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Beyond Compliance: Understanding the Dynamics of School Rules Implementation and Student Discipline in a Middle School

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the lived dynamics of school rule implementation and eighth-grade student discipline. Despite strict written regulations, persistent minor infractions indicate that conventional compliance metrics fail to capture how adolescents genuinely experience and negotiate institutional authority. Employing a qualitative intrinsic case study design, this research investigates student discipline within its natural socio-educational context. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, direct participant observations, and institutional document reviews involving school administrators, teachers, and students. The collected data were analyzed using Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's interactive cyclical model comprising data condensation, data display, and conclusion verification. Findings reveal two primary aspects: performative compliance versus value internalization and relational consistency as the key to rule legitimacy. First, students demonstrate gate-level tactical compliance strictly under visual surveillance while loosening uniform standards during unmonitored hours. Second, minor infractions serve as adolescent identity negotiations rather than malicious defiance. Third, disparate enforcement among educators creates administrative loopholes that undermine policy legitimacy. Fourth, students reject public shaming yet respond positively to empathetic disciplinary mentoring. Fifth, tardiness often stems from structural barriers requiring restorative solutions. Future research should examine multi-site longitudinal implementations of restorative mentoring across diverse middle school settings.

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Introduction

Education aims not only to enhance academic knowledge and practical skills but also to build strong character and behavior aligned with societal norms (Astuti, Belly, Maulana, & Armini, 2024; et. al Pathollah, 2023). In modern society, schools function as primary social laboratories where children transition into responsible adulthood, internalizing civic duties and moral frameworks essential for community cohesion (Bentri, Hidayati, Saputra, & Arina, 2025; Eunice Ocampo-Zavaleta et al., 2025). When educational institutions successfully instill behavioral order, communities benefit from generations equipped with high civic consciousness, mutual respect, and social accountability (Fox et al., 2020). Therefore, cultivating orderly school environments is fundamentally important because compliant, well-regulated adolescents ultimately transform into stable, productive adult citizens who uphold public trust, laws, and collective societal harmony. Consequently, investigating how institutional environments shape youth behavior carries profound significance for broader social development, ensuring educational systems actively contribute to building stable, ethical, and cohesive communities across the modern social landscape.

Despite these societal aspirations, modern educational systems face a persistent general problem regarding how authority is negotiated rather than merely imposed (Ayumi, Yul, & Andrian, 2025; Gunartin, Pratikto, Winarno, & Restuningdiah, 2025). Society frequently struggles with authoritarian versus permissive paradigms in youth development, often resulting in superficial compliance where students follow rules out of fear rather than genuine internalization. Traditional institutional models typically rely on rigid punitive measures that suppress misbehaviour temporarily without fostering true cognitive or moral transformation (Ansari & Muhlis, 2026). Consequently, schools often breed compliance-driven environments where young adolescents learn to circumvent rules rather than understand their underlying ethical value. This creates a systemic societal challenge, educational institutions struggle to balance administrative order with the psychological autonomy required for authentic character growth. Educators are thus pressed to discover alternative frameworks that transcend basic compliance, seeking deeper relational and cultural dynamics that foster meaningful, self-regulated discipline among developing adolescents within complex modern school contexts (Adewale & Moyo, 2025; Oryngaliyeva, Yermentayeva, Turganbayeva, Mamanova, & Abdrashitova, 2024).

In alignment with these challenges, localized phenomena observed in middle schools reveal complex realities that defy simplistic behavioural metrics. Preliminary observations and narrative accounts from educators indicate that eighth-grade students frequently engage in subtle negotiations, resistance, or passive compliance regarding school regulations. Rather than straightforward disobedience, daily interactions showcase a intricate dance between institutional expectations and adolescent agency, where students constantly test boundaries concerning uniform standards, punctuality, and behavioural norms. Official records of tardiness and minor infractions tell only part of the story; behind these statistics lie rich

interpersonal narratives of peer influence, teacher-student friction, and adolescent identity-seeking. These on-the-ground observations clearly demonstrate that student discipline cannot be understood merely through compliance checklists. Instead, daily school life pulses with complex social negotiations, meaning-making processes, and cultural dynamics that require deep qualitative exploration to truly comprehend why and how students relate to institutional rules.

