

Psychological Interventions as a Strategy for Addressing Examination Malpractice in Nigerian Secondary Education

¹ABDULLAHI Ahmed Barkuta, ²MOHAMMED Maimuna Lawal & ³AMINU GARBA (Ph.D)

Corresponding author: barkuta01@gmail.com

¹Department of Educational Psychology, School of Education, Dr Umaru Sanda Ahmadu College of Education, Minna

²School of Arts Education, Fati Lami Abubakar Institute for Legal and Administrative Studies, Minna

³Department of Counselling Psychology, Faculty Of Education and Arts, Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida University, Lapai, Niger State

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Abstract

Education plays a critical role in Nigeria's social, political, and economic development, with secondary education acting as a crucial link between basic and tertiary levels. However, the Nigerian secondary school system faces persistent challenges, notably examination malpractice, which remains one of the most damaging problems. Examination malpractice compromises the credibility and integrity of assessment processes, diminishes public trust in educational certificates, and adversely affects students' moral, psychological, and academic development. This paper conceptualizes examination malpractice as a behavioural and psychological issue rather than solely an administrative or disciplinary concern. Guided by Cognitive-Behavioural Theory and Social Learning Theory, it examines key psychological and social factors that predispose students to malpractice, including fear of failure, academic pressure, ineffective study habits, low self-esteem, peer influence, and society's excessive emphasis on certificates. The paper also outlines the nature, forms, causes, and consequences of examination malpractice in Nigerian secondary schools. It emphasizes psychological intervention strategies, such as individual and group counselling, cognitive restructuring, stress and test anxiety management, and values clarification as sustainable solutions to the problem. Furthermore, challenges to implementing these interventions are identified, including inadequate funding, shortage of trained counsellors, stigma, and weak institutional support. The paper concludes that integrating psychological interventions into school systems is essential for fostering academic integrity, ethical behaviour, and holistic student development. It recommends strengthening guidance and counselling services through the employment of qualified professionals and building counselling capacity among teachers and school administrators.

Keywords: Psychological interventions, strategy, examination malpractice.

Introduction

Education is universally recognized as a powerful instrument for social, political, and economic development. In Nigeria, education is not only regarded as a fundamental human right but also as a key vehicle for national development, unity, and modernization. Secondary school education, in particular, serves as a bridge between primary education and tertiary education, preparing learners for higher academic pursuits, vocational opportunities, and responsible citizenship. However, despite the essential role of education, the Nigerian educational system continues to grapple with challenges that threaten its credibility and quality. One of the most pressing challenges is examination malpractice (Abdulkareem, Adelokun & Adegboye, 2024). Examination malpractice has emerged as one of the most persistent and troubling challenges confronting the Nigerian secondary education system. Examinations are designed to assess students' knowledge, skills, attitudes, and readiness for academic progression; however, the increasing prevalence of examination malpractice has significantly undermined the credibility, validity, and integrity of these assessments (Pinga, Jor & Olatunde, 2024). Despite the efforts of government agencies, examination bodies, and school authorities, who have introduced strict rules, surveillance measures, and disciplinary sanctions, examination malpractice continues to increase across many secondary schools in Nigeria (Yeboah, 2022). This situation raises fundamental concerns about the effectiveness of predominantly punitive approaches in addressing a problem that is deeply rooted in human behaviour and psychological processes (Ntui & Egodi, 2021).

In the Nigerian context, examination malpractice manifests in various forms, including cheating, impersonation, leakage of examination questions, collusion among candidates, and the use of unauthorized materials (Baji, 2021). These practices are often driven by intense academic pressure, fear of failure, poor study habits, low academic self-concept, peer influence, and societal emphasis on certificates over competence (Olabisi & Abiola, 2014). Such factors suggest that examination malpractice is not merely an administrative or disciplinary issue, but a behavioural and psychological problem that requires a deeper understanding and targeted intervention (Mohammed, Kareem & Hassan, 2024). Psychological theories of learning, motivation, moral development, and behaviour modification provide valuable insights into why students engage in examination malpractice. From a psychological perspective, maladaptive coping strategies, test anxiety, external locus of control, and weak moral reasoning can predispose students to unethical examination behaviours (Ossai et al.,

2024). Consequently, psychological interventions, such as guidance and counselling, cognitive-behavioural strategies, stress management, study skills training, and values clarification, offer a more preventive and sustainable approach to addressing examination malpractice. These interventions aim to modify students' attitudes, beliefs, emotions, and behaviours toward examinations, thereby fostering academic integrity and self-regulation (Tanko et al., 2025).

