Fostering Academic Honesty in K-12 Education

“Honesty is the first chapter in the Book of wisdom. Let it be our endeavor to merit the character of a just nation”
-- Thomas Jefferson

“Rather fail with honor than succeed by fraud”
-- Sophocles

“. . . student cheating is the most critical problem facing education today”
(Davis, Drinan, & Bertram Gallant, 2009).

What is honesty?

The term honesty usually implies positive attributes related to being genuine and authentic, telling the truth (to oneself and to others), and being consistent in one’s thoughts, behaviors and words. On the other hand, a lack of honesty is generally associated with negative behaviors such as lying, cheating, and stealing. This review is mainly focused on academic honesty and cheating in schools. It contains a brief summary of useful strategies and resources, dedicated to those K-12 educators (teachers, counselors and administrators) who want to deepen their knowledge about how to promote academic honesty and prevent cheating in schools.

What is academic honesty?

Academic honesty refers to truthfulness, straightforwardness, and integrity in academic settings. Honesty implies the absence of academic misconduct, such as cheating or plagiarism (e.g., copying another student’s answers during an examination, presenting another person’s ideas as your own).

Risk factors for academic dishonesty

The last national survey conducted in the US by the Josephson Institute’s Center for Youth Ethics (2012) showed that out of 23,000 high school students 51% percent admitted that they had cheated on an exam and 32% admitted that they had copied an Internet document for a classroom. These numbers make evident that academic dishonesty is a problem that we should be addressing.
Research in primary, secondary, and higher education settings has shown that academic dishonesty may be associated with diverse factors, such as:

• **Students’ attitudes and motivation:**
  - Low levels of student interest in the subject matter\(^1\)
  - Lack of respect for the teacher\(^2\)
  - Experiences of failure and low grades\(^3\)
  - Low levels of self-efficacy\(^4\)
  - High interest to attain favorable social status with peers\(^5\)
  - Having performance goals instead of mastery goals (i.e., being motivated for good grades rather than being motivated to learn)\(^6\)
  - Extrinsic motivation over intrinsic motivation\(^7\)
  - Having low levels of self-control and not identifying oneself as a moral person\(^8\)

• **Peer relationships:**
  - High levels of peer tolerance for dishonest behaviors\(^9\)
  - Saliency of peers’ dishonest behaviors\(^10\)

• **Teachers’ attitudes and behaviors:**
  - Lack of enthusiasm for teaching\(^11\)
  - Poor quality of teaching or students’ perception of teacher’s lack of competence\(^12\)
  - Little acceptance of students input\(^13\)
  - Inconsistent authoritarian methods\(^14\)

• **Testing and grading practices:**
  - Type of test format (e.g., multiple-choice exams versus essay questions)\(^15\)

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\(^1\) See Miller, 1987
\(^2\) See Miller, 1987
\(^3\) See Miller, 1987
\(^4\) See Lang, 2013; Murdock, et al. 2001
\(^5\) See Miller, 1987
\(^7\) See Lang, 2013; Murdock et al., 2001
\(^8\) See Gino, Schweitzer, Mead, & Ariely, 2011
\(^9\) See Lang, 2013; Miller, 1987
\(^10\) See Gino, Ayal, & Ariely, 2009; Lang, 2013; Miller, 1987
\(^11\) See Miller, 1987
\(^12\) See Miller, 1987; Murdock, Hale & Weber, 2001
\(^13\) See Miller, 1987
\(^14\) See Miller, 1987
\(^15\) See Miller, 1987
- Big classrooms\textsuperscript{16}
- High levels of pressure on students to get good grades\textsuperscript{17}

- Family relationships:
  - Permissive or authoritarian parental practices\textsuperscript{18}

Moreover, people who cheat tend to justify and rationalize their behavior to make it seem acceptable (in their own eyes or in the eyes of other people). Therefore, misconduct becomes self-reinforcing as it becomes “morally acceptable” (Ariely, 2012; Bandura, 1999; Davis et al., 2009; Farnese et al. 2011; Konnikova, 2013; Shu, Gino, & Bazerman, 2011).

**How can we promote academic honesty and prevent cheating?**

An effort in promoting academic integrity must include strategies to change students’ behaviors at an individual level but also strategies that seek for a cultural or systemic change (Wangaard & Stephens, 2011). These are some strategies that K-12 educators can implement in order to promote academic honesty and prevent cheating in their schools:

- **Create and follow clear, fair, and consistent guidelines:** The first step in fostering academic honesty is to be clear, fair, and consistent about the school values, policies, and procedures. All school community members should know how they are expected to behave and what would happen if they do not follow those guidelines.

- **Focus on the learning process rather than focus on winning the contest:** Dishonest behaviors are less likely to prevail in cooperative environments where students are intrinsically motivated and focused on improving their skills. On the other hand, highly competitive environments where students are either demotivated or focused on competing and obtaining good grades may improve the likelihood of cheating.

- **Pay attention to the classroom climate:** Teacher-student relationships seem to be associated with cheating behaviors. A positive relationship of trust and respect where rules are clear and consistently applied contributes to academic honesty.

\textsuperscript{15} See Miller, 1987; Davis et al., 2009
\textsuperscript{16} See Miller, 1987; Davis et al., 2009
\textsuperscript{17} See Davis et al., 2009; Lang, 2013; Miller, 1987
\textsuperscript{18} See Miller, 1987
• *Give their memory a hand:* Helping students to recall their moral standards and identity (e.g., that they see themselves as “honest people”) may also minimize the likelihood of cheating.

• *Help students recognize when they are justifying their behavior:* Being aware of the ways we justify our misconduct can be useful to prevent the self-reinforcing effect of our misbehavior.

• *Strengthen positive social regulation:* Peer norms and behaviors are also determinants in students’ honest conduct. Therefore, the challenge for educators is to promote a culture where cheating is not *cool* and honesty is valued by everyone.

**Recommended Web-Sites / Blogs**

International Center for Academic Integrity WebSite:

http://www.academicintegrity.org/icai/home.php

Edutopia Blogs:

http://www.edutopia.org/blog/academic-integrity-cheat-or-be-cheated-denise-pope
http://www.edutopia.org/student-plagiarism-teacher-strategy

**Recommended Books**


**References**


