



Cheating and Dishonesty in Examinations: Can Examination Malpractices Be Curbed?

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Abstract

Cultivating students' awareness of cheating in examinations serves as a crucial initial step towards eradicating cheating practices during examinations. Statistics show that cheating among secondary school students has been on the rise each year yet research focusing on students' perceptions of the vice has not been adequately explored. This study singled out students as respondents and conducted an in-depth study to establish their perceptions of cheating in examinations. The study sought to establish why students in Ngong Division, Kajiado County, Kenya, cheated in examinations followed by a determination of the strategies that could be utilized to curb the malpractice. The target population for this study was students in public secondary schools in Ngong Division, Kajiado County. The sample consisted of 400 secondary school students from 8 sampled secondary schools in Ngong Division Kajiado County. Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyse the data. The results were presented in frequency tables, bar charts and percentages. From the findings, the reasons why students cheat in examinations include: poor/lack of invigilation, lack of revision, to please parents, the desire to get good grades, the desire to join good competitive courses and when the content/subject is hard to master. Strategies for curbing the vice include: using examinations in conjunction with other assessment techniques, enhancing invigilation, openly punishing the offenders, guidance and counselling, value-based education, keeping abreast with the latest cheating methods, parents and teachers desisting from punishing learners who do not pass examinations and the development of a comprehensive participatory examination dishonesty policy by every school. However, rather positively, the findings also revealed that some students would never cheat under any circumstances.

Subject Areas

Education Administration

Keywords

Cheating in Examinations, Examination Dishonesty, Examination Malpractices

1. Background

Education serves to produce citizens that respect human rights and uphold fairness. Lack of integrity and unethical behaviour within the education sector is, therefore, inconsistent with the main purposes of education. Malpractices in the education sub-sector are also incompatible with any strategy that considers education as one of the principal means of fighting corruption (UNESCO, 2016) [1]. Accordingly, for any education system to serve its intended purpose, it should be accompanied by a reliable and credible examination system as examinations still remain the most important measure of how well learning has taken place (Evans & Craig, 2012) [2]. Examination is also one of the major means of assessing and evaluating a learner's skills, knowledge and attitude in both general and specific areas of studies and acts as a quality assurance mechanism. Subsequently, examinations supply important feedback on instruction delivery and curricular effectiveness. Examinations, therefore, are necessary to all modern nations as every nation needs to select those who are certified as having graduated successfully from schooling and those who may proceed to the next level (Kuehn, Stanwyck & Holland, 2013 [3]; Oranga, Obuba & Nyakundi, 2020) [4].

In the same breath, Preirre (2009) [5], contends that examinations whether practical or theoretical, still remain the main measure of knowledge and skills acquired in an education system. Consequently, a good examination design can lead to social cohesion, help identify talent/success fairly, create trust in public institutions and give confidence in the general conduct of a school system. On the contrary weak and incredible examination systems, especially those that experience rampant and recurrent dishonesty have the opposite effect (Kuehn, *et al.*, 2013) [3]. This, thus, calls for national, external (divisional, regional) and internal examination systems that are credible. Examination malpractices make nonsense of quality and hard work and lead to the selection of unqualified persons who cannot perform assigned duties as expected. In the current age, where the world has become a global village, education systems that may be known to have proliferated cheating in examination risks being isolated and avoided by other nations.

Cheating refers to a dishonest way of achieving a goal, or the breaking of rules to gain an unfair advantage over others in a competitive situation. It is the act of getting a reward for ability by dishonest means (Craig, 2008) [6]. Thus, cheating in examinations is the act of gaining an unfair advantage over other candidates or learners in an academic assessment by varied means. It is also referred to as examination dishonesty, malpractice and/or irregularity and

results in an unfair choice of talent and selection of undeserving persons at the expense of those who worked hard and obtained grades honestly (Whitley 2013) [7]. Cheating also makes nonsense of educational qualifications and discredits institutions of learning. Furthermore, cheating poses a great threat to the validity and reliability of any examinations and the authenticity and recognition of the certificates issued. As a result, the public loses trust or confidence in examinations and educational institutions. Subsequently, if preventive and eliminative measures are not put in place, the problem may get out of hand and examinations may no longer serve the purpose for which they are intended. Odubunmi (2011) [8] observes that students are always looking for newer and simpler ways of cheating.

