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Teachers' discourses in relation to cooperation and competition

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Introduction

Competitiveness has permeated every facet of our life today, yet we could hardly claim that this phenomenon has not applied to other social groups since the beginning of time. Evolutionary theory views competitiveness as essential to the survival of species, the fight for survival being closely related to selection. On the other hand Montague (1975) sees cooperation as the most valuable behaviour at any stage of evolution. He points out that the society itself is basically a cooperative formation. Without cooperation individuals cannot survive.

The ecological perspective in the developmental theory by Bronfenbrenner (Smith, 1998) defines the interdependency between the acts of an individual and the environmental influences as a combination of various systems, from micro to macro level. One of the key micro systems – groups of individuals who directly affect the child's life, is school. The expectations of politics and economy are reflected in the education system, which ought to prepare young people for the life in global society even though it mainly promotes values such as tolerance, equal opportunity, respect for each individual and responsibility towards others (Ross, Fülöp, Pergar, 2000).

England

The English teachers in our sample used two distinct ways of talking about competition: the first that it promotes achievement through motivation, and the second that it holds back achievement through de-motivation. In the main they tried to deal with the conflict between these two ideas by managing competitive situations so that pupils are able to achieve. A few teachers had begun to link competition to more sociological arguments about its inequitable divisive nature, and use it very sparingly. There was no mention of winning or losing, and only very coded mention of 'learning to win or lose'.

The English teachers talked about cooperation in a variety of different ways. In many cases, it was used to indicate good behaviour, and students helping each other. They were positive towards this understanding of cooperation, but were generally unaware of the main academic arguments concerning the consequences of cooperation within the classroom. They therefore tended to use cooperation 'for cooperation's sake'. The teachers vaguely linked this to qualities that might benefit pupils in the future, but none were explicit about their role in this.

England: Discourses of Competition

All of the English teachers defined competition as occurring when individuals want to achieve a 'better' result than others. It therefore involved both comparison with one or many others (individuals or groups) and the desire to be 'better'. The most common

example given by the English teachers was competing to be chosen to answer questions in class. Although there was general agreement over the basic features of competition different teachers evaluate it in very different ways.

Teachers' own experience of competition and theory of origin

For the English teachers competition has been a mixed experience. Several enjoyed competition as a child because they were good at sport or academic work, or because they enjoyed winning. These teachers were broadly positive towards competition for the individual, although believed that certain conditions had to be in place. Three teachers had not enjoyed competition when younger, and these teachers tended to be less broadly positive towards competition. Several of the English teachers attributed their reaction to competition as a child in terms of being (or not being) a 'competitive person'. Of the English teachers who expressed an opinion about the origin of competition, all described it as natural or biological, rather than socially determined or nurtured.

Teachers' opinions of beneficial/detrimental effects of competition

English teachers all acknowledged positive benefits of competition for their pupils: including enjoyment, pupil motivation, and through pupil motivation, higher achievement. However, where they were positive about competition, there is generally immediate qualification:

> I don't think it does them any harm, most of the time as long as they're not trying to compete with someone that's always going to achieve more than them (Mrs Patterson)

A few of them explicitly linked competition with high achievers, suggesting that it was not so appropriate for lower ability children:

> ....the ones that tend to be high flyers that tend to be the competitive ones, […] But I would say that the lower ability probably that level of competition probably isn't there as much (Miss Patterson).

More generally the English teachers were concerned about competition where pupils 'don't achieve' because this leads to children feeling upset. Some of the teachers saw a link between these negative feelings and a withdrawal from competitive situations. The English teachers argued that discouraged or less confident pupils do not participate fully in classroom competition, and their ability is not fully developed:

> there are some pupils who are quite dominant in the class who will make comments. […] [pupils] really know the personalities that are going to make comments and they don't want to work with them or they don't want to present something. (Interviewer: You mean they are shy of being competitive because it makes them a target?) Yes. (Miss Sherlock)

Some part of this argument about competition leading to bad feelings, withdrawal and de-motivation was presented by all of the English teachers. In addition Mr Printt

suggested that competition is stressful, and others that it can lead to showing off, quarrelling and nastiness.

