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# International Perspectives on Educational Psychology

## Perspectivas Internacionales sobre la Psicología Educativa

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**Abstract.** The functions of psychologists working in the educational system differ from country to country, and so does the name of the profession. The author discusses the professional status of educational psychologists from an international perspective. The Spanish term 'orientación educativa' does not explicitly refer to a psychological profession. This may have consequences for training programmes and for the functions practitioners are expected to fulfil. The necessity of legal regulations, and the contribution of international associations to the standards in the field of educational psychology are discussed.

**Keywords:** european standards, Educational Psychology, international perspectives, school psychologists, professional regulations.

**Resumen.** Las funciones de los psicólogos que trabajan en el sistema educativo difieren de país a país, y lo mismo ocurre con el nombre de la profesión. En este artículo se analiza la situación profesional de los psicólogos de la educación desde una perspectiva internacional. El término español "orientación educativa" no se refiere explícitamente a una profesión psicológica. Esto puede tener consecuencias tanto para los programas de formación como para las funciones que se esperan de los profesionales en el ámbito educativo. Además se discute tanto la necesidad de una regularización en la normativa legal, así como la contribución que deben realizar las asociaciones internacionales en cuanto a los estándares dentro del campo de la psicología educativa.

**Palabras clave:** normas europeas, Psicología Educativa, perspectivas internacionales, psicólogos escolares, reglamentos profesionales.

"Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once the child grows up." This Pablo Picasso quotation was brought up recently in an essay on the topic "Expectations of Students from a Counselor". The essay was written by Varshaa, a 15 year old girl from Chennai, India. Together with 200 peers, Varshaa had participated in a school project on the occasion of the 33<sup>rd</sup> Conference of the *International School Psychology Association ISPA* held in Vellore, Tamilnadu, in July 2011. Proudly she read her essay to the conference delegates and to her peers who had come to the 'Children's Assembly' of the ISPA Conference. In India, psychologists working in the educational system are called 'school counselors'. In her essay, Varshaa pointed out that children have so many talents, and many of these get lost in the course of the schools years. She wrote that after a few years of school, many children with academic difficulties started to lose their self-esteem and were at risk for failing examinations or even dropping out of school. According to Varshaa, this is why school counselors are so much needed. They assist school children and students in building up their academic

and their personal competencies. "They help us learn from the mistakes we make. Counseling enhances student achievement". - Isn't this an original way to explain what Educational Psychology is all about?

Capacity-building - assisting students in the development of resiliency and of coping skills - is one of the main functions of psychologists working in the educational system (Furlong, Paige & Osher 2004; Varjas, Meyers J., Meyers B., Kim, Henrich, & Subbiah 2009). With the emergence of Positive Psychology, psychologists have been concentrating less on the problems and shortcomings of individuals, but rather on the conditions and processes that contribute to an optimal functioning (Gable & Haidt, 2005).

### Orientación Educativa - Guidance Counseling - School Psychology

Educational Psychology is named differently from country to country. Practising educational psychologists may be called 'school counsellors', 'school psychologists', 'pedagogical psychologists' etc. In Spain the terms 'orientador', 'asesor', 'psicopedagogo', 'consultor educativo' are common as well (León 2011). 'Orientation Scolaire' is often used in French

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speaking countries. The name of the profession matters. It is decisive for the expectations of the public and especially of policy makers. Terms have their connotation, and such associated meanings cannot easily be controlled. They may have far-reaching consequences.

'Orientación Educativa' is one of these terms. It is best translated by 'School Counseling' or 'Guidance Counseling'. In English speaking countries, School Counseling is a profession with its own regulations and its professional associations. *It is a specialty that does not require an academic degree in psychology.* School counselors or guidance counselors are *educators*, not psychologists. What are their functions? They empower students to make decisions, solve problems, and resolve issues in their lives. They also support parents, teachers and school principals in assisting the personal and social, career and educational development of students. Guidance counselors may be trained to use a limited range of psychometric tests and other evaluative instruments related to career and educational planning (see National Centre for Guidance in Education, Republic of Ireland, 2004). In Australia, school psychologists, together with school counselors and guidance officers, are represented by the same professional association, the Australian Guidance and Counseling Association. This is not the case in the United States of America. U.S. school psychologists see school counseling as a profession that is clearly different from their own. In the United States, one of the functions of school counselors is to assist in the planning of educational transitions of students (also young school children are called 'students' in the U.S.). These students may or may not have special educational needs. The diagnostic assessment of children and young people with special needs however needs to be conducted by fully trained *school psychologists*.

