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JOHN OLAYEMI OKUNLOLA

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Unmasking the Unseen in Examination Malpractices in High Schools: A Phenomenological Study of Quality Assurance Leaders' Lived Experiences in Public Examinations

JOHN OLAYEMI OKUNLOLA

Department of Education Leadership and Management, Faculty of Education, University of Johannesburg, P.O.BOX 524, Auckland Park 2006, South Africa

Corresponding author: jokunlola@uj.ac.za or jookunlola2@gmail.com

ORCID: 0000-0001-7234-0504

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Abstract:

Examination malpractice is a pressing and pervasive issue across all levels of education in Nigeria, undermining the integrity of academic assessments and posing significant challenges to the educational system. A qualitative approach was adopted using a semi-structured interview, which allowed open-ended questions. This study employs a phenomenological design that examines the lived experiences of nine quality assurance leaders tasked with monitoring the Senior Secondary Certificate Examination (SSCE) in the Northwestern region of Nigeria. Through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, the study unravels the nature and forms of examination malpractices, ranging from traditional methods to advanced strategies involving collusion and technology. Internal and external agents within the education system are identified as facilitators of malpractice, driven by financial incentives and societal pressures. Root causes, including societal emphasis on certificates and infrastructural inadequacies, underscore the systemic challenges contributing to malpractice. Drawing from the narratives of the participants, who are quality assurance leaders, recommendations are proposed to address the issue comprehensively. These include shifting societal focus towards moral ethics and competencies, leveraging technology for surveillance, and imposing stronger penalties on examination malpractice perpetrators. By implementing these recommendations, education stakeholders would be able to restore confidence, safeguard the integrity of public examinations, and foster a culture of academic honesty in Northwestern Nigeria and Nigeria at large.

Keywords: Examination Malpractice, Quality Assurance Leaders, Public Examinations, High Schools

Introduction

Examination malpractice has been a pervasive issue in the education sector, particularly in high schools, where it undermines the credibility of public examinations. The menace of examination malpractice continues to be a societal phenomenon that distorts quality assurance in test administration; assuring quality in test administration has become an arduous task for all relevant education stakeholders. The issue appears to be widespread across all levels of test administration and has taken on a frightening dimension (Raji & Okunlola, 2017). Examination malpractice remains a troubling phenomenon that is hard to comprehend and explain, let alone accept. It gives a candidate an unfair edge

needs and undermines the education system's credibility. Contributors include students, school principals, private over other candidates in an evaluation. It is detrimental to the quality of education and prevents the educational system from achieving many of its lofty goals (Oluwatimilehin & Opesemowo, 2019). In addition, examination malpractice increases errors in the evaluation process, reducing validity and reliability (Cizek, 1999). Examination malpractice discourages hard work, lowers educational standards, discredits certificates, and leads to quacks. It affects manpower school owners, and parents, who often pay for exams (Tolu-Kolawole, 2022).

Examination malpractices continue to plague educational systems worldwide, posing significant challenges to the integrity and fairness of public examinations. In the context of high schools, where academic assessments hold paramount importance in shaping students' futures, the prevalence of such malpractices demands rigorous investigation. The statistics on examination malpractices in high schools' public examinations are on the rise. The Registrar/Chief Executive of the National Examinations Council in October 2023 reported that 0.07% of 12,030 school-based examination candidates who participated in senior secondary school certificate examination were involved in malpractice, while 0.13% of 13,595 candidates were involved in malpractice in 2022 (Ogwo, 2023). In addition, former NECO Registrar Professor Charles Uwakwe revealed that 1,283,485 Senior School Certificate Examination candidates committed malpractice from 2010 to 2016, while 7,410,030 sat for NECO exams (Idoko, 2023). Judging by available data, examination malpractice statistics continue to rise exponentially in public examinations. This monster appears hard to tame and continues to bedevil the credibility and integrity of test administration in Nigeria. According to a survey by Exam Ethics Marshals International in a report by United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) also affirms that examination malpractice has increased in Nigeria by five percent.

Hence, examination malpractice is currently one of the main issues affecting the administration of public examinations (Idoko, 2023). Examination malpractice in the educational system as a whole keeps becoming worse. It has been demonstrated to be an incurable illness, implying that the quality of education is worthless (Raji & Okunlola, 2017). These examination malpractices have taken different dimensions, including bringing foreign materials, using electronic devices, engaging in irregular activities, aiding and abetting, erratically acting, collusion, and impersonation. Other offenses include leakage, insults, assaults, violent behavior, cheating detected at marking venues, and absent candidates with answer scripts (Okeke, 2023). However, understanding the underlying factors driving examination malpractices is necessary to comprehend the dynamics of test malpractices. This study explores the often-overlooked realm of quality assurance leaders' lived experiences to reveal the intricate details of examination malpractices in high schools. Through this phenomenological exploration, the study seeks to unmask the unseen dimensions of examination malpractices and offer valuable perspectives to inform effective quality assurance measures. By amplifying the voices of those tasked with upholding the integrity of high-stakes assessments, Ultimately, by illuminating the lived experiences of quality assurance leaders, this study strives to pave the way for more robust strategies to safeguard the sanctity of public examinations in high schools. By eliciting firsthand accounts and insights from quality assurance leaders immersed in public examinations, the research provides a comprehensive understanding of the challenges, dilemmas, and potential solutions inherent in tackling examination malpractices. Previous research has identified various forms of examination malpractice, but there is a gap in understanding the lived experiences of quality assurance leaders in addressing this issue in public examinations. Hence, this study sought to investigate hidden dimensions of examination malpractice in high schools through a phenomenological study of quality assurance leaders' lived experiences in public examinations. The following research questions guided the study.

