

From Compliance to Self-Regulation: Internalizing Discipline Through Culture in an Elementary School

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Abstract. Discipline in elementary education is frequently reduced to rule compliance. However, educational psychology views discipline as a developmental process through which externally guided behaviour gradually becomes self-regulation. Limited attention has been given to how this transition is supported through integrated school-culture practices. Therefore, this qualitative instrumental research aimed to examine how the BR3T programme (Bersih/Clean, Rapi/Neat, Tertib/Orderly, Teratur/Regular, Terpelihara/Well-maintained) at SD IT Salsabila, Purworejo, Central Java, functions as a cultural practice that facilitates discipline internalization. Data were collected from 25 participants, including 10 students (Grades 2–6), five homeroom teachers, and ten parents, through non-participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Subsequently, analyses were conducted thematically using Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's interactive framework. The results showed three interdependent processes, namely (1) behavioural habituation through structured repetition, (2) teacher role modelling that translates routines into moral meaning, and (3) reinforcement through monitoring and reflection that fosters self-evaluation. Collectively, these processes support a gradual shift from supervised compliance toward emerging self-regulation.

Keywords: discipline internalization, self-regulation, school culture, habituation, teacher role modelling.

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Introduction

In elementary education, discipline is often understood narrowly as students obedience to rules, schedules, and classroom procedures. However, from the perspective of educational psychology, discipline is more accurately understood as part of a developmental process through which children gradually learn to regulate behaviour, attention, and social actions (Savina, 2020). In this context, discipline is not limited to external compliance, but is connected to the emergence of self-regulation, defined as the capacity to manage individual behaviour with decreasing dependence on direct supervision (Guay, 2022).

The distinction is important because many school disciplinary practices still rely primarily on instruction, warning, and sanction. These approaches may secure short-term compliance, but do not necessarily support the development of disciplined behaviour that is personally meaningful and sustained. Consequently, recent scholarship in educational psychology has

emphasized the importance of repeated routines, meaningful adult guidance, and social modelling in supporting children self-regulated behaviour (Savina, 2020). Discipline becomes more stable when students repeatedly enact particular behaviours being modelled by significant adults, and receive feedback that helps understand the importance (Guay, 2022).

Previous research has examined discipline from several angles. Research on classroom management and school rules has emphasized the importance of structure, consistency, and adult guidance in shaping students conduct (Berkowitz & Bier, 2015). In general, children tend to adopt disciplined behaviour when teachers consistently embody the values being communicated (Birhan et al., 2021). Self-determination theory has clarified how autonomy-supportive learning environments help students develop internal regulation (Liew, 2020), while research on character education has shown how moral explanation and habituation support value formation (Damariswara et al., 2021).

However, these bodies of literature address discipline at a broad conceptual level, focusing separately on rule compliance, classroom management, character instruction, or individual psychological variables, without examining how the elements operate together as an integrated school-culture practice in everyday elementary school life. However, the aspect less examined is the mechanism through which discipline is gradually internalised when structured daily routines, consistent teacher role modelling, and systematic reinforcement are embedded simultaneously in a faith-based school-culture context (Berkman et al., 2014). Previous research have not clarified how the combination produces a shift from externally guided compliance toward self-regulation in elementary-aged children.

This research addressed the existing gap through the case of the BR3T program at SD IT Salsabila, Purworejo, Central Java, Indonesia. BR3T stands for *Bersih* (Clean), *Rapi* (Neat), *Tertib* (Orderly), *Teratur* (Regular), and *Terpelihara* (Well-maintained). In practice, BR3T functions as a structured school routine through which students are introduced to orderliness, responsibility, and care for shared spaces. It is implemented through repeated daily activities, classroom responsibilities, teacher guidance, and communication with parents, making it an appropriate empirical site for examining not simply whether discipline is promoted, but the interpretation, practice, and gradual internalization in students everyday lives (Halimah, 2024).

Three complementary theoretical perspectives were considered. First, social learning theory explains how students learn disciplined behaviour by observing the consistent actions of teachers, as discussed in (Rahman et al., 2024). Second, character education shows the importance of moral explanation and the translation of values into concrete action (Berkowitz & Bier, 2015; Damariswara et al., 2021). Third, self-determination theory and research on self-regulation clarify how externally structured routines can gradually support students growing behavioural awareness (Guay, 2022; Teherani et al., 2017). These perspectives are treated not as discrete frameworks but mutually reinforcing lenses for understanding how school routines can guide children from performing disciplined behaviours out of obligation toward increasing personal awareness.

