

Defense Mechanisms of Elementary School Children in Dealing with Emotional Stress (A Freudian Psychoanalytic Perspective)

Siti Muhdiati^{1*} and Arie Rakhmat Riyadi²

^{1,2} Elementary Education, UPI, Bandung, Indonesia

* sitimuhdiati@upi.edu, arie.riyadi@upi.edu

Abstract. Emotional pressure in elementary school children is an important issue that can significantly affect their psychological development. Defense mechanisms, from Freud's psychoanalytic perspective, function as unconscious strategies to cope with such pressure. This quantitative study aims to analyze the defense mechanisms used by fifth-grade students in West Bandung Regency to deal with emotional stress. A total of 66 students were selected through purposive sampling, and data were collected using a structured questionnaire measuring four types of defense mechanisms: denial, sublimation, reaction formation, and projection. Data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics (Kruskal–Wallis test). The results revealed that **sublimation** had the highest mean score ($M = 2.89$; $SD = 0.787$) and was the **most dominant strategy** used by students to manage emotional pressure, followed by **denial** ($M = 2.27$) and **reaction formation** ($M = 2.26$), while **projection** was the least used mechanism ($M = 1.64$). The Kruskal–Wallis test yielded $H = 70.875$; $p < 0.001$, indicating a **significant difference among the four types of defense mechanisms**. Post hoc analysis with Bonferroni correction confirmed that **sublimation differed significantly** from other mechanisms, while denial and reaction formation were used at relatively similar levels. These findings indicate that elementary school children tend to employ adaptive defense mechanisms when facing emotional pressure. The results are expected to serve as a foundation for developing psychological interventions in schools, including emotional regulation training and positive coping strategies to enhance children's emotional well-being.

Keywords: Emotional pressure, defense mechanisms, elementary school, psychoanalytic theory, sublimation.

INTRODUCTION

The psychological development of elementary school children is a critical phase that significantly influences the formation of personality and emotional adaptability. At this stage, children face various emotional pressures from their school environment, family, and peers. Emotional tension that is not properly expressed or managed may trigger psychological disturbances and negatively affect their well-being and academic achievement (Mammarella et al., 2021). Therefore, understanding the defense mechanisms used by children is essential to support their mental health and optimal psychological growth.

According to Freud's psychoanalytic theory, defense mechanisms are unconscious psychological processes that protect individuals from anxiety and internal conflicts (Cramer et al., 2021). These mechanisms function by rejecting, redirecting, or restructuring perceptions of threatening situations. Sigmund Freud (1936) explained that defense mechanisms act as psychological strategies protecting the ego from anxiety resulting from conflicts between the id, ego, and superego. Through this process, individuals can face inner conflict with less emotional strain and greater psychological balance (Hall & Lindzey, 1993).

Common types of defense mechanisms include denial, sublimation, reaction formation, and projection (Hentschel et al., 2004). Denial represents the refusal to acknowledge a threatening reality or problem. Sublimation involves channeling negative emotions or impulses into constructive, socially acceptable activities. Reaction formation refers to expressing behavior opposite to the true impulse, while projection is the tendency to attribute one's unacceptable feelings or thoughts to others (Cramer, 2006).

Elementary school children are in a complex psychosocial stage where they begin to recognize and regulate emotions more consciously. However, the defense mechanisms they use tend to be simple and often unconscious (Santrock, 2019). Research by Bhakti (2019) and Prasetyo (2023) shows that school-age children frequently employ denial and sublimation to cope with emotional stress, particularly when facing academic or social challenges. Adaptive mechanisms such as sublimation are associated with the ability to redirect negative energy into positive activities that reduce stress and enhance well-being (Compas et al., 2017). Conversely, the use of maladaptive mechanisms, such as excessive projection, can lead to social misunderstandings and increase the risk of psychological problems (Cramer, 2006).

Emotional stress among elementary school children continues to rise due to rapid social changes and high academic demands. Children often struggle to identify and express emotions in healthy ways (Zhao et al., 2023). Emotional pressure may stem from multiple sources, including academic tasks, family issues, and peer interactions (Sari, 2018). Persistent stress without proper emotional support can cause anxiety, depression, and behavioral disorders (Santoso & Wijaya, 2022). Unfortunately, teachers and parents often fail to recognize defense mechanisms reflected in children's behavior, which may result in misjudgment and inappropriate responses.