These arguments are relatively pragmatic ones, focussed on the level of the individual. However, two teachers extend the argument to include socio-political ideas. Mrs Shipley and Mrs Price saw competition as something divisive, which in their own personal experience produced failure and adversity. They therefore tried to re-define competition as 'keenness' in order to acknowledge the different strengths of everyone, and provide society with the best outcome. They do not refer to the idea that competition is natural or biological and make no judgement on the origin of competition. These teachers contrasted competition and niceness. They felt that competition constantly reinforces failure. For Mrs Shipley this attitude to competition came in part from her experience of the competitive British education system. Her experience of this school was very negative, and she felt that it was 'an appalling thing to be streamed at the age of eleven, segregated in that way'. Mrs Price talked about her childhood as 'of an age when there was true competition' in which social class played some part in determining 'your place in the hierarchy.' Both teachers were beginning to express the idea that competition causes inequality, which they felt unfair.

Winning and losing

None of the English teachers talked about their pupils losing, and only Mr Printt referred to winning. He then made the only explicit reference among the English teachers to children needing to learn to deal with defeat:

> you can't all win, you know, so you've got, there's that element as well and you've got to understand that (Mr Printt)

Three of the other teachers made coded reference to children needing to deal with emotions in competition, learning that they can't all be good at everything and learning that sometimes they will be second, not first. However, none of them explicitly said children need to learn to lose. This may be because within the English educational setting there has been a problematising of both winning/losing and passing/failing (Blair 2005).

How do teachers use competition in the classroom?

Teachers had various strategies to cope with the tension they identify between the motivational effects of competition on achievement and the de-motivational effects for those who 'don't achieve'. One strategy was to promote intra-personal competition rather than competition with others, which half of the teachers identified as a way in which they manage competition. A second way to manage competition, referred to by two teachers, was to ensure that everyone is achieving, primarily through ensuring that those of similar ability are competing over the same task (this might be done by grouping pupils of similar ability in sets).

Mrs Shipley and Miss Sherlock, the English language teachers, both talked about deliberately avoiding interpersonal competition and encouraging competition between

groups, usually of mixed ability. This idea was common among the primary school teachers too. This was justified on the grounds that 'you have to make it fair.' These teachers were attempting to use competition to raise achievement and motivate their pupils, but to avoid the negative feelings associated with losing or not achieving. Primary school teachers seem to recognise more frequent use of competition in their classrooms. All of the teachers avoided talking about winning and losing and were cautious about too much competition because of its possible negative effects.

Mrs Shipley and Mrs Price were the most cautious over the use of competition, reflecting their more socio-political arguments about competition. They seemed to have made a conscious decision not to introduce social division through competition within their class. Mrs Price also regretted the introduction of competitive practices into teaching:

> once upon a time teachers just had, there was a wage scale and after you'd been there so long you went up on the wage scale but now we have all sorts of things, you know all these extra line managers and PRP [Performance Related Pay] and nobody knows what anybody else earns and it's very divisive I think. So, I think there is a little bit of competition in school that sort of grates you (Mrs Price)

These two teachers were the most vocal in protesting against the current regime of testing in English schools, although several other teachers reflected on the impact of increased examining of children on competition within their class.

> The whole things with SATs and GCSE results and testing, that kind of competition, I hate it. I don't think it's educationally valid. I think the SATs are a complete waste of time. Why they are putting children through that I have absolutely no idea and it is a complete nonsense. Educationally the tests are unsound, the results are unsound (Mrs Shipley)

Conclusion

The teachers in our sample were dealing with two distinct ideas about competition: the first that it promotes achievement through motivation, and the second that it holds back achievement through de-motivation. In the main they tried to deal with this by managing competitive situations so that pupils are able to achieve. A few teachers had begun to link competition to more sociological arguments about its inequitable divisive nature, and used it very sparingly. However, interestingly for comparison with other countries: there was no mention of winning or losing, and only very coded mention of 'learning to win or lose'.

England: Discourses of Cooperation

The teachers tended to discuss cooperation more in the context of good pupil behaviour rather as tool for learning, and did not generally deal with any wider implications of utilising cooperation in the classroom. The teachers in our sample referred to a range of different behaviours when they talked about cooperation. The majority of the teachers

referred to cooperation as good behaviour or helping each other. Some added to this the concept of working together, and some built on this to include ideas about cooperation requiring very particular skills.