Previous studies have extensively examined school rules and discipline, yet largely prioritize measurable behavioral outcomes over lived adolescent experiences. For instance, Ayuba, dkk., (2025) demonstrated through quantitative surveys that strict rule enforcement significantly reduces classroom tardiness, while Sukirjo, dkk., (2025) found positive statistical correlations between consistent policy monitoring and student punctuality. Similarly, Pathollah & Muhalli (2024) revealed that structured disciplinary frameworks lower minor uniform infractions, whereas Peristianto, Subandi, & Utami, (2025) established that clear behavioral sanctions enhance short-term institutional compliance. Furthermore, Fahrurrozi (2024) highlighted how teacher supervision directly predicts lower rule-violation frequencies, and Minsih dkk., (2024) confirmed that administrative consistency strengthens observable student order. However, these six studies rely heavily on quantitative metrics and compliance checklists, leaving a critical qualitative gap regarding how middle school students subjectively interpret, emotionally experience, and socially negotiate rules in daily interactions. Positioning our study within this interpretive void allows us to transcend surface-level compliance scores and uncover the relational dynamics shaping authentic student discipline.

Addressing these gaps, the research problem is How do eighth-grade students and educators experience, interpret, and negotiate the implementation of school regulations within their daily institutional lives? Our preliminary working argument posits that school discipline is not a static product of strict top-down enforcement, but an active, fluid negotiation shaped by mutual interpretations of institutional authority and adolescent identity. We contend that true behavioural stability emerges only when educational regulations are relationally understood rather than coercively imposed. Ultimately, this qualitative study contributes actionable, deep-structure insights for school administrators, shifting administrative paradigms from punitive surveillance toward empathetic, culturally responsive disciplinary mentoring that fosters authentic, long-term student character development.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative intrinsic case study design rooted in constructivist-interpretive philosophy to explore the lived realities and complex social dynamics behind school rules implementation and student discipline. This approach was selected to investigate how adolescents perceive, negotiate, and internalize institutional policies within their natural environment rather than reducing behaviour to statistical metrics. Conducted between April and May 2026 at SMP BOASH, Bogor Regency. Data were collected through purposive sampling using

in-depth semi-structured interviews with administrators, teachers, and students, alongside direct participant observations during morning assemblies and routine inspections, supplemented by institutional document analysis of disciplinary logs and student handbooks (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007; Thompson Burdine, Thorne, & Sandhu, 2021).

Data analysis followed the interactive cyclical model by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, encompassing data condensation, data display, and conclusion verification (Creswell, 2007). Raw transcripts and field notes were systematically coded and simplified during data condensation, organized into thematic matrices and relational networks in the data display phase, and continuously verified against empirical field evidence to draw grounded conclusions. To ensure academic trustworthiness based on Lincoln and Guba's criteria, credibility was established through prolonged engagement, member checking with key informants, and methodological and source triangulation across interviews, observations, and records. Transferability was supported by providing thick descriptions of the Bogor Regency school context, while dependability and confirmability were secured via a comprehensive audit trail documenting raw data, coding iterations, and analytical memos, complemented by peer debriefing sessions to eliminate researcher bias and guarantee transparent, empirically anchored findings.

Finding and Discussion

Finding

Performative Compliance vs. Value Internalization

Performative compliance operationally refers to a behavioral state where eighth-grade students outwardly conform to school rules and uniform standards strictly under direct institutional surveillance, lacking genuine moral internalization (Zulhannan & Musyarrofah, 2024). In this study, this phenomenon manifests as situational compliance, where rules are treated by adolescents as external administrative hurdles to bypass tactically rather than internalized guidelines for personal character development. Students display outward obedience primarily to avoid immediate disciplinary penalties, point deductions, or punitive reprimands from teachers and disciplinary teams. Consequently, everyday school life becomes characterized by strategic adjustments rather than authentic behavioral discipline, revealing a profound disconnect between formal institutional regulations and students' internal value systems.