A child experiencing anxiety or fear may display aggressive or withdrawn behavior. Without sufficient psychological understanding, such behavior is often interpreted as disobedience or defiance rather than as a coping response. Misinterpretation of these behaviors can lead to punishment or emotional neglect, further aggravating the child's psychological condition. This misunderstanding may disrupt emotional regulation and hinder long-term socio-emotional development. Thus, educators and parents need a deeper understanding of how children use defense mechanisms as emotional protection.

Previous studies have emphasized the importance of identifying defense mechanisms in children. Di Giuseppe et al. (2021) found that school-age children tend to use primitive mechanisms such as denial and projection when facing intense emotional stress. Hernández

et al. (2022) revealed that adaptive mechanisms like sublimation are positively correlated with social competence and the ability to manage stress. Meanwhile, Kim and Park (2023) pointed out that teachers' limited understanding of children's defensive behaviors contributes to the ineffectiveness of educational and behavioral interventions in schools. Bhakti (2019) also confirmed that defense mechanisms play a crucial role in helping children manage emotional stress and maintain healthy social and academic functioning.

However, research on defense mechanisms among elementary school children in Indonesia—particularly in West Bandung Regency—remains limited. Most existing studies focus on adolescents or young adults and have been conducted in Western cultural contexts. Furthermore, previous research predominantly used qualitative methods, leaving a gap in quantitative data that identifies the dominant defense mechanisms among children. This research gap underscores the need for systematic exploration of how elementary school children use defense mechanisms to manage emotional stress.

Understanding children's defense mechanisms has strategic value in both educational and developmental psychology. These mechanisms influence how children respond to stress and maintain emotional balance (Di Giuseppe et al., 2021). Children who employ adaptive mechanisms such as sublimation or humor tend to have stronger coping skills and are less likely to experience psychological disorders (Mammarella et al., 2021). In contrast, the use of maladaptive mechanisms, such as excessive denial or inappropriate projection, can worsen psychological distress and impede socio-emotional development.

Research on children's defense mechanisms contributes to designing intervention programs aligned with their psychological needs. Emotional skills training and psychological support within schools can help children manage stress in healthy ways. Therefore, this study holds both scientific and practical significance for educators, parents, and child mental health professionals. The present study aims to identify the dominant defense mechanisms used by elementary school children in dealing with emotional stress through a quantitative approach grounded in Freud's psychoanalytic theory. The findings are expected to form a foundation for effective psychological intervention strategies and enhance understanding among teachers and parents in supporting children's emotional well-being during this critical stage of development.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative approach with a descriptive design aimed at providing an objective overview of the psychological phenomenon under investigation—namely, the defense mechanisms of elementary school children in coping with emotional stress. A descriptive design allows researchers to measure and present behavioral characteristics without manipulation or intervention (Creswell & Guetterman, 2021). According to Ary et al. (2022), quantitative descriptive research is appropriate when researchers intend to explore the frequency, distribution, or patterns of a phenomenon within a population in a numerical and systematic manner. Therefore, this approach was chosen to identify and categorize the defense mechanisms most frequently used by elementary school children in a measurable and statistically analyzable way.

This study adopted a non-experimental descriptive design, as no treatment or manipulation was applied to the participants. Instead, the research focused on observing and measuring variables as they naturally occurred. The non-experimental design is appropriate for describing natural conditions without interference (Ary et al., 2022; Creswell & Guetterman, 2021; Check & Schutt, 2022; McMillan & Schumacher, 2021). In this context, the analysis focused on assessing the defense mechanisms used by elementary school children to manage emotional pressures they experienced in daily life.

Research Location and Time

The study was conducted at an elementary school in West Bandung Regency, Indonesia, from March to May 2025. The school is situated in a suburban area characterized by diverse socio-economic backgrounds and represents a typical public elementary school environment in West Java Province. The location was selected to provide a representative context of students' emotional and behavioral dynamics in a mixed social setting.

Population and Sample

The population of this study consisted of all fifth-grade elementary school students in West Bandung Regency. A total of 66 students were selected using purposive sampling, a technique in which participants are chosen based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives. The inclusion criteria were as follows:

1. Active fifth-grade students,

2. Willing to participate voluntarily in the study, and
3. Not diagnosed with severe psychological disorders according to information provided by the classroom teacher and school counselor.

Purposive sampling was selected because it allows researchers to include participants most relevant to the study's context (Etikan & Bala, 2021).

Research Instrument

The primary instrument used in this study was a closed-ended questionnaire developed based on Freud's theory of defense mechanisms, focusing on four main types: denial, sublimation, reaction formation, and projection. The questionnaire consisted of 12 items, each designed to measure a specific aspect of defense mechanisms. Every item employed a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("Never") to 4 ("Very Often"), which is considered suitable for measuring the frequency of psychological behaviors in children through self-perception or observation of daily behavior (Boone & Boone, 2021).

