Challenging Stereotypical Notions of Discipline in Elementary Schools:

Building a Positive Classroom Environment

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Abstract

Indiscipline is the main source of anxiety among teachers, especially pre-service teachers. Indiscipline is caused by children in the class who are either misbehaving, or being unresponsive or showing lack of initiative. In classrooms there are a number of such incidents of disruption. For handling these issues teachers try different strategies. In this research, school teachers from schools were observed and their strategies to handle indiscipline were analyzed. This analysis helped in discovering teachers' notions of discipline which are labeled as 'Silence – Pin drop Silence'; 'Order – Order, Order'; 'Don't Ask Anything' and 'No movement'. However, these strategies though created silence in class but did not seem to make a difference in the learning environment of the class. Thus, a few alternate strategies of classroom management for building a positive environment in class were explored and tried. These strategies helped in solving the problem of indiscipline in classrooms. It was also found that managing children who are not inclined to engage in work is a challenging task. The skill of classroom management is very important for a teacher to manage her class and for the children for their effective learning.

Keywords: *Classroom Management, Discipline, Positive Environment of the Class, Elementary School*

Introduction

'Be in discipline' is the phrase which comes to my mind, whenever I think of my school experience. Considering that I did my schooling about three decades ago, is it still prevalent? Teaching methodologies have changed over a period of time, but what about notions of discipline? According to Cambridge English dictionary, discipline means "training that makes people more willing to obey or more able to control themselves often in form of rules and punishment if these are broken, or behavior produced by this training" (https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/discipline)

The word discipline which comes from the word "Disciple" meaning a 'learner' holds much importance in one's life. There is a need of discipline in our life, our society, in schools, in the playground and everywhere. The absence of discipline brings chaos and problems in life. Classroom discipline is a complex issue and a key concern for teachers, principals, children and parents. Classroom disruption or indiscipline is a major challenge faced by teachers. It is often indicated as one of the main causes of wasting time in classrooms. A great deal of the energy of teachers is directed toward classroom disruption while trying to deliver a lesson, thus it becomes the foremost reason for teachers' emotional exhaustion. Classroom discipline clearly cannot be reduced to a technical and/or scientific problem. A teacher needs to face it, handle it and rectify it with wisdom. Basically, classroom discipline refers to a set of teacher actions that constitute organizational and management processes aimed at establishing classroom order. There are challenging situations in classrooms especially related to classroom management.

Misbehaviour of children like violence, or theft are generally rare; in case it happens then also mostly in lunch times/ break and in corridors but not in classrooms. These are generally caused by few unruly children. On the contrary, in classrooms commonly observed misbehaviour are "inattentiveness, talking, calling out names or mild form of physical or verbal aggression".

Though minor, but these behaviours definitely disrupt the classroom interaction and distract every child's attention. How to manage such behaviours is the key question in this paper. Before addressing that let's explain the term 'classroom management'. It refers to "the techniques (actions and strategies) used by teachers in order to make children focused and attentive in any classroom transaction". Does the teacher need to be dominating or free with children? What needs to be done in such unruly classes? These are challenging questions especially for pre-service teachers and beginners. The paper is an attempt to answer them.

Objectives of the research

The following are the objectives of the research:

- To understand the notion of 'discipline' of teachers in a primary and a middle school.

- To build a positive environment in the class by using a variety of classroom management strategies.

Context of the study

The research was conducted in two schools – a co-educational primary school of the North Delhi Municipal Corporation and a Government Girls Middle School of the Directorate of Education. Both schools are located in Rohini, the North West of Delhi. In these schools' pre-service elementary teachers were placed for a duration of sixteen weeks for their school internship (practicum of practice teaching of BElEd (Bachelor of Elementary Education) an undergraduate professional course in teacher education).

Methodology

To find answers to these objectives two schools were chosen as a research sample. Children and teachers' behaviour in both the schools at different places – within classroom, in playground, in library, in corridors, during break time and assembly were observed. Informal conversations were held with teachers teaching in those schools. These observations and conversations helped explore the stereotypical notions of teachers about discipline.

