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School Culture and Character Value Internalization at SMK Negeri 4 Makassar

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ABSTRACT

A teacher's professional competence is cultivated in part through direct, situated exposure to school life, formalized in Indonesia through Pengenalan Lapangan Persekolahan (PLP), a structured school-orientation placement for pre-service teachers. This study presents an exploratory, practitioner-based qualitative case study of school culture at SMK Negeri 4 Makassar, analyzed through Deal and Peterson's (2016) framework of school-culture elements, namely values and beliefs, rituals and ceremonies, history and stories, and artifacts and symbols. Data were collected through direct field observation and informal interviews with the school principal, the supervising teacher, and teaching staff during a two-day PLP placement (13-14 March 2023), with the research team's dual position as observers and PLP participants made explicit as a methodological consideration. Findings, organized against the four culture elements, show a consistently practiced greeting ritual (the 3S habit: Senyum, Sapa, Salam), religiously framed learning-conditioning rituals (pre-lesson prayer, shared responsibility for cleanliness), a routinized weekly flag ceremony, and visible symbolic compliance (uniform, discipline norms), alongside an explicitly acknowledged limitation in sustaining classroom quietness during instruction. These practices appear to support the internalization of moral values (tolerance, social care, a peaceful disposition) and religious values (cleanliness and gratitude framed through faith) among students. Given the short observation window and single-site design, the study's claims are presented as an exploratory case description rather than a generalizable finding, and specific recommendations are offered for extending this work into a more methodologically robust follow-up study.

Keywords: school culture; character education; habituation; vocational school; Indonesia

INTRODUCTION

Teachers are required, under Indonesian Law No. 14 of 2005 on Teachers and Lecturers, to hold four core competencies: pedagogical, personal, social, and professional. Pedagogical competence includes understanding learner characteristics through to evaluating learning processes and outcomes; professional competence requires mastery of subject matter and curriculum; personal competence concerns the attitudes and ethics a teacher models daily; and social competence concerns effective, empathetic communication with students, parents, fellow educators, and the community. Preparing prospective teachers to meet these standards requires more than classroom instruction in pedagogy; it requires direct, situated exposure to how schools actually function as social and cultural environments.

In Indonesia, this exposure is formalized through Pengenalan Lapangan Persekolahan (PLP), a school-orientation placement mandated by Ministerial Regulation (Permenristekdikti) No. 55 of 2017 on Teacher Education Standards. PLP is defined as a process of observation and apprenticeship through which pre-service teachers study the learning and educational-management aspects of a school unit (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2017). At Universitas Negeri Makassar's Office Administration Education program, PLP I specifically directs pre-service teachers to observe a school's vision and mission, organizational structure and governance, rules and regulations, formal ceremonial activities, co-curricular and extracurricular activities, and school culture together with habituated positive practices.

Among these domains, school culture has drawn particular research attention as a mechanism for character formation. A substantial body of literature treats school culture as one of the most effective vehicles for internalizing character values in students, precisely because it operates through repeated,

everyday practice rather than isolated instruction (Zahra & Sumarno, 2025; Yulia & Quratul Ain, 2024). Character is understood in this literature as the outcome of sustained habituation, exemplary modeling by teachers, and consistent social reinforcement, rather than a result of moral instruction alone (Yaqin, 2023; Fatimah et al., 2024). A quantitative study of elementary school students similarly found a measurable positive relationship between school culture and character education outcomes, reinforcing the view that culture, not curriculum content alone, meaningfully shapes character (Vinona et al., 2024).