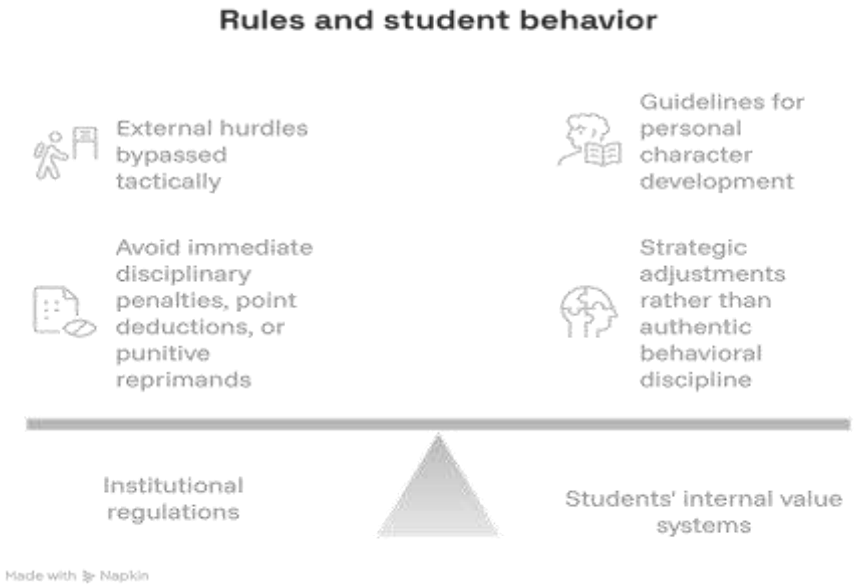


Figure 1. Institutional Regulations and Student's Values

Understanding this operational reality is crucial because it demonstrates that superficial rule adherence often masks a deeper absence of self-regulated discipline, challenging school administrators to look beyond compliance statistics and examine the true psychological and social mechanisms governing adolescent behavior within the school environment.

Expanding upon this definition, interview data from key school informants vividly illustrate how performative compliance operates in daily practice. Informant A, a seasoned eighth-grade homeroom teacher, articulated that students frequently exhibit tactical compliance solely to elude visual detection by school authorities. The teacher noted:

> *"They tuck in their shirts and straighten their ties immediately upon seeing my approach in the hallway, only to pull them loose the moment I turn the corner."*

Interpreting this narrative, the researcher posits that teachers recognize a pervasive culture of convenience rather than genuine respect for institutional order. This indicates that students perceive rules as rigid, external constraints imposed by adult authority rather than meaningful standards for community living. Rather than internalizing the moral value of discipline, students master the art of temporary adaptation, performing obedience strictly when monitored. This dynamic highlights a critical administrative flaw: traditional surveillance systems foster strategic evasion rather than cultivating authentic internal accountability among developing adolescents navigating school policies.

Further reinforcing this dynamic, interview testimony from Informant B, an eighth-grade student, offered direct insight into the adolescent perspective regarding minor infractions. The student confessed:

> *"We do not break rules to rebel against the school; we just want to look slightly different and feel comfortable with our friends."*

Interpreting this statement, the researcher observes that minor infractions—such as modified hairstyles, unauthorized socks, or subtle uniform adjustments—represent a vital adolescent negotiation for personal identity and peer acceptance within a rigid institutional framework. Eighth-graders are navigating a transitional developmental phase marked by intense self-expression and autonomy-seeking. Therefore, strict uniformity is psychologically experienced as a suppression of emerging individuality, prompting students to engage in micro-acts of resistance. This qualitative evidence proves that rule infractions in middle school are rarely malicious; instead, they are communicative tactics through which adolescents negotiate personal agency and social belonging against the backdrop of standardized institutional expectations.

The observational data gathered during assembling and routine gate inspections further corroborate these interview insights and reveal the behavioral mechanics of performative compliance. Systematic observations documented how dozens of students routinely paused fifty meters before the school gate to hastily adjust their ties, button top collars, and tuck in shirts, transforming their appearance from casual to compliant within seconds. Conversely, observational logs recorded that during recess and unstructured afternoon hours, these exact same students systematically dismantled their compliant presentation, untucking shirts and rolling up sleeves. Interpreting these observations, the researcher emphasizes that physical school spaces act as segmented behavioral zones where compliance fluctuates based entirely on the presence of surveillance figures. The school gate functions as a theatrical boundary separating institutional performance from authentic student comfort. This recurring behavioral pattern demonstrates that physical monitoring only secures superficial, temporary compliance, leaving the underlying behavioral attitudes completely untouched by institutional character-building efforts.

