The organization of competition and non-competition in schools

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This chapter explores competition in the context of education. We invite the reader into a Danish school filled with stars, trophies, and triumphant sounds. We point to the hard work done by the teacher to organize a sense of competition—but also to control and to reduce competition. We also suggest that this leaves students with the responsibility for assessing whether they are best motivated by comparing and competing with classmates or by focusing on their own learning paths. Ambivalence, volatility, and unpredictability are key words in understanding what is going on when it comes to competition in the classroom.

Now we are jumping to conclusions. Let us slow down a little and first dwell on the historical changes that have occurred with regard to the way competition is practised and understood in education. Subsequently, we will set out our understanding of competition as an analytical concept, which we will then use for our empirical analysis of a Danish school setting. We conclude with a discussion of ways in which competition is currently used in education, as well as the ambivalent attitudes that remain associated with it.

Educational ambivalences towards competition

In 2017, the Danish Ministry of Education issued guidelines for teachers on how to administer national tests for students in the most appropriate way. The ministry recommended that ‘in order to reduce a potential atmosphere of competition’ no student should be allowed to leave before the testing period expired. ‘Some students simply believe that the best students are those who finish up first’ (Undervisningsministeriet 2018: 11). This concern turns out to be relevant if children are asked about their perspective on assessment—and the similarities to computer gaming strategies (Kousholt 2016). A few paragraphs later, teachers are admonished that ‘it is important that students are seated in such a way that they will not be able to see your test page. If students are able to track how many questions their classmates have answered, this may create the basis for competition and discomfort for some students.’ (Undervisningsministeriet 2018: 11).

The association made here between competition and discomfort is not fortuitous; and the sense of discomfort applies not only to the students but also to the education system itself. In these guidelines, the ministry suggests how national testing can be organized so as to reduce or even eliminate competition. In the context of national testing, competition seems to be a spontaneous
(and irrational) product of the way in which students observe each other—something against which the education system must organize itself.

This sense of discomfort with regard to the idea of competition has not always been equally pronounced in the history of education. In fact, competition is one of the oldest and most common techniques for strengthening discipline and motivation for learning in the classroom. To our knowledge, the first educational thinker to discuss student competition in such terms was the Roman rhetorician and schoolmaster Quintilian. The potential for student competition was one of Quintilian’s main arguments for the educational superiority of the school as compared to the domestic teacher. According to Quintilian, competition (properly organized) could be used to intensify the motivation for learning in a manner unparalleled by any other pedagogical device:

I remember that my own masters had a practice which was not without advantages. Having distributed the boys in classes, they made the order in which they were to speak depend on their ability, so that the boy who had made most progress in his studies had the privilege of declaiming first. The performances on these occasions were criticized. To win commendation was a tremendous honour, but the prize most eagerly coveted was to be the leader of the class. [. . .] I will venture to assert that to the best of my memory this practice did more to kindle our oratorical ambitions than all the exhortations of our instructors, the watchfulness of our paedagogi and the prayers of our parents. (Quintilian 1980: I.2.25)

Quintilian’s masters organized competition by offering themselves as the third party for whose recognition students were invited to compete. They thereby exploited the natural limitations of teacher attention in a classroom setting with many students and one teacher in a way that turned teacher attention (or recognition) into the scarce object of their common desire.

According to Quintilian, this also profoundly changed the relationship between teacher and students, as compared to the domestic teacher. In the school, with its many students and a single master, the master appeared not so much as the one from whom students learned but as the one for whom they learned. To the extent that students learned, this was not primarily because the master taught them. It was because, through the organization of contests, learning was constituted as the object of the master’s recognition: it was by being ‘number one’, by displaying signs of superior learning as compared to their peers that students would gain the recognition of their teachers.

In different versions, this use of student competition as a motivational technology has played a huge role throughout the entire history of (Western) education, and not least the Christian tradition. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Jesuit system of education, which was based to an unprecedented degree on student competition (amulatio), was the most successful educational system in Europe (Durkheim 1938). To emulate means to imitate someone with a view to exceeding them. Here competition is embedded in a learning relationship: you can only surpass other people if you learn from them. However, Christianity charged competition with moral ambivalence, highlighting the dark sides of competition in a wholly new way. So even as the Jesuit system of education triumphed across Europe, its detractors, ranging from the Jansenists to Rousseau, were numerous and passionate. In their view, student competition was fundamentally a recipe for vice. For Quintilian and his contemporaries, student competition was not morally problematic. It served
to develop the confident and agonistic spirit, which befitted the Roman (male) citizen and public speaker. In a Christian perspective, on the other hand, it could easily be viewed as fostering pride and vanity on the part of winners and envy and anger on the part of losers—thereby running counter to the very purpose of education, that of fostering virtuous Christian subjects.

