

Consistency, discipline, and role modeling: Examining the influence of school culture on student character in a rural vocational school

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ABSTRACT:

Background: Character formation in rural vocational schooling is shaped less by formal policies than by daily routines, teacher conduct, and the consistency of discipline. Where home based discipline is uneven, school culture becomes a key environment for internalizing values and learning attitudes.

Aims: This study examines how consistency in discipline enforcement and teacher role modeling, as core elements of school culture, influence student character, focusing on self confidence, positive values, and learning motivation in a rural vocational school.

Methods: A qualitative descriptive approach was applied. Data were collected through participatory observation, in depth interviews with students, teachers, and the principal, and document review of school rules and activity programs, enabling triangulation across sources.

Result: Teacher role modeling supported the internalization of responsibility, honesty, and respectful interaction, especially when teachers demonstrated punctuality, appropriate language, and empathy. Yet discipline was enforced inconsistently, creating a permissive climate that weakened students' awareness of rules and accountability. Irregular non academic activities limited opportunities to develop cooperation, leadership, and civic mindedness. In addition, teacher centered classroom interaction reduced students' confidence to express opinions and participate actively.

Conclusion: School culture shapes student character through repeated practice and visible adult example rather than written regulations alone. Strengthening discipline consistency, reinforcing teacher exemplarity, and widening participatory spaces through routine co curricular activities and more dialogic classroom interaction are essential for sustainable character development in rural vocational education.

Keyword: Discipline Enforcement; Rural Vocational Education; School Culture; Student Character Development; Teacher Role Modelling.

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INTRODUCTION

Character formation remains one of the most enduring expectations placed on schooling, not only to produce academically capable learners but also to nurture responsibility, respect, integrity, and social awareness (Jelovac, 2025). In many school systems, however, character education is frequently expressed through official statements and curriculum goals, while the daily experiences that students encounter may communicate different messages (Ciampa & Wolfe, 2021; Hastasari et al., 2022). This tension makes school culture an important lens for understanding how values are actually learned and lived in educational settings.

Discipline is among the most visible cultural mechanisms through which schools attempt to translate values into action (Jayawardena, 2021; Wilcox et al., 2021). Rules and codes of conduct may exist in written form, yet their influence depends on whether enforcement is stable and perceived as fair. When sanctions and reminders are applied inconsistently, students often learn to treat rules as flexible and situational (Welsh, 2024). Over time, this weakens the formation of self regulation and accountability, because expectations become unclear and consequences appear negotiable.

Alongside disciplinary structures, teacher behavior functions as a daily reference point for students' moral interpretation of school norms (Cushing, 2021; Kramarczuk Voulgarides et al., 2021). Students often notice small but repeated actions, such as punctuality, respectful language, empathy, and fairness in responding to misconduct. When teacher conduct aligns with the values promoted by the school, character learning becomes more credible and easier to internalize. In contrast, visible inconsistency among adults can dilute school norms, produce mixed expectations, and reduce students' confidence in institutional messages.

These issues are especially salient in rural vocational contexts where many students may come from households that cannot consistently reinforce discipline or provide strong academic support (Lochmiller et al., 2024; Tefera et al., 2022). In such circumstances, the school is not merely a place for instruction but also a key social environment for building habits, confidence, and motivation (Farley & Burbules, 2022). The cultural climate created by discipline consistency and adult exemplarity can therefore play a decisive role in shaping how students approach learning and interpersonal conduct. Despite the prominence of school culture in character education discourse, the everyday pathways linking discipline consistency and teacher role modeling to student character are still not sufficiently documented in rural vocational settings through close qualitative inquiry (Brown & Shay, 2021). A grounded understanding of these lived mechanisms is needed to support school improvement strategies that are realistic and context sensitive.

School culture is commonly described as the collective patterns that organize school life, including shared expectations, routines, relational norms, and the unwritten rules that guide everyday behavior (Gilliland, 2023; Longmire et al., 2025). Culture is expressed not only in formal regulations but also in how teachers and students interact, how conflict is managed, and how learning participation is encouraged or constrained. Because culture operates through repetition, it often shapes students' dispositions gradually, through what feels normal and predictable in the school environment. Research on discipline suggests that consistency is a critical condition for meaningful character development (Pike et al., 2021; Spohrer, 2024). When enforcement is steady, students can anticipate expectations and understand that rules carry stable moral weight rather than arbitrary control. Consistency also reduces ambiguity, which helps students develop routines of punctuality, responsibility, and respect for shared norms. By contrast, inconsistent responses to similar violations

