



This paper is taken from

*Citizenship Education: Europe and the World  
Proceedings of the eighth Conference of the  
Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe  
Thematic Network*

London: CiCe 2006

edited by Alistair Ross, published in London by CiCe, ISBN 1 899764 66 6

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**Sándor, M. (2006) *Children's Views of Family and Institutional Socialization on Competition and Cooperation*, in Ross, A. (ed) *Citizenship Education: Europe and the World*. London: CiCe, pp 733-746.**

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This paper does not necessarily represent the views of the CiCe Network.



This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained herein.

#### **Acknowledgements:**

This is taken from the book that is a collection of papers given at the annual CiCe Conference indicated. The CiCe Steering Group and the editor would like to thank

- All those who contributed to the Conference
- The rector and the staff of the University of Latvia
- Andrew Craven, of the CiCe Administrative team, for editorial work on the book, and Lindsay Melling and Teresa Carbajo-Garcia, for the administration of the conference arrangements
- London Metropolitan University, for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The SOCRATES programme and the personnel of the Department of Education and Culture of the European Commission for their support and encouragement

## **Children's Views of Family and Institutional Socialization on Competition and Cooperation**

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Parents and teachers are the main socialising agents of such key interpersonal behaviours and skills like competition and cooperation. These adults have different kinds of practices and explicitly and implicitly expressed views on how to bring up children. Children need to be able to handle both cooperation and competition, and be able to function in a democratic and market oriented society that requires citizens to be good at both of these social skills. Therefore it is interesting to study their views, but in this research we found it particularly interesting to explore how children view their parents' and teachers' views on these behaviours, how the adults' views and behavioural practices are represented in children's views. We believe that what in fact influences children's development in this respect is what is understood by them, rather than what parents and teachers intend.

In this study we focused on 8 to 9 years old children's concepts of their parents' and teachers' views of competition. We interviewed 67 (33 boys and 34 girls) second graders from two primary schools with different academic levels in Budapest, and asked them about their personal experiences of discussions about competition, winning and losing with their parents and teachers. Categorical analysis of the responses showed both gender-related and school-type-related differences.

### **Introduction**

In the literature of developmental and educational psychology we don't know studies on children's concepts on competition or related phenomena (though studies of adolescents show the same tendencies), but there is a long tradition of research on children's experiences of their world. Margaret Mead provides an early example in her conversations with children and young people in New Guinea and Samoa (1930, 1961). A further early example is the work of Charlotte Büchler (1930) and her use of diaries as a mode of accessing the experience of teenage girls.

Through the history of developmental psychology, different approaches viewed the children and their development from very different aspects. These approaches differ in the way they consider children and their relation with their environment, culture and the world around them. At the beginning of the twentieth century the biological maturation approach was prevalent: this theoretical framework held that cultural effects related to development were less important and biological maturity was the main determining effect in children's development process (Gesell, 1940). Freud (1905, 0953), who focused on the development of human sexuality, also laid down that basic human motives are biologically determined, but emphasised the role of the social environment in forming these.

This paper is part of *Citizenship Education: Europe and the World: Proceedings of the eighth Conference of the Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe Thematic Network*, ed Ross A, published by CiCe (London) 2006. ISBN 1 899764 66 6; ISSN 1470-6695

Funded with support from the European Commission SOCRATES Project of the Department of Education and Culture. This publication reflects the views of the authors only, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained in this publication.

Around the 1940s there were changes in the theoretical position within psychology, especially in the area of developmental psychology. Researchers were influenced by the socialisation perspective and socialisation agents like family and school. Researchers focused on environmental variables such as gender, parent's ideas or religion to show how they affected children's views of society: their main idea was that children can not develop any understanding of societal phenomena by themselves and that they know their society by adopting the ideas and beliefs of the adults around them (Stendler, 1947)

In his universal-constructivist theory Piaget (1973) integrated the biological and the environmental approaches and emphasised that children, from the moment of their birth, are part of their social environment, the effects of which are as important as physical ones. According to this approach, children have a greater role in their own development, and those who follow Piaget believe that a particular environment does not have the same effect on all children of all ages, but the effect is dependant on the stage of their development (Fischer, Knight, 1990).