While the hold of Christian morality on education gradually weakened in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the critique of competition did not. Instead, it took a new turn. In the Nordic countries, especially, the purpose of schooling was re-conceived in the light of the catastrophic experiences with Fascism before and during World War II. From this perspective, the most important purpose of education was to educate students into democratic citizens capable of cooperation, dialogue, and mutual understanding. This ruled out any legitimate role for student competition in schooling. Competition was viewed as something which created conflicts and pitted students against each other—thus undermining the harmonious and democratic community that schooling was supposed to foster (Husén 1966). Educational psychology has treated competition almost solely in tandem with cooperation (Fülöp 2004). This sense of discomfort with regard to competition became even more pronounced as the expanding post-World War II welfare states sought to turn schools into engines of social equality under slogans like ‘equality through education’. In this context, educational competition was vehemently criticized as the engine through which existing class structures were reproduced within the education system (Bjerregaard 1977). According to the most principled proponents of this view, grades and examinations would also have to go in order to get rid of competition within the education system.

Today, it is clear that this did not happen. What did happen to competition, however, is less clear. Since the 1970s, the question of competition between students has played a very limited role in educational research and public debate (for analysis of discussions of downsides of competition in Singapore, see Christensen 2015). Policy makers and educationists are much more concerned with learning than with competition. The main concern of today’s dominant educational paradigm is to maximize learning and to do so not only for students as a group but for each individual student (Hattie 2012; Knudsen 2017; Thompson and Cook 2017). Efforts are made to make students want to do what they have to do: to be motivated to learn more (Staunæs 2018). In this context, competition is rarely mentioned. Various authors (Allen 2015; Thompson and Cook 2017) have suggested that this new educational paradigm may give rise to new modes of competition, but they have not developed this point in any kind of detail. We try to approach this problem by looking into the ways in which competition arises and is handled in a contemporary Danish classroom informed by the current educational paradigm. We ask if competition can be controlled and organized, and we point out the difficulties in doing this because competition is volatile and unpredictable and because of inherent paradoxes in the contemporary educational paradigm. As we shall see in our empirical analysis, both students and teacher work hard to get the best out of new modes of competition, handling the risks of comparison and forms of motivation which are deemed to be wrong. Before we turn to this, we need to develop competition as an analytical concept with a view to grasping what is going on in the classroom.

**Competition, observation, and desire**

In order to explain our approach to competition in education, we take our point of departure in a quotation from one of the lesser-known theorists of competition—the Danish-German sociologist Theodor Geiger. In his book on competition, originally published in Danish in 1941, Geiger (1941: 13) states that for competition to occur: ‘[t]he parties must subjectively experience each other in their
competitive roles. A side-glance to the other constitutes the competitive relationship.’ In this short statement, Geiger makes a number of points which we believe are important for an analysis of social competition in general and educational competition in particular.

First, Geiger claims that a sociological conception of competition cannot ignore the subjective experience of social actors. Whereas natural scientists speak of competition as an objective relationship between entities (animals, plants, and even genes) that are blissfully ignorant of competition, social competition cannot be conceived independently of the ways in which social actors define the situation in which they find themselves. In the same vein, Niklas Luhmann (1995: 382) states that competition is a special kind of social experience, the characteristic being that one system’s goals can only be attained at the expense of another system’s goals.

Second, Geiger suggests that the experience of social actors involved in competition can be conceived as a form of observation. He does this through the notion of a ‘side-glance’ through which competitors relate to each other. In other words, he conceives of competition as a specific gaze imposed by social actors upon each other. In his exposition of this idea, however, he seems to presuppose that this form of observation is reciprocal by nature. For competition to occur, the relevant social actors all have to observe each other as competitors. We want to argue, however, that reciprocity cannot simply be assumed if we conceptualize competition as a form of observation. For instance, it is possible to imagine a situation in which a younger sister wants to be the best in her class because her older sister was the best in her class. This younger sister competes both with her classmates to be number one in her class and with her older sister to be the best school performer. The older sister may not even know that her younger sister is competing with her, while (in the same vein) her classmates may not know that they are involved in a competition. Consequently, we want to keep open the possibility that the same situation can be construed differently by different social actors: some people may regard it as a competitive situation while others regard it as non-competition. The side-glance may be competitive for one and not for the other. In our analysis, we will devote more empirical attention to this question.

