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National cultures, educational policies and professional school practice

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In modern times there are opposing views about the tasks to be set [in education], for there are no generally accepted assumptions about what the young should learn, either for their own good or for the best life; nor is it clear whether their education should be conducted with more concern for their intellect or for their character ... it is by no means certain whether training should be directed at the useful things in life, or at those most conducive to virtue, or at exceptional accomplishments.

Aristotle, *The Politics*, Book VIII, Chapter ii, 1337a33

There has always been debate about the purposes and nature of education. Education has generally been perceived as a powerful social tool, but sometimes as a tool that can be used to conserve, preserve and transmit an established culture and social structure, and at other times as a mechanism that can transform and change a culture, and be an agent for social mobility. Aristotle identifies three variations that remain valid in most analyses of contemporary educational systems, curricula and purposes:

- A utilitarian or instrumental argument for education: training directed at the useful things in life (but: useful to whom? - to develop citizens 'useful' to a society/economy; to develop deference to/acceptance of authority; or for student's views of what will be useful).
- To support 'virtue' - a multi-faceted disposition to behave in a particularly pro-social manner, focusing on the development of the individual and the processes by which their individuality was formed in relation to others in society.
- 'Exceptional accomplishments' which means agreeing on what is cultural knowledge and on having a mechanism to define the exceptional. Education in such a context would be concerned with the transmission of the content of culture.

These three forms are essentialised types rather than descriptions of actual practice. Most educational systems combine elements of all three rationales, possibly in varying proportions. Any modern educational system would claim to be transmitting cultural knowledge, to be developing the individual and to be meeting the social objective of preparing a skilled and industrious workforce. The emphasis given to any of these three objectives might vary, but all will be present in some form or other. The three dimensions all concern the possible relationship between the educational system and the wider society or culture within which it is located. There are two broad sets of views on this question.

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Emile Durkheim characterised education as 'the image and reflection of society. It imitates and reproduces the latter in an abbreviated form; it does not create it' (1897, p 372). He argued that education was 'the means by which society prepares, within the children, the essential conditions for its very existence.' This view holds that education essentially reflects and reproduces the society in which it is embedded: 'Society draws for us the portrait of the kind of man we should be, and in this portrait all the peculiarities of its organisation come to be reflected' (1956, p 65). This functionalist view is still common; 'all societies have the task of passing on to the next generation the knowledge and skills regarded as particularly worthwhile; ... societies achieve this by means of ... education' (Lawton and Gordon, 1996, p 10). This view emphasises stability, sees society as essentially homogeneous and static. The reflection is mirror-like and results in self-replication. We learn who we are to be: we are what we have learned to be.

John Dewey proposed an alternative and transformative model of education. The school process should not only promote social equality, so that 'each individual gets an opportunity to escape from the limitations of the social group in which he was born, and come into contact with a broader environment (1910, p 20), but also develops and extends the individual – 'it creates a desire for continued growth and supplies the means for making the desire effective in fact' (p 50). These egalitarian and developmental functions partly derived from Dewey's view of knowledge as something that had been constructed by the learner as an active experimenter. More recently, John Rawls has also argued that education has such an egalitarian and developmental function: resources for education are not to be allocated solely or necessarily mainly according to their return as estimated in producing trained abilities, but also according to their worth in enriching the personal and social life of citizens, including here the less favoured' (1971, p 107). We decide whom we would like to learn to be: we are what we choose to learn.

The social behaviour that is determined within the discourse of the classroom has potential to be either the simple reproduction of existing patterns of behaviour or to be transformative. Therefore before examining the details of the schooling system, and the main educational policy discourses in each of the three countries, it is useful at this point to review some of the debates about schooling and social and cultural reproduction.

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital includes both cultural production and reproduction in schools. The cultural capital of the middle class is expressed through its habit of thought, assumptions and complexions, that are particularly cultivated and expressed by the school system: the school inculcates, partly through the formal but particularly through the informal curriculum, 'not so much with particular and particularised schemes of thought as with that general disposition which engenders particular schemes, which may then be applied in different domains of thought and action' (Bourdieu, 1971, p. 184). This cultural capital is used as a mechanism to filter pupils to particular positions within the hierarchy of capitalist society. Schools re-create the social and economic hierarchies of the society in which they are embedded, by using processes of selection and teaching: but by judging and comparing these; activities against the cultural capital held by the middle class, they effectively discriminate against all these children who have not had access to this. As Bourdieu puts it, 'the cultural capital and the ethos, as they take shape, combine to determine behaviour and attitude to

school which make up the differential principle of elimination operating for children of different social classes' (Bourdieu, 1974, p. 36). Applying the same cultural criteria in an equal way favours those students who have been previously socialised into the particularly favoured culture.

