This paper is taken from

***Lifelong Learning and Active Citizenship***
***Proceedings of the twelfth Conference of the Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe Academic Network***

London: CiCe 2010

**edited by Peter Cunningham and Nathan Fretwell, published in London by CiCe,**
**ISBN 978-1-907675-01-0**



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This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

**Acknowledgements:**

This is taken from the book that is a collection of papers given at the annual CiCe Conference indicated. The CiCe Steering Group and the editor would like to thank

- All those who contributed to the Conference
- The CiCe administrative team at London Metropolitan University
- London Metropolitan University, for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The Lifelong Learning Programme and the personnel of the Education and Culture DG of the European Commission for their support and encouragement.

# Respecting School Standards and Rules as the Foundations for Developing Responsible Citizen Attitudes

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***Abstract***

*The fact that pupils respect school standards and rules is generally considered to be the first stage of a positive stance towards further respecting broader social norms, which, having been accepted, enable developing responsible citizen attitudes. Our contribution, which is based on a questionnaire answered by university students (n=307) and primary school pupils (n=160), analyzes their attitudes towards school standards and rules. The survey focuses on looking for motives and reasons for obeying school standards and rules or violating them. We also investigated classroom status of the individuals who follow the rules and of those who break them repeatedly. One of the survey outcomes is rather alarming. Frequently occuring trespassing given school standards and rules in both investigated groups influences the way students and pupils perceive them. On the whole, they view standards and rules as something that is, given its statistically high occurrence, common to break.*

***Key words:*** *school rules, citizen attitudes, attitudes towards school rules, school cheating, respecting and trespassing norms*

## Introduction

Respecting social norms and rules forms the very basis of functioning in all the existing societies. Democratic countries build this respect on developed citizen attitudes in majority of the people in these countries. The principle valid in individual countries is fully valid in the European Union as well.

Relations to norms and keeping norms is the core of works by Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg, the founders of moral psychology. According to Piaget, developing ones's relation to norms represents foundations for all the moral attitudes. The process of inner norm adoption makes the transfer from heteronomous morale to autonomous morale possible (Piaget, 1977). Education for citizenship in primary and secondary schools represents a significant contribution towards the gradual process of making norms one's inner standards.

The issue of creating 'citizen virtues' seems to be more complicated in former totalitarian communist countries. Many reasonable and rightful norms and limits are still perceived by majority of people as a malicious state intention damaging their interests and, in other words, outer norms. People still feel inclined to the ways of the past, when tax evasion, breaking the Highway Code and acting against the state machinery was actually considered an act of resistance against the totalitarian regime. On the other side, the so-called decent citizens of the Czech Republic would rarely dream of going to a protest meeting organised against protesting xenophobic and racist groups. Protests

against extreme-right groups are only held by extreme-left groups with majority of the society taking on the role of on-lookers. Sadly enough, recent history has taught us how threatening to democracy these passive and witholding stances can be.

Schools are supposed to be the place of growing into the society including acquisition of respect to rules. However, education, despite its uniqueness and diversity, can also be characterized by certain ingrained features which show stability regardless of the time or place. These features (among others) include 'cheating and unfair behaviour' (Buschway, Nash, 1977, p. 623). Using our research outcomes, in this article we would like to point to the risks arising from ignoring school cheating or approaching it in the wrong way.

**Studies on School Cheating**

Eisenberg defines school cheating as 'obtaining and using information from illicit sources and using it for improving one´s (exam) grade ' (2004, p. 164). Mareš's definition, which is loosely based on Cizek, gives three basic indicators of cheating: This kind of behaviour: 1. breaks set school rules, 2. brings the pupil undeserved advantages 3. makes pedagogical conclusions based on their performance less reliable and precise (2005, p. 312).

To analyse school cheating, we used the questionnaire method and the structured interview method. The questionnaires were prepared especially for the survey needs and used twice within a twenty-year interval (see Šookyová, 1989 and Vojtěchová, 2008). The respondents were teacher trainees – students of the Faculty of Education (1989: n = 187; 2008: n = 120). Also, in 2008, the number of respondents included primary school pupils (n = 160). Structured interviews were carried out with 120 teachers in 1989 and 60 teachers in 2008.