For the primary teachers the most frequent reference of cooperation was to mean good behaviour:

> Interviewer: And who do they generally cooperate with?
> Miss Patterson: Me. Normally. Occasionally, there are children in here that aren't cooperative with me if they're having a bad day.

Conversely, when children behave badly, they were described as un-cooperative. A similar theme is that of being helpful, which both primary and secondary teachers commented on. This sort of cooperation is 'nice' and 'comfortable and children engage in it because others think 'she's a nice person because she cooperates'.

Although two of the primary school teachers focussed almost entirely on cooperation as good behaviour, the majority of the teachers also developed ideas about cooperation as pupils helping each other with work or sharing ideas, perhaps in partners or through questioning each other. A minority of teachers went further and constructed cooperation as a more complex interaction requiring specific skills. Mrs Shipley talked about cooperation in terms of 'critical friends' (pupils giving each other constructive feedback) and managing group dynamics, skills that have to be discovered and practised. She was the only teacher to suggest that cooperation should not just be between friends:

> I'm afraid it has to be a rule of the classroom that if you're asked to participate in something that you do it otherwise we have to remove you all together from the situation (Mrs Shipley).

Mr Printt talked explicitly about the skills his pupils need to learn in order to cooperate, especially those relating to taking on specific roles within the group. He saw cooperation as working together to complete a task, and identified particular problems that could interfere with this, such as one person doing all the work, group members not listening to each other, and disagreements over the best way to proceed. He dealt with these by drawing on the experiences of successful groups and encouraging the skills of compromise and negotiation.

Teachers' own experiences of cooperation and theory of origin

The majority of these teachers felt that they had done much less group work when at school in comparison to their pupils. Where there had been some cooperation all of the teachers remembered enjoying this, partly because they had enjoyed the subject matter and partly because of the supportive environment.

Teachers' opinions of the advantages of cooperation

Mrs Scott justified cooperation between pupils for pragmatic reasons – she was unable to help all of her students at the same time, and she would rather they cleared up their

problem with a classmate than waited for her help. However she also suggested that: 'they're going to learn a lot from each other. They're going to push each other on.' Mr Samms, Miss Sherlock and Mr Print began to express ideas that learning from each other in this way may be more effective than other learning methods, but they did not really suggest how or why.

Teachers' opinions of the disadvantages of cooperation

Mrs Scott suggested that when children work together they can become distracted and talk about other things. She also described cooperation being harder when pupils find the work hard, and suggested that pupils find algebra so hard that they can't cooperate. This fits with a concept of 'helping each other' rather than one of 'learning together'.

Teacher's use of cooperation

Teachers described encouraging cooperation occurring all the time, and very often. However, in some cases they were simply referring to good behaviour. In others, they were referring to spontaneous helping each other with work. Mrs Potts described working in pairs 'a couple of times a week' in English and Maths, although maybe every day in other lessons. Both of the English teachers and Mrs Scott described setting up their room or seating plan to encourage pupils to discuss their work. The English teachers talked about using group work frequently, as they felt it was encouraged by the 'Speaking and Listening' aspect of the English curriculum.

Teachers' views on the wider significance of cooperation

None of the teachers in our sample linked cooperation directly to the wider social world or the qualities pupils should be encouraged to develop in order to benefit future society in anything other than vague statements such as 'They've got to learn to cooperate with each other. You know, life skills and all that'.

While many of them hoped that working together would foster learning and raise achievement, only two teachers detailed how they expected this to work within the classroom. Our findings relating to the teachers in our study supports other research (Delamont and Galton 1986, Galton, Hargreaves, Comber, Wall and Pell 1999) that shows in England cooperation is under-utilised as a skill for learning. Yet recent work in Scottish schools has suggested that significant improvements in interactions were found after training for teachers and the provision of new materials encouraging group work (Christie, Livingston and Jessiman 2004). Most of the teachers in our sample did not seem to be aware of the main academic arguments concerning the consequences of cooperation within the classroom, and seemed to primarily utilise a narrower version of cooperation 'for cooperation's sake'.

