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Prevalence and Predictors of Examination Malpractice and Academic Performance Among Secondary School Students in Ebonyi State

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Abstract

Examination malpractice stands as a severe threat to the validity of academic performance. Despite the impact of this menace across the globe including Nigeria, relatively little research has examined this phenomenon among students of Ebonyi state. Our study explored prevalence and predictors of examination malpractice and academic performance in Social Studies in Ebonyi State. The study adopted a cross-sectional design to draw data from secondary school students in Ebonyi state. The participants were recruited using a multistage sampling procedure, while a semi-structured questionnaire was used for data collection. Mean, standard deviation and percentages were used to analyze data on extent and impact, prevalence, Causes, Influence and Preventive strategies of Examination Malpractice among Secondary Students. While, Chi-square and multivariable logistic regression adjusted odds ratios (aORs) were used to analyze association, prevalence and socio-demographic Characteristic of the respondents. The level of significance was set at $P < 0.05$. The results reveal that prevalence of examination malpractice among secondary school students in Ebonyi State was high (67.5%). Moreover, predictors such as Parental occupation showed significant associations. Thus, traders (AOR = 2.412, 95% CI: 1.01–5.76, p = 0.048) and artisans/others (AOR = 4.892, 95% CI: 1.55–15.42, p = 0.007) were more than 2 times likely to be involved in examination malpractice compared to those whose parents were civil servants. Resident type was not a significant predictor at $p > 0.05$, although students from rural areas (AOR = 2.184, 95% CI: 0.89–5.36, p = 0.081) had higher odds compared to those from urban areas, but the difference was not statistically significant. These findings highlight the potential for adopting 4-prong approach to tackle examination malpractice and restore academic integrity including scale-up school-based intervention policy/laws for strict legal & institutional sanctions, cultural & Re-orientation campaigns, robust technological & administrative infrastructure, comprehensive curriculum & teacher quality reforms.

Keywords: Examination Malpractice, Academic Performance, Prevalence, Predictors, Social Studies, Ebonyi State

Introduction

Academic performance is the extent to which a student, teacher, or institution has attained their short- or long-term educational goals and is measured either by continuous assessment or cumulative grade point average (CGPA) (Suleiman, et al. 2024; Carroza-Pacheco, 2025). The academic performance of students is a central concern in the field of education, with profound implications for their future success and societal well-being (Gidado, et al. 2024). It is influenced by variables such as family background, peer networks, socioeconomic status, educators, motivation, and engagement in coursework. Studies further define academic performance as the capacity of students to demonstrate their knowledge across various disciplines, or as an evaluation of learning outcomes verified through structured assessment methods (Hailu et al. 2024; Carroza-Pacheco, 2025). Consequently, it is frequently measured using examination scores, alongside broader metrics like course grades and demonstrated competencies (Puiu et al. 2024).

Ultimately, academic performance remains a critical focus in education, vital not only for enhancing national economic and schooling frameworks but also for its profound impact on individual development. It directly shapes a student's self-esteem and self-efficacy by serving as an initial benchmark for evaluation outside the home (Puiu et al. 2024). The landscape of modern education is increasingly defined by a high-stakes culture where academic credentials dictate social mobility, career opportunities, and economic security. In this hyper-competitive environment, the pressure to achieve exceptional grades has inadvertently fueled a global educational crisis thus the pervasive rise of examination malpractice (Okoye et al. 2024**)**. Examination malpractice refers to as any unlawful, unethical, or deliberate act committed by a candidate, examiner, or third party before, during, or after an assessment to secure an unfair academic advantage which directly undermines the integrity of educational evaluation (Nguwasen et al., 2017; Okolie et al., 2019). Examination malpractice is further viewed as collusion, copying, possession of unauthorised materials, impersonation, exchange of answers and the use of electronic devices (Abdulazeez et al., 2024).

The complexity of the relationship that exists between examination malpractice and academic performance is multidimensional (Barkuta et al., 2026). Although sometimes, malpractice may produce apparently improved scores in examinations, it can undermine genuine learning and academic competence in the long term (Olabisi et al., 2022). A study conducted in Enugu among secondary shool students identified factors associated with examination malpractice to include students' and teachers' lack of seriousness and an overloaded syllabus (Ugwuoke et al., 2023). Similarly, another study in

Edo State identified classroom management and instructional materials as causes of examination malpractice (Oteze, 2021). In Nigeria, examination malpractice has become a multidimensional problem that involves students, teachers, parents and other actors who exist within the educational system (Ugobueze 2024).

