



East African Journal of Education Studies

eajes.eanso.org

Volume 8, Issue 1, 2025

Print ISSN: 2707-3939 | Online ISSN: 2707-3947

Title DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37284/2707-3947>

EANSO
EAST AFRICAN
NATURE &
SCIENCE
ORGANIZATION

Original Article

Selected Factors Influencing KCSE Examination Malpractices among Secondary School Students in Kenya

Dr. Jared Momanyi Mauti, PhD¹*, George Asiago Masagara² & Maxwell Ong'eta Nyakwama¹

¹ Kisii University, P. O. Box 408-400200, Kisii, Kenya.

² Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology, P. O. Box 190-50100 Kakamega, Kenya.

* Author for Correspondence Email: mautijaredmomanyi@yahoo.com

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajes.8.1.2733>

Date Published: **ABSTRACT**

27 February 2025

Keywords:

Examination
Malpractice,
Social Learning
Theory,
Strain Theory,
Academic Integrity,
Secondary Education,
Kenya.

Examination malpractice in Kenya's secondary education, particularly in the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE), undermines academic integrity and jeopardizes the credibility of the education system. This study investigates the multifaceted factors contributing to this pervasive issue through the lenses of Bandura's Social Learning Theory and Merton's Strain Theory. Personal factors, including fear of failure and peer pressure, intertwine with institutional dynamics such as strained teacher-student relationships and ineffective supervision. Systemic challenges like resource inequality and the pressure of high-stakes testing exacerbate the problem, creating an environment where unethical practices thrive. The findings highlight how societal pressures, inequitable educational resources, and competitive academic environments compel students to adopt deviant strategies to achieve success. Drawing insights from global examples, the study underscores the urgent need for comprehensive reforms, including equitable resource distribution, mentorship programs, and a shift towards continuous assessments. This research contributes to the discourse on academic integrity, offering actionable strategies to mitigate malpractice and foster a fair, ethical, and inclusive education system in Kenya.

APA CITATION

Mauti, J. M., Masagara, G. A. & Nyakwama, M. O. (2025). Selected Factors Influencing KCSE Examination Malpractices among Secondary School Students in Kenya. *East African Journal of Education Studies*, 8(1), 444-456. <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajes.8.1.2733>

CHICAGO CITATION

Mauti, Jared Momanyi, George Asiago Masagara and Maxwell Ong'eta Nyakwama. 2025. "Selected Factors Influencing KCSE Examination Malpractices among Secondary School Students in Kenya". *East African Journal of Education Studies* 8 (1), 444-456. <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajes.8.1.2733>

HARVARD CITATION

Mauti, J. M., Masagara, G. A. & Nyakwama, M. O. (2025) "Selected Factors Influencing KCSE Examination Malpractices among Secondary School Students in Kenya", *East African Journal of Education Studies*, 8(1), pp. 444-456. doi: 10.37284/eajes.8.1.2733

IEEE CITATION

J. M., Mauti, G. A., Masagara & M. O., Nyakwama "Selected Factors Influencing KCSE Examination Malpractices among Secondary School Students in Kenya" *EAJES*, vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 444-456, Feb. 2025. doi: 10.37284/eajes.8.1.2733.

MLA CITATION

Mauti, Jared Momanyi, George Asiago Masagara & Maxwell Ong'eta Nyakwama. "Selected Factors Influencing KCSE Examination Malpractices among Secondary School Students in Kenya". *East African Journal of Education Studies*, Vol. 8, no. 1, Feb. 2025, pp. 444-456, doi:10.37284/eajes.8.1.2733

INTRODUCTION

Examination malpractices undermine the integrity of educational systems globally, threatening the validity and reliability of assessment outcomes. In Kenya, particularly in schools in rural areas, the persistent challenge of examination malpractices among secondary school students has drawn significant attention from educators, policymakers, and researchers (Kigen et al., 2023). These unethical practices erode academic credibility, affect learners' career trajectories, and compromise the fairness of the education system. Studies have noted that global trends in examinational malpractices are linked to societal pressures, competitive academic environments and insufficient regulatory frameworks (Olawale & Oladipo 2023a; Sharma, Patel & Kumar, 2023a). To survey this pressing issue, this study reviews the literature on personal, institutional, and systemic factors influencing examination malpractices in secondary schools, utilizing Bandura's Social Learning Theory and Merton's Strain Theory as guiding frameworks.

Examination malpractice is not confined to Kenya but is a pervasive issue affecting education systems worldwide. Recent studies reveal that the pressure to succeed academically, driven by societal expectations and competitive environments, contributes significantly to this problem (Oketch & Amutabi, 2022). In Finland, a strong emphasis on formative assessment rather than high-stakes exams has contributed to an education system widely recognized for its equity and quality. Finnish students are assessed continuously through classroom-based evaluations, project work, and teacher feedback, reducing the stress associated with singular high-stakes tests. This approach fosters critical thinking and deep learning, significantly minimizing the motivation for malpractice (Shepard, 2024a). Additionally, Finland's commitment to equitable resource allocation ensures that all schools, regardless of location, are well-resourced, creating a level playing field for students (UNESCO, 2024).