The second phase of the research was action research and involved a pre-service teacher teaching for 16 weeks while trying different techniques for classroom management. The findings and conclusions shared in this paper are based on the data collected from two schools only within a limited time span.

Observation of a primary school

Most of the children in primary school come from a nearby slum. Their parents work as laborers at construction sites, in factories, shops; as fruit or vegetable or other vendors or as servants in houses or shops. Most of them work in unorganized sectors. Their houses did not have even basic facilities of toilets and water. Water tankers from Delhi Jal Board come twice/ thrice a week and they use portable toilets located in the slum. Children came from disadvantaged families (socially and economically) where there was not enough support from parents to study.

Children in the primary school were always expected to be quiet and working silently. Most of the time teachers were talking and children were listening. There were hardly any activities where children were discussing among themselves. There was not any constructive talk observed among children. During recess time, mid-day meal was distributed and teachers remained in their respective classrooms. After having their meal, children went out to drink water, or to washrooms, or walked in corridors or went to other classes. However, they were not allowed to go into the school playground. The school has a large playground which is neither utilized nor maintained. The headmistress told that school didn't have funds to employ any person on a daily basis for maintaining the garden/ ground. She informed that the school hires a daily wager to cut grass on a fortnightly basis. Even in the school library, children were not allowed to pick up books of their choice. The school librarian decides upon a storybook then a child or two from that class read it aloud during the allocated time. On being asked why are the children not allowed to explore and read books as per their choice, the teacher responded that they don't know how to take care of books; they would tear pages and mis-manage the entire library. Instead of setting protocols to be followed in the library, children were denied access to books! At the dispersal time, children moved in a class wise queue and slowly went down the stairs. Classes were held regularly. However, there was no variation in the pedagogy of the teacher. It was 'talk and chalk' method.

Observation of a middle school

The middle school, located in Rohini, the North – west of Delhi was a only girls' school. After school assembly there was silence in school. Every girl was inside their classroom and working quietly. At any point during school hours there were hardly any girls seen outside their classes. The instances which were observed in corridors were of teachers scolding girls. Harsh words were used like - these girls can never improve (*'ye ladkiya kabhi sudhar nahi sakti')*; Have your parents taught you something or not? (*Tumhare maa baap ne tumhe kuch sikhaya hai bhi ya nahi'*); Girls were negatively reinforced. For instance, they were not allowed to go to the playground in their free time and break time. There were few instances of where teachers and class monitors were seen slapping girls. Girls were only allowed to play during their games/ sports period in the presence of a physical education teacher. During recess too after finishing their mid-day meal, girls were seen only roaming in the playground.

Girls were always expected to be on their seat and working silently and on time. If they were found talking, it was labeled that they were ill-mannered and not taking interest in the classes. Girls were afraid of their teachers and the principal. They hardly argued with the teachers. They did what was expected from them. Such kind of atmosphere in school develops a feeling of fear, dislike and even hatred in extreme cases towards teachers and the school system. Girls in this middle school were in their adolescence years and for them self -respect and self-image are of importance. Use of negative remarks about their family and parents are often like emotional torture for them. Verbal abuse is equally damaging as that of physical punishment. It was also observed that a lot of time was spent on how to do a particular work (instructions of doing in a notebook) or what behaviour is expected from them.

Stereotypical notions of discipline

During the observations in schools, a few practices were regularly observed. For the sake of convenience of recording and analyzing data, similar observations are grouped in a single category and are labelled. These categories are called notions, as these are 'conceptions or beliefs' of teachers about discipline. Thus, the following are their stereotypical notions about discipline: -

Notion 1: Pin drop Silence

All the students will remain in discipline. No one will speak loudly in the class, everyone will do neat and good work, no one will make a noise in the class. (Translated from Hindi - '*sab bache discipline main rahenge, koi bhi chilana mat, ache se kam karna, shor mat machana,*')

On a particular day, a visit from a school inspector was expected. The teacher instructed her class and reinforced the criteria of a 'good class'. Teachers find indiscipline as one of the major problems in teaching. 'Having control of the class' is seen as one of the indicators of good teachers by school authorities and principals. On the contrary, children don't see the school setting as an interesting place to learn. They come to school more as a compulsion or to socialize with peers. Hagenauer et al (2015) in their quantitative study on 132 secondary school teachers found that the "lack of discipline in class is the best predictor of teacher's anger experiences" Do we want children to be quiet or want to make them attentive? For making the environment of class meaningful for children in which learning can take place, it is essential to make them attentive, not quiet! But, teachers in the present study found it difficult to encourage children to participate in the classroom and even in other school activities.