Slovenia

In discussions about cooperation in the learning process in Slovenia, the term *cooperative learning* was often used but does not cover all forms of cooperation in the learning and teaching processes. Children and teachers themselves did not understand

'cooperation in learning' in the sense of its definition, 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 were *'work in groups'*, *'learning groups'* or just *'pupils' cooperation'*. According to Peklaj, 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 this paper we will use the term *cooperation in the learning process* to cover all forms of cooperation, ranging from simple help to better organised and more complex cooperative learning situations.

Slovenia: Teachers' responses on Cooperation

When asked in which situations pupils in the classroom are inclined to cooperate, primary school teachers replied that pupils cooperated in different ways: in groups, in pairs, helping the slower ones and those who had been absent; pupils were also successful in explaining syllabus topics to their classmates who might not have understood them properly; they borrowed textbooks and other learning aids, participated in organising various activities. Most pupils enjoyed such situations; there were only a few who needed teacher's assistance in joining the group. High school teachers described similar forms of cooperation, with the difference that they believed at this level solidarity (sometimes unjustly) played a stronger role and there was more cooperation among students of non-learning nature.

Pupils mostly cooperated with their classmates within the classroom: in some activities within a wider (school) context they also cooperated with pupils from other classes. They also cooperated in sports, in particular when they compete in groups against each other.

Teachers understood cooperation as a social skill which needs to be learned. Pupils learned to be responsible, tolerant, empathic and able to negotiate, they learned the importance of cooperation and learning from each other. In team work, they also acquired organisational skills, they learned to delegate tasks and accept responsibility, they discovered their own, and their classmates', weaknesses and strengths, they learned to respect other people's work, accept criticism and rejoice in their team's success.

> It is good that pupils gain experiences in cooperation as this contributes towards better quality of life; competitiveness is always present anyway, it is therefore necessary that school provides another experience as well, that is, the experience of cooperation. It is also important that pupils learn to assume different roles and not just to lead. They have to learn how to act within a team and to realise that differences among individuals can be enriching. (Primary School)

Teachers believed that the syllabuses provided a lot of opportunity for cooperative activities (work in groups, pairs, role playing, social games), in some subjects in particular (Slovene, Our Environment). It very much depends on the teacher, who can organise their work in different ways.

> We are all learning how to cooperate, how to delegate work, to listen, to respect other person's opinion. We play social games where pupils can experience how it feels when you are at the losing end, when you need help, if someone laughs at you… (PS)

Cooperation could be abused when some pupils try and present other pupil's work without their own input. There were also examples when pupils for various reasons (behavioural problems or bad experiences) did not wish to cooperate with some of their classmates. Pupils sometimes turned a cooperative situation into a competitive one: instead of cooperating, they started working each for themselves, even hiding results from one another; or smaller groups were formed which then competed one against the other.

> Cooperation is not advisable in tests and exams. The same applies to complaints about school: encouragements like 'write it down all together' is sometimes counterproductive. When it turns negative, it just deepens and can become less manageable. (Mr.Stanic)

Teacher's personal experience of cooperation from her/his school days

Teachers often claimed that as pupils they enjoyed various forms of cooperation, social contacts and the feeling they could help somebody or ask for help when needed. Primary school teachers were more likely to emphasise that their positive experiences from school were important but even more important were their positive experiences with their pupils now: if they saw that pupils are successful and happy when using this method, they were more likely to use it more frequently.

> I enjoyed cooperative tasks but that was quite complicated as cooperation is not a simple issue. It is often easier to do something on your own, under your own steam, rather than negotiate and worry about how to split something, for example, an award, and how much you should take for yourself. (Mr. Stanic)

Slovenia: Teachers responses on Competition

Thinking about competitive situations, teachers believed that in the first years of primary school there is not much competition, it mainly appears in situations related to volume and speed, most notably in Physical Education where tasks inherently encourage competition. It also appears in relation to assessment where products are awarded by points. In descriptive assessment, there is no scope for competition. Children sometimes also compete over who will make or bring to school more materials than necessary. Sometimes, there was a competition going on between groups but vary rarely when each pupil works on her/his own. Some children withdrew in competitive situations. Pupils liked to compete as a class against other classes; such competition was very prominent in various activities, such as collecting waste paper or competing for 'cleaner teeth'. Otherwise, there was no apparent competitiveness in the lower primary school in the sense of peer rivalry; teachers often talked about 'healthy competitiveness' in the sense of an effort for good results without any negative feelings about oneself or about others.