From many aspects the cultural approach is very similar to the universal-constructivist approach. Both emphasise the importance of differential stage-type changes and children's own role in the developmental process. But in the cultural approach the children and the parents both construct this process in an active way, and through culture it is more than a simple construction, it is a co-construction (Markus, Kitayama, 1991). Researchers involved in this idea accentuate the importance of the history of the particular culture in which the children are born and grow up (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, Baltes, 1987).

There are several studies about competition and cooperation in childhood, but most of these are based on laboratory methods (Madsen, 1968; Knight, G. P. & Chao, Chia-Chen, 1989). Many of these arose in the 1970s. These investigations used experimental methods, and children's behaviour was measured in dyadic games in laboratory situations. Most experimental situations derived from the Cooperation Board method of Madsen (1976). Another procedure was resource allocation measures, in which the condition of redistribution was changed. In the social values task or the Social Behaviour Scale (Kagan and Madsen, 1972) children are in a forced choice reward distributing situation, where they have to choose between two different reward allocation situations. From these experiments we learned much about children's behaviour in different – competitive, individualistic and cooperative – situations, but we do not know how they themselves think about these and how they conceptualise their behaviour, or about their parents and teachers views about competition and cooperation.

To explore children's own views about competition and cooperation and especially to explore how they think about their parents' and teachers' views about these phenomena we have to use qualitative methods.

Over the twentieth century a wide range of different qualitative methods were developed and employed in research on and with children. Many of them involve children themselves reporting on, or in some way revealing or displaying, their experience. Qualitative methods can be narrative and holistic and they are more able to capture the

full richness of experience and help us to understand how children themselves construe and negotiate their worlds.

The clinical interview is the most suitable way to discover the deeper entity of the child's mind. The possible data generated through interviews are rich and varied. The clinical interview was a method principally linked with Piaget (1929), who used this in conversations with children of different ages. Lurija (1976) followed this method with people from different cultures to map the structures of their thinking.

Later Ginsburg (1997), in his book *Entering the Child's Mind*, wrote about the importance and function of the clinical interview in psychological research and practice. Nasman and Gerber (2000) studied children's life from their own perspective by studying their communication. They made clinical interviews with 4 to 12 year old children about unemployment. Inagaki and Hatano (2002) wrote about young children's naïve thinking in relation to the biological world.

Sándor et al (2003) studied sharing behaviour in experimental situation and asked 5 to 6 year old children why they chose the given distribution in a resource allocation task. Analysis of the answers showed that children's verbal reasoning at this age already consistently followed their choices in the situations.

Our present work is a part of an extended examination of children's views about competition, cooperation, winning, losing, envy and jealousy. The focus of this particular paper is how children view their parents and teachers in terms of competition, winning and losing, what they teach to them and what kind of model they represent. We carried out clinical interviews with 67 children between the ages of 8 and 9 and asked them how their parents and teachers think about competition. We recorded the interviews, categorised the answers and qualitatively analysed them. This paper presents the result of this qualitative analysis.

### **Parental and institutional socialisation and the construct of competition**

It is an everyday practice that both parents and teachers interpret competitive situations for the child and they teach him/her - mostly spontaneously and not in a conscious or conceptual way - how one should react upon competition and how winning, losing and the accompanying emotions should be handled.

Personal experience and the reactions of the adult environment together form the conception and construct of competition, which then itself, in our view, also forms how children understand and experience competitive situations they experience later, in other words, a so-called 'co-construction' takes place, according to which the experiences and their representations construct each other mutually (as in the way Markus and Kitayama (1991) propose the functioning of culture).

It makes a difference how and in what way the direct social environment interprets competition for the child - whether competition is considered good or bad, what functions and roles are assigned to it, how winning and losing are approached, what is taught to the child about rivals and the relation to them.

Studies concerning the early institutional socialisation of competition are not known in psychological-pedagogical literature, and therefore teachers do not receive any kind of systematic preparation on how to interpret and handle the competitive situations that occur day by day by the hundred. In these situations educators proceed most likely according to their own conception of competition determined by culture.

