

# Structured school discipline as a cultural practice: A qualitative case study on character formation in secondary education

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## ABSTRACT:

**Background:** School discipline is often reduced to compliance with rules, even though in practice it can become a shared routine that shapes how students learn to act and relate. How structured discipline works as a cultural practice that supports character formation in secondary schooling still needs closer qualitative attention.

**Aims:** This study examines how structured school discipline is enacted as a cultural practice and how it is linked to students' character formation in a secondary education setting.

**Methods:** Using a qualitative case study design, data were gathered through direct observations of daily school routines, semi structured interviews with teachers and students, and review of relevant school documents. The analysis followed a descriptive qualitative approach to identify recurring patterns across sources and connect disciplinary practices with character related outcomes.

**Result:** Discipline was experienced as a daily cultural pattern supported by leadership and teacher role modelling, strict time regulation, routine checks of uniform and preparedness, regular evaluation meetings, extracurricular participation, and recognition for achievement. These practices were associated with students becoming more organized, accountable, and better able to manage time and tasks, alongside improved self regulation and cooperative behaviour. Challenges included student resistance to rules perceived as overly strict and occasional inconsistencies in enforcement.

**Conclusion:** Structured discipline can function as a cultural practice that strengthens character formation when it is modelled, communicated, and applied consistently. Sustaining its benefits requires continual reflection through evaluation and coordinated support among school staff, students, and parents.

**Keyword:** Character Formation; Qualitative Case Study; School Culture; School Discipline; Secondary Education.

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## INTRODUCTION

Education is not merely a structured transmission of knowledge but a formative process through which individuals develop habits, values, and dispositions that shape their participation in society (Smolentseva, 2023). In secondary education, this formative dimension becomes particularly significant because students are in a transitional stage of psychological and moral development (Lovren & Jablanovic, 2023). Schools are therefore expected to cultivate responsibility, integrity, and self regulation alongside academic competence. The effectiveness of such cultivation depends not only on curriculum design but also on the broader cultural environment in which students learn and interact.

School culture encompasses shared norms, routines, expectations, and relational patterns that influence everyday behavior within the institution (Jarl et al., 2021; Plaku & Leka, 2025). These patterns are not created instantly; they emerge through repeated practices that gradually become internalized by members of the school community. When routines are consistently enacted and reinforced, they begin to function as guiding structures that shape how students perceive responsibility, authority, and social interaction. In this sense, culture operates as an invisible yet powerful framework that directs behavior beyond formal instruction (Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021; Stutchbury, 2022).

Discipline is one of the central elements frequently associated with school culture (Jayawardena, 2021; Welsh, 2024). In many educational settings, discipline is often interpreted narrowly as compliance with rules or avoidance of sanctions. Such an interpretation reduces discipline to control and surveillance. However, discipline can also be understood as a structured practice that organizes time, behavior, and interaction in ways that foster responsibility and self management. When implemented consistently and modeled by school leaders and teachers, discipline may evolve into a shared cultural practice rather than a mere regulatory mechanism.

In secondary schools, structured discipline often manifests through punctuality requirements, uniform standards, monitoring systems, extracurricular engagement, and systematic evaluation processes. These elements, when coordinated, create predictable routines that help students develop habits of organization and accountability (Alsharif, 2025; Cedergren & Hassel, 2024). Over time, repeated exposure to such structures may contribute to the internalization of discipline as a personal value. The transformation from external enforcement to internal commitment represents a crucial dimension of character formation (Hasan, 2025; Kawai, 2021).

Despite the recognized importance of discipline in educational discourse (Cui & Teo, 2021; Usher & Barak, 2024), the processes through which structured disciplinary systems become embedded within school culture are not always examined in depth. Much discussion remains at the level of policy or behavioral management. There is still a need to explore how daily routines, leadership modeling, and institutional consistency collectively shape students' character development. Understanding this process is essential for clarifying how discipline functions not only as regulation but as a cultural practice within secondary education (Elmesky & Marcucci, 2023; Mincu, 2022).