1. What are the nature and forms of examination malpractices witnessed by the quality assurance leaders in public examinations in Northwestern Nigeria?
2. Who are the perceived agents of examination malpractices based on the lived experiences of quality assurance leaders in public examinations in Northwestern Nigeria?
3. What are the perceptions of quality assurance leaders as the root causes contributing to examination malpractices in public examinations in Northwestern Nigeria?
4. What effective quality assurance strategies can be employed to eradicate or minimize the prevalence of examination malpractices in public examinations in Northwestern Nigeria?

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Examination Malpractice

The Examination Malpractice Act (1999) defines malpractice as any fraudulent act that undermines examinations' validity, reliability, authenticity, and integrity by obtaining unfair advantages before, during, or after the examination

(Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999). The prefix 'MAL,' derived from a Latin abbreviation meaning bad, refers to the practice of attempting to manipulate an examination to achieve an undeserved grade (Asuru & Njigwum, 2021). Abdullahi (2009), cited in Asuru & Njigwum (2021), posited that examination malpractice, particularly at the secondary school level, aims to achieve excellence and gain access to tertiary institutions through fraud. Examination malpractice has become so commonplace that very few examinations are conducted without it. It is a prevalent issue worldwide, with new and creative cheating methods emerging every examination season (Jimoh, 2009). The pervasiveness of examination malpractices in all educational settings or systems in Nigeria reflects societal decadence. It mirrors the dysfunctionality of our nation's social, political, and economic systems. This is because examination malpractice is an act that violates the values, ethics, rules, regulations, moral codes, or laws established to ensure the integrity and fairness of examinations. Hence, the probability or tendency is high that those who circumvent established standards yesterday are the individuals undermining or cutting corners today in public and private bureaucracies. In other words, the carry-over effects of integrity from secondary schools to higher education institutions, where character and honesty are cultivated, may linger in the workplace.

2.2 Quality Assurance

Babalola (2004), cited in Fasasi (2006), posited that quality assurance in education involves proactive measures to ensure input quality, teaching-learning process, student academic achievement, and school environment before issues arise. This requires high-quality students, teachers, facilities, curriculum, and government policies. Quality assurance is result-oriented when high-standard resources are consistently provided, and execution of its action plan is not deferred until the end of an academic program. It should, therefore, be noted that quality assurance is pervasive and cut across several phases of the educational system. However, the quality assurance of test or examination administration is so fundamental that if compromised, the certificate's integrity, credibility, and validity are challenged. Thus, the quality of the assessment is made or marred. The quality assurance of the examination administration processes shall determine the quality of certificates awarded to examinees. It implies that quality assurance should be strictly adhered to without compromising in any way in all test administration processes since significant decisions will be made depending on the test outcomes (Raji & Okunlola, 2017). Quality assurance is not optional in eradicating the menace of examination malpractices in public examinations, particularly in guaranteeing test validity for assessment outcomes. Hence, a compromised quality assurance process will bequeath worthless certificates to the nation and the global community.

2.3 Nature and Forms of Examination Malpractice

Examination malpractice, categorized into pre-, during, and post-examinations, is prevalent today, involving impersonation, mercenary use, body writing, giraffing, collusion, and score alteration (Asuru & Njigwum, 2021). Other identified examination malpractices include token, contract, expo, impersonation, tattoo, question paper leakage, student aiding, collusion, unauthorized materials, giraffe, and spying. (Abikwi & Abikwi, 2021; Ayanniyi & Anya, 2017). Examination malpractices have assumed frightening dimensions, and there is no doubt that information communication technology (ICT) has weaponized its sophistication. The following under-listed nature and forms of examination malpractices seem to be most popular and common in high schools:

- a) Taking foreign materials into the examination hall/room
- b) Cheating
- c) Using smartphone/electronic communication gadgets in the hall/room
- d) Writing inside the lining of clothes
- e) Oral communication/gestures
- f) Replacement/substituting/slotting-in of answered scripts
- g) Hiding prepared answers in the toilet or private parts
- h) Writing answers inside question papers with the intent to exchange them with fellow candidates
- i) Bribing supervisor/invigilator/quality assurance officer (monitoring officer)
- j) Unruly/violent acts in the examination hall
- k) Collusion
- l) Impersonation
- m) Leakage of question papers before the examination
- n) Using coding and decoding
- o) Mass cheating
- p) Insult/assault/intimidation/disorderly acts inside or outside the examination hall
- q) Using weapons/harmful objects in the Hall
- r) Lateness to the examination center

