

Theoretical analysis of cheating at Slovak schools

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Abstract

Cheating occurs in all types of schools by students of all age groups. Any attempts to resolve this problem are ineffective and have only a temporary effect. The aim of this research was to analyze the content of the pedagogical documentation of randomly selected secondary schools, Slovak Universities and the Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic in relation to cheating. The work outlines the causes of this phenomenon and ways to help eliminate it.

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Key Words

Cheating at school, pedagogical documentation, elimination of cheating, Catholic Religious Education, Ethical Education, Academic Ethics

Introduction

Cheating is a problem for all types of schools around the world. With the increasing usage of information technology (IT), this phenomenon has become almost uncontrollable. Children and students lose their identity when they cheat. If children who cheat are more successful than those who do not, the noncheating children can become frustrated (Middle Me Earth, 2014). The innocent cheating of children and students can negatively affect their adult behavior (Anderman and Won, 2019; Bajtoš and Marhevková, 2016: 56; Isakov and Tripathy, 2017).

There is a different attitude about cheating among students and teachers. It is known that good students also cheat. These students want to receive good marks, and even if they study, they do not believe in themselves. For slow learners, cheating may indicate that they are not interested in the subject (Bajtoš and Marhevková, 2016: 54–56).

The indifferent and lax approach of some teachers allows students to cheat; others warn, explain misunderstandings or give the student a failing grade, Fx (Ahmad, 2017: 765–770; Asokan et al., 2013).

This work strives to determine the status of cheating in the pedagogical documentation of randomly selected high schools. Subsequently, our findings are combined with a discussed about academic ethics and the content of ethical and religious education in lower secondary classes and the first years of upper secondary classes, which is supplemented by examples from the pedagogical practice of the author. We attempt to define the most common types of cheating at all types of schools and to propose solutions based on a theoretical analysis that could eliminate them.

Research Methods

1. We compared the school rules of eight grammar schools and eight specialized secondary schools from different parts of Slovakia. One grammar school and one specialized school were randomly selected from each self-governing region. Our research was mainly focused on the parts of the school rules that referred to cheating: *"Obligations of the pupil."* *"The pupil is forbidden."* *"Educational measures."* The frequency of phrases related to cheating with the consequence of educational measures in individual types of schools was monitored. 2. In studying the possible impact of the educational process on schools to eliminate the cheating of pupils and students, we examined the topics, content, performance and graduate profile in Catholic Religious Education and Ethics Educational program of the state educational program. Our study of these documents focused on topics that could be used in the teaching process to address the global problem of cheating. 3. The code of ethics regarding cheating for three Slovak universities was also investigated.

Results and Finding

Cheating and School Regulations at Grammar Schools

In the reviewed school rules, the concept *"Obligations of a pupil"* was represented most often by the phrase *"obligation to acquire knowledge"* (5x). Conscientious work and conscientious access to duties appeared only once. Similarly, responsibility for one's study results was also mentioned one time. We also recorded statements about the violation of the school rule on cheating (1x), the ban on cheating (2x), and the statement *"it is not allowed"* (2x).

In studying the forms of sanctions that can be imposed on students who have been proven to have cheated, the following was discovered: in 3 cases, there was an admonition by the school principal; in one case, the admonition was only stated in general in violation of the school regulations and did not specify cheating. The educational measure was increased, from sanction by the class teacher to being excluded from school, or the educational measure resulting from cheating was never mentioned.

Cheating and School Regulations at Specialized Schools

In the section entitled *"Obligations of a pupil"*, the regulations of Secondary Specialized Schools contained a formulation of the obligation to acquire knowledge, to work conscientiously and to have a conscientious approach towards duties a total of four times. The students' responsibility for their study results was mentioned once.

In addition to the regulations of grammar schools, the prohibited activities of students were specified in the school rules for the Specialized Secondary Schools. The *"Prohibition "* section included statements about violations of the school rules due to deception and prompting, the use of unauthorized information sources and plagiarism a total of four times and the ban on the use of IT and mobile phones (4x). In one case, the ban on the use of mobile phones was highlighted twice in the school regulations.

