

PREVALENCE OF ACADEMIC DISHONESTY AMONG HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN ZIMBABWE

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Abstract

The study sought to identify common methods of academic cheating, situations when academic dishonesty took place and the perceived reasons for engaging in such behaviours. Form 5 and Form 6 students sampled from 4 Gweru urban high schools (n=238) responded to a questionnaire that was used to collect data. A descriptive survey design was used and the data were analysed using frequency counts and percentages. The results indicated that academic cheating was common among all sampled schools with male students more involved. It was also revealed that some officials were involved in assisting students to cheat. The findings of this study have implications that can assist in developing effective approaches to prevent and reduce academic dishonesty in high schools.

Introduction

Research evidence has shown that academic dishonesty is a common problem with increasing prevalence in some parts of the world (Gerdeman, 2000; McCabe & Trevino, 1996). It has also been revealed that, dishonest academic behaviours are well established by the time students reach high school (Newberger, 2003). At this level, the stakes of a test are high and thus may influence the probability of cheating. Parents and educators may inadvertently aggravate the problem by putting emphasis on results rather than on learning (Educational Testing Services, 2000; Newberger, 2003). In the present study, which examines the prevalence of academic dishonesty in high schools, academic dishonesty refers to use of all possible illegal or unacceptable means to present one's academic work or to facilitate academic cheating by someone else. Forms of academic

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dishonesty include sharing another person's work, purchasing an examination or test paper in advance and paying another person to sit the examination (Cox, Eissens, Martin & Stanislaus, 1999; Gerdeman, 2000). The present study focuses on the prevalence of dishonest academic behaviours in home based assignments, class assignments and national examinations.

Prevalence of academic dishonesty

Education systems that place emphasis on getting the grade by any means possible encourage dishonest academic behaviours (Educational Testing Services, 2000). Educational Testing Services (2000) observed that in such a system, students who do not cheat are not only at a disadvantage, but can be viewed as fools for not playing the system, a system that has grown tolerant of cheating with hardly any punishment. However, it seems the reasons for cheating behaviours are related to a variety of factors. Among them is the sex of the student, the age of the student and at times the expectations placed on the student by parents and society.

Several studies have indicated that male students are more likely to cheat than female students (Davis & Ludvigson, 1995; Genereux & McLeod, 1995; Newstead, Franklyn-Stokes & Armstead, 1996). However, some studies found no significant sex difference in dishonest academic behaviours (Crown & Spiller, 1998; Whitley, 1998). Pertaining to age, available literature suggests that in the early years (around 5-6 years) cheating may occur purely as a result of opportunity, followed by peer pressure (around 6-10 years of age) and then in the early adolescence years (around 11-13 years of age) it can be attributed to social pressures (Educational Testing Services, 2000; Livosky & Maline, 1993; McCabe & Trevino, 1996; Newberger, 2003). Furthermore, research carried out by Educational Testing Services (2000) shows that cheating behaviour begins to set in around 11-13 years of age and by high school level dishonest academic behaviours are well established. Educational Testing Services (2000) also concluded that high school students who cheat are motivated by emphasis placed on grades by the system. In addition, Newberger (2003:6) made the following observations:

When learning is most highly valued, there is little incentive to cheat.
When grades matter most, cheating rises as students begin to use every available means to increase their class ranking, or be seen as helpful to friends when they offer work to copy. Thus we may think of cheating as a social phenomenon induced by grading pressure at least as much as it is a phenomenon of individual character failure. The grading pressure is generated by the culture and personified by many parents. We can see resistance to this pressure when better students give worse students their homework to copy-by far the most common form of school cheating.

In line with the foregoing, in USA, Educational Testing Services (2000) reported that dishonest academic behaviours among high school and college students have risen sharply during the last 50 years. For instance of the 29th Who's Who Among American

High School Students Poll that surveyed 3 123 students with A or B averages, released in November 1998, revealed that about 80% of the USA's best students cheated to get to the top of their class while 95% of those who cheated say they were not caught (Educational Testing Services, 2000). According to Educational Testing Services (2000) Josephson Institute of Ethics surveyed 20 829 middle and high school students in 1998 and reported that 70% of the high school students and 54% of the middle school students had cheated on examination in the last 12 months.

