

Building a strong school identity through everyday cultural practices: A qualitative study of student character development in secondary education

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ABSTRACT:

Background: School culture is often linked to a positive educational climate, yet its role in reinforcing institutional identity while shaping student character is not always examined in depth. In many schools, daily routines and shared practices structure how values are experienced and internalized by students and teachers.

Aims: This study explores how everyday cultural practices strengthen school identity and how they are reflected in students' character development in a secondary education context.

Methods: A descriptive qualitative approach was employed. Data were gathered through fourteen days of non-participant observation, semi-structured interviews with a mathematics teacher and student affairs personnel, and documentation of school activities. The data were transcribed, organized, reduced, and interpreted to identify recurring themes related to institutional culture and character formation.

Result: The findings indicate that consistent routines such as the 3S practice of smiling, greeting, and saluting, daily literacy sessions, regular flag ceremonies, structured extracurricular programs, religious activities, and teacher role modelling reinforce a recognizable school identity. These practices are reflected in students' discipline, responsibility, social sensitivity, respectful communication, and learning motivation. Reinforcement through rewards, sanctions, and shared expectations contributes to a learning environment that feels orderly and purposeful.

Conclusion: Everyday cultural practices, when applied consistently, can provide a foundation for strengthening school identity and nurturing student character. Sustained commitment and reflective evaluation remain essential to maintain relevance and impact.

Keyword: Everyday cultural practices; School culture; School identity; Secondary education; Student character development.

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INTRODUCTION

Schools function not only as institutions for academic instruction but also as social environments where shared meanings, norms, and expectations are continuously formed and reinforced (Darwanto et al., 2024; Hasan, 2024). In secondary education, students experience a formative period marked by rapid intellectual growth and increasing moral awareness (Papakostas, 2025). During this stage, the daily atmosphere of the school plays a decisive role in shaping how students interpret discipline, responsibility, cooperation, and respect. Therefore, understanding the cultural dynamics within schools becomes essential for explaining how institutional identity and student character develop simultaneously.

School culture can be understood as the collective patterns of beliefs, routines, values, and interactions that structure everyday life within an educational institution (Amin, 2024). Unlike formal regulations or curriculum documents, culture operates through repeated practices that gradually become normalized (Mockler, 2022; Y. Yang, 2023). Greeting rituals, literacy routines, ceremonies, extracurricular engagement, disciplinary systems, and teacher role modelling are not isolated events; rather, they serve as subtle yet powerful channels through which institutional values are communicated. Because these practices are experienced daily, they shape how members perceive their school and how they define their roles within it.

When such practices are implemented consistently, they contribute to the emergence of a strong and recognizable school identity (Leithwood, 2021; Nadeem, 2024). Institutional identity is not constructed solely through official vision statements or administrative structures. Instead, it develops through sustained coherence between declared values and lived experiences (de Jong & Vijge, 2021; Prosek & Gibson, 2021a). In other words, identity is strengthened when everyday cultural practices reflect the principles the school seeks to uphold. As students and teachers participate in shared routines, they collectively reproduce the institution's character.

This connection between culture and identity becomes even more significant when viewed from the perspective of character development (Coombs et al., 2022; Suri & Chandra, 2021). Contemporary education systems increasingly emphasize the importance of nurturing integrity, discipline, empathy, and social responsibility alongside academic competence (Jia et al., 2024). However, character formation rarely results from formal instruction alone. Students internalize values primarily through habitual exposure to consistent behavioral expectations. Consequently, examining everyday cultural practices offers a grounded perspective on how school identity and student character are mutually reinforced within the same environment.

A growing body of research highlights the importance of school culture in shaping educational outcomes (Plaku & Leka, 2025; Wilson Heenan et al., 2023). Scholars describe school culture as a system of shared values, norms, rituals, and expectations that influence how members behave and interact. Positive school culture has been associated with improved discipline, stronger engagement, and enhanced institutional stability. Through repeated interaction, cultural practices establish predictable patterns that guide behavior and create a sense of belonging within the school community. Parallel to this, studies on character education emphasize habituation and modelling as central mechanisms of moral development (Han, 2024; Sanderse, 2024). Character is viewed as the result of sustained practice rather than isolated moral instruction (Islamic et al., 2024; Niemiec & Pearce, 2021). When students are consistently exposed to value-based routines and observe ethical behavior demonstrated by teachers, they gradually internalize these standards. Thus, daily practices

become vehicles for transmitting responsibility, respect, and social awareness. In addition, discussions on institutional identity suggest that identity emerges from cultural coherence (Sherman & Gutiérrez, 2025; S. Yang et al., 2022). When shared practices align with institutional values, they create a distinct institutional image that can be recognized internally and externally (Gatignon & Capron, 2023; Rakova et al., 2021). However, while literature acknowledges the influence of culture on both organizational functioning and character formation, fewer studies integrate these perspectives to examine how everyday cultural practices simultaneously shape institutional identity and student character.