The concept of discipline in educational settings has been examined from psychological, managerial, and moral perspectives (Abbas et al., 2024; Ooi et al., 2025). From a character education standpoint, discipline is closely linked to the formation of habits that reflect moral responsibility and integrity. Scholars of character development emphasize that consistent practice and reinforcement

are essential for transforming values into stable dispositions. Discipline, in this view, is not imposed externally but cultivated through structured repetition. Social learning theory provides further insight into how discipline becomes internalized (Macagno et al., 2024). Behavioral patterns are often acquired through observation and modeling, particularly when authority figures demonstrate consistency between expectation and action. In school environments, principals and teachers serve as significant role models whose behavior signals institutional norms. When leaders consistently embody punctuality, fairness, and accountability, students are more likely to interpret discipline as a shared standard rather than arbitrary control. Organizational culture theory also contributes to understanding how discipline becomes embedded in institutional life (Torres, 2022). Cultural practices are sustained through repeated routines, shared interpretations, and collective reinforcement. Within educational institutions, practices such as time regulation, systematic evaluation meetings, and structured extracurricular activities may function as cultural mechanisms that normalize discipline. When these mechanisms operate coherently, they reinforce each other and strengthen the stability of institutional norms (Blanco et al., 2022; Hindriks, 2022). Previous research has demonstrated that consistent disciplinary environments are associated with improved behavioral outcomes and learning engagement (Koretsky et al., 2021). However, many studies focus on measurable outcomes such as reduced misconduct or increased achievement scores. Fewer investigations examine how discipline operates as a holistic cultural system that shapes character through daily practice. This conceptual gap suggests the need for more nuanced qualitative inquiry (Dyar, 2022; Leggat et al., 2023).

Although existing scholarship recognizes the importance of discipline and school culture, several limitations remain evident (Mayer, 2024; Muñiz, 2021). First, discipline is frequently treated as a management strategy designed to control student behavior rather than as a cultural process that shapes identity and moral development. This managerial framing overlooks how structured routines gradually influence students' internal dispositions. Second, a substantial portion of empirical research relies on quantitative indicators such as academic performance or rates of disciplinary infractions (Taylor et al., 2023). While such measures are valuable, they provide limited insight into how students and teachers experience and interpret disciplinary structures in everyday school life. The lived dimension of discipline as a cultural practice remains underexplored. Third, few studies investigate how different components of structured discipline such as leadership modeling, time regulation, systematic evaluation, extracurricular engagement, and reward systems interact as an integrated framework (Huang et al., 2025). Most analyses isolate individual factors without examining how they function collectively within a coherent cultural system. As a result, the relational dynamics among these elements are insufficiently theorized (Kvangraven, 2021). Finally, within secondary education contexts where character formation is considered a primary objective, qualitative case based examinations of disciplinary culture remain relatively limited. There is a need to understand how structured discipline moves beyond formal regulation and becomes embedded in shared meaning, routine practice, and student identity formation. Addressing this gap requires an in depth qualitative approach capable of capturing complexity rather than relying solely on numerical indicators (Lepak et al., 2022).

Viewing discipline as a cultural practice offers a broader analytical lens for understanding character formation in schools (Carless et al., 2023). Rather than conceptualizing discipline solely as rule enforcement, this perspective emphasizes the importance of consistency, modeling, and

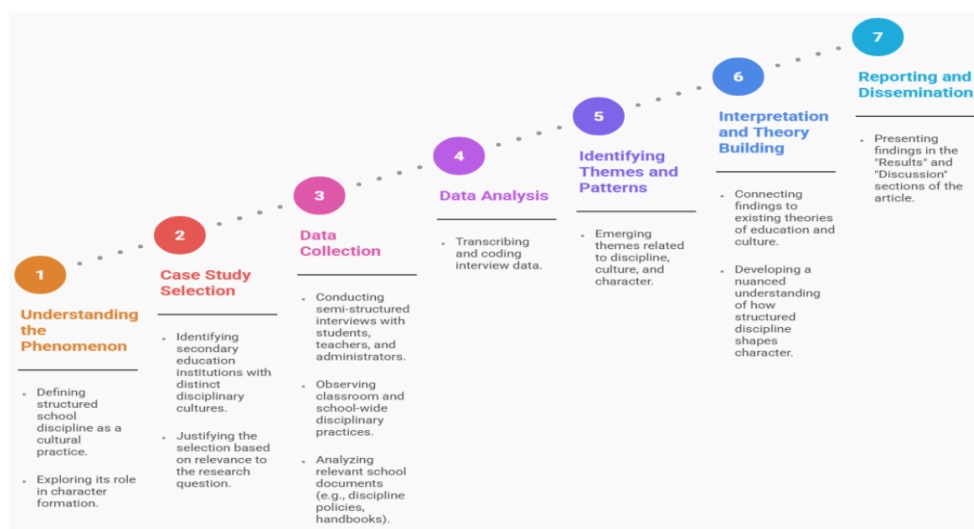
institutional coherence. By examining discipline as a structured and shared practice, it becomes possible to understand how habits of responsibility and self regulation are cultivated over time (Docherty, 2021; Zarestky et al., 2022). In secondary education, where students are negotiating autonomy and social identity, structured disciplinary environments may significantly influence behavioral development (Posselt & Nuñez, 2022). Investigating how such structures operate within everyday school life can provide practical and theoretical insights for educators and school leaders seeking sustainable character education strategies. The present study therefore adopts a qualitative case study approach to explore how structured discipline functions as a cultural practice and how it contributes to character formation.