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected through direct distribution of questionnaires to students at the school under the supervision of teachers or homeroom advisors. The researcher provided a brief explanation of the study's objectives and instructions for completing the questionnaire. A calm and supportive environment was ensured to encourage students to respond honestly and minimize external distractions. The collected data were then checked for completeness and accuracy before proceeding to analysis.

Data Analysis Technique

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation, to describe the distribution of defense mechanisms used by the students. The analysis was conducted using SPSS version 29, a widely recognized statistical software in psychology and education (Field, 2023).

Additionally, inferential analysis was carried out to determine whether differences existed in the use of defense mechanisms based on gender. Prior to analysis, data normality was tested using the Shapiro–Wilk test, which indicated that the data were not normally distributed. Consequently, the Kruskal–Wallis test—a nonparametric alternative to one-way ANOVA—was employed, as it is suitable for comparing medians between groups in ordinal or non-normally distributed data (Ghasemi & Zahediasl, 2021; Laerd Statistics, 2023).

Validity and Reliability Testing

Validity:

Content validity was established through expert judgment. Two experts in developmental and educational psychology evaluated the appropriateness of the questionnaire items with respect to the theoretical constructs of Freud's defense mechanisms. This procedure followed the approach recommended by Taherdoost (2022), emphasizing the importance of expert involvement in assessing item clarity, relevance, and adequacy.

Reliability:

Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha to determine the internal consistency of the instrument items. The result showed a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of $\alpha = 0.82$, which falls within the "good" category, indicating that the instrument was sufficiently reliable for measuring defense mechanisms among children (Taber, 2022).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study involved 66 fifth-grade elementary school students in West Bandung Regency as respondents. The primary objective was to identify and analyze the dominant defense mechanisms employed by children in coping with emotional stress, based on Freud's psychoanalytic perspective.

The descriptive analysis of students' questionnaire responses for each category of defense mechanism is presented in the following table:

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics of Students' Defense Mechanisms*

KATEGORI	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Denial	66	1	4	2.27	.692
Sublimation	66	1	4	2.89	.787
Reaction Formation	66	1	4	2.26	.791
Projection	66	1	4	1.64	.715
Valid N (listwise)	66				

The descriptive results provide an overview of the tendency among elementary school students to use four types of defense mechanisms. Sublimation showed the highest mean score ($M = 2.89$, $SD = 0.787$), indicating that students frequently used this adaptive defense

mechanism to channel negative emotions into positive behaviors such as studying or engaging in creative activities.

Denial and reaction formation had relatively similar mean scores ($M = 2.27$ and $M = 2.26$, respectively) and comparable variability ($SD = 0.692$ and $SD = 0.791$). These results suggest that both mechanisms were used at a moderate frequency, implying that some students still tend to reject reality or reverse emotional expression as a self-protective strategy. Conversely, projection recorded the lowest mean score ($M = 1.64$, $SD = 0.715$), indicating that it was rarely used by students. This finding may be considered positive, as projection is generally regarded as a less adaptive defense mechanism.

To determine whether significant differences existed among the four types of defense mechanisms, a non-parametric Kruskal–Wallis test was conducted. This test was chosen because the data did not meet the assumption of normality but still allowed statistical comparison among more than two groups. The analysis was expected to reveal whether variations in the frequency of use across the four mechanisms were statistically significant rather than merely descriptive. The results of the Kruskal–Wallis test are shown below.

Table 2. Results of the Kruskal–Wallis Test on Students’ Defense Mechanisms

Test Statistics ^{a,b}		SKOR
Kruskal-Wallis H		70.875
df		3
Asymp. Sig.		<,001
a. Kruskal Wallis Test		
b. Grouping Variable: TIPE		

The Kruskal–Wallis test yielded a value of $H = 70.875$ with 3 degrees of freedom and a significance level (Asymp. Sig.) of $< .001$. This result indicates statistically significant differences in the use of the four defense mechanism types among elementary school students. Since the significance value is less than 0.05, it can be concluded that variations in scores across the defense mechanism groups did not occur by chance but represent meaningful differences in their intensity of use. A post hoc analysis was subsequently conducted to identify which pairs of mechanisms differed significantly from each other.

Table 3. Post Hoc Test Output on Students’ Defense Mechanisms

Hypothesis Test Summary				
	Null Hypothesis	Test	Sig. ^{a,b}	Decision
1	The distribution of SKOR is the same across categories of TIPE.	Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	<,001	Reject the null hypothesis.