Despite extensive scholarship on school culture and character education, several conceptual and empirical gaps remain (Alzoraiki et al., 2024; Torres, 2022). First, many studies analyze school culture primarily in relation to leadership effectiveness or academic achievement, while research on character education often focuses on formal programs and curricular initiatives. This separation leaves limited understanding of how daily cultural routines operate as a connecting mechanism between institutional identity and student character development. Second, existing research frequently presents normative models of ideal school culture without closely examining how culture is enacted in everyday practice (Bisbey et al., 2021; Ryu et al., 2022). The cumulative influence of habitual activities, such as greeting rituals, literacy sessions, disciplinary enforcement, and extracurricular participation, is rarely analyzed as an integrated identity-building system. As a result, the lived dimension of culture remains underexplored. Third, qualitative, context-based investigations in secondary school settings are still relatively limited (Suyono et al., 2025; Xiao et al., 2026), particularly those that document how everyday practices function as sustained identity-forming processes (Baldera, 2025; Fohim et al., 2024). Without such empirical accounts, discussions about school culture risk remaining abstract. Addressing this gap requires in-depth qualitative inquiry that captures how culture is experienced, interpreted, and maintained within a specific institutional context.

Given these gaps, there is a need to examine school culture as a lived and observable process rather than solely as a conceptual framework (Hickey & Riddle, 2024; Young & Young, 2023). Understanding how everyday practices reinforce institutional identity and influence student character may provide more practical insight for educators and school leaders (Blöse, 2022; Jerdborg, 2022). By focusing on routine activities and shared expectations, this study seeks to illuminate the mechanisms through which culture operates in daily school life. Furthermore, investigating these processes within a secondary education context is particularly relevant, as students at this level are actively negotiating personal and social identities (Arvaja & Sarja, 2021; Rushton & Reiss, 2021). Exploring how institutional practices contribute to this negotiation can deepen understanding of the relationship between collective identity and individual character formation.

This study aims to explore how everyday cultural practices contribute to building a strong school identity and how these practices relate to student character development in secondary education. Specifically, the study seeks to describe the forms of cultural practices implemented within the school, analyze how these practices shape institutional identity, and examine how they are reflected in students' character development. Through qualitative inquiry, the research intends to provide an integrated perspective on how culture functions as both an identity-building and character-forming force within secondary education.

METHOD

Research Design

This study adopted a descriptive qualitative design to examine how everyday cultural practices contribute to the formation of school identity and how these practices are reflected in student character development in secondary education. The design was selected because the phenomenon under study is embedded in routine school life and is best understood through direct observation, participant accounts, and contextual documentation rather than through numerical measurement. To keep the inquiry focused, the study used the analytic framework shown in Figure 1 to organize what was observed and how the data were interpreted. In this research, the framework functioned as a guide for describing practices, tracing their meaning for student behavior, and interpreting their contribution to identity. The stages labelled “implement” and “evaluate” in the figure were used in an interpretive sense, referring to practices already embedded in the school’s daily routines and to the perceived or observable influence reported and seen in the field, not to an intervention carried out by the researcher.

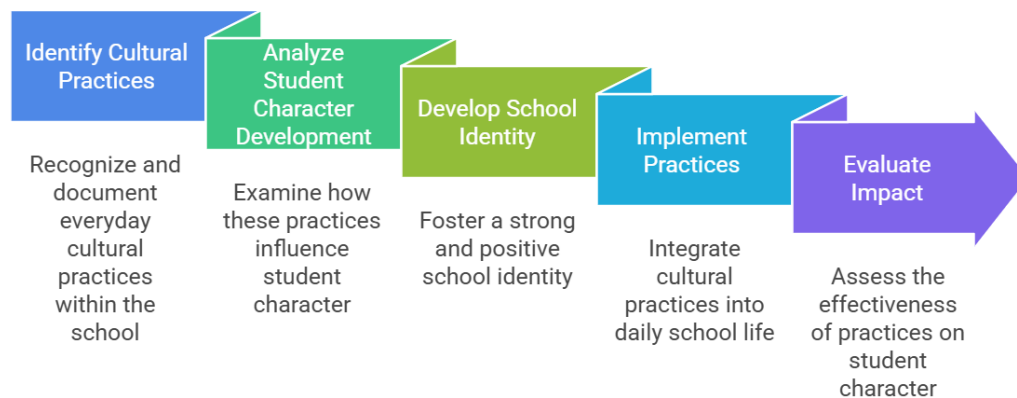


Figure 1. Analytic framework linking everyday cultural practices, school identity, and student character development.