We intended to give detailed characteristics of the investigated phenomena while making final conclusions in accordance with the development and changes in contemporary Czech schools. Partial goals of the work included:

- cheating pupil motives
- respondents' attitudes to school cheating
- the influence of cheating on being or not being favourite
- teachers' attitudes to school cheating

**Research Outcomes and Commentary**

*Very frequent* cheating in the form of forbidden sharing of information was admitted by 29% of the respondents in 1989 (almost one third of the total number) and 19 % of the teacher trainees in 2008. The items *very frequently* or *sometimes* were chosen by more than 92% of the respondents in 1989 and by 80% of the respondents (teacher trainees) in 2008. Primary school pupils scored a significantly lower rate. Higher (respectively the highest) occurrence of cheating is found in secondary grammar schools. Young school children scored the lowest numbers, with the amount of cheating gradually growing in the higher grades of primary schools, culminating in secondary schools and falling again in universities. University freshmen tend to cheat more than their senior colleagues

(McCabe, Travino and Butterfield, 2001). The lower rate of occurrence could be explained by their unwillingness to confess this kind of behaviour (compare with Mareš, 2005).

Our research outcomes confirm that the rate of cheating (using crib notes and forbidden sharing of information) rises up to a certain age level and the differences between primary and secondary schools are vast. While only 17% of the respondents in primary schools cheated, the number grew to 83% of the respondents in secondary schools. The number of respondents using crib notes rose from 18% to 70% (Šookyová, 1989). The relatively high number of cheating pupils causes that cheating appears *'normal'*, because it concerns majority and seems to be perceived as such not only by pupils and students but also by the teachers themselves.

Heteronomous moral of *younger school children* makes not cheating and not copying easier as the class collectives are less compact and there is less direct and indirect peer group pressure on conformity when compared to classes of older pupils. Not letting others copy one's work, not sharing information and reporting to the teacher on forbidden behaviour do not lead to a diminished class status in younger school children.

However, the rising rate of cheating correlating with older age can vary. Secondary education is more difficult both in terms of teachers' demands and study material, there is growing competition in the classroom, peer pressure is more palpable, classes become more united with pupils being more willing to 'help' each other, secondary grammar school students are older, no longer one-sidedly respect authorities and they are also much more inventive and daring in their ways of breaking norms (cheating in electronical forms).

What motives lead pupils to forbidden sharing of information? The prevailing one is undoubtedly the need to 'help one's peer in need'. This reason was given by 92.5% of the respondents in 1989 and 70% of the university students in 2008. An interesting point is represented by the 5% of the 1989 respondents who choose this method to make sure they will get help of this kind when they need it. This answer option was chosen by 15% of the university students in 2008 and even 19% of the primary school pupils (Šookyová, 1989, Vojtěchová, 2008).

Under these circumstances, we were also interested in the reversed side of the issue - why the respondents did not provide help. The most frequent answer was the simple 'I didn't know anything' (given by approximately one third of the respondents) and also 'I didn't feel like it' (given by one quarter of the respondents). No 1989 student opted for 'I would do something against my principles' – in other words, for an ethical reason. In 2008, this option was chosen by 12 primary school students (7.5%) and 4 teacher trainees (3.3%). Copying other pupils'/students' work shows a different picture. The most frequent reason is fear of punishment (38% - 1989; 54% - 2008 in university students; 62.5% in primary school pupils in 2008). Less than 10% of primary school pupils avoid this behaviour because it is 'unfair', while only 6% of the 2008 university students and almost 20% of the 1989 university students stated the same reason (Šookyová, 1989, Vojtěchová, 2008).

The basic underlying motive for school cheating is obtaining better grades through immoral (illegal) means. Forbidden sharing of information contains an extra element of interaction.The motive can be altruistic though a closer look often shows that it is exactly the opposite of 'help to a neighbour in need'. The help reciprocity is common. If you help me, I'll help you (Kohlberg's second stage of moral development). Further, it can represent an attempt to raise one's social prestige within the class (the third stage orientated at group appraisal – active help allows an individual to climb the class popularity ladder), but also - 'keeping a specific moral code – a friend should be helped at all costs', 'egotism and a desire to show off' (Mareš, Křivohlavý, 1995, p. 87). There is also the 'sports' motive – the gain is not the help to one's friend but cheating the teacher. Another specific type is a sort of pseudo-cheating meaning forbidden sharing of information in not a very subtle way, so that the teacher notes the fact that the helping pupil knows the answers.

Opinions of the respondents on the classroom peers who never helped by *fobidden sharing of information or letting others copy their work* were immensely interesting. We wanted to find out about the motives which *probably* led some of their classroom peers (on average, there were three to five of them in each classroom) into behaving the way they did. The first three places in the ranking are occupied by fear of punishment, own benefit and egotism, indifference and laziness, followed by lack of necessary knowledge. The 'noble' motive in the principle of not cheating was truly exceptional (the 1989 university students and the 2008 primary school students – less than 10% and the 2008 university students – less than 7%).