In Kenya, the number of students who cheat in examinations has been on the rise, ultimately necessitating the signing into law of the Kenya National Exam Council (KNEC) Bill (2012) [9], which spells out stringent consequences in terms of jail terms or hefty fines and penalties for individuals found aiding or abetting malpractices in examinations. Accordingly, one is liable for up to 10 years imprisonment or a fine of up to KES.2 million if convicted. However, the vice continues as evidenced by the ever-growing number of teachers arraigned in court, charged with examination irregularities. Other evidences include the recall of certificates and loss of jobs resulting from fake professional papers. Disciplinary measures including expulsion of students from higher institutions of learning are a common punishment meted on nabbed students.

In an attempt to address this problem, this study seeks to establish the perceptions of students in Kajiado County on cheating in examinations. Pertinent to the study are the reasons that make students cheat and strategies for surmounting the vice. This information may help various stakeholders in the field of education to establish ways of curbing cheating in examinations. Kajiado County is peri-urban and is located on the outskirts of Nairobi city and is basically cosmopolitan as people from different communities in Kenya have settled there. It borders the capital city, Nairobi to the West.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

Cheating violates the ethics and regulations that govern examinations. Statistics show that cheating among secondary school students has been rising gradually in Kenya in the past 30 years (Ministry of Education 2018) [10]. While extensive research exists on academic dishonesty in schools, colleges and universities, there is a limited body of research on students' perceptions on cheating in examinations. Further, none of the available related studies in Kenya (Ochieng, 2008 [11]; Evans & Craig, 2012 [2]), have investigated perceptions of learners toward cheating. This study therefore sought to establish reasons why secondary school students in the selected county cheat in examinations followed by a determination of strategies of intervening on the vice. In particular, the study focuses on learners' perceptions of the vice.

1.2. Research Questions

- i) Why do students cheat in examinations in Kajiado County, Kenya?
- ii) What strategies can be utilized to curb cheating in exams in Kajiado County, Kenya?

1.3. Significance

With the advancement in technology, cheating has become sophisticated, thus the findings may help school systems and different Stakeholders to invent strategies of detecting cheating and upholding honesty in examinations. The findings may also provide theory for future studies on cheating in examinations.

2. Research Design and Sampling

This study adopted the quantitative descriptive survey design. This is because the research aimed at collecting, documenting and describing students' perceptions on examination malpractices and ways of curbing it. The description is mainly in frequencies and percentages.

The target population for this study was students in public secondary schools in Ngong Division, Kajiado County. Statistics from Kajiado County office indicate that there were 13 public secondary schools in the Division: three girls' secondary schools, three boys' secondary schools and seven mixed secondary schools. The students' population in these schools was approximately 3547 students.

The study sampled eight schools that included four mixed secondary schools, two girls' secondary school and two boys' secondary school. The students were randomly selected from the form three classes only because the form one and two classes would not have been well rooted in the school system and not had enough experiences that meet the needs of the study.

The form four students did not participate in the study as they were preparing for their national examinations. The form three students were thus, the most suitable for the study as they had been in the school for a relatively longer time and were not facing an immediate national examination.

Cluster sampling technique was employed to select 8 schools to participate in the study. A list of all the secondary schools in Ngong Division was obtained from the Divisional Education Office. The schools were divided into three different clusters that were boys' secondary schools, girls' secondary schools and mixed secondary schools. There were seven mixed secondary schools, 3 girls' secondary schools and 3 boys' secondary school in Ngong division. From each cluster a simple random selection of schools was done. Clustered random sampling technique enhanced proportionality and study representation.

