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Received: 2025-12-31; Revised: 2026-03-13; Accepted: 2026-03-17; Published online: 2026-08-28

THE PROBLEM OF PROMOTING RIVALRY IN THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT AND CONSEQUENCES FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF PEER RELATIONS. ANALYSING THE TOOLS WHICH PROMOTE COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

Abstract: This article examines the pervasive nature of competition in educational settings and its impact on peer relationships and learning outcomes. Drawing on theoretical frameworks and empirical research, this study analyses how structural and intentional competition shapes the school environment. The article argues for a critical evaluation of competition-based pedagogical practices and proposes examples of collaborative learning activities for teachers to use with children. The author presents specific methods for building a cooperative classroom atmosphere and analyses their educational value in the context of students' social competence development.

Keywords: school competition, classroom cooperation, peer relationships, collaborative learning, educational environment

1. Introduction

Contemporary schooling is deeply embedded in a culture of competition, which permeates not only assessment practices but also everyday classroom interactions. From an early age, students are encouraged to compare themselves with others, strive for individual success, and perceive peers as rivals rather than partners in learning. This competitive orientation is reinforced through grading systems, rankings, rewards, and punishments, which shape students' motivation, emotional experiences and interpersonal relationships. As a result, competition has become an almost unquestioned element of school practice, despite growing concerns about its psychological and educational consequences.

Research in educational and social psychology indicates that competition in learning environments may be associated with increased anxiety, fear of failure, and a tendency to focus on avoiding mistakes rather than pursuing understanding

and mastery. Such conditions can inhibit creativity, reduce students' willingness to participate actively, and negatively affect peer relationships. By contrast, a substantial body of research highlights the benefits of cooperative learning, highlighting its potential to enhance academic achievement, foster positive social interactions, and support students' emotional well-being.

The present article aims to explore the role of competition and cooperation in the school classroom, with particular emphasis on cooperative learning as an alternative to competitive instructional models. Drawing on classic and contemporary research, the article examines how different forms of goal structures influence students' motivation, emotional experiences, peer relationships, and learning outcomes. In addition, it presents practical examples of cooperative learning activities that can be implemented in primary education, illustrating how theoretical assumptions can be translated into everyday teaching practice.

2. The classic works of educational theorists addressing the importance of interaction and cooperation

When discussing the value of cooperation in groups and the benefits it may bring to the development of children and adolescents, it is useful to refer to the classic works of educational theorists such as Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky.

According to Piaget, social interactions play a crucial role in a child's cognitive development because they enable the confrontation of one's own understanding the world with the perspectives of others. Piaget emphasised that children initially display an egocentric mode of thinking, interpreting reality primarily from their own point of view. Only through contact with peers and engagement in joint problem-solving does the need arise to coordinate different perspectives. Such confrontation leads to what Piaget described as the decentralisation of thinking and supports the restructuring of cognitive schemas. In this sense, cooperation among children becomes an important factor in intellectual development, as it requires negotiating meanings, justifying one's own judgments, and taking into account the arguments of others (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969).

The importance of social interaction in the learning process is even more strongly emphasised by Vygotsky. In his view, cognitive development has a fundamentally social character, as higher psychological functions first emerge at the level of interactions between individuals, and only later become internalised by the individual. In *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*, Vygotsky introduced the concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD), defined as the difference between what a child can accomplish independently and what can be achieved with the support of a more competent person or through cooperation with others. Joint activity, dialogue, and guidance from teachers or peers, therefore, create conditions in which a child can reach a higher level of reasoning than in individual work. In this sense, cooperation and social

interaction constitute key mechanisms supporting the processes of learning and cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978).

3. Structural competition and intentional competition

Referring to more recent literature, Alfie Kohn, in *No Contest. The Case Against Competition* (2022), the author identifies two types of competition: structural competition and intentional competition. Both forms can be observed in the school environment, and in each case, it is important to consider their consequences.

Structural competition refers to situations in which individuals strive for mutually exclusive goals, which can be summarised as: for me to succeed, you must fail. This reflects a zero-sum logic in which person's gain is another's loss (Kohn, 2022, p. 12). Many examples of structural competition can be found in everyday school life, including physical education classes based on competitive games, as well as subject lessons that incorporate competitive activities to increase engagement.

