



THE COMPETITION IN PRESCHOOL AGE: A SHORT REVIEW

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Abstract:

Competition matters in our daily life. Humans compete in their jobs, in their relationships, in the classroom etc. for different reason and with different way. We know a lot about competition for the adults but we lack of knowledge on what is happening during the preschool age and this is the focus of the present paper. The literature review shows that young children from the age of 4 years old perceive the concept of competition and express competitive behaviour. The factors which affect young children's competitive behaviour are the gender, the age and the composition of the team as to gender and size. Moreover, during the implementation of the curriculum children express competitive behaviour in kindergarten classroom. They express competitive behaviours, which are divided into two main categories, verbally and physically, which include and subcategories. Competitive behaviour is expressed by children more often during organized activities and less during free activities, like breakfast time and discussion.

Keywords: competitive behaviour, kindergarten, school program, childhood, education

1. Introduction

Humans compete in many areas of their activity, for example in their jobs, in their games, in the classroom etc. Sometimes, it can push them towards excellence and sometimes towards despair (Shields & Bredemeier, 2009). Different goal lead people to compete. Some compete because they want to develop mastery and cultivate excellence (Shields & Bredemeier, 2009) or because winning is exciting for them (Vansteenkiste & Deci, 2003). While some others compete to obtain additional outcomes, such as symbolic or monetary rewards that have been made contingent upon winning (Vansteenkiste & Deci, 2003) or in order to showcase their superiority over others (Shields & Bredemeier, 2009). Alfie Kohn (1986) refers in their book that people act competitively because they are taught to

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do so, because everyone around them does the same and because they are directly rewarded for displaying such behavior.

The literature review showed that there are only a few definitions of competition. Greenberg (1932) defines competition as a human tendency consisted of a desire to excel, of an impulse to do something better than another one. Kohn (1986) defines competition as a human trait also. He indicates that people from birth to death compete to excel among others in the work environments, in education, at home and in their leisure time. Richardson (2007) defines competition as a process of social comparisons. Babiniotis (2012) defines competition as a race among opponents who have the same purpose.

Kohn (1986) in his book "No contest" reports that: i) Competition is against productivity, because creates high levels of stress which affect negatively the performance and focuses on winning rather than performing well. ii) Competition is against psychological health, because foster insecurity, undermines self-esteem and creates undue anxiety. iii) Competition is against ethics because makes us to think that we are benefited only at the expense of others.

At school competition is a daily phenomenon. Students compete for grades, for their entrance into the best college, for the victory of their school team (Shields & Bredemeier, 2009). But competition may be counterproductive for learning (Kohn, 1986; Johnson & Johnson, 1994) and one of the main causes for this is stress. Although a moderated amount of stress can be beneficial, high levels of stress which are caused by competition affect the performance negatively. Furthermore, competition focuses on winning and not on well-performing. Individuals try to outdo others rather than accomplish the task with the best of their abilities (Kohn, 1986).

Johnson and Johnson (1994) reported that children learn more when they learn cooperatively than when they engage in a learning contest. Cooperation among children enhances academic performance, promotes self-esteem, intrinsic motivation, psychological health and social skills. In a classroom where there is competition, the majority of students experiencing daily failures, as the winner or the best student is usually one. The students who are often experienced failures may feel that they are powerless and cannot cope with the demands of school. This affects their performance and the general school attendance. They tend to perceive the learning experience as boring, unfair, no fun and not enjoyable and also evaluate their performance negatively. When people are under competitive conditions, all seek the victory, no one wants to lose, regardless it is in sports, education, politics or business (Shields & Bredemeier, 2009). However, the defeat affects the people negatively, for example reduces their self-confidence (Papaioannou & Kouli, 1999), decreases their intrinsic motivation for participation in an activity for learning, fun or enjoyment (Ferrer-Caja & Weiss, 2000). Nevertheless, people who are under competitive conditions and are intrinsic motivated for example play a game for fun, enjoy or learn and regard that winning is enjoyable and exciting for them, then competition does not affect them negatively (Shields & Bredemeier, 2009).

