Abstract

Purpose of Study: Producing a high school psychology curriculum that both meet the standards for such curricula as set forth by the American Psychological Association, as well as is co-constructed with students involved. Research Methods: Use of panel method and field research. The panel method implies interviews with high school students about what they see as effective psychology lessons, both in terms of comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness. The field study implies teaching a draft curriculum to several consecutive classes of high school students and developing and amending its content and didactics based on experiences. Findings: Information on a complex of important features of the process of developing a psychology curriculum for high school in the Netherlands has been gathered. Some of these features have to do with course content, others with the developmental stage of students and still others with didactical strategies. Conclusion: High school students are highly interested in attending psychology classes, in particular when they are actively involved in the process of developing a psychology curriculum. The boundaries with other school subjects, such as biology, is an issue that needs to be seriously looked at in order to avoid unfruitful overlap as well as confusion among students.

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1. Introduction

In the Netherlands there is no psychology curriculum for high school available. However, research shows a clear-cut need for psychological information among adolescents (De Kinder, Van Vaerenbergh, & Vanhoomissen, 2009; Diekstra & De Ruiter, 2011. See also Rigter, Diekstra, & Torringa, 2013 in this book). The present writers conduct an ongoing study which aims to produce a psychology curriculum for high school in the Netherlands. Information on important features of the process to develop such curriculum, as empirically found and observed so far in our study, is this chapter’s focus.

2. Problem statement

Current psychology curricula do not seem to have been developed in co-construction with students. An indication of this assumption is that publications on co-constructing psychology curricula for high school are hard to find. Furthermore, the National Standards for High School Psychology Curricula (2011) as set forth by the American Psychological Association (APA) do not contain any guidelines about co-construction. Co-construction here is conceived as actively granting students’ participation in the process of developing a curriculum and implementing their input into (draft) lesson material. The problem of curricula, which lack co-construction, is twofold. First, the lack of co-construction will not contribute to gain user acceptance. Second, not knowing how students experience the level (of abstraction and depth) on which materials are offered and meaningfulness of the subject implies obstacles to effective teaching.

3. Research questions

The study described here started in 2009. Its central question is: how to develop a psychology curriculum for high school that both meet the National Standards by the APA and is co-constructed with adolescents involved? In this chapter we focus on features that seem crucial in the process of developing such curriculum.
4. Purpose of the study

Our study aims: (i) to be of general use for other educationalists who want to develop a psychology curriculum for high school; (ii) to gain user acceptance and (iii) be based on empirical knowledge about the need for psychological information by adolescents.

5. Research methods

Research methods that have been used so far in our study are literature study, field study, and panel study.

6. Findings

Some preliminary results concern both empirical findings and developers’ observations who taught draft lesson material. Both type of findings are discussed alternately in this section. The following is based on research for a bachelor thesis by Hinz (2012). Hinz conducted a qualitative study to assess the perception of students who were offered to participate in a social psychology class. Before the results of this study are described, some information about the context of this study is needed first.

A high school, Jacob van Liesveldt, part of Penta College CSG, in the Netherlands offers gifted students throughout the first stage of secondary education the opportunity to follow a master class program regarding science and psychology. Most gifted students at this school have an IQ of 130 or higher. Since February 2012, gifted students of the second and third grade (most of them are 13-14 yrs.’ old), can choose to participate in a social psychology course. The topics dealt with are mainly related to social cognition and social perception. After the social psychology module had been completed by the students, an assessment was conducted on the quality of the lesson materials and the students’ overall perception of the curriculum.

Hinz (2012) assessed five interconnected quality and satisfaction factors by questionnaire. These factors are: comprehensibility, manageability, meaningfulness, the comparison between social psychology and other high school courses, and to what extent the students would perceive the future implementation of the social psychology course as a
beneficial addition to the regular high school curriculum. Data show that students in general are quite satisfied with the course and its quality. The majority of the students agree, or agree to some extent, with statements that the curriculum is comprehensible, manageable and meaningful. However, only a minority of the students indicates that social psychology is as relevant as other courses in their curricular portfolio. This also counts for the percentage of students that is in favour of the implementation of the social psychology curriculum at high school level.

Results obtained by open questions indicate that a large number of students finds topics related to attribution, social cognition, non-verbal communication, stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination most fascinating. As regards the comprehensibility of the lesson material several students argued that the content of the course is yet too abstract in terms of language use and examples.

Students also stated that more attention should be given to in-class exercises in order to make the concepts dealt with more understandable and interactive. Some students indicated that the component manageability (tests etc.) could be improved. Regarding the degree of meaningfulness and relevance of the material, students argue that more examples should be accompanied with the lesson material since they perceive the chapters to be too difficult at times.

Aside from empirical findings, as described above, developers’ observations who also taught draft lesson material have been gathered. Combining the development of lesson material with teaching it (for some period of time), is of course an example of co-construction. The first observation and perception by Torringa who taught biopsychology to first graders, regards the issue of the level of language use and/or abstraction of lesson material. Hinz’ (2012) qualitative study already showed that several students stated that they found the content of the social psychology course too abstract in terms of language and examples. The same may be the case for the experience of the students who were taught in biopsychology. Indications for this expectation are spontaneous responses to terms such as nature-nurture, genotype & phenotype, gene-environment correlations (active, passive, reactive) & gene-environment interaction, schizophrenia and brain related terms like: frontal, parietal, occipital, & temporal lobe, hypothalamus, hippocampus and amygdala.
Another observation has to do with the amount of information that is asked to process by the adolescents. When a test was given about five chapters, implying two modules on the nervous system and on nature-nurture, the mean score by a first grade class proved to be a 5.8 on a 10-point scale. How would you explain this group average and that half of you had a fail, the class was asked. This particular group mentioned the amount of information they had to learn as being an awful lot, as well as the level of it, which many of them found fairly difficult.

The final observation that is discussed here is about motivating students of the digital generation for psychology. The classes that were taught biopsychology expressed being quite interested in the lesson material they were offered. The impression that these adolescents have an intrinsic motivation – to a greater or lesser extent – for psychology is based on the fact that many questions are asked during a lesson about the matter at issue. Fascinating too is that they also have a strong tendency to share personal stories during class.

This tendency could well be utilized in the form of offering them self-tests and opportunities to reflect on psychological knowledge to intensify their motivation. It is the present writers’ experience that offering assignments at the end of a chapter is very effective for the adolescents’ learning process. Perhaps this also counts for their motivation. Observations that support this idea is that students we worked with visibly think actively when assignments are being checked up planarity and enjoy giving presentations or making a mind map.

Conclusions

What features seem crucial for developing a psychology curriculum for high school that both meet the National Standards by the APA and is co-constructed with adolescents involved? From Hinz’ (2012) qualitative study, some features of such process seem unmistakable. The majority of the students, who participated in a social psychology course, appeared to have matching opinions about whether lesson material was comprehensible, manageable, and meaningful to them. This result corresponds to teaching experience with draft lesson material within the domain of biopsychology. Choosing the co-construction approach to developing a psychology curriculum for high school implies that the students’ matching opinions can be utilized to improve on these features. In our on-going study, attempts are made to make draft lesson material more comprehensible, manageable, and meaningful to the students. Whether
these attempts are being honoured by our gifted students is something coming empirical research will show.

7. References


