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Report of the 17th European Conference on Developmental Psychology

The European Conference on Developmental Psychology was held on 8–12 September 2015 in Braga, Portugal. It was the 17th periodical meeting of experts from around the world on the theme of life-span development, organized by the European Association of Developmental Psychology. This year the conference host was the University of Minho, and more precisely two of its units: School of Psychology (represented by professor Ana Tomás Almeida) and Institute of Education (represented by professor Isabel Soares).

The conference was dedicated to the issue of development broadly understood. More than 1,000 participants presented results of their theoretical and empirical work and over the five days many events took place: 123 thematic symposia, 11 keynotes, 12 poster sessions and 2 workshops. Presentations concerned different topics: spheres of development (e.g. cognitive, social, emotional, personality), developmental psychopathologies and disabilities, methodological issues, contexts of development.

Among the different areas of studies presented during conference, the topic of education had a special place. Presentations were addressed especially to two aspects of education: school readiness and achievements and social relationships at school. According to the second one, an important issue was the case of difficulties experienced by children and adolescents at school, (such as bullying, cyberbullying and gender stereotyping). The question of efficient interventions which would contribute to the positive development in childhood and adolescence was

also highlighted, and several evidence based programs aimed at promoting teacher and parental competence were presented during the meeting.

School readiness was studied from both individual and social perspectives. For example, Valeria Cavioni, Mara Lupica Spagnolo, Giusy Beddia, Maria Assunta Zanetti and Gianluca Gualdi from the University of Pavia and University of Modena and Reggio Emilia argued that knowing the social emotional profile of a child can be helpful in planning specific early childhood programs to enhance children's social emotional skills, maximize his or her school readiness and to help to avoid future school failure. In their studies, children with very low socio-emotional competences displayed lower scores in language, logical mathematical abilities and symbolization skills. In turns, Pierre Lapointe from Université de Montréal and Christa Japel from Université du Québec à Montréal showed that an important factor in increasing the school readiness of preschoolers is the quality of communication between caregiver and teacher. It has a significant influence, especially in the following fields of school readiness: physical health and wellbeing, cognitive development, social integration and self-regulation.

In the context of school achievements, the role of self-regulatory skills were strongly emphasized. For example, Fitim Uka from the University of Freiburg and Antje von Suchodoletz from New York University showed that the ability to control behavior (especially to inhibit automatic reactions) is an important predictor of emerging academic skills in the fields of mathematics and vocabulary. Children (mean age = 4.8 years) with higher self-regulation had better results in the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test and the math subtest of the Kaufman Assessment Battery for Children both six and twelve months later, even when their fluid intelligence was controlled. Laura Traverso, M. Carmen Usai and Paola Viterbori from the University of Genoa showed results confirming that the training of so called 'executive functions', which are processes responsible for the production of deliberate, goal-directed thoughts and actions, not only increases the level of these abilities but also has transfer effects on learning skills in 6-year-olds. In the studies

of Maša Vidmar from the Pedagogical Institute of Slovenia the level of behavioral problems (internalizing and externalizing behaviors) has an important influence on the academic successes of children starting elementary education. What is important is that the reverse relation was not significant and children who had poor academic outcomes at primary school did not necessarily have any behavioral problems during adolescence.

The role of social support in academic achievements was also indicated. For example, Joana Cadima and Paula Mena Matos from the University of Porto showed that mother-child relationships in preschool are an important factor in elementary school achievement. Children whose relationships with their mothers are qualitatively better have closer relationships with their teachers and more intrinsic motivation to learn. These meditative variables have a significant impact on their school achievements. Karine Verschueren, Maarten Vansteenkiste, Noortje Vervoort and Sarah Doumen from the Catholic University of Leuven and Ghent University supported these results. In their studies, factors that significantly influenced the level of academic achievements in elementary school were: secure style of attachment and maternal autonomy support (both observed in middle childhood).

Children are exposed to gender – stereotyped environment from the very beginning of their lives. During the conference a lot of attention was dedicated to the subject of gender stereotyping in school as well as at home. Christiane Spiel from the University of Vienna emphasized that both sexes are still disadvantaged in the school context. Children are being educated according to common beliefs about what is typically “male” and “female”. This kind of education influences the progress of children at school (girls are better at reading than boys), as well as career planning (girls predominantly choose health services, boys opt for engineering and computing). Moreover, school environment can strengthen gender stereotyped behaviors which, in consequence, leads to vicious circles. Professor Spiel also presented an interventional training program called “Reflect”, whose aim is to enhance gender competence in secondary school teachers and their students.

