Graduate Professional Education in Psychology:
Its Essential Characteristics

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Abstract

Professional education has a central role in preparing professionals to capably serve the community. In the field of psychology education, graduate professional psychology programs are clearly important given the potentially significant influence psychologists have on their patients and communities in general. Graduate professional program, including those in the psychological field, have distinct characteristics that differentiate them from academic-research program. This paper explores literature identifying and elaborating on such characteristics and analyses them in the context of professional psychologist education. The information provided here, along with the fact that psychology is now undergoing rapid global expansion, highlights the importance of conducting further research on the characteristics of professional psychology programs in cultures other than those of Western countries where psychology was originally developed.

Keywords: professional education, psychology education, professional psychology

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the important roles of graduate professional education is to equip students with knowledge and skills needed to work competently to serve society demands. This is reflected in Bok's statement that the main objective of professional education is: "to educate students for specific occupations and thereby provide them with the knowledge that gives professions their claim to special competence" (as cited in Karseth and Solbrekke, 2006, p. 151). In contrast to traditional research programs, which emphasise knowledge acquisition and research capabilities, graduate professional education goes beyond -it is "preparation for accomplished and responsible practice in the service of others" (Shulman, 2005b).

Professional education is usually located within university structure. Thus, management of some graduate professional programs follows the rules applied in managing schools or faculties within higher degree education structure generally: "professional programs are subject to the standards of the academy" (Karseth and Solbrekke, 2006, p.150).These standards might include the selection mechanism of students, choice of content or subject matter related to research versus practical components, and evaluation mechanism. There is evidence- in the US, for example (McFall, 2006) –that some professional program are independent, located outside university structure, but this article focuses on professional education that is positioned in a university context.

In the first section, some distinct characteristics of graduate professional education as described in the related literatures are explored. Further, this article discusses how such characteristics feature in the education of professional psychologists.

2. CHARACTERISTICS OF GRADUATE PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION

Professional education is mainly characterized by the incorporation of advanced knowledge acquisition and skills development essential in practice. It emphasizes the relationship between education and effective practice. Shulman (2005a) observes:

" In professional education, it is insufficient to learn for the sake of knowledge and understanding alone; one learns in order to engage in practice" (p.18).

Although there seems to be an enduring debate over the relationship, nature and exact proportion of theory acquisition and skills development within the professional programs, scholars argue that there should be integration between the two (Karseth and Solbrekke, 2006). Karseth and Solbrekke further state that in addition to educating students in theoretical knowledge and problem solving ability, graduate professional program should pay attention to the development of practical skills and professional responsibility. Similarly, Jaffe (2004) argues that professional education should also prepare students to comprehend and meet the needs of thecomplex society that they will be serving as professionals.

Another feature of professional education is its emphasis on teaching societal responsibility, responsible commitment and codes of conduct within the professional field (Karseth and Solbrekke, 2006; Shulman, 2005a). As a consequence, program study content should include value-development subjects which aim to develop moral attributes like integrity and commitment to ethical service (Shulman, 2005a).

The need to integrate knowledge and skills development with training in professional ethics and societal responsibilities is reflected in the pedagogies within professional psychology education programs. This integration is one of the distinctive characteristics of the pedagogy. Of course, teaching a combination of theory, practical skills and ethics will never be simple: the pedagogy incorporates a mixture of techniques and emphasizes a high level of student participation (Karseth and Solbrekke, 2005). Shulman (2005a; 2005b) offers a concept of "signature pedagogies" when considering unique teaching methods that characterize each profession. Signature pedagogies are a comprehensive way of teaching incorporating some routines and consisting of habitual activities (Shulman, 2005a). Students engagement level is high and the nature of the teaching is interactive through the use of, for example, legal case method and "accountable talk" (Shulman, 2005a, p.22) in law education, or the bedside teaching (Shulman, 2005b) and "clinical rounds ritual" (Shulman, 2005a, p.19) used in the education of physicians.

This article explores the appearance of such features distinctive to the professional education of psychologists by analysing several practices in the management of psychology professional program. Curriculum components proposed by Taba (1962, p.10) serve as a foundation to analyse differentiating characteristics of professional education in psychology.

3. PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION IN PSYCHOLOGY: SOME CRITICAL FEATURES

Graduate professional programs in psychology exist at both Masters and doctoral level. The former are available in countries including Japan (Iwakabe, 2011), India (Prasadarao & Sudhir, 2001) and Indonesia, while doctoral level programs are run in, for example, the U.S and Canada (Helmes, 2011). Further, in some countries including most of those in Latin America, a professional education in psychology can be undertaken at undergraduate level, over four to five years (Helmes and Pachana, 2005). Australia offers both a two-year Masters and doctoral degree of professional education in psychology (Helmes and Pachana, 2005). To date, there is no international agreement on the appropriate level of study for professional programs in psychology.