Notion 2: Order

If anyone would like to ask questions from you, then raise your hands. You all have to prove to them that you are good children. (Translated from Hindi - '*sab hath uthake jawab denge agar wo kuch puchenge to, ache bache banke dikhana hai unhe*')

For the teacher a 'good child' is the one who follows all the rules of the class. Ironically, the practices of raising hands and waiting for their turn to speak/ ask questions were hardly followed. Teachers are bothered about unruly class and disruptive classroom behavior, but rules of classroom management were not made. Sometimes, rules like raise your hands, if you wish to answer were iterated but not practiced. It is also important to understand that 'order' in any examination hall meant absolute silence, passivity and following strict rules but in the case of classrooms order is different. All learners in classrooms should be allowed to participate in activities. Different classroom activities would require different activities like in a silent reading

task or written work, each child is expected to work individually and teacher supports learners wherever required; in a group activities, children will interact with each other and try to find answers for the questions posed; in a whole class discussion children will listen to others and speak when it is their turn; in lunch time (break time) children will freely move around and speak to each other. Thus, each context has different demands for order from children and teachers, it is not uniform!

Order does not necessarily mean passivity or absolute silence. It simply means that within the acceptable limits' children are following the behaviour expected for that particular classroom event.

Notion 3: Teachers Speak and Tell: They don't Ask!

Do not ask them (children) questions because if you will start asking them they will make noise in the class and then how will you control them (Translated from Hindi:'*Inko mat pucha karo ye shor macha denge fir tum kaise control karoge*')

Whatever you want to teach them, just tell and write on the board and they will copy it from the board; only then they will remain quiet. (Translated from Hindi '*Inko jo bhi krwana hai samjha diya karo aur fir inki copy main likwa diya karo tabhi chup rahenge ye*)

Teacher advised many times to the pre-service teacher for keeping children of the class 'disciplined'. During activities, children were excited about teaching learning material. Children were given space to interact in groups. However, the teacher ignored the difference between constructive talk and noise. Moreover, expecting children to be busy while copying from the board for the entire day is not appropriate. This kind of seat work may create children's lack of interest in school, thus leading to chatting, sleeping, walking around in the class or any other disruptive activity. The teacher would find it difficult to engage children in the classroom. For planning and organizing an activity and then to make it successful, it is important that children must be willing to participate. In case a few children were not interested in class activities but not being disruptive then they can be ignored. Thus, the need is to move away from 'Speak and don't Ask" and the purpose should be to keep children

engaged in a stimulating curriculum thereby leading to joyful learning.

Notion 4: Classroom: A Place for No Movement

Make children sit as they were before otherwise; they will start roaming around in the classroom. (Translated from Hindi -'*Inko jaise ye baithte hai waise hi bithao nahi to ye class main nachne lag jaenge*')

The teacher stayed in the class for the whole day in the primary school and in the middle school a teacher is with the same group of children for about 50 minutes. The class size in both the schools varied between 40 to 50, depending upon the number of present children on a particular day. This large group of children is heterogeneous with different academic levels and different interest levels. All times, children were seated in rows on their seats. In such heterogeneous group it is not possible to manage students on the same kind of task every day. Thus, the routine task made school boring for them. They seem to attend school to pass their time or socialize. By not allowing children to speak or to move, the situation was worsened as children started to show disruptive behavior. There was no place for theatre or story-telling or any other activities for accommodating various learning styles, which would make classroom an interesting place for children.