Much of this literature, however, concentrates on elementary and early-childhood settings, leaving the dynamics of school culture in vocational secondary schools (SMK), where students are older, closer to entering the workforce, and often navigating a more technically oriented curriculum, comparatively underexamined. Discipline and rule implementation specifically in an SMK context have been studied (Irwansa & Maf'ul, 2016), as has the role of extracurricular activity in character building (Arifudin, 2022), but the everyday, informal texture of school culture, greetings, ceremonies, conditioning rituals, at the SMK level remains thinly documented relative to elementary settings.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on Deal and Peterson's (2016) framework of school culture, one of the most widely used analytic frameworks in the school-culture literature, which describes culture as constituted by four interrelated elements: (1) values and beliefs, the shared convictions that give a school's work meaning and direct behavior; (2) rituals and ceremonies, the repeated, symbolically charged routines and formal events through which values are enacted and reinforced; (3) history and stories, the narratives through which a school's identity and norms are transmitted; and (4) architecture, artifacts, and symbols, the physical and visible markers, such as uniforms, mottos, and displays, that make a culture's values tangible. This framework is used in the Methodology and Results and Discussion sections below to organize field observations systematically, rather than treating school-culture practices as an undifferentiated list of impressions.

Building on this framework and the literature gap identified above, this study aims to describe how school culture, and in particular the 3S habit (Senyum, Sapa, Salam), is implemented in daily life at SMK Negeri 4 Makassar, analyzed through Deal and Peterson's (2016) four culture elements, and to identify the character values that this culture appears to cultivate among students.

METHODS

This study used a qualitative case study design, appropriate for describing a single school's culture in its natural setting rather than testing a hypothesis across a sample. Data were collected during a Pengenalan Lapangan Persekolahan (PLP I) placement at SMK Negeri 4 Makassar, located on Jalan Bandang No. 140, Paranglayang, Bontoala District, Makassar, South Sulawesi. Fieldwork was conducted in person (luring) over two consecutive days, 13-14 March 2023, following written approval from the school principal for the research team's placement and observation activities.

Data were gathered through two techniques: direct, non-participant observation of daily school activities (student-teacher greetings, classroom-entry routines, the weekly flag ceremony, uniform compliance, and general campus conduct), and informal interviews with the school principal, the supervising teacher (guru pamong), and several teaching staff, focused on their perceptions of the school's culture and how it is maintained and sustained over time (a form of institutional history and story-telling data, in Deal and Peterson's terms). Observations were organized around six domains specified in the PLP I guidelines: school culture, organizational structure and governance, rules and discipline, ceremonial activities, co-curricular and extracurricular activities, and good practices; within the school-culture domain specifically, field notes were subsequently coded against Deal and Peterson's (2016) four elements (values and beliefs; rituals and ceremonies; history and stories; artifacts and symbols) to structure the analysis reported below.

A methodological limitation is acknowledged directly: the four researchers were simultaneously PLP participants and observers, present in the school as guests introduced by the principal and supervising teacher rather than as independent, unannounced observers. This dual position may have encouraged staff and students to display culturally normative behavior (such as the 3S habit) somewhat

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more consistently than would occur on an ordinary day without visiting researchers present, a form of observer effect common to short-term, announced school visits. The research team sought to offset this by observing across two separate days rather than a single visit and by cross-checking observed behavior against staff and student accounts in informal interviews, but this limitation could not be fully eliminated within a two-day placement and is treated as a boundary condition on the findings rather than a flaw to be concealed.

Data were analyzed descriptively and thematically: field notes and interview impressions were organized by the four culture elements described above, summarized, and interpreted against the school-culture and character-education literature to identify the character values that observed practices appeared to support. Because the observation period was short and confined to a single school, and no verbatim interview transcripts were retained for direct quotation, this study is presented as an exploratory case description rather than an ethnographic or longitudinal account; this constraint, and its implications for the findings, is revisited in the Conclusion.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the school-culture practices observed at SMK Negeri 4 Makassar, organized against Deal and Peterson's (2016) four elements of school culture (Table 1), followed by the character values these practices appear to support and a discussion relating these findings to the school-culture and character-education literature.