The questions addressed by this research include (1) How do students, teachers, and parents interpret the BR3T practice in everyday school life? (2) Through what processes does the BR3T practice contribute to the internalization of discipline, particularly in supporting a shift from externally guided compliance toward emerging self-regulation? The results contribute to educational psychology by clarifying how

faith-based school culture can function as a medium for discipline formation in elementary-aged children (Sobri et al., 2019).

Methods

Research Design

This research used an instrumental case design to use SD IT Salsabila as a vehicle for understanding the broader processes through which discipline is internalized in a faith-based school-culture context. The interpretive nature aims to understand how BR3T routines, teacher role modelling, and reinforcement were experienced by participants and how these processes contributed to a gradual shift from externally regulated compliance toward emerging self-regulation. Data collection was conducted over eight weeks of fieldwork (February–April 2025), comprising 24 structured observation sessions across all five grade classrooms, in the natural school setting.

Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure information-rich cases directly involved in BR3T implementation. The 25 participants include ten students (Grades 2–6), five homeroom teachers, and ten parents. Grade 1 students were excluded because school adjustment was still in an early stage, and interview responses were unlikely to yield sufficiently reflective data.

The ten students were selected based on (1) regular participation in BR3T activities, (2) ability to communicate experiences during interviews, and (3) parental consent. Students were drawn purposively to represent variation in grade level (Grades 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6—two students per grade) and varying length of experience with BR3T routines. The five homeroom teachers covered the same grade range. The ten parents were the guardians of the participating students, providing complementary perspectives on whether school-based habits were observed at home.

Ethical Considerations

Written permission was obtained from the school administration before data collection. Written informed consent was provided by parents or guardians, and age-appropriate assent was obtained from student participants. All participants were informed that participation was voluntary, withdrawal was possible at any time without penalty, and confidentiality would be maintained through the use of pseudonyms and participant codes. The researcher disclosed the role as an external academic with no institutional affiliation at SD IT Salsabila, thereby minimizing potential power dynamics that could affect responses. Data were stored securely on password-protected devices accessible only to the research team.

Data Collection

Data were collected through non-participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Observations were conducted across eight weeks of fieldwork (24 sessions in total, distributed across the five grade classrooms), focusing on pre-class BR3T routines, classroom organisation, transitions between activities, lunch-related routines, and other contexts in which discipline-related practices were visible. Field notes recorded patterns of behaviour, teacher guidance, student responses, and the organisation of BR3T routines.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all three participant groups. Teacher interviews focused on how BR3T was planned, implemented, monitored, and explained to students. Student interviews explored students understanding of BR3T, the experience of the routines, and the meanings attached to disciplined behaviour. Parent interviews examined whether school-based habits were also observed in the home environment. The interview questions included: "What does BR3T mean to you?"; "How are BR3T activities carried out daily?" "How do teachers respond when students follow or do not follow BR3T practices?" and "Have you noticed similar habits at home?" Document analysis supplemented observational and interview data, drawing on school rules, classroom routine records, and BR3T-related activity materials.

Trustworthiness

Several strategies were used to strengthen trustworthiness. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing perspectives from students, teachers, and parents. Technique triangulation was applied by comparing data across observations, interviews, and documents. Member checking was conducted with selected participants to ensure that analytical interpretations remained aligned with intended meanings. The researcher also maintained a reflexive journal throughout the fieldwork period to monitor personal assumptions, document interpretive decisions, and reduce the risk of attributing only positive meaning to practices that were institutionally valued, an important form of transparency given the researcher position as a practising Muslim educator. These combined strategies strengthened the credibility and dependability of the results (Wilsani et al., 2023).

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed inductively using thematic analysis guided by the interactive framework (Wilsani et al., 2023). The process comprised repeated reading of field notes, interview transcripts, and documents to gain familiarity with the data. Open coding was then applied to identify meaningful units related to routines, role modelling, reinforcement, and student responses. Codes referring to similar processes were grouped into

broader categories, which were then compared across data sources. Finally, categories were organized into three interpretive themes, namely behavioural habituation through repeated routines, teacher role modelling as the translation of values into visible action, and reinforcement through monitoring and reflection. These themes were continuously reviewed against the full dataset through triangulation and analytic memoing. The aim was not to produce a formal grounded theory or causal model, but to generate a contextual explanation of how discipline shifts from externally supervised practice toward emerging self-regulation in this specific school setting.

Results and Discussion

The meaning of BR3T across students, teachers and parents

The first dimension of the results is related to how BR3T is interpreted differently across participant groups, and why this interpretive layering is important for understanding the early stage of discipline internalization.

