



COMPETITION and the CULTURE

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COMPETITION is the central motivating technique of the traditional American classroom. It is an acquired characteristic that is learned from the culture. In a learning situation, competition has various negative effects on children, but educationally sound alternatives to classroom competition do exist.

There are many findings to support the hypothesis that competition among children is not an instinctive phenomenon. According to Greenberg's¹ study of the behavior of children in controlled competitive situations, no competitive behavior was observed at two to three years of age. Children showed a marked increase in competitive behavior from 0.0 percent at 2-3 years to 86.5 percent at 6-7 years.

McKee² studied competitiveness among preschool children from differing socioeconomic levels and found significantly more competition between children from low levels than from middle levels. Also, more competitiveness occurred between older children than between younger. The investigators sug-

gested that perhaps (a) parents from the lower socioeconomic levels permitted or even encouraged competitiveness in their children and (b) in the absence of parental intervention, the children's own trial and error methods of interacting in the peer group resulted in increasing competition.

In both the McKee and Greenberg studies, greater competitiveness was observed among older children, so it is possible to hypothesize that competition is a learned trait that is reinforced by the culture.

According to Staats,³ children require training before they will find it rewarding to compete with, or to excel over, others. After appropriate conditioning experiences, however, children can become very competitive. They will then have internalized a system in which rewards are based on competition. Before such conditioning, children will not respond positively to a situation where rewards are tied to competing and winning. Teachers may recall instances in which young children have to be told not to help each other and where the children clearly want to help each other.

¹ P. Greenberg. "Competition in Children: An Experimental Study." *American Journal of Psychology* 44: 221-48; 1932.

² J. McKee and F. Leader. "The Relationship of Socio-Economic Status and Aggression to the Competitive Behavior of Preschool Children." *Child Development* 26: 135-42; June 1955.

³ A. Staats. *Child Learning, Intelligence, and Personality*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1971.

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In general, the behavior of helping or seeking help from another is not reinforced in the traditional classroom. Furthermore, some children do not bring with them to the schoolroom a background of winning or of achievement, and for them competition is not a stimulus to learning, but a reminder of past failures and a possible threat.

Cultural Differences

Not all cultural and educational systems, however, are oriented toward competition. In some cultures individual competition is highly rewarded, in others group competition is rewarded; in still others competition is not rewarded at all.

The Israeli Kibbutz

Because competition is not perceived by the kibbutz as a desirable social phenomenon, it is totally absent as a motivational classroom technique.⁴ Children are taught both individually and in groups, and teaching methods vary from person to person or group to group. All students are promoted at the end of the year because any other system, it is felt, would stigmatize the dull and violate the principles of equality and opportunity. Examinations are considered unnecessary, but recently take-home questionnaires have been introduced whose answers indicate a student's level of performance, not his passing or failure.

Group competition does exist outside the classroom in sports and other activities, but there are few opportunities for personal successes or failures. Seventeen of 28 high school students interviewed denied that they were competitive in any sense and expressed a desire to be equal rather than superior to others.

The Soviet Schools

In the USSR individual striving is rewarded only when it takes place within the

⁴ M. Spiro, *Children of the Kibbutz*. New York: Schocken Books, 1965.

framework of approved group goals.⁵ The primary motivating force in the classroom seems to be cooperation, to maintain and strengthen the welfare of the group. The collective, not the individual, is the focus of the reward and may take the form of the child's entire class, his after-school Young Pioneer group, his arithmetic team, etc.⁶ Although group competition is commonly used, it is not completely approved because Soviet educators feel it has negative effects upon slower pupils.

Following the principle of individual subordination to the collective, children entering school are given small responsibilities within the room. Responsibilities to the group are increased as the children get older. The literature does not offer evidence that children are urged toward individual excellence.

Soviet theory places greater educational value on a stable, heterogeneous class arrangement in which students help each other and carry out a variety of tasks together than on an arrangement in which children are grouped according to their achievement on a certain date. Research centers on the learning process—what helps or hinders learning.⁷

Individual tests are administered on a nationwide basis several times during the school years, and further education is based on level of achievement. Apparently Soviet educators do not see an inconsistency here and are confident that their instructional methods provide adequate preparation for individual performance tests.

Bright children have opportunities to do advanced work in their specialties by entering national olympiads.⁸ The highly organized after-school activities, available to

⁵ S. Rosen, *Education and Modernization in the USSR*. Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1971.

⁶ U. Bronfenbrenner, *Two Worlds of Childhood: U.S. and U.S.S.R.* New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1970.

⁷ D. Levin, *Soviet Education Today*. New York: John DeGraff, 1959.

⁸ *Soviet Commitment to Education*. Report of the first official U.S. Education Mission to the USSR. Washington, D.C.: Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1959.

all, permit development of talents and interests in nonacademic areas.

The Japanese School

In Japan competitiveness is considered an undesirable personal characteristic, and schools reflect this. The emphasis in physical education is on physical fitness, not team sports. Society and the family have always been strong forces for shaping behavior, so they contribute their influences to noncompetitive actions and attitudes. Today Japanese social and educational philosophy seems to be founded on the goal of promoting the national interest through cooperative means.

