Teachers' and Pupils' Constructions of Competition *and* Cooperation

A three-country study of Slovenia, Hungary and England

Učiteljevo in učenčevo razumevanje sodelovanja in tekmovanja

Študija v Sloveniji, Madžarski in Angliji

EDITED BY / UREDNIKI

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This highly original text in the educational literature examines competition and cooperation in real educational environments, taking into consideration the perspectives of all the various actors. Using the same analytic tools in the schools of three different societies allows significant insights into the role of various cultures and practices to impact on the way in which pupils and teachers construct and use the process of cooperation and competition in teaching and learning.

This book will be useful for teachers, psychologists, educationalists and educational policy makers. It will also allow those involved in business to have an insight into how the future workforce in these three countries are socialised towards competition and cooperation.

Pričujoči izvirni tekst v edukacijski literaturi proučuje tekmovanje in sodelovanje v dejanskem učnem okolju z ozirom na različne perspektive vpletenih. Uporaba istih analitičnih orodij v šolah v treh različnih družbah omogoča pomemben vpogled v pomen vloge različnih kulturnih praks pri načinu kako učenci in učitelji vzpostavljajo in uporabljajo proces sodelovanja in tekmovanja pri poučevanju in učenju.

Knjiga je uporabna za učitelje, psihologe, pedagoge in tiste, ki se ukvarjajo z edukacijsko politiko. Podjetnikom pa bo nudila vpogled v načine, kako se bodoča delovna sila v treh deželah vpeljuje v tekmovanje in sodelovanje.

University of Ljubljana
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Alistair Ross, Márta Fülöp
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Chapter 1

The background to this study

Zasnova študije

Alistair Ross
Márta Fülöp
Marjanca Pergar Kuščer

This study examines how teachers in three countries variously construct the meaning of competition and cooperation in their professional practice and discourse. From this, we examine the role of teachers and schools in contributing to pupils' construction of these concepts. Our analysis attempts to relate practice and discourse to the different educational policies and behaviours that are found in England, Hungary and Slovenia: we suggest that the differences we describe between teachers and pupils in the three countries are not accidental, but arise from the educational cultural practices that are found in each state. Although not arising by chance, these differences are not necessarily the intended outcome of policy initiatives: for the most part, they are unplanned, even unnoticed, consequences of educational cultural traditions that are entrenched or implicit and largely uncharted. As well as describing the practices we observed, and the discussions we had with teachers, we talked about these concepts with groups of these teachers' pupils, to see how young people were constructing these ideas of competition and cooperation, and if these bore any relationship to the understandings of their teachers. Finally, this study seeks to relate the way in which these terms are understood by teachers and pupils to broader socio-political concepts within the context of the developing European Union, and the growing foci within the policies of the union on shared citizenship, with its implicit sense of a shared cooperative perseverance, and enterprise, which has marked overtones of competitive ventures.

The study was supported by the British Academy, the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and the Slovenian Academy of Sciences. We brought these three particular countries together for a variety of reasons. They represent what have been three very different economic and political systems, now brought together in joint membership of the European Union. While Hungary and Slovenia had both had communist regimes between the late 1940s and 1989, Slovenia had been part of the Yugoslav state, which, unlike Hungary, had since 1947 attempted to forge an independent socialist state outside the ambit of the Soviet Union. Hungary, after a failed attempt to 'free' itself in 1956, remained within the Soviet block. England, part of the United Kingdom, had developed a largely mixed economy, but was firmly within the western group of capitalist economies and had at times had a particularly free market orientation. Within the soviet bloc, Hungary had a somewhat more prosperous history; and with Yugoslavia the Slovenian region had also been wealthier than any of the other regions. Competition and enterprise might thus have been supposed to have developed in the forty years from 1950 in very different ways in these three countries, and perhaps since then to have converged. There may well have been similar differences between these countries in ideas about cooperative behaviour. Conceptions of nationality and citizenship will also have varied: the United Kingdom and Hungary both with long traditions of independent (or at least semi-independent) existence – though both with significant territorial losses and boundary changes taking place in the early 1920s. In contrast, Slovenia developed independence for the first time in 1990, and created its own sense of national identity at this point: but there have also been national identity

issues in England, as the United Kingdom has since 1997 developed a more clearly articulated devolution of powers to its various constituent countries, leaving England in some senses in search of a cohesive identity. These three countries this offer an interesting set of contrasts in which to examine how the educational system might play a role in the construction of these two ideas of cooperation and competition, which we will argue have particular importance in creating the social identity of a country.