- s) Submission of multiple scripts
- t) Deliberately extending the examination period/time

2.4 Examination Malpractice and its Agents

Agents of examination malpractices may not necessarily be individuals overtly involved in committing the acts. These may be facilitators like teachers, examination supervisors, invigilators, quality assurance leaders (monitoring officers), parents, school proprietors, principals, and organized syndicates. Onyechere (2004) reveals what sustains the criminal enterprise of agents of examination malpractice as their ability to devise crafty means to make quick money. Adeniran et al. (2021) affirmed examination malpractice agents, including education ministry officials, examination body officials, school administration, proprietors, teachers, non-teaching staff, students, parents, community, and security agents. Onyechere (2004) and Raji & Okunlola (2017) reported that parents frequently provide funds for examination malpractice. Some parents even contracted mercenaries to impersonate their children so they could gain an undue advantage over other candidates.

2.5 Root Causes of Examination Malpractice

Examination malpractice, a pervasive issue in educational systems across Nigeria, can be attributed to various factors that drive candidates to compromise their integrity during examinations. Ijok and Njoku (2019), Adeniran et al. (2021), ANCOPSS (2006), and Oyeyinka (1998) listed the root causes of examination malpractices in Nigeria as follows:

- i. **Value system:** Nigeria is considered to have a horrible value system, which means that morally repugnant behaviors such as embezzlement, theft of public funds, and examination malpractices go unpunished.
- ii. **Emphasis on certificates:** The emphasis by Nigeria's society on certificates rather than skills and Competencies is increasing the prevalence of examination malpractices.
- iii. **Inadequate educational facilities:** Inadequate classrooms, libraries, laboratories, and even teacher-to-student ratio are among the main reasons for examination fraud. This is because insufficient resources have an impact on efficient teaching and learning.
- iv. **Teachers' salaries and remunerations:** Teachers are not well remunerated in Nigeria. Many individuals took the teaching jobs as a last resort. In a study by Okunlola & Hendricks (2022) on the influence of salary and compensation on the quality of secondary education, teachers responded that if given a job opportunity elsewhere, they would not hesitate to quit teaching jobs.
- v. **Students' vices:** Campus vices like cultism, drug addiction, sexual promiscuity, and truancy contribute to examination malpractice, as students spend more time engaging in these activities than studying.
- vi. **Lack of confidence:** Lack of confidence drives students or candidates to resort to examination malpractice as they may doubt their ability to perform well through honest means. This may be a result of inadequate preparation before the examination's commencement.
- vii. **The proliferation of private secondary schools in Nigeria:** The proliferation of secondary schools driven primarily by profit motives exacerbates examination malpractice. In these schools, financial gain takes precedence over learning outcomes. The pressure to produce favorable results usually leads to encouraging or tolerating dishonest practices among students.
- viii. **Parental desperation to ensure that their wards pass by all means:** Parental desperation to ensure their children pass an examination by any means necessary can contribute to examination malpractice. This may lead parents to arrange or facilitate dishonest means for their children to pass, thus undermining the integrity of the educational system.
- ix. **Overloaded syllabus and lack of adequate teaching materials:** Failure to meet the demands of the curriculum causes students and teachers to frequently turn to examination malpractice and other shortcuts due to an overburdened syllabus and a shortage of sufficient instructional resources. Without enough resources to address the subject matter in detail, students would feel pressured to cheat to live up to inflated expectations, which would eventually compromise the integrity of the learning process.
- x. **Precedence of those who made it to the top without hard work:** The precedence of individuals who achieved success without exerting significant effort has created a misguided perception that shortcuts, including examination malpractice, are acceptable means to attain academic or professional goals.

2.6 Quality Assurance Strategies to Curb Examination Malpractice

Since governments, institutions, individuals, and concerned groups have not effectively addressed the examination malpractice problem in Nigeria, it has become a persistent problem (Jimoh, 2009). Some of the common and popular strategies used in curbing examination malpractices in Nigeria include the following:

- a) Government legislation, teacher professional development, less emphasis on paper qualifications, improved education funding, awareness campaigns, and special welfare packages for teachers and examination officials are strategies to combat examination malpractices (Jimoh, 2009).
- b) Effective examination invigilation: Invigilation plays a critical role in examination administration because, if it is effectively carried out, it will curb examination malpractice acts during the examination period (Nkechi & Njoku, 2016).
- c) Examination malpractice prevention strategies include installing CCTV cameras, enforcing fines, penalizing offenders, and enhancing invigilation protocols to preserve assessment integrity (Situma & Wasike, 2020).
- d) Schools should enhance cognitive and moral development (Chala & Agago, 2022).