## **Our study**

### ***Participants and methods***

We carried out clinical interviews with 67 children between the age of 8 to 9, with a mean age of 8.6 – 33 boys and 34 girls, from two primary schools in Budapest. These two schools were different from each other in their academic level – one was a higher and the other is an average academic level school.

In our clinical interviews we asked the children how their parents and teachers think about competition, how they react if they win or lose in something, how they encourage and how they discourage them in these kinds of activities.

We recorded the interviews, categorised the answers and qualitatively analysed them. In this presentation we go through the questions one by one and try to put them next to each other and analyse them together. In our analysis we try to examine if there is any difference between the two types of school (differences due to different academic level) or between boys and girls (gender differences). We were curious if teachers and parents from the higher academic level school convey the same messages to the children as teachers and parents of those who attend the average academic level school. Next to it we would like to get an answer if teachers and parents say the same about competition, winning and losing to the boys and the girls or there are some differences in the content of these messages.

### ***What does your teacher and what do your parents tell you about competition?***

We asked the children what their parents and teachers tell them if they participate in a competition, in the school or outside of it. We tried to explore messages which they receive from their parents and from their teachers about competition. We categorised and analysed the answers and collected typical messages in which the parents and teachers define competition.

#### ***Teachers' messages about competition***

First we asked them about their teachers. Most children (85%) could answer the question 'What does your teacher tell you about competition?' Only 10 children (15%) didn't answer on this question.

Hereafter we focus on those who could answer this question and we try to collect the typical messages by the teachers and study the content of these – namely what these messages can mean for the children who receive these.

What does your teacher tell you about competition?	Total (67 children: 33 boys, 34 girls)
Nothing	(9) 13%
Discourage	(1) 2%
Regulate - discourage	(6) 9%
Encourage	(41) 61%
No answer/I don't know	(10) 15%

From those who answered this question, nine children (13%) said that they never speak about competition with their teachers and their teacher doesn't tell them anything about competition. Not to speak about it, or to say nothing before a competition can be interpreted as a kind of message, too. If a child doesn't get any information about competition maybe they can draw a conclusion from it: perhaps competition is not important or something which is not beloved by his or her teacher. So this is an interesting answer. We know that teachers do not receive any kind of systematic preparation on how to interpret and handle competitive situations so they behave as a layperson in these situations and according to their personal, not professional attitude towards it.

Among those who answered the question, only one child (2%) reported that his teacher definitely did not encourage him to compete.

Other six children (9%) said that their teachers mainly discourage them in competition. Answers, like *'Be careful!'*, *'Don't fight with each other!'* or *'It's better if you behave well!'* show that these children notice the teachers' intervention related to competition only in situations that involve a fight or some kind of danger. The underlying concept is that competition is some form of 'bad' behaviour and competing is equal to indiscipline.

All the other children – 18 boys and 23 girls – (61%) reported in the interviews that their teachers – more or less – encourage them in competitions.

If we focus on these 'encouraging' messages, we can collect the most frequent messages by teachers related with competition and we can discuss what these mean to the children and the possible motives behind them. The 41 children who said their teacher encouraged them more or less to compete, gave several different messages about competition. Some children mentioned only one message, but others listed two, three or four messages they receive from their teachers. Altogether we have 65 answers in this category.

Giving concrete advice to children – as in coaching – about how to behave in a competitive situation and to be more successful during competitions can help them to achieve better in a particular situation. With messages like *'Try to concentrate better!'* or *'Practice more!'*, teachers try to help their pupils to achieve well in that particular competition. They expect them to perform better and they help them in it. These messages focus on the results, help the children to reach this, and give them the feeling of being considered.