Participant

The study was conducted in a public secondary school context. The main interview informants were a mathematics teacher and staff responsible for student affairs, selected purposively because they were directly involved in classroom routines, student guidance, and the enforcement of school rules. In addition to these informants, students, teachers, and school staff were included as naturalistic observational subjects during everyday activities. Their participation in routine practices, such as greeting rituals, literacy sessions, ceremonies, and extracurricular programs, provided contextual evidence of how school culture was enacted and how character-related behaviors appeared within daily interactions.

Instrument

Three sources of data were used: non-participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. Observation was carried out over fourteen school days, during which the researcher recorded routine practices and interactions using an observation guide aligned with the framework in Figure 1. Semi-structured interviews were used to elicit explanations of why particular practices were maintained, what values they were expected to transmit, and how they were

perceived to influence students. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed for analysis. Documentation was collected to strengthen contextual understanding and to support verification of field accounts, including school rules, schedules, and records of relevant activities, as available.

Data Analysis

Analysis was conducted iteratively throughout the study. Field notes, interview transcripts, and documents were first organized and read repeatedly to build familiarity with the data. The researcher then reduced the data by selecting segments directly related to everyday cultural practices, indicators of student character development, and identity-related meanings. Coding was applied to identify recurring patterns, which were then grouped into broader themes. Figure 1 was used as a practical analytic guide to ensure that interpretation remained connected to the study aims, moving from the documentation of practices to their meaning for student character and to their contribution to school identity. Triangulation across observation, interviews, and documentation was applied to strengthen credibility by checking whether themes were supported consistently across data sources.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

The field observations and interview data revealed that school culture was not expressed through grand policies or symbolic statements, but through simple routines that were consistently practiced each day. What initially appeared as ordinary school activities gradually emerged as structured cultural patterns that shaped both how the institution presented itself and how students behaved within it. During the fourteen days of observation, recurring practices were identified across different domains of school life. These practices were not confined to academic activities alone; rather, they extended into relational interactions, disciplinary enforcement, religious observances, and extracurricular engagement. To provide a clearer overview, these recurring practices were grouped into thematic categories as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Categories of Everyday Cultural Practices Observed

Category	Practices Identified in the Field
Relational Practices	3S greeting routine, respectful daily communication
Academic Practices	Daily 15-minute literacy session, structured classroom opening
Disciplinary Practices	Flag ceremony, uniform regulation, reward and sanction system
Moral and Religious Practices	Prayer routines, Angelus observance, retreat activities
Developmental Practices	Extracurricular and co-curricular programs
Environmental Practices	Cleanliness monitoring, classroom and yard maintenance

As shown in Table 1, cultural practices were distributed across multiple dimensions of school life. This distribution indicates that school culture was embedded in daily interactions rather than concentrated in a single program or event. Each category reflected a different aspect of the school's shared expectations. Beyond categorization, further analysis examined how these practices signaled institutional identity and how they were reflected in student behavior. The findings demonstrated a clear alignment between repeated routines and observable character-related patterns. This relationship is summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Relationship between Cultural Practices, School Identity, and Student Character

Cultural Practice	Institutional Identity Reflected	Character Traits Observed
3S routine	Respectful and welcoming school climate	Politeness, social sensitivity
Literacy session	Academic seriousness and learning orientation	Focus, study discipline
Flag ceremony	Structured and rule-oriented institution	Punctuality, compliance
Religious observances	Moral and value-centered environment	Empathy, self-regulation
Classroom conditioning	Organized and prepared learning atmosphere	Readiness to participate
Extracurricular activities	Holistic developmental focus	Cooperation, responsibility
Reward and sanctions	Consistency in regulation	Behavioral accountability
Teacher modelling	Integrity-driven leadership	Emulation of positive conduct
Cleanliness enforcement	Orderly and disciplined environment	Environmental responsibility

The mapping presented in Table 2 suggests that identity was not abstractly constructed; it became visible through consistent student behavior. Discipline observed during ceremonies reinforced the perception of an orderly institution, while respectful greetings strengthened the school's relational identity. To understand student development more specifically, recurring behavioral indicators were synthesized into broader character dimensions. These dimensions are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Emergent Character Dimensions from Field Observation

Character Dimension	Field Indicators
Discipline	Arriving on time, adherence to uniform rules
Responsibility	Completing tasks, participating in structured activities
Social Awareness	Respectful peer interaction, cooperative behavior
Integrity	Alignment between expected and demonstrated conduct
Learning Motivation	Engagement during literacy and classroom activities

The patterns identified in Table 3 did not emerge from isolated instruction but from repeated exposure to structured expectations. Students appeared to internalize routines over time, and these internalized patterns were observable in their daily conduct. Taken together, the findings indicate that everyday cultural practices functioned as stabilizing mechanisms within the school environment. Identity and character were not developed through separate processes; rather, they evolved simultaneously through consistent participation in shared routines. The strength of institutional identity seemed to depend less on formal declarations and more on the continuity of everyday practice.

Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that school identity in the observed secondary school did not emerge from formal declarations or institutional slogans, but from the steady repetition of everyday practices. Throughout the observation period, routines such as greeting rituals, literacy sessions, ceremonies, and structured disciplinary enforcement were carried out with visible consistency. Over time, these practices appeared to shape how members of the school community understood what the institution stood for (Bishop et al., 2021). Identity, therefore, was not presented as an abstract concept; it was experienced through daily participation in shared routines (Feher, 2021).

This becomes particularly evident in relational practices, especially the 3S routine of smiling, greeting, and saluting. While such gestures may seem simple, their repetition created a recognizable atmosphere of respect and mutual acknowledgment (Saragih, 2024). Students were not merely instructed to behave politely; they were immersed in an environment where respectful interaction was normalized. As a result, relational identity developed not through instruction alone but through lived experience (Prosek & Gibson, 2021). This illustrates how small, consistent actions can gradually define the social tone of an institution.

A similar pattern was observed in academic routines. The daily literacy session did more than encourage reading habits; it established a collective rhythm that framed learning as a serious and shared responsibility (Grummell, 2023). Because this activity preceded formal instruction, it subtly communicated that intellectual engagement was a foundational value. Students' participation in this routine reflected increasing attentiveness and discipline, suggesting that academic identity was reinforced through habituation (Zembylas, 2021). In this way, institutional orientation toward learning became visible in everyday structure rather than in formal policy statements.

Disciplinary practices further strengthened this emerging identity. Regular flag ceremonies, punctual schedules, and uniform regulations contributed to an image of order and structure (Rowe et al., 2023). Importantly, students' observable compliance during these activities reinforced that image. The relationship between institutional structure and student behavior appeared reciprocal: consistent enforcement shaped student conduct, and disciplined student conduct reinforced institutional identity. This interaction indicates that identity is maintained not only by rules but by the collective enactment of those rules.

The integration of moral and religious observances added another dimension to this process. Daily prayer routines and spiritual activities embedded ethical reflection within the school day (Alsuhaymi & Atallah, 2025). These practices positioned the institution as value-oriented and provided students with structured moments for self-regulation. Rather than functioning as isolated moral lessons, these observances became part of the school's cultural fabric (Islamic et al., 2024). Consequently, moral identity was reinforced alongside academic and disciplinary identity, creating a more holistic institutional character.

Across these domains, character development appeared as an outcome of repeated exposure to consistent expectations (Cannon et al., 2021). Discipline, responsibility, social awareness, and integrity were not introduced as theoretical concepts; instead, they were practiced in concrete situations such as attending ceremonies, completing literacy tasks, cooperating in extracurricular activities, and adhering to rules. The visible alignment between teacher behaviour and institutional expectations further strengthened this process (Lim et al., 2023). When adults modelled the same discipline and respect that were expected of students, cultural messages gained credibility and stability.

What becomes clear from these patterns is the importance of coherence (Holst, 2023). The school's relational, academic, disciplinary, and moral practices did not operate independently; they converged to communicate consistent values. This alignment reduced ambiguity and created a stable cultural environment in which students could anticipate expectations (Shonfeld et al., 2021). Through this stability, identity and character development unfolded simultaneously. The strength of the school's identity was therefore not rooted in complexity, but in the continuity of everyday practice.

Taken together, the discussion underscores that building a strong school identity depends less on grand reform initiatives and more on sustained cultural consistency (Leu Bonanno, 2023). Everyday practices, when enacted collectively and repeatedly, form the foundation upon which both institutional coherence and student character development rest. In secondary education, where students are actively negotiating their personal and social identities, such continuity provides structure and direction. The findings suggest that identity and character are not parallel outcomes but intertwined processes shaped by the rhythms of daily school life.