Examination malpractice is a widespread issue that lowers academic standards, encourages student laziness, abuse of drugs, school dropout, and can impact genuine academic performance (Yusuf, et al.2025; Aleke et al. 2025). A pooled prevalence of examination malpractice has been documented thus, a report by the Examination Ethics Project revealed that about 12 per cent of the candidates who sat for Senior Secondary School Certificate (SSC) examinations in 2012 were involved in some form of malpractices during the examination (Alhassan, and Adamma, 2017). The report further revealed that Nigeria ranks poorly in the World Examination Malpractice Index (WEMI). Academic dishonesty (including examination malpractice, certificate forgery, plagiarism, lecture evasion and extortion) is one of the major problems plaguing higher education with serious implications for the worth of Nigerian Certificates (Olasehinde-Williams, 2006; Alhassan, and Adamma, 2017). The Senate of Umaru Musa Yar'adua University, Katsina at their 65th Regular meeting considered and approved the report of the Central Misconduct Committee on the examination misconduct cases during the First Semester of the 2014/2015 Session and expelled thirty-one (31) students. Seventeen (17) of the expelled students were from the Faculty of Education, seven (7) from Faculty of Natural and Applied Sciences, Five (5) from Faculty of Humanities, Two (2) from Faculty of Social and Management Sciences while the rusticated student was (Alhassan, and Adamma, 2017; Okey and Ewa, 2019).

This problem of examination malpractice is particularly a threat to the future of the students, community and society. It may create a misleading picture of the academic ability of the students (Adie & Oko, 2016). For instance, a student who scored a high grade through malpractice may lack the conceptual knowledge and analytical skills that are needed to successfully progress into the next academic level. Conversely, students who genuinely prepare for exams and obey all rules of the exam may become disadvantaged when other students refuse to obey such rules (Enebong et al., 2024). In North-Central and South-West Nigeria, evidence shows that examination malpractice is prevalent across gender, location, culture and school ownership (Olabisi et al., 2022; Oguche et al., 2023). It is also reported that parents contribute to the menace of exam malpractice (Agwu et al., 2022).

This suggests that cheating in exams should not be interpreted as just a problem of moral weakness of students; rather, the condition reflects the interactions that exist among personal attitudes, expectations of parents, school culture, pressure of exams and weaknesses in supervision, which makes it complex (Oteze, 2021; Ayoade & Agboola, 2022).The pervasive intersection of examination malpractice and skewed academic

performance remains one of the most critical threats to sustainable human capital development. Far from an isolated phenomenon or a regional anomaly, examination malpractice has escalated into a systemic global pandemic. It acts as a malignant tumor within the educational ecosystem, systematically destroying the validity of academic performance metrics. It creates a hollow illusion of intellectual achievement while actively fostering cognitive decline, rewarding ethical bankruptcy, and devaluing the currency of educational certifications.

Despite this available evidence in research regarding the impact of examination malpractice globally and across Nigeria (Suleiman, et al. 2024; Carroza-Pacheco, 2025; Alhassan, and Adamma, 2017; Okey and Ewa, 2019), empirical gap still remains dearth in the literature. Despite the sharp rise of examination malpractice in the location of the current study. Most of the available research has either examined examination malpractice generally, focusing on other areas outside Ebonyi State or investigated broader factors that determine the academic performance of students (Olabisi et al., 2022; Oguche et al., 2023 Puiu et al. 2024; Gidado, et al. 2024). Comparatively, there is limited location-specific evidence that examines the challenges causing malpractice in examinations and their relationship with the performance of secondary school students, particularly in social studies in Ezza North Local Government Area. This gap needs to be filled hence the current research on the prevalence and predictors of examination malpractice and academic performance in Ebonyi State. This current study is important as it establishes the prevalence, challenges and nature of examination malpractice, particularly as it relates to the performance of students in social studies within Ebonyi State. Evidence from these studies can be relevant to teachers, policymakers, school administrators, parents and examination bodies in designing targeted interventions that help to strengthen examination integrity, enhance genuine learning and improve academic outcomes.