Most frequent messages by teachers about competition	Total (41 children – 65 answers)
She gives some concrete advice	(19) 29%
• 'Trust yourself!'	(6) 9%
• 'Take it easy!'	(3) 5%
• 'Pull yourself together!'	(3) 5%
• 'Practice more!'	(3) 5%
• 'Concentrate on it!'	(3) 5%
• Concrete advices	(1) 2%
'Competition is good!'	(10) 15%
'Do well! – Be clever!'	(8) 12%
'It is not winning that is important but participation!'	(8) 12%
'Try to win!'	(6) 9%
'Good luck!'	(5) 8%
She cheers for us	(4) 6%
Other	(6) 9%

These messages are different from each other in many aspects. If we focus on the direct and concrete advice, we learn much about teachers' concepts of competition. The most frequent is the emphasis on the importance of self-confidence. Messages like 'Trust yourself!' raise children's belief about their own abilities. Other concrete messages focus on practicing, attention and reduce the stress of the competitive situation.

Sometimes teachers encourage children only to participate in competitions, saying that winning and the result of the competition is not important. 'It is not winning that is important but participation!'

Other answers like 'Do well!' or 'Be clever!' contain some expectation about the result of the competition, but in these kinds of messages children cannot find concrete advice of how to reach it.

With those messages like 'Be lucky!' or 'Good luck!' teachers also expect a result for the children, but imply that the result of the competitive process is not up to the child's ability or will, but up to something else like luck or other conditions.

#### *Parents' messages about competition*

We made a similar analysis with the answers about parental messages on competition. When we asked children 'What do your parents tell you about competition?', only six children (9%) didn't answer the question.

Hereafter we focus on those who did answer this question and collect typical parental messages and compare the content of these with the messages by the teachers.

What do your parents tell you about competition?	Total (67 children: 33 boys, 34 girls)
Nothing	(8) 12%
Discourage	(1) 2%
Regulate-discourage	(8) 12%
Encourage	(44) 65%
No answer/I don't know	(6) 9%

As we can see, there is no difference between the proportion of the discouraging and encouraging messages by the parents and the teachers. Forty-four children told us during our interviews that their parents more or less encourage competition and we have got altogether 65 answers from them. This is exactly the same amount of 'encouraging' messages as in relation with teachers. But when we analyse qualitatively the content of the messages, we can find some differences between the answers related with teachers and the parents.

Most frequent messages by parents about competition	Total (44 children – 65 answers)
They give some concrete advice	(23) 36%
• 'Practice more!'	(6) 9%
• 'Concentrate on it!'	(6) 9%
• Help us to practice	(5) 8%
• 'Pull yourself together!'	(3) 5%
• 'Trust yourself!'	(1) 2%
• 'Take it easy!'	(1) 2%
• 'Dress for sport!'	(1) 2%
'Try to win!'	(10) 15%
'Do well! – Be clever!'	(9) 14%
'Competition is good!'	(6) 9%
They cheer for us	(5) 8%
'Good luck!'	(5) 8%
'Not winning but participation is important!'	(4) 6%
Other	(2) 4%

According to the children, their parents give more concrete advice and emphasise less the importance of participation or that the result of the competition is not important. From the parental messages, the result of the competition and winning seems more important than the messages from teachers. In the analysis of the answers to the question related to winning and losing, we will examine this phenomenon in more depth. In our interviews children spoke about their parents helping them practice before a competitive action. This was a new category, in which we did not get any examples concerning teachers.

#### *Teachers and parents together*

As we analysed the children's answers about their teachers and about their parents we noticed interesting coherences. Children from the higher academic level school reported very similar from teachers and parents than children from the other school. These similar messages are different between the two schools. Parents and teachers in the higher academic level school both emphasise the importance of winning and achievement ('Try

to win!', 'Do well!' 'Be clever!'), while in the average academic level school they both focus on attention, concentration ('Concentrate on it!' 'Pull yourself together!') and discipline. Children from the average academic level school more often think that in these messages their teachers are discouraging them to compete ('Don't fight with each other!' or 'It's better if you behave well!').

***What does your teacher and what do your parents tell you about winning and losing?***

We also asked about winning and losing in our interviews. We asked children what their teachers and their parents tell them about winning and losing, and how they react to this.

At first we categorised the answers and analysed them together. During the interviews children found it easier to answer the question about 'winning' than about 'losing'. We got more answers to the first question (88%) than the second (63%). This is interesting and consistent with our previous experience: to manage a winning situation is easier than to handle a losing one.

