

An Evaluation of Teachers' Perceptions of Examination Misconduct in Nigerian Secondary Schools: Implications for Teacher Quality Assessment

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Introduction

Education is considered the foundation for national development. It equips individuals with the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes required for self-development and for driving societal advancement [1]. In Nigeria, secondary education occupies a strategic position in the education system because it serves as the bridge between basic education and tertiary education. It is at this level that students are prepared for higher learning, vocational training, and responsible citizenship. The quality of education at this level therefore determines to a large extent the quality of graduates produced and the overall development of the nation.

One of the major instruments used to assess students' learning outcomes and determine progression in Nigerian secondary schools is examination.

Examinations are designed to measure students' academic achievement, certify competence, and provide data for decision-making by schools, parents, and government [2]. For examinations to serve these purposes, they must be credible, valid, and free from any form of malpractice. Examination integrity is therefore central to maintaining the credibility of the education system and ensuring that certificates issued truly reflect the ability of the holders. However, in recent years, examination misconduct has become a major challenge confronting the Nigerian education system, particularly at the secondary school level [3]. Examination misconduct refers to any irregular behavior or act of dishonesty committed before, during, or after an examination aimed at gaining undue advantage [4]. These acts include cheating, impersonation, leakage of examination questions, collusion, bringing in foreign materials, and assistance from teachers or supervisors during examinations. The prevalence of examination misconduct in Nigeria

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has reached alarming proportions. Reports from examination bodies such as WAEC, NECO, and NABTEB consistently indicate rising cases of malpractice annually [5]. For instance, WAEC reported that over 22% of candidates who sat for the 2023 West African Senior School Certificate Examination had their results withheld due to various forms of malpractice. This trend suggests a systemic problem that threatens the validity of assessment and the quality of education in the country.

Several factors have been identified as responsible for the rise in examination misconduct. These include poor preparation of students, pressure to pass at all costs, societal emphasis on certificates rather than knowledge, inadequate supervision, and poor implementation of examination rules [6]. However, one group that has received relatively little empirical attention in relation to this problem is teachers. Teachers are central actors in the examination process. They teach students, prepare them for examinations, invigilate, and in some cases mark scripts. Their attitudes, beliefs, and actions can either promote examination integrity or encourage misconduct.

Teachers' perceptions of examination misconduct are important because perception influences behavior [7]. If teachers perceive examination misconduct as normal, inevitable, or even justifiable under certain circumstances, they are more likely to tolerate it or participate in it. Conversely, if teachers perceive it as unethical and damaging to education, they are more likely to uphold integrity and discipline students against it. Understanding how teachers perceive examination misconduct will therefore provide

insight into why the problem persists and how it can be addressed.

The issue becomes more critical when viewed from the perspective of teacher quality assessment. Teacher quality is one of the most important determinants of students' academic achievement and school effectiveness [8]. A quality teacher is expected to demonstrate professional ethics, subject mastery, pedagogical competence, and commitment to upholding academic standards. One key aspect of professional ethics is the ability to maintain examination integrity. Teachers who engage in or condone examination malpractice undermine their own professionalism and the credibility of the assessment system.

In Nigeria, various efforts have been made to assess and improve teacher quality through programs such as the Teachers Registration Council of Nigeria [TRCN] professional qualification, promotion examinations, and school-based assessments. However, these assessments often focus on subject knowledge and teaching methods, with little attention to teachers' ethical dispositions toward examination conduct. Yet, a teacher who is academically competent but lacks integrity in examination matters cannot be said to be of high quality. In Nigerian secondary schools, there are reported cases of teachers aiding students during examinations, selling questions, or collecting money to help students pass [9]. Some teachers also fail to report malpractice due to fear, peer pressure, or personal gain. These practices suggest that the problem of examination misconduct may be linked to teachers' perceptions and ethical orientation. Despite this, there is limited research examining specifically

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how Nigerian secondary school teachers perceive examination misconduct and what this implies for assessing their quality.

Cross River State, like many other states in Nigeria, has witnessed cases of examination malpractice in both internal and external examinations. The State Ministry of Education and examination bodies have made efforts to curb the menace through stricter supervision and sanctions. However, without understanding the perspectives of teachers who are at the centre of teaching and assessment, such efforts may not yield the desired results. In light of the foregoing, this study aims to assess secondary school teachers' perceptions of examination misconduct in Nigeria, with specific emphasis on Cross River State. The study will explore teachers' views on the causes, forms, and effects of examination malpractice and examine the implications of these perceptions for assessing teacher quality.

