate the need for a change.

In *France* recent developments have been very positive for educational psychologists. In this country, all our colleagues who work in public schools are required to undergo teacher training, and they are employed as teachers. Salaries are rather low and, until very recently, the legal regulation of the profession has been poor. The French Association of Educational Psychologists in the National School System, AFPEN, has advocated for the establishment of School Psychology as a recognised profession in the public schools. In June 2013 the French Parliament adopted a law that mentions school psychologists as members of multidisciplinary teams that serve the schools, together with other specialists (Légifrance 2013).

In *Germany* school psychologists often practise as consultants to school directors, to the policy makers in school districts and to the Ministries of Education. To an extent, this way of working is related to the systemic approach that is prevalent among psychologists in German speaking countries. However, it is also attributable to the very high ratio of

school children per school psychologist – German colleagues often don't have the time to do assessments or consultations with individual school children and their parents. Germany is a federation of 16 states. Some of them hardly employ any psychologists in the schools, others more. A main challenge in Germany is to convince the Ministers of Education of the need to create more positions for school psychologists. When the Ministry does not act, the parliament has the power to intervene, and this happened in the aftermath of a tragic event some years ago: Following a school shooting incident involving many victims, the number of school psychologists in the state of Baden-Württemberg was increased from 104 to 194 by an Act of Parliament (Landtag Baden-Württemberg 2015)!

In communicating with the public what educational psychologists do and why they are needed in the schools, it is important to speak a clear language, and to have useful resources available. In the *United States of America*, the National Association of School Psychologists NASP published a 'Model for Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services' (NASP 2010). It is also called the 'NASP Practice Model'. This model is one of 4 professional standards that are used by colleagues in the U.S. to exemplify what School Psychology is all about. Politicians who decide about school laws or about issues that affect the well-being of children need to know what they can expect from school psychologists. The same is true for parents, for young people and for the school staff. Such standards serve as guidelines for the profession, and they are an essential means to strengthen its profile.

School psychology in Switzerland

In *Switzerland*, four national languages are spoken in different parts of this small country. School Psychology is especially well established in regions where German is the main language. We have a ratio of about 1'500 students per school psychologist. Public employees like school psychologists usually work 42 hours a week and about 47 weeks per year, but many choose to work part-time. Most school psychologists conduct assessments and consult with parents in an office that is not located in a school building. The office can be located anywhere in the city – in a residential building or even in a former factory. School psychologists often cater for several schools. They frequently visit classrooms, where they observe tuition and student interactions and consult with the school staff. It is mainly teachers (with parental consent) who refer a child to the school psychologist, but sometimes the parents themselves request an assessment or a consultation. Prevention, evaluation and intervention are regarded as the main functions of school psychologists (Roe 2011). All three functions can be conducted with students, parents or school staff, but the school and the family systems are always considered as well. Learning difficulties or behaviour problems are frequent reasons for referrals. Many school psychologists practise a problem-solving approach. They prefer to intervene, to give advice and to see what works. Others mostly engage in

diagnostic testing when they evaluate the individual situation of the school child. There is quite a diversity of approaches, also depending on the strengths of the individual school psychologist. Most work in teams. Such teams can also be called upon when a tragic event occurs in a school, like the death of a child or a teacher. So crisis intervention has become a service that is often provided by school psychologists.

The supervisor of the school psychologist is not the school director but rather a member of the educational authority or of the district administration. In this way, the recommendations of school psychologists are less likely to be biased in favour of the school. Recommendations should always try to take into account the situation of the family just as much as the school's interests. Ideally, school psychologists are not seen as members of the school staff but rather as independent specialists who advocate for the best interest of the child.

I remember how in the town of Zurich a member of the city parliament successfully convinced a majority of the parliament to establish 6 new positions for school psychologists. The day after the motion had been carried, I called the lady, thanked her for her unexpected motion and asked her why she had done this. She told me a personal story and said that, when she was a child, she was so anxious that she didn't dare to speak at school. An educational psychologist had helped her to overcome her fears, and so she was able to make friends with other children. I was really moved, and thankful for this story. Can we learn from such experiences? – I know we can always hope for an unexpected surprise, and miracles may happen. But let us be honest: sometimes policy makers clearly need to be reminded of children's needs, and it is up to us to do this (Lauber 2012).