Methodology

Participants and Study Design

The study was an institutional-based cross-sectional quantitative survey conducted from October 2025 through April 2026, to assess prevalence and predictors of examination malpractice and association with academic performance in social studies in ebonyi state. Ebonyi State is one of the five states in Nigeria's Southeast geopolitical zone, possessing a rich and diverse Igbo cultural heritage (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022). The state spans a landmass of 6,488 km² with a total population of 3,242,500, resulting in a population density of 499.8/km² (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Administratively, Ebonyi is divided into thirteen (13) Local Government Areas (LGAs) distributed across three distinct senatorial districts: Ebonyi North, Ebonyi Central, and Ebonyi South. The state experiences an annual demographic growth rate of 2.7%, with secondary school-aged adolescents

comprising roughly 64.1% of the population (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022; Aleke et al. 2025). Driven by a high regional fertility rate of 5.4%, this adolescent cohort is expected to expand aggressively by the year 2050 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022; Aleke et al. 2025).

Study Population and Eligibility

The target population for this study comprised male and female adolescents aged 10 to 19 years enrolled in public secondary schools across both rural and urban areas of the 13 LGAs in Ebonyi State. The total number of students in the selected schools was one thousand eight hundred and twenty (1,957) students (Ebonyi State Education Board, 2026). Inclusion Criteria: The study recruited schooling adolescents aged 10–19 within the public school system who provided formal consent to participate. Exclusion Criteria: The study excluded adolescents enrolled in private secondary institutions, individuals under the age of 10, and those who were unavailable during data collection. Additionally, students who were acutely ill or faced severe physical or mental health challenges at the time of the study were excluded.

Samples Size Determination

The sample size was drawn from a population of 18,915 Secondary school students in Ebonyi State. The sample is statistically determined using Cochran's formula (Cochran, 1977).

$$n = N \times \frac{\frac{Z^2 \times p(1-p)}{e^2}}{\left[(N-1) + \frac{Z^2 \times p(1-p)}{e^2}\right]}$$

where n = sample size

z = value at significance level (at $\alpha = 0.05$, $z = 1.96$)

p = the population proportion (p = 67.5% = 0.675 based on the prevalence of examination malpractice among secondary school students in North-Central Nigeria according to *Gidado et al., 2024*.

e = acceptable sampling error ($e = 0.05$)

N = 375,576

Therefore,

$$n = 375{,}576 \times \frac{\frac{1.96^2 \times 0.675(1-0.675)}{0.05^2}}{\left[(375{,}576-1) + \frac{1.96^2 \times 0.675(1-0.675)}{0.05^2}\right]}$$

$$= 375{,}576 \times \frac{\frac{3.8416 \times 0.215775}{0.0025}}{\left[(375{,}576-1) + \frac{3.8416 \times 0.219375}{0.0025}\right]}$$

$= \frac{375{,}576 \times 336.8}{[(375{,}576-1)+336.8]}$

$= \frac{126{,}470{,}476.8}{375{,}911.8}$

$n = 336.5 \cong 337$

Adding 10% attrition rate, $N = \frac{n}{1-A}$

Where n = 336.5 the minimum sample size; A = 0.1 the attrition rate

Therefore, the final sample size used for this study was n $= \frac{336.5}{0.9} = 373.9 \cong 374$

The sample size for this study is 374 Secondary school students in Ebonyi State.

Sample and Sampling Technique

The final sample size used for this study was 374. A multi-stage sampling procedure was utilized to select the participants for this study. In the first stage, Ebonyi State was stratified into its three distinct senatorial zones: Ebonyi North, Ebonyi Central, and Ebonyi South. The second stage involved grouping all public secondary schools across the 13 Local Government Areas (LGAs) according to their respective zones. In the third stage, simple random sampling via balloting with replacement was used to select two public secondary schools from each zone, yielding a total of six schools. This approach ensured a balanced representation of both the geopolitical framework and geographical divides (urban and rural areas) of the state. In the fourth stage, a purposive sampling technique was applied to recruit 62 respondents from each of the six selected schools, resulting in 374 administered questionnaires, retrieved and analyzed based on their relevance and fits for the analysis.