This study aims to analyze how structured school discipline is enacted as a cultural practice within a secondary education setting and to examine how such structuring contributes to students' character formation. The study seeks to identify key disciplinary practices embedded in daily routines, explore the role of leadership and institutional consistency in sustaining these practices, and understand how students experience and internalize discipline as part of their character development.

## METHOD

### Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative case study approach to explore how structured school discipline functions as a cultural practice and how it contributes to character formation in a secondary education setting. A case study design was considered appropriate because the research sought to understand processes, meanings, and interactions within their real institutional context rather than to test predetermined variables. The focus was not on measuring disciplinary outcomes statistically, but on examining how discipline is enacted, experienced, and interpreted by members of the school community. The case was selected purposively based on the presence of clearly structured disciplinary routines that were consistently implemented in daily school life. This allowed the researcher to observe how discipline operated not only as a formal policy but as a lived practice embedded in routines, interactions, and institutional norms. To provide a structured overview of the research procedure, Figure 1 illustrates the stages undertaken throughout the qualitative case study.



**Figure 1.** Research Procedure of the Qualitative Case Study

As presented in Figure 1, the research began with clarifying the phenomenon of structured school discipline as a cultural practice. After determining the case, data were collected through multiple sources to capture different perspectives. The collected data were then analyzed through systematic coding and thematic identification. The process continued with interpretative reflection, linking empirical findings to relevant theoretical perspectives before final reporting.

Although the stages appear sequential in the diagram for clarity, the actual process was iterative. Data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously, allowing preliminary interpretations to guide subsequent observations and interviews. This flexibility enabled deeper engagement with emerging patterns related to discipline, culture, and character formation.

### **Participant**

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that those directly involved in disciplinary practices were represented. The participants included the school principal, several teachers, and students from different grade levels. The principal and teachers were included because of their central roles in designing, modeling, and enforcing disciplinary structures. Students were involved to provide insight into how disciplinary routines were experienced and internalized in everyday school life. Involving multiple groups allowed for triangulation of perspectives and helped capture discipline as a shared cultural practice rather than a top down mechanism.

### **Instrument**

Data were gathered through three primary techniques: observation, semi structured interviews, and document analysis. Observation was conducted during classroom activities, school assemblies, extracurricular sessions, and routine disciplinary monitoring. Field notes were taken to record patterns of interaction, time regulation practices, uniform compliance, and other structured routines. Semi structured interviews were conducted with the principal, teachers, and selected students. The interview questions focused on participants' understanding of discipline, their experiences with rule enforcement, perceptions of fairness and consistency, and reflections on how these practices influenced responsibility and behavior. Document analysis complemented these methods by reviewing school regulations, disciplinary policies, attendance records, and related institutional documents. These materials helped contextualize the observed practices and validate interview responses.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis followed a descriptive qualitative process. Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim, and observation notes were organized systematically. The analysis began with open coding to identify meaningful units related to discipline, cultural routines, leadership modeling, reinforcement strategies, and character development. The initial codes were then grouped into broader categories, allowing recurring patterns to emerge. Through continuous comparison across data sources, key themes were identified that reflected how structured discipline operated as a cultural practice. Interpretation involved connecting these themes with relevant theoretical perspectives on school culture and character formation. To enhance credibility, triangulation was conducted by comparing findings from interviews, observations, and documents. Patterns were examined across participant groups to ensure consistency of interpretation. The iterative nature of the analysis allowed emerging insights to refine subsequent coding and thematic development.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Result

The analysis revealed that structured school discipline within the observed secondary institution functioned as a lived cultural pattern rather than merely a regulatory framework. Across classroom observations, interviews, and institutional documents, disciplinary practices appeared woven into daily routines and relational interactions. Instead of operating as isolated rules, these practices formed a coherent structure that shaped expectations, behavior, and responsibility.