Intentional competition, on the other hand, also common in the schools, refers to the inclination to compete with others. In this type of competition, the individual's aim to compete with others, more or less consciously, comes into play. An example from school life might be competing to be the most popular person in the class in the eyes of peers, even though this is not associated with any concrete reward. Psychoanalyst Karen Horney, referring to the neurotic personality, indicated that a characteristic of such a person is "constantly comparing oneself and evaluating oneself relative to others, even in situations that do not require it." (as cited in Kohn, 2022, p. 14) Therefore, the question arises whether intentional competition appears spontaneously in an environment focused on constant competition and activities built on structural competition, or whether it is created in the consciousness of an individual student towards the other members of the class. Another obvious question is how competition affects relationships within the peer group and between students, and how it affects the creation of an atmosphere free from unhealthy anxiety.

Another academic who has addressed the issue of competition in schools is Bogusław Śliwerski. He underlines that the greatest concern arises from how teachers organise individual competition, arguing that fostering the desire for personal success at the expense of others is detrimental to social interactions. It leads individuals to outpace one another in a race to complete the same task more quickly and to establish dominance over others. Competitors strive for one and the same indivisible goal. Once again, this situation is reduced to a zero-sum logic: only one person can win, while another must lose an equivalent amount. As a result, rivals come to perceive each other as a threat, which naturally gives rise to antagonistic relationships. In such cases, individual success is necessarily achieved at the cost of others (Śliwerski, 2022, p. 189).

In the context of school and individual learning, anxiety can also have a significant impact on learning effectiveness. Undoubtedly, classroom competition in the previously mentioned activities sets rivals against each other. Competition causes feelings of anxiety, which makes it more difficult to achieve success. The vision of failure and the memory of past failures when participating in similar events or activities causes anxiety, stress, and negative connotations. This can be manifested in difficult emotions for pupils, which are significant for teaching effectiveness. However, might this anxiety motivate pupils to achieve better results? Kohn strongly believes that competition has a devastating impact on the psyche, claiming that it often leads to anxiety, which acts as an obstacle to learning. (Kohn, 2022, pp. 82–83). The overriding goal becomes avoiding failure, which is not the same as striving for success. In school practice, the reluctance to experience failure often causes a reluctance to speak up in class, a wish not to stand out, or a fear of being ridiculed by peers. Such an atmosphere does not foster creative problem-solving and does not, therefore, foster effective learning either.

4. Muzafer Sherif's study and conclusions applied to the school classroom

In his 1954 *Robbers Cave* experiment, Muzafer Sherif – a Turkish social psychologist – examined the concepts of cooperation and competition. During a summer camp, a group of 24 boys aged 12 were divided into two groups of approximately equal abilities. For five consecutive days, the boys worked together on cooperative tasks, prepared meals together, set up camp, and engaged in a range of other collaborative activities. Each group jointly established a division of tasks and responsibilities, as well as a group name, thus giving it a specific identity and rules of conduct that applied to them. During observation, it was noted that the cohesion and solidarity of both groups increased; their actions were unified and directed towards the common success of completing tasks. In the final stage of the study, both groups were tasked with competing against each other, with a valuable prize awaiting the winning group. While initially this competition took place in a relatively peaceful and friendly atmosphere, after a short time, the groups began to show dislike toward each other, even hostility. The defeated group became disorganised and conflicts that arose from the defeat were difficult to resolve. Nevertheless, the gradual reintroduction of conditions of cooperation, guided by a common goal that was also attractive to the participants, caused the gradual cessation of conflict between the feuding groups. The conclusions drawn from the study were that, under conditions of cooperation, the cohesion of the team performing tasks increases, as does discipline and effectiveness in information transmission, as well as the effectiveness of tasks performed both by individual members and by the team as a whole.