However, examination is a process of evaluating the extent to which education has taken place in an individual. Fadipe & Uwadia (2021) defined examination as a formal test of somebody's knowledge or ability in a particular subject, especially by means of answering questions or practical exercises. Examinations could be internal or external. It could be oral, written or both. Every examination is expected to be guided by the code of conduct or ethics of the institution, government or the examination bodies. Examination therefore, remains an important aspect of the education process, although some have argued or queried its use as a true test of knowledge or ability. As a result of its widespread use as a means of testing learners' knowledge or ability, examination has been exposed to all sorts of abuses (Duvie & Eluwa, 2016).

Concept of Examination and Examination Malpractice

Examination is a formal process of evaluating the extent to which learning has taken place in an individual. Fadipe and Uwadia (2021) defined examination as a formal test of a person's knowledge or ability in a particular subject, conducted through written, oral, or practical means. Examinations may be internal or external and are expected to be guided by established rules, codes of conduct, and ethical standards set by institutions, governments, or examination bodies.

Despite its importance, examination has been subjected to various forms of abuse due to its central role in certifying competence and licensing individuals for educational and professional advancement. In Nigeria, excessive reliance on paper qualifications has intensified the pressure attached to examination outcomes, thereby creating fertile ground for examination malpractice. This overdependence has transformed examinations into high-stakes events, often exploited through fraudulent practices for personal and economic gain (Abdulkareem, Adalakun & Adegboye, 2024).

Examination malpractice refers to any deliberate act of wrongdoing before, during, or after an examination aimed at gaining unfair advantage or manipulating assessment outcomes. According to Fadipe and Uwadia (2021), examination malpractice encompasses cheating, collusion, impersonation, leakage of question papers, and other dishonest practices that compromise fairness and credibility. It involves irregular behaviour by candidates or officials responsible for conducting examinations, including violations of examination rules before, during, or after the assessment process (Jaiyeola & Ishola, 2024). Reports from examination bodies such as the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) and the National Examinations Council (NECO) have consistently revealed widespread cases of malpractice in Nigerian secondary schools (WAEC, 2022). Despite sanctions such as annulment of results and the disqualification of candidates, the problem persists, indicating that punitive measures alone are insufficient.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is anchored on the Cognitive–Behavioural Theory and Social Learning Theory. The Cognitive–Behavioural Theory, developed by Aaron T. Beck in the 1960s, views examination malpractice as a result of faulty or irrational thinking patterns, such as fear of failure, low self-confidence, or the belief that cheating is necessary to succeed. The theory supports Psychological interventions that help students identify and modify negative thoughts, develop effective study skills, manage examination anxiety, and build self-confidence, thereby reducing the tendency to engage in examination malpractice.

The Social Learning Theory, developed by Albert Bandura in 1977, explains examination malpractice as behaviour learned through observation, imitation, and modelling of others such as peers, teachers, or societal figures. When students observe others engaging in malpractice without consequences, they are more likely to imitate such behaviour. Psychological interventions informed by this theory promote positive role models, peer-led integrity programs, and a school culture that reinforces honesty and discourages examination malpractice.

Nature and Forms of Examination Malpractice in Nigerian Secondary Schools

Examination malpractice manifests in diverse forms aimed at manipulating assessment outcomes to achieve unearned success, surfacing from simple acts of cheating into highly organized and technology-driven practices that pose a serious threat to educational integrity, thereby underscoring the need to understand these forms in order to develop effective prevention and control strategies.

1. Collusion and Copying during Examinations: This is one of the most common forms of malpractice where students share answers or copy from one another during an examination. Sometimes, the collusion involves exchanging written materials or using coded signals to communicate answers (Anyamene, Nwokolo & Madegbuna, 2020). Collusion is often made possible through poor supervision and overcrowded examination halls. In some cases, teachers or invigilators overlook such behaviour, thereby encouraging dishonesty (Ogbo, 2021).

2. Impersonation: Impersonation occurs when someone sits for an examination on behalf of another candidate. This may involve using forged identity cards or examination numbers to deceive invigilators. Impersonation is one of the most dangerous forms of malpractice because it involves a deliberate act of deceit and criminal intent. It is sometimes facilitated by corrupt officials who manipulate identity verification processes (Dadzie & Annan-Brew, 2023).

3. Leakage of Examination Questions: This form involves unauthorized access to examination questions before the scheduled date. It is often perpetrated by examination officials, teachers, or printers who have early access to question papers. Leakage represents a severe breach of examination security and is motivated by financial gain or favoritism. Once leaked, the questions are sold to students, giving them an unfair advantage over others. This not only erodes fairness in assessment but also damages the reputation of examination bodies and institutions (Ukwueze, 2018).