Data were collected through the use of a questionnaire which included 15-items and was structured into equal clusters based on the purpose of this study. The instrument was a four-point response type with numerical values assigned respectively to the levels of agreement and disagreement as follows: Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD). The items of the questionnaire were subjected to face validity by giving the instrument to one expert from the Department of Arts and Social Science Education and two experts from the Science Education Department of Ebonyi State University. Data were collected using the questionnaire, and it was administered by the researcher using two research assistants. Consent was obtained from the school management before the questionnaire was introduced to the students, and they filled out informed consent to show their willingness to freely participate in the study. The researcher gave immediate attention to those who needed explanations on how to tick or indicate their opinions on the items. The collected data were analyzed using the mean and standard deviation. In the decision rule, items that scored 2.5 and above were accepted, while items that scored less than 2.5 were rejected.

Results

Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of the participants (N = 374)

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Age (Group)		
15–19 yrs	138	36.8
20–24 yrs	190	50.9
25–29 yrs	34	9
30 yrs above	13	3.4
Gender		
Male	164	44
Female	210	56
Marital status		
Single	291	77.8
Married	83	22.2
Educational level		
Non-formal	45	12
Primary	18	4.7
Secondary	69	18.4
Tertiary	243	65
Family Economic Status		
Low	89	23.9
Middle	267	71.4
High	18	4.7
Number of Family		
Alone	13	3.4
1–3	113	30.3
4–6	157	41.9
7 and above	91	24.4
Family type		
Monogamous	259	69.2
Polygamous	93	24.8
Single-parent hood	22	6
Location		
Urban	249	66.7
Rural	125	33.3

Table 1 presents the sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents. The

largest age group was 20–24 years, 190 (50.9%), followed by 15–19 years, 138 (36.8%). The majority of respondents were female, 210 (56%), while males accounted for 164 (44%). Most respondents were single, 291 (77.8%), with only 83 (22.2%) married. In terms of education, the largest proportion had attained tertiary education, 243 (65%), followed by secondary education, 69 (18.4%). A smaller proportion reported non-formal education, 45 (12%), and primary education, 18 (4.7%). Regarding family economic status, most respondents belonged to middle-income households, 267 (71.4%), while 89 (23.9%) were from low-income families. Family size distribution showed that the majority lived in households with 4–6 members, 157 (41.9%), followed by those with 1–3 members, 113 (30.3%). Larger households of 7 and above accounted for 91 (24.4%). Most respondents came from monogamous families, 259 (69.2%), while 93 (24.8%) were from polygamous families. Finally, the majority of respondents resided in urban areas, 249 (66.7%).

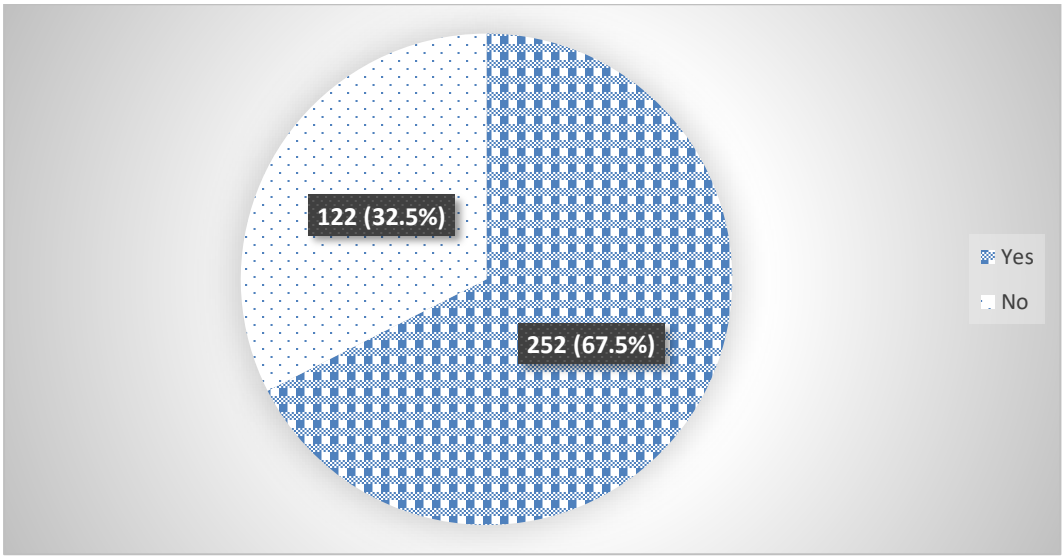


Figure 1: Pie chart showing Prevalence of Examination Malpractice among Secondary School Students (N = 374)

The results in Table 7 present the prevalence of examination malpractice among secondary school students in Ebonyi State is high. This is because out of the 374 total respondents, 252 (67.5%) were involved in examination malpractice, while 122 (32.5%) indicated not involved.