What if we applied this example to school life? What if we considered the statement: it is easier for me to succeed if you succeed as well? The concept

of positive interdependence was introduced by Morton Deutsch, who defined it as: “My success depends on yours.” (as cited in Kohn, 2022, p. 253). The first significant book devoted to cooperative learning – *Learning Together and Alone* – was written by David Johnson, a student of Deutsch, and his brother Roger. Kohn draws upon this earlier research in his idea of structural cooperation, which emphasises the need for joint action to achieve success. He summarises the concept as:

I can succeed only if you succeed, and vice versa. Reward is based on collective performance. Thus, a cooperative classroom is not simply one in which students sit together or talk with each other or even share materials. It means that successful completion of a task depends on each student and therefore that each has an incentive to want the other(s) to succeed. (Kohn, 2022, p. 16)

Cooperative learning broadly refers to striving towards a shared goal within a class or group. A well-functioning group often achieves greater success than each of its members working individually. Everyone shares their talents and resources and benefits from working with each other. This also happens because when one student grasps an idea more quickly and has the opportunity to explain it to a classmate, it benefits both participants. The learner receives knowledge presented from a peer’s perspective, while the one explaining reinforces their command of the material. Such ‘spiral learning’, if we may call it so, is an important element of education and knowledge consolidation. Those who teach may understand what they have absorbed the material even better because “they must explain it to someone else [...] and the methods can be applied in a context other than the task performed” (Foot et al., 1974, cited in Kohn, 2022, p. 266).

In addition to this, working in a group stimulates creativity. One student’s idea can inspire another student, who then comes up with a new idea – one which may not have emerged if the student had worked alone. Thanks to the students’ different life experiences and different ways in which they perceive the same topic, it is possible to see new perspectives and broaden each other’s horizons.

Undoubtedly, some of the most important aspects of classroom cooperation are the relationships and atmosphere that this type of learning fosters. A shared goal, and the very process of working towards it, makes students interested in one another and helps them to feel part of a community. Through activities that support cooperation, kindness grows and conflicts weaken. Successfully completing a group task through joint effort strengthens bonds among students and makes learning more effective, since it is grounded in mutual respect and drawing inspiration from one another.

Recent research continues to confirm the effectiveness of cooperative learning as an important instructional strategy that supports both academic achievement and students’ social development. A meta-analysis conducted by Johnson et al. (2000) synthesising results from numerous experimental studies demonstrated that

cooperative learning methods consistently lead to higher academic achievement, compared with competitive or individualistic learning structures. The authors also emphasise that cooperative learning promotes positive peer relationships and increases students' motivation to engage in learning tasks. Contemporary reviews of educational practice similarly highlight that well-structured cooperative learning environments create opportunities for meaningful peer interaction, dialogue and mutual support among students. Such conditions foster not only cognitive development but also important social competencies, including communication skills, shared responsibility and constructive collaboration within the learning group (Gillies, 2016). In this context, the present article contributes to the ongoing discussion on the role of peer interaction in educational processes by examining the motivational potential of cooperation and competition in classroom settings.

When it comes to school practice, it is essential to recognise that simply dividing the class into smaller groups and giving instructions is not enough. Such work may prove to be ineffective, and the teacher may become discouraged from planning lessons that involve cooperation. There is, after all, a risk that the most capable students will bear the greatest responsibility and complete most of the work, which defeats the purpose of the lesson. The point is to give students the opportunity to create something together and to learn from one another, not only in terms of content or academic knowledge, but also in the context of human relationships.

An interesting method that supports collaboration and ensures that all students are fully engaged is assigning roles within subgroups. This organisational tool can provide greater certainty that students are working equally: each student may receive a task or a short piece of material to learn, and their job is then to present this material to the rest of the group in a way that is understandable. The activity may conclude, for example, with a quiz in which the group must demonstrate knowledge of both the material they learned as an individual and the material presented by their peers.

In their recent thorough review of research on school-based collaboration, De Jong et al. (2022) indicate that one of the main challenges in the effective implementation of collaborative teaching is giving sufficient guidance to pupils. Teachers' guidance often merely suggests that students should cooperate and help one another in solving a task or completing a project. Therefore, while mutual support is, of course, valuable and beneficial, it is not sufficient on its own to ensure effective learning.