At the student level, BR3T is understood primarily in behavioural and situational terms. Students describe discipline through observable actions, including cleaning the classroom, arranging desks, disposing of rubbish properly, as well as following rules during lessons and religious activities. The responses focus on "what to do" rather than "why it matters," suggesting that at this stage, discipline is experienced as a set of externally structured routines. A Grade 4 student stated that:

BR3T berarti merapikan meja saya dan membuang sampah pada tempatnya sebelum guru datang. Itulah yang harus kami lakukan setiap pagi.

BR3T means keeping my desk tidy and throwing rubbish in the bin before the teacher arrives. That is what we have to do every morning. (Student S4)

Teachers, in contrast, interpret BR3T at a conceptual level. The concept is described not as a list of activities but a structured system for cultivating responsibility, orderliness, and character. One homeroom teacher explained that:

BR3T bukan sekadar tentang bersih-bersih. Ini mengajarkan siswa bahwa hidup teratur adalah bagian dari menjadi pribadi yang baik—hal ini mempersiapkan mereka untuk kehidupan yang sesungguhnya, bukan hanya untuk di sekolah.

BR3T is not just about cleaning. It teaches students that being orderly is part of being a good person—it prepares them for life, not just for school. (Teacher T2)

Parents occupy an intermediate interpretive position, understanding BR3T as a habit-formation

process. Several parents reported that behaviours practised at school, such as tidying belongings and maintaining cleanliness, started to appear at home without parental prompting:

Anak saya sekarang selalu menyiapkan tas sekolahnya sebelum tidur. Padahal saya tidak mengajarnya hal itu. Katanya, gurunya yang mencontohkan cara melakukannya di sekolah.

My child now arranges her schoolbag before sleeping. I did not teach her that. She said her teacher showed them how to do it at school. (Parent P6)

The differences in interpretation reflect an important mechanism in discipline internalization. Discipline does not start as an abstract value immediately understood by students, but develops through repeated participation in structured practices that are initially external. Teachers play a critical role in attaching meaning to these practices (Damariswara et al., 2021), while parents provide a secondary context in which emerging habits are reinforced or reproduced. This layered process is consistent with Bandura account of observational learning, in which imitation of behaviour precedes personal understanding as discussed (Rohman, 2022). In addition, the character education framework by Berkowitz and Bier (2015) states that moral action typically precedes fully articulated moral knowing.

Compared to (Priastuti et al., 2023), who found that disciplined behaviour was primarily maintained through teacher authority, the results suggest a more layered process where meaning-making, not only authority, sustains routine enactment. The contribution is to show that internalization is initiated not through formal instruction alone, but by the interaction of enacted practice, teacher explanation, and home reinforcement.

Teachers strategies for supporting discipline internalization

The second dimension is related to the specific strategies through which teachers actively support the process of discipline internalization.

Behavioural habituation: from repetition to familiarity.

The first strategy is behavioural habituation through structured and repeated routines embedded in everyday school life. Activities such as cleaning the classroom, arranging learning materials, and following scheduled transitions are consistently performed across different times of the school day in relatively stable patterns.

Observational data showed that repetition gradually reduced the cognitive demand required to perform disciplined actions. After repeated exposure, some students started to organize desks, dispose of

rubbish appropriately, and fulfil assigned responsibilities without immediate teacher prompting. A Grade 6 student observed during fieldwork independently started arranging chairs after a lesson ended, before the teacher had issued any instructions. When later asked in an interview, the student explained that:

Sekarang saya langsung mengerjakannya saja. Dulu, guru selalu mengingatkan kami. Sekarang saya sudah ingat sendiri.

I just do it now. Before, the teacher always reminded us. Now I remember by myself. (Student S9)

Although this habituation does not represent full internalization, it marks a transitional phase where behaviour is stabilized through repetition but still supported by external structure. This result is consistent with the behavioural perspective articulated by Damariswara et al. (2021), who described repeated exposure to consistent routines as forming early habit patterns. However, this research extends the perspective by showing that habituation functions as the initial layer of discipline formation, establishing behavioural regularity as a precondition for deeper understanding to develop.

Teacher role modeling: translating routine into meaning.

The second strategy is teacher role modeling, which transforms routine actions into value-laden practices. Observational data showed that teachers did not function only as supervisors but actively participated in BR3T routines, including cleaning alongside students, organizing classroom environments, and showing expected standards. One teacher was observed picking up rubbish in the corridor before the morning session and explaining to nearby students:

Saya juga ikut memungut sampah karena ini adalah ruang kita bersama. Menjadi 'terpelihara' berarti kita semua ikut merawatnya—bukan hanya para siswa.