Some views on academic dishonesty

In the study carried out by Educational Testing Services (2000), which was referred to in the above section, surveyed students revealed that they see cheating as acceptable as it is common in every facet of life: politics, business, home and schools. Students who cheated justified their actions as follows: (a) it is a victimless crime; (b) it is acceptable if you do not get caught; (c) everybody does it and (d) it makes up for unfair tests or lack of opportunity.

Educational Testing Services (2000) also reported that fewer American college officials (35%) perceive cheating as a problem than do members of the public (41%). However, after reviewing literature on academic dishonesty, Central Connecticut State University (2004:2) concluded that:

Academic cheating cheats the cheater out of an opportunity to learn. It is also harmful to the students who make the effort to do their academic work honestly. When undetected or unaddressed student academic misconduct rewards cheaters with credit for work they did not do and causes a relative reduction in the value of the efforts of those who work with integrity. Undetected and/or unaddressed student academic misconduct reinforces behaviour detrimental to the educational enterprise and undermines the positive behaviours educational institutions struggle to develop in their students.

Situations where academic dishonesty takes place and methods of academic cheating

Research has provided an insight into situations where students cheat and the modes of cheating they employ. In a study of 6 000 colleges and university students, McCabe and Trevino (1996) reported the following findings: (a) two out of three students admitted to dishonest academic behaviours; (b) about half of the respondents admitted to have inappropriately collaborated with others on assignments; (c) 70% having cheated on examinations, and (d) 84% having cheated on written assignments. Also, Genereux and McLeod (1995) reported that over 25% of students at an urban community college admitted engaging in one of the following: (a) sharing of examination answers; (b) listing false references in papers; (c) allowing others to copy during an examination and (c) plagiarizing parts of papers.

Other academic cheating behaviours include collaboration where students share the load on assignments meant to be completed individually, smuggling in answers into testing room, hiring

someone to sit for examinations in their place, re-submission of old assignments and Internet plagiarism (Szego, 2003). The use of information technology in cheating has been reported in countries such as China and South Korea. Vencat, with Overdrove and Adams (2006) explained how the police in China managed to crack gang web-based agencies that had already taken money from nearly 1000 students whom they were to assist to cheat in a number of national examinations. Also, 20 cheating rings were discovered to have text-messaged South Korea's 2005 national college-entrance examination answers to paying students (Vencat et al, 2006).

Some measures of dealing with academic dishonesty

Some responsible authorities in various countries have taken measures to prevent or at least reduce academic cheating. Such measures include (a) electronic fingerprints and digital photographs, (b) use of metal detectors for bathroom visits during exams, (c) sending those caught cheating to prison and (d) limiting the number of administrators with early access to the examinations (Vencat et al, 2006).

Based on literature on academic dishonesty, Gerdeman (2000) provide the following recommendation for dealing with academic cheating:

- 1) Policies on academic misconduct must be communicated to students and teachers.
- 2) Teachers must discuss dishonest academic behaviours with students.
- 3) Encouraging teachers to be vigilant, spaced seating, and varying examination formats could create non-permissive examination environments.
- 4) Punishment must be applied in a consistent, fair, and timely manner.
- 5) An environment of trust and honour must be created and maintained.

Reports on academic dishonesty in Zimbabwe

It is apparent from the above that academic dishonesty is a global problem. In Zimbabwe, however, the present researchers are not aware of any studies done on the prevalence of dishonest academic behaviours. However, there are many press reports on academic cheating especially at high schools. This is widespread during the two most important national examinations: Ordinary level and Advanced level. In some cases the cheating involves officials. Muponde and Nyathi (2006) reported one such case when a mathematics teacher at Msitheli Secondary School in Bulawayo was allegedly caught writing an Ordinary level mathematics paper for a female candidate whom he was meant to be invigilating. In addition, science notes were found in his folder yet he was the invigilator when a group of students sat for Integrated Science Paper 2 the previous Friday. This suggests possible academic misconduct involving the science paper as well.