*Different types of answers*

We studied the reactions to winning and losing. Children spoke a lot about their teachers' and parents' reactions to these concepts. We collected these categorised and them according to their presumed motives in that particular situation. After this process we could make two different groups.

The first group was of all the reactions that *focused on individual success* in the situation. For example, in connection with winning a child was told that his parents were happy or proud, or they congratulate them; or in connection with losing they are sad or speak about the competitive situation and try to find how the child can improve next time, and what the child can learn from the situation.

For example:

Focus on individual success reactions to competition:

- 'Trust yourself!'
- 'Take it easy!'
- 'Pull yourself together!'
- 'Practice more!'
- 'Concentrate on it!'
- 'Competition is good!'
- 'Try to do it as well as you can!'
- 'Try to win!'
- She cheers for us!

Focus on individual success reactions to winning:

- 'Congratulations!'
- 'You did it very well!'

- They give me some reward
- She is happy
- She is proud

Focus on individual success reactions to losing:

- 'She doesn't tell me that I did it well!'
- Give me good advices
- 'Doesn't matter, for the next competition we will practice more!'

In the second group were answers which *focused on avoiding individual failure* in the particular situation. For example, when a teacher emphasises that it is not winning but participation that is important, or when she does not let a child be openly happy after winning (or is even sad), or when she denies losing or behaves as if it was not losing and the class applauds the loser: these are all reactions in which the teacher concentrates on avoiding the failure offering consolation. Sometimes we found these kind of affective centred answers before a competitive action, when a teacher or parents try to protect their children from the negative consequences of losing.

For example:

Focus on avoiding individual failure reactions to competition:

- 'Not winning, but participation is important!'

Focus on avoiding individual failure reactions to winning:

- 'Don't stuck up with yourself!'

Focus on avoiding individual failure reactions to losing:

- 'Congratulations!'
- Give me some rewards
- 'You did it very well!'
- 'Doesn't matter!'
- 'Winning is not but participation is important!'

We compared the number of occasions in which the focus on individual success and focus on avoiding individual failure related to winning and losing, and found a very interesting difference between these two categories. In connection with losing, we found much more focus on avoiding individual failure (64% of teachers, 63% of parents) than in connection with winning (2% of teachers, 6% of parents). This could mean that teachers and parents handle losing in a more difficult way or it could mean that it is harder for children to speak about it.

*Teachers' messages about winning*

Of the 59 children who answered the question 'What does your teacher tell you about winning?' only two told us that the teacher did not say anything if they won something. We analysed the academic and gender differences.

The most frequent reaction in both types of school by the teachers about winning is to tell the children that they did it well. It seems that the teacher's happiness and pride after winning is more frequent in the higher academic level school than in the other. This could mean that teachers in the higher academic level school are more emotionally involved and express their positive emotions over winning in a more explicit way, but could perhaps mean that only the pupils from this type of school were able to notice this and report it.

What does your teacher tell you about winning?	Total (67 children)
Nothing	(2) 3%
'You did it well!'	(35) 51%
'Congratulations!'	(13) 19%
She is happy	(5) 7%
She is proud	(1) 2%
She gives some rewards	(1) 2%
'Just keep it up!'	(1) 2%
'Don't be stuck up!'	(1) 2%
No answer/I don't know	(8) 12%

*Parents' messages about winning*

We then focused on parental reactions and compared them. When we asked the children 'What do your parents tell you about winning?' from the 67 children only seven didn't answer on this question, and we have 60 (90%) answers on this question.

From the 60 children who could answer, only one child said that his parents did not say anything about winning. We collected all the reactions by parents about winning and compared these to the reactions of the teachers in the same situation.

What do your parents tell you about winning?	Total (60 children)
Nothing	(1) 2%
'You did it well!'	(30) 44%
'Congratulation!'	(12) 18%
She is happy	(8) 12%
She is proud	(1) 2%
She gives some rewards	(2) 3%
'Take care about the losers, too!'	(3) 4%

'They don't believe it!'	(2) 3%
'Winning is not, but participation is important!'	(1) 2%
No answer/I don't know	(7) 10%

The most frequent reaction by the parents to winning is that they tell their children that he or she did it well, but this was emphasised more by the parents from the lower academic level school. Parents from the higher academic level school emphasise more that winning is important, but you have to take care about the losers, too. Examples of this:

- 'Winning is good, but you have to leave someone else to win, too!'
- 'They tell me it is ok, but I have to cheer for the others!'

