



“It’s Not My Fault”: Using Neutralization Theory to Understand Cheating by Middle School Students

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Abstract

According to neutralization theory, to justify unethical behavior delinquents often embrace strategies that deflect personal responsibility for their actions from them and toward other persons or contextual factors outside their control. Drawing on neutralization theory, this case study explores how middle school students endorsed comparable strategies to justify cheating. Participants included six faculty members from an 8th grade teaching team and eight of their students at a competitive, private middle school in Northeastern Massachusetts. Based on interview and focus group data, we found that students adopted three of the five neutralizing strategies to rationalize what might be seen as unethical behavior: (1) denying responsibility; (2) condemning the condemner; and (3) appealing to higher ideals. Specific recommendations for schools include promoting supportive student-teacher relations and creating an academic environment in which students value course work for its inherent value, rather than solely as a means to gain admission to an elite high school.

Keywords: cheating, neutralization theory, middle school, student-teacher relationships, assignments

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Current Issues in Education

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In a survey of 4500 American high school students McCabe, Trevino and Butterfield (2001) reported that more than half admitted to plagiarizing from the internet, 74% admitted to cheating on exams, and 97% admitted to cheating on homework. According to Eisenberg's (2004) survey, out of 3000+ "high achieving" high school students, 80% self-reported cheating.¹ In its 2008 biannual report, the Josephson Institute of Ethics, a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization based in Los Angeles, disclosed that of the 30,000 high school students surveyed, 64% admitted to cheating on a test during the past year, with 38% of students sharing that they did so two or more times, and 36% admitting to using the internet to plagiarize an assignment. At odds with such behavior, 96% of these same students maintained, "It's important to me that people trust me," and 84% believed, "It's not worth it to lie or cheat because it hurts your character" (Josephson, 2008, p. 13-14). Furthermore, on the Josephson survey 93% said they were satisfied with their personal ethics and character, and 77% agreed with the statement, "When it comes to doing what is right, I am better than most people I know" (p. 5). Given these apparent contradictions and tensions, the following case study aims to explain how students purport to value honesty and take pride in their own integrity, while simultaneously cheating in school.

Theoretical Overview: Kohlberg and Neutralization Theory

To date, most analyses of students' moral development and its relationship to academic integrity and honesty in school view these issues in terms of Kohlberg's stages of moral development (Miller, Murdock, Anderman, & Poindexter, 2007). According to Kohlberg, moral reasoning progresses from the lowest pre-conventional level in which individuals obey established laws in order to avoid punishment to the highest post-conventional level at which point individuals make moral decisions because of an internalized universal ethic (Kohlberg,

¹ "High achieving" refers to students who have an A or B average and intend to go to college.

1984). Yet moral reasoning and cheating behavior have never been definitively correlated in the literature (Miller, Murdock, Anderman, et al., 2007). While research in some cases has substantiated the progressive evolution of moral thinking, there has been no subsequent link to specific actions, as various classroom characteristics can impact students' moral reasoning and thereby confound efforts to link students who have internalized higher levels of moral development with fewer incidences of cheating (Corcoran & Rotter, 1987; Hartshorne & May, 1928; Miller et al, 2007). Even Kohlberg acknowledged that his research attended to general reasoning about moral decision-making rather than specific decisions people had made. As such, cheating could, in theory, be viewed as ethically appropriate at any stage of moral reasoning. Students' reasoning about the acceptability of cheating depends to a greater extent on situational variables rather than a particular stage of moral development (Murdock & Stevens, 2007). As Aron (1977) summarizes, "[I]ndividuals at a higher stage are not necessarily more moral than those at a lower stage; they are only more advanced in terms of the principles they espouse and the justifications which they give for their judgments" (p.18). While a relationship exists between moral development and cheating, it is theoretically possible, even according to Kohlberg, that an individual at any stage could advocate either side of the dilemma (Kohlberg, 1977). Because Kohlberg's stages of moral development do not sufficiently explain students' cheating behavior, researchers must turn to other theoretical frameworks to understand student dishonesty in their academic work.