The researcher, having led quality assurance efforts too in the examination administration at the high school level, suggested the following measures to curb examination malpractices effectively:

- e) Deployment of enhanced surveillance and facial recognition technology and artificial intelligence (AI) to monitor and record examination real-time sessions.
- f) Review and enforcement of the Examination Malpractice Act and related legislation
- g) Establishment of a special tribunal for examination offenses
- h) Special quality assurance monitoring unit for private and rural secondary schools
- i) Deployment of special quality assurance crack team for remote and rural secondary schools
- j) Using sting operations to arrest agents and perpetrators of examination malpractices
- k) Involvement of civic organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and faith-based organizations (FBOs) in quality assurance efforts.

3.0 Materials and Methods

This study investigated hidden dimensions of examination malpractice in high schools through a phenomenological study of quality assurance leaders' lived experiences in public examinations. This section presents the research paradigm, design, participants, data collection, and analysis.

3.1 Research paradigm

The research paradigm for this study was interpretivism. Interpretivists contend that truth and knowledge are subjective, so the researchers can never be separated from their own values and beliefs (Ryan, 2018). The interpretive paradigm has its strength in diversifying views to look into phenomena; it describes objects, humans, or events and can understand them in a social context (Pham, 2018). Interpretivism helps build detailed descriptions and a deeper understanding of phenomena under study. In essence, the primary concern of the interpretive paradigm is to shed light on "the general through the particular" (Hussain, Elyas & Nasseef, 2013:2375). Although restrictive, interpretivism brings deeper understanding and insight into the phenomena studied, which remains a great strength.

3.2 Research design

Cohen et al. (2018) state that phenomenological research is based on the view that our knowledge of the world is rooted in our immediate experiences, and the researcher's task is to describe, understand, interpret, and explain these experiences. The emphasis is placed on the fully described subjective experiences, perceptions, interpretations, attitudes, beliefs, values, feelings, and meanings of agentic individuals (Denscombe, 2014). The distinctive feature of phenomenological research is its focus on the participants' subjective experiences. Meanwhile, the lived experiences come through the eyes of participants (Ary et al., 2002). Therefore, this study employed the phenomenological research design as the appropriate design based on the focus of this investigation, that is, the lived experiences of quality assurance leaders in monitoring public examinations. The phenomenological research design was the most appropriate because it aided the researcher in gaining an in-depth and robust understanding of hidden dimensions of examination malpractices in high schools as witnessed and observed by quality assurance leaders in public examinations in Northwestern Nigeria.

3.3 Participants

The study targeted all quality assurance leaders (examination monitoring officers) deployed to monitor the National Examinations Council's Senior Secondary Certificate Examination (SSCE) in Northwestern Nigeria. The nine quality assurance leaders who had lived experiences of the phenomenon being investigated were purposively selected for the study as opines by Kumar (2011) that a researcher should purposively select 'information-rich' participants for qualitative research so that appropriate and right information could be provided to establish the true state of affairs of the phenomena being studied. The participants were selected based on experience in monitoring examination and quality assurance and the number of years in service, which ranged from 10 to 17 years. All the selected participants for this study, quality assurance leaders in Northwestern Nigeria, were from Southern Nigeria and had been deployed a week before the 2023 school-based SSCE. This further confirmed that their narratives on the phenomenon being

investigated are an objective account of hidden happenings inside high school examination halls. Several quality assurance leaders were invited to participate in the study, but only nine could participate in the interview. They were informed, as Sotuku and Duku (2017) contend, that participants have the inalienable right to be informed about being researched and should be allowed to exercise discretion on whether to partake. The researcher explained to them what the study entailed and its benefits to participants, government, and society. The permission was sought and obtained before the data was collected from the participants. In addition, Talarico (2013) noted that researchers are sometimes forced to omit certain aspects of participants' identities to ensure ethical values and principles. Hence, the identities of the participants and schools monitored were not disclosed. The participants were identified as QA Leader 1, QA Leader 2, QA Leader 3, QA Leader 4, QA Leader 5 and so on as shown in the Table 1 below:

Table 1: Demographic Information of Participants

S/N	Quality Assurance Leader	Gender	Rank	Number of Years in Service
1	QA Leader 1	Male	Assistant Director	17
2	QA Leader 2	Male	Chief Information Officer	24
3	QA Leader 3	Male	Chief Examination Officer	24
4	QA Leader 4	Male	Chief Examination Officer	17
5	QA Leader 5	Male	Chief Examination Officer	18
6	QA Leader 6	Male	Chief Examination Officer	22
7	QA Leader 7	Male	Chief Examination Officer	15
8	QA Leader 8	Male	Chief Examination Officer	15
9	QA Leader 9	Male	Assistant Director	17

The demographic information from Table 1 reveals that the quality assurance leaders with the least year of experience have spent 15 years in service. This signifies rich experience in quality assurance. Table 1 equally shows that all the selected participants are senior officers. Meanwhile, no woman was ready to volunteer information or participate in this study, perhaps due to the investigated phenomenon's sensitivity.

