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Primary School Children's Views of Cooperation and Competition in England, Slovenia and Hungary: comparisons by country and by gender

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Throughout Europe there have been movements towards a more formalised education for citizenship, and discussion of what should be included in the citizenship curriculum, where in the curriculum it should be delivered and by whom (e.g. Roland-Levy and Ross 2003). However, there is recognition that the development of identity as a citizen is not just influenced by the formal curriculum. The ways in which things are done in school and the pedagogical practices of teachers convey messages about citizenship. For example, Ward and Rzoska (1994) refer to the 'implicit curriculum', which they define as the values, assumptions and principles underlying traditional educational techniques, and which have implications and consequences for student's cognitive and social development. Significantly for citizenship education they believe that (among other things) the implicit curriculum influences the way pupils interact with each other.

Competition and cooperation can both be used pedagogically in the classroom, and both represent values and skills regarded by some as important for citizenship. There is evidence that individuals in different countries perceive, evaluate and describe competition differently (for example students in Hungary, America and Japan, Fulop 1999). Fulop (2003) shows that there are differences between Hungarian teachers in the way that they construct competition, but that the distribution of these ideas in the student population is very different in Hungary when compared to Japan. This study compares the experiences and opinions of both competition and cooperation amongst pupils in three European countries: Hungary, Slovenia and the UK.

Methods

In each country children aged between eight and nine took part in 8 semi-structured focus group interviews (with 4 children in each group), from four different schools. In each school one group of boys and one group of girls were interviewed (we will be exploring gender differences in a future paper). Each group were asked the same questions in order for cross-national comparison to be achieved.

Cross-national similarities and differences: competition

Firstly, there were a number of national differences in pupils' conceptions of their teachers' attitudes toward competition. Hungarian children suggest that their teacher is happy when they get good results, and list almost a dozen rewards that teachers give for engaging in competitive tasks. They think that 'It is a joy for a teacher if the students win', and that teachers encourage competition because it helps them to learn, to do things better, and to improve their memory. They suggest that teachers rarely discourage them from competing.

In contrast, Slovenian children feel competition is encouraged in sports and tests, but not in other areas. In sports and tests the teacher wants the children to succeed and win, to enjoy the competition and to be good at what they do. Some children suggest that teachers do not encourage competitive behaviour; rather they want the children to work and not make mistakes. One teacher is reported as saying 'Everyone is good for something.'

In the UK, children suggest that teachers encourage competition in a wide variety of situations, including sport, tests and getting the answer right. They suggest that they are encouraged to take part by rewards (extra playtime or material prizes) and by being put into teams. They think that teachers do this to see how smart they are and to make them try. However, they also report teachers playing down the importance of competition. Teachers discourage competition to prevent arguments and so that there isn't any fighting or naughtiness. They will discourage competition when they want pupils not to rush and so that pupils 'don't feel bad'.

Therefore we see that in Slovenian and UK schools competition is present but not consistently encouraged; in fact in Slovenia it seems to be more usually discouraged, while the UK position is less clear. In contrast, Hungarian schools present a positive attitude towards competition and place a stress on winning.

In regards to pupils' own conceptions and experiences, there are some common experiences of competitive classroom situations in all three countries. These include: competing in class activities/games, competing to answer questions, competing in class tests and competing to finish class-work first. These are mainly classroom-based/organised activities. In addition, several of the children in Slovenia and one in the UK talk about taking part in school-wide competitions. In contrast, almost half of the Hungarian children talk about organised contests between classes or schools in a whole variety of subjects (including maths, reading, drawing and poem recital). Competition plays a more prominent role in Hungarian schools.

Outside the classroom all of the children talk about competing in sports, races, dance, music and games. Sport is a particularly strong theme in the UK and Slovenia. Slovenian children talk about competing to get to a good secondary school. There are several other areas mentioned by Hungarian children that children in Slovenia and the UK do not suggest, including competing about popularity (e.g. who will go out with a particular boy or girl), and organising competitions between themselves. Hungarian children seem to be more likely to think about areas of their lives outside school as competitive than children in the UK or Slovenia.