Neutralization theory, as applied to the interplay between the beliefs and actions of delinquent youth, offers one way to understand why individuals might violate ethical codes they otherwise endorse. Specifically, Sykes and Matza (1957) proposed that delinquents avoided personal responsibility for unethical actions by deflecting disapproval from the conforming

social order before actually committing the deviant act. When justifications precede deviant behavior, such rationalizing helps offenders ignore social controls. The actor can still embrace the normative system but simultaneously qualify prohibited behavior as acceptable, though not necessarily ethical. In such instances, delinquents typically portray themselves as caught up in a dilemma that must be resolved, often at the cost of violating some existing moral standard.

In applying neutralization theory to student cheating, a number of researchers have found that a student's likelihood of cheating derives not from an absolute sense of right or wrong, but by the degree to which individuals can rationalize cheating in a given context (Eisenberg, 2004, Diekhoff et al., 1996; Micheals & Miethe, 1989, Lanza-Kaduce & Klug, 1986; Whitley, 1998). If students can convince themselves that a given situation is unjust, unreasonable, or somehow exceptional, they can apply a personal sense of morality to validate actions which may violate school rules. In accord with neutralization theory, individuals use five strategies to deflect responsibility for deviant behavior from themselves, though we found that three most aptly apply to the cheating-related beliefs of middle school students: denial of responsibility, condemning the condemner, and appealing to higher ideals.² Although researchers have applied this theory in school settings, few studies address middle school learners (Evans & Craig, 1990; Murdock & Miller, 2003).

Denial of Responsibility.

Sykes and Matza (1957) contend that denial of responsibility entails not only that the actor perceives the behavior as an accident or unintended but also that external forces, beyond individual control, constitute the cause for cheating. Students may draw on this rationale when they consider aspects of the system of schooling as unfair. As McCabe (1999) found, a student may believe that without cheating he or she will fail a class, be excluded from a higher track in

² The two additional strategies are "denial of injury" and "denial of the victim."

school, or miss out on elite higher education opportunities. In other studies, students rationalized cheating when they were assigned overly difficult material or received excessive amounts of work (Daniel, Blount, & Ferrell, 1991). Other studies reveal that both cheating by one's friends and parental pressure to receive high grades can serve as justification for cheating (Michaels & Meithe, 1989, p.876). Together, these studies suggest that students may deny responsibility for their actions when, in their view, they can reasonably blame external factors for creating a situation where they must cheat to avoid unreasonable negative consequences.

Condemning the Condemner

One primary neutralization strategy involves shifting attention from the delinquent's actions and onto the motives and behavior of those who disapprove of those actions. In deflecting attention from one's deviant behavior to the ostensible shortcomings of others, those behaving outside accepted ethical standards can more easily repress, conceal, or deny any offense. Students, for example, may cite a teacher's perceived failings as a pretext for cheating (McCabe, 2001). Various studies associate students' judgment of teacher knowledge and pedagogical skills with increased acceptability of cheating behavior: when teachers are perceived as incompetent, unknowledgeable, or not committed to their work as teachers, students more frequently justify cheating (Murdock, Hale, & Weber, 2001; Schraw, et al., 2007; Szabo & Underwood, 2004). In a focus group made up of students from an AP calculus course, McCabe (2001) found that students validated cheating behavior by alluding to poor instructional methods. Specifically, McCabe documented student anger toward teachers who give tests that include material not discussed in class or covered in homework assignments and how such feelings tie to the ease with which students then justify cheating (McCabe, 2001). These practices could be interpreted by students as a lack of caring, weak pedagogy, or both. When students sense they

exert little control over their learning, cannot explain what they are expected to do, do not feel prepared or supported by the teacher, and do not value the task at-hand, they are more likely to cheat (Koch, 2000).

