



# 32nd International Congress of Psychology in Prague – a mirror of the state of educational psychology

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From 19 July to 24 July 2021, the 32nd International Congress of Psychology (ICP2020) took place in Prague. This was a world congress, which has been held every four years since 1889, each time on a different continent. It is an “ecumenical” congress because it is the only such professional meeting of psychologists from all the subfields and specialisations of psychology. It is a unique event in the humanities and social sciences in terms of its scope, and this was the first time in its history that it had been held in the Czech Republic (or Czechoslovakia). The Congress had several other unique characteristics.

For the first time in history, the organisers had to cope with several difficult challenges. As a result of the COVID pandemic, the congress was postponed for a year (hence the ICP 2020 in the logo). Gradually, the format of the congress had to be changed several times, from face-to-face to hybrid and finally to fully virtual. The result was the first fully virtual congress in history. It combined offline pre-recorded presentations and online live streams of workshops, round tables, and

keynote presentations. Given the high number of participants from all continents and different time zones, this naturally placed extraordinary demands on the organisers. The congress also featured the highest number ever of countries (107) and the highest number of lectures (19) of the highest category, mapping and taking stock of the state of the art in individual areas of psychology. Just a few basic numbers about the congress: out of the original 9,830 submissions, 8,086 were accepted and eventually 3,844 contributed to the virtual version of the congress.

The congress was preceded by an important two-day activity, a programme for emerging psychologists provided by the staff of the Department of Psychology of the Faculty of Education of Charles University (doc. Smetáčková). In addition to lectures by experienced psychologists from several countries, the 42 participants also consulted on their research projects and learned about the state of contemporary Czech psychology.

A section dealing with educational psychology also formed part of the congress. Of the original 490 submissions,



257 were finally received, including 107 oral presentations, nine symposia, and 141 posters. In addition to these, six major “keynotes” focused on educational psychology topics. The section was one of the busiest and offered insights into current topics, methodological approaches, and the latest research results in educational psychology, as well as the ways in which it influences practice.

Nine symposia were devoted to topics that one can describe as “psychological services for teachers”. These included knowledge about teachers’ professional reflection practices, formative assessment methods, support for students’ self-regulation, and the psychological preparation of student teachers. The second group of topics consisted of symposia focused on working with students. Knowledge about working with pupils with special educational needs, about creating emotional stability in pupils, and about working with the gifted was presented. One symposium was devoted to a topic that can be described as a contribution to self-reflection in the field. It was about what have been called neuromyths in educational psychology and their reception by student teachers.

The range of topics and methodological approaches shown by the individual oral presentations was wide. Roughly speaking, they can be divided into traditional topics, current topics reflecting the contemporary social order, and methodological contributions. Research and papers conducting meta-analyses and self-reflection on the field represented a completely marginal category.

Of the traditional themes, the trend towards more subtle or detailed exploration of pupils in relation to their school success and well-being was interesting. We may mention the findings on cognitive strategies (research on students’ learning styles was completely absent), on developing metacognitive skills, on critical thinking, etc. There were also a large number of papers focusing on non-cognitive determinants of pupils’ school success. Surprisingly, not much research was presented on the ‘pop topic’ of the moment – student well-being. To summarise, the emphasis in traditional research on the determinants of learning and school success has shifted to an emphasis on self-regulation and creativity, as well as stress management.

Similarly, the topic of the teaching profession can be considered a traditional one. And stress and coping strategies or individual characteristics such as resilience or perseverance are also part of the traditional knowledge pool. However, psychology is also much more involved in boundary approaches using sociological or pedagogical variables. Thus, similar findings have emerged across countries on the impact of socioeconomic and sociocultural variables on the attractiveness of the teaching profession, retention, attrition, and coping with crises – in general, on professional engagement and professional development. It was possible to note the similarity of the interpretations of the situation of teachers in many countries and the measures proposed to improve it. This is already at the beginning of their



careers, a point at which several studies of student teachers have highlighted the importance of building a healthy professional self-concept, which is more related to managing professional autonomy and conditions such as openness in the school climate, collegial sharing, or supervision than to salary.

Among the new topics, the large amount of research on education during the coronavirus pandemic, when schools were closed practically all over the world, is unsurprising. The shift of teaching and learning to virtual environments – whether offline or online – has sparked a wave of research across continents. Two topics predominated: on the one hand, the impact of the pandemic on teaching “models” and students’ learning styles, on motivation to learn, and on students’ self-regulation, and on the other, description and analysis of the impact on the socialisation and socio-emotional development of pupils and students.

Rather surprisingly, there was very little representation of research on inclusive education, unless, of course, we include a number of contributions on the education and socialisation of pupils with various disabilities and special needs. However, these often did not explicitly examine the situation of these pupils in mainstream schools. Something that was similarly surprising was the absence of contributions on bullying, which had earlier been a dominant topic.

Papers presenting research results at the interface of didactics and psychology were not very frequent, although they were

visible. In addition to science subjects, it was also possible to learn about approaches to music or art pedagogy, mostly from the perspective of traditional psychological concepts of creativity and giftedness.

From the point of view of the further development and application of the knowledge of educational psychology, I perceive the lack of systematic self-reflection in the field as a major shortcoming or weakness. Weaknesses include a lack of reflection on the so-called agenda setting – who determines which topics are worth researching and how and when? Is this a practice? And what does it mean? Why is bullying as a topic already quite marginal? Do we already know everything about it, or was it a conceptual mistake that covered up other, deeper phenomena? Will the next ‘pop topic’ on the agenda be, for example, well-being, even if it is a consequence or even just a symptom of the processes that lead (or do not lead) to well-being?

Similarly, the self-reflection of the field requires a deeper analysis of the changes in the methodology of educational psychological research. Since the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, the pendulum has swung from the emergence of qualitative, narrative, ethnographic approaches back to more (or perhaps mostly?) quantitative, statistical procedures that excel and to instrument-oriented research. What impact does this have on interpretation, and particularly on theoretical conceptualisation in educational psychology? What is perhaps far more lacking than evidence-based robust data is quality theory. Of course, the problem cannot be formulated



as an “either/or” one. However, a look at the often sophisticated methodology and data basis begs the previous question. The contribution of psychology to educational theory and practice must be not only “accurate” but also relevant.

Apart from two symposia and about three papers, meta-analyses and reflections on the field were absent. As for the aforementioned neuro-myths adopted in a simplified and factually incorrect form in educational psychology, one can ask the question of how many other myths are adopted and accepted by the non-psychological public, including the teaching public. This is without psychologists deconstructing them and confronting them with the findings of serious research. Daisy Christodoulou’s recently translated book *Seven Myths About Education* may inspire such a research focus in educational psychology.

If we accept the hypothesis that the papers in the Educational Psychology section reflect the actual state of knowledge of education through the prism of psychology, we can state the following. Educational psychology is alive, dynamic in terms of its breadth of topics, responsive to current stimuli, and able to detect ever more subtle connections in the determinants of, in particular, formal education. However, it also underestimates systematic reflection on the development of the field and its theorisation.

The 32nd International Congress was extremely successful, and the committee of the International Union of Psychological Associations unprecedentedly decided to hold the next congress, the 33rd, in 2024 again in Prague – this time in face-to-face form. Educational psychology will once again have the opportunity to show itself, one hopes, in the best light.

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