This is a very wide-ranging claim. It implies that the 'nature vs. nurture' debate is irrelevant, because we largely do not choose our identity - or indeed, *cannot* choose our identity. 'We receive the cultural identity which has been handed down to us from previous generations. ...as we grow older, we modify the identity we have inherited. The identity is not intrinsic but the scope for changing it is circumscribed by the social expectations of the group with which we are associated. By our actions we informally reinforce our inherited group affiliation' (Robbins, 1990, p. 174).

We are formally socialised by the system of education. The state establishes a schooling system to give the particular training or instruction necessary for the changing labour market. The schooling system may also seek to build in the whole population of the State an identity or association with the nation-state, that is in some way parallel to, or equivalent to, the group or class affiliations.

It would be simplistic to apply each of these different models to one of the three national educational systems involved in this study: there is no simple correspondence. But it may be instructive and useful to consider how the three national systems may differently emphasise the various characteristics of each model.

England

Thus the English educational model shows all three forms. The basic principle underlying English school education is that it should 'provide a balanced and broadly based curriculum which is suitable to the child's age, ability, aptitude' and to any special educational needs (SEN) the child might have. The Education Act 1996 requires a curriculum which conveniently enshrines all possible models of education: to promote the spiritual, moral, cultural, intellectual and physical development of students at the school and of society; and to prepare such students for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of adult life. (Great Britain, 1996) Overtly, the structure of the National Curriculum documentation suggests a traditional content-based transmission model but in practice, this has been used to focus on standards of achievement by pupils. The English school system has a high degree of focus on the achievement of particular standards: the national curriculum, and more particularly its assessment system, has been employed to define and measure particular targets. The targets to be achieved are set nationally, and measures by aggregating pupil results at the school and local authority level. The result is not necessarily a high level of competition between pupils – the standards set are criterion-referenced, not peer referenced, but an extraordinarily high degree of competition between local authorities and between schools. The funding and inspection regimes make it very attractive for schools to be seen as achieving high standards, and an increasing emphasis on parental choice in the selection of schools means that league tables of aggregated results are seen as significant.

The curriculum activities that are set out in current educational policy documents particularly emphasise recent changes in the curriculum – for example, the introduction of citizenship education in 2002, the development of an early years curriculum in 2002 and 2005, and changes in the 15 – 18 year old curriculum – and the setting of targets to be achieved by schools.

The emphatic role of standards and targets can be seen in the following examples set by the government.

By 2004, targets for:

11-year olds

85% to reach the expected standard in English and mathematics

35% to reach *above* the expected standard in English and mathematics

16-year-olds

75 % to reach the standard expected for their age in English, mathematics and information and communications technology (ICT).

70% to reach the standard expected for their age in science.

38% to achieve five GCSE passes at grades A* to C

92% to obtain five or more GCSE passes at grades A* to G.

A National Literacy Strategy and a National Numeracy Strategy were launched to support achieving these targets, in which all primary schools are expected to dedicate a minimum of one hour per day to literacy and another hour for mathematics, with fairly prescriptive guidance.

The consequences of these policies, which have been sustained with an unrelenting programme of initiatives, has been to focus many teachers' attention on the discourse of standards and achievement rather than on the nature of what is being taught. Effectiveness is judged very largely by the degree to which pupil reach the various 'level descriptors', particularly in literacy and numeracy. This is an objectives-led policy, and the objectives themselves are narrow, closely defined, measurable and prescriptive. In a sense, the actual 'content' or subject matter of what is being taught has been subsumed in a set of measurable behaviours. For example, pupils are assessed in formal tests at seven and eleven in English, Mathematics, Science and ICT. They are also assessed in secondary schools. As a result, each child is judged to have achieved a particular level. This technicised breakdown of competences has been criticised.

