

True Competition: A Guide to Pursuing Excellence in Sport and Society, David Light Shields and Brenda Light Bredemeier (2009), Champaign: Human Kinetics, 239 pp., ISBN: 978-0-7360-7429-2, p/bk, £ 18.95

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Since the late 1950s – the groundbreaking experiments of Morton Deutsch (1949), Muzafer Sherif (1966) and other well-known experimental social psychologists – competition has been seen in education research as a one-dimensional and inherently detrimental social phenomena, which promotes inter alia destructive conflicts, prejudice, aggression, increased stress level and frustration. Scholars thought for almost half of a century that the only solution to avoid these harmful processes and experiences is to eliminate competition as a whole and to focus educational goals on education for cooperation. The most significant added value of this book, however, is that based on demonstrative real-life examples and countless, valid scientific evidence it shows us that competitive encounters can lead to different processes and results. The book admits that controlled and constructive competition has its own valuable functions in society, which provide the bases for effective and ethical actions at interpersonal, intergroup, macroeconomic and national levels. This new perspective is particularly important, especially if we think about the key competencies a citizen living in a capitalist economy and a democratic society must have, in order to become a useful member of the community: for example competencies such as entrepreneurship skills, interpersonal

skills and personal characteristics like morality that are all closely related to competitive interactions. And the authors, who are prominent representatives of sport science, sport psychology and character education and who were the leaders of institutions like the Mendelson Centre for Sport, Character and Community (University of Notre Dame) are indeed genuine sources of theory and practice in this field.

In the first part of the book, following the synthesis of dominant results of twentieth-century education research in connection with competition, the authors set up a framework in which a wide range of experiences related to competition can be discussed. They introduce a new terminology to differentiate between the noble and enjoyable process of competition and its ‘ugly twin’, the destructive ‘imposter of competition’, i.e. decompetition, as they call it. In Chapter 3, they give us a valuable field guide to identify the factors underlying the process of true competition and decompetition, and these elements are explored in subsequent chapters. In this second part of the book, they elaborate on a number of contextual and personal factors including the different types of motivations, rewards, competition structures, goal orientations, regulations, the different patterns of the relationship between opponents, and the character development of those who are involved.

According to the main idea of the book, we can talk about true competition only when competition is based on partnership and respect between opponents, when the parties are striving for mutual excellence, when competitors have multiple goals (i.e. winning and joint mastery at the same time), when they comply with the rules, follow the basic moral laws and when the major sources of motivation are intrinsic values. The ideal contest, as they describe it, is very similar to M. Fülöp’s cooperative competition phenomena (Fülöp

and Szarvas 2011), and in this way the book fits very well into the latest wave of competition research. Turning to the other side of the coin, when competitors think of competition as war, use unfair or aggressive means, we cannot talk about true competition anymore. This differentiation of processes related to competitive contexts has major consequences both at individual and at community level. From this point of view, we can hypothesize that competition, which also implies a high level of cooperation, can be a fundamental part of constructive coexistence of citizens in society and only decompetition leads to deteriorating outcomes. Because of this, education for true and controlled competition may have exceptionally great significance in citizenship education. The authors, however, also admit that in many cases decompetition dominates during interactions, and this shows clearly that their tolerant views towards competition are far from being uncritical or oversimplifying. They list the most important factors, which are responsible for creating the atmosphere of decompetition, but they also look beyond the identification of this harmful process. The authors specify different tools for educators to create a proper environment for true competition. Inter alia, they emphasize that in educational settings the war metaphor of competition – where opponents are enemies – should be avoided and that teaching true competition also should cover education for cooperation, partnership and team responsibility. As can be seen, in this theoretical framework cooperation is ‘compatible’ with competition (opposed to the old approach of competition), and what is more necessary for constructive outcomes. They also suggest building a value-based culture in classroom, where constructive interactions can be based on consensual shared values and putting the focus of competition on mutually valuable relationships. They declare that educators should define multiple goals

during competition, which contain winning and enjoyment as equally important, and to support task motivation, which is mainly built on intrinsic rewards and enthusiasm. They also cover a number of topics in connection with developing character, compliance and self-awareness, and finally stress that educators should avoid unbalanced contest situations with regard to capabilities and also to emotional reactions.

The book is not just theoretically well established and informative, but also very practical containing a number of best practices, which can be easily adapted to citizenship education. It is important to highlight that the most essential message of the book is that whether a contest ends up in competition or decompetition is largely in our control. True competition can be and has to be taught for future citizens. The clarity of the writing and the interesting and illustrative real-life scenarios make this book a useful and pleasant read. Even if most of the examples are derived from sport, anyone from the field of education in general or citizenship education may find the outlined perspective useful and eye opening.

Reference

Fülöp, M., and Szarvas, H. (2011), 'The cooperative competitive citizen', in P. Cunningham and N. Fretwell (eds), *Europe's Future: Citizenship in a Changing World*, London: CiCe, pp. 1–11.

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