



National Survey of High School Psychology Teachers: Executive Summary

**APA Education Directorate
Office of Precollege and Undergraduate Education**

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The American Psychological Association (APA) Education Directorate conducted a *National Survey of High School Psychology Teachers* between December 2011 and March 2012. The purpose of this survey was to (1) gather information on who is teaching high school psychology across the United States, (2) assess teachers' knowledge of various resources and opportunities available through APA, and (3) assess the professional development needs of high school psychology teachers. A summary of key findings follows.

The survey was conducted online, and requested information on: demographic characteristics, preparation and training, resources and opportunities, classroom issues, future trends, and professional development needs. All current high school psychology teachers were eligible to participate, and there were 1,087 valid responses to the survey.

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Demographic Characteristics

School Characteristics

Over half (58%) of respondents reported teaching in suburban areas while nearly equal percentages of respondents reported teaching in rural (20%) and urban (22%) areas. Nearly 85% taught at public schools and 9% taught at private schools.

The average school size of those respondents who taught at public schools was 1,524 students ($SD = 829$), and the average school size of those respondents who taught at private schools was 609 students ($SD=477$). There was a large variance in student population in both public and private schools, which had median populations of 1,450 and 500 students respectively. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the average student enrollment size of regular public secondary schools in the 2009-2010 academic year was 854 students (NCES, 2012), so it appears that larger public high schools may offer psychology courses more often than do smaller schools.

Years Teaching

The average number of years respondents had been teaching any subject or grade level was 16.8 years ($SD=9.58$), and the average number of years the respondents had been teaching psychology was 10.5 years ($SD=7.92$). Nearly 80% of respondents had taught psychology for 15 years or less.

Teachers' Educational Background

A majority (69%) of respondents held a master's degree (e.g., MA, MS, MEd) as their highest level of education. Of these degrees, 42% were in Education and 18% were in Psychology. We found that 4% of respondents held a doctoral degree (i.e., PhD, EdD, PsyD), and that 53% of these respondents held a doctoral degree in psychology.

Certification

When asked about their certification credentials, 57% of respondents reported they were certified to teach psychology under a social studies certification, and 28% reported that they had a separate psychology certification. These numbers are consistent with Weaver's (2005) findings that psychology teachers typically possess certification under the broader category of social studies or social science, and that one-quarter of high school psychology teachers are certified in psychology¹.

Consistent with these findings, most (65%) respondents said a teacher certified in social studies/social sciences was most likely to teach psychology at their high schools, while 28% said a teacher certified in psychology was most likely to teach psychology. Only 1% said a teacher certified in science was most likely to teach psychology.

Courses Taught

When Ragland (1992) conducted a survey two decades ago of high school psychology teachers, she found that just 11.6% of her respondents taught psychology exclusively; however, we found that 26% of our respondents said they only taught psychology in the 2011-2012 academic year. Other subjects taught by psychology teachers included US history (taught by 24% of respondents), world history (21%), sociology (13%), and government (10%). These subjects are generally considered social studies courses. Just over 2% of respondents taught chemistry, biology, and/or physics in addition to psychology.

Over one-third (38%) of respondents taught one or two sections of psychology during the current academic year, while 45% taught between three to five sections. On average, respondents taught 107 students per year in their psychology course(s) (Median=100; SD= 75.82). Just over half (53%) of respondents taught a single type of psychology course. We found that 57% taught Advanced Placement (AP) psychology courses and that 20% taught only AP psychology. Just 4% of respondents taught International Baccalaureate (IB) psychology courses, while 7% taught Dual Enrollment courses with a local or community college. Interestingly, at a time when AP and IB examination numbers are increasing, 75% of the respondents indicated that they taught the General or Introductory (non-AP or -IB) psychology course. Furthermore, over one-third (34%) reported that they only taught the General or Introductory course. Teachers who only teach General or Introductory psychology do not have access to the resources from the College Board or International Baccalaureate Organization, and are a key audience APA can serve. The General or Introductory Psychology course(s) were more often offered as one semester courses, while AP psychology and IB psychology course(s) were more often one year courses.

Psychology Course(s) in the School Setting

When asked how many sections of psychology were taught at the teacher's entire school in a typical academic year, 55% responded 5 sections or less, while 17% responded that there are ten or more sections of psychology taught at their schools. The number of sections of psychology taught at a school was positively correlated to the student population of the school.