Appealing to Higher Ideals

Deviating from accepted norms may occur not because an individual rejects specific norms per se, but because these standards are superseded by alternative priorities, held to be more pressing or involving a more valued ideal. With cheating behavior, this may occur when students feel they should cheat to help others, often to maintain friendships (Jensen, Arnett, Feldman, & Cauffman, 2002). Similar tensions may arise when students weigh the value of honesty with the importance of attaining high grades as a means to gain admission to elite colleges and thereby secure a prestigious job. In such cases, a decision to cheat derives from an ethical tension between competing priorities in which students feel compelled to sacrifice one value for another. When students decide to cheat they may not be acting immorally as such; rather, they have prioritized competing ideals and decided the benefits derived from high grades exceed those derived from honest behavior.

Summary of Neutralization Theories

Individuals justify cheating when they view societal rules as flexible and not binding in every situation. Though murder is a crime, for instance, during war or under laws of capital punishment, society condones killing. Likewise, dishonest students may believe that alternative decision-making factors—such as social conventions, peer norms, and school rules—may justify dishonest behavior. With this possibility in mind, neutralization theory posits that students' likelihood of cheating increases when they find themselves in a context they feel will excuse dishonest behavior and may even necessitate such action. Drawing on the three strategies derived

from neutralization theory, we address the question: What do students believe are school-based characteristics that influence cheating in middle school?

Methods

Northwest School is a private, non-denominational, coeducational day school in Northeastern Massachusetts. Blending a strong academic reputation with an advisory program, the school focuses on the holistic development of its students. Average class size for grades 6-through-8 ranges between 13 and 16 students, with an overall student-to-faculty ratio of 8-to-1. Nearly 30% of students and 18% of teachers and administrators identify as Non-European Americans. Typically, students are assigned two-and-a-half hours of homework each night. There is no tracking although accommodating student math programs limits classroom heterogeneity.

Two eighth grade advisories participated in this study, and eight of the 16 students in those advisories were actively involved, five girls and three boys. All four core teachers in the advisories (math, English, history, and science) participated along with two of the four world language teachers. Data were gathered during Spring 2008 and included, semi-structured, one-hour interviews with all participants, and two focus groups of four students each.

Sampling & Data Analysis

For the purposes of this study, it seems fortuitous that the Northwest school mission aligns with the aims of our study, which includes examining links between academic integrity and thoughtful pedagogy while raising student and teacher perceptions about quality schoolwork. As middle schools cluster by team level, an important characteristic of our study is the willing participation of all four core teachers from the eighth grade team and the two world language teachers. Student participants came from two advisory groups and their involvement derived

largely from a willingness to openly and honestly discuss issues of academic integrity. Students were de facto representative of Northwest students in general because the school intentionally organizes advisory into diverse, well-balanced groups of ten to twelve students. Focus groups and individual interviews were conducted so students could both hear what their peers believed and clarify their own beliefs on these matters.

To analyze our data, we relied extensively upon six analytic strategies outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994): open coding of data from interviews; sorting data by similar codes; writing reflections on the data; looking for commonalities and differences among the data; reducing codes to a concise group of generalizations, themes, and tentative theories; and analyzing these generalizations in light of extant research. For example, after reading interview transcripts multiple times, we applied line-by-line in-vivo coding to our data. We then kept a separate running list of in-vivo codes (Eaves, 2001). After reviewing multiple transcripts, we reduced these codes by grouping similar codes and compressing some disparate codes into more encompassing categories. This list of preliminary codes was then applied to the remaining transcripts, adding new codes when data did not fit existing codes (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Next, we generated patterns and regularities derived from these codes. Upon completing this step, we identified tentative themes, generalizations, and theories regarding these data (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). We continued this process until we had reviewed all data sources and used them to test and further refine our emerging insights.

Results

Based on our study, a correlation seems to exist between academic cheating and eighth grade students' contextualized attitudes about dishonesty. Consistently, students' reasoning about the context for cheating tempered any judgments they made about those who acted

dishonestly. In so doing, they drew upon three aspects of neutralization theory: denial of responsibility, condemning the condemner, and appealing to higher ideals.