In contrast, India's reliance on high-stakes standardized testing for university admissions and scholarships has exacerbated systemic inequities and heightened malpractice. The Joint Entrance Examination (JEE) and similar assessments place

disproportionate pressure on students, particularly those from underprivileged backgrounds, who face challenges such as inadequate access to quality preparatory resources. This has led to widespread cheating scandals and an industry of exam-focused coaching centres that further deepen inequality (Sharma et al., 2023b). India's experience highlights the dangers of overemphasizing standardized tests without addressing systemic disparities, as these exams disproportionately reward students from affluent families with access to better preparation materials.

Similarly, in Nigeria, the emphasis on high-stakes exams, such as the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE), has resulted in widespread examination malpractice, driven by intense societal and parental pressure to achieve high grades. However, recent policy shifts towards incorporating continuous assessments into final grades have begun to address this issue. These reforms aim to distribute the weight of academic evaluation across multiple assessments, reducing the temptation and opportunity for malpractice during final exams (Olawale & Oladipo, 2023a).

Kenya can learn from these examples by considering reforms to its KCSE examination system having that the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) examinations represent a critical milestone that determines students' future opportunities. The stakes associated with KCSE results are exceptionally high, influencing admission to tertiary institutions, scholarships, and career prospects. However, the pressure to excel often leads students to engage in unethical practices, ranging from unauthorized material possession to impersonation (Wanjohi, Githinji & Mutua, 2023).

The existing literature suggests that these malpractices are exacerbated by personal, institutional, and systemic factors, necessitating a multidimensional approach to address the issue. This review is grounded in Bandura's Social Learning Theory and Merton's Strain Theory, offering complementary perspectives on examination malpractices.

Thesis Statement

Examination malpractice in Kenya's secondary schools is a multifaceted challenge driven by personal, institutional and systematic factors, including fear of failure, peer pressure, weak teacher-student relationships, inadequate supervision, resource inequality, and the pressures of high-stakes testing. Grounded in Bandura's Social Learning Theory and Merton's Strain Theory, this study explores how these factors interact to create an environment conducive to unethical academic practices. Addressing this issue requires a comprehensive approach that enhances academic integrity through institutional reforms, mentorship programs, equitable resource distribution, and a shift toward continuous assessments.

Objectives of the Study

- To examine the personal factors influencing examination malpractices among secondary school students in Kenya, with a focus on fear of failure and peer pressure.
- To assess the role of institutional dynamics such as teacher-student relationships and the effectiveness of supervision in fostering or preventing academic dishonesty.
- To analyse systematic factors including resource disparities and the impact of high-stakes testing on students' ethical decision-making.
- To apply Bandura's Social Learning Theory and Merton's Strain Theory in understanding the behavioural and structural factors contributing to examination malpractices.
- To recommend evidence-based interventions aimed at reducing examination malpractices through educational reforms, policy adjustments, and ethical mentorship programs.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Bandura's Social Learning Theory

Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory emphasizes the role of observational learning, imitation, and modelling in human behaviour. Bandura (1977) argues that individuals learn not only through direct experiences but also by

observing others, especially within social contexts. This theory has been applied extensively in educational settings to explain how students adopt behaviours, attitudes, and skills. Recent studies by Liu et al. (2024a) highlight the influence of social media as a virtual space for modelling behaviours. Teachers play a crucial role as role models, shaping students' academic and social development through their actions and attitudes (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2023a).

Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory emphasizes that individuals acquire behaviours, attitudes, and values through observation, imitation, and modelling within their social environments, influenced by cognitive, behavioural, and environmental interactions (Bandura, 1977). In contemporary contexts, digital technologies and social media significantly amplify these processes, particularly in academic settings. Platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and WhatsApp provide students with access to a wide range of models, including peers, educators, and influencers, whose behaviours are often emulated. The vicarious reinforcement generated through likes, shares, and comments on social media glamorizes both ethical and unethical practices, with actions such as sharing leaked exam tips being perceived as effective and risk-free (Liu et al., 2024b; Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2023).

These platforms also normalize behaviours within peer groups, intensifying the pressure to conform to group norms that may endorse unethical practices. For instance, virtual communities or group chats can facilitate the rapid dissemination of exam materials, fostering a culture of academic dishonesty among students (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2023). At the same time, digital education technologies, such as online learning platforms and AI tools, play a dual role. While they model positive learning behaviours through tutorials and ethical study strategies, their misuse, such as employing plagiarism-detection tools to bypass academic scrutiny, can inadvertently encourage unethical actions (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2023b; Liu et al., 2024b).

Recent studies underscore the role of digital technology in amplifying social learning processes. Liu et al. (2024a) found that students often emulate behaviours they observe on social media platforms,

including unethical practices like cheating, especially when such behaviours appear to yield positive outcomes. Similarly, Schunk and DiBenedetto (2023) argue that educators serve as powerful role models whose reinforcement strategies can either deter or inadvertently encourage maladaptive behaviours, including examination malpractices.

In the Kenyan context, Bandura's framework is instrumental in understanding how peer groups influence examination malpractices. For example, fear of failure and the desire to conform to peer expectations may prompt students to imitate peers who engage in cheating. Furthermore, lax supervision by teachers or institutional negligence may act as reinforcements, normalizing unethical behaviours. Addressing this requires fostering environments that prioritize ethical role modelling and accountability (Njoroge & Nyaboga, 2020).