Only one school stipulated specific sanctions for the use of mobile phones during classes, "cheat sheets" and prompting. In this case, the sanctions depended on the frequency of the cheating. In another case, the pupil could be sanctioned according to the level of the proof. Three of the eight specialized schools did not stipulate the sanctions for cheating.

Cheating and Catholic Religious Education

In the state educational program for the 1st year of grammar school (subject – Catholic religion), no reference to school cheating was found (National Institute for Education in Slovak Republic, 2017a).

We believe that the assessment of the implications of such behavior by students could be included in the classes on consciousness formation, knowledge of sin and the application of the Ten Commandments in ordinary life. Graduate students of Catholic religious education should be able to *"Effectively solve problems, to take responsibility for their actions, properly adapt to changing living conditions, effectively learn and to collaborate"* (Catholic Pedagogical and Catechism Center, 2015).

Cheating and Ethical Education

According to the educational program for subject *ethical education* (National Institute for Education in Slovak Republic, 2017b), the topic of the elimination of school misconduct could be used to focus on the ability to correctly use verbal and nonverbal communication, assessing the need for education, moral and legal norms relative to individual conscience, the rules of fair play and a code of ethics. Students of ethical education should be able to *"apply different learning strategies, critical thinking and creatively handle information, use all available forms of communication, creatively use information technology (IT), and actively approach the achievement of their goals."* (National Institute for Education in Slovak Republic, 2017c).

Previous paragraphs imply that, after completing religious or ethical education, a pupil should be aware of the negative consequences of cheating.

Cheating and Academic Ethics

The ethical codes of universities form part of their strategic documents, and they are closely linked to the employee's code of ethics. The ethical rules for student behavior at universities are formulated in the school's ethical principles (Comenius University, 2016) or separately (Matej Bel University, 2015; Pavol Jozef Šafárik University, 2014). These documents highlight honesty, responsibility, and honest ways of verifying acquired knowledge during one's studies (Kralova and Svetlikova-Martauzova, 2017). The issue of plagiarism is highlighted separately.

The student's Code of Ethics thoroughly addresses all forms of academic ethics, such as *"illicit aid, copying, use of illicit materials, plagiarism, counterfeiting and modification of information, selling or providing seminar, academic or other written works, use of IT on tests without the tutor's approval..."* (Matej Bel University, 2015: 3).

Discussion

Cheating at Primary and High Schools

Cheating occurs in primary school when students are required to acquire knowledge they should have in a certain period. At this level, pupils use classical methods of cheating: 1. whispering answers and using hand signals for one-word answers. 2. Cheat sheets are used primarily for written answers and tests. Cheat sheets contain the most basic information on the subject, and its basic features are its size and inconspicuousness. The placement of cheat sheets depends on the students and their ingenuity. These methods are mainly used in the primary school environment (Bajtoš and Marhevková, 2016: 57). In our opinion, the abovementioned methods are mainly used by children 6 to 10 years of age. In higher grades, these methods are replaced by cyber cheating, IT cheating (Blau and Eshet-Alkalai, 2017). Students will be able to communicate via hands-free technology, text messages, and photographing and distributing tests to classmates or a website. This form of cheating is widespread, especially at universities (Bajtoš and Marhevková, 2016: 58).

The development of projects and the use of IT leads to violations of copyright law at primary and secondary schools (Blau and Eshet-Alkalai, 2017; Copyright the law No. 185/2015). From our own experience, we know that Slovak primary and secondary school teachers do not require students to use references when creating projects. When the students are alerted to this duty (for example, by parents), the sources are not compliantly added; instead, they say *"We don't have to. The teacher / professor doesn't want us to."* We

think that even teachers do not realize in this case that they are tolerating plagiarism (Copyright the law No. 185/2015; Szattler, 2007).