Tabel 1: School-Culture Practices at SMK Negeri 4 Makassar, Organized by Deal and Peterson's (2016) Elements of Culture

Culture Element (Deal & Peterson, 2016)	Observed Practice	Description
Rituals and ceremonies	3S habit (Senyum, Sapa, Salam)	Students greet teachers verbally and with a handshake gesture on arrival and when entering classrooms; observed consistently across both field days.
Rituals and ceremonies	Learning-conditioning routine	Greetings and a short prayer recited before instruction begins; shared, ongoing responsibility for classroom cleanliness.
Rituals and ceremonies	Weekly flag ceremony	Held every Monday as a routine formal ceremony.
Artifacts and symbols	School uniform	Students observed to be generally compliant with uniform regulations on both field days.
Values and beliefs	Cleanliness-as-faith norm	Staff explicitly linked cleanliness practices to religious framing (cleanliness as part of faith) in interviews.
History and stories	Staff accounts of culture maintenance	Principal and supervising teacher described the school's culture and how it is sustained over time through staff interviews.

Source: authors' field observation and informal interviews.

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1. Rituals and Ceremonies: The 3S Habit and Learning Conditioning

As summarized in Table 1, the most consistently observed element of school culture at SMK Negeri 4 Makassar was the ritual category, in Deal and Peterson's (2016) terms: the 3S habit (Senyum, Sapa, Salam - Smile, Greet, Salute) was observed to be reasonably well established, with students greeting teachers verbally and with a handshake gesture on arrival and when entering classrooms, and this pattern held across both field days rather than appearing staged for the visiting research team alone. Teachers were observed responding to and reinforcing these greetings, consistent with the role-modeling mechanism through which habituation-based character education is theorized to operate (Yaqin, 2023). Learning sessions were similarly conditioned by a consistent ritual sequence: students greet the teacher, a short prayer is recited before instruction begins, and classroom cleanliness is treated as an ongoing, shared responsibility. A weekly flag ceremony, held every Monday, constitutes a further, more formal ritual element.

2. Artifacts, Values, and an Uneven Boundary Condition

At the level of artifacts and symbols, student uniform compliance was observed to be generally consistent with school regulations on both observation days. At the level of values and beliefs, the school's cleanliness norm was explicitly and repeatedly linked by staff, in informal interviews, to a religious framing in which cleanliness is treated as part of faith, suggesting that this particular value operates not merely as a rule but as a belief staff actively articulate and, by their account, seek to transmit.

Alongside these consistently positive observations, a clear limit to the culture's reach was also apparent and is reported here without softening: sustaining a quiet, focused classroom atmosphere during instruction was described by teachers as an ongoing, unresolved challenge, with some students not yet fully internalizing norms around classroom quietness. This finding is important precisely because it complicates a purely positive account: it indicates that the school's ritual and symbolic elements (3S, uniform compliance, ceremony) are more consistently embedded than its behavioral discipline norms, suggesting these are not a single undifferentiated "culture" but several partially independent dimensions that may require distinct reinforcement strategies.

3. Character Values Observed

Two broad categories of character value appeared, in the research team's interpretation, to be supported by the observed rituals and values documented in Table 1. First, moral values: the 3S habit was associated, in interviews, with values of tolerance, social care, and a peaceful disposition among students, consistent with the view that character values, when practiced repeatedly through everyday ritual rather than taught abstractly, become internalized as part of a student's disposition (Fatimah et al., 2024; Vinona et al., 2024). Second, religious values: the cleanliness-as-faith belief and the pre-lesson prayer ritual were described by staff as cultivating gratitude and discipline before learning begins. These interpretations rest on staff and researcher impressions rather than direct student self-report, a limitation made explicit here rather than implied.

4. Development Ideas

Based on the observation, two development directions are suggested, mapped to the culture elements above. First, the ritual element (3S) could be further strengthened through more deliberate reinforcement, such as recognizing classes or students who model it consistently, rather than relying on informal, unprompted practice alone. Second, because the behavioral-discipline dimension (classroom quietness) appears less consistently embedded than the ritual and symbolic dimensions, a more consistently conducive classroom climate would likely require clearer, more consistently enforced classroom-conduct expectations, treated as a distinct improvement target rather than assumed to follow automatically from a strong greeting culture.