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- a. The significance level is .050.
 b. Asymptotic significance is displayed.
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The results of the post hoc hypothesis testing show a significance value (Sig.) of $< .001$, which is lower than the conventional significance threshold of 0.05. Therefore, the null hypothesis stating that the distribution of defense mechanism scores is the same across all mechanism types is rejected.

This finding indicates that there are statistically significant differences in the distribution of scores among the four types of defense mechanisms used by elementary school students. The result supports the previous descriptive findings, suggesting that each type of defense mechanism—denial, sublimation, reaction formation, and projection is employed with different levels of frequency or intensity. These differences reveal distinct behavioral preferences and coping patterns in how children manage emotional stress.

Table 4. Post Hoc Pairwise Comparisons of Students' Defense Mechanisms (Bonferroni Correction)

Pairwise Comparisons of TIPE					
Sample 1-Sample 2	Test Statistic	Std. Error	Std. Test Statistic	Sig.	Adj. Sig. ^a
Projection – Reaction Formation	52.008	12.517	4.155	<.001	.000
Projection – Denial	55.152	12.517	4.406	<.001	.000
Projection – Sublimation	105.326	12.517	8.414	<.001	.000
Reaction Formation – Denial	3.144	12.517	.251	.802	1.000
Reaction Formation – Sublimation	53.318	12.517	4.260	<.001	.000
Denial – Sublimation	-50.174	12.517	-4.008	<.001	.000

Each row tests the null hypothesis that the Sample 1 and Sample 2 distributions are the same. Asymptotic significances (2-sided tests) are displayed. The significance level is .050.

The results of the pairwise comparison test using the Bonferroni correction method indicated that there were significant differences in the distribution of scores among most types of defense mechanisms examined. The projection mechanism showed significant differences compared to the other three types—reaction formation ($p = .000$), denial ($p = .000$), and sublimation ($p = .000$). This finding suggests that the pattern of projection use among students was clearly distinct from the other mechanisms, particularly in terms of its intensity and frequency of use.

In addition, sublimation also exhibited significant differences from both denial ($p = .000$) and reaction formation ($p = .000$), indicating that this mechanism tended to be used differently from the other two. The only pair that did not show a significant difference was reaction formation

and denial ($p = 1.000$), meaning that these two mechanisms were employed with relatively similar tendencies by the students.

These findings reinforce the earlier descriptive results, which demonstrated a clear variation in students' preferences for using defense mechanisms sublimation emerged as the most prominent mechanism, whereas projection was identified as the least frequently used. A visual representation of the Post Hoc test results is presented in the following figure.

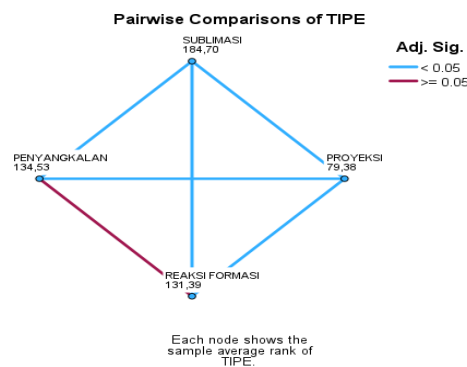


Figure 1. Diagram of Post Hoc Test Results on Students' Defense Mechanism

The figure presents a comparison of the mean ranks for each type of students' defense mechanism based on the results of the Kruskal–Wallis post hoc test. The four points shown in the graph represent the four types of mechanisms, namely Sublimation (184.70), Denial (134.53), Reaction Formation (131.39), and Projection (79.38). These values indicate the relative tendency of each mechanism used by students—the higher the mean rank, the more frequently the mechanism was employed.

The relationships between the points are illustrated with lines indicating the significance of differences between the two compared mechanism types. Blue lines represent pairs with statistically significant differences ($p < 0.05$), whereas red lines indicate no significant difference ($p \geq 0.05$). Based on the graph, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. Sublimation differs significantly from all other mechanisms, indicating that this mechanism is used at a statistically higher frequency than the other three types.
2. Projection also differs significantly from all other mechanisms, showing that projection is the least frequently used defense mechanism among students.
3. Denial and Reaction Formation do not differ significantly from each other, meaning that these two mechanisms are employed at relatively similar levels by the students.