Four recurring components emerged from the coding process: clear expectations, consistent enforcement, positive reinforcement, and restorative practices. These components did not operate independently; rather, they interacted in ways that gradually normalized discipline as part of everyday school life. The distribution of coded references across these components is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Distribution of Thematic References on Structured Discipline

Disciplinary Component	Coded References	Percentage (%)
Clear Expectations	18	26.9
Consistent Enforcement	22	32.8
Positive Reinforcement	15	22.4
Restorative Practices	12	17.9

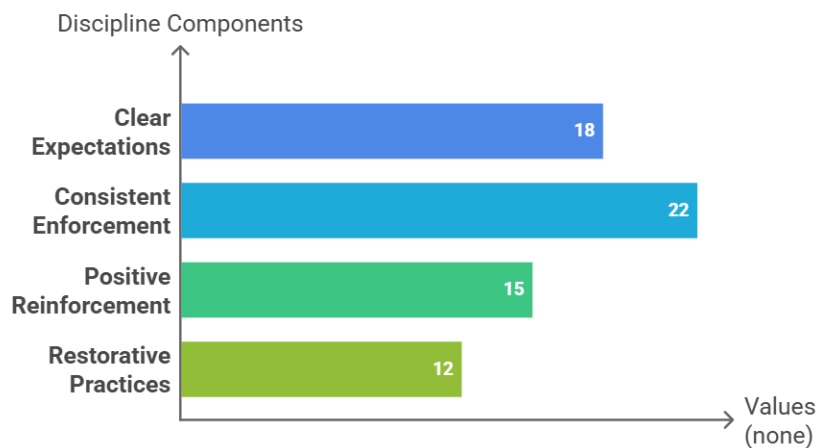
The data show that consistent enforcement was the most salient component across sources, indicating that discipline was experienced as credible when rules were applied in a stable and predictable manner. Participants did not describe consistency simply as strictness, but as a form of fairness that reduced uncertainty and prevented selective treatment. Students repeatedly connected their willingness to comply with the expectation that consequences would be the same regardless of who violated the rules, which helped them interpret discipline as an institutional norm rather than a personal judgment. From the teachers' and administrators' perspectives, consistent enforcement also functioned as a signal of collective commitment, because uneven implementation was viewed as quickly weakening authority and creating "grey areas" that encouraged negotiation and resistance. In this way, consistency became the cultural backbone of discipline, sustaining shared meaning and strengthening students' sense of accountability in everyday school life.

Clear expectations emerged as the second most prominent element, suggesting that discipline was supported not only by enforcement but also by clarity of behavioral boundaries. School regulations, punctuality standards, and uniform policies were communicated in explicit terms and reinforced through routine reminders and monitoring. Importantly, participants described these expectations as becoming normalized through repetition, meaning that students gradually recognized them as part of the school's ordinary rhythm rather than as occasional interventions. This normalization reduced the need for constant corrective action because students learned to anticipate what was required before entering classrooms, assemblies, or extracurricular sessions. When expectations were framed as shared routines, they appeared to foster practical habits such as arriving on time, preparing materials, and maintaining orderly conduct, which are closely tied to character related qualities like responsibility and self management.

Positive reinforcement complemented the structure of enforcement and expectations by providing a motivational dimension that strengthened students' voluntary commitment. Recognition was not limited to top academic performance, but also extended to effort, participation, and consistent responsible behavior, which made discipline feel achievable rather than punitive. Students

interpreted acknowledgement as a form of validation that their self control and persistence mattered, which encouraged them to sustain positive routines over time. Alongside reinforcement, restorative practices appeared as a reflective response to misconduct. Although less frequent in coded references, restorative actions were significant because they shifted the focus from punishment alone to learning and repair. Teachers described using dialogue and guided reflection to help students understand the impact of their actions and to take responsibility for corrective steps. This approach supported moral awareness and self regulation, reinforcing the idea that discipline was not merely about avoiding sanctions but about building character through accountability and reflection.

The relative prominence of each component is illustrated in Figure 2, which visually confirms that consistent enforcement and clear expectations formed the primary structure of disciplinary culture, while reinforcement and restorative responses provided supportive mechanisms that deepened internalization.