Third, by using the notion of ‘side-glance’, Geiger suggests that competition involves more than one glance. For competition to occur, competitors must also observe something more than each other—something for which they are both striving, which they both (or all) desire. Here, Geiger makes an important conceptual distinction between a struggle (Zweikampf) and a competition. In a struggle, the parties simply fight against each other, face each other. The objectives of the contestants are exhausted by the defeat of the opponent. In a competition, on the other hand, the contestants do not simply fight against each other but also for something else—what Geiger (1941: 12) calls ‘the object’. In our analysis, we want to explore how this object can be defined in different ways in educational settings and how this is related to different forms of interplay between the glance towards the object and the side-glances between competitors.

For this purpose, however, we also need to go beyond Geiger’s rather restricted conception of the object of competition. While Geiger mentions many different examples of competitive objects, he seems to understand them predominantly as things: prizes or possessions won through competitive success.

In this connection, we want to enlist Georg Simmel’s theory of competition in order to gain a more nuanced approach to the object of competition. According to Simmel, competition, or, at least, ‘higher competition’ (see Chapter 1, this volume), is not simply a struggle for something but also a struggle for someone. If Simmel views competition as a social form (rather than pure anti-social
destruction), this is not just because it links competitors to each other but also because it links them to a third party for whose favour they are vying (Simmel 1903/2008: 961).

The favour of the third party may take many different forms: it may be public opinion in politics, consumers on the market, the jury in a courtroom, or a loved one in courtship. In all these cases, Simmel claims, the key to competitive success is the ability to figure out what the third party wants—or, put differently, what the third party desires (1903/2008: 962). In this sense, desire is not simply what motivates the parties to compete but also the object for which they compete. The competitors strive to become (as in courtship) or at least to provide (as in market competition) what the third party desires.

In this respect, Simmel is close to French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan’s theory of desire, on which we will also draw in our analysis (and on which we have already implicitly drawn in the previous section). According to Lacan’s famous formula, desire is ‘the desire of the other’ (2006; 2019). This means, on the one hand, that desire is socially constituted: our desire is not purely individual but is shaped by our side-glances towards others—our observations of other people’s desires. On the other hand, desire can be understood as a desire to obtain the recognition, approval, or simply attention of the other. This (the Lacanian equivalent of the third party) is what Lacan calls ‘the big Other’—the (imagined) figure to whom we want to appear in a certain desirable light.

In our analysis of competition in a contemporary educational setting, we want to use the insights of Geiger, Simmel, and Lacan to explore three sets of questions. The first set concerns the objects of desire offered to students in contemporary education. Which objects do contemporary educational authorities (from teachers to educational games and testing systems) invite students to desire and to which extent do they lead students towards competition or away from competition? The second set of questions concerns the volatility and unpredictability that may follow when you conceptualize competition as a mode of observation that also involves the agency of side-glances between students themselves. How do teachers and students respond to the potential for competition, which dynamics are produced, and what can we learn about the manageability of (non)competition in educational settings? The third set of questions focuses more specifically on ambivalences towards competition in contemporary education. Can the ambivalences relating to competition which run throughout educational history still be identified in contemporary education? And if so, how are they shaped differently in the context of today’s dominant conceptions of education?

Organized (non) competition in the school class

Beyond scarcity: individual trajectories, prizes for all

If it seems timely to return to the question of competition in education, this is also because, in recent years, competition has resurfaced in education as an explicit motivational technology—most directly under the name of ‘gamification’.

Basically, gamification means the introduction of game elements (new levels, prizes, leaderboards, etc.) into activities that are not in themselves game activities, so as to make such activities more exciting and thereby increase motivation. The term covers a number of very different activities, ranging from loyalty programmes to learning apps like Duolingo or Mathletics.

In the context of schools, the widespread use of Kahoot games is probably the best-known example of gamification. Here, however, we focus on a different example of gamification. CampMat is a digital maths game for primary school students, developed by the Danish learning company Alinea.
We adopt two different perspectives on this game. First, we analyse two short videos that were produced by Alinea for marketing purposes. Second, we discuss how the game is actually played by second graders in a Danish school class (We have previously analysed this case in a Danish book on motivation; Christensen and Knudsen 2019). We seek to identify the ways in which competition is organized both into existence and out of existence in the context of CampMat. We draw on our conceptualization of competition as a form of observation, and we look for invitations of competitive side-glances implying that someone can only obtain the object of desire at the cost of someone else. In other words, the competitive side-glance involves scarcity, a relation (without reciprocity), and a source of recognition (a third party).