Overview of examination and examination misconduct in Nigerian secondary schools

An examination is a formal and systematic process of testing and evaluating the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and competencies that students have acquired during a period of instruction. In Nigerian secondary schools, examinations can be internal, such as first-term to third-term tests and continuous assessments, or external, such as the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE), National Examination Council (NECO), and NABTEB. The main purpose of examination is to assess students' academic achievement and determine how well instructional objectives have been attained

[1]. Examinations also serve the purpose of certification, where bodies like WAEC and NECO issue certificates that qualify students for admission into tertiary institutions and for employment [4].

Furthermore, they are used for selection and placement of students into higher classes and universities, for quality control to monitor standards in schools, and for providing feedback to both teachers and learners on areas of strength and weakness. Examinations equally motivate students to study and ensure accountability in the education system [10,11].

Examination misconduct refers to any irregular behavior by a candidate or any other person that violates the rules guiding the conduct of an examination [4]. The Examination Malpractice Act of 1999 defines it as any act of cheating or fraud committed before, during, or after an examination [12]. In Nigerian secondary schools, several forms of misconduct are common. One is cheating, which involves copying from another student, textbooks, or prepared notes during the exam [13].

Another is examination leakage, where questions or answers are made available to candidates before the scheduled time, often through social media or compromised officials [3]. Impersonation occurs when another person sits for an examination on behalf of a registered candidate, especially in external exams [14]. Collusion involves secret cooperation between candidates or between candidates and invigilators to share answers [1]. Lastly, the use of foreign materials entails bringing unauthorised items such as handwritten notes, textbooks, mobile phones, and smart devices into the examination hall [14]. Other

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forms include mass cheating, bribery, intimidation of officials, and substitution of answer booklets [3].

Several factors contribute to examination misconduct in Nigerian secondary schools. Research shows that fear of failure, pressure from parents and society, poor teaching, inadequate preparation, and the desire to pass at all costs are major causes [15]. Other causes include greed and commercialisation by schools that run “*special centres*,” weak and compromised invigilation, and a societal value system that encourages “success by all means” [13]. The consequences of examination malpractice are serious. For students, WAEC and NECO impose penalties such as cancellation of results, a ban of 2 to 4 years, and prosecution under the Examination Malpractice Act of 1999 [4,12].

Schools involved may be de-recognised or blacklisted by examination bodies. At the national level, examination malpractice devalues Nigerian certificates, leads to the production of incompetent graduates, and undermines the credibility of the education system. This ultimately affects national development because the workforce produced lacks the necessary skills and integrity [3,11].

Factors responsible for examination misconduct in secondary schools

Several factors are responsible for examination misconduct in Nigerian secondary schools, and poor preparation is one of the leading causes. Many students enter the examination hall without adequate study because of poor teaching, absenteeism, or lack of commitment to learning. When students are not confident in their ability to answer questions, they

resort to cheating and other forms of malpractice as a way of coping [15].

Closely related to this is pressure to pass. Students face intense pressure from parents, peers, and school authorities to obtain good grades and certificates at all costs. In a society where academic success is often equated with personal worth, many learners see examination malpractice as the only option to avoid failure and shame [13]. This pressure is heightened during external examinations like WAEC and NECO, where results determine admission into tertiary institutions.

Another major factor is inadequate supervision during examinations. Weak invigilation and poor monitoring create an enabling environment for candidates to engage in malpractice without fear of being caught [3]. When invigilators are lenient, compromised, or absent, students take advantage to copy, use foreign materials, or collude. In addition, societal emphasis on certificates fuels the problem. In Nigeria, certificates are highly valued for employment, political appointments, and social status, often more than the actual knowledge and skills acquired [11]. This has created a “*certificate syndrome*” where both parents and students prioritize obtaining the paper qualification by any means rather than genuine learning. Compounding this is teacher involvement. In some cases, teachers and school administrators aid malpractice by dictating answers, leaking questions, or collecting money to run “*special centers*” for candidates [1]. Their involvement undermines the integrity of the examination process and encourages students to believe that cheating is acceptable.