Merton's Strain Theory

Robert K. Merton's Strain Theory posits that societal structures can pressure individuals to engage in deviant behaviours when they are unable to achieve culturally approved goals through legitimate means (Merton, 1938a). In the context of education, this theory explains the behaviours of students from disadvantaged backgrounds who may resort to cheating, truancy, or dropping out due to systemic barriers (Agnew, 2023a). Recent adaptations of the theory, such as the General Strain Theory, emphasize the role of negative emotional states like frustration and anger in influencing student behaviour (Broidy, 2024). Policy interventions aimed at reducing structural inequalities, such as providing scholarships and mentorship programs, align with the theory's principles (Merton, 1938b).

Merton's Strain Theory highlights how societal structures and cultural expectations create pressures that lead individuals to deviant behaviour. Originally framed, the theory explains crime, but its principles have been applied to education. The inability of students to achieve academic success due to systemic barriers such as poverty, inadequate resources, and high-stakes testing aligns with Merton's concepts of strain and innovation (Merton, 1938a).

Robert K. Merton's Strain Theory provides a compelling framework for understanding how systemic barriers, such as poverty and inequitable access to resources, shape examination malpractice in Kenya. Merton (1938a) posited that societal structures create pressure on individuals to achieve culturally valued goals, such as academic success, through legitimate means. However, when systemic barriers, such as inadequate educational resources or socioeconomic disadvantages, obstruct these pathways, individuals may resort to deviant behaviours, including examination malpractice, as alternative strategies to meet these expectations. In Kenya, the high-stakes nature of the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) exams exacerbates this issue. Students from underprivileged schools often lack essential resources such as textbooks, trained teachers, and adequate infrastructure, creating significant disparities in academic preparation (Johnson et al., 2023a). These inequalities intensify the pressure to succeed, leading some students to engage in unethical practices to compete with their more advantaged peers (UNESCO, 2024).

This phenomenon is not unique to Kenya but aligns with global trends. For instance, research in Nigeria and India highlights similar patterns, where systemic inequities disproportionately affect marginalized communities, driving them toward examination malpractices as coping mechanisms (Sharma et al., 2023; Olawale & Oladipo, 2023b). In these contexts, the emphasis on high-stakes testing amplifies societal pressures, perpetuating a cycle where students, teachers, and even schools prioritize results over ethical practices. Furthermore, recent adaptations of Merton's theory, such as Agnew's General Strain Theory, emphasize the emotional and psychological responses to these stressors. Negative emotions like frustration, fear, and anger, often resulting from resource disparities, further increase the likelihood of deviant behaviour (Agnew, 2023b).

By applying Merton's Strain Theory to the Kenyan context, it becomes evident that examination malpractice is not merely a moral failing but a symptom of structural inadequacies that demand comprehensive and sustained reforms to uphold academic integrity. Moreover, Merton's theory

provides a lens for examining the systemic factors fuelling examination malpractices. High-stakes KCSE exams create immense pressure, especially for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. For example, inequitable resource allocation often leaves some students feeling unable to compete fairly, prompting them to adopt deviant strategies such as cheating.

Away from Bandura's Social Learning Theory and Merton's Strain Theory, future empirical studies could operationalize the theoretical insights derived from Bandura's Social Learning Theory and Merton's Strain Theory by employing targeted metrics and data sources to examine the factors influencing examination malpractice. For instance, observational learning, a core tenet of Bandura's theory, could be measured by assessing the prevalence of unethical behaviours modelled by peers, teachers, or social media influencers and their subsequent adoption by students. Surveys and interviews could be conducted among students to capture data on exposure to such influences and their perceptions of these behaviours (Liu et al., 2024a).

Additionally, longitudinal studies could track the frequency and intensity of exposure to these models over time and correlate them with students' academic behaviours to identify patterns of malpractice development. Merton's Strain Theory could be operationalized by analysing systemic barriers such as resource inequalities and high-stakes testing. Quantitative metrics such as per-student expenditure, teacher-to-student ratios, and availability of learning materials in schools could provide insights into the systemic pressures faced by students (Johnson et al., 2023a). These data points could be complemented with qualitative inputs from focus groups involving students, teachers, and parents to explore the psychological and emotional responses to these barriers, such as feelings of frustration, fear of failure, and perceptions of inequity (Agnew, 2023b).

Furthermore, cross-sectional studies comparing schools with varying levels of resources could shed light on how disparities impact the likelihood of malpractice. Potential data sources for these studies include school records, examination incident reports, and government education statistics, which

could offer quantitative evidence of malpractice trends and resource distribution.

Social media analysis could also provide valuable data, as platforms like WhatsApp and TikTok often serve as spaces where students discuss or normalize unethical academic practices (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2023). Tools such as sentiment analysis could be applied to online discussions to gauge students' attitudes toward cheating and identify emerging trends.

Additionally, mentorship program efficacy could be evaluated by tracking student participation and outcomes using metrics such as reduced incidents of malpractice, improved ethical decision-making scores, and better academic performance. Experimental designs, where one group of students receives mentorship interventions while another does not, could offer causal evidence of such programs' effectiveness (Wentzel, 2023). By combining these methodological approaches, future studies could provide a robust evidence base for policies and interventions aimed at addressing examination malpractice.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design with a literature review approach to examine the factors influencing examination malpractices among secondary school students in Kenya. By analysing existing studies, reports, and theoretical frameworks, the research provides a comprehensive understanding of how personal, institutional and systematic factors contribute to the problem. The study was guided by Bandura's Social Learning Theory and Merton's Strain Theory, which helped to explain students' behavioural motivations and structural challenges leading to academic dishonesty. Data for this study was collected from secondary sources, including Peer-reviewed academic articles and books that discuss examination malpractice, academic integrity, and related psychological and Sociological factors. Reports from education agencies and organizations, such as UNESCO and the Kenya National Examinations Council (KNEC) provide statistical and Policy insights. Case studies from other countries, including Finland, India, and Nigeria, to compare Kenya's situation with global trends and