Just over half (53%) of respondents said they were the only psychology teacher at their school, compared with the 79.8% Ragland (1992) found who were the only psychology teacher at their school two decades ago. While this percentage has decreased over the last two decades, our finding indicates that more than half of our respondents are without psychology colleagues at their schools.

Most (88%) of the respondents identified the social studies/social sciences department as their primary assigned department. Close to 3% taught in the natural science department. This may have been influenced by the outreach efforts we used to announce the survey, which included sending emails to social studies department chairs but not science department chairs. Our choice of outreach was based on previous studies (e.g., Ragland, 1992, Ware & Johns, 1990) that found high school psychology courses to often be housed within social studies departments.

¹ APA advocates the development of a teaching credential endorsement for psychology in all states (see APA, 2012).

Becoming a Psychology Teacher

When asked how they became a psychology teacher, 50% of respondents said they were teaching another social studies course(s) and were assigned to teach psychology by their administration, while 19% said they were specifically looking for a job teaching high school psychology. Nearly half (46%) of respondents said they felt moderately or very prepared to teach psychology when they first taught the course, and 27% felt moderately or very unprepared. Those who were moderately or very prepared to teach the subject were more likely to hold a certification in psychology, and were more likely to hold a degree in psychology. See APA (2012) for recommendations regarding teacher preparation.

National Board Certification

Pursuing national board certification for psychology teachers has been a priority of the APA Committee of Teachers of Psychology in Secondary Schools (TOPSS) for over a decade. To date, such a certification in psychology does not exist. We found that 8% of respondents were national board certified teachers, and that the majority of these teachers (83%) were certified in Social Studies - History: Adolescence and Young Adulthood. Most (78%) respondents said they would probably or definitely support the development of a national board certification in psychology, and of these respondents, 70% said they would probably or definitely be interested in pursuing a national board certification in psychology if one were available.

Resources and Opportunities

Professional Memberships

In 2012, TOPSS is celebrating its 20th anniversary. TOPSS is the voice of high school psychology teachers in the APA, and membership recruitment has long been a priority for APA and the TOPSS Committee. Over one-third (37%) of respondents were current members of TOPSS. One-fifth (21%) were not familiar with TOPSS and 8% were previous members. These numbers provide a benchmark for APA's work ahead in reaching those teachers not familiar with TOPSS, and encouraging those who are familiar with but have not joined TOPSS with incentives for joining. Of previous members, 42% said they did not renew their membership due to financial reasons and 22% said they forgot to renew.

When asked about other professional organizations to which they belong, 25% of respondents said they were members of the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), and 10% said they were members of the Society for the Teaching of Psychology (STP; APA Division 2). Only 3% were members of either the National Science Teachers Association (NSTA) or the Association for Psychological Science (APS).

APA Resources and Opportunities

TOPSS, through the APA Education Directorate, offers teaching resources and opportunities for professional development. The TOPSS unit lesson plans have long been a key APA resource for psychology teachers. One-third (33%) of respondents said they use TOPSS unit lesson plans frequently or occasionally in course planning, and 17% said they were not familiar with the TOPSS unit lesson plans. Nearly one-third (29%) of respondents said their curriculum was extensively tied to APA's *National Standards for High School Psychology Curricula* (APA, 2011), which provides learning benchmarks for high school students taking psychology courses, and 42% said their curriculum was somewhat tied to the *National Standards*; 13% said they were unfamiliar with this APA policy document.

Textbooks and Review Books

The survey asked teachers about textbook use in their classes. Respondents indicated that there are over 80 different psychology textbooks currently used in classrooms across the country, not counting different editions of the same textbook. Less than 1% (N=7) of respondents said they were using textbooks from 1989 or earlier, though the average copyright year of all textbooks used was 2007. Of eighteen textbooks specifically listed in the survey, 52% of the respondents using one of those texts was using the most current edition available. We found that 64% of respondents used

one textbook in their psychology course(s) and 27% used two textbooks. Roughly 46% of respondents who taught AP or IB psychology always or sometimes use a review book.

