

Read the Room, Not Just the Rulebook: A Gender-Based Look at How Malaysian Secondary Students Decode School Rules

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Abstract

School rules function as one of the clearest expressions of the hidden curriculum, shaping student behaviour through values that are rarely stated outright. Yet surprisingly little research has examined how students themselves perceive these rules, and even less has looked at whether that perception varies by gender. To address this gap, data were collected from 80 Year 10 students at a government secondary school in Perak, Malaysia, and an independent samples t-test was used to compare male and female responses. The analysis found only a marginal, statistically non-significant gap between male students ($M = 1.6$) and female students ($M = 2.2$), $t = 27.4$, $p = 1.000$. In practical terms, this suggests that boys and girls in this setting read school rules in much the same way, and that the hidden curriculum embedded in those rules is being transmitted evenly across genders. The discussion below considers what this pattern means for how school rules function as a hidden curriculum within the Malaysian secondary school context.

Keywords: hidden curriculum, school rules, student perceptions, gender differences, secondary education

1. Introduction

Schools do more than transmit academic content at heart, they are socialising institutions that pass on the norms, values, and behavioural expectations of the wider society (Ahmad, 2012). Alongside the formal curriculum, which focuses on knowledge and skills, sits a hidden curriculum: the lessons students absorb informally through a school's culture, policies, and daily routines (Bartlett & Burton, 2012). School rules sit at the centre of this hidden curriculum. They are not merely administrative guidelines for keeping order; they also serve as a quiet vehicle for teaching social values (Thornberg, 2008b). This matters for practice: how a student perceives a rule shapes whether they follow it, and whether they accept the values behind it (Demirkasimoğlu et al., 2012). Earlier work has established that students' understanding of school rules shifts with social context and personal background (Ramly, 2003), yet the question of whether that understanding also shifts with gender particularly within Malaysian schools remains largely untouched.

Gender differences in the classroom have drawn attention across a range of disciplines (Borgonovi, 2016), and there is some evidence that boys and girls respond differently to authority and discipline (Baba, 1990). If that holds true, it stands to reason that gender could also shape how students read and respond to school rules as part of the hidden curriculum and understanding this could help schools apply their policies more fairly and effectively. This study sets out to examine how male and female secondary school students interpret the rules their schools enforce, with the aim of narrowing this gender-based gap in the literature. It tests the hypothesis that male and female students interpret school rules differently, with female students expected to view them more favourably than their male peers.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Hidden Curriculum and School Rules

Jackson (1968) is generally credited with coining the term hidden curriculum, arguing that pupils learn as much through the unspoken organisation and routines of school life as they do through formal instruction. Apple (2012) built on this, framing educational institutions as mechanisms that reproduce particular kinds of students instilling behaviours through channels that are never explicitly taught, but reinforced daily through the practices of ordinary schooling, from discipline to social integration. One of the clearest places to see the hidden curriculum at work is in the rules a school enacts. Thornberg (2008a) grouped these into five categories relational, structural, protective, personal, and ethical each targeting a different dimension of student behaviour and socialisation. Taken together, these rules function almost like a school's constitution, spelling out what is and is not permitted. A good deal of recent scholarship has zeroed in on the moral dimension of school rules. Thornberg (2009) contended that rules are woven into everyday social interaction, and it is through this everyday enforcement rather than through explicit lessons that the hidden curriculum's real goal of values education gets accomplished. By marking out the boundaries of acceptable conduct, school rules effectively teach students what it means to be a moral member of a community.

2.2. Student Perceptions of School Rules

Whether a student complies with a rule tends to hinge on how they perceive it in the first place. Ramly (2003) points out that because students have no hand in creating school rules, their perception of those rules can diverge sharply from what the rule-makers intended. Smith and Khan (2022), meanwhile, found that strict, consistent enforcement tends to build self-discipline, while patchy or inconsistent enforcement is often what erodes it. Other research suggests that a student's perception of rules is shaped less by the rules themselves and more by school climate, peer influence, and individual personality (Long, 1978). Unsurprisingly, students who see rules as fair tend to comply with them, while those who see rules as unjust rate them poorly and are more likely to push back (Hurlock, 1973).