Notion 5: Teaching Feeling of Inferiority

Observe these girls in the class. They are so good; they are always silent in the class. Learn from them how to be in discipline. (Translated from Hindi - '*Ladkiya dekho kitni samjhdar hai hamesha chup baithi rehti hai inse sikhlo discipline main kaise rehte hai*')

In certain contexts, the teacher positively reinforced certain behaviour such as 'being silent'. The language of the teacher also conveyed a meaning to students about what type of behaviour is accepted in the class. When this strategy failed after sometime the teacher started using negative reinforcement by saying:

"Whoever (boys) will be talking, I will change his seat and make him sit with a girl."

(Translated from Hindi - '*Jis ladke ne bat ki uski seat badal dungi aur use ladkiyo se sath bitha dungi*')

There were times when after repeated reminders few children (boys) continued moving in and outside the class. Then during such times, the teacher remarked:

Boys are ill-mannered. Without getting a slap, they will never be silent.

(Translated from Hindi - *'Ladke to hai hi batamez, bina thappad ke chup hona nahi ata tumhe'*)

Strategies used in schools to maintain Discipline
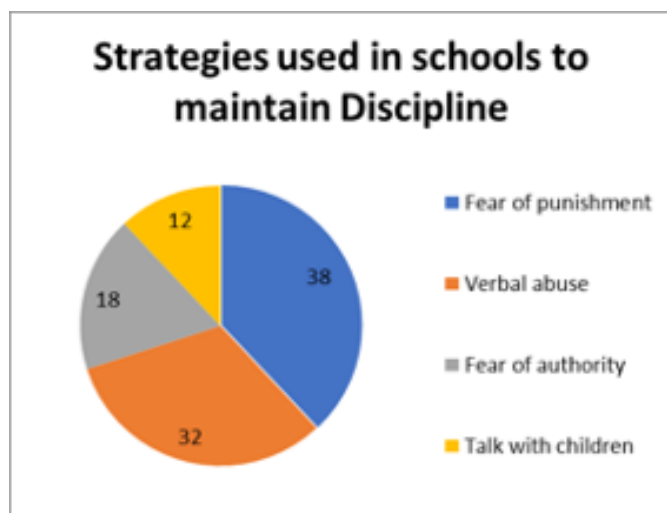
The chart shows the graphical representations of the strategies used by school teachers. It was found that the most frequently used strategy was fear of punishment (38%) followed by verbal abuse (32%) and then fear of principal or senior teacher or parents (18%). And only in 12% of cases conversations were held with children regarding reasons for indiscipline or mis-behaviour.

The teachers were aware of the fact that corporal punishment is not allowed. Still, when they were not able to manage the class, especially when they felt that situation was out of control, children were threatened for punishment. On the other hand, children commonly observed (and even part of) verbal and physical abuse in their homes or colonies. Thus, when any teacher threatened them of corporal punishment, they were not afraid of that too. Charles (2014) has defined three types of discipline in classrooms. One, 'preventive discipline', where a teacher sets expectations, guidelines and rules for averting any kind of misbehavior by students. Second is 'supportive discipline' wherein a teacher observes "any student on the 'cusp of misbehaving' and she nips it in the bud, thus avoiding any escalation". Third is 'corrective discipline', which refers to actions focused to correct any behavior that might cause disruption.

However, discipline is not punishment in any situation.

Understanding teachers perspective of discipline

The meaning of discipline was limited to being silent and behaving properly in front of others in the primary school. However, the need for a disciplined life was neither discussed nor practiced. Slaps and sticks were hardly used but its fear was always maintained. The entire teaching learning process was recall or rote memorization based. Textbook chapters were read and then responses of textbook questions were written on Chalkboard. Children quietly copied the responses. The entire day went like this with no change in learning style or teaching methodology. This can be attributed to different reasons:-

Firstly, there is scarcity of resources in terms of physical as well as technological resources. Materials like charts, models, flash cards were not available. A few schools have libraries but books are not freely accessible to children. They were maintained well in stock for the audits. In few schools' computers and smart boards were installed but those were hardly used by teachers. One, there were not sufficient materials (software) were available on the systems and secondly, teachers were not trained well in handling technological resources.

Secondly, there are 40 to 50 children in a class. It is difficult to organize different activities with such a large group. Moreover, teachers also seem to take the path of least difficulty. They are neither trained nor appreciated for organizing varieties of activities. The school principals and higher authorities like school inspectors always appreciated silent classrooms.