Dzirutwe (2006) reported an incident that could easily have led to dishonest academic behaviour. According to Dzirutwe (2006) the Zimbabwe School Examination Council (ZIMSEC) recruited five students whose Advanced Level examination results were still pending in the dispatch section of its headquarters giving them possible access to their answer sheets. Such a situation could tempt students to cheat as a result of the opportunity presented.

Pertaining to leakages, The Herald of 19 October 2006 and The Herald of 3 November 2006 reported that in November 2004, Zimbabwe School Examination Council (ZIMSEC) was forced to reschedule Ordinary Level Mathematics paper 1 after the paper had been leaked through spoilages taken to Kadoma paper mills by the security printer. Chipoyera (2006) also reported that in early October 2006, a 19 year old young man was jailed for four years for stealing a batch of Ordinary level examination papers, forcing ZIMSEC to set another one that was written on 10 November 2006. As a result of such incidences, which have almost become perennial, senators have urged the government to provide funds in the 2007 National Budget to enable ZIMSEC to acquire its own printing press. One senator warned that if academic dishonesty is not curbed, this could lead to creation of a workforce that is qualified on paper but in reality is incapable of doing a good job (Chipoyera, 2006).

Purpose of the study

Given the seriousness of dishonest academic behaviours as highlighted in the preceding paragraphs, the present study sought to meet the following objectives:

1. To identify common methods of academic cheating
2. To discover whether dishonest academic behaviours were more common during national examinations or during term work
3. To determine what students perceive as the major reasons for academic dishonesty

It is hoped that, by determining the extent of academic cheating in high schools and the perceived reasons for engaging in academic dishonesty, the study can significantly assist responsible authorities in their efforts to inculcate appropriate behaviours in students.

Methods

Participants and Setting

Two hundred and thirty eight Form 5 and Form 6 students responded to a questionnaire on academic dishonesty. These students were chosen because they were deemed rich sources of information due to their experience in national examination at Ordinary level. In addition, they were assumed to have done more assignments and homework than their counterparts from lower level classes. The participants were sampled from 4 of the 12 Gweru urban high schools with Advanced level classes: Matinunura high school and Mkoba 3 high school, Chaplin high school and Thornhill high school. The first 2 are day schools and they are former group 'B' schools while the other 2 schools have both day and boarding facilities and they are former group 'A' schools.

Instruments

A questionnaire was used to collect data (see Appendix 1). The questionnaire constituted 3 questions. Question (a) had 9 sub- items of dishonest academic behaviours. For each of the 9 items, participants were asked to indicate whether they have been involved in the stated behaviours, or were aware of someone else involved. If they were not aware of any dishonest academic behaviour, the respondents were asked to indicate by ticking none. Question (b) required participants to state when students at their schools cheated most among the following:

in examinations, when doing class assignments or when doing homework. In addition, they were asked to explain their answers. Finally, question (c) requested the participants to describe any other dishonest academic behaviours that were not mentioned in question (a). To develop the instrument, the researchers adapted some items from the list of 14 "Honor Code violations" at UNC-Chapel Hill college (Cox, Eissens, Martin & Stanislaus, 1999). Of the 14 items, 9 were deemed relevant to Zimbabwean high school students. To check the comprehensibility of the items to Advanced level students, a pilot study was done with 10 Ordinary level graduate school leavers. After responding to the questionnaire, the respondents were interviewed individually. This was done to check on any unclear and ambiguous items. The final result was the questionnaire presented in Appendix 1.