We suggest that CampMat is a learning game that claims to provide the intensity of competition without the dark sides like failure and superficial motivation or demotivation. And it is apparent that the teacher works hard to organize (non)competition, giving the students responsibility for handling the perennial ambivalence regarding competition.

CampMat is clearly a game, and it makes abundant references to the best-known (or at least most-popular) arena of social competition: sport. The outcome of the game is not (for the most part) referred to as ‘learning’ but as ‘training’. This reference is also quite clear in the very name of the game. The ‘camp’ to which the name refers is a ‘training camp’—a space dedicated to optimizing your fitness and technical skills.

Nevertheless, Alinea’s presentation material carefully eschews, or at least down-plays, the competitive aspect of game-playing. In one of the videos, a student voice says about the game: ‘Even though some of us have advanced further than others, we have all been rewarded with a radio’ (an in-game prize). So what matters is not that some of the participants are ahead of others. What matters is that there are prizes for everyone. Recognition is an abundant resource, not a scarce one, and in this way competition is sidelined in the gaming context.

It is therefore no coincidence that the side-glance is virtually absent in the videos. Students are sitting in rows, each turned towards their own iPads. A boy who has just been awarded a star clenches his fist, exclaiming ‘Yes!’ However, such gestures of triumph do not appear to be manifestations of competition. The students are playing for stars, trophies, and prizes. In other words, they are playing for the recognition of the big Other—but they are not competing for this recognition. The algorithmic big Other differs from the classroom teacher to the extent that students do not have to compete for its attention. The game is based on an adaptive algorithm, which gets to know students while they are playing it. Thus, CampMat revolves around the intimate relationship between the algorithm and the individual student. This algorithm is a benevolent and generous big Other that works according to a logic of abundance rather than scarcity: each student has its undivided attention, and it offers recognition (stars and trophies) in abundance.

In using elements associated with competitive activities (stars, trophies, prizes, etc.), CampMat is not only related to modern computer games. It can also be viewed as dovetailing with the tradition of emulation in education. It functions as a motivational technology that incites students to perform for the Other—to strive for the recognition of the algorithm. It instils a desire for learning in students by exploiting the reflective dimension of desire—by embedding desire for learning within the desire for the desire of the Other (stars, trophies, prizes, etc.).

As already suggested, however, CampMat is also profoundly different from other competitive activities because it seeks to eradicate the specifically competitive element in emulation. All the students can obtain the undivided attention and recognition of the algorithm. If competition is
eradicated from the game, this is basically because the other students are irrelevant to each student’s relationship with the algorithm.

In this sense, CampMat can be viewed as yet another manifestation of the dis-comfort with competition that has permeated education throughout history. However, this is a different kind of discomfort. In the 1970s, especially, educators criticized competition in the name of the social: competition was rejected as a threat to the school class as a collaborating social community. This is not the case in CampMat since the school class as a social community is virtually absent from the game. Competition appears not as an expression of individualism, which threatens communitarian relations, but rather as a social dynamic, which may distort the learning relationship between the algorithm and each individual student.

In this sense, the sidelining of competition involves less a concern for social relationships and more a concern for individual learning. Competition appears as a distraction that may divert students from their own individual learning paths (or, in other words, their own exclusive and intimate relationship with the big Other of the game). In this way, CampMat may exemplify how the educational critique of competition is re-articulated under the aegis of a new educational paradigm focusing on personalized or individualized learning (Thompson and Cook 2017). It also raises the question of how the social relations traditionally associated with the class are themselves re-articulated through this learning paradigm. In the next section, we address this question by examining the game in a different way—as a social practice in a Danish second grade.

**Bringing the class back in**

In the second grade in which we observed the use of CampMat, the game was played in a way that differed significantly from Alinea’s promotion material. Most importantly, both the maths teacher and the students worked hard to supply the game with a social dimension—that is, to turn it into a class activity and not simply an activity for individual students.

They did this primarily in two ways. First, the class adopted its own rules for playing the game. CampMat consists of three different universes that are very close to the levels of conventional computer games. However, they differ from levels because in order to ensure individual learning trajectories CampMat allows players to move back and forth between the levels. However, the class had decided to ban this possibility, condemning it as a form of cheating that made it impossible to assess how far each student had advanced in the game. In this sense, the rules of the class prioritized standards that privileged social comparison of learning progress over individualized learning trajectories.

