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Primary Teachers' Views of Cooperation

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The process of socialisation – adaptation to the norms of society – intensifies when a child starts compulsory education in primary school. The organisation and execution of the school curriculum in primary school should include experts' suggestions about cognitive development interconnectedness with social experiences. That was the reason that led us to seek teachers' opinions on pupils' cooperative behaviour in different classroom situations. The data from interviews with teachers and from school observations in all three countries involved in the Joint Project showed some differences in the understanding of children's cooperation. Compared to their Hungarian colleagues, Slovenian and English teachers facilitate cooperation more, because they regard it as positive and as something that stimulates learning. In the answers of Hungarian teachers, however, we found competitive elements even when they give examples of co-operation. When teachers from the three groups answered the question about the needs of society and economy, they all recognised the importance of both: competition and cooperation.

Introduction

The theory of evolution sees in competitiveness the importance of survival of the species, since the battle for survival is closely connected with selection (Gould, 1991). On the other hand, the anthropologist Montague (after Johnson and Johnson, 1987) believes cooperation to be selectively the most valuable form of behaviour at any evolutionary stage. He claims that in its essence society is a cooperative structure. Without cooperation, the individual cannot survive and it is because of cooperation that society has managed to survive until the present.

Environment plays an important role in a child's life. The ecological perspective of Uri Bronfenbrenner's developmental theory, which we increasingly encounter in modern psychological literature (Smith, Cowie and Blades, 1998), defines the interdependence between the behaviour of the individual and influences of the environment. One of the more important microsystems – groups of individuals that directly impact the child's life – is school. Next to learning contents and teaching methods, interpersonal relations between the children have an important impact on the child's experience and development. These relations are also reflected in cooperation and competitiveness. Since microsystems are influenced by macrosystems – politics and economy, the two elements that stimulate competitiveness in modern society – the latter also impacts the behavioural patterns of individuals.

Interpersonal relations are of fundamental importance for the development of personality. We build our identity on the basis of our relations with other people and we form an image of ourselves based on the response of others to our behaviour (how others respond to us partly also depends on ourselves). In interpersonal relations we learn to take on various social roles.

In the area of education, especially compulsory primary education, there is not a great amount of research-based findings on competitiveness and cooperation. Experts focus mainly on cooperation, while competitiveness is researched primarily in connection with

cooperation. Three of the most important researchers of cooperation after 1980 are Johnson and Johnson, Slavin and Oin, who in their studies examined the impact of cooperation and competitiveness on pupils' academic achievement (after Peklaj 2003).

This comparative study of three countries, now united within the European Union but with different cultural and historical backgrounds, tries to present the interconnectedness of both phenomena within the classroom, and to recognise their positive as well as negative factors, which could in turn enable teachers to approach their work with greater awareness of their impact. In this way they would become empowered to prepare children for their future lives, where the latter will be required and will, as a result of teachers' support, know how to cooperate and compete in a tolerant manner, with responsibility and respect.

In this interpersonal and cooperational relationship they would learn to trust and express empathy. Thus an important psychological need, to be accepted in a group of peers, would be realised, which would then be reflected in their commitment to joint work and cooperation. In this connection, the teacher's role is of crucial importance. With respectful attitude and spontaneous communication s/he can bring the children to attentively and actively listen to one another (Pergar Kuščer, 2000). Vygotski (1986) also claims that the culture reflected in social processes is transferred to the children through their teachers who motivate them and lead them through the learning process, thus directing their development.

Learning through cooperation

There are different terms used for cooperation connected with learning. One expression is '*group work*', but we need to bear in mind that learning and working in groups does not automatically mean 'group work'. The distinction between the two is in the level of participation in the group, which serves as a source of learning rather than just focusing on achieving the shared group task. Slavin (2004) uses the expression '*cooperative task structure*' (in contrast to independent and competitive task structure). The level of cooperation in this kind of learning structures can vary. Another term is '*collaboration*', which 'is similar to cooperation, (since) it involves working together, but cooperation involves less commitment to joint goals' (Askew and Carnell, 1998, p.41).