The results of this study indicate that the most dominant type of defense mechanism used by elementary school students is sublimation, followed by denial and reaction formation, while

projection was identified as the least frequently used mechanism. These findings are consistent with the classical theory of defense mechanisms developed by Sigmund Freud (1936) and further elaborated by Anna Freud, who classified sublimation as one of the most mature and adaptive forms of psychological defense. Sublimation reflects an individual's—in this case, children's ability to redirect emotional impulses or inner tension into socially acceptable and productive activities, such as drawing, playing music, or studying.

The predominance of sublimation suggests that most students are capable of channeling emotional stress in a constructive manner. This finding highlights the importance of a supportive environment that promotes healthy emotional regulation, particularly through the role of teachers at school. Teachers serve not only as academic educators but also as key figures in students' social and emotional development. In this context, teachers can foster an emotionally safe classroom environment, provide expressive outlets such as art or role-playing activities, and model emotional acceptance without judgment. Such support allows children to develop more adaptive defense strategies and fosters resilience in coping with stress.

Conversely, the low use of projection, which is classified as a primitive and maladaptive defense mechanism, indicates that students are less likely to attribute their internal conflicts or distress to others. This suggests a relatively healthy level of emotional development among the respondents. Moreover, the absence of a significant difference between reaction formation and denial implies that these forms of defense remain common among children in the elementary age range, particularly when facing academic or social pressures.

These results are consistent with the findings of Cramer (2006), who stated that children's defense mechanisms develop progressively with age and cognitive maturity. They are also in line with Rueth et al. (2019), who found that emotional support from the school and family environment contributes to the use of healthier and more adaptive defense mechanisms. These studies emphasize the crucial role of supportive adult figures including teachers in shaping children's emotional regulation patterns.

The contribution of the present study lies in revealing the general patterns of defense mechanism use among elementary school students, which can serve as a foundation for psychopedagogical interventions. The findings provide valuable insights for teachers, counselors, and educational policymakers regarding the importance of creating learning environments that not only prioritize academic achievement but also address students' emotional needs.

Practically, these results reinforce the urgency of integrating character education and emotional literacy into elementary school curricula. Education should not solely focus on academic outcomes but also aim to develop students' social-emotional competencies, including the ability to recognize, understand, and manage their emotions adaptively. In this regard, teachers play a central role as facilitators of effective emotional learning. Teachers who understand the concept of defense mechanisms are more sensitive to behaviors that may reflect students' psychological coping processes such as sudden withdrawal, irritability, or perfectionism as compensatory responses to internal emotional tension.

Through appropriate professional training, teachers can be equipped with the skills to identify signs of maladaptive defense mechanisms, such as recurring projection or denial, which may indicate unresolved stress or emotional conflict. With such awareness, teachers can respond more wisely by providing empathetic support rather than harsh reprimands that could exacerbate a student's psychological distress. For example, a student who repeatedly blames peers for mistakes in class may be displaying a form of projection. A more appropriate approach would be to engage the student in a calm and nonjudgmental conversation about their feelings, helping them to recognize and express emotions in a healthy manner.

Teachers are also expected to create a learning environment that fosters positive emotional regulation. This can be achieved through positive reinforcement strategies, such as appreciating students' efforts rather than merely their outcomes, and by instilling values of empathy, responsibility, and honesty through contextual and reflective learning activities. Project-based learning, educational games, and group discussions can also be utilized to cultivate self-awareness and healthy conflict resolution skills, ultimately supporting the development of more mature defense mechanisms such as sublimation.

Furthermore, collaboration among teachers, school counselors, parents, and educational management personnel is essential in establishing a sustainable psychosocial support system. Schools should serve not only as places for intellectual education but also as environments that nurture children's emotional resilience and life skills, enabling them to face developmental challenges adaptively and in balance.

This study, however, has several limitations. First, the use of a questionnaire as the sole data collection instrument may be susceptible to perceptual and comprehension bias, particularly among children. Second, the data were obtained from a single age group within one school context; therefore, the generalization of findings to broader contexts should be made with caution.

Future research is recommended to incorporate qualitative methods, such as observations or interviews, to obtain a more contextual and in-depth understanding of children's emotional dynamics. Subsequent studies should also examine the relationship between teacher support or classroom management strategies and the types of defense mechanisms developed by students. Such research would help refine pedagogical strategies aimed at promoting children's mental health and emotional well-being from an early age.

CONCLUSION

This section should summarize the principal findings of the study and discuss their implications. It should provide a synthesis of the research's contributions, offering a clear and concise overview of the key results. The conclusion must align with the findings without introducing any new information or quotes. Instead, it should reflect on the significance of the study's outcomes and their potential impact on the field.

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