Procedure

Permission to carry out the study in Gweru urban schools was sought and granted by the Midlands Provincial Education Office. Permission was also sought from each of the head of the participating schools, while informed consent was sought and given by all the participants. At each of the sampled schools, participants were grouped according to the following subject areas: science, commerce and arts, and then in terms of upper and lower sixth classes. Ten participants were then randomly selected per subject and level. Confidentiality and anonymity were emphasized by reminding students that their names were not required and the responses were going to be used for the purpose of the study only.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed using frequency counts and percentage frequency tables. The commonness of dishonest behaviours was rated by using relative percentage frequencies. To calculate the percentage frequencies, the frequency with which dishonest behaviours were ticked or mentioned were determined. The next step was to divide the score obtained for each of the behaviours by the total number of participants. The resultant figures were then converted to percentages. For the purpose of comparing males and females, the frequency by which each sex was involved was divided by the total number of participants for each sex, and then converted to percentages.

Results

Common method of academic cheating

Table 1: Some common dishonest academic behaviours

Table 1 shows the percentage frequency with which students engaged in nine common cheating behaviours during both national examinations and term work. More students have at least copied someone else’s work compared to those who reported that they were aware of someone who either copied someone else’s work or got answers from someone’s paper. Male students reported relatively more involvement in most of the listed common academic cheating behaviours.

Dishonest be
Getting answ
someone’s p
Copying som
work
Not reporting
cheating
Giving or rec
unlawful hel
Knowing ans
beforehand
Turning in so
work as one’s
Allowing som
copy own pa
Giving own s
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Taking a che

Table 2: Other types of dishonest academic behaviours

Dishonest academic behaviours	Frequency	Percentage
None or no response	82	34.35
Bringing written material, other than cheat sheets, into exam rooms	46	19.33
Inapplicable response	41	17.23
Assistance from teacher or other staff member	24	10.08
Unlawful help from fellow students	18	7.56
Writing on surrounding objects or self	12	5.04
Seeing the exam material in advance	7	2.94
Falsifying marks	7	2.94
Using talisman in examinations	1	0.42
Total	238	99.89

Table 2 summarizes other forms of dishonest academic behaviours that were identified by the respondents and are not listed in Table 1. These other types of common academic cheating behaviours are presented in order of the frequency with which they were mentioned. The second category of dishonest academic behaviour listed in Table 2 included such practices as writing information on cell phones, rulers, calculator cases or storing formulas in calculator memories and writing answers on tissue papers so as to pretend to be blowing one's nose while checking the answers.

Table 3: Situations and reasons for engaging in dishonest behaviour

Situations when dishonest behaviours take place	Rated most common		Reasons for engaging in the behaviours (given in percentages)						
	Total frequency	Frequency percentage	Lack of supervision	No reasons	Lack of preparation	Too much homework	Pressure to pass	Not significant	Lack of resources
Class work & homework	96	40.34	46.88	19.79	9.38	10.42	1.04	6.25	6.25
During class assignments	40	16.81	42.50	20.00	20.00	7.50	5.00	2.5	2.5
During homework	39	16.39	41.03	12.82	25.64	5.13	0.00	5.13	10.26
During Exams	31	13.03	12.90	12.90	29.03	3.23	31.94	0.00	0.00
In all situations	25	10.50	16.00	40.00	0.20	12.00	0.04	0.04	0.04
Inappropriate response	7	2.94	0.00	57.14	28.57	14.29	0.00	0.00	0.00
Total	238	100	36.13	21.01	18.07	8.40	7.14	4.20	8.46

Table 3 presents situations in which dishonest academic behaviours were rated most common and the reasons for engaging in the dishonest behaviours. Academic cheating was reported to occur more during term work than during national examinations.

Perceived reasons for academic dishonesty

Lack of supervision was the most common reason put forward for engaging in dishonest academic behaviours during homework and class assignments, while pressure to pass was the most common reason suggested for cheating during examinations. Overall, lack of supervision was mentioned most often as the major reason for academic cheating.