Another factor is that school teachers have additional responsibilities like maintaining records of scholarships, distribution of mid-day meal, organizations of assembly or any other event/ celebrations by planning and conducting activities namely essay writing, poster making, science fair and many others. Teachers felt that there is too much additional work than teaching. The success in additional activities contribute more to the definition of good teacher than success in classroom teaching -learning experience.

Yet another factor is that children are promoted to the next class, because of no detention policy

thus focus on teaching and learning is further lost under the burden of additional work. Another significant factor is the admission of children to their age appropriate classes, as per the RTE guidelines. Due to which there are some children in classes who did not have prerequisite knowledge for that class. Such children were not able to make sense of what is happening in classes. They tend to lose interest in class interaction, thus creating disturbances in class management.

Furthermore, the socio-economic background of children was very different from that of teachers. It was observed a number of times in schools teachers would remark about children and their families like '*ye kabhi sudhar nahi sakti' ; Tumhare maa baap ne tumhe kuch sikhaya hai bhi ya nahi'*.This socio-economic divide was a huge barrier to the teaching -learning process. Teachers seem to assume that these children don't require education; they will ultimately be working as maids, peons or servants like their parents. Secondly, children hardly had any familial support for their education. They had nobody to help/ assist them in their education other than teachers. Children coming from the socio-economic disadvantaged group had their own set of challenges in personal lives which were hardly understood in the school.

Lastly, another factor that contributed to the ill managed classrooms was teachers' job satisfaction. There was no tool used for finding their job satisfaction but a large number of teachers spoke about their promotions which were long due or their eligibility to teach higher classes or qualifying tests for higher grade teachers (Trained Graduate Teachers (TGTs) or Post Graduate Teachers (PGTs)). Such kind of dis-satisfaction led to an atmosphere of non-learning in classrooms.

Building a positive environment in the classroom: Action research

In the primary classroom, I observed that children have different preferences, interests and learning styles. Before teaching them, it is important to manage the entire class. To quote Sanchez (2011), "classroom management can't be mastered by reading about it". Therefore, I should not only be prepared for the content (academic work) but also be equipped with strategies of classroom management. In the following section, I mentioned activities and strategies which worked for my classroom.

We used an instrument named 'Voice-o-Meter' for managing the noise level in the classroom. This instrument also indicates children the level of noise which is acceptable in a particular situation. Its picture was displayed in the class. It has following six levels:

Level 0: Complete Silence - nobody in class can hear you.

Level 1: Whisper - only the child next to you should hear your sound;

Level 2 Group Talk – During group work, children talk softly to each other and without disturbing other groups;

Level 3: Class talk - In class discussion children are presenting their point of views/ opinions audible to everyone in class; Level 4: Play-ground voice - children are talking freely as in lunch break;

Level 5: Emergency voice - a voice used to alert the teacher that you are in need.

These levels of Voice-o-Meter are adapted from
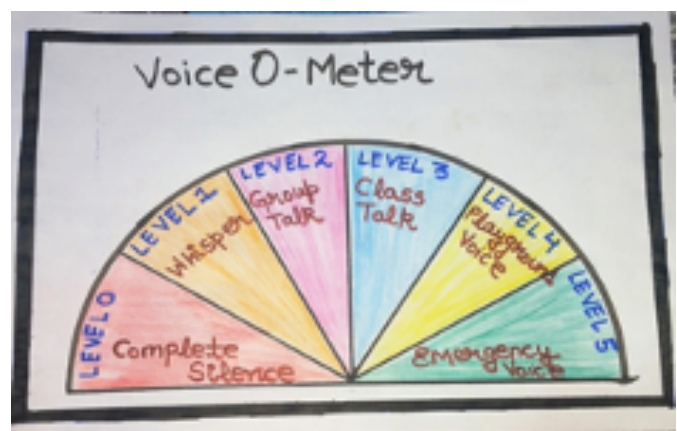
various other such charts available in the market.