To select the students, simple random sampling technique was employed in single gender schools, while clustered random sampling technique was used to select students from mixed schools to ensure proportionate gender representation. Fifty students (58.8%) were selected from each sampled school as each double streamed school had an average of 85 students per class. This made a to-

tal sample of 400 students half of whom were female. Gay, Mills, and Airasian, (2006) [12] propose a minimum sample of 10% for a large population. The sample size is as shown in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Sample size.

School	Boys	Girls	Total
A	28	22	50
B	25	25	50
C	26	24	50
D	24	25	49
E	-	50	50
F	-	50	50
G	51	-	51
H	50	-	50
Total	204	196	400

In the table, A, B, C, and D represented the mixed secondary schools where proportionate cluster/strata sampling was done to get an almost equal number of male and female students from each school. The total sample from the mixed schools was 50 per school totalling to 200 student respondents. E and F were randomly picked samples from the two girls' schools while G and H were represented by 51 and 50 respectively from the boys' secondary schools.

Data Collection and Analysis

The study used questionnaires as data collection instruments. Questionnaires were administered by the researcher to the sampled students. They were then collected, summarised and coded. Data were then analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 21 and presented using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages).

3. Findings

3.1. Demographic Information of the Respondents

The return rate of the questionnaires was 88.5%. Ultimately, background information was sought by the researcher to establish the basis on which the respondents' opinions were based. The background information of the students is summarized in **Table 2**.

Table 2. Demographic information of the students.

		f	%
Gender	Male	178	50.3
	Female	176	49.7

Continued

Age	15 - 16 yrs	207	58.5
	17 - 18 yrs	107	30.2
	19 - 20 yrs	40	11.3
When admitted in current school	Admitted in Form 1	261	73.7
	Transferred from another school	82	26.3
Category of Secondary school	Boys Only	110	31.1
	Girls' Only	112	31.6
	Mixed	132	37.3

From **Table 2**, 50.3% of the respondents were male while 49.7% were female. This would ensure balanced responses from the boys and girls. Further, more than half (58.5%) of the respondents were between the ages of 15 - 16 years, 30.2% were between the ages of 17 - 18 years, 11.3% were of age 19 - 20 years. In addition, majority 73.7% of the respondents had been admitted in the school in form one with only 26.3% of the students having transferred from other schools. Additionally, 37.3% of the students were from mixed schools, 31.6% were in girls' and 31.1% were in boys' schools. This implies that data collected was equally distributed amongst the different types of schools in the county.

3.2. Reasons for Cheating in Examinations

In order to establish the reasons why some students cheat in examinations, the researcher first asked the students to indicate whether they had ever cheated in the examinations or not. The findings are as shown in **Table 3**.

Table 3. Whether or not the students have ever cheated in examinations.

	f	%
No	145	41
Yes	174	49
No Response	35	10
Total	354	100

From **Table 3**, the majority, 49.0% of the students agreed to having cheated in examinations while 41.0% of them indicated that they had never cheated in examinations. These findings are in line with those of Desalegn & Berhan (2015) [13], in whose study in the US, 51% of the school's best students alarmingly admitted to having cheated to get to the top of the class, thus, calling for very decisive measures to curb the vice before it completely gets out of hand. The researcher further sought to establish why the students had cheated and their responses are summarized in **Table 4**.

Table 4. Reasons why students cheat in examinations.

	f	%
Did not revise enough	10	5.8
Was struggling with subject content	17	9.8
Fear of failure	36	20.8
To get a good grade	70	39.9
To please parents	24	13.9
Poor/lack of invigilation	17	9.8
Total	174	100.0