Discussion

The main finding from this study is that, the prevalence of academic dishonesty in Gweru urban high schools is very high. The overall results are consistent with those of many other researchers who have carried out various studies on academic cheating and concluded that academic dishonesty is widespread (Educational Testing Services, 2000; Livosky & Maline, 1993; McCabe & Trevino, 1996). In line with the first objective that identified common methods of academic cheating, the common dishonest academic behaviours, which participants reported to have been involved in, are as follows in their order of commonness:

1. Copying someone else's assignment
2. Knowing that someone else was cheating but not reporting it
3. Allowing someone to copy own paper
4. Giving or receiving unlawful help
5. Getting answers from someone's paper
6. Giving own assignment to be copied
7. Knowing answers to a test before hand
8. Handing in someone's work as one's own
9. Taking a cheat sheet into a test or examination

It is interesting to note that, the first six most common dishonest academic behaviours are related to each other and have to do with either one student copying another, receiving unlawful help from another student or not reporting someone cheating. These results support Newberger's (2003) observation that students show their resistance to grading pressure imposed by society when better students allow weaker students to copy their assignments. This is also consistent with McCabe and Trevino (1996) who found about half of the participants in their study having inappropriately collaborated with others on assignments. Thus students may not see anything wrong with some forms of cheating. The implication of this finding is that students may have different views from those of responsible authorities concerning some forms of academic cheating. Male students reported to have been more involved than female students in dishonest academic behaviour. This finding is consistent with literature (Davis, & Ludvigson, 1995; Genereux & McLeod, 1995; Newstead, Franklyn-Stokes & Armstead, 1996).

The possible reasons why male students are more involved in dishonest academic behaviour than female students could be their involvement in risk behaviours associated with gambling such as frequent illegal drug use, carrying a weapon and being involved in a fight (Proimos, DuRant, Pierce & Goodman, 1998). Furthermore, it has been documented that, in general, men engage in more risky behaviours than women (Harris, Jenkins, Diego & Glazer, 2006). It was however puzzling to note that female students admitted to have engaged in copying someone else's assignment more than male students. The possible reason is that female students usually find themselves under pressure with domestic chores after school, which leaves them with very little time to do homework. Hence some female students are left with no option but to copy from other students' assignments.

Other types of common dishonest academic behaviours reported by the students, which were not listed in the questionnaire, are as follows, in their order of commonness: (a) bringing written material (other than cheat sheet) into examination rooms, (b) getting unlawful assistance from teacher or other staff member, (c) getting unlawful help from fellow students, (d) writing notes on surrounding objects or on one's body, (e) falsifying marks and (f) using talisman in examinations. The implications of dishonest academic behaviours (a), (c), (d) and (e) are that the responsible authorities have to be very vigilant to detect such forms of academic cheating. Since (f) was mentioned by one respondent only and because of difficulties in verifying the authenticity of such forms of cheating behaviour, the problem could not be analysed in the present study. For dishonest academic behaviour (b), it is worrying that some staff members are inappropriately collaborating with students who engage in academic cheating. It is difficult to deal with academic cheating when teachers and other staff members who are supposed to be the custodians of the school policy on academic misconduct are in the forefront in practicing academic dishonesty.

The second objective sought to discover whether dishonest academic behaviours were more common during national examinations or during term work. The participants indicated that dishonest academic behaviours were common in all situations. However, these behaviours were reported to occur more during term work where there is less supervision than during national examinations. The finding is in agreement with those of Educational Testing Services (2000) who concluded that students cheat more during term work because there is greater opportunity to do so. This analysis partly answers the third objective. Objective number 3 was to determine what students perceived as the major reasons for academic dishonesty. The most common reason for engaging in dishonest academic behaviours was lack of supervision during homework and class assignments while pressure to pass was the most common reason suggested for cheating during examinations. Concerning supervision, it should be noted that most parents and guardians do not supervise homework given to high school students while teachers are generally expected to supervise class assignments. However, the findings of this study suggest that both homework and class assignments are not seriously supervised. Thus,