Table 2: Causes of examination malpractice in secondary schools (N = 374)

Items	SD n ()	D n ()	A n ()	SA n ()	Mean ± SD	Decision
Lack of proper preparation usually causes examination malpractice	92 (24.6)	88 (23.5)	121 (32.4)	73 (19.5)	2.80 ± 1.08	Accepted
Teachers' inability to cover the scheme of work sometimes causes examination malpractice	85 (22.7)	95 (25.4)	120 (32.1)	74 (19.8)	2.90 ± 1.15	Accepted
Lack of a conducive examination hall often encourages examination malpractice among students	90 (24.1)	87 (23.3)	122 (32.6)	75 (20.0)	2.80 ± 1.05	Accepted
Examination special centers constantly cause examination malpractice	80 (21.4)	92 (24.6)	128 (34.2)	74 (19.8)	3.00 ± 0.97	Accepted
Lack of discipline among teachers and students sometimes causes examination malpractice in schools	140 (37.4)	92 (24.6)	85 (22.7)	57 (15.3)	2.30 ± 1.17	Rejected

SD = Strongly Disagree; D = Disagree; A = Agree; SA = Strongly Agree

Table 3 presents the causes of examination malpractice in secondary schools. The highest mean score was observed for the statement "Examination special centers constantly cause examination malpractice" with a mean of 3.00±0.97. This was closely followed by "Teachers' inability to cover the scheme of work sometimes causes examination malpractice" with a mean of 2.90±1.1. "Lack of proper preparation usually causes examination malpractice" and "Lack of a conducive examination hall often encourages examination malpractice among students" both recorded mean scores of 2.80±1.08 and 2.80±1.05, respectively.

Table 3: Influence of examination malpractice on the academic performance of secondary school students (N = 374)

Items	SD n ()	D n ()	A n ()	SA n ()	Mean ± SD	Decision
Examination malpractice always discourages students from reading their books for examinations	85 (22.7)	92 (24.6)	120 (32.1)	77 (20.6)	3.00 ± 1.01	Accepted
Examination malpractice usually affects students' performance negatively	142 (38.0)	101 (27.0)	82 (21.9)	49 (13.1)	2.10 ± 1.08	Rejected
Examination malpractice usually makes students lack confidence in themselves	92 (24.6)	87 (23.3)	121 (32.4)	74 (19.8)	2.61 ± 1.17	Accepted
Examination malpractice often influences students' performance	100 (26.7)	95 (25.4)	110 (29.4)	69 (18.5)	2.50 ± 1.13	Accepted
Examination malpractice usually removes the zeal in students to learn during and after classroom lessons	77 (20.6)	84 (22.5)	128 (34.2)	85 (22.7)	3.10 ± 0.97	Accepted

SD = Strongly Disagree; D = Disagree; A = Agree; SA = Strongly Agree

Table 4 presents the influence of examination malpractice on the academic performance of secondary school students. The highest mean score was observed for the statement "Examination malpractice usually removes the zeal in students to learn during and after classroom lessons" with a mean of 3.10±0.97, indicating that malpractice negatively affects students' motivation to learn. This was followed by "Examination malpractice always discourages students from reading their books for examinations" with a mean of 3.00±1.01, showing that malpractice reduces students' commitment to study. "Examination malpractice usually makes students lack confidence in themselves" also recorded a mean of 2.61±1.17, reflecting its impact on students' self-belief.