We will use the term 'cooperation and cooperative learning' for learning structures which 'all involve having pupils work in small groups or teams, to help one another learn academic material' (Slavin, 1991, p.115).

Several studies (Askew and Carnell, 1998) have shown that cooperation leads to higher achievement than competition. Cooperative learning seems to result in positive effects on pupils' self-esteem, on the development of social and socio-emotional skills, on improved ability to see the world from another person's point of view, on better relations among different ethnic groups in the classroom, and also increases motivation. Pupils learn to negotiate and to be more tolerant of others (Woolfolk, 1993). The most frequently cited researches, lead by Johnson and Johnson in 1974 and later, as well as meta analyses made by Slavin (1991), confirm positive effects of cooperative learning on academic achievement, self-esteem, inter-group relations, mainstreaming, and has also other important positive educational outcomes. Slavin (2004) discusses several complementary perspectives of cooperative learning: motivational, social cohesion, cognitive and classroom organisation perspectives. Learning with others provides opportunities for

feedback, challenge, support, risk taking, for experience and learning to be dependent, independent and interdependent. Group members can take on a number of roles within the group and thus increase their repertoire of skills. In different social relations pupils can learn more about themselves. Presselsen (Askew and Carnell, 1998, p.43) argues that learning in groups also facilitates meta-cognition: 'Pupils must explain how they reach a conclusion or arrive at an answer ... they need to reflect on what they think about the particular task...'

One of the positive effects of learning in groups is also the stimulation of a great number of ideas generating creative solutions. Pupils learn that differences can be a strength. It is obvious that cooperation includes the emotional, social and cognitive domain of human nature.

Slavin (2004, p. 288) argues the need 'to look beyond usual disciplinary boundaries to consider more broadly how cooperation among pupils can enhance their learning'.

According to Samples (Askew and Carnell, 1998, p.41), 'the nature taught us to cooperate to learn – the society teaches us how to cooperate'. The same author argues that cooperation in schools should not only be a way of organising experience; he proposes it should become a lifestyle, subject to changes at the group and individual level.

In order to achieve this, it is important that teachers accept the corresponding style of organising classroom activities. Stipek (1998) stresses that the potential of cooperative learning is not always realised in practical school situations. Teachers and pupils need preparation and training to organise/engage in cooperative learning situations. Peklaj (1996) proved that with systematic preparation of teachers and pupils cooperative learning had positive effects on achievement (in Mathematics and Slovene language), on social processes in the group and on the desire to cooperate with other pupils. There were no significant effects on the affective level and no general differences with regard to gender, ability level, and cognitive style. It seems that cooperative learning tends to be more suitable for girls than for boys.

Some authors (MacGilchrist, Myers and Reed, J., 2004) also argue that cooperation should be a style of school management; together with collegiality it is essential for school improvement.

Cooperation in Slovene school documents

Cooperation goes well together with the concepts of democracy, understanding, tolerance, participation and solidarity. In Slovenia all these concepts are stressed either as basic principles of education (White Paper, 1996, pp. 33-47) or as the goals of primary education. It is stressed that primary (compulsory) education should promote understanding, tolerance and solidarity, and develop one's ability for living in a pluralistic and democratic society (ibid, pp. 91-92).

Within the Primary Curriculum (1998) it is possible to find contents and explicit guidelines which provide teachers with suggestions to encourage cooperation in different ways: to organise discussions, to stimulate listening to each other, to organise cooperative work (e.g. projects, games, dramatisation of a poem, story or other literary form). Within the first three grades, Early Science is the subject where cooperative activities, contents and guidelines are suggested most frequently. Some of the emphasised goals are

respecting needs and interests of others, the importance of agreement for joint work and cooperation between girls and boys.