Then some other symbols were also used like hand raise, if any child would like to answer;

raising a finger if any child would want to ask a question and making a 'T' using both hands if any child would like to share something or say something related to the concept being taught in class. These kinds of signs significantly reduced the noise levels in class.

Children also decided the rules they would like to follow all year along the teacher. These are kind of ground rules, that is, compulsory to follow. Only after detailed deliberations, rules and consequences (if rules were not followed) were finalized. It was observed that children do not take rules seriously when they realize that no actions are taken for breaking the rules. As per Osher et al (2010), "classroom rules need to be concrete, explicit and functional". Thus, in this light the following rules were finalized:

We will not speak in chorus

We will speak one by one

We will use symbols if we would like to answer or ask question or say something

We will wait for our turn to answer

We will listen to others; We will not litter in the classroom

We will put pencil shavings and paper in the dustbin

If someone does not follow rules then she/ he will not be allowed to participate in the next activity.

In a classroom a lot of things happen simultaneously, for instance, during a writing task I was helping an individual child, and at the same time observing or monitoring the rest of the class; I also acknowledged other children's request for support; handled noise or misbehaviour and was keeping track of the time. Thus, a teacher is a multi-task master.

Any classroom is a place with rapid events which at times require quick actions. For instance, when I observe a child getting bored, I immediately involve her/ him in the class discussion or ask a question. Indiscipline or disruption often results from children who are getting bored and then they attempt to liven up a dull moment by distracting others by some kind of misbehaviour.

It was challenging to make the classroom a learning place especially when children were not interested. At such times I narrated stories using props like hand puppets or stick puppets or

engaged children in craft activities. This kind of transition from one task to another to getting the attention of children did wonders in my classroom. At the same time, I changed the seating arrangements of children as per the nature of activity. For instance, children were seated in a circle for a story telling; in a semi-circle to observe a demonstration performed by teacher; in groups for experimentation or discussion; on their respective seats for individual writing task or a silent reading task. This kind of variation in seating arrangement also helped children to move around during transition and reduced the restlessness among children.

There is plenty of communication with individual children the entire day. After the initial few days, I realized that some are children in the class are hyperactive and showed minor disruptive behaviour like chatting or moving after completing their task. Thus, for such children, I created a story corner. They were asked to pick up a book and read it when other children are doing their work. Moreover, positive and negative reinforcements were given to children by displaying stars or smileys and frownies respectively on a chart in the classroom. Different types of monitors like row monitors, stationery monitors, worksheet monitors were made, which were changed on a weekly basis. It was always in our mind to keep the children engaged. Even in free times, children were actively engaged using theatre techniques.

In small group tasks it is not fair to expect perfect classroom management. Children will talk, share and discuss their ideas. For instance, in a sharing task on the 'Visit to a Mandi', after initial discussion, there was too much excitement and every one was eager to present their experiences. Then I realized that I need to

change the pedagogy. Thus, I asked each group to take 10 minutes to organize their experiences under broad headings and then present their reports/ findings to the entire class. Thus, children were again engaged in the class.

In another small group investigation on 'what floats and what sinks', all children were busy in

their experimentation and simultaneously recording their observations in a notebook. But, one particular group was working meticulously. The group was positively reinforced as they set examples for others to behave in a particular manner.

Children were clear that if they break the rules action will be taken. A chart about rules of consequence (if someone does not follow rules) was displayed in the classroom. According to the behaviorist theorists like Skinner, when the rewards and reinforcements are used in an effective way, "different types of attitudes can be induced in learners without punishment". Actually, there is no need for punishment.

Thus, children will not be allowed to participate in the next activity, in case they repetitively break any rule of the classroom management. Classes were held every day. Children accumulated experiences, understood routines and norms and realized that rules are strictly

followed without exception. Thus, it provided a strong foundation of conducting activities throughout the internship period of four months. Moreover, all children are observing the teacher's behaviour. Each child sees how others are treated. Thus, a teacher needs to be cautious of her biases avoiding any discrimination or favouritism.

Indiscipline is difficult to be absolutely solved. It

is important to identify, manage and overcome classroom challenges with interpersonal skills. I learnt to be more patient with children. It is also important to give free time and play time to children. I observed that children complain a lot about other children and in between classes too. We decided and made a complaint box, in which children put their written complaints without disturbing class. Those complaints were read every day before dispersal and then resolved. After following this practice regularly, the number of complaints reduced considerably over a period of time.

