



Elementary School Students' Moral Dilemma Regarding Cheating Practices: Analysis of Attitudes and Decision Making

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Article Info	Abstract
<p>Article history: <i>Received:</i> 2026-04-20 <i>Revised:</i> 2026-05-01 <i>Accepted:</i> 2026-05-01 <i>Available online:</i> 1 Juni 2026</p> <p>Keynote: cheating; morals; honesty.</p> <p><small>This is an open-access article under the CC BY-SA license. Copyright © 2026 by Author. Published by Yayasan Mujtahidin Sajimah Selong (Musa Foundation), Indonesia.</small></p>	<p>This study aims to analyze the moral dilemma faced by elementary school students in responding to cheating, particularly in social situations involving peer pressure. This study used a qualitative descriptive approach and was conducted at a State Islamic Elementary School in Bandar Lampung. The research subjects consisted of purposively selected elementary school students. Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, and data analysis employed thematic analysis to identify patterns, categories, and themes that emerged from the interviews. The results showed that students' attitudes toward cheating spanned a spectrum: firm rejection, ambivalence, and a tendency toward permissiveness. The findings also revealed a moral dilemma between the values of honesty and social solidarity, in which some students tend to compromise moral values under peer pressure. The students' decision-making process is dynamic and contextual, influenced by cognitive, emotional, and social environmental factors. Furthermore, a gap was found between students' moral knowledge and actual practice, even though they understand the importance of honesty. Factors such as teachers' roles, peer influence, and religious values also shape students' attitudes and decisions. This study concludes that cheating behavior in elementary school students is not only related to individual factors but also to a complex interaction between moral values and social context. Therefore, character education needs to be developed more contextually, emphasizing habituation, role modeling, and strengthening the social environment that supports the development of consistently honest behavior.</p>

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of cheating in elementary school can no longer be viewed as a simple violation, but rather as part of the complex dynamics of children's moral development. At this stage, students begin to learn to negotiate between formal rules and the social realities they face daily, so the decision to cheat is often not made in isolation, but is influenced by relationships with peers. Nucci (2001) explains that children's moral development involves a separation between moral and social domains, while the findings of Hinnant et al. (2013) indicate that self-control and the influence of the social environment greatly determine children's ethical behavior in concrete situations.

In practice, cheating often arises not solely from individual dishonesty, but also from social pressure and the need for group acceptance. Anderman and Murdock (2007) emphasized that classroom context and peer norms play a significant role in shaping



students' academic behavior, including cheating. In Indonesia, Retnawati et al. (2018) found that academic dishonesty among students is still influenced by a collective culture that, in some cases, condones such behavior, especially when associated with solidarity among peers.

Interestingly, in many cases, students actually understand that cheating is wrong, yet remain ambiguous when faced with real-life situations. This relates to the stages of moral development described by Kohlberg (1981), where children are often in the conventional phase, which emphasizes social acceptance. Nucci and Narváez (2008) also highlight that children's moral decisions are based not only on knowledge of right and wrong, but also on situational interpretations involving emotions and interpersonal relationships.

On the other hand, character education currently implemented in elementary schools often emphasizes cognitive aspects rather than practical aspects in students' social lives. Lickona (2012) states that effective character education must simultaneously integrate knowledge, feelings, and moral actions. However, as Kristjánsson (2015) notes, there is a gap between what is taught as moral values and how students act in challenging situations, including when faced with invitations to cheat.

Therefore, it is important to examine more deeply how elementary school students respond to the invitation to cheat as a real moral dilemma. Berkowitz and Bier (2005) emphasized that understanding children's moral decision-making processes is crucial for designing effective educational interventions. In this context, Retnawati et al. (2018) reiterated that analyzing students' concrete experiences can provide a more comprehensive picture of honesty practices in schools. Therefore, this study seeks to uncover the dynamics of students' attitudes and decisions regarding cheating in greater depth.

This study aims to analyze the moral dilemma faced by elementary school students when responding to cheating, particularly in social situations involving peer invitations. More specifically, this study aims to: (1) identify variations in students' attitudes towards invitations to cheat, including rejection, ambivalence, and permissive tendencies; (2) examine the forms of moral dilemmas that arise between the values of honesty and social solidarity in interactions between students; (3) analyze students' moral decision-making processes in facing these situations; and (4) reveal factors that influence students' attitudes while identifying gaps between moral knowledge and actual practices in the context of cheating. Thus, this study is expected to make a conceptual contribution to the development of more contextual character education, particularly by strengthening the integrity and consistency of moral decision-making among elementary school students.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative, descriptive approach to gain a deep understanding of the moral dilemmas faced by elementary school students in responding to cheating. This



approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore students' meanings, experiences, and decision-making processes within a real social context, as Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasize that qualitative research focuses on exploring the meanings individuals construct about a phenomenon. In an educational context, this approach is also relevant for examining students' moral behavior, which cannot be reduced to mere numbers (Moleong, 2017).

