Chapter Five

OVERCOMING EXAMINATION MALPRACTICE THROUGH EFFECTIVE USE OF POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE REINFORCEMENT

Beatrice N. Kohol, Ph. D.
Department of Educational Foundations and General Studies, Federal University of Agriculture, Makurdi.

And

Terumbur A. Iordaah, Ph. D.
Department of Educational Foundations and General Studies, Federal University of Agriculture, Makurdi.

Introduction

The high incidence rate of examination malpractice at all levels of the educational system in Nigeria is of great concern to all well meaning citizens. It poses a great threat to the validity, reliability and authenticity of the academic certificates so issued. Observable evidence shows that punishment does not seem to be the solution in curbing this menace.

In this paper positive and negative reinforcement are postulated as the way forward.

Concept of Examination Malpractice

Examination is viewed as an objective assessment and evaluation of what learners have achieved after a period of schooling (Akinpelu, 1981). This implies after the learners are exposed to a context material, examinations are given to ascertain whether a specific standard of knowledge or performance objective has been achieved. Akem and Ortese (2005) reiterates that examinations are
necessary to evaluate the learners at each stage of learning to understand the depth to which the skills taught are mastered, identify learning difficulties, strength and weaknesses and apply remedial measures. Ikwe (2010) affirms that it is not easy to give a precise definition of what examination malpractice is since it has multifarious manifestations. However, he enumerated a number of acts/omissions which if committed by any person who is connected with the conduct of examination will amount to malpractice. These include:

- Copying at examination hall
- Lobbying lecturers/teachers for grades
- Writing examination for a candidate or procuring someone else to write for another (impersonation).
- Bringing into examination hall unauthorized materials.

Laha (2008) posited that examination malpractice is an academic crime committed before, during and after an examination by means of deviant approach to guiding principles of conduct of examination.

The diversity in opinion of what constitutes examination malpractice clearly points out the complexity and divergent nature of what the practice is all about. The question that borders all and sundry is that, if teachers do their job effectively and students are diligent in attending to their lessons, how could this menace so deeply affect the nation? This however is a hard question as the many reasons people advance to justify examination malpractice are unimagined.

Some of the reasons for malpractice according to Okonkwo, Uruakpa, Agada and Kanu (1991) can be traced back to 1988 when the Federal Government of Nigeria introduced the Quota System Policy in the Nigerian educational system, with 20% of admission coming from educationally disadvantaged states for first generation universities and 30% for second generation universities. The Quota system which was introduced with the aim of correcting imbalance in the educational sector between the North and the South and the reflection of the Federal Character in admission policy in Federal
institutions made mediocres gained admission into universities, colleges of education and Polytechnics. This resulted to massive cheating and malpractice by those not qualified in order to cope and merit was sacrificed on the altar of federal character and ethnicity.

Other reasons advanced for examination malpractice include the general decadence in the society and quest for money hence individuals collect money to help others cheat. The high level of corruption of national leaders, increasing rate of insecurity to lives and property and above all the poor attitude of the people towards reverencing God has led youth to ferociously commit examination malpractice (Igbe, 2006). Parents are also not left out as they give their children money to buy question papers or even hire people to write examinations for them.

Again Igbe (2006) asserts that examination malpractice is the result of fear of failure and laziness on the part of the students who fail to adequately prepare for examination, instead they resort to cheating. To Anger (2004) examination malpractice is rampant because of high fees charged by the examining bodies i.e. the West African Examination Council (WAEC) and the National Examination Council (NECO). Poor students believe that failure entails re-registering meaning they will spend more as a result they go all out to cheat in order to pass. The principals too in order to maintain false academic success rate they use whatever convenient method to encourage cheating.

However, the problem of examination malpractice has so much been discussed both in high and low places; it has even led to the enactment of severe penalties for offenders such as Decree NO.33 of 1990 which stipulates punishment ranging from a fine of Fifty Thousand Naira (₦50,000.00) to One Hundred Thousand Naira (₦100,000.00) or imprisonment for a term of 3 - 4 years with or without an option of fine.

The West African Examination Council (WAEC) has on its own part black listed and closed down centers notorious for acts of examination malpractice. Tertiary Institutions on their part have
never failed to expel students who are caught in this practice. Yet year in year out we seem to see and hear more of examination malpractice. The solution for this weird behaviour seems not to be in the present use of punishment which serves as a deterrent. Now let us examine what punishment is.

**Punishment (The Traditional Form of Discipline)**

Punishment is the removal of a pleasant stimulus or the application of an unpleasant stimulus thereby lowering the probability of occurrence of an action. Dantani (2009) stated that punishment is a measure presented in order to stop unacceptable behaviour. It is the inflicting of pains or suffering on an individual as a result of undesirable behaviour. In the classroom teachers use punishment to maintain discipline. It is also administered for corrective purpose so that the offender may realize his mistakes and avoid them. Many of the disciplinary techniques we have relied on are ineffective especially those that involve demanding, flogging, expulsion or dismissal, scolding, warning, belittling and suspensions as these tactics can only keep behaviour partially under control for a while. He added that they can produce effects such as uneasiness, fearfulness, dishonesty and overall dislike for school.

**Disadvantages of Punishments**

Wood, Wood, & Boyd, D. (2005) have advanced the following as disadvantages of punishment;

1. Punishment does not extinguish an undesirable behaviour; rather, it suppresses the behaviour when the punishing agent is present.
2. Punishment indicates that a behaviour is unacceptable but does not help people develop more appropriate behaviours. If punishment is used, it should be administered in conjunction with reinforcement or rewards for appropriate behaviour.
3. Some teachers may abuse it by using it to foster their own needs rather than as an instrument of learning.
4. The person who is severely punished often becomes fearful and feels angry and hostile toward the punisher. These reactions may be accompanied by a desire to retaliate or to avoid or escape from the punisher and the punishing situation. Many runaway teenagers leave home to escape physical abuse. Punishment that involves a loss of privileges is more effective than physical punishment and engenders less fear and hostility (Walters & Grusec, 1977).

