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Competition in the classroom: primary school teachers' view in Hungary, Slovenia and the UK

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Introduction

Competition is a highly complex phenomenon that can be found in a more or less hidden form in every human group. It is considered to be, together with cooperation, a fundamental dimension of interpersonal and inter-group relationships. Competition may take different forms and patterns and depending on the nature of these patterns it can be constructive or destructive (Fülöp, 2004).

Competition is present in many fields of the education. The educational system itself is more or less selective in all parts of the world. The educational arena always applies some sort of evaluation of the students' academic and sports achievement and also evaluation of other aspects of the person, like social skills and leadership skills. Every kind of evaluation forms the basis of social comparison, irrespective of its nature (giving grades or verbal description) and we know from several studies that students engage in social comparison and as a result of it spontaneous competition in the class even if the teachers do not evaluate at all (Pepitone, 1985).

National school systems and schools within one nation differ significantly how much they introduce competition and selection into their education. There are school systems, like for instance the Hungarian that starts to organise for students school-wide, district-wide, city-wide and nation-wide contests basically in all school subjects and students participate in them already from the first grade of the primary school (Fülöp, 2004). Competition is also present in the entrance exams both at the secondary and higher education level in most of the countries. While children go through the educational system the evaluation of abilities, achievement and in relation to these normative comparisons become more and more frequent. There is a growing emphasis on school marks and test results and this strengthens social comparison and competition among children.

Teachers – through the educational system – have an extremely important role in the process of socialization of competition. Their views about this frequently occurring phenomenon have a big influence on what they 'teach' about it. In a previous study Fülöp (1992) examined secondary school teachers' views on competition. Teachers were interviewed in order to discover their personal implicit theories and cognitive conceptions of competition. The interviews also asked about the teachers' daily educational practice in handling and controlling competition in class. Four distinctly different ways of conceiving competition have been differentiated. One that was called fragmented, because no systematic conceptual framework could be identified. The other three were: the social-Darwinistic, representing a natural acceptance of the existence of competition and the need to teach students to survive in a competitive environment, the idealistic, representing the notion of competition being the result of societal learning and something that should

be eliminated from the society and the bio-cultural stating that while competition is a socio-biological fact there is a lot of space for learning and teaching how to compete in a constructive way and how to avoid destructive competition.

Competition is an inevitable concomitant of social life. It is highly important therefore that teachers in schools have a clear understanding about it, be able to handle and influence competitive processes and prepare students for competitions in life and teach them how to compete while keeping themselves to implicit and explicit rules of competition and how to cope with the emotional consequences of competition e.g. how to win and lose gracefully and how to use both to help self-improvement rather than for instance destruction of others. To teach students how to compete constructively is a very important task of nowadays schools also because the business world everywhere in the world needs working force that is able to function in a competitive market environment. Competition as a social skill is necessary to successfully adapt to a democratic society too. The quality if interpersonal and inter-group competition in a society, their potential beneficial and harmful effects profoundly contribute to how citizens relate to each other. Also the European Union consists of countries that are both competing for resources and cooperating over resources with each other. The way competition is conceptualized in different countries and the way competition manifests itself in everyday school life from an early age has got some potential effects on these much more far reaching processes.

The study

In our present study – that is a part of a larger research project – we focus on 13 primary school teachers' views on competition – 5 from Hungary, 4 from Great Britain and 4 from Slovenia. These three countries have a very different history. Hungary and Slovenia are post-socialist countries, where competition came into the foreground in the political and economic life only after the political changes while the UK has been a market economy and a democracy for centuries. We were interested in the similarities and the differences in the teachers' views on competition among these three contexts. In all the three countries the teachers were from two different schools in the capital city. All schools were chosen to represent an average in terms of parental background and academic standing. In every school we observed two different classes and then we carried out in-depth interviews with the teachers and focus-group interviews with the pupils – with three boys and three girls from each class. In this paper we will focus on the teachers' interviews about competition.

Situations in class when pupils compete

When we asked the teachers about those situations, in which children in their class are competitive, we have got altogether 94 answers. Most of the answers were related to competition in the field of *study* (62%), but teachers also spoke about competition in sports, competition for *teacher's attention* and for *popularity and dominance* in the peer group.

There were no differences between Hungary and Great Britain in terms of the number of mentioned examples, but the teachers from Slovenia gave altogether fewer examples of children's competition in their class, especially much less examples of competition *over studies*. Social aspects, like competing for *popularity* (for instance who plays with whom)

and dominance (who is the leader in the class) as a category was exclusively mentioned by Hungarian teachers.