it is likely that students cheat more during homework and assignments because the risk of being caught is very low. This is consistent with some scholars who documented that students cheat less when responsible authorities make efforts to deal with cheating (Davis, & Ludvigson, 1995; Genereux & McLeod, 1995). The finding that students cheat as a result of pressure to pass examinations is consistent with that of Educational Testing Services (2000) and Newberger (2003) who observed that some students cheat due to pressure from parents and educators. It should be noted that high school students do not get pressure from parents and educators alone but also from society in general because good grades at high school are seen as guarantee for brighter opportunities in life. Other reasons mentioned for engaging in academic cheating include, lack of preparation, too much homework and inadequate learning materials. Respondents to the present study indicated that dishonest academic behaviours due to lack of preparation are more common during examinations than during class assignments and homework. A possible explanation could be that stakes are higher during examinations than during term work. Since most subjects at high school do not use course work as part of final assessment of students, it is possible to make amends after failing class assignments and homework. Thus, students may be more inclined to cheat when they feel they are not ready to write final examination than when they feel not ready for a class assignment or homework. It is interesting to note that while lack of preparation apportions blame on the respondent, too much homework and inadequate learning materials blame the system. When someone blames the system he or she feels justified to cheat and as a result it becomes more difficult to deal with such a student compared to the one who shoulders the blame (Educational Testing Services, 2000). Thus, the way students cope with academic challenges may also merit special consideration when addressing the problem of academic dishonesty.

Conclusion

Although the study surveyed four Gweru urban high schools only, the results of this study pose important implications on the prevalence of academic cheating in all Zimbabwean high schools. The implications are that academic dishonesty is a widespread problem that can have negative effects on the academic enterprise. Hence it should be taken seriously by all concerned. The study has identified several dishonest academic behaviours commonly practiced in high schools. Respondents have also reported that some teachers and other staff members assist students to cheat. The participants further reported that dishonest academic behaviours were common, both during national examinations and during term work. Major reasons for engaging in academic cheating were suggested with lack of supervision being mentioned most often. These findings could assist in developing effective approaches to preventing and reducing academic dishonesty in high schools. A limitation of this study is that a questionnaire was the only instrument used to collect data while students from one urban setting were the only participants. Also the study was limited in the number of variables investigated. It is therefore recommended that future research should use more than one instrument to collect data; include both rural and urban high schools; and sample participants from

other stakeholders such as teachers, Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture officials, ZIMSEC officials and parents. Such research could also examine the relationship between student's self-efficacy, motivation, coping strategies and dishonest academic behaviours. The following are other recommendations based on results of this study:(a) High school authorities should establish an environment where the risk of being caught outweighs any possible benefit of academic dishonest behaviour. (b) Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture, and ZIMSEC should encourage students and officials to develop proper conduct that enhances academic integrity.(c) Both parents and educators need to be reminded to supervise students' work in addition to enlightening them on the negative effect of putting students under pressure to perform beyond their abilities.

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Appendix 1: Questionnaire

Please read the following instructions carefully and respond to the statements that follow.

Tick (✓) in each of the boxes under the heading **Myself** for each of the statement that indicate an activity that you have been involved in. Also tick (✓) in each of the boxes under the heading **Others** for each of the statements that indicate an activity that you have seen or heard that someone else was involved in. Thus you can tick **two adjacent** boxes if appropriate. For example: If no one has been involved for any particular stated activity, tick (✓) the box under the heading **None**.

- a) 1. Getting an answer from someone else’s paper during a test
- 2. Copying someone else’s assignment
- 3. Knowing that someone else was cheating but not reporting it
- 4. Giving or receiving unlawful help
- 5. Looking at an answer to a test beforehand
- 6. Turning in an assignment that was written by someone else
- 7. Allowing someone else to cheat off of one’s own exam paper
- 8. Giving ones own assignment to someone else to turn in as his or her own
- 9. Taking a cheat sheet into a test/examination

Myself	Others	None

b). When do students at your school cheat more, in exams or when doing class assignment and homework? Explain your answer.

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c). Describe any other cheating behaviour you know about which was not mentioned above.

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