We also found gender differences. Parents more frequently congratulate their sons and express happiness after winning than they do for their daughters.

#### *Teachers' messages about losing*

As we mentioned earlier, we have fewer answers about the reactions to losing than for winning. From the 67 children, only 42 (22 boys and 20 girls) (63%) answered this question. From the 42 children who answered the question '*What does your teacher tell you if you lose in something?*' three children said that their teacher did not say anything or did not know that he or she had lost in something. We analysed teachers' responses about losing and analysed academic and gender differences.

What does your teacher tell you if you lose something?	Total (42 children)
Nothing	(3) 7%
Focus on individual success answers	36%
• Gives concrete advices	(8) 19%
• 'You did it well but it was not enough!'	(3) 7%
• She is sad	(1) 2%
• 'Maybe next time it will be better!'	(2) 6%
• She doesn't tell me I was good!	(1) 2%
Focus on avoiding individual failure answers	57%
• 'Next time it will be better!'	(5) 12%
• 'Winning is not, but participating is important!'	(8) 19%
• 'Doesn't matter!'	(3) 7%
• 'You did it well!' or 'Congratulation!'	(8) 19%

From this table more (57%) 'Focus on avoiding individual failure' than 'Focus on individual success' (36%) answers can be seen. In terms answers that of avoid individual failure, there are no differences between the two types of school, nor between boys and girls. But in terms of answers that focus on individual success answers, there were

almost twice the level of responses from those in the higher academic level school, and almost twice the responses from boys. Those who said their teachers did not say anything if they lost, or they did not know they had lost were all from the lower academic level school, and were all girls.

In teachers' messages about losing we also found differences according to school level. Teachers from the higher academic level school were more often sad and more often used verbal distinctions – such as 'you did it well, but not so much!' – in these situations. In the lower academic level school it was more frequent that the teacher congratulated the loser and asked the class to applaud him or her. We also found gender differences in responses on individual success. Girls more often reported their teachers were sad if they lose, and boys more frequently mentioned their teacher telling them that next time they might perform better.

#### *Parents' messages about losing*

We analysed parental reactions on losing. When we asked the children '*What do your parents tell you if you lose in something?*', of the 67 children eleven did not answer. So we have 56 answers to this question (30 boys and 26 girls) (84%). Of the 56 children, four children said their parents did not say anything about losing. We compared the results with the reactions by teachers.

What do your parents tell you if you lose something?	Total (56 children)
Nothing	(5) 9%
Focus on individual success answers	31%
• Give concrete advice	(8) 14%
• 'You did it well but it was not enough!'	(1) 2%
• They don't let me use the computer or PlayStation	(3) 5%
• ' <u>Maybe</u> next time it will be better!'	(4) 7%
• She doesn't tell me I was good!	(3) 5%
• 'Others were bigger or better!'	(2) 4%
Focus on avoiding individual failure answers	54%
• 'Next time it will be better!'	(10) 18%
• 'Winning is not, but participating is important!'	(13) 23%
• 'Doesn't matter!'	(1) 2%
• 'You did it well!' or 'Congratulation!'	(6) 11%

In case of the parents, we have almost as many who focus on individual success and on avoiding failure as in case of teachers. We found no differences between the two types of school.

## Summary

Children know a lot about competition, winning and losing and about how their teachers and parents think about these concepts. From their answers we could find typical messages in relation with competition, winning and losing.

We have found both gender and school-type differences in the content of these parental and teacher messages. These messages mediate important values about these concepts and about how to handle winning and losing. These messages have a very important role in our society.

At the time of the change in system in Hungary – in 1989 – today's children were not even born. Nevertheless, soon they will become the leaders of this rapidly changing society. They will be citizens of a society that is based on market economy, and where competition has more emphasis than in the past.

In other words, from the aspect of the development and future of Hungarian society - and economy – competition and the development and forming of related conceptions in childhood have an outstanding importance.

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