best practices were also used. Empirical studies on educational inequality, supervision, and high-stakes testing, which offer contextual evidence for systemic factors influencing malpractice were deployed in this study. In data analysis, a thematic analysis approach was employed to categorize the data into key themes that emerged from the literature. The analysis process involved: Identifying and grouping personal, institutional, and systemic factors that contributed to examination malpractice. Mapping findings to theoretical perspectives, particularly, Social Learning Theory and Strain Theory, to understand behavioural and structural influences. Extracting policy implications and recommendations for mitigating examination malpractice and fostering a culture of academic integrity in Kenya was also deployed in the analysis. In ethical considerations, the researcher used credible and properly cited sources to maintain academic accuracy. First, the researcher ensured objectivity by analysing multiple perspectives and avoiding bias. Second, the researcher respected confidentiality by focusing on publicly available data without disclosing sensitive student or institutional information.

PERSONAL FACTORS

Fear of Failure

Fear of failure is a significant personal factor influencing educational outcomes. Conroy, Kaye and Fifer (2023) define fear of failure as the apprehension students experience due to the perceived inability to meet academic expectations. It leads to avoidance behaviours, reduced risk-taking, and diminished academic performance. The conceptual framework of the achievement motivation theory posits that fear of failure stems from extrinsic pressures, such as parental expectations (Elliot & Hulleman, 2022). Recent research highlights that this fear exacerbates mental health challenges like anxiety and depression among students, further hindering academic success (Wang, Eccles, & Kenny, 2024a).

Fear of failure significantly contributes to examination malpractices among students. It arises from high academic expectations imposed by parents, teachers, or societal standards (Elliot &

Hulleman, 2022). This apprehension may lead students to engage in dishonest practices, such as cheating, to avoid disappointing significant stakeholders in their education (Conroy, Elliot & Thrash, 2023). Moreover, the intense focus on high-stakes examinations like the KCSE exacerbates this fear, as failure is perceived to have far-reaching consequences on future educational and career prospects (Wang et al., 2024b).

In the Kenyan context, fear of failure is further amplified by systemic inequalities, such as resource disparity between schools and inadequate support systems for students. The resulting pressure often drives students to adopt unethical measures as a coping mechanism. Recent studies also emphasize the mental health implications of fear of failure, including heightened anxiety and stress, which impair judgment and decision-making, increasing susceptibility to examination malpractice (Jones, Smith, & Wang, 2024a).

Peer Pressure

Peer pressure refers to the influence exerted by peers on an individual's decisions or behaviours. Adolescents, being in a critical developmental stage, are particularly susceptible to this factor. According to Brown and Larson (2024a), peer pressure can manifest both positively and negatively. Positive peer pressure may enhance students' commitment to academic pursuits, while negative peer influence often leads to deviant behaviours such as substance abuse, truancy, or diminished academic engagement (Steinberg, 2023). Furthermore, the role of digital platforms in amplifying peer influence has been underscored, as virtual spaces create environments where students may feel compelled to conform to unrealistic standards or harmful behaviours (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2023).

Peer pressure plays a pivotal role in influencing students' engagement in examination malpractices. Adolescents are particularly vulnerable to the influence of their peers, who may encourage or normalize unethical behaviours, such as sharing exam answers or accessing leaked papers (Brown & Larson, 2024a). This is compounded by the collectivist nature of some cultural settings, where

group conformity takes precedence over individual moral judgment (Steinberg, 2023).

In contemporary educational environments, digital platforms have become significant amplifiers of peer pressure. Social media and group chats often facilitate the spread of examination leaks or foster unhealthy competition among students (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2023). Furthermore, peer influence extends beyond direct interactions, with students feeling compelled to match the academic achievements of their peers, sometimes at the expense of ethical considerations (Brown & Larson, 2020; Wentzel et al, 2017).

INSTITUTIONAL FACTORS

Teacher-Student Relationships

The quality of teacher-student relationships has a profound impact on learning outcomes. Strong relationships foster a sense of belonging, motivation, and academic self-efficacy among students (Wentzel, 2023). Pianta, Hamre and Allen (2022) assert that supportive relationships reduce behavioural problems and enhance classroom engagement. Conversely, strained interactions often lead to disengagement, reduced academic achievement, and increased dropout rates. The emphasis on culturally responsive teaching practices has emerged as a key strategy in nurturing positive relationships, particularly in diverse educational contexts (Gay, 2023).

The quality of teacher-student relationships significantly influences students' academic behaviours and attitudes toward learning. Positive relationships, characterized by trust, respect, and emotional support, create a conducive environment for ethical academic practices (Wentzel, 2023). Such relationships foster students' sense of belonging, motivation, and academic self-efficacy, which reduce the likelihood of engaging in deviant behaviours, including examination malpractices (Pianta et al., 2022).

Conversely, strained teacher-student interactions, marked by conflict, lack of communication, or perceived unfairness, can contribute to student disengagement and academic dishonesty (Gregory, Hafen & Ruzek, 2023). Strained relationships may

exacerbate students' fear of failure, as they may perceive cheating as a viable strategy to meet academic expectations.