Second, CampMat’s reward system was externalized—transformed from being an intimate relationship between the algorithm and the individual student into a public system of rewards that were visible to everybody in the classroom. In order to turn the game into a class activity instead of being an individual activity, the maths teacher had decided to duplicate the star system in the classroom. Whenever students had obtained a certain number of stars in the game, they were allowed to manufacture a yellow cardboard star, which they would then fix onto a cupboard at the back of the class.

For Helle, the maths teacher, this system served to incorporate the individualized learning trajectories of CampMat into the class as an overarching learning community. There were two main aspects to this reconstitution of the class. First, it sought to displace the function of the big Other
from the algorithm to the class itself. On several occasions, Helle said that she had duplicated the star system because she thought that students’ successes in learning should be recognized not only by the algorithm but also by fellow students. This is precisely what happened when students walked through the classroom in order to fix their stars to the cupboard. The function of the big Other was transferred from the algorithm to the class community (including the teacher herself). In other words, Helle’s star system turned the individualized recognition of the algorithm into a way of obtaining the collective recognition of the class by placing your star on the cupboard under the gaze of the entire class. However, even as the source of recognition shifted, the form of recognition remained basically the same. Just like the algorithm, the class appeared as a benevolent and generous big Other that had recognition in abundance. Each student and learning achievement was recognized in precisely the same way—by walking down the ‘catwalk’ of the classroom displaying your star to the class.

Secondly, Helle’s star system sought to re-embed the playing of CampMat within the class as a community of learning. As suggested earlier, CampMat describes itself as a ‘training camp’—using an expression usually associated with sport. In an educational context, however, the notion of training is dangerously close to drilling—the repetitive inculcation of purely technical skills. For Helle, her duplication of the star system was one way of remedying this. She stated explicitly that the star system was her way of elevating CampMat from a training activity to a learning activity. According to her, the public display of stars created a space for students to relate to each other’s experiences with the game. It created a communicative space where students could discuss and reflect on the game—and seek help on questions that had been successfully answered by other students. For Helle, it was this inter-subjective and reflective dimension of her reward system that elevated CampMat from the level of training to the level of learning.

Comparison and competition

By inventing her own classroom star system, Helle deliberately changed CampMat from an individualized activity (involving the algorithm and the individual student) into a social activity (involving the class and the individual student). However, in doing this Helle also re-introduced the dimension of sociality that the game itself had carefully eliminated—that is, the side-glance.

Helle’s star system re-introduced the side-glance in the sense that it re-constituted the class as a space for comparison between students. Naturally, comparison is nothing new in classroom life. It is inherent to the class as a social institution. However, as mentioned earlier, since World War II in particular, comparison has been dis-avowed by an educational ideology calling for students ‘not to compare’ (in order not to open the gates of competition)—even though the education system systematically does so itself. While comparison is active in this kind of classroom context, it is implicit and disavowed. In Helle’s classroom, on the other hand, it was explicit and public. It constituted a public grid of visibility that no student could ignore and to which they were all accountable.

As a medium of comparison, Helle’s star system worked in an ambivalent way. On the one hand, it was a system of universal recognition in which all the students could have their learning successes recognized by the class. On the other hand, it worked in terms of more and less and ahead and behind. It did this because it made visible the different achievements of the students (the number of stars), as well as their overall degree of progression (levels completed).
If students could not ignore this grid of comparison, they could (and did) relate to it in different ways. The fact that the star system made students accountable for their learning in a highly public and visible way was revealed not least by the fact that most students openly discussed their relative positions in the game. To the extent that Helle’s star system succeeded in inspiring reflection and communication between students, this was very much an ongoing and open-ended discussion of the meanings of comparative positions.

Even though the star system made comparative positions visible to all, this did not result in a general state of competition between students. The reason for this was the absence of a big Other—whether this is interpreted as the teacher or the class—inciting students to observe the grid of comparison as providing a ranking where only one could be number one (Esposito 2017). Indeed, it was highly unclear how the big Other wanted students to observe and make sense of their comparative positions. To the extent that the star system organized students’ learning achievements on a scale of more and less, ahead and behind, it introduced a dimension of scarcity (one student’s learning successes made other students less successful, and vice versa) that might be seen as inciting competition between students.

Still, it was left entirely unclear whether this was the correct way to observe comparative positions. In the class, one boy was acknowledged by everybody (including Helle) as being far ahead of the others in CampMat (and maths generally). However, it remained unclear whether this boy was a model of excellence to be emulated by other students. In an interview with a Danish newspaper, Helle seemed to support this interpretation when she defended her star system by claiming that children are naturally motivated by competition (Nilsson 2019).