Denial of Responsibility

When denying responsibility, students typically attribute what might be seen as unethical actions to factors outside their control. Along these lines, in a focus group one Northwest student rationalized copying another student's homework: "If you get a lot of homework in one day, if you were not to cheat, it would be four or five hours of homework. So you are just not going to do that much. So, I think it would be acceptable. . . ." Another student justified getting help from a friend, even though in this focus group scenario the teacher expressly prohibited such help. As he explained, "[E]ither I work with someone else and understand what I was doing because of their help, or I do not do the assignment because it was too hard." Providing further justification for such behavior, students claimed that cheating would be minimal and their action would be somewhat altruistic if it helped other students better grasp course material.

Much the same, when asked, "Do you think your teachers would prefer that the assignment to be done collaboratively [so that] everyone has the correct answers, or for kids who are having difficulty to have not done the assignment?" students as a whole, both in interviews and focus groups, said they did not see anything morally wrong with helping one another understand an assignment, even if that meant giving others some answers. The English teacher sought to clarify such thinking: "There are those [Northwest students] who are good at the class and those who are not good at the class. And everyone knows who they are. The more empathic 'haves' feel compulsion to even things out, to be a middle man between the instructor and the

‘have-nots’ in class.” Further, students believed the consequences of not helping or receiving help from others would be far worse, as their teachers would be upset at them for not completing the work, even if they did not understand it, and they would be penalized for doing it incorrectly. In such situations, students viewed getting help from other students, tutors or parents as the only option available if they did not understand the assigned homework. They were not responsible for their ultimate actions. In agreement, the history teacher said that students may fear the consequences of failing to complete their work: “Teachers that are extremely rigid might invite more cheating. Students [who] are scared of the teacher, think, ‘Okay if you don’t turn it in on [this particular] day you get a zero.’ Well, then the incentive [to cheat] is greater.” This teacher felt that students need to realize that teachers are not their enemies and may be quite understanding of their individual situations. He added that some students lose sight of the fact that missing one assignment is not going to mean failing a class.

Condemning the Condemner

At times, students violate a moral standard they might typically honor because a teacher has, in their view, compromised the educational process. Thus, in some classroom contexts cheating may seem acceptable, though perhaps not right. The history teacher offered a classic example: when teachers have students exchange papers to correct one another’s work. As he explained, “Kids, I think, are sophisticated enough to recognize that one reason a teacher might be doing that is to save themselves the trouble of correcting each paper individually.” Therefore, students may “allow themselves a lower degree of respect for the content as a result. So [cheating] might not seem as serious an offense, to change something here or there. . . . The [integrity of the work] is not really being protected by the teacher who has the power to protect it.”

In a related instance, a student explained how one might justify cheating if a teacher failed to thoroughly explain a concept: “In the last five minutes [of class, our teacher] explained these really hard math terms, and no one really got it. And you are not supposed to work in groups, but sometimes they help.” Although students recognized that the teacher considered it cheating to work in groups and had given clear directions about this issue, students still engaged neutralizing attitudes to distance themselves from moral responsibility. Moreover, if students do not understand assigned work but have been told not to work with others, some may still justify doing so because, as one student contended in a focus group, “It is not really cheating, if you are learning to understand it. It is ‘not following directions.’” In this same focus group, a fellow student agreed, saying that a student could either fail to do any homework individually or complete it all wrong. In either case “the next day the teacher is probably going to be mad at you.” Or, as the same student continued, “[Y]ou can do it with a friend. Then you will get there the next day and you will have it done. You have it understood. Which one sounds better?”

Offering a comparable explanation, another student shared:

[When] a student has so much work because the teacher is just laying it on, having someone else help you get something done faster, which might be considered cheating, [but] I guess you could consider it okay in this [situation]. You could [somewhat] cheat by asking someone to help you do it faster. If you are doing the problems really slow, a person might help you, show you one of their problems and give you a shortcut or something, which could be seen as cheating. But it is that versus not doing the assignment at all.”