3.4 Data collection

This study used semi-structured interviews, which allowed open-ended questions to be used in data collection. Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2018) maintain that an interviewer must use exact wording and a fixed sequence of questions in this type of interview. This interview form was preferred because it allows conversational engagement between the interviewer and interviewees. However, there were limitations, such as not getting adequate or rich responses, which were overcome through questioning techniques and probing strategies.

3.5 Credibility and Trustworthiness of the Study

Credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability are aspects of trustworthiness that researchers need to address in qualitative research (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). The integrity of the findings matters in research; hence, research findings should be a true reflection of reality, with sincerity observed in reporting through sound arguments to ensure richness and acceptance of the outcome for all (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2011) suggest that member checking should be observed to achieve accuracy and thoroughness in qualitative data collection such as interviews. The researcher applied this principle by giving the interview transcripts back to the participants to check for errors and misrepresentations of their views. Identified errors were corrected. The researcher did not take the ethical implication of trustworthiness for granted throughout the study.

3.6 Ethical Consideration

The permission was obtained from the National Examinations Council staff who are the participants interviewed for the study. The consent of the participants was individually sought and obtained after briefing them about the study. They were informed that their participation was voluntary and they could opt out at any point. The anonymity of the

participants was ensured throughout the interview processes, and their identities were confidentially protected through codes.

4.0 Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to identify common themes and patterns from the participants' interviews. Thematic analysis helps the researcher to see and make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, organizing, and providing insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Thematic analysis is well-suited for exploring the intricate layers of the investigated phenomenon. It allows for the identification and interpretation of recurring themes from the transcript of the transcribed interviews. In addition, thematic analysis facilitates the understanding of rich, nuanced narratives, illuminating the essence of their lived experiences.

5.0 Results

This study unmasked the unseen in examination malpractices in high schools through a phenomenological study of quality assurance leaders' lived experiences monitoring public examinations in Northwestern Nigeria. A number of themes that arose from the participants' lived accounts were used to answer the sub-research questions.

5.1 Nature and Forms of Examination Malpractices

The first sub-research question for this study was: What are the nature and forms of examination malpractices witnessed by the quality assurance leaders in public examinations in Northwestern Nigeria? This question was asked to elicit responses and uncover hidden dimensions of this phenomenon of examination malpractices in this part of the country. The responses of the quality assurance leaders revealed a lot about the nature and forms of examination malpractices, which showed that the menace has advanced beyond common and usual information known by the public. A quality assurance leader who monitored narrated his experience as follows:

"I saw teachers writing answers on chalkboards for candidates, and several candidates brought in electronic communication gadgets in many schools monitored for quality assurance. A man was caught writing an examination for his wife on the day of Economics. Collusion, whereby candidates rendered assistance to one another, was witnessed. Some candidates deliberately came late to the examination hall so they have foreknowledge of the examination (QA Leader 5)."

Other natures and forms of examination malpractices were revealed:

"In some schools visited, they were dictating answers to objective questions while some brought in photocopies of the prepared answers, which implies they had foreknowledge of questions before the examination. Some stored prepared answers on their Android phones. Some even brought in books, textbooks, and key points. I equally witnessed a case of impersonation, a mercenary sitting for a registered candidate (QA Leader 4 & QA Leader 6)."

Some odd dimensions were further reported:

"I saw students using the handset to browse for an answer through the Google search engine. Schools were offering money to bribe quality assurance leaders (monitoring officers) to allow them to perpetrate examination fraud. The schools I visited that ought to use examination halls that can contain all candidates used about fifteen classrooms so that it will be easy for the candidate to cheat and difficult for quality assurance leaders to monitor whatever is being perpetrated. Perimeter fencing around the school is another dimension as the school would lock the gate, and before the monitoring gains access, the deeds would have done and clear the traces (QA Leader 3 & QA Leader 7)."

Additional nature and forms of examination malpractices showed:

"As examination bodies eadavour upscale strategies to curb malpractices, the candidates also look for ways to beat them, making this almost impossible. My worst experience was in a school I monitored and discovered that the number of candidates sitting for the examination was far less than the number marked present in the mark and attendance sheet. I later discovered they were absent, but they all had worked scripts. This would not have been possible without the collaboration of supervisor and school management (QA Leader 8)."

These findings have shown that examination malpractice has moved from the sidelines to the front burner. The excerpt from the quality assurance leaders revealed how candidates who did not sit or were physically present for the examination were marked present and had scripts. The case of impersonation is mind-boggling as it is revealed that the husband sat for his wife. Another odd dimension is the audacity of candidates using their phones to browse for answers in the examination hall. All these combined showed that examination malpractice is growing in leaps and bounds.

5.2 Agents of Examination Malpractices

The second sub-research question for this study was: Who are the perceived agents of examination malpractices based on the lived experiences of quality assurance leaders in public examinations in Northwestern Nigeria? This question seeks to unveil those fanning the ember of examination malpractices in public examinations, especially in Northwestern Nigeria. From their lived experiences inside the examination hall, the study participants categorized those fuelling or supporting these acts as internal and external agents.