From **Table 4**, of those who admitted to having cheated, a high frequency of 70 (39.9%) did so to get good grades, while 20.8% engaged in it due to fear of failure, a further 13.9% engaged in cheating to please their parents while 9.8% cheated because they were struggling with the subject. The least (6%) cheated due to lack of revision. These findings echo the sentiments of Abedraboh (2003) [14] whose study established that main reasons as fear of examinations, desire to get high Grade Point Average (GPA), and lack of preparation. Similarly, the results are in line with those of Dodeen (2012) [15] who established that the most compelling reasons for cheating were hard courses, hard examinations, lack of enough study time, pressure from parents and teachers, improving one's chances in life, and fear of failing an examination. These results also point at sentiments by Desalegn & Berhan (2015) [13], who noted that students justify cheating based on poor pedagogy, testing practices, and student-teacher relationships. This implies that the goals that teachers create for their classrooms can influence cheating since interest or improvement objectives are more attainable than performance-related objectives. Thus, indeed, the main reasons for cheating are self-aggrandisement, laziness and a lack of administrative structure in manning examination. McCabe and Trevino (2013) [16] revealed that one way of reducing cheating in examinations is making education systems less examination oriented by shifting focus to other areas of learning and students' abilities.

Notably, most education systems tend to emphasize certification at the expense of competencies. Ultimately, the researcher thought it prudent to establish if the learners had ever been caught cheating and the results are summarized in **Table 5**.

Table 5. Whether or not students had ever been caught cheating in examinations.

	F	%
No	283	80.0
Yes	71	20.0
Total	354	100.0

The findings in **Table 5** indicate that a whopping 80.0% of the students had

never been caught cheating while a paltry 20.0% admitted to having been caught cheating in examinations. In comparison to the number of students that previously admitted to cheating in examination, those caught cheating were less than half of them implying that more than half of the number of students caught cheating in examinations are never caught, bringing into question the capabilities of students allowed to ascend the academic ladder and ultimately transit to the job market. This also implies that examination invigilation and supervision conducted by teachers is not effective and that cheating may be taking place under the very watchful eye of the invigilators. This validates the claim that the staff in charge of examination administration abet the malpractice. It also alludes to the claims that the staff, by omission, lends a hand in cheating and other exam malpractices. The respondents were further asked if they could cheat again after previously being caught. The findings are summarized in **Figure 1**.

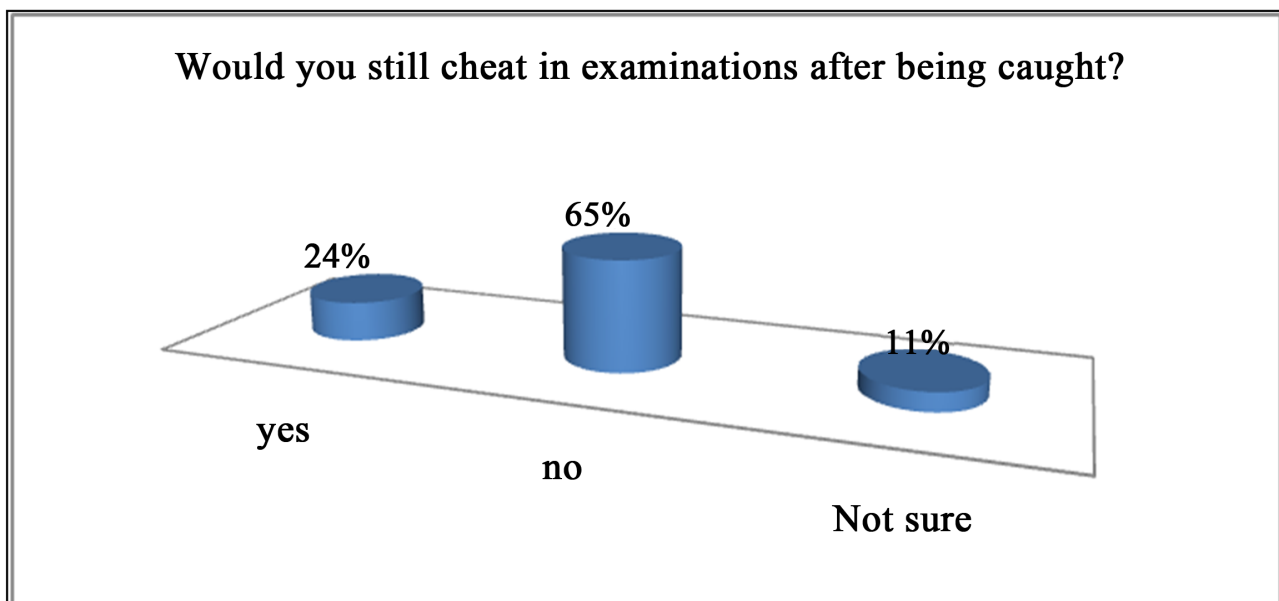


Figure 1. Whether students would still cheat in examinations after being caught.