4. Use of Foreign Materials or “Expo”: This involves students bringing unauthorized materials such as notes, textbooks, written answers, or microchips into examination halls. These materials are often hidden in clothing, writing instruments, or mobile devices. Technological advancement has made this form more complex, as students now use electronic gadgets such as smart watches, Bluetooth devices, and mobile phones to access information. The use of foreign materials undermines academic integrity and reflects poor preparation habits (Mireku, Bervell & Dzamesi, 2024).

Causes of Examination Malpractice from a Psychological Perspective

Examination malpractice results from interacting personal, institutional, and societal factors. In Nigeria, it is driven by fear of failure, societal pressure for success, and weak examination systems. Below are the major causes of examination malpractice in secondary schools:

1. Pressure to Succeed and Fear of Failure: One of the most significant causes of examination malpractice is the intense pressure students face to achieve high grades. In many Nigerian families, academic success is equated with future prosperity and social recognition. Students who fear disappointing their parents or failing to meet expectations often resort to cheating as a coping mechanism. This anxiety is compounded by competition for limited tertiary admission spaces. When success is valued more than learning, students are easily tempted to engage in dishonest practices to attain good results at all costs (Ikpekaogu & Chinwe, 2024).

2. Poor Preparation and Laziness among Students: Lack of adequate preparation is another major driver of examination malpractice. Many students fail to dedicate sufficient time to reading and rely instead on shortcuts to success. This is often linked to poor study habits, distractions from social media, and lack of motivation. Students feel unprepared; they perceive malpractice as the only way to pass examinations. Inadequate reading culture also reflects the absence of effective guidance from teachers and counsellors (Dadzie, 2022).

3. Inadequate Supervision and Weak Examination Administration: Weak supervision systems during examinations provide an enabling environment for malpractice to thrive. Examination halls that are overcrowded, poorly invigilated, or lack surveillance equipment make it easier for students to cheat where invigilators are few, uncommitted, or corrupt, students take advantage of the situation to engage in dishonest acts (Gulee, Micah & Yayock, 2025).

4. Moral Decadence and Societal Corruption: A decline in societal values is a key factor fueling examination malpractice. When dishonesty and corruption are tolerated in the larger society, students internalize these behaviours as acceptable norms. The growing moral decay in Nigerian society has normalized unethical conduct in schools. Parents sometimes encourage their children to cheat by

providing funds to bribe officials or obtain leaked questions. This indicates a broader cultural problem that extends beyond the school environment (Ikwueke, 2021).

5. Location of examination centre: Remote centres tend to receive materials in advance, thus increasing the opportunity of gaining access to examination paper; they are less likely to be closely supervised. Or scripts may be exchanged while in transit because of the poor terrain in which it takes a longer time to travel to the collection center (Ntamu, 2020).

Psychological Intervention Strategies for Addressing Examination Malpractice

Examination malpractice in Nigeria persists despite strict regulations, indicating that the problem is rooted in psychological, emotional, and social factors rather than administrative weaknesses alone. Psychological intervention strategies provide a sustainable solution by addressing students' beliefs, attitudes, and emotional pressures that encourage dishonest behaviour.

1. Individual Counselling: Individual counselling involves one-on-one interaction between a student and a trained counsellor or psychologist. It helps to identify personal factors such as fear of failure, low self-esteem, poor study habits, and family or societal pressure that predispose students to examination malpractice. Through guided discussion, students are assisted in developing effective coping strategies and academic skills. Counsellors and psychologists also help students understand the consequences of malpractice on their future. This approach encourages self-awareness, honesty, and personal responsibility (Gulee, Micah & Yayock, 2025).

2. Group Counselling: Group counselling focuses on the social and peer-related causes of examination malpractice. Students are brought together to discuss common academic challenges and examination anxieties in a supportive environment. This reduces feelings of isolation and emotional distress that often encourage cheating. Counsellors guide group discussions to challenge norms that justify malpractice. Positive peer modelling helps students learn constructive coping strategies from others (Enebong, Ataide & Ataud, 2024).

3. Cognitive Restructuring: Cognitive restructuring is based on cognitive-behavioural principles and targets students' irrational and negative thoughts. Many students believe that failure is disastrous

or that cheating is the only way to succeed. This strategy helps students identify such distorted beliefs and understand how they influence behaviour. Counsellors and psychologists then assist students in replacing these thoughts with realistic and positive alternatives. Students learn to view challenges as opportunities for improvement rather than threats. As confidence increases, the tendency to engage in malpractice decreases (Ntui & Egodi, 2021).