5.2.1 Internal Agents of Examination Malpractices

The excerpt from the quality assurance leaders' narrative revealed that many of the agents of examination malpractice are within the school system. They are mainly those entrusted with the daily operations of the system. Their roles in contributing negatively to the menace are well captured as follows from the participants' accounts:

“These perpetrators are within the school system and are motivated by the money they make from this fraudulent venture. They include examination supervisors, school principals, proprietors, invigilators, and school examination officers(QA Leader 4).”

Other agents who were involved within the system were revealed:

“The supervisors are the major agents, based on what I witnessed on the field. They collaborated with the school authorities in executing examination fraud and will be the ones to alert candidates once the quality assurance leaders are around the corner. Subject teachers, too, are prepared for the execution of examination malpractice as they are in charge of writing prepared answers on the chalkboard for the candidates. Private school teachers are pressured to do this as it is the major condition that guarantees their job continuity (QA Leader5& QA Leader6).”

It can be deduced from the above narratives of the quality assurance leaders that those who perpetrated the examination practices are within the system. These individuals have responsibilities to ensure that the system produces candidates whose learning outcomes would help them lead a good life and ultimately impact society positively.

5.2.2 External Agents of Examination Malpractices

The narratives further revealed other agents of examination malpractice who are not within the school system but have vested interests or statutory roles to ensure the quality of the examination. These external stakeholders and their roles are shown as follows:

“I discovered while monitoring the SSCE that parents of candidates not only encouraged their wards but scout for or buy leaked questions from syndicated online agents. These parents want their children to pass by all means and also come to the center. They have contacts among teachers, supervisors, and invigilators. The collusion from quality assurance leaders who are saddled with the responsibility of monitoring the examination, in some instances, was noticeable (QA Leader5& QA Leader6).”

Other external agents who collaborated are:

“I am highly disturbed to see the synergy among the so-called stakeholders in perpetrating this menace. These stakeholders include parents, staff of examination bodies, candidates, and mercenaries. Some personnel who are quality assurance leaders from examination bodies or the Ministry of Education who are greedy for money are not completely exonerated from this act (QA Leader8 &QA Leader3).”

Another extreme dimension is provided:

“I wish to state that the printing house and staff working there can not be exonerated. They have access to both hardcopy and softcopy of the sensitive materials. This custodianship role places or demands so much from them, and whatever happens, they are suspect (QA Leader6).”

The above narratives have further shown that other agents are indirectly involved beyond agents who operate within the school system to aid examination malpractices. Some are stakeholders in examination administration, while some are motivated by money and material benefits they stand to gain from this act.

5.3 The third sub-research question intended to unveil the perceptions of quality assurance leaders on the root causes of this menace: What are the perceptions of quality assurance leaders as the root causes contributing to examination malpractices in public examinations in Northwestern Nigeria? The quality assurance leaders enumerated the perceived root causes as follows:

5.3.1 Emphasis on Certificate

The societal emphasis on the certificate is serving as a driver that negatively influences those without sufficient cognitive capacity to acquire academic certificates. Due to the unbridled societal craving for certificates, many went beyond decent ways to obtain a certificate. One of the participants has this to say about it:

“The Society is no not emphasizing quality and skills of a candidate rather than the certificate, whether he or she can defend it or not, is not utmost priority (QA Leader 6).”

The above findings indicated that Nigerian society places a lot of emphasis on acquiring academic certificates. Hence, many ventured into fraudulent means of getting it through examination malpractices.

5.3.2 Influence of Money

The role of monetary inducement is fundamental in unveiling one of the root causes of examination malpractices in public examinations in Northwestern Nigeria. Parents are major culprits in this act. They acted as providers of funds to procure prepared answers to questions for their wards. A participant had this to say:

“Some bad elements among the staff of examination bodies and examination supervisors are the main culprits in leaking live questions to students as long as monetary inducement is involved, which is mostly provided by parents (QA Leader6).”

The above excerpt shows that monetary inducement plays a critical role in negatively influencing the outcome of public examinations. Funds and material benefits strongly influence this criminal enterprise's external actors or agents.

5.3.3 Lack of Preparedness for Examination

Students have roles to play in passing either internal tests or public examinations. It is never rocket science; they must devote time to diligently reading and studying their books and reference materials. Schools also have duties to prepare the students for passing public examinations, but quality assurance leaders submitted as follows:

“The root cause of examination malpractice is traceable to the ill preparation of our students in our public schools. This was occasioned by inadequate manpower, and the available subject teachers were not motivated to work hard. I can ascribe the problem to poor teaching methodology because teaching has become all comers' affairs as several schools do not have qualified teachers (QA Leader6 & QA Leader8).”

From the above findings, it can be deduced that schools and students contributed immensely to why students indulge in examination malpractices. Schools did not adequately prepare students for public examinations due to the dearth of subject teachers. Students also did not deem it fit to prepare effectively, believing they could maneuver to pass without hard work.