2.3. Gender Differences in Educational Settings

Gender has been examined across most of these threads of research. Borgonovi (2016) notes that gender gaps show up clearly in certain classroom activities, where boys and girls can end up achieving quite differently depending on the task. On matters of discipline specifically, the evidence tends to point the same way: female students are typically found to be more compliant and rule-abiding, while male students are more likely to push against authority (Smith & Jones, 2022). Even so, the intersection of gender and

rule perception is still a young field, and almost nothing has been written about it in the Malaysian context specifically. Since schools rely so heavily on the hidden curriculum to socialise students, mapping out any gender differences in how rules are perceived could inform more effective, more equitable school policy.

3. Research Method

3.1. Context and Respondents

This study was carried out at a government secondary school in Perak, Malaysia, which follows the Malaysian national curriculum and has a multi-ethnic student body of Malay, Chinese, and Indian students. Year 10 students were chosen as participants for two reasons: it is a non-examination year, so taking part would not interfere with their studies, and students at this level were judged mature enough to answer the survey thoughtfully.

3.2. Instrument and Data Collection

Data were collected using a two-part questionnaire. Section A gathered basic demographic information gender and ethnicity while Section B consisted of 30 items on a five-point Likert scale, asking students about their views on school rules and the consequences attached to student behaviour. The instrument was a validated tool adapted for this study, with content validity checked by experts in the education field. Responses ranged from 1 (Strongly Agree) to 5 (Strongly Disagree). A pilot test was run to check the instrument's reliability, yielding a Cronbach's alpha of .829 comfortably above the .6 threshold generally considered acceptable (Kilic, 2016).

3.3. Data Analysis

All analysis was quantitative and carried out in SPSS (version 27). Descriptive statistics were used to summarise participant demographics and average perception scores, while an independent samples t-test compared perception scores between male and female students. Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$.

4. Results

4.1. Respondent Profile

As shown in Table 1, the final sample comprised 80 respondents: 43 male students (53.8%) and 37 female students (46.3%). By ethnicity, the sample was 57.5% Chinese, 28.8% Indian, and 13.8% Malay.

Table 1. Respondent Profile

Learner Variable	Category	n (%)
Gender	Male	43 (53.8)
	Female	37 (46.3)
Ethnicity	Malay	11 (13.8)
	Chinese	46 (57.5)
	Indian	23 (28.8)

4.2. Descriptive Statistics of School Rule Perceptions

Overall, the results are encouraging. With an overall mean of 4.41, classroom rules are being followed at a very high level. Four of the ten items reached the Very High range, and the other six were rated High. None fell below 4.00, so no rule was seen as poorly observed.

Where compliance is strongest. Classroom cleanliness earned the highest rating ($M = 5.00$, $SD = 0.000$), with every respondent giving it the top score. Noise and behavior control ($M = 4.89$), assembly line-up ($M = 4.75$), and uniform and grooming ($M = 4.75$) followed closely. These are rules that everyone can see and that teachers can easily monitor. When expectations are clear and consistently reinforced, students tend to meet them, which likely explains these results.

Areas doing well, with room to grow. Attendance documentation ($M = 4.19$), desk arrangement ($M = 4.19$), energy conservation ($M = 4.16$), and punctuality ($M = 4.14$) were rated High, just under the Very High threshold. These rules rely on daily habits and personal responsibility, so small lapses are understandable. Punctuality may also be shaped by factors outside the school's control, such as transportation and household routines, especially with a 7:15 AM cutoff.

Where support is most needed. Mobile phone prohibition and homework and learning materials preparation were the lowest-rated items, both at $M = 4.00$. Even so, this is still a High rating and not a cause for concern. Phone rules are naturally hard to enforce given how tempting the device is, and homework preparation depends as much on students' study habits and home support as on classroom supervision. These two areas would benefit most from targeted, encouraging strategies.

Consistency of responses. All standard deviations were below 0.50, showing that respondents largely shared the same view. The SD of 0.000 for cleanliness and phone prohibition means every respondent gave the same rating. This may reflect a truly uniform practice, but it could also be influenced by a ceiling effect, a tendency to give socially desirable answers, or ratings given as a group rather than individually. The results should therefore be interpreted with some care, and this is worth acknowledging as a limitation of the study.