**Figure 2.** Distribution of Structured Discipline Components

The visual representation confirms that enforcement and expectation clarity formed the structural backbone of disciplinary culture, while reinforcement and restoration provided supportive dimensions. Together, these elements contributed to observable behavioral shifts, including improved punctuality, greater responsibility in completing tasks, cooperative interaction, and enhanced self regulation.

Overall, the findings suggest that structured discipline in this context operated as a stable cultural framework. Its effectiveness did not stem from severity, but from coherence, repetition, and shared understanding among members of the school community.

## Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that structured school discipline gains its formative power when it is sustained as a shared cultural rhythm rather than enforced as a series of isolated commands. What appeared most striking was not the strictness of the rules themselves, but the stability with which they were implemented. Students did not describe discipline primarily in terms of punishment; instead, they associated it with predictability. This predictability seemed to reduce anxiety and ambiguity, allowing students to anticipate expectations and adjust their conduct accordingly (Emerson & Costley, 2023). In this sense, discipline became less about control and more about environmental consistency.

The centrality of consistent enforcement suggests that fairness functions as a moral anchor within institutional life (Ro'is et al., 2025). When students perceived that rules applied equally to everyone, the legitimacy of the system strengthened. Unequal treatment, by contrast, was viewed as potentially destabilizing. This finding indicates that character formation may depend not only on the presence of rules, but on the perceived justice embedded within their application (Szafran & Bach, 2024). Accountability, therefore, was shaped not through coercion but through stable institutional credibility.

Clear expectations further reinforced this cultural foundation. The repetition of punctuality standards, uniform guidelines, and structured routines gradually normalized certain behaviors (Kremser & Blagoev, 2021). Over time, these expectations became part of the school's ordinary atmosphere rather than extraordinary interventions. Students appeared to internalize these patterns through repetition, which suggests that character formation often emerges through habituation rather than direct moral instruction. The environment itself became instructive.

The relationship between clarity and consistency proved particularly significant. Clarity without enforcement risks becoming symbolic, while enforcement without clarity may be interpreted as arbitrary (Brook & Cseres, 2024). The findings indicate that the interaction of these two elements created a coherent framework in which students could situate their behavior. Within such a framework, responsibility was not demanded abstractly but practiced daily through structured routines. This daily rehearsal of responsibility seems to be a crucial pathway toward internalized discipline (Steyn & Sewchurran, 2021).

Positive reinforcement introduced a different but complementary dynamic. Recognition of effort and responsible behavior appeared to foster voluntary engagement rather than reluctant compliance (Carter & Siddiki, 2021). Students described feeling acknowledged when their discipline was noticed, which strengthened their willingness to maintain it. This suggests that affirmation plays a meaningful role in stabilizing disciplined habits (Bernardi della Rosa & Zengiaro, 2025). Rather than weakening authority, recognition appeared to humanize the disciplinary system and make it relational rather than mechanical.

Although restorative practices were less dominant numerically, their qualitative impact was notable. When misconduct occurred, reflective dialogue allowed students to examine consequences and repair relationships. This shift from punitive reaction to reflective engagement positioned discipline as a learning process. In these moments, character development was most visible, as students moved from defensive responses toward acknowledgment and corrective intention. Such practices illustrate that discipline can cultivate moral awareness when it includes opportunities for reflection (Schwittay, 2025).

Leadership modeling also emerged as a subtle yet influential factor. Students observed how teachers and administrators adhered to the same expectations imposed on them (Walker & Qian, 2022). When authority figures demonstrated punctuality and consistency, institutional norms gained authenticity. This modeling reduced the perception of hierarchy and strengthened the sense of shared responsibility. Discipline thus appeared less imposed and more collectively enacted. Taken together, the findings suggest that structured discipline functions as a cultural ecosystem rather than a single strategy. Its effectiveness derives from coherence, repetition, and relational trust. Character formation, in this context, did not arise from isolated moral lessons but from participation in a stable and predictable institutional environment. When discipline is embedded in daily practice and

sustained through fairness, clarity, affirmation, and reflection, it gradually shapes dispositions that extend beyond immediate compliance toward enduring responsibility.