5.3.4 Promotion Tool/Job Security

Teachers are pressured to aid students in passing public examinations to save their jobs or as a way to ensure their job security, mostly in private schools. The following responses attested to this:

“Government using pass rate in the public examination as a promotional tool to evaluate teachers is not completely ideal. This pushes teachers to ensure that their students pass, even through obnoxious means. The uncooperative teachers in private schools in helping the students to pass will be shown exit doors (QA Leader4).”

5.3.5 Inadequate Infrastructural Facilities/Instructional Aids

The responses of the participants lend credence to this as follows:

“Visiting most of these public schools showed an ugly sight to behold. Buildings are dilapidated. Laboratory equipment for sciences is not available, and teaching aids are lacking in several schools(QA Leader3 &QA Leader8).”

The place of infrastructural facilities and instructional materials in teaching and learning can not be undermined in the school system. However, the current state of affairs, especially in public schools, seems to influence the level of infidelity in our public examinations, going by the participants' narratives.

5.4 The fourth sub-research question sought the views of quality assurance leaders on the needed strategies to curb this menace based on the experiential knowledge of the examination administration: What effective quality assurance

strategies can be employed to eradicate or minimize the prevalence of examination malpractices in public examinations in Northwestern Nigeria? The participants highlighted some strategies as follows:

“I think ways and means to minimize examination malpractices effectively would be for society to lay less emphasis on the acquisition of certificates, give incentives for outstanding moral conduct, promoting merit and Competencies, promoting stiffer penalties for those involved in the acts and empowering examination bodies with prosecutorial powers (QA Leader1).”

Another participant added:

“Our usage of biometric machines for fingerprint verification is not effective enough, so there is a need for examination bodies to step up the usage of technology and artificial intelligence (AI) to monitor and record examination sessions. The government needs to increase sanctions on the offenders of these acts as well(QA Leader7).”

The narratives of the quality assurance leaders have shown that the society, government, and examination body need to do more to curb examination malpractices through modern and innovative technologies. One of the participants revealed that societal emphasis on academic qualifications needs to be revisited. At the same time, strict sanctions should be meted out to the perpetrators of examination malpractices, which may include school administrators, supervisors, examination body officials, school principals, invigilators, and students.

5.0 Discussion of Results

The narratives from the lived experiences of the quality assurance leaders on the first research question shed light on diverse forms of examination malpractices observed in Northwestern Nigeria. The responses indicated that examination malpractices have evolved beyond conventional methods. Instances such as teachers providing answers on chalkboards, candidates using electronic gadgets, collusion among candidates, and deliberate lateness to gain foreknowledge of the examination illustrate the depth of examination malpractice tactics. This narrative on the forms of examination malpractice aligns with that of Situma & Wasike (2020) and Iheanacho & Anam (2019), who affirmed that different types of examination malpractices have emerged. The findings also revealed sophistication among students, with some candidates possessing pre-prepared answers, storing information on electronic devices, or even utilizing internet searches during examinations. This demonstrates a high degree of sophistication of examination malpractices in this clime. Maheka et al. (2020) revealed in their study that examination malpractice has gone multifaceted with several forms and types. The cases of collusion and impersonation, where individuals provide assistance or sit for examination on behalf of others, showcase the extent to which malpractice is orchestrated and coordinated. The example of a husband impersonating his wife underscores the audacity and creativity of malpractitioners in circumventing examination protocols. As reported in the participants' narratives, the discrepancy between the number of candidates present and the number of submitted scripts indicates complicity at various levels of examination administration. The scenario of candidates not present but having scripts in the examination was also reported by (Maheka et al., 2020). In addition, attempts to bribe quality assurance leaders and influence favorable outcomes fraudulently indicate another strange extent to which candidates and their accomplices have advanced, which aligns with Okolie et al. (2019) and Rufai (2010) that examination malpractice has become a lucrative enterprise as facilitated by criminals for money-making motives.

The findings of the second research question, which investigated the agents of examination malpractice in Northwestern Nigeria, provide valuable insights into the various actors involved in perpetuating examination malpractice. The study reveals that individuals operating within the school system facilitate a significant portion of examination malpractices. The study of Agi & Omokhoa (2019) and the report by Atueyi (2019) align with this narrative that internal agents include examination supervisors, school principals, proprietors, invigilators, and school examination officers. Their involvement seems to stem from financial incentives derived from fraudulent activities (Agi & Omokhoa, 2019; Rufai, 2010), which compromise the quality assurance of the examination administration. The participants' narratives clearly showed that examination supervisors emerge as central figures in orchestrating examination malpractices, often collaborating with school authorities to execute examination fraud and alerting candidates of the impending arrival of quality assurance leaders. Subject teachers also play a crucial role by providing prepared answers on chalkboards, which is a condition to ensure job continuity, particularly in private schools.