Figure 1, rather positively, indicates that the most 65.0% of the students would not cheat again after being caught while 24.0% of the students said that they would still cheat in examinations even if previously caught. This may be due to the fact that the deterrent policies or punishments in place are not effective or stringent enough to deter students from re-engaging in cheating. Presnky (2010) [17] pointed out that if cheating is not curbed with stringent policies, in good time, students may stop studying completely with the full knowledge that they would cheat. Accordingly, once students turn cheating into a habit, only very firm deterrent policies may stop them from cheating, hence the need for firm deterrent policies. The researcher further asked the students who had never been caught cheating to indicate the reasons why they had never been caught. The findings are summarized in **Table 6** as follows.

Table 6. The reasons why some students are never caught cheating in examinations.

	F	%
I am careful	43	15.2
I do not cheat in all examinations	135	47.7
I do cheat not in the whole examination	40	14.1
Teachers never invigilate examinations	65	23.3
	283	100.0

Table 6 shows that the most, 47.7% of the students indicated that they had never been caught because they never cheated in all examinations while another 23.0% of the students indicating that they had never been caught because their teachers never invigilated the examinations. At the same time, 15.2% of the students indicated that they were careful when cheating in examinations while another 14.1% said they only cheated in a few sections of the examination. These results point to a study conducted by Prensky (2010) [17] that reveals that previously it was easier to catch exam cheats, but as a result of the widespread use of technology, students are able to cheat easily and disseminate content faster than before without notice. This calls for a lot of keenness from the part of the teacher. Anderman (2007) [18] asserts that teachers and instructors need to be very vigilant during supervision so as to help reduce cheating behaviours in students. Additionally, he observes that teachers should device simple precautions to minimize cheating.

The reasons given above also point out to the fact that examination officials do not do enough to prevent cheating. Similarly, the researcher sought to know what happened to the students caught cheating. The findings are indicated in **Table 7**.

Table 7. What happened to students caught cheating in examinations.

	F	%
Not sure	159	45
Punished	144	41
Not punished	51	14
Total	354	100

From **Table 7**, it is evident that the most, 45.0% of the students were not sure what happened to the students who were involved in examination cheating, implying that perhaps there's no deterrent policy in place or not made obvious to the students. A further 41.0% of the students indicated that those caught cheating in examinations were punished, which is a positive step in helping curb cheating. Ibraheem (2005) [19] underscores the need for a deterrent to dissuade students from engaging in cheating. Lack of punishment only serves to make cheating habitual amongst the students. Consequently, teachers should punish students who engage in cheating so that it is well understood that examination

dishonesty has negative consequences. The results also indicate that, since students never know what happens to colleagues caught, the intended deterrence is never felt. Students and staff who aid in the irregularities should be made public and the consequences properly explained. Furthermore, the researcher sought to establish students' general perceptions on cheating by their peers and the findings are as shown in **Table 8**.

Table 8. Students' views on peer-cheating.

Statement	Disagreed		No Response		Agreed	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
I would do nothing when I see my peers cheating	123	35.2	20	5.7	206	59.0
I would confront a classmate who cheats in examinations	254	73.8	16	4.7	74	21.5
I would report peers who cheat to the teacher	236	69.6	31	9.1	72	21.2
I wouldn't be able to say no to a friend who asked me to cheat	131	39.8	25	7.6	173	52.6