We examined the school regulations of 16 randomly selected high schools (8 of the 16 were grammar schools) from all Slovak regions. Because the regulations are based on the Methodological Guidelines of the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic (MESRS SR) for the Evaluation and Classification of High Schools (Ministry of Education Science Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic (MESRS SR), 2011), they are very similar and often identical in terms of content. Possible sanctions for students who cheat are only rarely mentioned in the school regulations in the Educational Measures section. In most cases, grammar schools refer to cheating in the general sense. At specialized high schools, methods of cheating are specified. All the documents, regardless of the type of school, were published on school websites without any limitation to access. The regulations rely on students to prepare for classes and acquire the required knowledge. Most students have a lax attitude towards these documents even though they are familiar with them at the beginning of their studies at the beginning of each new school year. We assume that school regulations are more precise for students in specialized high schools because of the general assumption that these students cheat more often.

Cheating at Universities – Academic Ethics

Upon being admitted to university, students become members of the academic community; therefore, they have the right to learn. The use of this right must be in accordance with the law (Higher Education Act. No. 175/2008) (National Council of the Slovak Republic, 2008). The student, as a member of the academic community, is obliged to follow the school's internal regulations, including the academic ethics or ethics code for members of the academic community. These codes are said to be clear about students fulfilling their duties, condemning cheating of any kind in examinations and the emphasizing the ongoing fulfillment of student's duties. The codes state that *"Being part of the academic community means being honest with myself and others ... As a matter of course, academics (and students) are expected to be disqualified by academic rules (not cheating) due to the loss of academic and professional honor"* (Meško et al., 2005). The ethical codes are published on the faculty websites and have no limitations to access. Our experience shows that many students and teachers do not know about the existence and content of such codes.

When teaching biophysics and medical physics, teachers are regularly exposed to plagiarism from students in the first semester of their studies. Plagiarism is *"the intention to present the results of someone else's intellectual activity (thoughts and expressions) as their own."* (Szattler, 2007). When creating semester projects on a particular topic, students do not know the correct way to quote, even though this methodology is repeatedly explained, and they have written instructions on how to do it. Students do not understand the need to specify primary sources for the images and schema used in their work.

The vast majority of students use *"mosaic plagiarism"*, which is defined as *"distracting borrowed phrases and sentences in the thesis without quoting the source"* (Meško et al., 2005: 413). During our pedagogical practice, we are repeatedly faced with cases in which students hand in someone else's semester project and present it as their own original work. Such papers are mostly taken from the internet or purchased (made to order).

Another type of cheating that we face every year is fabrication: *"making and knowingly using false data, results and notes in any activity related to the learning process."* (Meško et al., 2005: 413) In our case, the deception of the results of the measured values ultimately disregards the entire protocol. Students prepare the reports electronically and submit them in printed form. Quite often, we find identical protocols among an entire group of students or even between groups taught by different teachers.

Our students complete two tests in electronic form as part of the practical exercises. These results determine whether the students will be able to pass the final exam. Before the test, the students are alerted to the banning of smartphones and other IT sources. Regarding foreign students in particular, we meet with requests for help in solving the problems, finding the right answer on the smartphone or making photocopies of the test. This form of cheating is characterized by *"using or attempting to use unauthorized materials,*

information and teaching aids in any academic, scientific and pedagogical activities” (Meško et al., 2005: 413).

Why do Students Cheat – the Fault Lies with Teachers and the Curriculum as well as the Students