can normalize rule breaking and weaken students' sense of obligation. Teacher role modeling is frequently identified as a powerful route through which students learn values in practice (Fields et al., 2025; Gladstone & Cimpian, 2021). Students tend to evaluate moral expectations by observing whether teachers embody the standards they promote. Modeling is not limited to dramatic acts of mentorship, it often appears in everyday professionalism, fairness, empathy, and the willingness to listen (Seals, 2022). When such conduct is repeatedly visible, students are more likely to associate school norms with legitimacy and to adopt them as personal standards. Character development is also shaped by the wider ecology of school activities. Non academic programs, ceremonies, and extracurricular routines often provide structured opportunities to practice cooperation, leadership, and civic mindedness in real situations (Chierichetti et al., 2025). In addition, classroom interaction patterns matter, because participation norms influence confidence, voice, and engagement, which are closely tied to motivation and social development (Sedova & Sedlacek, 2023; Severe et al., 2024). If these activities are irregular or marginal, students lose an important experiential space for values to become habits. Taken together, prior scholarship suggests that discipline enforcement, teacher exemplarity, and participatory opportunities operate as interconnected parts of school culture. Their combined presence, or absence, can strengthen or weaken the social conditions needed for students to internalize positive values and develop stable learning attitudes.

Although school culture and character education have been studied extensively, many publications emphasize program descriptions, curriculum integration, or broad school climate indicators. Such work often underexplores how character is shaped through the micro level realities of school life, particularly the repeated experience of consistent or inconsistent discipline enforcement (Huan, 2025; Schiff et al., 2021). In practice, students build moral expectations from patterns, not from statements, and this routine based mechanism is still not sufficiently captured in context grounded qualitative studies. A further limitation is that discipline and teacher role modeling are frequently discussed as separate variables, while students experience them as one cultural system (El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022; Muir et al., 2022). Rules gain meaning through the conduct of the adults who enforce them. The interaction between enforcement consistency and role modeling therefore deserves closer empirical attention than it typically receives. Context also remains a major gap. Rural vocational schools tend to be peripheral in international debates, which often draw evidence from urban or academically oriented settings (Imdorf et al., 2025; Oppido et al., 2023). Without more studies grounded in these environments, character education knowledge risks being biased toward settings with different institutional capacities and student backgrounds. This study responds to these gaps by examining discipline consistency and teacher role modeling as lived cultural mechanisms within a rural vocational school, using qualitative evidence from observation, interviews, and school documentation to explain how student character is shaped through everyday practice.

This study is warranted because character education cannot be strengthened effectively if schools focus only on formal guidelines while neglecting the consistency of implementation (Arriola-Mendoza & Valerio-Ureña, 2024; Berkowitz, 2022). By foregrounding discipline enforcement and teacher role modeling, the study addresses two mechanisms that students encounter daily and that strongly influence how rules and values are interpreted (Saleh et al., 2025). The rural vocational context is also an important site for inquiry because the school may function as a primary setting for developing self regulation and learning motivation when external support is uneven (Held & Mejeh,

2024; Hennessy et al., 2021). Insight into how culture operates in such a setting can inform improvement strategies that are realistic and sensitive to local constraints (Díaz-Arancibia et al., 2024). Finally, by attending to participation patterns and the regularity of non academic activities, the study provides a more holistic view of how cultural routines shape confidence and engagement. This broader lens is useful for designing character development efforts that strengthen not only compliance, but also internalized values and sustainable learning attitudes.

This study aims to examine how consistency in discipline enforcement and teacher role modeling, as key elements of school culture, influence student character in a rural vocational school. It focuses on how these cultural practices relate to students' self confidence, internalization of positive values, sense of responsibility, and learning motivation as reflected in everyday routines and interactions.

METHOD

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive approach to explore how discipline consistency and teacher role modeling operate within the everyday culture of a rural vocational school. The choice of a qualitative design was grounded in the intention to understand processes rather than to measure variables. Character formation, particularly in a school context, unfolds through repeated interaction, routine practices, and shared expectations. Capturing such dynamics requires close engagement with lived experiences rather than numerical indicators.

The study was guided by a conceptual framework that positions school culture as a broader institutional environment expressed through three interrelated dimensions: consistency in discipline enforcement, disciplinary practice, and teacher role modeling. These dimensions are understood to shape student character, which in turn relates to broader positive developmental outcomes. The framework does not function as a causal statistical model but as an analytical lens that helps structure observation, interviews, and thematic interpretation.