According to the authors, students can achieve more when they share a common team goal. What might such a goal be? Above all, it should be something that demonstrates that the team has done an excellent job by engaging every group member and encouraging each of them to contribute to the best of their ability. One possible team goal may be achieving a high score on a quiz after students have learned a given topic from one another, as described above. Another option may be a final product of the group's work, consisting of individual components created by

each team member. In each case, the teacher evaluates both the overall outcome produced by the entire team and the individual contribution of each student.

In order to ensure the engagement of every student, it is crucial that, in addition to a shared group goal, each learner is assigned a clearly defined task—an individual goal. This helps to prevent situations in which students who are more reserved, less inclined to participate, or generally reluctant to engage in group work are left without a specific responsibility—especially one that cannot be completed by another member of the team on their behalf. At the same time, assigning individual tasks ensures that students who are typically highly knowledgeable and tend to take over most of the work do not end up doing the work for the entire group, thereby limiting the participation of others.

Equally important is the provision of constructive feedback, which helps students understand their strengths and areas for further improvement. Collaborative work should not be limited to presentations alone, and providing appropriate feedback to students is essential (De Jong et al., 2022). Cooperative learning also plays an important role in students' social development and in increasing their sensitivity to others. Teaching methods that focus on collaboration in small groups support students' socialization as well as enhancing their motivation to learn. There are known cases of students who, despite initial reluctance from their peers, gained sympathy and goodwill when they were given the opportunity to present their abilities within a small group and contribute to the group's success (Gillies, 2007, p. 3). A final important thought is that cooperative learning cannot be treated as a separate topic used only in occasional activities. What matters is a holistic approach, cultivating a sense of community and cooperation in students throughout the day's activities—from the moment they enter the classroom to the moment they go home. The atmosphere in the learning environment is created and evolves during the entire day, not only through isolated activities. It is worth bearing this in mind when planning lessons for children in virtually every area of teaching.

5. Examples of collaborative learning activities for teachers to use with children

5.1. Dominoes

Students receive domino-style cards containing images on one half and words on the other half (the word does not describe the picture). The cards form a domino set, which means that each picture has its matching word on a different card. No elements are repeated and all cards can be connected into a whole (in the form of a closed square or rectangle). It is important to remember this rule when creating your own set.

Each student receives one card, and their task is to find the matching pair by asking questions in Polish or English, depending on the focus of the lesson; these may include:

- Pictures and Polish words, where students are required to use their imagination to describe the picture accurately without using the exact word shown in the picture (e.g. *Jest to przedmiot, który można powiesić na drzwiach w okresie świątecznym, zazwyczaj jest kolorowy i może pachnieć lasem – wieniec świąteczny*).
- Pictures and words in English, in the case of English lessons – less advanced students ask simple questions in English, e.g. “*What do you have?*” – “*I have a wreath*”, while more advanced groups describe the object in English without using the exact word shown in the picture.
- Learning addition and subtraction – domino cards contain mathematical operations (e.g. addition, subtraction, multiplication, division) on one half and numbers written in words on the other half.

In all the examples above, students work together through discussion and cooperation to match the domino cards (on the board or on the floor) so that they form a closed square or rectangle. The emphasis of this activity is on achieving a common goal. This task involves both interaction in pairs while students talk and determine what is on their domino cards, and whole-group collaboration to complete the set.

5.2. The Telephone Game – Cooperative Version

Students are divided into three (or more) rows and stand one behind another in their rows. In front of them, there is a board and a marker. If there is no board in the classroom, a sheet of paper placed in front of the first student in each row will suffice.

Each row of students receives one part of a sentence (the parts together form one complete sentence). Their task is to pass on their part of the sentence by whispering, one after another, from the student at the back to the one at the front. Then, the student at the front writes down what they have heard.

Once all three (or more) parts are written on the board, students discuss the correctness of their sentence parts in their subgroups and make any necessary corrections. Next, the whole class works together to arrange the parts into one correct and complete sentence.

This activity can be used both in Polish lessons to practise spelling, for example, and in English lessons to practise sentence structure and vocabulary in context.