Table 2. Mean Results of Each Student's Perception of School Rules

Item	Mean	SD
Classroom cleanliness requirement	5.00	0.000
Attendance documentation requirement	4.19	0.393
Punctuality (before 7:15 AM)	4.14	0.347
Energy conservation (lights/fans)	4.16	0.371
Mobile phone prohibition	4.00	0.000
Assembly line-up requirement	4.75	0.436
School uniform and grooming compliance	4.75	0.465
Homework and learning materials preparation	4.00	0.390
Orderly arrangement of desks and chairs	4.19	0.417
Classroom noise and behaviour control	4.89	0.428

4.3. Gender Variance of School Rules Perception

Table 3 presents the independent samples t-test comparing perception scores by gender. Male students averaged 1.6, compared to 2.2 for female students a gap of just 0.6 points. This difference was not statistically significant, $t = 27.4$, $p = 1.000$, indicating that male and female students perceive school rules in much the same way.

Table 3. Independent t-test for Gender-Based Perception

Variable	Gender	Mean Score	t	p
Perception	Male	1.6	27.4	1.000
	Female	2.2		

Note. $p < .05$

5. Discussion

This study set out to examine student perceptions of school rules through a gender lens, treating those rules as an active part of the hidden curriculum. The results point to one clear conclusion: gender does not meaningfully shape how students perceive school rules. Female students scored marginally higher, but the gap was too small to matter statistically. In practice, this means boys and girls at this school share broadly similar attitudes toward the rules that structure their daily school life. This is worth noting for two reasons. First, it pushes back against the assumption that girls are inherently more agreeable toward rules than boys here, both groups seem to accept rules around punctuality, attendance, and assembly conduct as reasonable. Second, it suggests that the hidden curriculum operating through this school's rules is, at least in this setting, gender-neutral: the values of control, responsibility, and respect embedded in the rules appear to land the same way regardless of a student's gender.

The high mean scores across the board reflect a generally positive view of school rules, which aligns with Thornberg's (2008a, 2009) argument that school rules and routines tend to be administered in a gender-neutral way, whatever the hidden curriculum's underlying intent. The near-unanimous agreement with the cleanliness rule ($M = 5.00$) and the assembly rule ($M = 4.75$) suggests students genuinely recognise these rules as necessary for keeping the learning environment orderly. In that sense, school rules do more than control behaviour in the moment they quietly shape how students feel about shared spaces, time-keeping, and responsibility toward one another. From a practical standpoint, the absence of a gender gap means school authorities do not need gender-specific rule frameworks a uniform approach works well. Effort would be better spent ensuring rules are applied fairly and consistently, and that students understand why a rule exists in the first place. Prior research supports this: when students grasp the rationale behind a rule and see it enforced evenly, they are far more likely to accept and follow it (Smith & Khan, 2022; Hurlock, 1973).

This, in turn, feeds into better student behaviour and a stronger overall system of school discipline. At the same time, the data hint that other factors school climate, culture, peer relationships, prior socialisation likely matter more than gender in shaping how rules are perceived. This echoes more recent work by Kaur and Kaur (2017), which suggests that students' views of school are driven more by personal motivation, school atmosphere, and teacher-student relationships than by gender alone. That said, the study has clear limits. It draws on a single government secondary school and a sample of just 80 students, which may not capture the range of conditions found across Malaysian schools more broadly. The data are also self-reported, which means they capture attitudes rather than actual behaviour a student can rate a rule highly and still break it in practice. Limitations aside, the findings still offer something useful: in this setting, school rules as an expression of the hidden curriculum are valued positively by boys and girls alike,

reinforcing the idea that a fair, consistent, and clearly communicated set of rules can shape student behaviour without needing to be tailored by gender.

6. Conclusion

This study surveyed secondary school students to explore how the hidden curriculum operates through school rules. The findings confirm no statistically significant gender difference in how students perceive these rules, reinforcing the idea that school rules shape behavioural values consistently across genders. Overall, students viewed the rules favourably, suggesting the hidden curriculum is functioning as intended in this context. Future research would benefit from sampling multiple schools across different curricula to see whether these patterns hold more broadly. Qualitative methods, such as interviews, could add depth to how students interpret and respond to rules, while a longitudinal design would help capture how students' behavioural responses and feedback evolve over time.

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