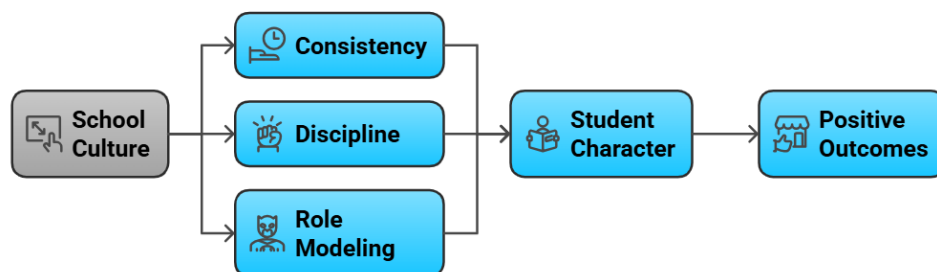


Figure 1. illustrates the conceptual orientation of the study.

The framework served to organize the inquiry while allowing findings to emerge inductively from the field. In this way, the diagram guided reflection without limiting the interpretive nature of the analysis.

Participant

The research was conducted in a rural vocational school where students largely come from families with limited economic and educational resources. This context was selected intentionally because it offers a meaningful setting for examining how school culture contributes to character development when external support structures may vary. Participants were chosen purposively to ensure representation of different roles within the school. The principal was included to provide

insight into institutional expectations and policy implementation. Teachers were selected based on their involvement in classroom instruction and disciplinary practices. A group of students participated to share their experiences of daily routines, rule enforcement, and teacher behavior. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was maintained throughout the research process. Pseudonyms were used where necessary to protect identities.

Instrument

In qualitative research, the researcher acts as the primary instrument of data collection. To support systematic inquiry, three techniques were employed: participatory observation, semi structured interviews, and document analysis. Observation focused on everyday routines such as punctuality, responses to rule violations, communication patterns in classrooms, and the implementation of non academic activities. Detailed field notes were recorded to capture both behavior and contextual nuances. Interviews were conducted with the principal, teachers, and students using open ended guiding questions. These conversations explored perceptions of discipline consistency, experiences with teacher exemplarity, and reflections on how these factors influenced responsibility, confidence, and learning motivation. Document analysis involved reviewing school regulations, disciplinary guidelines, and activity schedules. This allowed comparison between formal expectations and observed practice.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a thematic approach. Field notes and interview transcripts were read repeatedly to gain familiarity and identify recurring patterns. Initial codes were developed around three central areas derived from the analytical framework: discipline consistency, teacher role modeling, and expressions of student character. Through constant comparison, these codes were refined into broader themes that explained how cultural practices were enacted and interpreted within the school environment. Rather than imposing predetermined categories, the analysis remained open to emerging insights while maintaining alignment with the conceptual framework. To strengthen credibility, findings were cross checked across observation, interviews, and documents. Reflective notes were maintained throughout the process to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in the data and attentive to the context in which they were generated.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

The analysis draws on observation, interviews, and school documents to examine how discipline consistency and teacher role modeling shape student character within the school's cultural environment. Rather than presenting isolated findings, the results are organized around recurring patterns that emerged from everyday routines and interactions.

To clarify the scope of data sources, Table 1 outlines the participants and materials that informed the analysis.

Table 1. Overview of Participants and Data Sources

Participant Group	Role in School Culture	Data Collection Method	Focus of Inquiry
School Principal	Institutional leadership and policy implementation	Semi structured interview	Discipline policy, expectations, institutional consistency
Teachers	Classroom instruction and rule enforcement	Semi structured interview, observation	Discipline practice, role modelling, classroom interaction

Participant Group	Role in School Culture	Data Collection Method	Focus of Inquiry
Students	Recipients and interpreters of school culture	Semi structured interview, observation	Perceptions of discipline consistency, teacher conduct, character development
School Documents	Formal institutional framework	Document analysis	School regulations, activity schedules, disciplinary guidelines

The use of multiple sources allowed comparison between formal expectations and the realities observed in daily school life.

Discipline Consistency and Institutional Climate

Although the school maintained written regulations regarding punctuality, attendance, and uniform standards, enforcement was not always applied in the same manner. During observation, similar infractions sometimes received different responses depending on the teacher present or the situation at hand. Students themselves acknowledged this variation and described rule enforcement as uneven. This inconsistency influenced how discipline was understood. Rather than being experienced as a steady framework guiding behavior, it was often interpreted as context dependent. Some students complied strictly when supervision was visible but relaxed their adherence when monitoring decreased. In this sense, discipline functioned more as external control than as an internalized value.