Table 4: Preventive strategies of examination malpractice among secondary students (N = 374)

Items	SD n ()	D n ()	A n ()	SA n ()	Mean ± SD	Decision
Candidates are not allowed to leave the examination venue for one hour after the examination	135 (36.1)	92 (24.6)	89 (23.8)	58 (15.5)	2.40 ± 1.09	Rejected
Students are not usually allowed to speak to any students during the examination except with the permission of the invigilator	110 (29.4)	95 (25.4)	96 (25.7)	73 (19.5)	2.70 ± 1.27	Accepted
Students are expected to bring their identity cards to the examination hall	77 (20.6)	84 (22.5)	128 (34.2)	85 (22.7)	3.10 ± 1.08	Accepted
Invigilators should always be strict in the conduct of the examination and also punish every offender	95 (25.4)	92 (24.6)	110 (29.4)	77 (20.6)	2.70 ± 1.18	Accepted
Examination malpractice is often hard to curb	85 (22.7)	87 (23.3)	120 (32.1)	82 (21.9)	3.00 ± 0.92	Accepted

SD = Strongly Disagree; D = Disagree; A = Agree; SA = Strongly Agree

Data in Table 4 shows preventive strategies of Examination Malpractice among Secondary Students. Specifically, the table shows that students are expected to bring their identity cards to the examination hall with the mean 3.10 ± 1.08; Students are not usually allowed to speak to any students during the examination 2.70 ± 1.27; Invigilators should always be strict in the conduct of the examination and also punish every offender 2.70 ± 1.18; and Examination malpractice is often hard to curb 3.00 ± 0.92. By implications, the most preventive strategies to examination malpractice are that students are expected to bring their identity cards to the examination hall with the highest mean 3.10 ± 1.08. See Table 4.

Table 5: Association between socio-demographic characteristics and the prevalence of examination malpractice (N = 374)

Variables	Yes n (%) (n = 252)	No n (%) (n = 122)	χ^2	P-value
Age (Group)				
15–19 yrs	93 (36.8)	45 (37.2)	12.214	<0.001
20–24 yrs	128 (50.6)	62 (51.2)		
25–29 yrs	23 (9.1)	11 (9.1)		
30 yrs above	9 (3.6)	4 (3.3)		
Gender				
Male	111 (43.9)	53 (43.8)	8.395	0.004
Female	142 (56.1)	68 (56.2)		
Marital Status				
Single	197 (77.9)	94 (77.7)	1.628	0.443
Married	56 (22.1)	27 (22.3)		
Educational Level				
Non-formal	30 (11.9)	15 (12.4)	0.318	0.812
Primary	12 (4.7)	6 (5.0)		
Secondary	47 (18.6)	22 (18.2)		
Tertiary	164 (64.8)	79 (65.3)		
Family Economic Status				
Low	60 (23.7)	29 (24.0)	2.018	0.367
Middle	180 (71.1)	87 (71.9)		
High	13 (5.2)	5 (4.1)		
Number of Family Members				
Alone	9 (3.6)	4 (3.3)	10.285	0.001
1–3	76 (30.0)	37 (30.6)		
4–6	106 (41.9)	51 (42.1)		
7 and above	62 (24.5)	29 (24.0)		
Family Type				
Monogamous	175 (69.2)	84 (69.4)	0.574	0.752
Polygamous	63 (24.9)	30 (24.8)		
Single-parenthood	15 (5.9)	7 (5.8)		
Location				
Urban	169 (66.8)	80 (66.1)	1.574	0.455
Rural	84 (33.2)	41 (33.9)		

χ^2 = Chi Square, * = P-value

The results in Table 6 present the association between sociodemographic characteristics and the prevalence of examination malpractice among secondary school students. Age group was significantly associated with malpractice ($\chi^2 = 12.214$, $p < 0.001$), as respondents aged 20–24 years (50.6%) and 15–19 years (36.8%) reported higher involvement compared to older groups. Gender also showed a significant association ($\chi^2 = 8.395$, $p = 0.004$), with females (56.1%) reporting more malpractice compared to males (43.9%). Number of family members was significantly associated ($\chi^2 = 10.285$, $p = 0.001$), as students from households with 4–6 members (41.9%) and 1–3 members (30.0%) reported higher involvement compared to those living alone (3.6%). Other characteristics such as marital status ($p = 0.443$), educational level ($p = 0.812$), family economic status ($p = 0.367$), family type ($p = 0.752$), and location ($p = 0.455$) were not significant ($P > 0.05$).