Moreover, the study identifies external agents who, despite not being part of the school system, actively contribute to examination malpractices (Aderogba, 2011; Ofor-Douglas, 2021; Okorordudu, 2013). These include staff of

examination bodies, Ministry of Education officials, personnel from printing houses responsible for producing examination materials, and parents who encourage or facilitate the acquisition of leaked examination questions, sometimes through syndicated online agents. Their complicity underscores the systemic challenges in safeguarding examination integrity, with some driven by greed for financial gain. The findings suggest that addressing examination malpractices requires a multi-dimensional approach that addresses not only internal actors within the school system but also external stakeholders involved in examination administration and monitoring.

The third research question, which sought the perceptions of quality assurance leaders regarding the root causes of examination malpractices in public examinations in Northwestern Nigeria, revealed the underlying factors contributing to this issue. The societal emphasis on academic certificates over skills and competencies is a significant driver of examination malpractices. This response agrees with Amadi & Opuiyo (2018), who opine that the Nigerian educational system is primarily certificate-oriented and that the relentless pursuit of certificates, irrespective of the means employed, fuels a culture of examination malpractice in the quest for academic credentials. Monetary inducement emerges as a fundamental factor contributing to examination malpractices, as Rufai (2010) affirmed. Parents, examination staff, and supervisors are implicated in leaking live questions or providing prepared answers in exchange for financial incentives. The allure of financial gain motivates external actors to engage in fraudulent activities, perpetuating the cycle of malpractice. The narratives from the participants also align with Amadi & Opuiyo (2018) on the complex interplay of several factors shaping the prevalence of examination malpractices in Northwestern Nigeria. The inadequate preparation of students in public schools is attributed to factors such as acute shortage of manpower, unmotivated subject teachers, and poor teaching methodologies. Using pass rates in public examinations as a metric for evaluating teachers for promotion creates pressure to ensure students' success, even if it means resorting to unethical means. In private schools, teachers may face dismissal if they fail to aid students during the examination, leading to compromises in academic integrity. The study by Udim et al. (2018) is equally in tandem with this study that the poor state of infrastructural facilities and instructional aids in public schools further compounds the challenges in preparing students for examinations and indirectly influencing students to engage in examination malpractices.

The fourth and last research question sought to provide effective strategies to mitigate the prevalence of examination malpractices in Northwestern Nigeria. The recommendations of Akunne et al. (2021) and Obiora (2012) in their studies also corroborate the narratives of the participants who emphasize the need for society to shift its focus away from the mere acquisition of certificates towards recognizing and rewarding moral conduct, merit, and competencies. By promoting values beyond academic credentials, such as integrity and ethical behavior, society can discourage individuals from committing fraud to obtain certificates. Participants also advocate for the increased use of modern technologies, such as biometric machines for fingerprint verification and artificial intelligence (AI) for monitoring and recording examination sessions. Leveraging technology can enhance the integrity of the examination process by reducing opportunities for malpractice and improving surveillance capabilities. This suggested strategy by the quality assurance leader is also supported by Dadzie & Annan-Brew (2023), who state that to curb examination, examination bodies should intensify efforts in using electronic technology. The discovery of Agwu et al. (2020), who identified weak sanctions from the government on the perpetrators as one of the drivers of examination malpractice, aligns with the strategy participants recommended for imposing stiffer penalties on individuals involved in examination malpractices. This includes school administrators, supervisors, examination body officials, principals, invigilators, and students. By increasing the consequences of engaging in malpractice, the deterrent effect can discourage individuals from participating in fraudulent activities. Moreover, participants suggested the need to empower examination bodies with prosecutorial powers to effectively and timeously address examination malpractices. Granting examination bodies the authority to prosecute offenders can streamline the legal process and expedite the resolution of cases, further deterring individuals from engaging in malpractice.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Examination malpractices in Northwestern Nigeria have evolved beyond conventional methods, demonstrating high sophistication among students. Various tactics, including collusion, impersonation, and the use of electronic devices, highlight the multifaceted nature of malpractice. Examination malpractices are facilitated by both internal and external agents/actors within the education system. Societal emphasis on academic certificates, monetary inducement, and inadequate preparation of students are identified as primary drivers of examination malpractices. Pressure on teachers to achieve high pass rates and the poor state of infrastructural facilities further exacerbate the issue. Therefore, society should shift from mere certificate acquisition to recognizing and rewarding moral conduct, merit, and competencies. There is a need to emphasize integrity and ethical behavior to discourage fraudulent means of obtaining certificates. There is a need to increase the use of modern technologies, such as biometric machines and artificial intelligence (AI),

to verify and monitor examination sessions. Leveraging technology can enhance examination integrity by reducing opportunities for malpractice and improving surveillance capabilities. Due to current weak sanctions, there is an urgent need to implement stronger penalties on individuals involved in examination malpractices, including school administrators, supervisors, examination body officials, school principals, invigilators, and students. This will serve as a deterrent for those engaging or those who tend to engage in examination malpractices.

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