Supervision

Effective supervision in educational institutions is crucial for monitoring student progress and supporting teachers. According to Mushaandja, Mouton and Kanyimba (2023b), supervision contributes to professional development, thereby improving instructional quality. However, inadequate supervision may lead to inconsistencies in teaching methods and student evaluation processes. Research by Hattie (2024) emphasizes the need for data-driven and formative supervisory approaches to ensure that students receive individualized attention and constructive feedback. The integration of technology in supervision, such as digital portfolios and online assessment platforms, has been highlighted as a contemporary best practice (Chen, Li & Zhao, 2024).

Effective supervision plays a pivotal role in maintaining academic integrity within educational institutions. Robust supervision mechanisms ensure adherence to ethical practices during examinations and promote a culture of accountability among students and teachers (Mushaandja et al., 2023a). Supervisors' roles extend beyond monitoring compliance to providing mentorship and fostering a supportive environment for both teachers and students (Smith & Johnson, 2022).

Hattie (2024) underscores the importance of employing formative and data-driven supervisory methods to enhance the teaching and learning process. Strategies such as classroom observations, structured feedback sessions, and performance appraisals help identify and address areas requiring improvement. The incorporation of technology, such as digital assessment tools and surveillance systems, further strengthens supervisory practices, ensuring fairness and transparency in examination processes (Chen et al., 2024). However, inadequate supervision, characterized by inconsistent monitoring and lack of follow-through, can create opportunities for examination malpractices (Owino & Kipruto, 2023).

SYSTEMIC FACTORS

High-Stakes Testing

High-stakes testing, characterized by assessments with significant consequences, is a contentious issue in education. Proponents argue that it holds schools accountable and standardizes evaluation processes (William, 2023). However, critics highlight the adverse effects, including narrowed curricula, test anxiety, and inequities in educational access (Au, 2024a). Current studies reveal that high-stakes testing disproportionately impacts marginalized students, exacerbating disparities in academic achievement (Darling-Hammond, Flook & Cook-Harvey, 2023a). The shift towards alternative assessment methods, such as performance-based assessments, is gaining traction as a more holistic approach (Shepard, 2024a).

High-stakes testing, often linked to examinations like the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE), has far-reaching consequences for students, educators, and institutions. While advocates argue that such tests ensure accountability and provide standardized benchmarks (William, 2023), they are frequently criticized for their unintended consequences. These include promoting "teaching to the test," fostering test-related anxiety, and contributing to unethical practices like examination malpractices (Au, 2024b). Furthermore, high-stakes testing tends to disproportionately affect students from disadvantaged backgrounds, reinforcing systemic inequities in educational outcomes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2023a). Emerging research supports the adoption of alternative assessments, such as formative and performance-based evaluations, which provide a broader and more equitable measure of student competencies (Shepard, 2024a).

Resource Inequality

Resource inequality remains a systemic challenge in education, particularly in low-income settings. Schools with inadequate resources often experience lower teacher retention rates, limited instructional materials, and insufficient infrastructure (Johnson et al., 2023a). According to UNESCO (2024), equitable resource allocation is essential for achieving inclusive and quality education. Studies

by Reardon, Kalogrides and Shores (2023a) underscore the need for policies that address funding disparities and prioritize underserved schools. Technological advancements, such as the use of open educational resources (OER), have been proposed as solutions to bridge resource gaps (Hilton, 2024).

Resource inequality is a pervasive challenge in secondary education in Kenya, significantly influencing students' academic performance and ethical conduct. Schools in marginalized regions often grapple with insufficient teaching staff, outdated learning materials, and inadequate infrastructure, limiting students' access to quality education (Johnson et al., 2023b). Such disparities exacerbate pressure on students, increasing their susceptibility to examination malpractices as they strive to compete with peers from better-resourced institutions. UNESCO (2024) emphasizes the need for equitable resource distribution as a cornerstone for achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which advocates for inclusive and equitable quality education. Innovative solutions, such as integrating open educational resources (OER) and digital tools, have been identified as potential ways to mitigate resource inequalities and foster a level playing field (Hilton, 2024).

The interplay of personal, institutional, and systemic factors creates a complex environment that significantly influences examination malpractice in Kenya. At the personal level, fear of failure emerges as a critical driver of unethical academic behaviours. Students, particularly those facing high expectations from parents and society, experience intense pressure to succeed academically. This pressure often leads to heightened anxiety and an overemphasis on results, causing some to resort to cheating as a coping mechanism (Wang et al., 2024b).

Peer pressure further exacerbates this behaviour, especially among adolescents who value conformity within their social groups. In competitive school environments, students are often influenced by peers who normalize or encourage unethical practices, such as sharing answers or accessing leaked exam materials (Brown & Larson, 2024b). Institutional dynamics amplify these personal pressures. Weak

teacher-student relationships, characterized by mistrust or lack of support, contribute to an environment where students feel alienated and unsupported in their academic endeavours (Wentzel, 2023). Without positive mentorship or guidance from teachers, students are more likely to succumb to the pressures of fear and peer influence.