Given the above mentioned answers, it is not surprising that the not cheating students did not belong among popular pupils. In 1989, 61.5% of these students/pupils were *not very popular* and *more unpopular*, with numbers going down to 50% in 2008 (Šookyová, 1989, Vojtěchová, 2008). On the other hand, the *above average popularity* of the cheating pupils and students ranged between 68% in primary school pupils and 77% in university students (Šookyová, 1989, Vojtěchová, 2008).

The issue of school cheating appears to be more complex. Particularly, the cheating pupil finds himself or herself in the middle of a norm conflict: the official external norm forbidding to provide help in this way and an informal peer group norm which assumes and requires this kind of help. Class group norms can be influenced. Students in a group with encouraged pro-cheating atmosphere cheated on a wider scale than those in a group where cheating was disapproved of (Knowlton, Hamerlynck, 1967). This statement is hopeful as it shows that teachers using sophisticated strategies can positively influence class group norms.

It seems that our pupils and also our teacher trainees suffer from certain deficiency in the ability to distinguish what is moral and immoral. In our survey on cheating in school (Vojtěchová, 2008) teacher trainees (n = 120) were asked whether they consider cheating:

| | Teacher trainees % |
|---|---|
| honest | 15.8 |
| more honest | 23.3 |
| more dishonest | 54.2 |
| dishonest | 6.7 |

Considering the fact that approximately 40% of the respondents among teacher trainees do not know precisely whether cheating is moral or not, we need to think where their ability to distinguish between these dimensions 'got lost' (and whether there was something to lose in the first place) and we can also ask how these students will influence moral character of their pupils in the future when they have such 'blurred vision'. It seems that their assessment of morality of the given behaviour is influenced by its frequency. If something appears frequently, often and naturally, without being assessed from the moral point of view, then it is normal and it does not violate any standards. In such situations, a situational variable (peer group pressure, current psychical state, etc.) prevails in an individual's decision-making process.

If we look at the above mentioned facts, it is hardly surprising that teacher trainees very seldom react to this behaviour by trying to influence the development of *moral character* of their pupils: Only three of the 1989 trainees and six of the 2008 trainees would attempt to *explain* why crib using or forbidden sharing of information (and, generally, cheating) is wrong. For example, as one of the respondents said: 'I'd try to make them see that this is unfair.' Others would, probably based on experience gained from their own teachers, rely on punishment in different forms (oral reprimanding, failing grades, setting an extra test, and so on). Six of the students would work with fear of punishment and three of them would let guilty pupils copy the school code (Šookyová, 1989, Vojtěchová, 2008).

Here, Eisenberg (2004) quotes Nevo, who found out that 53% of students stated that cheating in school is immoral and mere 4% of them did not see this kind of behaviour as a problem. 30% viewed this as a minor offence. When asked if they feel guilt while cheating, 60% of the respondents said either 'no'or 'only a temporary one, while cheating'. Eisenberg suggests that especially the group perceiving cheating only as a minor offence considered cheating to be rather a matter of *breaking conventions* (that is trespassing agreed upon school rules stating exactly what is allowed and what is forbidden) and not being *immoral*.

Only 6.7% (!) of our future teachers consider school cheating truly unfair. The answer 'rather unfair' (54.2%) makes the phenomena seem somehow less grave and reflects the opinion that cheating is a 'minor offence'. However, in spite of the fact that 60% of the respondents think that forbidden sharing of information is wrong, most of them still occasionally employ it ('sometimes' – 61.4%, 'often'- almost 20% or 'very rarely' – 18.3%). These students know that their behaviour is wrong, but they separate this knowledge from their actual behaviour.

The new study shows that cheating is influenced by many factors: individual characteristics of the pupil, their fellow pupils and of the teacher, class atmosphere, way of teaching, used testing methods (including didactic test layouts and computer testing), taught material and test timing specifics (Mareš, 2005, p. 232).

To sum up, we can say that schools and teachers are capable of limiting cheating in school to the minimum level if they detect it and react appropriately and use sophisticated methods for its elimination. The same author (Mareš) also emphasizes the

necessity to evaluate school cheating in a wider social context and not only as an individual, class group or school failure.

The last area to deserve our attention are teachers' views on crib notes and forbidden sharing of information. It must be said that the twenty year gap between the respondent groups did not alter their opinion on the subject of the question in any way (although the teacher group differed). In 1989, forbidden sharing of information was seen as a major problem by 3.9 % of the teachers and by 3.3% of the teachers in 2008. Using crib notes was seen as a major problem by 4.9% of the teachers in 1989 and only by 1.7% of the teachers in 2008.