The present literature survey is based on international literature advances relative to competition during the preschool years. More precisely on the way preschool children

perceive the concept of competition, on the factors which affect young children's competitive behavior and on the way preschool children express competitive behavior in the classroom. Although there are researches studying competition in preschool age from 1933 to 2021, they are very few. Studying competition at preschool age is important because research which conducted with older students (e.g. junior high school students) showed that competition leads to less motivation for learning in educational settings and increasing anxiety (e.g. Papaioannou & Kouli, 1999). So, it is important to know what happen in early years of children, if preschool children express competitive behavior, which ways and if they perceive the competition, in order to encourage their motivation for learning and avoid creating anxiety and reducing motivation for learning in learning environments.

The age from the second to sixth year is defined as preschool age. The preschool age is characterized by the rapid linguistic and cognitive development (Vosniadou, 2002). The cognitive development in preschool age is characterized, according to Piaget (1964), by the stage of preoperational thought. In this phase, children acquire/develop the capacity for representative thinking that is the ability to produce internal symbols that represent objects and events.

Other characteristics of preschool age are: i) Egocentrism and animism, which two more characteristics of preoperational thought. The egocentrism refers to the children's tendency to perceive and explains everything based on their personal opinion and in relation to themselves. They see things only from their side and have difficulty to take into account the opinion of others (Vosniadou, 2002). The animism refers to the children's tendency to give life and feelings in inanimate objects, for example they say that the sun cry or smile (Cook & Cook, 2005). ii) At preschool age there is an explosive increase in children's vocabulary. They use large and complex sentences and conquer language's grammatical and syntactical rules (Cook & Cook, 2005; Vosniadou, 2002; Piaget, 1964). iii) Furthermore, preschool children are socialized and begin to acquire relationships with other people except of their mother. They develop social consciousness and ethical behavior as they begin and internalize social rules. Moreover, they gain a sense of themselves and perceive the differences between social roles and between genders (Vosniadou, 2002).

2. Perception of competition at preschool age

Studies conducted with young children reported that from the age of 4 years old children perceive the concept of competition and express competitive behavior. Under competitive condition they perceive that only one can be the winner and express a desire to excel (Greenberg, 1932; Leuba, 1933; Kimiyoshi, 1951).

Greenberg (1932) observed the appearance of competition and evaluated the degree of competition displayed in the child's performance in specific conditions. More precisely, he asked from children 2-6 years old to make a construction using wooden blocks. In the first experiment children were asked to make a construction. When they finished it, they were asked to compare their constructions and select the best one. In the

second experiment, children were asked to make the best construction. The results showed that children between 2 and 3 years old did not respond to the above mentioned call (to make the best construction). However, from the age of 4 years old children's level of arousal and competition, in order to become winners, increased. Furthermore, systematic comparisons of their structures, competitive behaviors, such as grabbing the wooden bricks from their peers, self-praise and sustained efforts to win, were observed. Children built rapidly, with tense muscles and wanted to make their construction as fine as they could in order to win, while a really appreciable increase in interest and in energy was observed.

One year later, Leuba (1933) asked from children between 2 and 6 years old to put pegs on a board, first individually and then in pairs. The results showed that competition was no-existent at the age of 2 years old. At the age between 3 and 4 years, competitive behavior among children started to appear when they worked in pairs. They used expressions like "I'm going to beat!" but they did make efforts to become better than the other. They placed fewer pegs on the board when they worked in pairs than when they worked individually. However, at the age of 5 years old children expressed competitive behavior when they worked in pairs and placed more pegs on the board than when they worked individually.

Similar results were presented few years later by Kimiyoshi (1951). Children aged 2-7 years old were asked to make a construction with wooden blocks under competitive and non-competitive conditions. The results showed that under competitive conditions children from the age of 4 years mobilized all physical functions in order to win, increased self-praises and the time spent in building was much shorter compared with non-competitive conditions.

This year (2021) we performed a research in order to study the role of competitive activities on preschool children performance with children at a mean age of 5 ½ years, and we asked them to participate in two different games, twice each with a different goal each time: i) the first goal was a product goal, which determine the outcome of learning and lead students' attention to the outcome rather than to the strategy or method that can lead to the result and ii) the second was a process goal, which refers to methods and strategies that lead students learn handling a specific task. The aim of the one game was the child to throw a bean bag in the hoop, which was placed on the floor, from a standing position and from distance 2.5 m and the aim of the other game was the child to throw a ball in the basket, which was placed on the floor, from a standing position and from distance 2.5 m. The results showed that preschool children had better performance in both games when the goal of the game was product than process. Preschool children seem to understand competitive conditions and express a desire to excel, enhancing their performance in case of product goals aiming to win.