The Science teacher offered an additional point of view on the matter, saying that Students don’t like to see their classmates or friends looking dumb or feeling inferior . . . and so . . . oftentimes they are legitimately wanting to help their friends. But what I then

think is important to do is to let students know that if assignments are only being done to help them to become better [at a particular skill], that by stopping them from doing their own work, they are preventing their friends from becoming better.

Students can also find grounds to modify ethical standards when they feel overwhelmed by the amount of work they face—when they get home from music recitals, lacrosse practice, and art lessons. Here, too, students may sense that the educational process has been undermined. In particular, students object to teachers who assign excessive amounts of homework. Echoing a common sentiment, one young woman remarked, “Sometimes I don’t think they realize that there are other subjects. If I had the same amount of math or Spanish homework as I did in other subjects, then I would be up all night.” Another student recalled a time when “I had a science paper, an English paper, a math test coming up and then a Spanish paper. It just sometimes feels that you are drowning in work. You start to get really desperate then.” A third student explained how such predicaments could lead to cheating: “If you have a lot of homework . . . in one night, you are going to cheat, because one, you feel cheated, and two, you don’t have time. So you are going to copy someone’s answers.” A fourth student agreed, portraying cheating as virtually inevitable when teachers assign too much work: “I think . . . it is almost required [to cheat in this context] because [teachers] are just giving you so much homework. It is not right to do that much homework and [they] act like you don’t have other assignments to do.”

Students, in general, felt that teachers did not appreciate how much work they did each night and how little time they had to complete it, given their commute and extracurricular activities. Although most every teacher mentioned the pressure students feel regarding schoolwork and expressed compassion for them, no teacher noted that students receive excessive amounts of work, either for their class or cumulatively. In fact, teachers mentioned a daily study

hall, their efforts to coordinate due dates of major tests and projects with other teachers, and their consistent efforts to break large assignments into smaller, more manageable parts as efforts they made to keep student workloads reasonable.

To some degree, perceptions of being overworked provide a complementary rationale to help students justify what may seem unethical, as students often link their decisions to cheat to the type of teacher they have. A teacher who is unfeeling towards student needs will generate resentment that may justify behaving dishonestly. In the words of one female student, “The teacher has something to do with [cheating]. If [teachers] are insensitive, there is going to be more cheating. ‘Oh yeah I heard you have a math test but I am going to assign you two hours of homework’ [said mockingly].” This student followed up her comments by acknowledging,

You could communicate with your teacher, ‘Hey, I really haven’t been getting enough sleep because you have been laying our assignments so much.’ [But] it is sort of hard to say that to a teacher. Some of the teachers are almost in their own world just because they are so old. We can’t really go up to them and tell them what they are doing is bad.

Although their remarks, aside from a few, derived largely from hypothetical scenarios presented in focus groups, students could articulate clear and consistent rationales for deviating from accepted standards, even though they recognized the standard as a valid moral guideline.

In contrast, just realizing that a favorite teacher would be disappointed to learn you had cheated would devastate some students: “I would never ever even think of like cheating with [one teacher]. It would never go into my head. You wouldn’t want him to find out. He is such a good person that you don’t want to disappoint him.” Another male student shared, “I would never cheat for my seventh grade English teacher because if he ever caught me I would be miserable.” Much as students validated unethical behavior with teachers who didn’t care,

students expressed utmost loyalty to teachers who students believed cared about them. In looking at student thinking regarding when they would and would not cheat reveals that student views of what kind of teacher a person is can notably impact student honesty in the classroom.