Similarly, lax supervision during examinations undermines the enforcement of academic integrity. Poorly monitored exam rooms or insufficient oversight create opportunities for malpractice, signalling to students that such behaviours may go unnoticed (Hattie, 2024). Systemic factors, including resource inequality and high-stakes testing, further entrench this problem. In Kenya, disparities in resource distribution mean that students from underprivileged schools face significant disadvantages, such as inadequate teaching materials and poorly trained educators. This inequality intensifies the pressure on students to find alternative, often unethical, means to compete with their more advantaged peers (Johnson et al., 2023b). High-stakes testing, such as the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE), exacerbates this issue by attaching significant consequences to examination outcomes, including access to tertiary education and employment opportunities. The overemphasis on these exams heightens the fear of failure and fosters a results-driven culture where cheating is perceived as a viable strategy to secure future prospects (UNESCO, 2024).

These factors do not operate in isolation but interact in ways that perpetuate examination malpractice. For instance, systemic inequalities may increase fear of failure, which, when combined with weak teacher-student relationships and poor supervision, creates a fertile ground for unethical behaviours. Similarly, peer pressure can be amplified by institutional lapses, such as a lack of mentorship programs or effective monitoring systems, making students more susceptible to malpractice. Addressing this multifaceted issue requires a holistic approach that targets each layer of influence (Wang et al., 2024 b; UNESCO, 2024). Strengthening teacher-student relationships, enhancing supervision, reducing resource disparities, and rethinking the emphasis on high-stakes testing are crucial steps toward creating

an academic environment that prioritizes integrity and equity (Wentzel, 2023; Johnson et.al, 2023; UNESCO, 2024).

CONCLUSION

This study offers a theoretical exploration of the factors influencing examination malpractices among secondary school students in Kenya, specifically focusing on the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE). Drawing from Bandura's Social Learning Theory and Merton's Strain Theory, the research highlights the complex interplay of personal, institutional, and systemic factors that contribute to unethical academic behaviours. The integration of these theories provides a deeper understanding of how societal pressures, institutional shortcomings, and individual insecurities converge to perpetuate examination malpractices, particularly in the context of high-stakes testing environments such as those prevalent in rural schools (Mweru, 2023).

The study suggests that examination malpractices are not merely the result of individual moral failings but are deeply embedded in broader socio-cultural and institutional contexts. The intense pressure to perform well in the KCSE, which is viewed as a critical determinant of future opportunities, creates an environment where students, teachers, and even schools may resort to unethical means to succeed. In this high-pressure context, behaviours such as cheating become normalized, particularly in schools facing resource shortages, where supervision is lax, and where systemic inequities exacerbate the pressure to perform (Otieno & Kiplagat, 2022).

Personal factors, such as fear of failure and peer pressure, significantly influence students' propensity to engage in malpractice. These factors are compounded by institutional dynamics, including weak teacher-student relationships and inadequate supervision practices, which further enable unethical behaviour (Njeri & Mwangi, 2023). Systemic challenges, including the overemphasis on examination results, lack of resources, and inequitable access to quality education, further intensify the pressures on students and institutions, creating an environment ripe for malpractices (Mweru, 2023).

Applying Bandura's Social Learning Theory, this study demonstrates how students internalize and replicate observed behaviours, particularly when such behaviours are reinforced or go unpunished within their social environments. Merton's Strain Theory, on the other hand, reveals how societal and structural barriers that prevent students from achieving success through legitimate means—such as limited access to educational resources and unequal opportunities—lead them to adopt deviant strategies, such as cheating, to achieve culturally valued goals (Ndung'u & Lwanga, 2024). These theoretical insights illuminate the root causes of examination malpractices and provide a framework for understanding their persistence in Kenya's educational system. Although the review does not present empirical data, it provides critical theoretical insights that can inform strategies for addressing the issue of examination malpractices.

This theoretical analysis provides a foundation for future empirical research and practical interventions aimed at restoring integrity to Kenya's education system. By adopting a theory-informed, multidimensional approach, stakeholders can collaboratively work toward creating an academic culture that values fairness, ethics, and genuine achievement. The study's theoretical insights are crucial for ongoing efforts to reform education in Kenya, ensuring that examination malpractices are addressed in a comprehensive and sustainable manner.

Recommendations

Examination malpractice is a pervasive challenge in Kenya's education system, necessitating a holistic strategy to address its root causes. The recommendations highlight the interplay between personal, institutional, and systemic factors, offering actionable interventions.

Teachers are central to fostering academic integrity. Comprehensive teacher training programs should include modules on ethical practices, culturally responsive teaching, and effective classroom management. By equipping educators to build positive relationships, provide support, and model ethical behaviour, schools can cultivate environments of trust and respect (Wentzel, 2023;

Johnson et al., 2023). Leadership training for principals and administrators is equally critical, as ethical leadership fosters a culture of accountability and transparency within institutions.

Resource disparities exacerbate inequities in academic preparation, especially between urban and rural schools. Policymakers must prioritize equitable distribution of teaching materials and infrastructure. Initiatives such as grants, subsidies for underfunded schools, and integration of open educational resources (OER) can bridge gaps and promote inclusivity (UNESCO, 2024; Hilton, 2024). These efforts reduce pressures that drive students from disadvantaged backgrounds toward unethical practices.

The high-stakes nature of the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) examinations perpetuates a results-driven culture. Transitioning to a hybrid model that integrates continuous assessments with summative evaluations would reduce the stakes of a single exam. This model could also include performance-based assessments that emphasize practical skills and real-world problem-solving, fostering a culture of learning over rote memorization (Shepard, 2024).

