

AGENTS OF EXAMINATION MALPRACTICE IN NIGERIAN PUBLIC EXAMINATIONS: THE STRONGEST LINKS

By

Prof. (Mrs.) N.Y.S. Ijaiya,

Department of Educational Management,

University of Ilorin, Nigeria.

Abstract

Accusing fingers have been pointed at teachers, principals, parents and invigilators as being agents of examination malpractice. In order to stop the apparent intractability of the crime, it is necessary to identify the role of these agents. This study aims, to find out the strongest links to examination malpractice in order of their influence with a view to proffer solutions. The sample consisted of 241 undergraduates of the University of Ilorin randomly selected to complete a 14 item questionnaire on the agents of examination malpractice questionnaire based on the strength of their influence in aiding and abetting the crime. The data were analyzed using percentages for ranking parties to public examinations from 1 to 14. Findings pointed to the students and their peer groups as the strongest link followed by their fathers in that order. It was however noted that students are victims of their poor educational environment. Among other recommendations, it was suggested that a conducive and enabling environment should be provided for the students to face all examinations with confidence that they can pass without cheating.

Introduction

From all available evidence, examination malpractice is real and like the HIV scourge still growing fast in the Nigerian educational system. What is missing now is an effective solution to the scourge before it destroys the whole system. Recently, the Kwara State Government dismissed ten school principals from its service due to their involvement in examination malpractice during the 2003 Senior Secondary School Certificate Examinations (SSCE). Also in 2002, this researcher personally witnessed a case of a man impersonating a woman during the JAMB examination at the centre where she was the supervisor. The

man, upon discovery, bolted out through the window and ran across the field to jump over a high fence. He escaped with the question paper only for the actual candidate to surface later with some boys who stood at the school gate insulting the invigilators and pressing them to allow the woman to take the examination. When their threat became real and there was no security personnel around, to save lives and property, the candidate was allowed in. The threat stopped immediately. Fortunately, JAMB had provided special envelopes for such reports to be packed which was our plan for the candidate before allowing her in. This may not be an isolated experience. The JAMB Registrar personally caught candidates in special centers cheating and their collaborators were paraded on the national television during his random checks on the day of examination. The depth of malpractice in public examinations in Nigeria is perplexing to say the obvious. As noted by Onyechere (2004), it is almost a routine for students to cheat in both internal and external examinations. What makes the matter intractable is the role played by adult agents or collaborators. Among them are teachers, school principals, higher institution students, touts or mercenaries who invade centers to make quick money. Parents are said to provide money too. There are also special coaching schools or centers which aid and abet examination malpractice for popularity and profit. For those who succeed, the pay offs have been good. The candidate scores higher marks than the ability and secures admission into the university while the collaborators smile to the bank. Meanwhile, all efforts being made to stop it including enacting laws (Examination Malpractices Act of 1999) to make it a criminal offence, punishable with dismissal and cancellation of the centres' results among others remain largely ineffective. Examination Malpractice continues to grow at all levels of the educational system. It has proved to be an incurable disease in the educational system making nonsense of the educational standard. There is a great need for Nigeria to look for a permanent solution in this millennium if education is going to be the catalyst for national development and if Nigerian certificates are going to be respected in this era of globalization. To emphasize the seriousness of cheating in examinations and its implications for professionalism, Rani (2004) opines that *.....considering the fact that if a medical doctor makes a mistake, the patient dies, if an engineer makes a mistake, the bridge collapses, but if a teacher makes a mistake, it affects the unborn generation, showing that while the mistake of the*

medical doctor and the engineer have immediate repercussions, that of the teacher is eternal (p.2).

It is clear that many people are involved in examination malpractices. It is therefore a serious matter that must be stopped at all cost. Examination malpractice involves students, parents, teachers, school heads, examination officials, supervisors and it is for these reasons that this researcher sets out to find out who is most culpable in this crime with a view to finding out what factors conditioned them to do it and how they can be assisted out of it.

The seriousness of examination malpractice and its widespread manifestation have received attention in research. It has generated both public and private discussions (Omotosho, 1990; Adekale, 1993; Olasheinde, 1993; Ijaiya, 1998; Sooze, 2004). The Exam Ethics Project (EEP), led by Ike Onyechere, is currently leading a campaign against examination malpractices. Some Nigerian universities have also come up with policies on examination malpractices. The Lagos State Police Community Relations Committee (PCRC) has also organized a public relations workshop to sensitize the public on the evils of examination malpractice. Topics covered included the causes of examination malpractice and other public offences in Nigeria and factors motivating students to go into cheating in examinations among others (Ozor), 2004). This is a welcome development but the activities of this group should spread beyond Lagos State. Rani (2004) has advocated the use of counseling as a tool for stopping examination malpractices in the universities.