The reform of Slovak education and the adaptation of the content of teaching and the hourly allotment for individual subjects (including physics and mathematics and other natural sciences) resulted in the exclusion of some topics. We assume that these topics had been used to connect and understand the different parts of a given thematic unit. Students or even teachers often do not know about interdisciplinary relations between physics and biology. Teachers often do not explain to students why they should learn such subjects and how to use them in future studies even in a different field. Due to the timidity or “incompetence” of teachers, the subject is insufficiently explained to students, and there is a lack of time for practice and consolidation. In this environment, student motivation decreases (Anderman and Koenka, 2017; Kralova, 2017), and talented students lose interest in acquiring knowledge over time; their primary goal is to obtain good grades (Anderman and Won, 2019). Students do not try to logically understand the content of classes and apply learned knowledge but rely on short-term memory. Therefore, tests on less recently studied themes may induce the use of cheat sheets. Other possible reasons for the occurrence of cheating include the strictness of the teacher and disproportionate demands and pressures on the student by parents. According to the literature, students’ attempts to cheat may also be conditioned by the ignorance of teachers regarding students’ busy schedules, loss of interest in the subject, inability to spend time studying and, on the other hand, exaggerated competition (Bajtoš and Marhevková, 2016: 54; Clariana et al., 2012; Escolano-Perez et al., 2017; Fecková, 2014: 329).

After admitting students to university, they have to get used to a different working regime; many duties, including a high level of requirements, are associated with preparing for the next day. It is almost the rule that, in lower grades, students have to pass compulsory subjects that obviously have no importance to them; they do not know about the connection between a subject and its practice at a higher grade. A student’s financial background is also a significant matter. Many students work while studying and do not have enough time to meet the obligations of their studies. We will be able to document the above statements by responding to a student’s response to the question about why she did not prepare for practical exercises: “... *I had to work at McDonald’s; I need the money, my parents do not have it.*” As mentioned above, many students have insufficient basic knowledge from high school, which may highlight their problems with adapting to university. On the other hand, we know from our own experience that successful high school graduates begin to study at university with the resolve to earn the same grades they earned in high school.

Solving the Issue of Cheating

Cheating is a generally widespread phenomenon at all kinds of schools. The documents we examined did not disclose how the teacher should deal with this phenomenon. The only internal document that informs the teacher of how to proceed in such cases is found on the website of a Catholic high school: “*Work that is not original will not be positively evaluated. Including (not only) copying from the Internet when preparing homework and presentations, copying from their classmates during tests and quizzes, etc.*” (Štefániková, 2016: 3).

In the vast majority of cases in primary and grammar schools, the solution remains at the level of the teachers and students in an internal classroom environment. Although we have experience with some warnings in school regulations regarding cheating, we believe that they are rarely implemented.

The Methodological Guidelines for the evaluation of behavior at high schools states “*Grade 1 – The student complies with the school regulations and other internal rules of the school and respects the moral principles and cohabitation rules with the others and in relation to the teachers. Occasionally they may commit minor transgressions*” (Ministry of Education Science Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic (MESRS SR), 2011). It is the teacher’s duty to interpret the seriousness of the cheating. If this activity is not negatively perceived and teachers allow it to continue, it can influence students’ behavior in adulthood (Middle Me Earth, 2014).

The detection of cheating at university in most cases remains at the teacher-student level; the student is punished with the Fx grade. The academic code of ethics, published on the university's website, contains the rules of academic behavior, but it does not comment on the attitudes of teachers to students after they have been caught cheating. From the narrative of university students, we know that a student who is caught cheating may have a problem at the final exam due to the escalation of tensions in his/her relationship with the teacher, which sometimes leads to the premature termination of studies.

Cheating in all kind of schools has become a complex problem, which, in our opinion, needs to be comprehensively addressed from many perspectives. Once cheating is detected, punishment in most cases is ineffective. A number of factors mentioned above trigger the moral failure of individuals. This issue should be given increased attention not only in secondary and elementary schools in subjects such as religious and ethical education and lessons about society but also at universities.

Our research indicates that the topic of cheating and its implications should be included in primary school education on ethics in the following thematic areas:

1. Communication: inform students of the inappropriateness of verbal or nonverbal communication for cheating.
2. Philosophical generalization of moral and ethical principles: use appropriate life examples to show that cheating, even though it is widespread in all areas, can harm the cheater and others.
3. Ethics of work, ethics and economics: in line with the profile of students in age groups 10-12 years (National Institute for Education in Slovak Republic, 2017c), teach to accept the results of their work and bear responsibility for it. The teacher should support students in this effort and allow them to achieve a result that is difficult for students to accept. It is important to show students real examples demonstrating that when they become accustomed to cheating during their education process, they may later be tempted to cheat regardless of the difficulty of the task. In the future, their cheating can harm not only themselves but also others. Self-assessment, attitudes towards duties and moral attitudes are topics that could be included in lessons about society (National Institute for Education in Slovak Republic, 2017d).