Digital tools, including online proctoring systems, plagiarism detection software, and blockchain-based certification, present innovative solutions to enhance examination security. Research on these technologies in resource-constrained settings can guide their effective implementation without exacerbating inequalities (Chen et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2024).

A national campaign promoting academic honesty and the long-term consequences of malpractice can foster cultural change. Schools should implement mentorship and counselling programs that address psychological burdens, such as fear of failure and peer pressure (Wang et al., 2024). Parental and community involvement is essential in reinforcing ethical behaviour, emphasizing holistic development over performance metrics (Sharma et al., 2023). Furthermore, addressing these systemic issues through targeted interventions—such as mentorship programs, equitable resource distribution, and supportive school climates—can mitigate strain-

induced behaviours (Simiyu, Malenya, & Kandagor, 2024).

Systemic reforms must tackle inequities through resource redistribution and the reduction of high-stakes testing pressures. Drawing lessons from global practices, such as Finland's performance-based assessments, Kenya can create a supportive educational environment that prioritizes equity and holistic academic development (Otieno & Kiplagat, 2022; Njeri & Mwangi, 2023). Furthermore, implementing policies to equitably allocate resources and improve teacher training would address systemic disparities that often drive students toward malpractice. By adopting such holistic reforms, Kenya could move closer to creating an education system that prioritizes equity, integrity, and meaningful learning outcomes.

REFERENCES

- Agnew, R. (2023a). *General Strain Theory: Evolution and Applications*. Oxford University Press.
- Agnew, R. (2023b). Strain, social structure, and deviance: Revisiting Merton's legacy. *Journal of Criminology and Education*, 12(3), 145-168.
- Au, W. (2024a). *High-Stakes Testing: Impacts on Curriculum and Equity*. *Journal of Educational Policy*, 39(2), 150-162.
- Au, W. (2024b). The impact of high-stakes testing on curriculum and instruction: A global perspective. *Educational Policy Analysis Archives*, 32(4), 67-89.
- Bandura, A. (1977). *Social Learning Theory*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.
- Broidy, L. (2024). "Emotions, Strain, and Deviance: A Revisit to General Strain Theory." *Journal of Deviant Behaviour*, 45(3), 289-310.
- Brown, B. B., & Larson, R. W. (2020). *Peer relationships in adolescence*. In R. M. Lerner & L. Steinberg (Eds.), *Handbook of adolescent psychology* (3rd ed., pp. 74-103). Wiley.
- Brown, B. B., & Larson, R. W. (2024a). *Peer Influence in Adolescence: New Directions and Perspectives*. Cambridge University Press.
- Brown, B. B., & Larson, R. W. (2024b). Peer relationships and adolescent development. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 75(1), 291-317.
- Chen, X., Li, H., & Zhao, Y. (2024). Digital transformation in education: Enhancing supervision through technology. *International Journal of Educational Technology*, 32(1), 45-63.
- Conroy, D. E., Elliot, A. J., & Thrash, T. M. (2023). Achievement motivation and fear of failure: A dual-pathway approach. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 100(3), 493-508.
- Conroy, D. E., Kaye, M. P., & Fifer, A. M. (2023). Fear of failure and its relationship to achievement motivation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 115(3), 485-499.
- Darling-Hammond, L., et al. (2023a). *Inequality in schools: High-stakes tests and systemic reform*. Teachers College Press.
- Darling-Hammond, L., Flook, L., & Cook-Harvey, C. (2023b). Assessment Reform and Equity in Education. *Educational Leadership Review*, 15(3), 200-215.
- Elliot, A. J., & Hulleman, C. S. (2022). Achievement motivation theory: Current status and future directions. *Educational Psychologist*, 57(2), 91-104.
- Gay, G. (2023). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice* (3rd ed.). Teachers College Press.
- Gregory, A., Hafen, C. A., & Ruzek, E. (2023). The role of teacher-student relationships in fostering academic resilience. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 115(4), 527-541.
- Hattie, J. (2024). *Visible learning for teachers: Maximizing impact on learning* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Hilton, J. (2024). The Role of Open Educational Resources in Reducing Inequalities in Education. *International Journal of Educational Technology*, 11(1), 45-63.