Sooze (2004) defined examination malpractice as all illegal means which students use to pass examinations. The University of Port Harcourt's academic policy refers also to examination malpractice as: "all forms of cheating which directly or indirectly falsify the ability of the students" which include "..., cheating within an examination hall, cheating outside an examination hall, and any involvement in all illegal examination related offences" (University of Port Harcourt, 2004). The document listed 10 types of cheating within an examination hall to include copying from one another, exchanging question/answer sheets, collaboration with an invigilator/lecturer where it involves a lecturer providing written/oral answers to a student in the examination hall, among others nine

types of cheating outside the examination hall were also listed. These include colluding with members of staff to obtain or on their own initiative students obtain set questions or answers beforehand and soliciting for help after an examination to cite a few. Onyechere (2004) extended the list further to include Government's policy of automatic promotion and lecturers' examination of students based on topics they did not teach due to prolonged strikes. Olasheinde (1993) identified 10 while Onyechere identified 33 types of examination malpractice. In whatever form it rears its ugly head, examination malpractice is unacceptable in any sane society.

For public examinations like JAMB and SSCE, records showed that in most cases, candidates who cheat do not act alone. Sooze (2004) and Onyechere (2004) listed subject teachers, invigilators, supervisors, principals and parents as agents of examination malpractice. There are also examination 'mercenaries' helping some students as well as students who have been caught red-handed. There were also rumours about community's participation through contribution of money to bribe supervisors and invigilators to look the other way. Where they could not supply the money, they dug trenches on the road leading to their community so that the supervisor would not reach the school while the examination was in progress.

Literature has identified several factors responsible for examination malpractice and has lamented its seeming intractability. Institutional, personal and societal factors have been advanced while lack of adequate preparation for examinations, poor school facilities, poor sitting arrangement for examinations and low morality are among the causes identified (Adekale, 1993; Omotosho, 1990). In a study carried out by Ijaiya (1998), socio-economic factors were found to be stronger than institutional factors i.e remote causes were considered stronger than the immediate causes. Findings suggested a link between the living standard and the morality of the teachers and the wider society. In spite of the recent increase in workers' salaries, the situation has worsened rather than abate with the demand of cheats in examinations getting higher and many students ready to pay.

One of the reasons why it persists is because the 1999 Examination Malpractice Act has not been implemented to the letter. Although the act stipulated three and four years imprisonment with or without option of fine, nobody has so far been arraigned in court in spite of the large number caught red-handed. However, even if they were prosecuted, found guilty and jailed, can that stop the perpetrators? It may not, judging by the increasing cases of armed robbery in the country. This is why this researcher feels that there is a need to look more closely at the perpetrators of this crime against society to identify the strongest links and the factors that encourage them, how to deal with them and cut off the link. The focus of this study therefore is to find out the strongest agent(s), examine their roles and factors responsible in the examination malpractice saga with a view to proffering solutions to break the link.

Methodology

The population under study included all students of the University of Ilorin who had taken both the JAMB UME and SSCE with which they secured admission to the university. The sample consisted of 241 undergraduate students who were randomly selected. The instrument used for data collection was a 14 item questionnaire developed by the researcher and face-validated with a reliability coefficient of 0.89. It listed 14 agents of examination malpractice which the respondents were required to rank in order of their influence in aiding and abetting examination malpractices. The guide indicated 1 for the agent having the 'greatest influence' and 14 for the one with the 'least influence'. The data were analysed using frequency count and percentages. The result is presented in Table 1.

Result

Table 1: Result of a rank order of agents of examination malpractice according to undergraduate students' perception.

S/N	AGENTS	FREQ	%	RANK
1	Individual teachers	18	7.5	5
2	Teachers as a group	7	2.9	9
3	The principal and the teachers together	18	7.5	5
4	Individual Principals	20	8.3	4
5	The student himself/herself	68	28.2	1
6	Fathers	24	10.0	3
7	Mothers	6	2.5	10
8	Peer group influence	38	15.8	2
9	Special Centres influence	12	5.0	7
10	JAMB Officials	5	2.1	12
11	WAEC Officials	12	5.0	7
12	Community in which school is situated	6	2.5	10
13	Influence of mercenaries	5	2.1	12
14	Other relations(brothers,sister, uncles etc.)	2	0.8	14