The discussion about the necessity and importance of cooperation among people in different situations is also suggested, combined with concrete cooperative activities (e.g. conducting simple surveys). To achieve these goals, teachers are free to choose the situations and methods (working in groups, in pairs, role playing, etc.), whereby they need to take into account the level of pupils' development. Cooperation and respecting the rules of group work are also among the elements recorded in assessing achievement.

Objectives

In elementary school, teachers spend most of their time with their pupils, which also represents most of the children's daily working hours. The influence of the teacher on their not yet fully formed personality is very important. The Joint Project in the UK, Hungary and Slovenia aimed to find out the connection between the teacher's understanding and perception of cooperation and competition in their class, and also in society. Part of the study presented here focuses on teachers' opinions about cooperation. We expected some differences between the compared countries.

Method

We made observations during Math, Language and Sports lessons in 12 classes in different primary schools in the three countries. Following these, we interviewed 12 primary teachers (4 from each country).

Materials

To determine teacher's opinions about cooperation and competition we constructed a questionnaire. After preliminary testing, the Teachers' Questionnaire included 27 open questions grouped in six clusters: competition and cooperation in the classroom; teachers' experiences about competition and cooperation, and teachers' opinions about competition and cooperation in everyday life.

Procedure

Focused questions were the basis of our directed interviews, which were carried out with every teacher after the observation in her/his class. Answers were taped and analysed with regard to teachers' perception of competition/cooperation of pupils in their class, their experiences with competition/cooperation during their school years and with regard to the significance they believe competition/cooperation has in the society.

In this paper we will discuss only the answers about cooperation (16 questions), which we classified into six categories:

- *Cooperative situations in the classroom (examples of cooperation)*
- *Cooperation – is it seen negatively, positively, its origins and qualifications, outcomes and consequences*
- *Curriculum and teacher's behaviour (encouraging or discouraging cooperation in the classroom) in connection with cooperation*
- *Teacher's own experiences and attitudes towards cooperation*

- *Cooperation in everyday life*
- *General view on the cooperation in the world of economy/UK, HU, SI/*

Results and interpretation

According to classroom observations (Razdevšek-Pučko, C. *et al.*, 2004), there are many more similarities between the three countries in the area of cooperation than there were in competition.

After analysing the observations, we concluded that:

1. all teachers encourage cooperation, no situations of discouraging cooperation were observed;
2. observed cooperation was mainly unstructured and at a low level (helping, supporting, sharing ideas);
3. only few structured cooperative learning structures at a higher level were observed;
4. teachers structured cooperation mainly with the guidelines for working in groups or in pairs;
5. teachers praised pupils for cooperative behaviour;
6. cooperation was generally treated as something positive.

Analyses of teacher's interviews, comparison between the three countries

Cooperative situations in the classroom (examples of cooperation)

All teachers mentioned the role of the teacher in organising cooperative situations. Mainly the examples of a low level of cooperation are mentioned: working in pairs, helping each other, sharing materials, reading materials, correcting each other's mistakes. An interesting example of cooperation connected with assessment was mentioned by a Hungarian teacher, namely cheating i.e. telling answers to another pupil.

Pupils usually cooperate with their classmates or with the teacher. It can be understood that a 'cooperative child' means one who cooperates with the teacher (UK). Teachers stress cooperation in groups with mixed abilities, in some cases (HU) cooperation with smart children is mentioned, and with those who are good at sports or in school, and also with 'winners'.

Cooperation – is it perceived negatively, positively, origins and qualifications about it, outcomes and consequences.

As already mentioned, teachers' answers generally treat cooperation as something positive, while *non-cooperative* behaviour is treated as 'not respecting the rules' (UK), 'not being mature enough to cooperate' (HU), 'converting cooperation into competitive or individual work' (SI).

Teachers tend to evaluate cooperation as something good, with positive outcomes and consequences for the individual and for the society as well; according to their answers, cooperation promotes democracy and equality, produces mostly enjoyable situations in the classroom, encourages learning and motivates children (SI).

Most of the teachers involved in our interviews see cooperation as the result of social situations; they also believe that cooperative situations encourage group loyalty, develop better interpersonal relations and active participation.