It is difficult to predict how an activity will go on a particular day and with a particular group of children. For instance, in a group discussion on 'Healthy Food vs Junk Food', children were excited to share their views; they were not listening to others; they were not waiting for their turn; Finally, I stopped the activity and asked all of them to write their views on the topic. At the same time, to negatively reinforce their behaviour, I cancelled their scheduled story time. A classroom is full of life with opportunities to explore and try new things every day. Indiscipline negatively impacts the learning environment.

Besides this, the nature of the task is also of extreme importance. If children find the work to be too difficult then only a few will be able to participate in carrying out the activity and others will disturb the class. Therefore, the nature of the

task should be appropriate to the age and level of children. Thus, it can be summarized that children were given plenty of opportunities to talk, discuss and share their ideas with each other, within groups and within class. In such cases children are having meaningful and constructive talk and which aid in learning. In all such situations it is important to prevent discipline problems initially otherwise it may develop into serious issues.

Conclusions

The meaning of discipline changes according to different teachers and different classroom situations. Corporal punishment or its fear does not serve any purpose. It may create a temporary silence in class but in long term it hampers active learning of children. According to Skinner, if "children are punished even for constructive classroom talk then this kind of negative reinforcement will remove that behaviour". It will hamper the development of thoughts and the natural learning process which happens through interaction with others in society.

A positive classroom environment was created by proper management which begins with having rules of classroom behaviour. These rules need to be strictly followed and in case they aren't followed then appropriate consequences should follow. However, these rules should not be rigid or irrational. In case, children and teachers feel the need to change the rules then those should be changed. In general, after developing a set protocol for classroom management a number of activities like engaging children in learning tasks; drawing; playing games; reciting poems; story telling; theatre techniques; story corner; complaint box and talking to children can be planned and organized.

Also, it was found that attractive and engaging materials in classroom learning activities helped

reduce dullness of the classroom thus, minimizing indiscipline. Such an environment provides all children with a satisfactory school experience while also discouraging misconduct. Thus, classes can be consistently successful, productive and pleasant for all.

However, engaging children in the classroom is much harder than it appears here. It puts a lot of pressure on teachers in terms of planning a
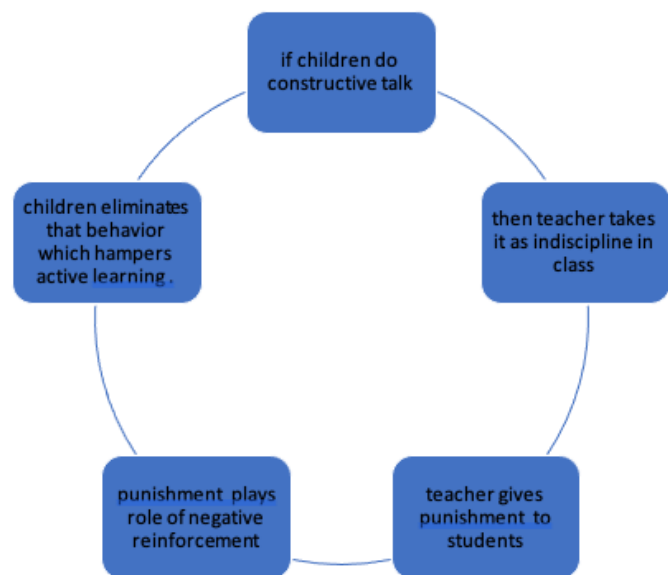
lesson, delivering content and managing classrooms. An activity which may be successful on a day may not be successful the other day. Moreover, duration of an activity (whether it is 40 mins or 1 hour), number of children in class (30 or 50), available space to move around, seating arrangement (as per nature of activity), the behaviour of teacher with children and the content of class are also important factors for building positive environment in classroom. The key to maintaining discipline is keeping children busy and providing them with enough variety in lessons to prevent boredom. To end, I will say Face it, if a class is boring children will be disruptive!

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