Appealing to Higher Loyalties

In “appealing to higher ideals,” students recognize that cheating is morally wrong. However, when negative consequences are likely to arise if one does not violate this standard, students may consider such potential outcomes valid rationales for deviating from what is generally considered ethical. Thus, in certain contexts students may view cheating as the better option when failure means the loss of valued extra-curriculars or future academic opportunities. For example, one student shared, “If your mom says, ‘If you don’t get [good grades], you are not going to be on the ski team anymore.’ I think that is a pretty good reason. I know that happened at Northwest.” Other students shared this point of view, linking such decisions to school climate. As one girl remarked, “This is sort of an athletic school, so people might think it is okay to cheat a little bit to a lot if it is going to get in the way with their sports.” She further maintained that even though teachers say that if you are having problems with your classes then you can skip sports, if you make a varsity team and miss practice, there are consequences.

A similar rationale could be adapted and applied to academics. When students feel overwhelming pressure to earn high grades to gain entry to select high schools, as is the norm at Northwest, cheating may become a viable option. Offering a sense for what her peers may be telling themselves, one student explained: “I know if I did this assignment without cheating, then I am going to get a bad grade. And then I am not going to get into a good school.” She continued, “Then you could see it as affecting the college you get into and your job and your success later in life.” Along the same lines, another student shared, if you are at risk for academic probation and

the possibility of expulsion, then cheating may seem reasonable: “I see it both ways. I see it as a really bad thing, as cheating. Or you could see it as a sort of a thing done out of desperation, to prevent something worse from happening.” Clearly, these students could envision how the negative impact from certain difficult circumstances might adversely affect their lives.

Every teacher did mention the pressure on students to earn high grades. The following comment from the Spanish teacher exemplified this point of view: “The work all of a sudden becomes important when students don’t necessarily get a good grade and that is going to affect the secondary school [they attend].” The history teacher talked specifically about the pressure students on the edge of a B+/A- grade experience: “[S]ome are on the border line, especially in our situation. They are leaving this school and their grades really matter, because they are basically applying to elite secondary schools.” In addition to concerns with getting admitted to elite secondary schools, parents were most often cited by both students and teachers as a source of academic pressure, although participants acknowledged that pressure also originated from teachers and students themselves.

Discussion

As Sykes & Matza (1957) suggested in their theory on delinquent deviance, students often viewed decisions to cheat as a reflection of factors beyond their control. Comparable to McCabe’s (1999) findings, this allowed students to divert blame from themselves to the situation as a means to lessen feelings of guilt and shame. In particular, Northwest students may consider cheating acceptable, though not “right,” when cheating compensates for perceived unjust treatment, such as excessive amounts of work or when hard-working students do not have the time after school, given other extra-curricular commitments, to complete the work assigned (Daniel, et al., 1991).

As other studies have found, students also will more likely commit to an educational program if they believe their teacher “is personally interested and emotionally invested in [their] success” (Collier, 2005, p.4). As Shraw et al. (2007) found on their survey, the single variable most cited as decreasing cheating behavior was an effective teacher. Comparably, in this study every student pointed to teacher caring and mutual respect as pivotal in shaping students’ perception toward their course work, including the possibility of them cheating. In what seems a related development, various scholars claim students are more likely to cheat when they suspect their teacher either does not care about them, the quality of instruction, or they judge the teacher as somehow incompetent (Evans & Craig, 1990, Murdock et al., 2001; Schraw et al., 2007; Szabo & Underwood, 2004). In such instances, students draw on this perception to justify completing work dishonestly (Pulvers Diekhoff, 1999; McCabe, 2001; Evans & Craig, 1990). As various studies have found, students are most invested in the course goals when they trust that the teacher cares about them and their individual success (Collier, 2005; Murdock & Miller, 2003).