In the subject of religious education (Catholic Religion), the issue of cheating can be included in discussions of deception or theft. Based on the Innovated Framework Education Program (Žigová, 2016) and teacher lesson plans for elementary and secondary schools in the Slovak Republic (Žigová, 2016), we have found that this issue can be addressed in several topics:

1. The thematic units *"The Dialog of God and Man"* and *"Man in Paradise"* are taught to students 10 to 12 years of age at elementary school. It is possible to point to interpersonal relationships that should be based on love and confidence, not lies and the consequences of deception (including cheating) in relation to the eighth commandment from God. Space to address this issue is also provided in the topic *"Truth as Value"*.

In later years, the curriculum is focused more on the formation of the individual and on the development of interpersonal relationships (topics *"Why follow the Ten Commandments"*, *"Responsibility for building relationships"*, *"Man in the world of faith"*, *"Authority and for what?"*). The lesson should also be aimed at highlighting the correct relationship with authority based on trust and love, which could be disturbed by cheating. It should be emphasized that parents and teachers are authority figures for students. Students need to be responsible for their actions and growth in the field of study. Students are preparing for a future job while studying. Therefore, the failure to prepare and the resulting possible deception in the form of cheating is irresponsible. Cheating harms further growth from the natural and the spiritual sides.

2. In education, it is worth mentioning cheating as "something" that destroys not only mutual relationships in the class but also the relationship between the teacher and the student. Every relationship between people is based on mutual trust. Through deception, this confidence is disturbed, breaking our relationships and bringing suspicion and mistrust to them.

We assume that curricula should be organized in such a way that teachers have enough time to review and repeat lessons. Topics should be explained to students briefly and clearly with respect to all contexts and interdisciplinary relationships. In doing so, the content of the subject matter cannot be "lost". In secondary

and elementary schools, the main idea of the subject is "lost" in an effort to impress as many students as possible.

It is important for students to be provided with relevant information about the test or verbal exam: the form of questions, time limits, number of questions, and form of evaluation. In the case of a test at the end of the school year, the teacher should provide students with a set of questions from which the test questions will be selected. The questions must be concise, clear, precise and unambiguous. The teacher should ensure that students do not disturb each other during the test and should distribute students in the classroom so that no one has a neighbor (Topirceanu, 2017). The test should be of such a scope that students have enough time to rethink their answers or recheck them after completing their work. For electronic testing, it is important to be able to return to or correct issues once questions are answered. Important tests should not be written at the last minute. In our opinion, it is important for students to receive results quickly, so they have enough time to retake the test. If a student is interested in questioning the test results, the teacher should allow it.

Conclusion

The problem of cheating has become international in scope, which may impact all of society, services, the economy, science, etc. Therefore, it is necessary to start addressing this issue within families, not only in the primary and in secondary schools. Young people must recognize that their own knowledge, creation, and way of thinking, which they can build on and continually develop, are extremely valuable. Teachers must be aware that sanctions are not appropriate or effective enough to correct this problem. Teachers should try to provide students with specific examples of the knowledge that they are trying to teach and talk about that knowledge. These recommendations should be strengthened by addressing the issue of cheating and its impact on people and society in the context of civic, ethical and religious education.

In general, society needs the mutual communication of its members for its future existence, which should be based on sharing values and emphasizing the demand for truth (Fitte, 2007: 122–123). This fact can be reflected in a learning process in which the authenticity of sharing knowledge, values and relationships is emphasized. Relationships based on trust and mutual communication are the basis of a stable society. Therefore, it is necessary to guide students towards recognizing truth as a value and then living up to that value. The formation of the abovementioned values in students depends on the teacher.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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