

A-level Psychology: Teachers' Views

Learning Evaluation Research Network

Recently, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) and the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) made decisions to classify psychology as a science. This means it will be reviewed in line with other science subjects and inspected as a science, thereby leading to obvious implications for the way it is taught at pre-degree levels.

At present, there is no specific route into teaching psychology despite the fact it is now one of the most popular choices at A-level and degree. This, along with perceptions of psychology as a 'soft' option, may be the reason why schools or colleges will employ staff without a psychology background to teach it.

The views of those teaching psychology were explored through a small scale survey of pre-degree psychology teachers in South East England. 1,136 questionnaires were mailed to schools and sixth form colleges, and a total of 160 completed and returned the questionnaires (response rate 14%). Of these, 21.9% were secondary schools without a sixth form, 61.3% were schools with a sixth form and 15% were sixth form colleges. Of the 160 returned questionnaires, 60% taught psychology at some level; although mostly at AS/A-level, some taught it at GCSE or another level.

For those schools that stated that they taught psychology, the questionnaire asked for specific details from the psychology teacher, such as their role at the school and their qualifications. Responses indicated that the majority of psychology teachers surveyed had studied psychology at some point, e.g. at degree level, as a postgraduate course or a conversion course, and many respondents had also completed some type of teacher training.

Interestingly however, there were some respondents who stated that they did not feel that psychology qualifications were required to teach the subject, and although a quarter of respondents felt that both a psychology degree and teacher training were necessary, just under half of the respondents stated that it would only be necessary to have a psychology degree. These findings suggest a general lack of clarity with regards to what are the basic requirements for a psychology teacher, but the findings should perhaps be considered in light of the current situation for psychology teachers and psychology graduates wanting to teach.

Many respondents expressed their dissatisfaction at the training and employment of pre-tertiary psychology teachers and remarked on the issues related to routes into teaching for psychology graduates, and the employment of teachers without specialist knowledge in the subject. Respondents also showed unease about AS/A-level specifications and commented on the notion of rote learning to pass exams. Overall, however, the teachers who responded felt confident in their teaching and were happy with how psychology was taught at their school or college.

Interestingly, when asked whether psychology is a science subject, although 62.3% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, 28% remained neutral on the matter and a further 3.3% disagreed (or strongly disagreed). This is interesting given the recent reclassifications of psychology as a science. It would appear that not all those who teach it regard it to be so. The possible influence of this attitude on the teaching of psychology deserves further research.

It would be interesting to also look into the views of teachers of other subjects to provide a comparison with psychology teachers. This would help determine which concerns and issues are related to teaching generally and which are specifically related to the teaching of psychology. It may also be beneficial to investigate the views of pre-tertiary psychology students, especially to gain a wider understanding of the issues related to non-specialist teachers of psychology. After all, the overall aim of teaching is for students to learn.