In Zurich, children in public schools have free access to school psychology services if they are between 4 and 16 years of age. The law states that school psychologists provide assessment and consultation. When parents and the school staff cannot agree on what a child needs, the school psychologist has to be involved. A school psychologist's evaluation and report are also required in cases when parents or the school staff think that a child needs special education. This legislation only came into force six years ago. Previously, school psychology was not much regulated in the region of Zurich. The scope and quality of services were very diverse, and it was hard to communicate to the public the tasks that school psychologists perform. In some cities there was no school psychologist at all. There were no generally accepted standards regarding training, responsibilities, or the methods educational psychologists should use. All these are improving now with the new legal regulation, and likewise the visibility of the profession.

A major achievement of Psychology Associations in Switzerland has been the adoption of a *Law on Psychology Professions* that came into force in 2013. In Switzerland, the title 'Psychologist' is now protected (Swiss Federal Administration 2013). It can only be used by professionals or scholars who have completed their Psychology studies with a Master's or Doctoral degree. A state agency has been appointed for accrediting postgraduate training programmes and it also awards

specialist titles. Psychologists are now subject to the same laws on professional secrecy as medical doctors, priests or lawyers. They are only allowed to disclose personal information about clients with the client's informed consent. Exceptions exist in cases of child abuse. – Educational psychologists in Switzerland very much endorsed the new policies. They saw these regulations as an indication of the growing importance of the profession in the service of schools, families and the society. However, some difficulties still persist, and so I will conclude by mentioning a few challenges that educational psychologists in Europe continue to struggle with.

Challenges to educational psychologists

According to many policy makers, school psychologists are mainly needed in their function as 'gate keepers' for access to special education. They say that educational and therapeutic supports are very costly, so in order to allocate these supports to children who really need them, they want to rely on specialists. In the view of these policy makers, the educational psychologist's function is to be a diagnostician and an assistant to the Local Educational Authority. What a narrow conception of school psychology!

Other challenges are the demands brought forward by teachers. Teachers often don't recognise their own contribution to the learning difficulties or the behaviour problems of a child. They want to refer the child to the school psychologist – and that's it. When the school psychologist suggests changes in the classroom, many teachers are not eager to collaborate. – It is difficult for the school psychologist to maintain a truly unbiased position, as losing the confidence of the school staff may prove the end of a fruitful collaboration and thus make further consultation impossible.

Parents are now aware of their rights. They want the very best supports for their children and rarely consider the school's limited resources. In this situation, the educational psychologist can be an essential mediator between the parents and the school, and take a stance as a mindful but unambiguous advocate for the child.

Conclusion

As educational psychologists we are used to working in critical contexts. We are called upon when children are bullied in the classroom, when parents don't get along with teachers, or when young people have difficulties at school. These are the challenges we have learned to manage. However, political disputes such as the struggle for the recognition of a profession can be more challenging than the situations just mentioned. – There are several ways for us to react to public policies that have an adverse impact on our working conditions. We should see the positive as well as the critical challenges as an opportunity to make a difference and to contribute to a better future. There is a Chinese proverb that says: *"When the winds of change blow, some*

people build walls, and others build windmills.” - So let us be windmills in the lives of the children and families that we serve! We have a wonderful profession and can be proud of it. Our communities need educational psychologists to support students at school, to facilitate their academic development as well as their social and emotional learning. We care about the students' mental health. They have a right to be assisted by competent professionals!

Let me finish with a few suggestions on how we can promote Educational Psychology in our countries. We can

- advocate for the establishment of training programmes at universities
- organise conferences and publish scientific journals
- set up and strengthen professional associations
- publish standards for ethical and professional practice
- use TV, print media, the internet, social media, and radio as helpful means in the promotion of Educational Psychology, and
- advocate for a legal regulation of the profession

So let us share our knowledge and our experiences not only with policy makers but also with colleagues in our own countries and worldwide. With this aim in view, conferences like CONPE and ISPA are an ideal platform for networking!

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