Results in **Table 8** show that, alarmingly, 206 (59.0%) of the students would do nothing when they see their peers cheat with 123 (35.2%) disagreeing to that fact while 20 (5.7%) not giving a response on the same. In addition, 73.8% of the students disagreed with the fact that they would confront someone who cheats in examinations. At the same time, 74 (21.5%) of the students agreed to this fact while 16 (4.7%) of them gave no response on the same. A further 173 (52.6%) of the students agreed to the fact that students would not be able to say no to a friend who asked them to cheat while 131 (39.8%) of them disagreed with the same fact. These findings are in line with Moon (2006) [20] who indicated who indicated that several environmental factors influence perceived justifiability of cheating. The factors cited included peer norms, classroom factors and facets of students' lives outside of school. Accordingly, these factors play a role in shaping students' attitudes towards cheating in examinations. Obiefu (2010) [21] echoes similar sentiments and states that students may look to their peers for signs regarding whether they are also cheating and if cheating is justified. Accordingly, some students cheat in order to be uniform with the group they belong to. Consequently, if the students belong to a group whose members pass examinations through cheating they end up doing the same.

3.3. Measures for Curbing Cheating in Examinations

Cheating in examinations has become malignant and acute and if preventive and eliminative measures are not put in place, the education system of a country like Kenya may be discredited. The researcher therefore focused on the measures put

in place to curb cheating in examinations.

According to the Kenya National Examination Council (2012) [9], there are clear guidelines on examination management to curb cheating. They include, having properly designated officials to man examinations who, if found culpable of abetting or aiding dishonesty in examinations, suffer serious career consequences. Further the Penal Code has clear penal consequences for the errant officers. Students have also been made aware of the consequences of cheating in examinations including cancellation of results, jail terms or both time and financial-resources loss.

Hence, the researcher, sought to establish the effectiveness of these measures, and why students still engage in examination malpractices. The opinion of students on the effectiveness of their internal academic dishonesty policies in their school. This information is summarized in **Figure 2**.

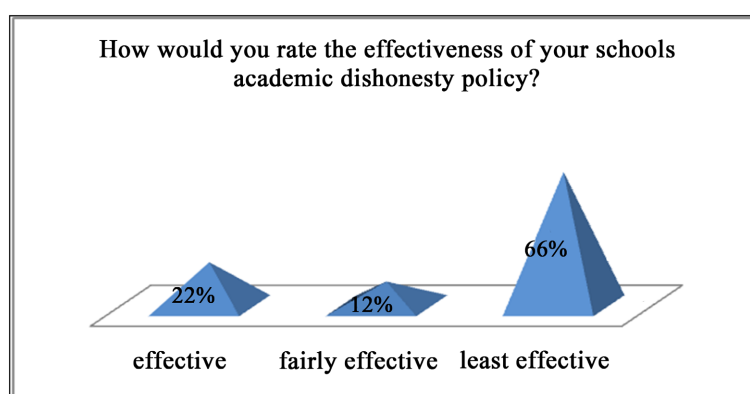


Figure 2. Effectiveness of academic dishonesty policy.

Figure 2 shows that, ironically, most (66%) of the respondents rated the effectiveness of the academic dishonesty policy as being least effective. A few (22%) thought the policy was effective while the least (12%) thought it was fairly effective. These findings echo the sentiment by Moon (2006) [20] who observed that some learning institutions may have academic dishonesty policies which no one (including the teachers) adhere to. The author further proposes that the solution to academic dishonesty should not only include methods of finding and punishing academic fraud, but also educational influences that develop personal and moral characters of students. Accordingly, this may help reduce cheating in examinations. The study further sought to establish whether the respondents thought cheating in examinations can be stopped or prevented. This information is summarized in **Table 9**.

Table 9. Whether or not cheating in examinations can be stopped or prevented.

	f	%
Yes	200	56.5
No	154	43.5
Total	354	100.0

From **Table 9**, a bare majority of 56.5% believe that cheating is a menace that can be eliminated. This may be based on the fact that the policies and consequences are not effective. This may also be due to the general attitude towards cheating by teachers, students and the general public.

The researchers also sought to establish what, according to the students, could stop or prevent cheating in examinations. The results are summarized in **Figure 3**.