Other examples of problems experienced in schools which present a severe threat for development are bullying and cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is based on the same background as bullying – both of these aggressive behaviors are characterized by power imbalance and repetition, however cyberbullying is practiced via technologies (for example mobile phones and internet). Being involved in cyberbullying is usually linked with behaviors typical for the traditional bullying, as well as with similar coping strategies and emotional consequences of the negative experiences. Dian Liu from the University of Stavanger investigated cyberbullying among Chinese youth. The results showed that only a small part of the students who experience cyberbullying turn to social support and this is deeply worrying. The analysis indicates that over half of cyberbullying cases are conducted by classmates or friends (only 9.4% of perpetrators are strangers), moreover boys are more likely to be both perpetrators and victims online than girls. Many researches were focused on features that distinguish bullies from victims, defenders and outsiders. Considering bullying as a phenomenon clearly transgressing moral principles, during the conference it was strongly linked to the subject of morality. Evelyne Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger and Sonja Perren from the University of Teacher Education in Lucerne in Switzerland were investigating if the negative relationship between moral judgments and moral emotion attributions and bully-victim problems hold for passive moral temptations. The results show negative links between moral competence and pro-bullying behaviors. However, the relationship of moral competence to helping the victim was indicated to be positive. In the case of bullying, a very significant factor is the teacher's reaction, which can reduce the phenomenon or, in some cases, even worsen the situation. Kristel Campaert, Annalaura Nocentini and Ersilia Menesini of the University of Florence based their study on the sociocognitive theory which shows that students are likely to elaborate cognitively their teachers' behaviors. According to the theory this process can activate or de-activate students' sense of responsibility. Researchers were examining moral disengagement as a mediator between teachers' reactions towards bullying and student's bullying. The results of the study indicate that students of teachers who communicate

that bullying is unacceptable through their behavior showed a lower level of bullying because of the effect that this has on their moral disengagement. These results show clearly that teachers' behavior has a significant impact on their students bullying behavior.

The importance of the results presented above emphasizes the need to implement them in practice. Different types of interventions aimed at reducing school bullying are already in progress. One of the examples is The Friendly School (FS) intervention, which was presented by Donna Cross from the University of Western Australia. The program of FS intervention is based on 15 years of empirical research investigating the most effective strategies for stimulating social and emotional development and reduce school bullying. The very advantage of this program is the wide target group, which includes students (aged 4 to 14 years), as well as families, teachers and policy makers who actively participate in organized interventions as co-researchers and key contributors to program development.

The subject of moral and prosocial development was also presented beyond the context of bullying. A thematic session dedicated to moral development referred to the subject of bioethical issues. Olga Fotakopoulou from the Birmingham City University, together with Triantafyllia Georgiadou and Dimitris Pnevmatikos from the School of Education in Florina conducted research on children's bioethical judgments. The idea of the research was extremely interesting, as the first attempt to examine primary school children's judgments and opinions about contemporary bioethical issues, as well as the values that are strong enough to form bioethical judgments. Using grounded theory methodology, researchers analyzed children's judgments and developed a theory based on the collected data. Findings indicate that primary school children emphasized the value of human life. The main category – respect for human life – was generated from three categories: protection of human and animal lives, the implications of human intervention in patients' lives and helping other people. What is more, young participants were concerned about current scientific developments and their consequences for society.

During the European Conferences on Developmental Psychology there are always two prizes awarded. The first one is the William Thierry Preyer Award for Excellence in Research on Human Development. William Thierry Preyer (1841–1897) was a developmental psychologist who conducted studies on child development which resulted in his main work 'The Mind of the Child'. This prize is given to a psychologist or group of psychologists who have had an important impact on promoting a better understanding of human development and its contexts. The Preyer Award Committee of the European Association of Developmental Psychology assess candidates on the basis of their internationally known works. This year the winner was Professor Peter Smith from the University of London. His works have made substantial scientific contributions in the field of bullying, especially cyberbullying. The second prize periodically awarded during European Conferences of Developmental Psychology is the George Butterworth Young Scientist Award. George Butterworth (1946–2000) was one of the fathers of the European Society for Developmental Psychology. His works were concentrated on infant development and the George Butterworth Young Scientist Award is dedicated to young scientists who have recently completed their Ph.D. studies and written excellent dissertations. This year this prize was given to Maja Schachner from the University of Postdam, for the thesis: 'From Equality and Inclusion to Cultural Pluralism – Realizing the Potential of Cultural Diversity in Education'.

The 17th European Conference on Developmental Psychology was a very important and fruitful scientific event, one of the most important in the area of human development studies. The 18th meeting will take place in Utrecht in 2017. Taking into consideration the innovative character of the research presented during the 17th edition of the conference and the various ideas of the effective use of the obtained results in practice, it will be extremely interesting to participate in the next meeting in Utrecht.

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