The research was conducted at a State Islamic Elementary School (MIN) in Bandar Lampung City, with elementary school students selected as subjects using purposive sampling. Subject selection was based on the assumption that they had direct experience with the phenomenon being studied. Patton (2015) explains that purposive sampling enables researchers to obtain rich, in-depth data from relevant informants, while Sugiyono (2019) emphasizes that this technique is commonly used in qualitative research to gather information aligned with research objectives.

The data collection technique used semi-structured interviews, which allow researchers to explore respondents' answers flexibly yet purposefully. According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), interviews in qualitative research aim to understand the subjects' lives from their perspectives. Furthermore, documentation serves as supporting data to strengthen research findings and provide additional context for the interview results (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, which involves coding, categorizing, and identifying themes in the data. Braun and Clarke (2006) explain that thematic analysis is a flexible and systematic method for identifying patterns of meaning in qualitative data. The analysis process is carried out iteratively from data collection to conclusion drawing, allowing researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomena being studied (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

The validity of the data in this study was maintained through source triangulation and greater analytical rigor. Lincoln and Guba (1985) emphasized that credibility in qualitative research can be strengthened through repeated data checking and comparisons between sources. Furthermore, researchers carefully interpreted the data to ensure that the findings accurately reflected the experiences and perspectives of the research subjects.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Variations in Students' Attitudes towards Invitations to Cheat

Cheating behavior among elementary school students in various studies is not always understood as a single, uniform act, but rather as a phenomenon with a spectrum of attitudes and moral responses. Anderman and Murdock (2007) explain that academic cheating among students is influenced by social context and class norms, so students' responses to the practice can vary. In the context of moral development, Kohlberg (1981) emphasized that children at elementary school age are generally in the early conventional



stage, where moral judgment is still strongly influenced by social acceptance and the rules that apply in their surroundings.

Based on the interview results, students' attitudes toward invitations to cheat showed quite clear variations. Some students showed a firm rejection as a form of internalizing the value of honesty, as expressed in the statements "I don't want to accept the invitation" (Student 1) and "refused and said cheating is very bad" (Student 17). This attitude reflects a commitment to ingrained moral values, in which students can uphold the principle of honesty despite social pressure.

However, some students displayed ambivalent attitudes, being torn between accepting and rejecting invitations to cheat. This was evident in the statements "sometimes accepting, sometimes rejecting" (Student 26) and "thinking first" (Student 15), which indicate that moral decisions are not always spontaneous but rather arise from a process of situational consideration. This finding indicates that some students are still at an unstable stage of moral development, in which the value of honesty can be negotiated under certain conditions, especially in social relationships with peers.

On the other hand, some students exhibited a permissive tendency toward cheating. Statements such as "it's okay" (Student 5) and "as long as I don't get caught" (Student 7) indicate tolerance for behavior that actually contradicts the value of honesty. In fact, in some cases, students actively engage in such practices, such as "say I will give you the answer" (Student 16). This situation demonstrates that in certain contexts, social norms among students can shift existing moral understandings.

Moral Dilemma: Between Honesty and Social Solidarity

In the study of moral education, student behavior often cannot be understood solely within the framework of normative right and wrong but also needs to be seen as the result of negotiations among conflicting values. Lickona (2012) emphasized that character education concerns not only knowledge of moral values but also how individuals make decisions in dilemmas. In this context, Nucci and Narváez (2008) explained that children often face tensions between moral obligations (such as honesty) and social demands (such as maintaining relationships with friends), which constitute a moral dilemma in everyday life.

Previous research has shown that in school settings, peer pressure significantly influences students' moral behavior. Anderman and Murdock (2007) revealed that group norms can shape students' perceptions of what is considered acceptable, including academic cheating. On the other hand, Hinnant et al. (2013) highlighted that children's self-control and moral courage are still developing, so they tend to adapt their behavior to the social situation they face, especially when there is a risk of rejection from the group.

Interview results indicate that the dilemma between honesty and social solidarity is clearly evident in students' responses to cheating. Some students tend to prioritize social relationships over honesty. This is evident in statements such as "It's okay because we're gathered here to unite, so we have to cover up each other's faults" (Student 7), which



demonstrates that helping a friend, even in the wrong context, is perceived as justifiable. This statement indicates that group solidarity can serve as a moral justification for cheating.

On the other hand, some students are aware of this value conflict but still struggle to take a firm stand. This is evident in expressions such as "I feel like I want to, but I don't" (Student 11), which reflect the tension between the urge to help a friend and the realization that such an action is incompatible with the value of honesty. This situation suggests that moral dilemmas are not only cognitive but also emotional, influencing students' decisions.

However, not all students are caught in this dilemma. Some respondents still choose to reject invitations to cheat, arguing that such actions conflict with their values. Statements such as "refusing and saying that cheating is very bad" (Student 17) demonstrate moral courage in upholding principles despite potential social pressure. This indicates that for some students, the value of honesty has been internalized more strongly than the urge to maintain group solidarity.