The pattern observed at SMK Negeri 4 Makassar, a functioning ritual element (3S, learning-conditioning routines, flag ceremony) supported by an articulated value (cleanliness-as-faith) and visible symbolic compliance (uniform), is consistent with the broader claim in the literature that school culture operates as an effective, ongoing medium for character internalization, functioning through continuous habituation, social interaction, and role modeling rather than through discrete lessons (Zahra & Sumarno,

2025; Yulia & Quratul Ain, 2024). The specific linkage observed here between cleanliness practices and religious framing, and between prayer routines and classroom discipline, mirrors findings that habituation of good character, such as greeting rituals and maintaining cleanliness, is often explicitly rooted in religious character-education framing in Indonesian school settings (Fatimah et al., 2024).

The uneven implementation noted for classroom quietness, read through Deal and Peterson's (2016) framework, suggests that ritual and symbolic elements of culture (which are highly visible, performed publicly, and reinforced through direct teacher-student interaction) may become embedded more readily than behavioral-discipline norms (which depend on sustained individual self-regulation with less immediate social reinforcement). This is consistent with the view that character values are internalized gradually and unevenly across students and across behavioral domains, since they depend on sustained, repeated exposure rather than a single successful ritual generalizing automatically to unrelated behaviors (Yaqin, 2023). It also suggests that school culture and school discipline, while related, are not interchangeable: a strong greeting culture does not, on its own, guarantee consistent classroom-conduct norms, consistent with observations that discipline implementation in SMK settings requires active, ongoing staff supervision rather than passive cultural transmission alone (Irwansa & Maf'ul, 2016).

These findings extend existing school-culture literature, much of which is grounded in elementary or early-childhood settings (Vinona et al., 2024), to a vocational secondary school context, where students are older and closer to workforce entry. The ritual and symbolic elements observed here appear to function similarly to those reported at the elementary level, suggesting that Deal and Peterson's (2016) framework, developed primarily from general and elementary school contexts, may transfer reasonably well to the SMK setting, at least for the ritual and symbolic elements; whether the same holds for the values-and-beliefs and history-and-stories elements, which this study's short observation window captured only thinly, is a question this case study cannot resolve and is flagged directly as a direction for further research rather than glossed over.

CONCLUSION

Analyzed through Deal and Peterson's (2016) framework of school culture, this case study found that SMK Negeri 4 Makassar maintains a moderately strong, positively oriented school culture, most clearly embedded in its ritual element (a consistently practiced 3S habit, learning-conditioning routines, a regular weekly flag ceremony) and its symbolic element (generally consistent uniform compliance), supported by an explicitly articulated value (cleanliness framed through faith), alongside an acknowledged, unresolved challenge in sustaining classroom quietness during instruction. These practices appear to cultivate both moral values, including tolerance, social care, and a peaceful disposition, and religious values linked to cleanliness and pre-lesson prayer, consistent with the broader literature's treatment of school culture as a vehicle for character internalization through habituation rather than direct instruction.

This study's findings should be read as an exploratory case description rather than a generalizable claim. Three specific limitations bound its conclusions: the two-day observation window and single-site design restrict generalization to other vocational schools or to this school's culture over a longer period; the research team's dual position as PLP participants and observers introduces a plausible observer effect that could not be fully separated from genuine, everyday practice; and no verbatim interview transcripts were retained, so character-value interpretations rest on researcher and staff impressions rather than directly quotable student or staff testimony. A methodologically stronger follow-up study would extend the observation period substantially, use a structured observation protocol with verbatim-quote capture, seek independent (non-participant) observation where feasible, and compare findings across multiple SMK sites, which together would allow more confident claims about how school culture shapes character formation in vocational secondary education specifically.

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