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Just a little healthy competition? Teachers Perceptions of Competition in the Classroom

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INTRODUCTION

- There is long standing debate about the use of competition in the classroom.
  - Individuals on the pro-side suggest that the world is full of competition, and thus a necessary preparation (Shinder, 2009).
  - Individuals on the con-side highlight negatives associated with competition including heightened student anxiety or fear of failure (Shinder, 2009).
- Regardless of side in the debate, students currently exist in a system marked by standardized assessments and school rankings that emphasize student performance and comparison (Daniels et al., 2020).
- Therefore, the purpose of the current study was:
  1. To examine to whom teachers attribute the emphasis on performance, competition, and comparison.
  2. To explore the reasons teachers give to minimize or not minimize competition in their classrooms.

METHOD

- We surveyed 475 teachers who ranged in age from 21 to 71 (M = 37.25), and had an averaged of 11.24 years of teaching experience.
- We asked teachers to indicate the extent to which five members of the school community focused on competition on a scale from 1 (not very focused) to 4 (very focused).
  - We ranked the means in ascending.
- We also asked teachers to respond to a forced-choice question "*Do you try to intentionally reduce the focus on performance, competition, and social comparison in your classroom?*"
- Then we had teachers explain why or why not to examine word frequency in their responses.

To what extent do you think each of the following groups of people is focused on performance, competition, and social comparison?
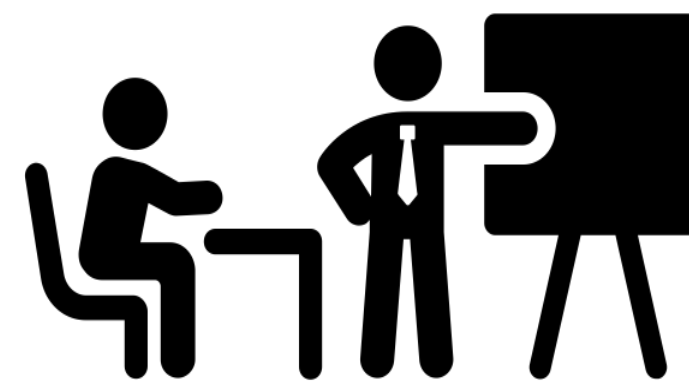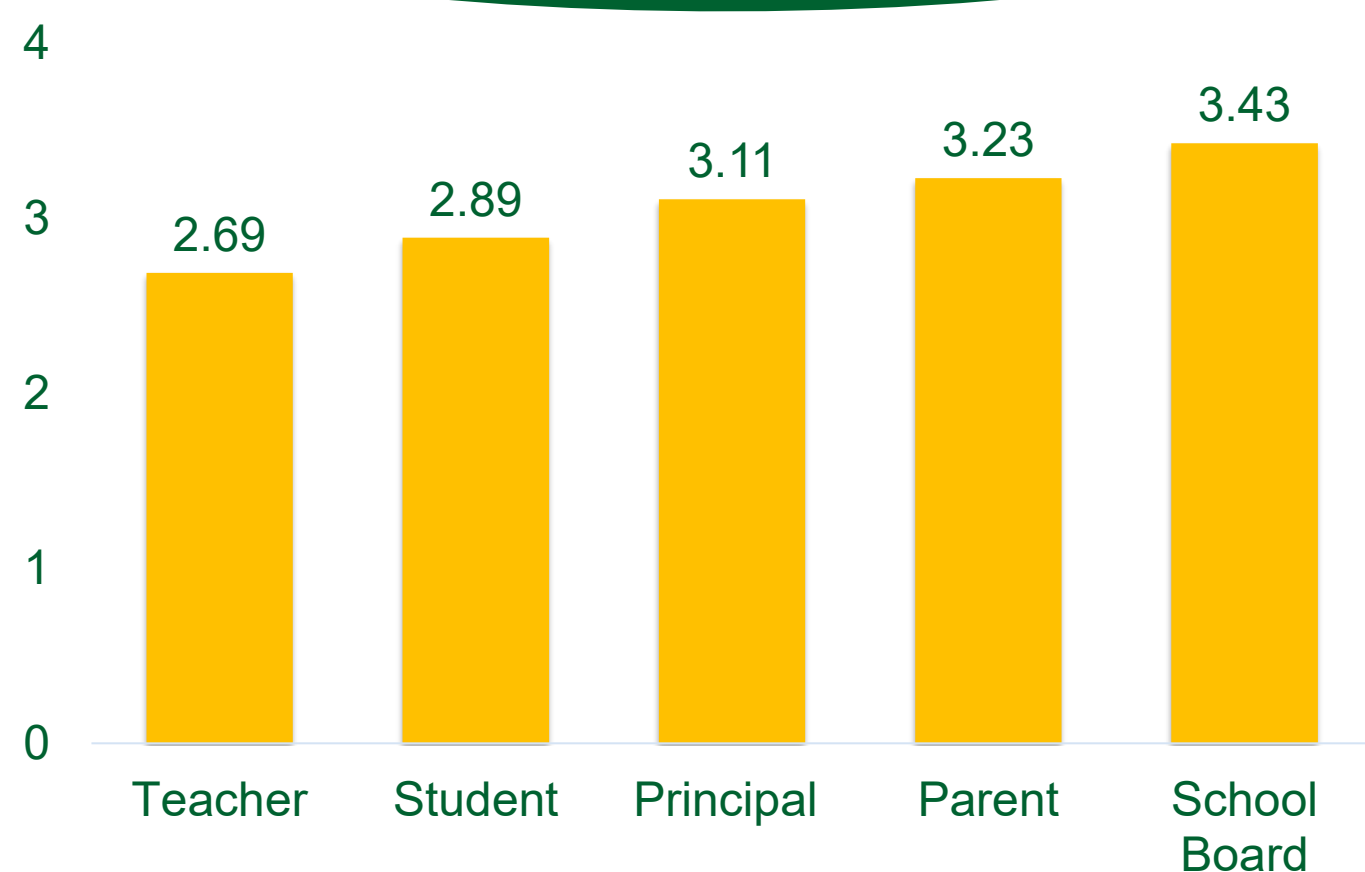
Do you try to intentionally reduce the focus on performance, competition, and social comparison in your classroom?

82%
of teachers said yes.

Why?

Why not?

DISCUSSION

- Teachers ascribed more focus on performance, competition, and social comparison to individuals outside the classroom than those within.
  - These differences could be used to facilitate a conversation between educational stakeholders.
- Teachers who intentionally reduce the focus on competition, emphasize learning and the importance of accepting individual differences.
  - These values may stem from the importance placed on inclusive education (Government of Alberta, 2021).
  - Here, competence is measured not relative to others, but based on the students' own understanding and mastery of the material.
    - This can encourage students to adopt mastery goals that are often linked to positive outcomes such as adaptive help-seeking, and persistence (Murayama & Elliot, 2019).
  - Alternatively, a focus on social comparison can lead to more negative outcomes such as stress, anxiety, and procrastination.
- A professional development session for school personnel, outlining positive approaches for motivating students, may be advantageous.

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