American Schools

Our own culture rewards individual competition, and our classrooms are examples of this cultural orientation. As a motivational technique, competition can be considered a challenge only if a child assumes he will be among the winners and not the losers. Children from deprived culture groups often bring a history of failure to the classroom so that a competitive situation serves as a further environment for failure. Similarly, children who bring with them personal insecurities will feel threatened in a competitive classroom.

Threat has an extremely negative effect on a learning situation because it causes perceptions and energies to focus on the threat itself instead of on the material to be learned.⁹ Because threat appears to cause rigidity in behavior and resistance to changing one's perceptions, the resulting state of mind is not receptive to new learning.

Generalizations can be drawn from many studies by Deutsch¹⁰ that group productivity is greater when individuals interact cooperatively, not competitively. Moreover, in competitive situations individuals tend to

expect hostility from others, bringing about personal insecurities, and may replace task directedness with hostility directedness.

If we believe that children need to have good self-concepts and to have confidence in their own abilities in order to learn and perform intellectual tasks, then it is imperative that the classroom situation provide many opportunities to develop these attributes. John Holt, Jonathan Kozol, and others have amply documented the failure of the traditional classroom in this respect.

Alternatives to Competitive Orientation

Bloom¹¹ has described a method which he calls mastery learning, in which levels of mastery or achievement are set and the student is graded on his performance relative to this level and is not ranked according to class position. This frees the student to concentrate on the learning and removes the threat of inter-student competition. Tests are used that show the student how far he has progressed toward the mastery level and in what specific areas he needs more study. A variety of teaching techniques are applicable.

Bayles¹² has described a system of reflective teaching in which a question is raised and study follows to determine the answer. The teacher acts as chairman of a group of investigators. Tests are given to assess both objective and interpretational learning. Teachers reported remarkable gains in standardized test scores as well as positive changes in attitude toward schoolwork and toward fellow students. Reflective teaching seems to create a setting in which learning becomes an active rather than a passive phenomenon and in which students assume the responsibility for learning.

North Dakota's New School offers an educationally sound alternative in the form of children progressing at a rate appropriate to their own capacities and stages of develop-

⁹ A. Combs. "Intelligence from a Perceptual Point of View." *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 47: 662-73; July 1952. (Reprint.)

¹⁰ M. Deutsch. "An Experimental Study of the Effects of Cooperation and Competition upon Group Process." *Human Relations* 2: 199-231; 1949.

¹¹ B. Bloom. "Learning for Mastery." *UCLA Evaluation Comment*, Vol. 1, No. 2; May 1969. (Mimeographed reprint.)

¹² E. Bayles. *Democratic Educational Theory*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1960.

ment.¹³ The aim is to prepare teachers who will be able to individualize instructional programs and to establish environments in which intellectual learning and positive psychosocial characteristics can flourish. The teacher's role is seen as observing, stimulating, and assisting children in their learning. One specific anticipation is that the classroom environment will improve the quality of interpersonal relationships among students and between students and teachers.

The British Infant School approaches education from the standpoint of the strengths, needs, and interests of the children.¹⁴ Teaching begins with the experiences the children bring to the room and moves steadily toward a more disciplined effort. Again we find that the quality of the various relationships is of supreme importance, as is an atmosphere that promotes learning and healthy social and emotional states. The integrated approach is used; that is, art, reading, and the lunch period are given equal consideration as learning situations.

Does competition produce negative social behavior in all settings? Phillips¹⁵ found

¹³ V. Perrone and W. Strandberg. "The New School." *Elementary School Journal* 71: 409-22; May 1971.

¹⁴ J. Featherstone. "The British and Us." *New Republic* 165: 20-25; September 11, 1971.

¹⁵ B. Phillips and L. D'Amico. "Effects of Cooperation and Competition on the Cohesiveness of Small Face-to-Face Groups." *Journal of Educational Psychology* 47: 65-70; February 1956.

data to suggest that, in the following controlled situations, competition does not appear to have undesirable effects on interpersonal relationships: (a) where individuals are about equally matched, and (b) where rewards are equally distributed. However, where competing individuals are unequally matched and/or rewards are unevenly distributed, negative relationships are formed.

In conclusion, the evidence presented here would seem to indicate that a competitively oriented classroom does not strongly promote learning or strengthen interpersonal relationships or contribute to healthy psychosocial attitudes.

Various techniques and theories are available to the teacher who may wish to move away from a competitive orientation. For example, competitive threat may be removed by criteria-referenced tests instead of norm-referenced tests, a procedure called performance-based education. Behavior modification can be used to reinforce cooperation and behaviors that strengthen peer relationships.

Both the British Infant School and the New School proceed from children's strengths and interests to more structured disciplines. Should competition be desired as a motivating force, the teacher can set up groups of equally matched students and reward them on an equal basis. □

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