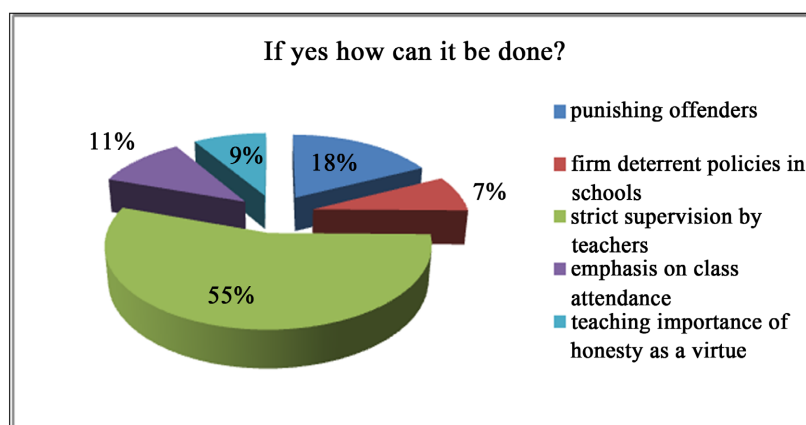


Figure 3. Perceived measures to curb or prevent cheating in examinations.

Figure 3 shows that most (55%) of the students indicated that strict supervision by teachers could help prevent or stop cheating in examinations with a few (18%) of the respondents citing punishing offenders. These results point to the sentiments of Obiefu (2010) [21] who indicated that the situation of examination malpractice demands that stiffer measures be taken on the root causes of examination dishonesty. According to the author, if the root cause of examination malpractices is not established and addressed, all efforts will be in vain.

The results also indicate that the laxity of examination officials is the main cause of cheating. The researchers further sought from learners the measures that should be taken against the students caught cheating. **Table 10** shows the results.

Table 10. Suggested measures that could be taken against students caught cheating.

	f	%
Punishing those who cheat	58	16.4
Guiding and counseling students who cheat	131	36.6
Expelling students who cheat	165	47
Total	354	100.0

Table 10 shows that most, 47%, of the students indicated that students who cheat should be expelled with a further 16.4% citing the need for punishing those who cheat. This is intended to deter would-be examination cheats from engaging

in the practice. In addition, only 36.7% suggested provision of guidance and counselling for students who cheat in examinations. This may be a pointer to the fact that the role of guidance and counseling in shaping values and help deter cheating has not been adequately leveraged.

4. Conclusions

In light of the findings of this study, the following conclusions were made:

1) Reasons why students cheat in examinations

The reasons for engaging in academic dishonesty include poor/lack of invigilation, fear of punishment as a result of failure, lack of revision, hard subjects, fear of failure, desire to get good grades and to please parents. Furthermore, according to the respondents, cheating enabled students to achieve good grades without straining and to get into good courses/careers. Ironically, some students indicated that after being caught cheating in examinations, they were not punished, hence encouraging cheating among learners.

2) Measures for curbing cheating in examinations

The respondents indicated strengthening and making known to all students the school's policy on academic dishonesty, strict supervision by teachers, guidance and counseling and punishing offenders. Respondents further indicated that pointing out and reporting offenders by students to teachers would also help end the vice. Further, students thought that teachers and parents should desist from punishing those who fail in examinations as this piles pressure on students to pass examinations making them resort to cheating. Furthermore, the respondents recommended expulsion for students found cheating. This indicates that the respondents preferred an all-inclusive approach to curbing academic dishonesty in examinations.

5. Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations were made:

i) This study revealed that students keep on inventing varied methods of cheating in examinations, hence stakeholders in education should strive to keep abreast with students' cheating inventions through constant investigations in order to curb the vice.

ii) Based on the reasons given for cheating, including pressure from peers and parents, and lack of opportunities in the event of failure, it is recommended that these pressures be reduced by all means.

iii) It was also observed that the consequences and deterrent measures for cheating were not effective, this study thus recommends enhancement of invigilation and examination regulatory efforts.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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