The first PISA study in 2000 (referred to below in relation to Hungary) did not report on competitive and cooperative learning preferences by pupils in the UK sample: however, a later analysis of the data (2005, Haahr *et al*), found that in the Reading survey (2000), United Kingdom students scored particularly highly in their preference for cooperative learning (3rd out of 22 states, scoring +0.39. mean 0.0), and in competitive learning they also scored highly (7th out of 22, +0.18, mean 0.0) (Haahr, 2005, Tables 6.16, 6.17).

Hungary

The educational policies in Hungary have some superficial similarities. There have also been a series of major changes, mainly a consequence of the drastic transformation of the wider political, social and economic environment in the country: Hungary too has developed and refined a National Core Curriculum, finalised in early 1996. However, most of the other priorities were essentially structural: increasing resources and managing these, expanding secondary education, support for special needs, strengthening the teaching force, and developing assessment systems.

The Public Education Act (1993) *Act LXXIX on Public Education* led to a modified definition of primary and secondary education and brought the upper limit of basic education to the age of 16, which coincided with the end of statutory schooling. This leaving age was extended to 18 in the 1996 *Amendment to the Public Education Act (of 1993)*. The 1993 Act also defined, in its preamble, the objectives of the Nemzeti alaptanterv The National Basic Curriculum as honouring basic human rights, children's rights, freedom of conscience and religion and the values of school education, as well as minority rights. These basic objectives had to be adopted by every school in Hungary (1996). As in England, the Ministry of Education makes declarations such as school is the 'most important public institution for social mobility, for ensuring cultural continuity and individual advancement, and for aiding economic growth' (INCA, 2005).

However, a more detailed examination of the prioritised policies (1998: The aims of the Hungarian Ministry of Education, Unpublished report) shows a strong emphasis on structural reorganisation:

- Creating a unified and more efficient institutional system of school education;
- Drawing up framework curricula;
- Supporting a quality assurance system;
- Developing the teaching of a European dimension;
- Developing curricula to ensuring that two other *EU* languages are taught;
- Developing the teaching of information technology;
- Improving teacher training;
- Higher education reform.

The entry on Hungary in the Eurydice Information Database on Educational Systems in Europe reinforces this perception. The school's pedagogical programme is defined in terms that suggest that the curriculum is very largely traditional in structure, consisting of established subjects or bodies of knowledge with some additional grafting on of newer disciplines or skills.

There is continuous student assessment, which is the responsibility of the individual teacher who usually enjoys considerable autonomy in this field. Student performance and progress is evaluated throughout the school year and, on the basis of these marks received throughout the year, students receive an end-of-term and end-of-year mark in each subject. There are relatively few direct references to competition in

the *Nemzeti alaptanterv* (NAT). Competition is suggested to motivate mathematics teaching, and musical performance and sporting activities are considered competitively. There are more references to encourage cooperation as a socially desirable behaviour to be developed in schools. Working in pairs and small groups and debating are encouraged. For example, in mathematics,

Paying attention to each other, taking joint responsibility are also important part of cooperation. Pupils have to plan, organise and distribute work together. Pupils have to take into consideration during the joint work each of their individual abilities and characteristics in order to achieve a good joint result, they have to respect these in order to promote each of their individual development during the joint work. (from NAT, 2001).

Similar guidance is offered in other subjects. Informal assessment in class is often internally referenced by position within the class, but formal assessment and examinations are norm-referenced, and at national level, teachers have no obligation to report test results. There is no formal way for schools to report on assessment results. Informally, examination results may be reported internally ranked in order against peers in the class or school. There is nevertheless competition between schools in the outcomes of assessments, based on league tables of the proportions of students entering particular forms of higher education, because:

Student performance and achievement in the general school generally determines the type of secondary school a student will go on to attend. ... Students whose achievements are not judged adequate to attend either the secondary grammar school or a 'standard' secondary vocational school are usually placed in *vocational training schools* (1997, Eurydice)