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Finally, weak enforcement of rules contributes significantly to the persistence of examination misconduct. Although the Examination Malpractice Act of 1999 prescribes penalties, enforcement is often poor and inconsistent [12]. Many offenders are not prosecuted, and schools found culpable are rarely de-recognised. This lack of strict sanctions gives students and other stakeholders the impression that they can engage in malpractice and go unpunished [4]. As a result, examination malpractice continues to thrive, threatening the credibility of the Nigerian education system and the quality of graduates produced.

Teachers' perceptions and attitudes toward examination misconduct

Teachers' perceptions and attitudes toward examination misconduct in Nigerian secondary schools are mixed and often shaped by personal values, school environment, and societal pressure. A significant number of teachers condemn examination malpractice and view it as a threat to academic integrity and national development. To them, examinations are meant to measure true learning, and any form of cheating undermines the credibility of certificates and the education system [11]. These teachers believe that students who engage in malpractice will become incompetent professionals in the future.

However, another group of teachers accept or tolerate examination misconduct. They see it as a "*necessary evil*" to help students pass, especially when students are perceived as poorly prepared or when schools are under pressure to record high performance in external exams like WAEC and NECO [15]. This tolerant

attitude often stems from sympathy for students and the belief that the system itself is flawed.

Some teachers also rationalise their involvement or silence for several reasons. One common reason is pressure from school authorities and parents. Teachers are sometimes forced to aid malpractice or to look the other way to protect the image of the school and secure the jobs of both students and staff [1]. Another reason is financial gain. In "special centers," some teachers collect money from students and parents to provide answers or to relax supervision during examinations [3].

Others remain silent out of fear of intimidation or assault by students, parents, or community members who benefit from malpractice. There is also the belief that "*everybody is doing it*," which creates a culture of normalization where teachers no longer see malpractice as wrong [13]. The consequence of these varied attitudes is that examination misconduct persists despite existing rules. Teachers who condemn it often feel powerless because enforcement is weak and offenders are rarely punished [4]. Those who are involved or tolerant contribute directly to the devaluation of Nigerian certificates and the production of graduates who lack competence [12]. Therefore, changing teachers' perceptions requires re-orientation, professional ethics training, and strict enforcement of sanctions to restore integrity to the examination system in secondary schools.

Concept and importance of teacher quality assessment

Teacher quality refers to the attributes, competencies, and effectiveness that a teacher demonstrates in facilitating learning and achieving desired educational

outcomes. According to Darling-Hammond [16], teacher quality encompasses a teacher's subject matter knowledge, pedagogical skills, ability to manage the classroom, and commitment to student learning. In the Nigerian context, teacher quality is not limited to academic qualifications alone but also includes the teacher's professionalism, ethical behavior, and capacity to contribute to national educational goals [1]. High-quality teachers are therefore seen as those who can deliver curriculum content effectively, assess learners fairly, and model the values expected in society.

In Nigeria, the Teachers Registration Council of Nigeria [TRCN] provides the official framework for assessing teacher quality. One major criterion is subject knowledge, which requires that teachers have adequate mastery of the content they teach and are academically qualified in their subject areas [17].

The second criterion is pedagogy, which focuses on the teacher's ability to apply appropriate teaching methods, use instructional materials, and assess learners to promote understanding [18]. The third criterion is professionalism. TRCN expects teachers to engage in continuous professional development, maintain records, collaborate with colleagues, and uphold teaching standards [17]. The fourth and equally important criterion is ethical conduct. Teachers are required to demonstrate integrity, punctuality, fairness, respect for learners, and avoidance of examination malpractice or any act that compromises the profession [19]. The importance of teacher quality assessment in Nigeria cannot be overstated. First, it ensures accountability by determining whether teachers meet minimum standards for recruitment, promotion, and retention

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[20]. Second, it improves student learning outcomes because research shows that teacher quality is the single most important school-related factor influencing student achievement [16]. Third, assessment helps to identify professional development needs and guides TRCN in organising training and licensing programs [17]. Finally, by emphasising subject knowledge, pedagogy, professionalism, and ethics, teacher quality assessment promotes public confidence in the teaching profession and contributes to the overall improvement of education in Nigeria.

Implications of teachers' perceptions of examination misconduct for teacher quality assessment

Teachers' perceptions and actions toward examination misconduct have direct implications for how teacher quality is assessed, for professional standards, and for the credibility of the education system in Nigeria. When teachers condemn and actively prevent examination malpractice, it reflects positively on their quality because it demonstrates adherence to the professional and ethical standards set by the Teachers Registration Council of Nigeria [17]. Such teachers are seen as meeting TRCN's criteria of professionalism and ethical conduct, which are key components of teacher quality assessment in Nigeria [1]. They also model integrity for students and contribute to reliable assessment data that accurately reflects student learning.