Student Characteristics

One-quarter (25%) of respondents said there are only requirements to enroll in advanced psychology courses (e.g., AP, IB) at their school, and not in General or Introductory courses. The majority said juniors (89%) and seniors (99%) take psychology at their school, and nearly three-quarters (71%) said only upperclassmen take their psychology courses.

Student Gender

On average, teachers reported that 60% of their students were females ($SD=14.02$). This reflects trends in both undergraduate and graduate education, where female enrollment surpasses male enrollment, though it appears that higher percentages of male students are enrolled in high school psychology courses compared with higher levels of education. Aud et al. (2012) reported that in the 2009-2010 academic year, 77% of bachelor's degrees in psychology were awarded to females, and Hart, Wicherski, and Kohout (2010) found that in the 2008-2009 academic year, 75% of doctoral students were female and 77% of students in master's degree programs were female. Compared with these undergraduate and graduate percentages, the high school psychology course has the highest average percentage of male students, suggesting that the high school level might be a key setting for recruiting more male students into the psychology pipeline.

Classroom issues

Student Research

Nearly two-thirds (65%) of respondents said their psychology students participate in research projects. However, only 3% of respondents said their students frequently or occasionally submit science projects to either the Intel International Science and Engineering Fair (ISEF) or to ISEF-affiliated fairs. ISEF is the world's largest celebration of precollege science education, and psychological science projects are featured in both ISEF and its affiliated fairs.

Instructional activities

When asked about instructional activities used regularly in class, 88% of respondents said they engaged students in discussion and conversations frequently or nearly every day and 73% engaged in lecture frequently or nearly every day. Nearly three-quarters (72%) engaged in activities or demonstrations frequently or nearly every day. Of multi-media used in the psychology classroom, 88% said they use movies/films and 84% said they use YouTube video clips. Most respondents (95%) who used multi-media used more than one method in their classes. High school psychology teachers appear to teach interactive, media-supported courses.

Future trends

Course Enrollment and Challenges

When asked to predict whether enrollment in psychology courses would increase, decrease, or stay the same over the next 5 years, 53% of respondents predicted enrollment would remain the same, 36% predicted enrollment will increase, and 7% predicted enrollment would decrease. When asked about the single biggest challenge to the teaching of high school psychology over the next five years, budget cuts, lack of administration support, access to resources, and keeping current with research in the field were among responses given.

Psychology for Science Credit

As APA works to promote psychology as a science (see APA, 2009a; APA, 2009b), 29% of respondents said they would like to see psychology courses be taken for natural science credit in high school. A slightly higher percentage (30%) said they did not want to see this happen, and 41% were uncertain. Issues of teacher certification are especially relevant to this discussion, since as shown above, most current psychology teachers are certified in social studies.

Professional Development

One of the goals of this survey was to assess the professional development needs of high school psychology teachers. Survey results will inform the APA Education Directorate of plans for the future, especially regarding the use of new funding available from APF.

School Requirements and Support

Most (95%) respondents said their school/district did not require professional development hours in psychology, but 34% said their school district provides financial support always or almost always to attend professional development opportunities in psychology, with 18% indicating financial support is provided if the opportunity is AP or IB related. Nearly one-quarter (24%) said their school district does not provide such financial support for professional development, whether in psychology or in other area(s).

Funding Opportunities

When asked how helpful various funding opportunities might be to psychology teachers and how likely teachers were to apply for such opportunities, travel grants to attend teaching or psychology conferences/workshops were ranked highest on average, followed by travel grants to attend the APA Convention.

Professional Development Format and Content

When asked about formats for professional development opportunities, 76% of respondents said they would be interested or very interested in regional, university, or conference workshops, and 72% of respondents said they would be interested or very interested in on-line modules. Three-fourths (73%) said they would definitely or probably be interested in taking an online course or webinar on improving the teaching of high school psychology. This lends support to developing future professional development opportunities that are both in person and online.

When asked which content areas respondents had a high or very high level of need for professional development in order to improve or refresh content knowledge, biopsychology, cognition, applications of psychological science, and individual variations averaged the highest need, in descending order. This information will be helpful to APA as it considers future options for professional development.

Future Research

While these data provide important information about these teachers, it is important to note that those who responded to our survey represented only a subset of the high school teachers in the United States who are teaching psychology. Further research and data collection are needed to better understand and support this important population, and the impact of high school psychology education.

Questions about this survey may be sent to:

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