Synthesizing these findings, restatement confirms that eighth-grade students consistently engage in performative compliance, demonstrating outward obedience under surveillance while tactically circumventing rules during unmonitored times. The descriptive pattern emerging from these qualitative findings highlights a fundamental structural misalignment between rigid institutional expectations and dynamic adolescent developmental needs. Rather than internalizing institutional values, students navigate school regulations through strategic adaptation, performing compliance as a survival mechanism against punitive oversight. This pattern demonstrates that traditional surveillance models fail to produce genuine behavioral discipline, resulting instead in a perpetual game of administrative cat-and-mouse. Ultimately, addressing this educational challenge requires transforming disciplinary approaches from external policing into relational mentoring, ensuring that rules are co-constructed and meaningfully understood rather than coercively enforced upon developing adolescents.

Relational Consistency as the Key to Rule Legitimacy

Relational consistency operationally refers to the uniform, empathetic, and equitable application of school regulations by educators, which establishes

institutional rule legitimacy among eighth-grade students. In this qualitative case study, this construct measures how teacher behaviour directly influences student compliance, punctuality, and social ethics. Rather than relying on rigid, authoritarian enforcement or permissive inconsistency, relational consistency bridges the gap between formal administrative policies and adolescent lived realities. Students display significantly higher behavioural discipline and respect for authority when rules are implemented fairly and transparently across different classrooms. Consequently, this operational definition shifts the core focus of school discipline away from text-based legalism toward interpersonal dynamics. Understanding this relational mechanism is critical because it reveals that institutional order is sustained not through punitive surveillance, but through fair, predictable, and supportive adult-student interactions that foster genuine respect for school norms and cultivate long-term self-discipline among developing adolescents within the school environment.

Expanding upon this operational definition, qualitative interview data from Informant, a student affairs coordinator, revealed deep institutional dilemmas regarding enforcement inconsistency across various teaching staff. Informant explained the constant friction between completing academic curriculum targets and managing minor behavioural infractions:

> *"Some teachers ignore late arrivals to save teaching time, while strict teachers penalize every minute, creating mixed signals for the students."*

Interpreting this narrative, the researcher emphasizes that pedagogical fragmentation severely undermines institutional legitimacy. When students experience varying disciplinary standards between subject teachers, homeroom supervisors, and duty officers, they quickly identify administrative loopholes. This inconsistency teaches adolescents to calculate risks based on who is supervising rather than respecting the rule itself. Consequently, disparate enforcement creates structural confusion, eroding collective behavioural expectations and transforming school rules into arbitrary guidelines rather than stable, reliable standards upheld equitably across the entire educational institution.

Further deepening this perspective, interview testimony from Informant, an eighth-grade student, highlighted the crucial psychological impact of relational fairness versus authoritarian reprimands. Informant remarked:

> *"We respect teachers who talk to us calmly and explain why we are wrong, but we hate being publicly humiliated for a minor uniform mistake."*

Interpreting this statement, the researcher observes that students respond profoundly to relational authority over mere positional power. Eighth-graders reject public shaming because it threatens their developing autonomy and personal dignity, often triggering defensive disobedience. Conversely, personalized disciplinary mentoring—characterized by respectful dialogue and empathetic problem-solving—earns genuine student cooperation. This qualitative evidence demonstrates that rule legitimacy is co-constructed through interpersonal respect. When educators replace authoritarian punishment with supportive guidance, students feel valued rather than degraded, transforming potential behavioral friction

into meaningful opportunities for character development and positive behavioral internalization within the middle school setting.