I also pick up rubbish because this is our shared space. Being terpelihara means all of us take care of it—not just the students. (Teacher T1)

More importantly, teachers consistently accompany actions with explanation and moral framing. Through this process, routine actions such as cleaning or organizing are reframed as expressions of responsibility, respect, and Islamic values of cleanliness (*thaharah*). This result extends (Jumatullailah et al., 2024), who documented teachers role-modeling function in character education, by showing specifically how modeling operates as a bridge between external routine and emerging internal meaning. In this context, modeling functions not only

as imitation, but also guided interpretation in which students begin to link actions with values.

In contrast to research focused on rule enforcement (Muda et al., 2022), the results suggest meaning-making through modeling constitutes a qualitatively distinct mechanism that rule-based approaches cannot replicate. This distinction is important for educational psychology understanding of how school culture, rather than compliance management, supports discipline development.

Reinforcement through monitoring and reflection.

The third strategy is reinforcement through continuous monitoring and reflective evaluation. Reinforcement in the BR3T context is primarily pedagogical rather than punitive, focusing on helping students recognise, evaluate, and adjust the behaviour over time.

Teachers monitor students participation and provide feedback in various forms, including reminders, corrective guidance, and appreciation for appropriate behaviour. When students fail to carry out routines, responses are typically framed as opportunities for improvement rather than punishment. A teacher described her approach:

Jika ada siswa yang lupa, saya bertanya kepada mereka, 'Apa yang harus kamu lakukan selanjutnya?' Saya tidak langsung memberikan jawabannya. Saya ingin mereka memikirkannya sendiri.

If a student forgets, I ask them, 'What should you do next?' I do not just tell them the answer. I want them to think about it themselves. (Teacher T4)

A critical feature of this process is the inclusion of reflective moments—brief occasions during or after routines in which students are encouraged to evaluate individual behaviour. These moments gradually shift the source of behavioural regulation. Initially, students depend on external monitoring and then begin to anticipate expectations and evaluate individual actions through repeated feedback and reflection.

Kadang-kadang saya mengecek tas bahkan sebelum disuruh oleh guru, karena saya sudah tahu apa yang harus kami lakukan.

Sometimes I check my bag even before the teacher asks, because I know what we are supposed to do (Student S7)

This shift can be understood as a movement from externally regulated to more self-referential behaviour. Similarly, Guay (2022) reported how autonomy-supportive feedback helps learners develop behavioural awareness. Self-determination theory framework also describes how internalized regulation develops through environments that support competence and reflection. The contribution lies in showing empirically, through classroom data, how

specific teacher practices, rather than abstract environmental conditions, enable this regulatory shift.

Discipline internalization as a contextual process

When considered together, the three processes described show the mechanism through which discipline is gradually internalized in the BR3T context. Habituation establishes behavioural regularity, role modeling attaches meaning and moral significance, while reinforcement supports reflection and self-evaluation. The interaction of these processes enables a progressive shift in the source of behavioural control, from external structure toward emerging internal awareness.

This sequence does not operate in a strictly linear manner, but as a continuous, overlapping, and mutually reinforcing process. Habituation creates the behavioural substrate on which meaning-making can occur, role modeling offers a substrate of moral and social significance, while reflective reinforcement enables the individual to take ownership of the behaviour. Collectively, these processes offer a process-oriented explanation of how school culture can function as a medium for discipline formation, extending beyond rule enforcement to include the broader social, relational, and interpretive context of learning.

The results extend the character education literature (Birhan et al., 2021; Juliana & Siregar, 2024) by specifying the mechanisms through which values extend from external prescription to habitual practice and toward self-regulation. Previous research has described this process in broad terms without tracing the specific interplay of routine, modelling, and reinforcement. The research also complements and extends investigations on self-regulation in school settings (Guay, 2022) by providing a concrete, culturally-grounded description of how regulatory development is supported through everyday school practices rather than via formal psychological intervention. Self-regulated learning model emphasises individual cognitive strategies, while this research shows that, in elementary school contexts, self-regulatory capacity first develops through social and relational processes—teacher modeling and guided reflection—before being exercised independently. This distinction shows the importance of the school-culture context as a precondition for individual self-regulation, rather than treating self-regulation as a purely internal achievement. Furthermore, the result contributes to a growing body of research on faith-based schooling (Halimah et al., 2024) by showing that Islamic values of cleanliness and orderliness (*thaharah*) can be pedagogically integrated into routine school culture in ways supportive of general disciplinary development, not only religious compliance.