The first PISA study by the OECD (*Knowledge and Skills for Life*, OECD, 2001) created comparative international indices for cooperative and competitive learning, based on student reports. The cooperative indices were based on questions about whether students liked working with others and helping others, etc., while the competitive index was based on responses to questions about whether students liked to do better than others (being the best, learning better when trying to be better than others) (OECD, 2001, p 114). Of the 24 countries in this study (which did not, unfortunately for our purposes, include Slovenia), Hungary scored third lowest on cooperative learning (-0.34, mean 0.0) (OECD, 2001, Table 4.8) and eighth highest on competitive learning (+0.1, mean 0.0) (OECD, 2001, Table 4.9). This is unusual: Haahr *et al* (2005) note that 'paradoxically, many countries where students have relatively high scores on the index of cooperative learning are also the countries where students have correspondingly high scores on the index of competitive learning, and vice versa (Haahr, p 128). The original OECD report suggested that it might be that 'active learners use both strategies on different occasions, rather than limiting themselves to a single strategy that may not be the best in a particular situation' (2001, p 115). Commenting on this, a survey of *Education in Hungary 2003* (National Institute of Public Education, Lannert J and Halász G) suggested that most 15 year old Hungarian students:

use a memorization-based strategy in studying. The elaboration and linking of various items and their application in different contexts are seldom used by students. Cooperative learning strategies are similarly used to a lesser extent. The reason may perhaps be found in the traditions of the prevalent classroom management, which displays a dominance of frontal teaching. This leads to a competitive, performance-orientated environment – in addition to the process of individualization also perceptible at societal level – in which the youth display less solidarity towards each other and less cohesion is shown among schoolmates, according to the findings of empirical research. (Lannert and Halász, 2003, p 95)

To conclude, the Hungarian system would appear to be a largely content-driven system, with a curriculum and educational policy designed to transmit a culturally-determined set of knowledge and skills, which is normatively assessed but used within schools to refer to pupils' comparative positions. These encourage competition between both schools and between pupils in the schools.

Slovenia

As in Hungary – and for very similar reasons – the educational policies of Slovenia have been through a major programme of modernisation since 1990. The White Paper on Education in the Republic of Slovenia (1995, English version 1996) established not only a policy framework but also the overall philosophy, values and principles forming the basis for the renewal. These, however, were of a rather different qualitative nature to the priorities identified in Hungary: (1) accessibility and transparency of the public education system, (2) legal neutrality, (3) choice at all levels, (4) democracy, autonomy and equal opportunities, and (5) quality of learning to take precedence over the accumulation of facts.

Changes were implemented in parallel with the gradual provision of facilities and staff, designed to achieve the following objectives, which are notable in the way that they prioritise an inclusive, near-egalitarian agenda:

- A greater variety of pre-school education programmes and qualification routes;
- Opportunities to transfer between routes and better access to part-time study;
- Improve functional and cultural literacy among adults;
- Equal educational opportunities for the socially disadvantaged;
- Equal opportunities for both sexes;
- Increase the mainstream inclusion of children with special needs;

The content renewal of the curricula specifically included the elimination of ideologies from school subjects and a shift from memorisation of facts to learning skills and problem solving. The new curriculum was intended to 'pay less attention to content and place greater emphasis on the process of learning and knowledge-acquisition'. There were very specific initiatives in the elementary school sector to encourage cooperative learning styles.

These overall goals were extended into specific aims (*The Education System in Slovenia* (2001/2002), at the Eurydice Information Database on Educational Systems in Europe, that are in sharp contrast with the more instrumental and content-focussed policies of England and Hungary respectively:

- Increased autonomy and professional accountability of schools and teachers;
- Greater integration of interdisciplinary knowledge;
- Ending excessive workloads and tiredness of pupils;
- Diverse forms and methods of work;
- A more active learning role for pupils;
- A balanced physical and psychological development;
- A greater role for teachers in directing the educational process;
- Greater role for schools in pupils' social integration;
- Increased participation in higher levels of education;
- Preparation for a high quality of life, life-long learning and employment;
- Internationally comparable standards and levels of knowledge;
- Efficient and high quality communication in their mother tongue;
- Improved functional literacy;
- Increased quality and continuity of acquired knowledge;
- Develop the capacity for independent creative and critical reflection and judgement; to train them to face and solve problems;

The Slovenian primary school syllabuses for individual subjects, as in Hungary, often recommend team and cooperative work, project work, work in pairs and small groups. These syllabuses have been in force since 1998, and it is sensible to ask how these recommendations are applied in the primary school carrying out the nine-year program.