The results above ranked the students themselves as the strongest link(1st) in examination malpractice while the peer group influence and fathers were ranked second and third (2nd and 3rd) respectively. The influence of other relations, JAMB officials and the community in which the school is sited were the weakest agents ranked 12th and 14th respectfully. Mothers were ranked tenth. Although this is a small scale study, it nonetheless gives some insight into the linkage in examination malpractices worth exploring. It seems to confirm that since the students are the candidates who write the examination by themselves but try some unacceptable ways to pass the examination, then they are the strongest link. In other words, if students decide not to commit examination malpractice, there will be none. Or if it is possible to prevent the student from carrying out examination malpractice, it will not happen. The result also shows that peer group influence is strong and so is the father's. What is interesting and possibly worth exploring is why JAMB officials were ranked 12 (not a strong link)

and WAEC officials ranked 7 as having a stronger link than the former. Even the mercenaries thrive only because there are customers (students) who patronize them. Looking at the school as a link, the result is also revealing. The individual school principal and the individual teacher were ranked fourth and fifth showing that when they aid and abet examination malpractice, they do so mostly on individual basis. This study reveals that the whole staff hardly act together as shown by item two ranked ninth by the respondents. The school principal and the teachers together reveal that the teachers aid examination malpractice with the knowledge of their Principal when they act as a group.

Findings of this study have therefore isolated three strongest links to examination malpractice; namely the student concerned, peer group and fathers. The next step is to examine the role each of them plays in this crime. First, students succumb to temptation either from themselves or from other sources. On the part of the peer groups, they can supply information to each other on leaked question papers, source for mercenaries to assist them, and supply the amount to pay in cash or sometimes in kind. The group members can also allay each others' fears of being caught and/or assist each other inside the examination hall. The father's role is that he may wittingly or unwittingly through the usual pocket money supply the money for the 'mercenaries' or purchase of leaked papers or pay fees for special centres where leakage of papers is expected.

What then are the factors to which one can trace the role of the three strongest agents? First the student, Onyechere (2004) is of the opinion that too much emphasis on certificates in Nigeria is one of the factors responsible for examination malpractice. Lack of confidence to pass examinations due to ill-preparedness has also been advanced as a student factor. This researcher's observation of many Nigerian undergraduates is that they do not care about the acquisition of knowledge if they can get the certificate that qualifies them as university graduates. Some do not attend lectures regularly: They roam about on the campus, travel at will and engage in clandestine activities. These may be habits they have cultivated from primary or secondary school levels. Apart from the student's own inadequacies, many are victims of the poor environment in which they have to learn. From poor infrastructure in the school to inadequate

number of teachers as well as poor attitude of teachers to work, parental carelessness and government's inadequate budget for education, the environment appears hostile for even serious students while the unserious ones use it for making excuses for their non-performance.

The influence of the peer group has not been given the needed attention in the literature probably because it is a hidden affair among students. However, it is well known to teachers that some students share information that can lead to examination malpractice and also assist each other to cheat. This researcher has caught students who have arranged to assist a classmate in the examination hall. They were successfully incapacitated due to vigilance. Some students in possession of UME or SSCE question papers whether fake or real either sell it to fellow students or share it freely so that if caught, they would not be alone in facing the punishment. Some jointly contribute money to buy the papers.

As for the fathers, there may be other possible factors which make them a strong agent apart from the money they supply. Interestingly, the mother, though not exempted is a weak link. Children are usually more afraid of the father than the mother and when they fail, the father's reaction is usually stronger and sometimes physical, hence the desire to pass at all costs to impress the father. Of course, mothers also over celebrate their children's achievement, so she must be given something to celebrate. So, parental reaction is a strong factor in examination malpractice.

Conclusion and Recommendations

From the findings of this study, it appears as if the students are the strongest agent of examination malpractice. But from the discussion above, they are actually victims of poor educational environment in which they find themselves. Children educated in good schools with good parental upbringing will have confidence to face the examination unaided if only to have inner satisfaction and pride in their achievement.

Based on the findings of this study, how to create an enabling environment for effective teaching and learning in schools, give the students the confidence to face examination and thus break their dependence on examination

malpractice to succeed is what is strongly recommended in this paper. Parents should send their children to good schools. Government must intensify the monitoring and supervision of private schools as part of their social responsibility to the people. Government schools must be adequately funded and supervised to stem the tide of decay.

An apparently simple but significant problem that the government must solve in schools to break the vicious cycle of cheating in internal examinations is the seating arrangement in most primary and secondary schools which are overcrowded. 'One chair and one desk' policy is the ideal with a maximum of 35 students in a class. In addition, more teachers have to be appointed. The shortage is artificial because there are many unemployed teachers in the country. More schools have to be built so as to have enough classrooms. Communities should be encouraged to establish more schools. Teaching materials must take priority attention and more teachers should be trained and re-trained. With all these in place, the child would not be tempted and so peer group influence to cheating will not arise. Counseling is another powerful tool for behaviour change. If a student lacks confidence to face an examination, they might throw decency overboard. Finally, The Examination Malpractices Act of 1999 should be implemented to the letter to serve as a deterrent to others.

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