Example in Polish

Sentence:

Żółw Zenon z zaciekawieniem zaglądał do zielonego ogrodu, obserwując żonkile, jeżyny, rzeżuchę oraz brzęczące nad nimi pszczoły.

Division into 3 groups:

- Group 1: Żółw Zenon z zaciekawieniem zaglądał do zielonego ogrodu,
- Group 2: obserwując żonkile, jeżyny, rzeżuchę
- Group 3: oraz brzęczące nad nimi pszczoły

Example in English

Sentence:

In the morning, a small grey mouse sees a big hungry cat and runs away quickly.

Division into 4 groups:

- Group 1: In the morning,
- Group 2: a small grey mouse sees
- Group 3: a big hungry cat
- Group 4: and runs away quickly.

It is important that the activity is adapted to the material being covered and that the level of difficulty matches the students' abilities.

5.3. Correct Order

The organisational goal of this activity is to arrange students in the correct order through asking questions and making joint decisions. It can be successfully used in Polish lessons, foreign language lessons, and mathematics lessons.

Example from a Polish or foreign language lesson

Each student receives a card with a word in Polish or in a foreign language. The common task of the whole group is to arrange themselves in the correct order, for example alphabetically, by asking their classmates questions. An alternative to alphabetical order may be learning the months of the year, where each student receives a card with the name of a month and the group's task is to arrange themselves in the correct order from January to December.

To increase the level of difficulty for more advanced students whose skills already allow it, the task may require describing the word using definitions, synonyms, or gestures until the guessing student provides the correct answer.

Mathematics lesson alternative

In mathematics lessons, students may receive cards with mathematical operations. In this activity, it may be helpful to start by pairing up the students so that they solve their operations and then check their partner's results. Next, the task of the whole group is to arrange themselves in the correct order from the smallest to the largest result.

5.4. Educational value of cooperative tasks

The aim of cooperative tasks is student cooperation, both in terms of interpersonal relationships and the correct completion of the task. This approach supports not only the development of knowledge but also social competencies, which are essential for achieving shared success.

By working together, students develop socially, learning mutual responsibility for the final outcome and recognising the importance of every individual's contribution to the success of the entire group. Such activities strengthen positive peer relationships, foster a sense of belonging, and enhance motivation to learn.

6. Conclusions

The analysis presented in this article highlights the significant influence of classroom goal structures on students' learning experiences, emotional functioning, and social relationships. Competitive practices, particularly those grounded in structural competition, tend to foster anxiety, fear of failure, and rivalry among students, which may undermine both learning effectiveness and the quality of peer interactions. While competition is often justified as a means of increasing motivation, the evidence discussed suggests that it frequently shifts students' focus from striving for understanding to avoiding mistakes and social embarrassment.

By contrast, when thoughtfully designed and systematically implemented, cooperative learning creates conditions that support positive interdependence, shared responsibility, and mutual support among learners. Research findings indicate that cooperation enhances not only academic achievement but also social cohesion, communication skills, and students' sense of belonging within the classroom community. Importantly, cooperative learning is not merely a matter of grouping students together; its effectiveness depends on clearly defined shared goals, individual accountability, appropriate task design, and meaningful teacher guidance.

The practical examples discussed in the article demonstrate that cooperative learning can be successfully applied across different subject areas and educational contexts. Activities such as structured group tasks, role assignment, and collaborative problem-solving encourage active participation from all students and help prevent both social loafing and dominance by more confident learners. Furthermore,

consistent feedback and reflection play a crucial role in reinforcing the educational value of cooperative work.

From a practical perspective, the findings underscore the need for a holistic approach to cooperation in schools. Cooperative learning should not be treated as an occasional instructional strategy but rather as a fundamental element of classroom culture, shaping daily interactions and relationships. Future research may further explore long-term effects of sustained cooperative learning environments, as well as teachers' professional development needs related to designing and facilitating effective collaborative tasks. Such efforts may contribute to creating school settings that promote not only academic success but also students' psychological well-being and social development.

Statements

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Acknowledgments: Not applicable.

AI Tools Declaration: The author declares that no artificial intelligence tools were used in the preparation of this manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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