4. Test Anxiety Reduction Programmes: Test anxiety reduction programmes are designed to address excessive fear and worry associated with examinations. Anxiety can impair memory, reasoning, and performance, pushing students toward dishonest practices. These programmes include systematic desensitization, confidence-building exercises, and examination simulations. Students are taught how to approach exams calmly and strategically. With reduced anxiety, students feel more in control during examinations (Ikwueke (2021).

5. Moral and Values Education: Moral and values education emphasizes ethical principles such as honesty, integrity, responsibility, and fairness. Students are guided to reflect on the moral implications and long-term consequences of examination malpractice. Through discussions, role-playing, and moral reasoning activities, students learn to differentiate right from wrong. This strategy encourages internal moral control rather than fear of punishment. When ethical values are internalized, students are less likely to engage in dishonest behavior, and it promotes a culture of academic integrity (Ekejiuba, et al., 2022).

Consequences of Examination Malpractice

According to Agwu et al., (2020), examination malpractice has far-reaching implications that go beyond the immediate act of cheating, affecting students, educational institutions, and society at large. It undermines the integrity of the examination system, erodes public confidence in educational outcomes, and imposes psychological, financial, and administrative burdens on stakeholders. The following points highlight some of the major consequences of examination malpractice in the education system.

1. Cancellation of Examination Results: Examination malpractice often leads to the cancellation of results in affected centres or regions. This penalty may affect both guilty candidates and innocent

students who wrote the examination in the same centre, resulting in frustration, emotional distress, and loss of academic opportunities for hardworking students.

2. Loss of Credibility of Educational Certificates: Common examination malpractice makes certificates issued by educational institutions and examination bodies questionable. Employers and higher institutions may doubt the competence of certificate holders, thereby reducing the value and acceptance of Nigerian educational qualifications.

3. Invalidation of Examination Processes: When malpractice is detected, examinations may be declared invalid. This creates serious challenges for examiners and examining bodies, including the need to conduct investigations or repeat examinations, which disrupts academic schedules and planning.

4. Psychological and Emotional Effects on Students: Students involved in examination malpractice may experience fear, guilt, anxiety, and low self-esteem. Innocent students affected by cancelled results may feel discouraged and lose confidence in the fairness of the education system.

This paper therefore, argues that integrating psychological interventions into secondary school systems in Nigeria is essential for effective addressing of examination malpractice. By shifting emphasis from reactive punishment to proactive psychological support, schools can promote ethical behaviour, reduce examination-related anxiety, and enhance students' confidence and academic competence. Such an approach is not only addressing the root causes of examination malpractice but also contributes to the holistic development of learners and the restoration of public confidence in the Nigerian secondary education system.

Conclusion

Examination malpractice remains a critical threat to the credibility, integrity, and effectiveness of secondary education in Nigeria. As demonstrated in this paper, the persistence of this menace despite strict rules, surveillance and penalizing sanctions suggests that examination malpractice is not merely an administrative or disciplinary failure, but a deeply rooted psychological, behavioural, and societal problem. Factors such as fear of failure, intense academic pressure, poor study habits, low academic self-concept, peer influence, moral decadence, and weak guidance and counselling structures continue

to prompt students to unethical examination behaviours. The widespread nature of examination malpractice has far-reaching consequences, including the wearing a way of public confidence in educational certificates, psychological distress among students, financial losses to examination bodies, and the overall decline in educational standards.

Recommendations

Based on the discussions and conclusions of this paper, the following recommendations are made:

- 1. Strengthening Guidance and Counselling Services:** Government and school authorities should prioritize the employment of qualified guidance counsellors and educational psychologists in secondary schools. Counselling units should be adequately staffed and equipped to provide continuous psychological support to students.
- 2. Integration of Psychological Interventions into School Programmes:** Psychological intervention strategies such as cognitive-behavioural techniques, stress and test anxiety management, study skills training, and moral education should be formally integrated into the school curriculum and co-curricular activities.
- 3. Reduction of Overdependence on Certificates:** Educational policies should emphasize competence, skills acquisition, and continuous assessment rather than excessive reliance on high-stakes examinations and paper qualifications.
- 4. Improved Examination Administration and Supervision:** Examination bodies and schools should strengthen supervision, ensure adequate spacing in examination halls, and improve monitoring systems, especially in remote examination centres.

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