When we examined the teachers' examples of competition in studying – which was the biggest category – we could distinguish examples of *structured and of spontaneous* competition.

We called *structured competition* all those situations when it is the teacher who sets up the competitive situation, determines the rules and criteria and monitors the process of competition. For instance organized contests, competition among teams during the lesson or some individual or group tasks with a time limit are like this. *Spontaneous competition* is different from the structured one, because in this case, children behave competitively without any open instruction from the teacher. This kind of competition is for example, when they compete for grades or points generally, or when they would like to be the best at mathematics or the most clever in the class, or the best prepared for the lesson or when they would like to answer the teacher's questions first and try to raise their hands faster up than the others.

Teachers of the three countries gave almost three times more examples of spontaneous competition (42) than of structural (16). In terms of structured competition we found no difference among teachers of the three countries, but the Slovenian teachers mentioned less situations of spontaneous competition among the children than the Hungarian and English teachers.

Who children compete with

When we asked teachers about those who their children in their class compete with, we have got altogether 38 answers from the three countries. The Slovenian teachers gave fewer examples on this question, too. The Hungarian and the English numbers were close to each other, *competition with their classmates* was the most frequent answer, but there were differences in other categories. Only Hungarian teachers spoke about children's preference to compete *with those in their class, who are able to lose or with those who are good at something.* On the other hand, competition *with friends* was almost exclusively an English answer. Slovenian teachers gave basically no example of individual children competing with each other while *competition within themselves* was a category mentioned only by them. Both the Hungarian and English teachers spoke about the importance of *same ability* in the context of competition, but there were no answers like this from Slovenia. Competition among not individuals but *among classes* was mentioned by Hungarian and Slovenian teachers.

From these data we can conclude that for the Slovenian teachers in our study competition among individual students in the class was less important than to the other two groups and they focused mainly on the intra-personal and class level competition (i.e. between two classes). For the Hungarian teachers competition has a strong relationship with winning and losing and teachers have the impression that children prefer to compete with those who are able to lose gracefully. English teachers mainly perceived that friendship and competition can go together, that competition is a friendly and less stressful relationship between those who are in the same class or group, and who can be friends during or after the competition.

Teachers encourage competition

The English teachers think more positively about competition, than teachers from Hungary or from Slovenia. When we asked them about how often they encourage competition in their class they answered *frequently* or *sometimes* and no teacher said *never*. Whereas when we asked the Slovenian teachers they rather answered negatively, saying that *they never or usually do not encourage competition or their children behave competitively*, Hungarian teachers being in the middle.

When we asked the teachers about those situations in which they encourage competition, we have got altogether 34 answers and in terms of the number of answers there were no big differences among the three countries. It seems that if asked directly about concrete situations, Slovenian teachers, despite presenting a general negative attitude, still list competitive situations. *Study* was the most important area where teachers reported encouraging competition in each country. The Hungarian teachers did not mention encouraging competition in *sports*, while this was an answer both in Slovenia and the UK.

In terms of how they encourage competition in their class English teachers mentioned the biggest number of examples and also they reported the biggest variety of methods, *like giving rewards (i.e. stickers) for the good answers, increasing motivation when a task is boring by introducing competition with a time limit, splitting the class or setting the level according to abilities, asking children to evaluate each others' achievement etc. According to this, English teachers have the most varied picture and methods about encouraging competition among the three groups. In contrast to this Slovenian teachers hardly mention any mean that they apply to increase competition among their students. One teacher mentions giving rewards and one rather emphasises that she says to students it is not winning that is important in competition. Hungarian teachers are in between. They encourage competition frequently if there is a chance to win or if the child is very good at the given area. The strong connection between competition and its result, winning or losing, is seen mostly by the Hungarian teachers. Winning seems to be much more important for them, than for the English or Slovenian teachers.*

Teachers discourage competition

We also asked the teachers when and in what sort of situations they discourage competition. If we put next to each other the two questions – encouraging and discouraging competition – we find interesting connections between them. First of all, there is a big difference in the number of answers, but this difference derives only from the Hungarian part of the data. The English and Slovenian teachers mentioned the same number of situations to both questions, but the Hungarians gave more than twice the number of examples of when they discourage competition (30) than when they encourage it (12). Teachers also tend to discourage competition in different circumstances and situations. Hungarian teachers discourage competition primarily when it gets to intensive and serious or when it is not fair (when children are cheating or break the rules). This latter, moral aspect of competition is not mentioned at all by the English teachers. Discouraging competition in mixed ability groups to protect the weak students appeared almost only in the Hungarian and English answers and the Slovenian teachers didn't speak about it.