The findings suggest that consistency is not a minor procedural issue but a defining feature of how school norms gain or lose moral credibility.

Teacher Role Modeling in Everyday Practice

Teacher behavior emerged as a strong and tangible influence on students. Students frequently mentioned specific teachers whose punctuality, respectful communication, and calm handling of misconduct left a lasting impression. These teachers were not necessarily those who spoke most about values, but those whose actions reflected what they expected from students. However, differences in enforcement styles and classroom management approaches sometimes created mixed signals. When one teacher tolerated late arrival while another imposed strict consequences, students perceived the rule itself as flexible. This variability affected not only compliance but also trust. Students were more likely to internalize expectations when adult behavior appeared aligned and predictable. Role modeling, therefore, operated as a continuous and subtle process through which students interpreted institutional values.

Participation Patterns and Character Expression

Beyond rules and teacher conduct, the broader ecology of school activities influenced character expression. Non academic programs, including ceremonies and extracurricular activities, were not always implemented consistently. As a result, structured opportunities for leadership and cooperation were limited. Classroom interaction patterns also played a role. Instruction tended to be teacher centered, with few occasions for open dialogue. Students who were already confident participated more actively, while others remained silent observers. This pattern affected the development of self confidence and learning motivation.

Overall, character traits such as responsibility, respect, and engagement appeared strongest in situations where expectations were clear, adult behavior was consistent, and participation was

encouraged. To synthesize these findings, Table 2 maps the relationship between observed cultural practices and character dimensions.

Table 2. Themes, Subthemes, and Character Implications

Major Theme	Subtheme / Observed Pattern	Character Dimension Affected	Source of Evidence
Discipline Consistency	Inconsistent enforcement of punctuality and uniform rules	Accountability, self-regulation	Observation, student interviews
Discipline Practice	Variable response to minor violations	Responsibility, rule awareness	Observation, teacher interviews
Teacher Role Modeling	Punctuality and respectful communication	Respect, discipline internalization	Observation, student interviews
Teacher Role Modeling	Alignment between words and actions	Trust, moral credibility	Interviews
Participation Opportunities	Irregular non academic activities	Leadership, cooperation	Document review, observation
Classroom Interaction	Predominantly teacher centered communication	Self confidence, active participation	Observation, student interviews

The table reinforces that discipline consistency and teacher exemplarity do not operate independently. They interact within the broader school culture to influence how students interpret rules, authority, and their own responsibilities. Character development, therefore, emerges from repeated patterns of interaction rather than from formal instruction alone.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that character formation within the observed rural vocational school is shaped primarily through everyday cultural practices rather than through formal declarations of values. Although the school possesses written regulations and structured expectations, the lived experience of students reveals that consistency in enforcement plays a decisive role in determining how those regulations are interpreted. Discipline, in this context, is not merely a rule system but a relational and situational process that influences students' perception of fairness and accountability (Hibbin, 2024; Patel, 2021). This perspective aligns with broader views that school culture operates through daily interaction rather than policy statements alone (Hantzopoulos et al., 2021; Torres, 2022).

Inconsistent enforcement emerged as a significant factor affecting students' internalization of responsibility. When rules were applied differently depending on circumstances or individuals, students tended to perceive discipline as flexible rather than binding. This pattern aligns with the observation that accountability was stronger under supervision but weakened in less monitored situations. The findings suggest that predictability in enforcement strengthens moral credibility (Walker et al., 2021), while variability reduces the likelihood that students adopt discipline as a personal standard (Burger et al., 2022).

Teacher role modeling further reinforces this interpretation. Students responded more positively to teachers whose conduct consistently reflected institutional values, particularly in punctuality, respectful communication, and calm responses to misconduct. Rather than relying on explicit moral instruction, character learning appeared to occur through repeated exposure to adult behavior (McGrath et al., 2022). This confirms that students interpret school norms not only through written policies but through observable daily practice (Burner & Carlsen, 2022).

At the same time, differences among teachers in handling similar situations created ambiguity. When enforcement standards varied, students encountered mixed expectations, which weakened the stability of school culture. The interaction between discipline consistency and teacher exemplarity therefore becomes central (Smyth & Carless, 2021). Discipline without consistent adult modeling risks becoming procedural, while modeling without institutional coherence risks becoming individualized and fragmented (Foussard, 2026).

