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The role of Parents in Facilitating Academic Cheating: A Qualitative Exploration of Contexts and Consequences

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored the causes and dimensions of parental involvement in academic cheating during virtual education. Utilizing Strauss and Corbin's systematic grounded theory approach, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 parents in Yazd, Iran (2022–2023 academic year), selected via theoretical sampling with maximum variation until theoretical saturation was reached. Data were analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding. Findings identified direct and indirect parental participation in cheating as the core phenomenon, driven by causal factors such as social pressure, parental anxiety, and grade orientation. In a context characterized by virtual learning environments, ineffective assessment methods, and teacher skill deficits, parents adopted strategies including moral justification and normalization of cheating. The primary consequences were the transmission and institutionalization of dishonest behaviors in children. Reducing this phenomenon requires revising educational assessment methods and reforming parental attitudes.

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

Academic dishonesty remains a persistent challenge within educational systems worldwide, acquiring new dimensions with the rapid expansion of virtual learning and emergency remote teaching. While online learning environments offer unprecedented instructional flexibility, reduced direct physical supervision and increased reliance on technology have exacerbated unethical educational behaviors. Notably, an emerging aspect of this problem is the active role played by parents in facilitating or directly participating in their children's academic cheating during online assessments and assignments. Driven by academic pressure, credentialism, and anxiety over grades, some parents provide unauthorized assistance to secure higher scores for their children. Despite its profound long-term implications for ethical development and educational integrity, parental participation in academic dishonesty remains under-researched. Accordingly, this study aimed to develop a grounded theoretical model to explain the underlying causes, contextual conditions, strategies, and consequences associated with parental facilitation of academic cheating during virtual education

Method

This study adopted Strauss and Corbin's systematic grounded theory methodology to construct a qualitative explanatory model grounded in parents' lived experiences. The target population comprised parents of primary and secondary school students in Yazd, Iran, during the 2021–2022 academic year. Participants were selected using purposive theoretical sampling with maximum variation regarding socio-economic status, educational background, and child grade level. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 parents until theoretical saturation was achieved. Data collection focused on parental motivations, behaviors during online exams, perceived societal pressures, and perceived consequences. The collected qualitative data were systematically analyzed through open, axial, and selective coding procedures. Rigor and credibility were established using prolonged engagement, member checking, peer debriefing, and constant comparative analysis.

Results

The findings yielded a comprehensive grounded theory paradigm explaining parental involvement in academic cheating. Direct and indirect parental facilitation emerged as the core phenomenon, triggered by causal factors such as intense social pressure, parental anxiety, a grade-oriented culture, and inadequate educational environments. Contextual and intervening conditions shaping this behavior included economic and occupational pressures on families, widespread credentialism, structural vulnerabilities of virtual testing environments, ineffective assessment methods, rigid school demands, neglect of individual student talents, perceived irrelevance of course materials, and deficiencies in teacher pedagogical skills. In response to these conditions, parents primarily adopted strategies of moral justification and the normalization of dishonest behavior in online settings. Consequently, the primary outcomes of this involvement included the intergenerational transmission and institutionalization of dishonest academic practices, eroded moral boundaries in children, and the emergence of a pattern characterized as learning while cheating.

Discussion and Conclusion

The study concludes that parental facilitation of academic cheating is not merely an isolated individual misbehavior, but a complex socio-educational reaction to structural deficits in

assessment methods, intense grade orientation, and societal credentialism. When virtual learning environments lack robust and authentic evaluation mechanisms, parents feel compelled to intervene to safeguard their children's academic standings. However, this intervention inadvertently undermines moral development and instills dishonest behavioral patterns in learners. To mitigate this issue, educational authorities must shift from traditional, recall-based testing toward authentic, process-oriented continuous assessment. Furthermore, parental awareness programs are essential to realign parental attitudes from score-driven competition toward genuine learning and ethical integrity.

Author Contributions: All authors contributed to the design, execution, and writing of the research. Ali Najafi participated in the conceptualization, study design, and execution. Dr. Mohsen Shakeri played a role in designing the qualitative framework and in the analysis and coding of interview data. Dr. Ali Rouhani provided research consultation and conducted the final review. Dr. Seyed Alireza Hooshy-Sadat contributed to drafting the problem statement, literature review, discussion, and conclusion sections; conducted the literature search; and performed the specialized and final editing of the manuscript.

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