To clearly conceptualize how these relational dynamic operate within the institutional framework, the core mechanism of relational consistency can be mapped across sequential interactive stages, beginning with administrative policy formulation, passing through teacher enforcement practices, and culminating in student behavioural responses. Initially, formal regulations are established by school administration as standard behavioural guidelines. However, their operational success depends entirely on the calibration of enforcement among educators. When teachers exhibit uniform consistency and empathetic engagement, students perceive high institutional fairness, which fosters relational trust and internal compliance. Conversely, when enforcement is fragmented and authoritarian, students experience procedural injustice, leading to tactical evasion and behavioural resistance. Interpreting this operational flow, the researcher asserts that rule legitimacy is not a static top-down mandate, but a circular feedback loop driven by relational equity. Transforming school discipline therefore requires aligning administrative rules with consistent, supportive educator behaviour that reinforce mutual trust rather than widening the psychological distance between staff and adolescents.

Direct observational data gathered across classrooms and morning gate duties further substantiate these interview insights and structural patterns. Systematic observations recorded that classrooms managed by consistently fair and empathetic teachers exhibited remarkably orderly transitions and prompt student compliance without requiring loud reprimands. In stark contrast, classes overseen by inconsistent or authoritarian educators experienced frequent disruptions, student defiance, and widespread tardiness following recess breaks. Observational logs also captured how structural challenges, such as difficult public transportation or family responsibilities, frequently caused morning tardiness among specific students, which were successfully resolved through restorative mentoring rather than punitive exclusion. Interpreting these observations, the researcher highlights that student discipline is deeply intertwined with relational context. When teachers address punctuality and rule infractions through supportive problem-solving rather than rigid punishment, students feel understood and supported, proving that relational consistency serves as the vital cornerstone for sustainable behavioral compliance and positive institutional culture.

Synthesizing these comprehensive findings, restatement confirms that school discipline is fundamentally driven by relational consistency and equitable adult-student interactions rather than rigid textual enforcement. The descriptive pattern emerging from these qualitative findings demonstrates that adolescents navigate school rules through a relational lens, complying willingly with fair, empathetic educators while resisting inconsistent or authoritarian authority. This pattern reveals that institutional order collapses when enforcement standards vary across classrooms, creating systemic loopholes exploited by students. Ultimately, cultivating true discipline requires bridging administrative policy with relational mentoring, ensuring that rules are upheld uniformly and compassionately across the

school. By shifting from punitive surveillance to equitable, supportive engagement, educational institutions can successfully transform external compliance into enduring student character development, securing a stable, respectful, and productive learning environment for all middle school adolescents throughout their foundational educational journey.

Discussion

The findings of this inquiry strongly illuminate the hidden behavioural dynamic underlying school rule implementation, offering a compelling dialogue with established sociological and psychological frameworks. Specifically, our first core finding regarding performative compliance and gate-level tactical adjustments that aligns remarkably well with Foucault's concept of *Panopticism* (Fox et al., 2020). Just as prisoners internalize the gaze of the watchtower without experiencing genuine moral transformation, eighth-grade students adjust their uniforms strictly under the visual surveillance of teachers at the school gate. Furthermore, this behavioural pattern substantiates Deci and Ryan's *Self-Determination Theory*, demonstrating that rigid external controls devoid of meaningful dialogue merely trigger extrinsic motivation driven by fear of punishment, thereby stifling authentic internal self-regulation (Fongkanta & Buakanok, 2024). While earlier studiy by Rahmatya, Abdul Latif, Mahaiyadin, & Mohamed Shith, (2025) concluded that strict enforcement reduces visible infractions, evidence challenges superficial interpretation by exposing that such statistical compliance is largely theatrical, dissolving immediately once institutional surveillance vanishes during unmonitored school hours.

Transitioning to our second major finding regarding relational consistency, the empirical evidence directly corroborates Gregory and Cornell's *Authoritative School Climate* framework, which posits that optimal adolescent discipline requires balancing high behavioural structure with high emotional support (Alsamiri & Alduaylij, 2025). The field data demonstrate that eighth-graders willingly adhere to punctuality and uniform standards when educators enforce rules fairly and empathetically, whereas authoritarian public shaming or permissive inconsistency breeds resentment and administrative loopholes. This insight enriches and nuances prior literature which emphasized administrative consistency without examining its interpersonal mechanics (Atabik, Fian, Hardoyono, & Dahlan, 2025). Our findings reveal that consistency alone fails if delivered through humiliating positional power; legitimacy emerges only when rule enforcement is paired with relational dignity. Moreover, uncovering structural barriers behind morning tardiness, such as transportation difficulties, contrasts sharply with traditional punitive models that treat every late arrival as moral defiance, proving that effective discipline must contextualize student behaviour within broader socio-ecological realities rather than relying on mechanical rule application.

