



## Strategies used by students in cheating in examination: A case study of two primary schools in Calabar South

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### Abstract

Examination malpractice is a growing concern in educational systems globally, and its early manifestation in primary education has serious implications for the future moral development of children. This study investigates the strategies employed by primary school pupils in cheating during examinations, using a structured non-participant observational technique. Conducted in two public primary schools in Calabar South, the study observed 40 students across two examination sessions. Results indicate a variety of cheating methods, including whispering, use of concealed notes, sign language, and collusion with peers. The findings reveal that environmental factors such as classroom layout and teacher supervision play critical roles in enabling or deterring dishonest behavior. The study recommends increased vigilance, moral instruction, and institutional reforms to curtail the practice at an early stage. This research contributes to the growing literature on examination malpractice at the foundational level of education.

**Keywords:** Examination malpractice, primary education, cheating strategies, classroom environment, moral development

### Introduction

Academic dishonesty in examinations, commonly referred to as examination malpractice, has long been a challenge in educational systems worldwide. While often associated with secondary and tertiary institutions, there is growing concern over its increasing prevalence in primary schools. In Nigeria, particularly in urban centers like Calabar South, reports from educators and administrators suggest that even young pupils are adopting diverse strategies to gain undue advantage during examinations (Omemu, 2015) <sup>[14, 15]</sup>. The rise of cheating in early education not only undermines academic standards but also threatens the development of integrity and accountability in children. If left unchecked, it becomes normalized behavior that extends into adulthood. This study aims to explore and document the actual cheating practices among primary school pupils using an observational approach. Observing without interfering provides authentic insights into what pupils do when faced with academic evaluations.

Academic dishonesty in examinations, commonly referred to as examination malpractice, has remained a persistent challenge confronting educational systems across the globe. It encompasses a wide range of unethical practices such as copying, impersonation, collusion, use of unauthorized materials, and other deceptive behaviors intended to gain unfair academic advantage (Adeyemi, 2010; Alutu & Aluede, 2006) <sup>[2, 4]</sup>. Although examination malpractice is often discussed in relation to secondary and tertiary institutions, recent studies indicate that the phenomenon is gradually permeating the primary school level, where foundational academic and moral values are expected to be instilled (Adebayo, 2012) <sup>[1]</sup>.

In the Nigerian context, examination malpractice has assumed alarming proportions, prompting concern among policymakers, educators, parents, and examination bodies. Urban areas, in particular, have been identified as hotspots due to increased competition, parental pressure, and the emphasis placed on academic success as a pathway to social mobility (Omemu, 2015; Okafor, 2018) <sup>[11, 14, 15]</sup>. In Calabar

South Local Government Area of Cross River State, anecdotal evidence and informal reports from teachers and school administrators suggest that even primary school pupils are increasingly engaging in deliberate and organized cheating strategies during examinations. These strategies range from copying from classmates and exchanging prepared notes to subtle forms of communication and reliance on external assistance (Emaikwu, 2011) <sup>[7]</sup>.

The growing incidence of cheating at the primary school level is especially troubling because early childhood and basic education represent critical stages in moral and character development. When pupils are exposed to or actively participate in dishonest practices at such an early age, it undermines the objectives of basic education and erodes the values of integrity, honesty, and accountability that schools are meant to promote (Federal Republic of Nigeria [FRN], 2013) <sup>[8]</sup>. Scholars have warned that when examination malpractice becomes normalized in the early years of schooling, it increases the likelihood of persistent unethical behavior in later academic pursuits and adulthood (Olatoye, 2014; Nwadiani, 2005) <sup>[10, 13]</sup>.

Furthermore, the consequences of examination malpractice extend beyond individual pupils to the wider educational system. It compromises the validity and reliability of assessment outcomes, lowers educational standards, and diminishes public confidence in the school system (Alutu, 2007) <sup>[3]</sup>. In primary schools, where assessment results often determine promotion, placement, and parental perception of school quality, the temptation to cheat may be reinforced by both peer influence and adult complicity (Okoye & Okechukwu, 2016) <sup>[12, 16]</sup>.

Against this backdrop, this study seeks to explore and document the specific strategies used by primary school pupils to cheat during examinations, using a case study of two selected primary schools in Calabar South. By adopting a non-intrusive observational approach, the study aims to capture authentic pupil behaviors within the examination setting. Observation without interference allows for a more realistic understanding of how cheating occurs naturally,

rather than relying solely on self-reports or disciplinary records, which may underrepresent the true extent of the problem (Creswell, 2014) <sup>[6]</sup>. The findings of this study are expected to provide empirical evidence that can inform school administrators, teachers, and policymakers in developing effective preventive and corrective measures to address examination malpractice at the foundational level of education.

### Statement of the Problem

Examination malpractice among primary school pupils is often ignored or underestimated, yet it is a reflection of deeper systemic issues within the educational environment. Teachers in Calabar South have raised concerns over behaviors that suggest dishonesty during tests and exams. Despite increasing anecdotal reports, there is a dearth of systematic research focused on how primary pupils engage in cheating.

In many schools, exam supervision is inconsistent, and classroom environments can be poorly structured, which makes cheating easier. Furthermore, children might model dishonest behavior seen in older siblings, parents, or even teachers who condone or overlook cheating. This study seeks to fill this gap by providing observational evidence of the specific methods used by students to cheat in primary schools.