Scholars have identified some attributes of graduate professional psychology education that distinguish them from traditional research programs in psychology. These specific features will be described in four subthemes, which are based on the ideas of Hilda Taba (1962) about aspects of curriculum. The components of curriculum mentioned by Taba (1962) include: 1) aims and specific objectives of program; 2) selective and organized content; 3) learning and teaching models; 4) evaluation of the outcomes.

3.1 Aims and Objectives of Program

Since the primary aim of professional education in psychology is to equip students with the theoretical knowledge and skills required of independent psychologists, the features of professional psychology programs are both scientific and practical. The objective is to provide not only substantial knowledge of clinically relevant content, but also skills based training and some form of experience in performing the roles of a psychologist (Helmes, 2011).

Peterson et al. (1997) identify the following core competencies of professional psychologists in the U.S: relationship, assessment, intervention, research and evaluation, consultation and education, and management and supervision. The educational activities of the professional programs are, in general, directed towards providing students with these six core competencies.

3.2 Content

The subject matter of professional psychology programs includes research and skills development, as well as attitude and ethical responsibility issues. Research training is deemed important in the preparation of professional psychologists (Belar and Perry, as cited in Rodolfa et al., 2005; Peterson et al., 1997); hence, research and skills development courses are frequently given equal emphasis. This is the case in the U.S and Canada, which apply the scientific-practitioner model in their programs.

Research content within professional programs covers areas such as psychological research methods (Qian, 2011), multivariate statistics and other statistical modelling (Helmes, 2011; Iwakabe, 2011).

Specific psychological subject matter includes psychopathology, psychological assessment, treatment methods, counselling and psychotherapy, and some other specialized intervention strategies such as cognitive behavioural therapy and play therapy (Helmes, 2011; Iwakabe, 2011).

The inclusion of the study of ethics in course subject matter is intended to foster development of an appropriate professional attitude in students.

There is ongoing debate over the emphasis that should be applied to research and practice respectively in professional psychology program curricula (e.g. Peterson et al., 1997; Rodolfa et al., 2005).

3.3 Learning and Teaching Methods

To achieve the complex objectives of professional psychology programs, a combination of integrative teaching and learning methods is a necessity (Kaslow, 2004; Peterson et al., 1997). Kaslow (2004) further asserts that a professional education in psychology should provide students with enriching learning experiences.

Ideally, teaching and learning methods should integrate traditional lecturing with a practicum, internship and close mentoring relationships in the form of individual supervision of each student (Helmes, 2011; Iwakabe, 2011; Kaslow 2004). Peterson et al. (1997) endorse a strategy of utilising

a wide variety of practicum and internship models to prepare students for multiple roles as psychologists.

3.4 Evaluation Method

One of the aim of students' evaluation is to assess "their mastery of the psychological knowledge related to professional practice and its ongoing development as well as their understanding of the relationship between that knowledge and professional practice" (Peterson, R.L., Peterson, D.R., Abrams, and Stricker, as cited in Peterson et al., 1997, p. 382). Importantly, as Kaslow (2004) maintains, the evaluation process should address multiple attributes of students, apply various evaluation methods, and be collected from many relevant sources to ensure optimal evaluation. Peterson et al. (1997) states that evaluation activities should include some form of academic assessment and an assessment of traits relevant to future professional competence, such as personal attitudes, aptitudes, and values.

In line with the notion that education of students should provide them with professionally adequate knowledge as well as developing appropriate attitudes and inculcating in them the value of responsible practice, comprehensive forms of student evaluation appear in some professional psychology programs. These evaluation methods include written exams thoroughly testing theoretical knowledge, thesis, case study, case conference, and evaluation of performance during practicum and internship (Helmes, 2011; Iwakabe, 2011).

4. CONCLUSIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH

Some distinctive features of professional education as referred to by scholars in the related field are components of the education of professional psychologists. The integration of research and practice is apparent, with varying implementation regarding the proportion of research and practice within programs' curricula.

In professional psychology education, a strong emphasis on ethics subject matter is also evident. Such content includes ethics courses and evaluation mechanisms that acknowledge the importance of assessing students' behaviour and related ethical values (Peterson et al., 1997) in a professional context. This emphasis reflects the fact that psychological services directly impact the welfare of others.

Furthermore, comprehensive teaching and learning methods in the education of professional psychologists include practicum, internship, and supervisory relationships between students and lecturers, as well as some traditional elements such as class lecturing. Lastly, student evaluation covers knowledge, theoretical mastery and attitudes required in responsible practice.

There is abundant international literature on the management of professional psychology education concerning the features and practice of professional programs in psychology- especially in western countries such as the U.S, Canada, Australia and parts of Europe (e.g., McFall, 2006; Helmes, 2011; Pachana, O'Donovan &Helmes, 2006; Lunt, 2000; Honkala, 2006). However, there is little coverage in the literature on how programs are organized in Asian countries where the field of psychology is undergoing rapid expansion (Shimoyama, as cited in Pachana et al., 2006). Research which explores characteristics of professional psychology programs in these countries would be very valuable in increasing international awareness of relatively recently developed features of educational practice in the Asian context, as well as related obstacles and major concerns.

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