Synthesizing these analytical comparisons, this study offers significant theoretical implications for the fields of educational management and adolescent behavioural psychology. Primarily, our research expands *Self-Determination Theory* and *Authoritative School Climate* theory into semi-urban Indonesian middle school

contexts, illustrating how cultural norms of hierarchy interact with adolescent autonomy-seeking. By conceptualizing school discipline not as a static compliance score but as a continuously negotiated relational process, this study provides a qualitative bridge between macro-level institutional policies and micro-level student agency. It challenges traditional behaviourist paradigms in educational administration that equate visible obedience with moral character development. Instead, our theoretical synthesis demonstrates that sustainable behavioural order depends on relational legitimacy—a construct co-created through procedural fairness, emotional safety, and dialogic mentoring. Consequently, future academic models examining school rules must move beyond linear cause-and-effect compliance metrics to incorporate interpretive frameworks that capture the subjective meaning-making and identity negotiations of developing adolescents navigating institutional authority.

From a practical standpoint, these empirical insights carry urgent, actionable implications for school administrators, vice principals of student affairs, and classroom teachers seeking sustainable behavioural reform. First, educational leaders must prioritize institutional calibration across all teaching staff to eliminate enforcement disparities between duty officers, homeroom teachers, and subject instructors. Regular collaborative workshops should be institutionalized to align disciplinary standards, ensuring students receive consistent behavioural expectations rather than exploiting administrative loopholes. Second, schools must transition away from punitive, surveillance-heavy practices toward *restorative discipline* models integrated directly into student affairs management. When students violate punctuality or uniform policies, educators should engage in restorative mentoring conversations that uncover root causes, such as family or transportation constraints, while guiding students to take constructive accountability. By embedding restorative practices into daily routines, schools foster genuine self-regulation, transforming disciplinary interactions from adversarial confrontations into supportive learning opportunities that nurture authentic adolescent character and mutual trust.

Ultimately, bringing together theoretical insights and practical realities underscores a transformative vision for middle school governance that reaches far beyond superficial compliance. When educators harmonize high structural expectations with empathetic relational consistency, school regulations cease to be perceived as oppressive external barriers and instead become shared frameworks for community respect. While this qualitative single-case study is contextually bound to one public junior high school in Bogor Regency, its rich analytical transferability provides a vital blueprint for similar institutions struggling with recurring minor infractions despite strict written policies. Future research should explore longitudinal implementations of restorative disciplinary mentoring across diverse regional settings to further examine how sustained relational consistency reshapes adolescent moral internalization over time. By shifting the administrative paradigm from external policing to relational empowerment, educational institutions can fulfil their highest societal mandate: cultivating self-regulated, ethical, and responsible

young citizens prepared to thrive harmoniously within broader democratic communities.

Conclusion

This qualitative case study demonstrates that authentic middle school discipline cannot be achieved merely through strict regulatory texts or punitive gate surveillance, as such mechanisms predominantly generate performative compliance rather than genuine moral internalization. The core lesson emerging from our findings is that eighth-grade students actively negotiate institutional rules in relation to their developing personal identity, obeying policies authentically only when educators exercise relational consistency—balancing clear behavioral structure with empathetic, equitable mentoring. Scientifically, this research contributes a vital interpretive lens to educational management literature by bridging macro-level school policies with micro-level adolescent agency, extending *Self-Determination Theory* and *Authoritative School Climate* concepts into semi-urban Indonesian contexts while challenging purely quantitative compliance metrics. Nevertheless, because this inquiry is limited to a single public junior high school in Bogor Regency over a two-month period, its findings remain contextually bound rather than statistically generalizable. Future research should therefore conduct multi-site longitudinal studies examining how restorative disciplinary mentoring impacts long-term student character development across diverse socio-cultural educational settings.

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