Table 6: Predictors of prevalence of examination malpractice among secondary school students in Ebonyi State

Variable	OR	P-Value [95% CI Lower–Upper]	aOR	P-Value [95% CI Lower–Upper]
Highest level of education				
Non-formal	1 Ref	–	1 Ref	–
Primary	1.112	0.812 [0.54–2.29]	1.245	0.674 [0.48–3.21]
Secondary	0.894	0.543 [0.46–1.72]	0.832	0.612 [0.35–1.97]
Tertiary	0.765	0.421 [0.39–1.51]	1.021	0.942 [0.38–2.76]
Occupation of parents				
Civil servant	1 Ref	–	1 Ref	–
Trader	1.389	0.276 [0.74–2.61]	2.412	0.048* [1.01–5.76]
Farmer	1.208	0.518 [0.65–2.25]	1.987	0.142 [0.78–5.03]
Artisan/others	1.571	0.239 [0.73–3.38]	4.892	0.007* [1.55–15.42]
Unemployed	1.342	0.511 [0.52–3.47]	1.876	0.351 [0.47–7.41]
Resident type				
Urban	1 Ref	–	1 Ref	–
Semi-urban	1.025	0.978 [0.56–1.87]	1.462	0.398 [0.57–3.72]
Rural	1.389	0.241 [0.80–2.42]	2.184	0.081 [0.89–5.36]

aOR = Adjusted Odd Ratio; 95% C.I = 95% Confidence Interval for aOR; Upp = Upper limit; Low = Lower limit; * = Significant at $P < 0.05$

The results in Table 7 present the predictors of prevalence of examination malpractice among secondary school students in Ebonyi State. Educational level was not a significant predictor ($p > 0.05$). Parental occupation showed significant associations. Students whose parents were traders (AOR = 2.412, 95% CI: 1.01–5.76, $p = 0.048$) and

artisans/others (AOR = 4.892, 95% CI: 1.55–15.42, p = 0.007) were significantly more than 2 times likely to be involved in examination malpractice compared to those whose parents were civil servants. Resident type was not a significant predictor (p > 0.05), although students from rural areas (AOR = 2.184, 95% CI: 0.89–5.36, p = 0.081) had higher odds compared to those from urban areas, but the difference was not statistically significant. Other characteristics such as educational level (p = 0.812) and resident type (p = 0.455) were not significant (P > 0.05).

Discussion

Examination malpractice stands as a severe threat to the validity of academic performance. Despite the impact of this menace across the globe including Nigeria, relatively little research has examined this phenomenon among students of Ebonyi state. Our study explored prevalence and predictors of examination malpractice and academic performance in Social Studies in Ebonyi State. Our finding revealed that prevalence of examination malpractice among secondary school students in Ebonyi State was high (67.5%). This finding is expected and consequently not a surprise. Thus, the high prevalence of examination malpractice among secondary school students in the area may be attributed by systemic indiscipline, poor implementation of legal deterrents, and a societal obsession with paper qualifications in Nigera (Alhasan & Adamma, 2017). However, the current finding validates the study which reported that examination malpractice is widespread across Nigerian secondary schools, driven by societal pressure for certificates, weak institutional enforcement, and complicity among teachers, parents, and school administrators (Olatunbosun, 2009). The current finding is also in agreement with the study which reported that Examination malpractice was prevalent among female and male secondary school students, in private and public secondary schools, in rural and urban schools in North-Central Nigeria (Gidado, et al. 2024).

The most predictors of examination malpractice and academic performance were parental occupation, thus, those students whose parents are traders (AOR = 2.412, 95% CI: 1.01–5.76, p = 0.048) and artisans/others (AOR = 4.892, 95% CI: 1.55–15.42, p = 0.007) were more than 2 times likely to be involved in examination malpractice compared to those whose parents were civil servants. This finding is expected thus; parental occupation is widely recognized as predictor of both a student's academic performance and their likelihood to participate in examination malpractice (Olasehinde-Williams, 2006). The finding is in consonant with the research in educational sociology which indicates that children of traders and self-employed individuals often experience distinct socioeconomic dynamics that influence these outcomes (Ejaigu & Ogbodu, 2024). The study also supports the research which reported that traders often work long, irregular hours to sustain their businesses and that this demanding schedule frequently leaves them with less time to

monitor their children's daily academic progress, review homework, or track study habits (Danmadami, & Bilbis, 2026).