Punishments can be painful but at the same time not harmful and of no consequence physically especially to those who are involved in examination malpractice. Psychologically it could be damaging. The failure of punishment to inflict any physical pain makes it ineffective but the consequence of the psychological effects makes it better imagined than experienced. This is because students who are expelled from school on account of examination malpractice can likely become armed robbers, political thugs, motor park thugs, and dependant on others for means of livelihood. Often they generate hatred to the general world (Essuman, Nwaogu and Nwachukwu 1990).

Researchers agree that traditional forms of punishment which involve the demand of obedience are closer to the authoritarian end of the spectrum.

The solution to this siege seems rather to be in re-orientation of societal values through counselling rather than punishment and coercion. Positive response with empathy and respect regardless of behaviour may seem to be the language, this attitude will be changed and this can be effectively done with behaviour modification techniques and in particular positive and negative reinforcement.

**Effective Behaviour Modification Techniques**

Behaviour modification is viewed by Essuman, Nwaogu and Nwachukwu (1990) as any course of action to shape or modify student's inappropriate behaviour or misbehavior into appropriate behaviour.
In educational setting, psychological theories and behaviour modification techniques are employed to provide solutions to behavioural problems of learning. Since most of these problems are not pathological but are built around activities of learning, the responsibilities rest upon the shoulders of guidance counsellors who are trained to apply appropriate skills to help unlearn such misbehaviour.

However, the key component in the success of these techniques is the consistency in the implementation. A well-designed programme must first and foremost receive acceptance from the school administration and then the government to ensure proper implementation.

Secondly, another key component of a successful behavioural intervention is that there should be a match between students' developmental level, cognitive and functional abilities and the accomplishment of desired behavioural change. A comprehensive assessment and understanding of strengths and weaknesses is necessary for the acquisition of behavioural proficiencies. In this case, it must be noted that examination malpractice cuts across all institutions of learning; from primary, secondary or tertiary institutions. Techniques must be modified to suit the level.

The Use Positive and Negative Reinforcements

The concept of positive and negative reinforcement was introduced by Skinner (1904 – 1990) during his research on operant conditioning. He carried out his experiments when he conditioned the rat by reinforcing each bar-pressing response with a food pellet. In his experiment, the consequences of behaviour are manipulated in order to increase or decrease the frequency of an existing response or shape an entirely new response. This was achieved through reinforcement. Reinforcement is anything that strengthens or increases the probability of the response it follows. Reinforcement is of two types, positive and negative. Positive reinforcement involves any pleasant or desirable consequence that follows a response and increases the probability the response will be repeated. Negative reinforcement on
the other hand refers to the termination of an unpleasant condition after a response which increases the probability that the response will not be repeated.

Note: In both positive and negative reinforcement behaviour is strengthened which is a diversion from the traditional punishment. Traditionally, punishment lowers the probability of a response by following it with an aversive or unpleasant consequence, whereas with negative reinforcement an unpleasant condition is terminated or avoided.

**Avoidance Learning**

Learning to avoid an event or conditions with aversive consequence is termed as avoidance learning (Wood, Wood and Boyd, 2005). In negative reinforcement an individual is given an alternative.

This can be applied to stop examination malpractice thus: schools that are noted to engage in examination malpractice shall have their names annually published in National Newspapers and the general public warned about the authenticity of certificates obtained from such institutions. In which case, candidates would fear stigmatization and avoid registering in such institutions.

At the school level, internal supervision of examination will be strengthened through proximity control where students will be closely monitored to avoid copying or impersonation. Consequently, those caught will have their names displayed for all the members of the school community to see. Furthermore, they shall be strictly monitored in future examinations. This strategy will expose examination thieves to shame and ridicule as a result they will voluntarily avoid cheating.

This strategy is supported when Travers (1977) mentioned that the society in several instances does not provide people with alternative to avoid punishment. They are often made to suffer for their misdemeanors.

When a school is closed or students are expelled because of examination malpractice, the Government and school administrators
are simply saying that bad behaviour cannot be controlled and the services of Guidance counsellors are not needed. But the big question still remains, after expelling students or closing down schools what next?

Teachers can also reinforce students positively when they teach them effectively the full content of the National curriculum designated for each subject. Teachers who set short term and long term goals work towards completing what the curriculum stipulates thereby preparing the students effectively for both internal and external examinations.

Students can also be encouraged and motivated if teachers give assignments regularly, mark and return scripts. Names of students that do well can also be out on the notice board in this wise they will be encouraged to work harder as their names will drop if consistency in performance is not maintained.

The principle of Primack principle can also be practiced to avoid malpractice. Primack principle is practiced when something desirable is made contingent with something less desirable. If teachers place more emphasis on skills and rewards at the end of the term, students and pupils will shift emphasis from paper certificate which encourages malpractices.

Conclusion

Punishment does not seem to restrict undesirable behaviour. Counsellors and administrators should use alternatives in this case positive and negative reinforcements to curb examination malpractice. However, in administering positive and negative reinforcements, educators and administrators should take into cognizance the maturity level of the students and provide a wide range of alternatives that could be meaningful to the learners when selected from. It is only by so doing that behavior modification techniques could be effective.
Recommendations

i. Consistency should be ensured in the implementation of behaviour modification techniques.

ii. All hands must be on deck to curb the menace of examination malpractice, teachers, students, parents, school administrators and the government.

iii. Workshops and seminars should be organized periodically so that alternative means of curbing examination malpractice, other than punishment will be developed.

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