I. Citation Info

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Year of publication
2003

Title of Study
Using the Epidemic of Academic Dishonesty as an Opportunity for Character Education: A Three-Year Mixed Methods Study (with Mixed Results)

Source of Study
*Peabody Journal of Education*

Volume
88

Issue
2

Pages
159-179

Keywords
N/A

Abstract
Academic dishonesty among high school students has long since transformed into an epidemic that affects nearly every student, compromising not only their intellectual growth but also their moral development. Yet, beyond the occasional hand-wringing in the media, the problem has been largely ignored by teachers, schools, policymakers, and even character educators. To address this notable failure to respond, the authors developed and evaluated a character education program that sought to use the epidemic of academic dishonesty as an opportunity to reduce cheating and promote
integrity. The present article describes the core components and central mechanisms of this schoolwide program as well as results from a 3-year mixed methods study of its implementation at 3 high schools in the Northeastern United States. These results and their implications are discussed in detail. The article also outlines suggestions for further program development and research.

II. Study Description

Intervention Description

• Name of the program/study condition: The Awl Project
• Main purpose or general description:
  o “to use the epidemic of academic dishonesty as an opportunity to reduce cheating and promote integrity” (p.160)
• Theoretical background: N/A
• Components:
  o The program defines four components:
    1. Communication and embracing of core values (respect, trust, honesty, responsibility, effort, and learning)
    2. Curriculum and instruction (teaching with mastery goals and pedagogical caring)
    3. Community and culture (creating a culture that values achieving with integrity)
    4. Creation of Committees and Commitments (such as the Academic Integrity Committee)
• Previous studies / evaluations: N/A

Implementation Elements

Content elements:
• Core values (respect, trust, honesty, responsibility, effort, and learning)
• Academic integrity

Pedagogical strategies:
• School-wide strategies
• Focus on mastery goals and pedagogical caring
• Creation of Committees and Commitments

Research Question(s) / Hypotheses

Research questions related to processes:
1. “What policies and procedures were created to reduce academic dishonesty and how were these determined?” (p. 164)
2. “How were academic integrity policies and procedures implemented? How did school policies and procedures support the input and commitment of students, teachers, and administrators?” (p. 164)

Research questions related to program effectiveness:
1. “Did students in pilot schools and students in control schools report significantly different changes (from Year 1 to Year 3) in their perceptions of school policies and peer norms related to academic integrity?” (p. 164)
2. “Did students in pilot schools and students in control schools report significantly different changes (from Year 1 to Year 3) in their beliefs related to academic dishonesty?” (p. 164)
3. “Did students in pilot schools and students in control schools report significantly different changes (from Year 1 to Year 3) in their self-reported engagement in academic dishonesty?” (p. 164)

Hypothesis: “The combination of change over time among students at pilot schools, and the relative continuity over time among student[s] at control schools, will produce statistically significant School x Time interactions on all seven variables of interest” (p. 164)

Research Methods
Sample Description:
- Total N final sample: n = 1,137 (Year 1) and 1,017 (Year 3)
  - Control group: 596 students in Year 1 and 601 students in Year 3 from 3 high schools
  - Intervention group: 541 in Year 1 and 416 in Year 3 from 3 high schools
- Composition:
  - Gender:
    - High-SES, rural schools (Year 1): 54.1% female for pilot school and 50% female for control school
    - Mid-SES, suburban schools (Year 1): 59.5% female for pilot school and 53.4% female for control school
    - Low-SES, urban schools (Year 1): 53.8% female for pilot school and 53.8% female for control school
  - Location: northeastern United States
  - Ages: freshmen and sophomores (ages are not specified)
  - Ethnicity:
    - High-SES, rural schools (Year 1): 81.4% White for pilot school and 87.6% White for control school
    - Mid-SES, suburban schools (Year 1): 79.5% White for pilot school and 80% White for control school
    - Low-SES, urban schools (Year 1): 42.4% White, 28.8% Hispanic and 28.8% Black for pilot school, and 15.5% White, 37.2% Hispanic and 29.5% Back for control school
  - SES: Two high-SES rural schools (one pilot, one control), 2 mid-SES suburban schools (one pilot, one control), and 2 low-SES urban schools (one pilot, one control).
  - Special education: N/A
  - Family composition: N/A
Measures:

- Academic Motivation and Integrity Survey (AMIS); comprises original and adapted measures (student report):
  - Policy perceptions:
    - Assesses students’ perceptions of their school’s policies related to academic integrity.
  - Policy learning:
    - Assesses students’ perceptions related to how much they had learned about their school’s policies related to academic integrity.
  - Peer disapproval:
    - Assesses students’ perceptions related to peer disapproval of academic dishonesty.
  - Peer cheating:
    - Assesses how often, during the past year, students had seen other students engage in different types of cheating behavior.
  - Moral judgment (adapted from Stephens, Young, and Calabrese, 2007):
    - Assesses students’ beliefs about the morality of cheating.
  - Moral obligation (adapted from Beck and Ajzen, 1991):
    - Assesses students’ belief about their personal responsibility related to cheating.
  - Academic dishonesty (adapted from Stephens et al., 2007):
    - Assesses how often, during the past academic year, students had engaged in cheating behavior (self-report).

- Open-ended response:
  - Two optional open-ended questions about changes students would like to see in their schools in support of academic integrity and about the role students should play in this process.

Procedures:

- Design:
  - Quasi-experimental

- Times of assessment:
  - Year 1: Early fall 2008
  - Year 3: Spring 2010

- Assignment method:
  - Level of assignment: classrooms.
  - All participants were recruited based on their enrollment to in English or Social Studies classes. A stratified sample of English or Social Studies classes was identified based on academic level (e.g., general, college prep, honors, AP). An average of 8 classrooms per school and 4 per level were selected.

Research results*

* Only results related to program effectiveness are reported here.

Baseline differences:
• Given the marginal frequencies, the observed count was significantly greater than the expected count for the following socio-demographic characteristics:
  o Percentage of freshmen in control schools with mid-SES (from total n of Years 1 and 3).
  o Percentage of freshmen and White students in pilot schools with low-SES (from total n of Years 1 and 3).
  o Percentage of Black and Hispanic students in control schools with low-SES (from total n of Years 1 and 3).

Program effects:
• High-SES schools:
  o Results from 2 (school) x 2 (time) analyses of variance did not support any of the hypothesized interactions.
  o Statistically significant results for two measures:
    § Students’ positive perceptions of their school academic integrity policies (i.e., policy perceptions): decreased over time for the pilot school and increases slightly for the control school.
    § Students’ beliefs about the wrongfulness of academic dishonesty (i.e., moral judgment): increased over time in both schools.

• Mid-SES schools:
  o Due to low fidelity of implementation and low participation in Year 3 data collection, mid-SES schools were excluded from the analysis.

• Low-SES schools:
  o Results from 2 (school) x 2 (time) analyses of variance did not support any of the hypothesized interactions.
  o Statistically significant results for three measures:
    § Students’ positive perceptions of their school academic integrity policies (i.e., policy perceptions): students at control school reported significantly higher policy perceptions than pilot school across both times.
    § Students’ perceptions about how much they have learned about their schools’ policies related to academic integrity (i.e., policy learning): students at control school reported significantly higher policy learning than pilot school across both times.
    § Students’ perceptions of peer cheating behavior (i.e., peer cheating): increased across time for the pilot school and decreased for the control school across time.

Summary of results
Results from analyses of variance did not support any of the hypothesized interactions concerning students’ perceptions, beliefs, and behaviors related to academic integrity. Statistically significant results were found for the measures of policy perceptions and moral judgment at the schools with high-SES, and for the measures of policy perceptions, policy learning and peer cheating at the schools with low-SES. However, none of these results favored the intervention.
High-SES school:

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<th>DIRECTION (positive, neutral, iatrogenic)</th>
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<th>P VALUE</th>
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<td>Peer cheating</td>
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<td>Moral judgment</td>
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<td>Moral obligation</td>
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<td>Academic dishonesty</td>
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Low-SES school:

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Study limitations
N/A

Outcome Variables Taxonomy

- Policy perceptions
- Policy learning
- Peer disapproval
- Peer cheating
- Moral judgment
- Moral obligation
- Academic dishonesty

Program Association
The Awl Project