An evaluation study carried out by researchers of the Education Institute in Ljubljana (Gril, 2003) examined whether the changed teaching principles set out in the curriculum documents (White Paper on Education in Slovenia, 1996, Nine-year primary school syllabuses, 1998) are actually applied and whether they result in a structured learning interaction in the classroom, arising from cooperation or competitiveness and fostering personal interrelations between children. Science and humanities teachers in the new nine-year program are more likely to encourage various forms of cooperative work among pupils than in the previous eight-year program, in particular, introducing project team work, experiments and tasks, and also encouraging exchange of knowledge, opinions and experiences. In the nine-year program, pupils more frequently work in groups and there is less 'frontal' teaching (compare this with the report of Hungarian practice cited by Lannert and Halász, 2003, cited above).

Pupils in the final three years of the programme themselves noted a higher degree of cooperation. The authors concluded that the curriculum changes had a positive effect on the development of social competencies and communication skills as well as on pupils' higher evaluation of help and cooperation among peers. This study shows that the nine-year primary school is already realising some principles promoted by individual syllabuses.

In discussions about cooperation in the learning process in Slovenia, the term cooperative learning is used frequently, but this does not cover all forms of cooperation in the learning and teaching processes. As we will elaborate later in this study, children and teachers themselves do not understand 'cooperation in learning' in the sense that it is usually defined, namely, as 'learning in small groups in which pupils are required to do tasks promoting positive bonding among its members while achieving a common goal as a result of their direct interaction' (Peklaj, 2001, p 9). Other terms frequently used in schools are 'working in groups', 'learning groups' or just 'pupils' cooperation'. According to Peklaj (ibid), the main difference is in the level of 'positive interdependency among the group members generated by common goals'. Slavin (2004) also uses the term 'cooperative structure of learning situations' as opposed to the individual structure or the competitive structure. In our context we will use the term cooperation in the learning process to cover all forms of cooperation, ranging from simple help to systematically organised and more complex cooperative learning situations.

Peklaj's (1996) research demonstrated that when both teachers and pupils were systematically prepared, cooperative learning had positive effects on pupils' acquired knowledge in mathematics and in Slovene, on social relations within groups, on the desire to cooperate with other pupils and on the motivational-emotional level.

Assessment is again regarded very differently in Slovenia: it is based on principles of institutional self-evaluation with some external support from professional institutions. There is no national reporting of schools' or individual pupil's performance.

Conclusions

Having reviewed the educational policies in each of the three countries, we can now begin to offer some preliminary hypotheses about how these might create particular conditions for the development of discourses of cooperative behaviour, competitive behaviour, neither or both. It might be expected that these different policy discourses in the three countries' systems might lead to different practices in teaching and learning styles. The dominant discourse of standards and targets in the English system might emphasise individual learning. The key objective for teachers and schools is not to rank pupils in order, one against the other, but to get each individual to as high a level descriptor as possible. Given the relatively crude nature of the level descriptors – each level represents on average an approximately two year period of study – then teachers whose pupils are approaching the key assessment stages at ages seven and eleven might concentrate their attention on those pupils they judged just below the threshold of the level descriptor. Effort and attention given to pupils above the threshold would not produce a visible 'result' unless the pupil could be raised to the level of the next descriptor. So there would be no need to encourage individual pupil competitiveness, or pupil cooperation, unless it could be linked to the specific individual improvement of a pupil in the marginal category. In Hungary, on the other hand, the dominant ethos of subject knowledge might lead to a situation in which pupils competed between themselves in a class: the relative absence (or insignificance) of national norm-related standards mean that the teacher and the school, who have wide discretion in assessment, would be particularly encouraged to make assessments that, in effect, compared

individual pupils to the local norms of the class or school, and thus to foster competition between pupils. The same situation of a lack of normative standards applies also in Slovenia: but in that country there is also a very strong and explicit policy discourse that relates to inclusion and egalitarian behaviour, particularly so in the basic schools.

We could also expect these differences to be reflected in the professional discourses and practices of the teachers themselves. If these policies are effective and pervasive, then we should anticipate that they will have a significant role in classroom practice. Do teachers in these countries behave in different ways? Are there differences in the way that they discuss how they manage the processes of teaching and learning? If there are differences, then the way in which they construct the two concepts of cooperation and competition in the classroom should illuminate the extent to which these policy discourses are realised in the different countries' systems.

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