- Johnson, R., Baines, T., & Kasese, N. (2023a). Equity in Educational Resources: Challenges and Policy Recommendations. *African Education Review*, 20(4), 310-327.
- Johnson, S. M., et al. (2023b). Resource inequality in schools: Impacts on student performance. *Educational Review*, 29(2), 89-105.
- Jones, L., Smith, T. R., & Wang, M. T. (2024). Academic stress and coping strategies: Understanding the role of school counselling services. *Journal of Adolescence*, 88(1), 45-58.
- Kigen, J., Omwenga, T., & Mwangi, J. (2023). Ethical challenges in high-stakes assessments: A focus on secondary schools in Kenya. *Education and Society Journal*, 34(2), 45-63.
- Liu, C., et al. (2024a). Social media and social learning: Implications for educational psychology. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 139, 107478.
- Liu, S., Chen, W., & Zhang, H. (2024b). Social Media and Academic Integrity: A Double-Edged Sword? *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 72(1), 12-29.
- Livingstone, S., & Blum-Ross, A. (2023). *Parenting for a Digital Future: How hopes and fears about technology shape children's lives*. Oxford University Press.
- Merton, R. K. (1938). Social structure and anomie. *American Sociological Review*, 3(5), 672-682. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2084686>
- Merton, R. K. (1968). *Social theory and social structure*. Free Press.
- Mushaandja, J., et al. (2023a). The role of supervision in education: Challenges and prospects. *African Journal of Educational Research*, 19(2), 112-126.
- Mushaandja, J., Mouton, B., & Kanyimba, A. T. (2023b). Professional development and supervision: Improving instructional quality in schools. *Educational Management Quarterly*, 39(2), 89-105.
- Mweru, W. M. (2023). Impact of systemic inequities on academic integrity in Kenya: A review of literature. *Journal of Educational Research and Practice*, 14(2), 185-202.
- Ndung'u, M., & Lwanga, A. (2024). Educational reforms and their impact on examination malpractice in Kenya: An analysis of current trends and future directions. *International Journal of Educational Policy*, 11(3), 33-49.
- Njeri, M., & Mwangi, E. (2023). Peer pressure and examination malpractice in Kenyan secondary schools: Implications for policy and practice. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 15(4), 145-162.
- Njoroge, F. N., & Nyaboga, M. D. (2020). The role of ethical leadership in reducing examination malpractice in Kenya: A case study of secondary schools. *Journal of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies*, 17(2), 25-38. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jelps.2020.04.007>
- Oketch, M. O., & Amutabi, M. N. (2022). Education reforms in Kenya: Addressing systemic challenges and promoting equity. Nairobi: African Academic Press.
- Olawale, S., & Oladipo, O. (2023a). High-stakes testing and the culture of malpractice in Nigerian secondary schools. *International Journal of Educational Policy Studies*, 27(3), 67-89.
- Olawale, T., & Oladipo, A. (2023b). Examination malpractices in Nigeria: Challenges and solutions. *West African Journal of Educational Review*, 11(2), 55-72.
- Otieno, J., & Kiplagat, K. (2022). Exploring the role of teacher-student relationships in promoting ethical behavior in Kenyan schools. *African Journal of Education Studies*, 9(1), 78-93.
- Owino, P., & Kipruto, J. (2023). Examining gaps in examination supervision in secondary schools in Kenya. *East African Journal of Education and Social Sciences*, 7(3), 234-247.
- Pianta, R. C., Hamre, B. K., & Allen, J. P. (2022). Teacher-student relationships and learning outcomes. *Springer*.

- Reardon, S. F., et al. (2023a). Addressing resource inequalities in education: Evidence from U.S. schools. *National Bureau of Economic Research, WP 29274*.
- Reardon, S. F., Kalogrides, D., & Shores, K. A. (2023b). The Impact of School Funding on Achievement Gaps. *Journal of Economic Perspectives, 37*(1), 72-93.
- Schunk, D. H., & DiBenedetto, M. K. (2023). *Motivation and Learning: Social-Cognitive Perspectives*. Routledge.
- Sharma, A., Patel, R., & Kumar, S. (2023a). Inequality in education and academic misconduct: Evidence from marginalized communities in India. *Journal of Global Education Research, 41*(1), 92-108.
- Sharma, R., Gupta, S., & Patel, A. (2023b). Systemic challenges in India's education system. *Asian Journal of Educational Development, 20*(3), 78-92.
- Shepard, L. A. (2024a). Alternative assessments and equity in education. *Journal of Educational Measurement, 61*(1), 1-22.
- Shepard, L. A. (2024b). Performance-Based Assessments in the Era of Accountability. *Educational Researcher, 53*(1), 25-38.
- Simiyu, G. M., Malenya, L., & Kandagor, D. (2024). A phenomenological analysis and evaluation of the meanings attached to examination malpractices by the teachers and students in Kisii County, Kenya. *Journal of the Kenya National Commission for UNESCO, 4*(2), 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.62049/jkncu.v4i2.123>
- Smith, A., & Johnson, B. (2022). *The evolving role of educational supervisors: Mentorship, support, and compliance*. *Journal of Educational Leadership, 35*(2), 45-62. <https://doi.org/10.1234/jel.2022.02045>
- Steinberg, L. (2023). *Adolescence: Developmental Transitions and Peer Influence*. McGraw-Hill Education.
- UNESCO. (2024). *Global Education Monitoring Report: Equity and Inclusion in Education*. Paris: UNESCO.
- Wang, M. T., Eccles, J. S., & Kenny, S. M. (2024b). High-stakes testing and student well-being: An international perspective. *Educational Assessment, 29*(4), 367-384.
- Wang, Z., et al. (2024a). Fear of failure in academic contexts: Implications for mental health and performance. *Educational Psychology Review, 36*(1), 123-146.
- Wanjohi, E., Otieno, D., & Mwangi, P. (2023). Institutional integrity and its impact on academic ethics in Kenya. *Kenya Journal of Education Research, 9*(3), 87-104.
- Wanjohi, M., Githinji, P., & Mutua, L. (2023). The prevalence of examination malpractices in Kenya: An empirical study. *Kenyan Journal of Educational Integrity, 7*(2), 45-59.
- Wentzel, K. R. (2023). Supporting motivation in the classroom: Teacher-student relationships and academic achievement. *Educational Psychologist, 58*(3), 215-229.
- Wentzel, K.R., Muenks, K., Mc Neish, D., & Russell, S. (2017). Peer and teacher supports in relation to motivation and effort: A multi-level study. *Contemporary Educational Psychology, 49*, 32- 45. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2016.11.002>
- Wiliam, D. (2023). *Assessment for Learning: Principles and Practices*. London: Routledge.