Moreover, students often view values as in competition with one another and can therefore justify cheating by framing a decision to cheat as choosing some other esteemed value over honesty. In this regard, students and teachers acknowledged that in some circumstances students feel that completing work honestly may jeopardize peer friendships. If sharing answers with a friend could help students maintain a friendship, some may choose the stability of the friendship over any concern that such collaboration constitutes cheating. Likewise, in some instances, students viewed maintaining sports eligibility as justifying cheating behavior. Were they to become ineligible, their self-esteem, friendships with teammates, and relations with the coach could all suffer. Further, students often feel significant parental pressure to earn high

grades, which they may occasionally feel they cannot achieve without cheating. Consequently, they may seek to honor their parents' aspirations, but do so in dishonest fashion.

Implications

Often, as educators, we ask children to rank competing values by unintentionally placing one in tension with another. For example, we emphasize the importance of grades as well as honesty. Students therefore may, at times, need to weigh two competing values, as an assignment or exam completed honestly may threaten their chance of obtaining a high grade and consequent selective school admission. In addition, we tell students to report when their peers cheat. But again, a tension may arise: students should value loyalty and friendship but also be honest and truthful. While we don't propose a simple answer to such dilemmas, we do believe schools should explicitly acknowledge that students at times may embrace one value and thereby violate another. We need to discuss with students how to consciously grapple with these tensions as a means to help students clarify their values and begin to resolve what may for many be enduring tensions.

Advisory groups, such as those at Northwest, seem ideal for this purpose. They are relatively small, so they provide opportunities for teachers to know students well. There is also a commitment to respect and confidentiality, which allows students a safe space to interact honestly with both peers and a teacher. And this seems precisely where students could explore the contextual factors, contradictions, and conflicts many encounter when they confront issues linked to academic honesty: As a student, do you have to share your hard work with a friend to preserve that friendship? Is a teacher's perceived lack of commitment to your success in the classroom grounds for cheating? If, as a student, your schedule leaves little free time, how do you respond to a teacher who assigns considerable homework? Exploring such issues would

provide students with an opportunity to articulate their position on tensions that seem inherent to a school such as Northwest, and thereby address some likely scenarios in a way that is thoughtful, reflective, and includes more of the school community rather than being a spur of the moment judgment made by an individual student. Moreover, this approach allows faculty working on the same team to engage in dialogue with students about important matters, air their concerns, and thereby begin to consider how they might address these matters of importance.

In addition, teachers should acknowledge the links among good teaching, teachers who care, and student engagement and honesty in their work. In turn, faculty should consider how they might signal to students that they care about their personal and academic well-being. What does this look like in terms of routine classroom interactions, and how should teachers design lessons and assessments so they embody both rigor and concern for students' academic growth? As we found, when teachers ask little of students, students respond in kind, and honesty may easily be compromised. Teachers who invest little effort in developing respectful relations with their students and authentic learning opportunities in the classroom, may create alienated students who willingly cheat in a context where they care little for anyone's well-being but their own. Schools can't be amoral institutions. They cannot ignore the link between good teaching, respect for students, and honesty.

Finally, our research suggests that Northwest teachers and administrators, as well as those in similar schools, may want to think about how they might help students deal with pressures linked to high school admission. Presently, many Northwest students view eighth grade as preparation for high school rather than as equipping them with skills and knowledge that are innately interesting, personally relevant, and applicable beyond the classroom. Consequently, it seems that some students rationalize cheating behavior because they sense little inherent value to

some school work and therefore cheating seems benign. With this perception in mind, teachers might reevaluate their instructional practices and work they assign to avoid involuntarily reinforcing cheating behavior on the part of alienated students.

Limitations

This case study included teachers and students from a single, rather exclusive middle school in the Northeast, resulting in little generalizability. To the extent that these students and teachers represent typical eighth grade students and their core teachers requires the reader to recognize particular elements of relevance to another context. In addition, because of the sensitivity of the topic, interview protocols did not ask participants about personal cheating behaviors. Rather, they focused on their general attitudes on the acceptability of cheating and the perceived likelihood of cheating of their peers in particular contexts. Thus, this study generally explored student perceptions of cheating behavior rather than the actual behavior of the students interviewed. Students therefore may have felt a need to provide socially desirable responses and not been fully candid in their remarks.

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