Hungarian teachers mentioned cooperation as an instrument of protecting the weak in the classroom ('The weak can also feel their achievement is good', 'Motivates the weak pupils'), while English teachers see cooperation as a way of 'learning from each other', as a way of working 'because it is nice' and not just because of the results. Slovene teachers see cooperation as helping the development of tolerance, learning how to cope with each other's differences.

Curriculum and teacher behaviour (encouraging, discouraging cooperation in the classroom) in connection with cooperation

In Slovenia, cooperation is emphasised in curriculum documents, but teachers claim that the implementation and organisation of cooperative learning situations mainly depends on them. The curriculum offers many contexts, but teachers need to know how to put it into practice, whereby the Slovene teachers mentioned teacher's autonomy. English teachers produced a list of subjects where cooperation takes place and excluded the areas where individual testing takes place, while Hungarian teachers mentioned cooperative learning methods as an example of curriculum encouraged cooperation.

Teacher's own experiences and attitudes towards cooperation

We asked teachers about their own experiences from school and about the influence of these experiences on their present approach to cooperation in teaching.

We elaborate only the answers of Slovene teachers, and all (4) of them enjoyed cooperative school situations because of social contacts. Some concrete answers: 'I really enjoyed cooperation. I found fun in such work (creating, sharing ideas). I liked to help others and feel important, competent.'; 'I enjoyed cooperation if I was included as an equal. I enjoyed being part of a group as an equal. If I did not feel like this, I preferred to give up.' They also think that these experiences influence (not always intentionally) their present work, because 'I have good and live memories about cooperation in school'. They mention also other kinds of benefits: 'I am able to understand conflicts between children, I know how important it is to be part of a group, to be appreciated as a person', although it is also stressed that 'work with children is more influential, as they themselves showed me when and where they enjoyed their work, and when they were successful'.

Cooperation in everyday life

While Hungarian teachers mentioned that pupils at primary level are too young to cooperate, they see cooperation as a social skill which should be learnt in later years; English teachers are not sure about its benefits ('perhaps it will help them in later life'), Slovenian teachers are able to justify cooperation in terms of benefiting the society, they see cooperation as a much liked and appreciated form of behaviour and stress that practising cooperation in school is important for children's later years when they should be able to work in teams, respect differences between people and appreciate diversity.

General view on the cooperation in the world of economy

While English and Slovene teachers emphasised the need for cooperation, teamwork, tolerance and a degree of 'healthy competition' for the future world, local and global

economy, the answers of Hungarian teachers mentioned the need for competition much more frequently (e.g. 'Competition is what moves things ahead', 'It is a fight for life and survival').

Slovene teachers warn against 'a competitive society even in family relationships' but at the same time they see a gap between the school policy, which tends to favour the cooperative style and the transitional (competitive) economy, therefore the need for both: cooperation and ('healthy') competition is evident.

Conclusions

In general, interviews with teachers in all three countries gave us the same views about cooperation as our classroom observations (Razdevšek-Pučko, C. et al. 2004), which means that teachers' behaviour tends to be congruent with their opinions. Most answers indicate that cooperation is treated as a form of behaviour with positive outcomes from mainly all perspectives (Slavin, 2004): cognitive, motivational, academic achievement and social cohesion.

Teachers see cooperation as a result of social situations and therefore stress the importance of cooperative school experiences for pupils' life in society. While emphasising the importance of learning cooperative behaviour, some Hungarian teachers expressed doubt about the maturity of children at the primary level for cooperation.

We noticed some differences between the countries regarding also the meaning of cooperation in everyday life. While English and Slovene teachers are convinced about the need of cooperation for the future social and economic development of society, Hungarian teachers more frequently mentioned competition as the main factor of development. Although the number of respondents does not allow us to make generalisations of these opinions, we can assume that the answers in a way reflect the transitional characteristics of the society in Slovenia and Hungary, as well as the level of economy in the compared countries.

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