Although, competition appears at a very early age not only under specific competitive conditions but also in natural environments such as in kindergarten classrooms (Sheridan & Williams, 2006) it is important to note that there are only a few references in the literature concerning the early years of life.

3. Factors which affect young children's competitive behavior

In a number of studies, the factors affecting young children competitive behavior are the gender (McKee & Leader, 1955; McClintock & Moskowitz, 1976), the age (McClintock, Moskowitz & McClintock, 1977) and the composition of the team as to gender (Moely, Skarin & Weft, 1979) and size (Benenson, et al., 2001).

Studies report that the competitive behavior is more enhanced in boys. McKee and Leader (1955) in their research asked from children 3 to 4 years old to make a construction using toy construction bricks and recorded their behavior. Results showed that boys expressed more competitive behavior than girls. Similar results were presented by McClintock and Moskowitz (1976), who observed children aged 5-8 years old. Moreover, these results were confirmed by Tsiakara and Digelidis (2014a) in a more recent study where they observed and recorded the frequency of verbal (words and phrases) and physical (movements and gestures) competitive behaviors which were expressed by preschool children during school program and the results showed that boys expressed more competitive behavior than girls.

McClintock, Moskowitz and McClintock (1977) reported in their research that competition is a function of age. Children 3.5-5.5 years old were observed under competitive conditions and the results showed that older children compete more than younger.

Moely, Skarin and Weft (1979) reported that the composition of the team as to gender affects significantly the behavior of children. In their research they studied competitive and cooperative behaviors in preschool children 4-5 years old. They asked from children to play a board game with peers of the same or opposite gender. The results showed that both boys and girls expressed more competitive behaviors when they played with children of different gender than when they played with children of the same gender.

The group size seemed to affect the competitive behavior of children. Benenson, et al. (2001) studied children's competitive behavior in tetrads and in dyads. Kindergarten and 1st grade children played a competitive game in both tetrads and dyads and their competitive behavior were recorded. Results showed that boys compete more in tetrads than in dyads.

4. Competition in kindergarten classroom

Tsiakara and Digelidis (2012) attempted to examine the manifestation of possible competitive behaviors in preschool children during regular school program. In this study 195 preschool children (aged 4-5 years old) from 11 kindergarten classes took part. The results showed that preschool children express a variety of competitive behavior during organized (e.g. where the teacher usually chooses the activity in which the children will be engaged and/or the group in which they will be involved) and/or free activities (e.g. where children choose themselves in which activity they will engage and in which group they will be involved), and during breakfast time (e.g. where children eat their meal).

Qualitative analysis of the data showed that preschool children express competitive behavior, verbally and physically. More specifically they express verbal competitive behavior by making comparisons, such as: i) comparing different objects according to their size but also compare the qualities and the characteristics of objects ii) comparing themselves to others based on their physical characteristics but also according to their abilities and possibilities, iii) comparing their assignments and accomplishments (e.g. drawings or constructions) during and at the end of construction, iv) disagreeing with each other for different issues, and v) interrupting the talk of another child. Furthermore, they express physically antagonistic behaviors, such as: i) grabbing objects that another child possesses, ii) pulling, pushing or kicking other children to take their places or their objects and iii) taking the place of another child. The results of the research show that preschool children express competitive behavior with a variety of ways during the entire school program.

Two years later Tsiakara and Digelidis (2014b) developed a direct observational system in order to measure competitive behaviors in preschool children. The Observational System Assessing Competition in Kindergarten (OSACK) was developed with 12 observational categories; each one was assigned into one specific competitive behavior. These categories were based on the observations and descriptions made by Tsiakara and Digelidis (2012). Eight of these categories are verbal and four are physical behaviors. The OSACK allows trained observers to record children's verbal competitive behavior (e.g. words and phrases) and children's physical competitive behavior (e.g. movements and gestures). Moreover, it can give information about the frequency of competitive behavior depending on (a) the type of the activity and/or (b) the gender of the child who expresses the behavior.