In terms of the causes of examination malpractice, the factors that were identified by the respondents to influence malpractice included examination special centres, teachers' inability to complete the scheme of work, inadequate preparation, and unconducive examination halls. This finding is consistent with the findings of Chikendu (2022), who identified poor preparation, weaknesses within the school environment and other factors that are associated with the system as contributors to examination malpractice. Similarly, it was reported by Ugwuoke et. al. (2023) that malpractice among secondary schools in Ezza North LG is due to a lack of seriousness among students and teachers, and there is also an overloaded syllabus that affects learning achievements. This above finding reinforces the other studies that malpractice cannot be explained exclusively by the moral disposition of students; rather, opportunities or pressures can be created by institutional and instructional conditions which encourage dishonest examination practices.

Dishonest practice during exams is increased by the use of examination special centres. This agrees with the findings of Agwu et al. (2022), in a systematic review study that identified "miracle examination centres" as an important factor that promotes examination malpractice in Nigeria. This suggests that broader weaknesses in examination centres encourage malpractice rather than merely individual behaviour of students. However, it was found that a lack of discipline among teachers and students was not accepted in this study. This differs from studies such as Ayoade and Agboola (2022), which emphasized that multiple interactions during examinations are a cause of malpractice. This difference can reflect the characteristics of schools in a particular context in the study area and demonstrates the importance of investigation that is location-specific.

Regarding the the influence of examination malpractice on the academic performance of secondary school students. The study found that Examination malpractice usually removes the zeal in students to learn during and after classroom lessons. This indicates that malpractice negatively affects students' motivation to learn. These results are consistent with the findings of the study conducted by Olabisi et al. (2022), who argued that although favourable examination scores may be generated by malpractice, it undermines the academic competence of students and their ability to genuinely learn. This also corresponds with Enebong *et al*. (2024), who associated examination malpractice with broader consequences for the development of educational and human resources. However, in this study, respondents rejected the statement that students' performance is negatively affected by malpractice. This obvious contradictory finding suggests that students may differentiate between immediate examination scores and long-term competence in academics. In other words, examination performance of students can be improved through malpractice while learning motivation and confidence of students are simultaneously weakened.

The control measures that are proposed in this study emphasizes stronger examination supervision, student identification and sanctions. This aligns with the findings of Ayodele (2023), who advocated that malpractice can be curbed through effective institutional strategies. Nevertheless, the findings in this study that malpractice remains difficult to control show that only punitive measures may be insufficient in curbing malpractice; this supports Barkuta et al. (2026), who highlighted that psychological interventions have potential value.

Conclusion

Examination malpractice remains a significant challenge that affects the integrity of education in secondary school, including learning experiences of students. The findings of this study show that examination malpractice is affected by factors that are student-related, teacher-related, and environmental. The introduction of exam centers also plays a significant role. The study further shows that malpractice can be a limiting factor for students as it affects their study life, confidence, and motivation to learn during and after classroom lessons. Although respondents did not agree that students' examination performance is necessarily affected negatively by malpractice, it is suggested through the findings that genuine knowledge and competence cannot be represented by examination success achieved through malpractice. The incidence of malpractice can be reduced through coordinated examination supervision, proper identification of students, strict enforcement of examination rules, and the assignment of appropriate sanctions. However, the continuous occurrence of the problem shows that examination malpractice is an educational problem that is multidimensional and requires improvements in preparing students, teaching methods, examination conditions, supervision and students' attitudes.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that:

- Examination supervision should be strengthened by schools, and strict penalties enforced for malpractice.
- Students should be adequately prepared by teachers for their exams by completing the scheme of work before examination. Examination halls should be made conducive for students.
- Special examination centres should be strictly monitored.
- There should be collaboration between parents, teachers and examination authorities to promote examination integrity and genuine learning.

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Ethical Considerations and Consent to Participate

The ethical considerations were waived because the study does not involve human specimen and experiments. However, Before the commencement of the study, a written informed consent was obtained from all the participants. Regarding the minors, which refers to individuals below the age of 16 years, informed consent to take part in the study was obtained from their parents or legal guardians. In the consent letter, they were fully assured of confidentiality and anonymity of the data.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Competing Interests Statement

The authors declare that there are no competing or potential conflicts of interest.

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