### Purpose of the Study

This study is guided by the following objectives:

- To identify and categorize common cheating strategies used by primary school pupils in examination settings.
- To assess how environmental and instructional factors contribute to or hinder examination malpractice.
- To explore the influence of gender and age on the types of cheating strategies employed.

These objectives are grounded in the belief that early intervention and understanding of dishonest behavior can help shape more ethical learners.

### Research Questions

The study addresses the following questions:

1. What specific methods do primary school students use to cheat during examinations?
2. How do factors such as classroom arrangement and teacher supervision influence cheating behaviors?
3. Are there observable patterns based on gender or age in the use of specific cheating strategies?

These questions are essential in developing practical strategies for curbing cheating at the foundational education level.

### Significance of the Study

The importance of this study lies in its focus on the early stages of education, where values and ethical behaviors are still being shaped. The research provides valuable insights for:

- **Teachers:** To identify common cheating behaviors and respond appropriately.
- **School Administrators:** To improve classroom management and examination supervision.
- **Parents:** To be more involved in their children's ethical and academic upbringing.

- **Policy Makers:** To introduce reforms and preventive strategies in the curriculum.

According to Oko and Adie (2016) <sup>[16]</sup>, when cheating is not addressed at the grassroots, it evolves into a national menace with long-term consequences on societal development.

### Scope and Delimitation

This research is restricted to two public primary schools in Calabar South Local Government Area. The study focuses on Primary 5 and 6 pupils because they are more likely to understand examination pressure and therefore attempt dishonest strategies. The study covers two examination periods: a mid-term and an end-of-term test. The observational method is limited to classroom examination settings and does not account for other forms of assessment, such as continuous assessment tasks or group projects.

### Review of Related Literature

Examination malpractice is often linked to socio-cultural and institutional factors. In the Nigerian context, studies by Omemu (2015) <sup>[14, 15]</sup> and Oko and Adie (2016) <sup>[16]</sup> highlight systemic corruption, poor monitoring, and peer influence as key contributors to cheating behaviors. At the primary level, much of the dishonesty is learned rather than inherently developed. Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977) <sup>[5]</sup> provides a relevant framework, suggesting that students imitate behaviors they observe from others, especially when such actions appear to bring success without consequences. Furthermore, McCabe *et al.* (2001) <sup>[9]</sup> show that early exposure to unethical practices increases the likelihood of similar behaviors in higher academic settings. Thus, interventions must begin early to prevent the normalization of malpractice.

### Research Methodology

#### Design

This study uses a qualitative case study design employing structured non-participant observation to ensure objectivity and minimize disruption.

#### Population and Sample

The population includes all Primary 5 and 6 pupils in the two selected public schools. From this, 40 pupils (20 from each school) were purposively selected. Criteria included accessibility and cooperation of the school authorities.

#### Instruments

A structured observation checklist was developed, covering indicators such as:

- Movement during exams
- Eye direction
- Hand signals
- Interaction with peers
- Use of unauthorized materials

Field notes were also used to record contextual details.

#### Procedure

Observers sat at the back of classrooms during exam periods. Two observers rotated between the two schools during the mid-term and end-of-term exams. Pupils were not informed of the observation's purpose to ensure natural behavior.

### ▪ Ethical Consideration

Permission was sought and obtained from the school heads and class teachers. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the students and schools involved.

### Presentation and Analysis of Data

Data gathered from observations are summarized in the table below:

Cheating Strategy	Description	Observed Frequency
Whispering	Sharing answers quietly with nearby peers	18
Signaling	Using fingers, hands, or nods to indicate answers	12
Paper Swapping	Exchanging small paper slips or answer sheets	9
Hiding Notes	Bringing small notes in socks, sleeves, or under desks	15
Asking to Go Out	Pretending to use toilet to access hidden answers	4
Peeking Over Shoulders	Looking at others' answer sheets	10
Engaging the Teacher	Asking misleading questions to distract and cheat	7

### Qualitative Notes

- In both schools, cheating was more common during poorly supervised exams.
- Pupils seated at the back or near walls were more likely to use hidden materials.
- Girls were observed using subtler techniques like signaling and whispering.
- Boys more frequently engaged in bold strategies such as paper swapping.

### Discussion of Findings

The study confirms that even primary school pupils are engaging in a variety of cheating strategies. This aligns with Omemu's (2015) [14, 15] findings that systemic weaknesses and peer behavior encourage malpractice.

The gendered patterns also support McCabe *et al.*'s (2001) [9] work, suggesting that methods may vary depending on socialization and risk tolerance. Girls in this study favored non-verbal, less detectable strategies, while boys took more direct risks. The observation that pupils exploited the teacher's absence or distraction reaffirms the importance of constant vigilance and effective classroom management.

### Summary, Conclusion, and Recommendations

#### Summary

Through direct classroom observation, this study identified multiple forms of cheating used by primary school pupils in Calabar South. These strategies were often influenced by seating arrangements, supervision levels, and peer behavior.

#### Conclusion

Examination malpractice exists at the foundational level of education and reflects larger societal issues. Without early interventions, these dishonest habits become entrenched and carried into adulthood.

#### Recommendations

The following recommendations were made:

1. **Teacher Training:** Teachers should be trained in advanced monitoring techniques and child psychology.
2. **Seating Arrangements:** Classrooms should be rearranged during exams to limit collusion.
3. **Moral Education:** Ethical instruction should be integrated into the curriculum.
4. **Increased Supervision:** Schools should assign more staff to monitor exam sessions.
5. **Parental Engagement:** Parents must be sensitized to monitor and reinforce academic honesty at home.

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