Implications

The findings of this study suggest that the strength of school identity is closely tied to the consistency of everyday practice. Rather than relying on formal reform agendas or symbolic positioning, identity appears to be sustained through repeated routines that structure daily school life. This implies that school leaders should view routine activities not as administrative formalities, but as cultural anchors that communicate shared expectations. When greeting rituals, literacy sessions, disciplinary structures, and moral observances are maintained with coherence, they gradually define the character of the institution. This consistency also places responsibility on educators as cultural agents. The credibility of school values depends not only on written regulations but on visible alignment between institutional expectations and adult behaviour. When teachers demonstrate the discipline, respect, and responsibility they expect from students, cultural norms become embodied rather than abstract. Therefore, professional reflection and ethical modelling should be recognized as central components of character formation strategies within schools. Furthermore, the study indicates that character education may be more effective when embedded within daily routines rather than implemented as separate programs. Integrating moral, relational, and academic values into habitual practices appears to generate more stable behavioural patterns. For practitioners, this underscores the importance of sustaining simple but meaningful routines that consistently reinforce shared principles.

Research contribution

This study contributes to educational research by offering an integrated view of school culture, institutional identity, and student character development as interconnected processes. While previous discussions often treat these themes independently, the present findings demonstrate how everyday cultural practices operate as the practical bridge between them. Identity was shown to emerge from routine enactment, while character development unfolded through repeated participation in structured expectations. In addition, the study provides context-based qualitative insight into how identity is constructed through lived experience rather than policy declaration. By focusing on observable routines and their behavioural manifestations, the research deepens understanding of how institutional coherence is sustained over time. This perspective strengthens theoretical arguments that emphasize habituation and modelling as foundational mechanisms of moral and social development.

Limitations

Although the study offers meaningful insight, several limitations should be acknowledged. The research was conducted within a single secondary school context, which means that the findings reflect a specific cultural environment. Educational institutions with different organizational structures, leadership styles, or community backgrounds may demonstrate alternative cultural patterns. Moreover, the qualitative design prioritizes interpretive depth over statistical measurement. The conclusions are based on observed behaviours, participant accounts, and

contextual documentation rather than quantifiable indicators. While triangulation was used to strengthen credibility, the findings represent an interpretive understanding of cultural processes rather than causal verification. Additionally, the observation period was limited to a defined timeframe. Cultural consistency is often shaped over longer durations, and extended fieldwork might reveal variations or shifts that were not fully captured within the scope of this study.

Suggestions

Building on these limitations, future research may consider comparative studies across multiple secondary schools to explore how variations in cultural coherence influence institutional identity and student character development. Such comparison could help clarify whether the patterns identified here are context-specific or reflect broader educational tendencies. Longitudinal approaches may also provide valuable insight into how cultural practices evolve and whether their influence on student behaviour remains stable over time. Tracking students' behavioural patterns across academic years could illuminate the durability of habituated character traits. Finally, deeper exploration of students' subjective interpretations of school routines may enrich understanding of internalization processes. While this study identified observable behavioural patterns, further inquiry into how students make meaning of everyday practices would offer a more comprehensive view of the relationship between institutional culture and personal development.

CONCLUSION

This study affirms that school identity is built less through what an institution claims about itself and more through what it repeatedly does in everyday practice. The school's routines, including the 3S greeting habit, daily literacy activities, ceremonies, moral and religious observances, structured discipline, and the example set by teachers, collectively created a stable cultural pattern that students encountered each day. Within this pattern, character development emerged as a lived process rather than a lesson delivered in isolation. Discipline, responsibility, respectful interaction, and learning motivation were strengthened through continual participation in shared expectations and consistent reinforcement. The findings also indicate that identity and character did not develop in separate tracks; student behaviour made the school's values visible, while the school's cultural consistency shaped the behaviours that were later recognized as part of its identity. In secondary education, where students are actively negotiating social and moral orientations, sustained routines provide a practical framework for value internalization. For this reason, efforts to strengthen school identity and student character are most likely to succeed when schools protect the continuity of everyday cultural practices and routinely reflect on their alignment with the values they intend to uphold.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Wilibaldus Bhoke conceptualized the study, formulated the research design, and supervised the overall research process. He contributed substantially to the development of the theoretical framework, interpretation of findings, and final revision of the manuscript. Jeane Rosalia Kapoh Dolu was responsible for data collection, including conducting observations, interviews, and documentation. She contributed to data transcription, initial coding, and the organization of research findings. She also participated in drafting the results section. Iventius Bai Rema contributed to data analysis and synthesis, assisted in interpreting the relationship between school culture, institutional identity, and student character development, and was involved in drafting and refining the discussion section. He also supported manuscript editing and formatting prior to submission.

All authors discussed the results, contributed to the final version of the manuscript, and approved the submitted version for publication.

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