Competition and cooperation appear to be characteristic of all societies, but both are particularly complex concepts, and are intimately and intricately related to each other. An example taken from some observations made in a school in the early stages of this study may serve to demonstrate this.

Researchers from the three teams – English, Hungarian and Slovenian – were making preliminary observations in a school in Budapest, as part of the process of understanding what these concepts might mean in the context of school practices. We watched a class of 12 year old children over the course of a morning. One of the lessons was physical education. The class were divided into two teams, and began a game of handball. We were told that they had only very recently been introduced to the fundamentals of the game. The ball had to be hit across a high net, about 2.5 meters above the ground. The ball could not be held and should not touch the ground: if it did, the team who allowed this to happen lost a point.

Initially all the children, on both teams, acted very much individually. The child nearest the point where the ball came over the net attempted to hit the ball directly back over the net. Often they were too far from the net, and their shots fell short (a point lost): the more successful shots were lobs that gave the opposing team an easy chance to intercept and attempt to hit back.

After about ten minutes of this play, one side made a discovery. If the ball was passed to a member of the team standing close to the net, rather that being aimed over the net, then this team member could play the ball on over the net in a much more controlled way – with a fast shot that couldn't be intercepted, or the player could leap up and make a shot directly downwards over the net, or more accurately aim for an area of the court not covered by the opposition. The game was transformed: the team with this strategy took a decisive lead, scoring point after point against an apparently bemused opposition, who seemed unable to figure out what was happening.

After this lesson the research team discussed what we had observed. The group of researchers from one country saw the lesson as a classic example of competition. The game itself was predicated on competition between two groups. The members of each team were clearly vying to succeed, to score points to win. The individual players on both sides were positioning themselves to try and intercept the ball, and to do this and have the chance to score rather than allow their fellow team-members the opportunity

to score: several would rush to where the ball was coming over the net, and compete to hit it back. The group of researchers from the second country disagreed. Of course, this was a competitive situation in that a team was expected to win. But the purpose, in educational terms, was primarily and explicitly to encourage physical activity, not as a competition. Even in the early part of the game we observed, members of each team were cooperating together, spacing themselves out to cover their side of the pitch – they were observed looking at each other, moving apart to get maximum coverage. Of course, when the ball came over the net, several players would converge to a point – but this was to ensure that the ball was intercepted for the team, not simply individuals competing to be the one making the return. And the team that had discovered so dramatically, and so successfully, how to play in collaboration as a team had demonstrated precisely the benefits of cooperation. Subordinating individual aspirations and thoughts of personal advantage, each member of the team had learned a valuable lesson. The group of researchers from the third country broadly concurred: what we had observed was a team competition, in which one team in particular had demonstrated how teams must cooperate if they are to be successful. It could be argued that the purpose of encouraging team games as an educational activity was not simply to promote physical development and growth through exercise, but the social lessons associated with working together as a unit, working in partnership with other members of the team so that all could share in the success of the group.

This experience – and our various reactions to it – have prompted the development of this monograph. In the course of this project, which we describe in detail in chapter five, we have gathered and analysed a wealth of detail about how teachers understand, construct and practice these two concepts. What particularly marks out this study is that it so clearly demonstrates how different cultural traditions and professional practices influence how teachers construct these ideas, and how they pass these ideas on – wittingly or not – to their pupils. What is of particular interest in this study, we believe, is that these ideas are developed by groups of teachers in different ways, under different local conditions, and this leads to different local discourses of competition and cooperation. This is rather different from the construction of scientific concepts, for example of mass or of the nature of light. In such instances, studies have shown how some teachers may indeed misconstruct these concepts: non-science specialist teachers introducing general elementary science often confuse mass and weight, and struggle with wave/particle theories of light. But these conceptual constructions are confused by very common misconceptions, that suggest that there are near universalistic 'common-sense' (and wrong) views of these concepts, and that these can be 'corrected' when teachers are properly taught the accepted shared scientific constructions. The differences in how teachers construct these concepts is not related to local variations in culture or local pedagogic cultures or policies, but to more general issues of understanding scientific abstractions. Equally, there are other kinds of concepts, where it might be expected that teachers in different countries would promote very different understandings. In large areas of history, for example, or

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