### **Implications**

The findings of this study suggest that efforts to cultivate character in secondary education cannot rely solely on moral instruction or sporadic disciplinary intervention. Instead, character formation appears to emerge from the steady repetition of structured routines that are applied consistently and perceived as fair. This indicates that school leaders and teachers need to view discipline as an ongoing cultural commitment rather than a corrective response to misconduct. When expectations are communicated clearly and enacted uniformly, students gradually learn to navigate institutional life with greater responsibility and self awareness. Moreover, the interaction between enforcement, clarity, reinforcement, and restoration highlights the importance of balance. A system that emphasizes control without affirmation risks fostering compliance without internalization. Conversely, a system that relies only on encouragement without consistency may weaken institutional authority. The study therefore implies that sustainable character development requires coherence among disciplinary components. Schools seeking to strengthen their character education programs may benefit from examining not only what rules exist, but how those rules are lived and experienced in everyday practice.

### **Research contribution**

Building upon these implications, this study contributes to educational discourse by offering a cultural perspective on structured discipline. Rather than interpreting discipline as a managerial technique designed to regulate behavior, the findings position it as a relational and systemic practice embedded in daily school life. This conceptual shift expands the conversation about character formation by emphasizing the role of institutional coherence and shared meaning. In addition, the qualitative approach adopted in this study allows for a deeper understanding of how discipline is perceived and internalized. By foregrounding the voices of students and educators, the research illuminates the subtle processes through which predictability, fairness, and recognition shape behavioral dispositions. In doing so, it provides a framework that may inform further theoretical development and comparative inquiry into school-based character formation.

### **Limitations**

While the study offers valuable insights, its conclusions must be interpreted within certain boundaries. Because the research focused on a single secondary school, the patterns observed reflect a specific institutional context. Cultural norms, leadership styles, and community expectations may differ across settings, potentially influencing how discipline is enacted and experienced. Furthermore, the reliance on qualitative data prioritizes depth over generalizability. Although this approach captures nuanced perspectives and lived experiences, it does not establish statistical relationships between disciplinary structure and measurable outcomes. The interpretations presented here are therefore contextual and exploratory rather than predictive. Recognizing these limitations provides a basis for refining future investigations.

### **Suggestions**

Given these limitations, future research may extend this line of inquiry by examining multiple schools with varying disciplinary cultures to explore comparative patterns. Such studies could help clarify whether the integrated structure identified here represents a broader model or a context-specific configuration. Comparative analysis would also deepen understanding of how different

institutional environments mediate character formation. Longitudinal designs may further enrich the field by tracing how sustained exposure to structured disciplinary culture influences students over time. Exploring whether habits cultivated within school settings endure beyond graduation would provide stronger evidence regarding the long-term impact of cultural discipline. Additionally, combining qualitative insights with quantitative indicators may offer a more comprehensive account of how structured discipline interacts with academic engagement and socio-emotional development. Through these extensions, the cultural dimension of discipline can be examined with greater breadth and precision.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study affirms that structured discipline, when embedded within the everyday life of a school, carries formative potential that extends beyond behavioral regulation. The evidence suggests that discipline becomes meaningful for students not because it is rigid, but because it is stable, predictable, and enacted with fairness. Through repeated routines and consistent implementation, expectations gradually shift from externally imposed requirements to internally acknowledged standards. In this process, discipline ceases to function merely as a mechanism of control and begins to operate as a shared cultural pattern. The findings further indicate that character formation unfolds through participation in this stable institutional environment. Responsibility, self regulation, and accountability were not cultivated through isolated moral instruction, but through daily engagement with coherent structures that aligned enforcement, affirmation, and reflection. When disciplinary practices are sustained collectively and modeled authentically by school leaders and teachers, they create conditions in which students learn to situate their behavior within a broader framework of mutual expectations. Ultimately, this study underscores that the strength of structured discipline lies in its integration within school culture. It is through consistency, relational trust, and lived practice that discipline contributes to enduring character development. By approaching discipline as a cultural process rather than a corrective tool, secondary schools may cultivate dispositions that extend beyond immediate compliance toward sustained personal responsibility.

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### **AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT**

Maria Editha Bela conceptualized the study, designed the research framework, and led the data collection process. Yohanes Oskarito Kila Kel contributed to data analysis, interpretation of findings, and the development of the discussion section. Yosefa Vilmit Ndao participated in literature review development, manuscript drafting, and revision of the final version. All authors reviewed, approved, and agreed on the final manuscript submitted for publication.

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