When asked when and how they encouraged children to compete, teachers gave the replies such as:

> Even though I am mainly trying to encourage them to compete against their own previous results, they of course want to compete one against the other, especially against better students in the classroom with whom they compare themselves. (PS)

High school teachers also believed there was more competitiveness between classes or between schools rather than within the classroom, where it became more prominent only when students are collecting points.

> Competition is disguised because it is generally believed that it should not be obvious, but when you play a language game it becomes obvious because in a game competitiveness is acceptable. When it comes to school work – others think you are a nerd. It's a matter of hidden objectives. It shows when points are involved. It is also related to the age – in puberty they don't want to stick out which is bad for better students. If the whole group is ambitious it pulls everyone. (Ms.Sivec)

Competitiveness was encouraged when students competed against their previous results and by the frontal questions method. It was encouraged to develop critical thinking and arguing skills needed in confrontations.

> … they already have the capacity for a personal interpretation, forming arguments - in this way they are learning the discourse needed in competition in real life. (Mr. Stanic)

Teachers' personal experiences from their own school days

Having their own experiences, teachers found it easier to understand the potential conflict within a group and were more aware how important it is for each individual to be accepted by the group. When reflecting on their own school years and competitive situations they mostly did not recollect any bad experiences:

> Even though I wasn't always successful I can't claim that I didn't like competitive situations. You learn to accept losses, provided they are not constant and alternate with successes. (PS)

Teachers believed that syllabuses did not include topics and themes which would explicitly encourage competitiveness. However, grades, points, number of errors, length of essay are all elements which inherently include competitiveness. More competitive were extracurricular activities (regional, national competitions).

Conclusion

According to all the teachers we interviewed, our society today needs people who know both how to cooperate and to compete. Awareness of positive and negative factors in

both phenomena could help teachers develop such methods of work that would prepare children for life in which they would be able to cooperate and compete in a tolerant, responsible and respectful way. The teacher educates his/her pupils also by his/her personality, his/her way of communication and his/her responding to different situations in the classroom during lessons as well as during breaks.

Teachers believed that it is mainly cooperation that should be encouraged in school. By encouraging different forms of cooperation they believed they are developing tolerance and openness to different ideas and the ability to learn from each other. Lower primary school teachers often emphasised that cooperative situations enable the pupil to feel accepted and to enjoy the results achieved by the whole group. They also believed that the syllabuses encourage cooperation, however, the teacher plays the key role in facilitating it in the classroom. How much the child enjoys learning and how much effort they put into his work is related to how much they enjoy school. Even though teachers maintained that their responsibility is mainly to encourage cooperation (every child needs to feel accepted by his peers), they found acceptable also those forms of competitiveness which enable children to realise their need to be independent, creative and successful, to test their knowledge and their courage. It boosts their motivation. It is necessary, however, to create such conditions in which no child's integrity is under threat (being laughed at, treated in a demeaning way). Nevertheless, teachers believed there is so much competitiveness in the society anyway that school should mainly teach children how to cooperate. High school teachers, on the other hand, believed cooperation is beneficial mainly to the less successful students while competition and confrontation provide opportunities for students to develop thinking supported by arguments which they rarely volunteer without teachers' encouragement in fear to be seen as nerds.

We conclude this paper with the replies of one teacher who answered to two questions related to cooperation and competitiveness in her day-to-day life and to the meaning of both phenomena for the society:

> At my age, there are fewer cooperative situations. Of course, there is a lot of it in the family, but elsewhere there is more competitiveness. These are developmental situations in life – careers; later on, when people are over their dreams about what they had wished to be in their life, they become again more dependent on others – helplessness is usually the reason for cooperation.

> In Slovenia, people are not used enough either to cooperation or competition. Too many things are still tied to the old ways – who you know, family conditioning. An open society will do away with this state of affairs and people will have to get used to quality selections in order to succeed on the European and world stage. (Mr. Stanic)

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