When the children talk about why they might enjoy competition, or why competition is good, all of the children talk about enjoying competition when it is fun/exciting/interesting and when there are prizes or rewards. The children also talk about liking to win. When compared to Slovenia and the UK, more of the children in Hungary talk about the good feeling of winning. One child suggests that 'I even lie if I won't be able to win'. Perhaps the prominence of competition in the school experience of Hungarian children makes winning more of an issue for them.

Children in all three countries suggest that competition allows you to find out/demonstrate how good you are and that it motivates you to try. However, these ideas are expressed least clearly and developed least in the UK children. UK children are also more likely to give examples of concrete situations where they like or dislike competing,

while Hungarian and Slovenian children are more likely to give reasons why they enjoy or dislike competition and what it achieves. In addition to the roles of competition expressed in all countries, Hungarian and Slovenian children also talk about competition helping them to learn more, and Hungarian children also give reasons – that competition makes them think, allows them to practice and helps their memory. So we see that for some reason Hungarian and Slovenian children are more able to articulate the purposes of competition and potential positive outcomes, with

Hungarian children having the most developed reasoning on the subject.

Interestingly there are quite striking differences in the ways that children in different countries talk about conflict in competition. Ideas about fighting and conflict in competition are least developed in Slovenia, where mention is made of quarrelling, fighting and teasing, but not developed. In Hungary children talk about quarrelling and fighting arising from competition. Similarly to the Slovenian children they are concerned about quarrelling at the end, but in contrast to Slovenian children, they particularly talk about conflict related to accusations of cheating. One child suggests that these accusations are because other children are envious, and another that they are because he is a gypsy.

Children in the UK are different in two ways: firstly that they have a very strong association between competition and conflict. Sometimes competition is equated with arguing:

Well my sister, me and my sister like arguments, like compete over stuff like television (Sedgefield Girls 2)

This is especially noticeable when they talk about adults – 5 of the 8 groups talk about arguments when they talk about adults competing.

Secondly, children in the UK speak about the emotions associated with competition and conflict. These ideas about emotion are not developed in either of the other countries. One group suggests that when people laugh at them and are nasty this makes them feel sad and angry.

In the UK it seemed children associate competition, especially losing, with conflict, argument, anger, sadness and teasing. Although children in Slovenia and Hungary mention being laughed at, and quarrelling, the association between the process of competition and conflict is stronger in the UK than in Slovenia, and also than Hungary, where it is confined to more informal competition in the playground.

Children in both the UK and Hungary say that they do not like to compete when they lose. As with the focus on 'being good' it is the Hungarian children who mention 'not winning' most often as a reason for not enjoying competition; again there seems to be a particular concern over winning and losing in Hungary.

Cross-national similarities and differences: cooperation

Slovenian children report frequent and consistent encouragement to cooperate with each other. The teacher encourages them to cooperate by putting them into groups and giving them instructions. The children explain that teachers want them to cooperate because it makes things easier and allows them to learn from each other. Children also explain that

teachers encourage cooperation so they will be able to work together when they are grown up. In contrast, Hungarian children say that their teachers never or very rarely encourage cooperation. Many of the suggestions that they make as to how teachers encourage cooperation are more about good behaviour: telling them to be kind to each other, making them congratulate winners, asking them not to cheat and to keep the rules. This fits with the earlier observations that Hungarian children often understand cooperation as good behaviour. However, they do suggest that teachers encourage them to cooperate during team games in PE. The UK position seems to be intermediate. Children suggest various times at which teachers encourage them to cooperate but also times when they are discouraged from cooperating. Sometimes they are referring to teachers encouraging them to behave well, and to get on with each other (ensuring others aren't left out, making friends through cooperation). However, they also suggest that teachers encourage cooperation so the smarter ones can help others, so you learn and so you concentrate.

In terms of the children's own experiences of cooperation, UK children tend to give short, concrete examples (English, maths etc) which are mainly focussed on the classroom and helping each other. Slovenian children focus especially on group tasks in a variety of subjects. Hungarian children tend to talk about cooperation in the context of competition. This is mentioned in briefly in Slovenia and the UK, but is common in Hungary, where children talk both about cooperation within organised school competitions and about cooperation in arguments or competitions in their free time.