These findings suggest that cheating among elementary school students is not solely related to individual dishonesty, but also a manifestation of a moral dilemma involving a conflict between the values of honesty and social solidarity. In this context, students' decisions are influenced not only by moral understanding but also by the dynamics of social relations they experience in the school environment.

Students' Moral Decision-Making Process

In the study of moral development, decision-making is understood not only as the result of right or wrong choices but also as a cognitive and affective process involving consideration of values, emotions, and social context. Kohlberg (1981) emphasized that moral reasoning develops gradually, with individuals beginning to consider rules, consequences, and social acceptance when determining actions. Meanwhile, Rest (1986), through a four-component model, explains that moral decisions are influenced by moral sensitivity, moral judgment, moral motivation, and moral character, which work simultaneously within an individual.

Based on the interview results, students' decision-making processes in responding to invitations to cheat showed diverse patterns. Some students tended to make spontaneous decisions based on principles they already held, such as the statements "I don't want to accept his invitation" (Student 1) and "I don't want to and tell him it's not a good thing" (Student 30). This indicates that in this group, the value of honesty has been internalized, serving as the primary basis for decision-making without lengthy deliberation. However, some students also went through a deliberation process before making a decision. Statements such as "thinking first" (Student 15) and "sometimes accepting, sometimes rejecting" (Student 26) indicate that moral decisions are not always straightforward, but are influenced by the situation, relationships with friends, and



potential consequences. This condition indicates that the decision-making process for some students is still at the stage of negotiation between moral values and social interests.

On the other hand, some students tend to follow situational or social impulses without strong moral considerations in their decision-making process. This is evident in statements such as "okay, that's it" (Student 10) or even "tell me, I'll give you the answer" (Student 16), indicating that decisions are made pragmatically and lack consideration of the action's moral implications. This finding suggests that not all students use moral reasoning optimally when facing dilemmas. Therefore, elementary school students' moral decision-making processes in the context of cheating demonstrate a dynamic and contextual character. Decisions are not based solely on knowledge of right and wrong but are also influenced by the interplay of cognitive, emotional, and social factors. This confirms that moral development in students requires not only an understanding of values but also practice in making consistent decisions in various real-life situations.

Factors Influencing and the Gap between Moral Knowledge and Practice

In the study of moral education, student behavior cannot be separated from the various factors that shape and influence the development of their values. Lickona (2012) emphasized that character formation is influenced by three main components: moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action, which must work in harmony. However, Berkowitz and Bier (2005) showed that in practice, there is often a mismatch between students' moral knowledge and the actual behavior they display in everyday life.

Several studies have also revealed that the social environment plays a significant role in shaping students' moral behavior. Anderman and Murdock (2007) emphasized that peer norms and classroom climate can either encourage or discourage honest student behavior. Conversely, Retnawati et al. (2018) found that academic dishonesty in students is influenced not only by individual factors but also by social interactions, school culture, and perceptions of the consequences of such actions.

Based on the interview results, several main factors influence students' attitudes toward cheating. The role of teachers emerged as a dominant factor in shaping students' moral awareness, as seen in the statements "teachers who always educate me" (Student 1) and "teachers who always remind me to be honest" (Student 17). Furthermore, peer influence is also very strong, both in encouraging and discouraging cheating behavior. Some students mentioned encouragement from friends, while others received reinforcement to remain honest from their circle.

Other influencing factors include religious values and awareness of moral consequences. This is reflected in statements such as "because I'm afraid of going to hell" (Student 22) and "so my reward will increase" (Student 23), indicating that religious considerations inform decision-making. However, some students also expressed a lack of concern or a lack of strong internal drive, such as "none" (Student 5), when asked about their motivation for honesty, indicating variation in the internalization of moral values.



Interestingly, although most students can define honesty as a right and important value, this is not always reflected in their behavior when faced with real-life situations. As seen in the previous sub-discussion, some students still have a permissive or ambivalent attitude toward cheating. This situation indicates a gap between moral knowledge and actual practice, in which students understand the value of honesty but are not yet fully able to apply it consistently in everyday social interactions.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that elementary school students' attitudes toward cheating are not singular, but rather range across a spectrum, ranging from firm rejection and ambivalence to permissive tendencies. This variation reflects the moral dilemmas students face, particularly in negotiating the value of honesty with the demands of social solidarity among peers. Students' moral decision-making processes are also shown to be dynamic and contextual, influenced by the interaction of cognitive and emotional factors, as well as the social pressures they experience within the school environment.

Furthermore, the findings of this study reveal a gap between students' moral knowledge and actual practices. Although most students understand the importance of honesty, not all can consistently implement this value in concrete situations. Factors such as teachers' roles, peer influence, and religious values help shape students' attitudes and decisions regarding cheating. Therefore, character education in elementary schools needs to be directed not only at understanding values, but also at fostering habits, modeling behavior, and strengthening a social environment that supports the development of sustainable, honest behavior.

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