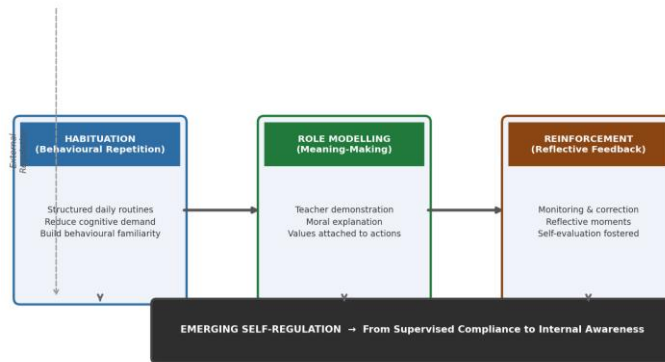


Figure 1. Process Model of Discipline Internalization through the BR3T School Culture

Importantly, the results show that internalization is gradual and partial rather than complete. Students operate within a continuum where external structure and internal awareness coexist. This implies that discipline should not be understood as a binary outcome, either compliant or self-regulating, but an ongoing developmental process shaped by the continuous interaction of routine, social guidance, and reflective feedback. The conceptualisation is consistent with the meta-analytic result by Battaglia et al., (2015) regarding a positive association between school discipline and self-control. It provides a process-level explanation of how the association is produced in a specific school-culture context. Meta-analysis showed the correlation across levels, and this research qualitatively shows how the mechanisms of habituation, modelling, and reflective reinforcement produce the association in daily practice. A comprehensive review of self-regulation models in education showed that structured instructional environments play a key role in developing students self-regulatory capacity. However, the review focused primarily on formal instructional settings. This research suggests that self-regulatory development may also emerge organically through consistent school-culture practices without formal intervention programmes, thereby extending the theoretical reach of self-regulation investigations into the domain of informal, culturally embedded school routines.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research shows that discipline internalization in the BR3T school culture at SD IT Salsabila operates through the interaction of three interdependent processes, namely behavioural habituation (structured repetition), teacher role modelling (translates routines into moral meaning), and reinforcement (monitoring and reflection that fosters self-evaluation). Collectively, these processes support a gradual, partial, and non-linear shift from externally

supervised compliance toward emerging self-regulation.

The results contribute to educational psychology in three specific ways. First, it provides an empirical, process-level account of how discipline internalization is produced through the interaction of habituation, teacher role modelling, and reflective reinforcement. This contribution expands on a previous investigation (Berkowitz & Bier, 2015) to show how the elements function together within a school-culture context. Second, this research extends the self-determination theory (Guay, 2022) by showing that, in elementary school settings, the conditions for internalized regulation are first established through social and relational processes (teacher modelling and guided reflection) rather than through individual cognitive effort alone. Third, it contributes to research on faith-based schooling by showing how Islamic values of cleanliness and orderliness (*thaharah*) can be integrated into daily school culture in ways that support broad disciplinary development, not only religious conformity. For practice, the results imply that school should invest not only in rule systems and sanctions, but in the consistent design of repeated routines, the quality of teacher exemplarity, and the integration of structured opportunities for student reflection and self-evaluation. At the same time, because this research is limited to a single case context, the results should be understood as a contextual explanation rather than a universally generalisable framework. Future research should examine whether similar processes operate in non-faith-based, multicultural, or secondary school settings.

This research has several limitations. First, it was conducted in a single faith-based elementary school implementing a specific program, which limits the transferability of results to other school types or cultural contexts. Second, the qualitative case design with 25 participants did not allow for statistical generalization. Third, the reliance on observational and self-reported data may be influenced by participants

awareness of the researcher presence, social desirability, and interpretive bias. Although strategies including triangulation, member checking, and reflexive journaling were used to enhance trustworthiness (Wilsani et al., 2023), the possibility of interpretive bias cannot be fully eliminated. In particular, the position of the researcher as a practising Muslim educator, while enabling relational access, may also have introduced a tendency to interpret school practices in a favourable light. Future research should address this limitation through formal reflexivity protocols.

Declaration

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Author Contributions

Conceptualization: Nursidik; Methodology: Nursidik; Investigation: Nursidik, Raharjo, Azam Syukur Rahmatullah, Arina Athiyallah, and Lika Hestyarningsih; Formal analysis: Nursidik; Writing—Original Draft Preparation: Nursidik; Writing—Review & Editing: all authors; Supervision: Nursidik.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no known competing financial interests or personal relationships capable of influencing the work reported in this paper.

Use of Artificial Intelligence

The authors declare that no Artificial Intelligence (AI) or AI-assisted technologies were used in the creation of this manuscript.

Ethical Clearance

Written permission was obtained from the school administration, and informed consent was secured from all participants or their guardians before data collection. Participation was voluntary and confidentiality was maintained through the use of pseudonyms.

Data Availability

The data supporting the results of this research are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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