In our conversations with her, however, she argued differently, explaining that this boy was a very competitive student with a highly achievement-oriented family background. Competition here appeared as one particular mode of game-playing with no inherent superiority over others. In this sense, the boy did not stand out as the unambiguous winner of the learning game created around CampMat. Indeed, in the class one girl rivalled his position as a model learner—not by competing with him but by adopting the opposite approach to the grid of comparison created by Helle’s star system. ‘If you see that others are ahead’, she told us, ‘you may get an urge to overtake them. But then you realize that it’s not about coming first, it’s about being good.’ This girl had realized that the overall objective was to focus on your own learning. So for her the learning ideal was not the student who came first but the one who was mature enough in her learning strategies to resist the temptation of competition and focus instead on her own individual learning trajectory. She expresses precisely the ambivalent attitude to competition in the current educational paradigm, with the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation dominating and interest focusing on the factors that promote learning most efficiently. The risk of utilizing an external reward system is that it leads to extrinsic motivation (Greer 2017).

In this sense, Helle’s star system paradoxically reverted to the individualized approach of the game itself. No specific mode of observing comparative positions was imposed on the students. Instead, they were left to work out their own way of coping with universal comparison in the manner that best suited their individual modes of motivation. Here competition appeared as just one way among others of observing the classroom grid of comparison—a strategy that was neither superior nor inferior in itself, but one that students could adopt if this mode of observation was most efficient for their learning motivation. This individualized approach is reminiscent of many gamified learning apps (Duolingo, for instance), which are not directly organized in competitive terms but in which competition (leaderboards, etc.) is a function that can be switched on or off at will, depending on the motivational structures or current mood of individual learners.
Conclusion: competition as disavowed sociality in current education

Earlier pedagogical discussions on competition saw competition as a threat to community and cooperation, potentially undermining collaboration and socialization for democracy and equality. The current ambivalence towards competition is based less on moral and social concerns and more on a concern for individual learning. According to the currently dominating educational paradigm, students should maximize their own learning. This re-actualizes competition as a tempting solution to the problem of upholding the maximum intensity of investment in learning. The dilemmas regarding competition in the current educational paradigm therefore relate to the risk of alienating individual students from their own learning paths by being seduced to follow superficial goals or to compare themselves to others.

The current prevalence of gamified learning technologies in education can be viewed as an attempt to find a solution to these dilemmas. Such technologies are frequently based on adaptive algorithms that customize learning to suit the individual even though they rely on elements (like prizes) associated with competition. The intensity and motivation a student can experience by winning is desirable. At the same time, gamified learning technologies avoid the downsides of competition as a form of sociality: prizes for everyone should make sure that no-one is envious or disappointed.

In our analysis of CampMat we have explored how these current ambivalences with regard to competition play out—and mutate into new forms—in a classroom setting. We have seen how the teacher externalizes the reward system. She thereby simultaneously provides a system of universal recognition—a rating with stars for everyone—and a ranking of students that could incite students to observe the situation as competitive.

However, according to our analysis, this does not unambiguously mean that the teacher is inviting competition. Instead, we have argued that the classroom setting is characterized by a form of open organization that leaves undecided the question of competition or non-competition. To a large extent, each student is left to work out how to observe herself and her classmates. In this sense, the perennial ambivalence between competition and non-competition is displaced, becoming something for which each individual student must assume responsibility. Students must prove that they are reflective learners by deciding whether coming first or being good will be the most effective way of sustaining their investment in learning. The student should be aware whether learning is promoted more with the side-glance turned to her/himself or to the classmates. Simply forgetting yourself in the attempt to win is too easy, and competition becomes a temptation for the student and the disavowed form of sociality in current education.

The current ambivalence with regard to competition stems from a care for the individual’s maximized learning. This means that even when the issue is forms of sociality, the starting point is the individual. Education has never been simply a matter of learning how to read and count; it has always been a question of socializing future generations. The current focus on learning makes basic questions like what kind of citizens do we want to educate, which virtues should they possess, and how do we want them to relate to each other difficult to debate among educational professionals. Sometimes the question of what kind of children we will get out of all this occurs in debates among educational professionals, but often in indirect ways, as ‘a cold shiver down the spine’ (Pors 2016). Focus on individual learning has impoverished our language for the social dimensions of education. By focusing on competition, we have sought in this chapter to direct focus back on sociality in education.
References