The OSACK was used in 10 kindergarten classes of one city in central Greece (176 children, 86 girls and 90 boys observed) in order to monitor in which way preschool children express competitive behaviors in kindergarten school environment, how often and during which activities of the school program. The results showed that preschool children express a variety of competitive behavior during organized (e.g. where the teacher usually chooses the activity in which the children will be engaged and/or the group in which they will be involved) and/or free activities (e.g. where children choose themselves in which activity they will engage and in which group they will be involved), and during breakfast time (e.g. where children eat their meal). They express competitive behavior both verbally and physically. During school program children express more often verbal competitive behaviors (64.59%) compared with physical competitive behaviors (35.41%). The verbal and physical competitive behavior with the highest frequency is the same for both boys and girls: "Disagree with each other." and "Grab objects that another child possesses" respectively. Moreover, competitive behavior expressed by children more often during organized activities (48.45%) and less often during free activities (23.60%), breakfast time (14.29%) and discussion (e.g. the teacher plans the daily activities together with children or discusses interesting topics) (13.66%). During organized activities, the competitive behavior with the highest frequency is "Compare their assignments and accomplishments during construction". During free

activities the competitive behavior with the highest frequency is "Disagree with each other". During breakfast time the competitive behavior with the highest frequency is "Compare objects according to their size." and during the discussion "Interrupt the talk of another child." is the competitive behavior with the highest frequency. Boys express more often physical competitive behaviors while girls express more often verbal competitive behaviors. Also, boys express competitive behaviors more often during free activities, breakfast time and during discussion compared with girls. On the other hand, girls express competitive behaviors more often during organized activities compared with boys.

Moreover, in our previous investigation (2014a) we examined the differences between 90 boys and 86 girls with mean of age 5.2 years old, in the way they express competitive behavior in a kindergarten classroom. They observed and recorded the frequency of 12 verbal (words and phrases) and physical (movements and gestures) competitive behaviors which were expressed by preschool children during organized activities (e.g., where the teacher usually chooses the activity in which the children will be engaged) and free activities (e.g., where children choose themselves in which activity they will engage) in 10 kindergarten schools and classrooms accordingly. Results from 20 hours of observations showed that boys expressed more competitive behavior than girls. Both boys and girls expressed more competitive behavior during organized activities and less during free activities. During organized activities girls expressed more competitive behaviors than boys while during free activities boys expressed more competitive behaviors than girls.

5. Concluding remarks

The literature review showed that competition makes its appearance from preschool age and specifically from the age of 4 years old. Preschool children perceive the concept of competition and express competitive behavior. Under competitive condition they perceive that only one can be the winner and express a desire to excel (Greenberg, 1932; Leuba, 1933; Kimiyoshi, 1951). These results are confirmed by more recent research which showed that preschool children seem to understand competitive conditions and express a desire to excel, enhancing their performance in case of product goals aiming to win (Tsiakara & Digelidis, 2021).

The factors influencing young children competitive behavior are the gender, boys expressed more competitive behavior than girls (McKee & Leader, 1955; McClintock & Moskowitz, 1976), the age, older children compete more than younger (McClintock, Moskowitz & McClintock, 1977) and the composition of the team as to gender and size, both boys and girls express more competitive behaviors when they played with children of different gender than when they played with children of the same gender (Moely, Skarin & Weft, 1979) and when they played in tetrads than in dyads (Benenson, et al., 2001).

More recent researches (Tsiakara & Digelidis, 2012, 2014a, 2014b) examined competition in kindergarten classrooms and showed that cooperation there is not only

under specific competitive conditions but also in natural environments such as in kindergarten classrooms. Preschool children express competitive behavior during regular school program, more often during organized activities (48.45%) and less often during free activities (23.60%), breakfast time (14.29%) and discussion (13.66%). Competition in kindergarten classrooms expressed by children verbally and physically and boys seems to be more competitive than girls.

The literature review about competition in preschool age showed that children from the age of 4 years old express perceive competition and express competitive behavior. The fact that preschool children express competition in classrooms and taking into account that research which conducted with older students (e.g. junior high school students) showed that competition leads to less motivation for learning in educational settings and increasing anxiety (e.g. Papaioannou & Kouli, 1999) lead us to point out the importance of further study of the subject, in order to be able to encourage children's motivation for learning from early years old and to avoid creating anxiety and reducing motivation for learning in learning environments.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interests.

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