### The need to regulate the profession

In many countries educational psychologists work in multidisciplinary teams, they collaborate with teachers, school principals, guidance counsellors, therapists and others. It is a clear advantage when there is a common understanding of the respective roles and functions of the specialists. What are the tasks of the school counsellor, and what is the function of the educational psychologist? What is their training? Is a certification or licensing procedure established, so the public knows who is a qualified specialist? In the United States the National Association of School Psychologists NASP has published such standards (NASP 2010; Armistead, Williams & Jacob 2011). The requirements for entering the profession are described in the following way: "School psychologists are highly trained in both psy-

chology and education, completing a minimum of a specialist-level degree program (at least 60 graduate semester hours) that includes a year-long supervised internship. This training emphasizes preparation in mental health and educational interventions, child development, learning, behavior, motivation, curriculum and instruction, assessment, consultation, collaboration, school law, and systems. School psychologists must be certified and/or licensed by the state in which they work. They also may be nationally certified by the National School Psychology Certification Board (NSPCB). The National Association of School Psychologists sets ethical and training standards for practice and service delivery." (NASP 2011).

A common understanding of the functions of a profession is not enough, legal regulations are needed. Laws provide a framework for the practice of a profession. A recent example is Switzerland where 26 autonomous regions ('cantons') have their own school systems and their own health legislation. When professionals like psychologists or teachers move from one part of the country to another, they may require a new licence to practise. In such a situation there is a need for coordination. A national regulation of professions is in the interest of all stakeholders. In March 2011, the Swiss Parliament almost unanimously approved a Law on Psychology Professions. The new law will presumably come into force in the year 2013. It states that a psychologist is a professional with a Master's degree in Psychology that is awarded by a university. No other person may claim to be a psychologist. The law has two aims, to promote public health, and to protect the public from misleading information on the services provided by psychologists. In the following 5 fields of practice and research, post-master training programmes will be accredited by a national authority once the law is in force: Psychotherapy, Clinical Psychology, Child and Youth Psychology, Neuropsychology, and Health Psychology. Accredited training institutions will be entitled to award degrees of advanced studies. Psychotherapists will only receive a licence to practise when they have earned a degree of advanced studies in Psychotherapy in an accredited training programme. If they are self-employed, the law states a number of ethical obligations they have to assume. - Undoubtedly this new law will contribute to higher standards in the professional practice of psychologists in Switzerland. It is therefore welcomed by politicians across the country as well as by most Psychology Associations.

### Educational Psychology on its way to European standards

To regulate the profession of psychology on a national or international level is a way to promote

quality assurance. Such regulations often facilitate the mobility of professionals. In Europe, it is the *European Federation of Psychologists' Associations EFPA* that has been pursuing these goals very actively during the past years. *Europsy*, a certificate for qualified European psychologists was issued. In the field of Educational Psychology, EFPA contributed to an EU Lifelong Learning Programme named ESPIL. This stands for 'European School Psychologists Improve Lifelong Learning' (for more information on the EuroPsy certificate and on ESPIL, see León 2011 and Pérez Solís 2011). One outcome of the ESPIL project was a Position Paper on Psychologists in the Educational System (Roe 2011). This paper is a successful attempt to state briefly and comprehensively what Educational Psychology in Europe is about. It acknowledges the great diversity of educational systems across the continent, a diversity that strongly influences the activity of psychologists working within these systems. It makes clear what tasks educational psychologists are qualified for. And it mentions that the roles of psychologists in the educational system comprises prevention, evaluation and intervention at each of three levels: the individual child or student, the educational institution, and society.

It is evident that educational psychologists are faced with many challenges in their professional practice. They identify the special educational needs of children and adolescents, they help students cope with emotional stress, they assist parents in difficult family situations and teachers in turbulent classrooms, they advocate for children's rights. Educational psychologists use prevention and intervention strategies, they are capacity-builders and counsellors - it is a profession that requires a high degree of responsibility, an ability to work under pressure. It requires communicative and social skills as well as a clear mind to analyse complex situations.

A continuing professional development and a sound ethical background help to assume these functions. To interact with colleagues on the regional, national or international level is a very helpful way to share knowledge and experience. But most importantly: for their demanding tasks, educational psychologists need a sound theoretical knowledge, a qualified professional training and a stable personality.

To establish this standard across Europe is a challenge. It takes committed professionals and politi-

cians. - For the benefit of children, their families and their schools it is worth the effort!.

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