Teachers mention many ways of discouraging competition: not giving rewards, not evaluating openly, applying group work instead of individual one, playing non-

competitive games etc. Slovenian teachers' seem to have a deliberate decision not giving rewards frequently. They avoid competitive situations consciously, and their methods and behaviour are in harmony with their concepts about competition. They tell their students that winning is not important only participation and learning, they strongly emphasise cooperation and ask their students to be emphatic towards the weaker ones.

There can be different motives identified behind discouraging competition. In case of the English and Slovenian teachers most frequently the goal is to establish *equality*. In case of the Hungarian teachers the goal is most frequently *to escape from competitive situations*. All three mention in a lower frequency that the goal can be *to understand differences* or sometimes the teacher thinks, that the amount of competition that appears spontaneously is enough – there is no need to have more, there is no need to encourage if

There are different ways to achieve equality. To protect and help the weak students is an important and returning motive of teachers' reactions in competitive situations in all three groups of teachers and is a significant factor of discouraging or avoiding it, because it can be bad for them, or it is not good if someone is very obviously not successful and is just has his/her own failure constantly reinforced. Another way to establish equality is to discourage the better students and this is mentioned also in all three countries.

While Hungarian teachers try to escape from comparisons and competition especially the English but also the Slovenians try to actively establish equality. They do it however in a different way. The English teachers try to decrease the differences between the better and less good students not with avoiding comparison, but mainly with *improving the weak students or with setting the levels according to ability* and *making mixed ability groups and evaluate them equally*. If they have a mixed ability group, they give the children individual targets and different tasks. With this frame they encourage competition openly, they concentrate mainly on winners and this process in not so stressful and not saturated with the feeling of regret (sorry), bad conscience and guilt. For instance: 'Set levels according to ability – some children get a stickers for 10 good answers, but others get the same stickers for five good answers (from ten)' (UK) or 'In literacy – we have five different levels: A is the highest, D and E are lower' (UK). Slovenian teachers, on the other hand, try to reach equality by emphasizing cooperation instead of competition.

Conclusions

In our study we examined teachers' views on competition in the class in three countries: Hungary, Slovenia and the United Kingdom and we found several similarities and also characteristic differences that can be connected and explained by different historical-cultural factors.

Competition was perceived to be present among students already from the first grade and was reported to appear more often spontaneously among children than due to the direct guidance and competitive structural arrangement of studies on the teacher's side. Children are perceived to compete mostly with their classmates, especially with those who are similar in their abilities.

English teachers report competition among friends reflecting a notion of competition, that is a friendly interpersonal process. Those are the English teachers too who reportedly encourage competition in the classroom the most frequently and they also list the biggest

variety of means to encourage competition among them mainly giving rewards. They are concerned with equality but they try to promote it not by escaping competitive situations but by establishing circumstances for the weak students where they can be in a fair comparative structure.

Hungarian teachers are more ambivalent about competition. They give many more examples of discouraging it than encouraging it. Because they seem to be concerned with the result of competition, namely winning or losing and they concentrate mainly on the losers, their attention is focused on protecting the weak ones from competition by escaping competitive situations where there is a chance to lose. They are sensitive to the intensity and seriousness of competitive processes and also to any kind of cheating that occurs during a competitive situation or task and in these cases they intervene by discouraging competition.

The Slovenian teachers try not to encourage competition among individual students at all. If they do encourage some kind of competition it is either intra-psychic (within oneself) or between groups and classes. They approve however competition in sports. Instead of concentrating on competition they put cooperation into the focus of attention of the students. They emphasize that it is not competition but cooperation that is important; it is not important to win but to get through the process.

Among the three groups of teachers English teachers seem to be the most straightforward and natural about competition, they speak about it as a matter of course. Hungarian teachers quite clearly struggle with it, they think it is important and necessary, but also they lack the skills to handle it in a way that takes the weak into consideration while not blocking the competition itself.

Slovenian teachers do not approve the necessity of competition: they place cooperation into the centre of their way of thinking and try to prevent any kind of competition that can turn individuals into competitive parties.

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