Many of the children express personal likes or dislikes for cooperation or working alone. They identify factors that make cooperation more or less enjoyable. If the subject is interesting, cooperation is more enjoyable, and if it is boring it is less enjoyable. Girls link enjoyable cooperation with friendship. There are also a range of behaviours that might occur within the group that make cooperation more or less enjoyable. When others cooperate, help each other and discuss things then cooperation is enjoyable. When you are not friends, or there is arguing, or people copy, or you are blamed for mistakes, or not all of the team members make an effort, then cooperation is not enjoyable. These ideas come up in all of the countries, and are all about behaviours that can spoil cooperation. There is also a concern with being in a group that is not good in all three countries. However, there are some national differences. Hungarian and UK children focus more on why they don't enjoy cooperation, and give additional reasons. UK children express concerns about cooperation not being fair, people not taking turns, others being left out, people being silly, people being bossy and people showing off. These are all different behaviours that spoil cooperation. In addition, UK children suggest that cooperation is boring. Hungarian children add reasons to do with competition: not working with those who don't like to lose, and not working with people who cheat. They also feel that working together can cause them to make mistakes, and to progress less because they have to wait for others who are not so good. So we see that Slovenian children give fewest factors that make them dislike cooperation (although they do still express dislike for cooperation or preferences for competition at times). UK children give additional factors about non-cooperative behaviour that mean they don't like cooperation, and Hungarian children add factors associated with cooperating in a competitive setting. Hungarian children seem the most concerned about working in a group that is not good.

The children were also asked to talk about the role of cooperation in their experience and in the lives of adults. Slovenian children have the most positive view as to the role of cooperation, and are most able to relate this to society. In the context of the classroom

they spontaneously give reasons about the benefits of cooperation before being asked this directly, unlike in the other two countries. The children suggest that grown-ups who cooperate will learn more, and get on together better.

With the Hungarian children, one group suggests that they have to learn cooperation so that they can cooperate as adults. Others argue that cooperation allows them to reach a common goal, and that it can help them to learn, to work better, to work faster, or to make fewer mistakes. However, all of these ideas are contested, as other children argue that they don't improve as fast when they cooperate, that they have to wait for others who are not so good, and that they make mistakes because they are disturbed in groups. They also argue strongly that sometimes cooperation can help them to win. They have very few examples of things that are good to cooperate about, and their examples of cooperating outside school are more about helping (around the house, rescuing someone who is drowning) or of competitive situations (like war). In contrast to Slovenia, there are very few suggestions as to why cooperation is important for grown-ups. One is that it will help their work when they don't understand, and the other is that if they are cooperating in order to get something, then it is important.

The UK children talk about the role of cooperation in very vague terms. Much of what they talk about is to do with cooperation as getting on with each other, and when they talk about cooperation, much of the discussion centres around the practical things that mean they like or dislike it. However they do talk about being able to get help from smarter people so that they can do difficult work. One of the girls explains that she is doing reading and her friend is drawing for a project, and that this is a good thing. However, she is not able to explain the general principal behind this, unlike two of the groups in Slovenia. The UK children suggest that grown-ups might cooperate with the police to give evidence about a crime, to put money together to buy a car, to cook dinner and run the house or to keep children safe (by strapping them into fun-fair rides correctly). If teachers cooperated it would make the school better. However, the children are generally vague about the role of cooperation for them and in the lives of adults.

Conclusion

This analysis seems to suggest significant differences between the understandings of the nature, roles and value of competition and cooperation that children in these three educational systems are developing. Children in Hungary think in some detail about competition, and generally understand cooperation in the context of competition. We suggest that this may be because of the highly competitive schooling system, a system in which there are numerous formal settings in which children are expected to compete with each other. Thus the children are learning to value competition more than in Slovenia or the UK. In contrast children in Slovenia place more emphasis on cooperation. This is likely to be due to a deliberate policy to focus on cooperative learning within Slovenian primary schools. Children in the UK have the least developed ideas about the nature, roles and values of either competition or cooperation, and their views seem more confused than those of the other children. In the UK there has been increasing control and specification of the work of teachers, with very little space provided amidst the heavy workload of teachers for them to reflect on their personal or collective values and ideas, or for these values to play a part in policy formation (Mahoney and Hextall, 2000). This is perhaps leading to a vacuum of ideas about competition and cooperation in the 'hidden' curriculum in the UK.

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