The need for quality education in Nigeria is a priority not only to the government but to all educators and evaluators. As educators, the right norms and values should be taught in school. This is because every

deviation from the character of the child lies on the shoulders of the teachers (educators and evaluators). To this end, educators and evaluators should design instruments that will discourage cheating among examinees. From the researchers' point of view, most examinations constructed, administered and scored by the examiners lack content validity and reliability. In other cases, they are prone to promoting cheating among test takers. Also, educators should understand the need for concentrating more on the affective and psychomotor domains of learning. This is because there has been overemphasis on the cognitive domain of learning at the expense of the affective and psychomotor. Obviously, most of the cognitive assessment techniques used by educators and evaluators have encouraged the incidence of examination malpractices among test takers.

Conversely, teachers who tolerate, encourage, or participate in malpractice fail to meet these professional standards. Their involvement undermines the assessment process because student results no longer measure actual learning but rather the extent of assistance given by the teacher [11].

The actions of teachers regarding examination misconduct also affect the overall evaluation of teacher quality by regulatory bodies. During teacher appraisal and licensing, TRCN and school authorities assess teachers based on subject knowledge, pedagogy, professionalism, and ethical conduct [17]. Teachers who aid leakage, dictate answers, or collude with students cannot be rated as high-quality because they violate ethical codes and compromise fair assessment [19].

Furthermore, widespread teacher involvement in malpractice makes it difficult to distinguish between

effective and ineffective teachers during quality assessment, since inflated results mask poor teaching and inadequate subject mastery [20]. This distorts data used for promotion, training needs analysis, and policy decisions.

At the broader level, teachers' perceptions of examination misconduct affect the credibility of the education system. When teachers are perceived as being part of the malpractice problem, public confidence in Nigerian certificates declines both locally and internationally [15]. Employers and tertiary institutions begin to doubt the competence of graduates, leading to the devaluation of WAEC, NECO, and NABTEB results [3]. This also weakens accountability in the system because assessment is no longer a true measure of teaching effectiveness or student achievement [16]. Therefore, for teacher quality assessment to be meaningful, teachers must uphold ethical standards and reject malpractice. Doing so will ensure that quality assessment reflects real teacher competence and that the education system maintains its integrity.

Significance/contribution of the study to quality classroom assessment practices

The significance of the study "*An Evaluation of Teachers' Perceptions of Examination Misconduct in Nigerian Secondary Schools: Implications for Teacher Quality Assessment*" lies in its direct contribution to improving quality assessment practices in schools.

First, the study is significant because it provides empirical evidence on how teachers' attitudes toward examination misconduct influence the reliability of teacher quality assessment. Teacher quality assessment in Nigeria, as stipulated by the Teachers

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Registration Council of Nigeria, is based on subject knowledge, pedagogy, professionalism, and ethical conduct [17]. If teachers tolerate or engage in examination malpractice, assessment data become distorted because student results no longer reflect actual learning or teaching effectiveness [11]. Identifying specific perceptions that encourage or discourage malpractice, school administrators and TRCN can design appraisal tools that better capture teachers' ethical behavior and integrity as part of quality evaluation [1].

Second, the study is important for strengthening professional standards and accountability in schools. When teachers' views on examination misconduct are understood, school management can target areas of weakness through re-orientation, ethics training, and stricter supervision during examinations [3]. This will help to ensure that teacher appraisal is not based only on student pass rates, but also on adherence to professional codes [19].

Consequently, teachers who uphold integrity will be recognised and rewarded, while those involved in malpractice can be identified for sanction or retraining. This promotes a culture of professionalism and discourages the normalisation of malpractice in schools [13].

Finally, the study has significance for the credibility of the education system. Examination results are used by schools, parents, and tertiary institutions to make decisions about students and teachers. If teachers' involvement in misconduct is left unchecked, it undermines the validity of assessment and devalues Nigerian certificates [15]. Evaluating teachers' perceptions, the study provides a basis for policy recommendations to TRCN, WAEC, NECO, and

school authorities on how to align teacher quality assessment with ethical standards [16]. In the long run, this will help restore public confidence in school assessments and ensure that quality assessment practices produce competent graduates for national development.

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