On the contrary, approximately the same number of teachers could not find any major problem in school cheating neither in 1989, nor in 2008. Most frequently, this group of teachers described both these types of school cheating a *minor problem.* In the case of forbidden sharing of information, this opinion was held by 45% of the teachers in 1989 and only by 20% of the teachers in 2008. The numbers concerning using crib notes were 34% of the teachers in 1989 and 23.4% of the teachers in 2008 (Šookyová, 1989, Vojtěchová, 2008).

Teachers usually see school cheating as breaking norms set by the *school code of conduct* and disturbing the proccess of teaching and, similarly to other forms of misconduct, as an act deserving a punishment. They are less likely to perceive it as a *moral problem*.

Teachers face more troublesome issues such as drug use, bullying and truancy as these represent a more serious threat to fulfilling group and individual education goals. As a rule, these kinds of school misconduct result in more severe punishment. However, based on the potential long-term impact on pupils' characters, school cheating must not be underestimated.

Thus, the highest and the most valuable form of school cheating prevention should be the moral awareness of the pupil preventing him or her from cheating from *within*. As our survey outcomes and common experience show, a growing debt of our schools lies in the fact that there is a small justifiable moral teachers' appeal on pupils to act fairly and honestly. The issues of honesty, morale, good and wrong, fair and unfair should become natural and ever-present regardless of the type and level of the school.

Surely, it would be naïve to think that this vice can actually be eliminated but we must bear in mind its *ethical dimension* and not resign on influencing *pupils' moral characters*. A survey study by McCabe, Travin and Butterfield show that universities as well as lower level schools should introduce their own codes of ethics which would aid in school cheating prevention. They base their answer to the question 'why do students cheat?' on two basic variables. First, on individual variables (such as age, sex, study results, etc.) and, second, on the so-called contextual variables, which their research outcome results proved to be the more significant ones. The contextual variable include items like the influence of other cheating pupils/students, expressed disagreement with such behaviour, perceived severity of the punishments administered for cheating, and so on. If a high occurrence of cheating is established, it offers a so-called *normative support*

and could be seen as an acceptable form of behaviour (McCabe, Travino and Butterfield, 2001).

The above mentioned authors as well as other experts conclude that influencing individuals‘ moral characters plays its important role even in university environment. Repeated experiments showed that the departments which have own codes of ethics and actively work with them (students are made familiar with their content and become their co-authors) score a lower rate of cheating (McCabe, Travino and Butterfield, 2001, McCabe, Pavela, 1997, Liddel, Fong, 2008). Though it is not a general rule, students do remember some of their teachers who made them not to cheat even if the situation allowed it with respect, because ‘*it would be embarassing to do so in his/her lesson*, ‘*if I got caught, I would feel ashamed*‘, and so on. Some time ago, a student described to me her experience from secondary grammar school. Her teacher, having given out tests to the class, turned to the window saying *‘Cheating is unfair and immoral.‘* Student did copy and cheat at the beginning, however they ceased to do so in the second and higher grades. As the student put it ‘*We simply couldn’t cheat, we deeply respected that teacher*.‘ Needless to say, there are always more factors to consider, for example the ‘quality‘ of the given class and characters of its pupils. Students in this classroom had undoubtedly made moral norms their inner standards. How is it possible that the same norm could not be applied to the other teachers? And was it really a question of inner standards? What is the difference between respecting norms out of principle or out of situation?

**Conclusions**

Underestimating impacts of school cheating on the making especially of moral and, at the same time, civil character of the child has already proved short-sighted. If a type of cheating behaviour becomes fixed, it leads to breaking social norms on a general level. It may spread to other areas and cheating may become one of the permanent features of one’s character.

Let us list the negative features of school cheating according to Thomas Lickona:

- It will ultimately lower your self-respect, because you can never be proud of anything got by cheating.
- Cheating is a lie, because it deceives other people into thinking you know more than you do.
- Cheating violates the teacher´s trust that you will do your own work. Furthermore, undermines the whole trust relationship between a teacher and his other class.
- Cheating is unfair to all the people who aren´t cheating.
- If you cheat in school now, you´ll find it easier to cheat in other situations later in life. – perhaps even in your closest personal relationship (Lickona, 1992, p.77).

Together with Eisenberg, we would like to declare that teachers and schools who tolerate unfair behaviour and dealing with this problem by merely exposing it and subsequent punishing the involved means that schools have resigned on their educational

role and their ambitions in influencing pupils‘ values and attitudes. By doing this, schools also resign on developing their pupils‘ adult citizen attitudes in the future.

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