The study also highlights the importance of participatory space in shaping character expression. Irregular implementation of non academic activities limited opportunities for students to practice cooperation and leadership. In classroom settings dominated by teacher centered interaction, students had fewer occasions to articulate opinions and build confidence. These conditions suggest that character development requires not only stable rules and consistent adult behavior but also structured opportunities for engagement (Zarrett et al., 2021). Such engagement has been linked to the development of self confidence and social responsibility (Rudito et al., 2023).

Taken together, the findings reinforce the view that school culture operates as an interconnected system (Wilson Heenan et al., 2023). Discipline consistency, teacher role modeling, and participation patterns are mutually reinforcing components that shape how students interpret responsibility, respect, and motivation. In the rural vocational context examined in this study, the school functions as a primary environment for cultivating self regulation and social awareness. Strengthening coherence between institutional expectations and daily practice therefore becomes essential for sustainable character development.

Implications

The findings suggest that character education cannot rely solely on written regulations or formal declarations of values. What ultimately shapes student character is the degree to which expectations are applied consistently in daily practice. For schools, this means that discipline should not depend on individual discretion alone, but should reflect a shared institutional understanding. When teachers communicate similar standards and respond to violations in comparable ways, students are more likely to perceive rules as meaningful rather than situational. The study also underlines the quiet yet powerful influence of teacher conduct. Small, repeated actions arriving on time, speaking respectfully, handling conflict calmly carry more weight than occasional moral advice. Professional development efforts may therefore benefit from incorporating reflective dialogue about everyday modeling practices, not only instructional techniques. In addition, strengthening participatory opportunities may help transform discipline from external control into internal motivation. When students are invited to speak, collaborate, and assume responsibility in structured activities, character formation becomes an active process rather than passive compliance.

Research contribution

This study offers a grounded perspective on how school culture operates within a rural vocational setting, an area that receives comparatively less attention in international discussions of character education. By examining discipline consistency and teacher role modeling as interconnected rather than separate elements, the research highlights how institutional coherence shapes students' moral interpretation of rules. Rather than presenting character development as the outcome of a specific program, the study emphasizes its cumulative nature. Values are formed gradually through repeated exposure to predictable routines and observable adult behavior. This

process oriented understanding contributes to a more nuanced view of how school culture influences student character.

Limitations

The research was conducted in one rural vocational school, which means the findings reflect a particular institutional and social context. Schools in urban areas or with different organizational structures may demonstrate alternative patterns of discipline and role modeling. Furthermore, the qualitative design centers on interpretation and lived experience. While this approach provides depth, it does not quantify the extent of influence or establish measurable causal links. The findings should therefore be understood as contextual insights rather than universal conclusions.

Suggestions

Future studies could extend this inquiry by comparing rural and urban vocational schools to identify similarities and differences in discipline consistency and teacher exemplarity. Such comparative work may clarify whether the patterns observed here are context specific or more broadly applicable. Long term research may also examine how sustained improvements in institutional consistency affect student character over time. Observing change processes would deepen understanding of how cultural adjustments translate into moral development. Finally, incorporating complementary quantitative measures alongside qualitative exploration may provide a more comprehensive account of how school culture shapes student character while preserving attention to everyday experience.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how consistency in discipline enforcement and teacher role modeling, as central elements of school culture, shape student character in a rural vocational school, and the findings show that character development is influenced less by written regulations than by the coherence of daily practice. When rules are enforced inconsistently, expectations become situational and students' sense of accountability weakens, whereas predictable enforcement strengthens the credibility of norms and supports self regulation. At the same time, teachers' everyday conduct functions as a direct reference point for students' moral learning, so punctuality, fairness, and respectful communication tend to be mirrored by students, while variation in adult behavior and enforcement creates ambiguity that blurs the meaning of school standards. The study also indicates that character formation is reinforced when students have regular opportunities to participate, collaborate, and voice ideas, yet irregular non academic activities and largely teacher centered classroom interaction can limit confidence and active engagement. Overall, the results suggest that school culture operates as an interconnected system in which discipline consistency, adult exemplarity, and participatory space jointly shape students' responsibility, self confidence, and learning motivation, highlighting the need for stronger institutional alignment between stated values and everyday routines in rural vocational education.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Melkior Wewe conceptualized the study, designed the research framework, and supervised the overall research process. Anastasia Rao was responsible for data collection, including interviews, participatory observation, and documentation, as well as the initial organization of field data. Fidelplanus Nambe conducted data analysis, interpreted the findings, and drafted the manuscript. All authors contributed to the discussion of results, critically revised the manuscript for intellectual content, and approved the final version for publication.

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