

Punishment and School: Understanding Action and Reaction

Deepti Kavathekar

Doctoral Research Scholar, IASE, Jamia Millia Islamia

Abstract

The present research paper attempts to understand the reactions of students in a classroom and their perceptions of discipline and punishment. The study has used non-participant classroom observations and interviews of children, in classroom settings. The study analyzes the interviews of thirteen students studying in class VIII. The school enrolls students from nearby slum. The research findings indicate the role of school vision and role of teacher as major factors that influence students' responses towards punishment. Also, students' voices revealed that the teachers are seen as dedicated and caring, and the use of punishment is thus viewed as beneficial to the students themselves.

Introduction

"Chhari lage cham-cham vidhya aaye gham-gham..." a popular Marathi song indicating that with caning, knowledge comes spontaneously. Integration of punishment in the form of caning, slapping, beating is often accepted as an unquestionable reality. A study 'Child Abuse in India – 2007', by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India, found that "69% of children reported having been physically abused. Of these 54.68% were boys." and "Every two out of three school children reported facing corporal punishment" (NCPCR, 2008, p.4). The significant question here is: Why is there a need for punishment? In order to discipline the student, the teacher or the school enforces punishment. Discipline in itself has many dimensions. Foucault (1979), Bernstein (1990); Bourdieu & Passeron (1990) have put forth varied dimensions of Discipline in relation to society and power structures. Considering the notion of discipline in the context of school, it must be understood that it does not depend on the student and teacher along, but also upon the culture, society and the philosophy that the school follows. A school runs

on a prescribed curriculum but also has a unique 'social curriculum'. "A school's social curriculum is chosen and administered based on a set of assumptions about what discipline is supposed to accomplish and how it can be accomplished." (Irby & Clouge, 2015, p.153). In India, common approaches which are followed by the school for disciplining their students is based on the Skinnerian approach of rewards and punishment. Desired behaviour is rewarded and punishment is given for the undesired one.

Contemporary literature in education focuses on the notion of 'corporal punishment'. Corporal punishment refers to "the use of physical force with the intention of causing a child pain, but not injury, for purposes of correction or control of the child's behaviour" (Straus & Donnelly, 1993, p. 420). A variety of negative health and behavioural outcomes suggests that acts involving physical punishment are stressful for children. Turner & Finkelhor (1996) stated in their research that "many researchers have focused on aggression in children as an effect of physical punishment, but there are instances where several negative effects

behavioural and health related issues are also reported”

Many researches that have studied the impact of punishment and depression in children (Holmes & Robins, 1988; Maurer, 1974; Straus, 1994; Bryan & Freed, 1982). It was found that those college students who were physically punished during childhood developed a number of long-term effects which included making fewer friends, depression, anxiety and negative social interactions (Bryan & Freed, 1982). “Corporal punishment leads to adverse physical, psychological and educational outcomes – including increased aggressive and destructive behaviour, increased disruptive behaviour in the classroom, vandalism, poor school achievement, poor attention span, increased drop-out rate, school avoidance and school phobia, low self-esteem, anxiety, somatic complaints, depression, suicide and retaliation against teachers – that emotionally scar the children for life.” (NCPCR, 2008, p.6).

In the Indian context, Cheruvalath & Tripathi (2015) examined the issue of corporal punishment in India in relation to the perceptions of the teachers. They emphasized that use of corporal punishment is not a good method of attaining the discipline and teachers should understand the student’s mental state while evaluating situations.

The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child defines corporal punishment as follows: The Committee defines “corporal” or “physical” punishment as any punishment in which physical force is used with the intent to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, however light. Most involve hitting (smacking, slapping, spanking) children, with the hand or with an implement – a whip, stick, belt, shoe, wooden spoon, etc. But it can also involve, for example, kicking, shaking or throwing children, scratching, pinching, biting, pulling hair or boxing ears, forcing children to stay in uncomfortable positions, burning, scalding or forced ingestion (for example, washing children’s

mouths out with soap or forcing them to swallow hot spices). In the view of the Committee, corporal punishment is invariably degrading.

“Currently, there is no statutory definition of corporal punishment of children in Indian law. Definition of corporal punishment can at best only be indicative. In keeping with the provisions of the RTE Act, 2009, corporal punishment could be classified as physical punishment, mental harassment and discrimination.” (NCPCR, 2008, p.7)

According to National Commission for Protection of Child Right (NCPCR) had mentioned other difficult situations in schools “some behaviours of children are perceived by schools and teachers as problematic and the prevalent practice is to respond to them with punishment of varying degrees. Some such situations that arise in schools that invite punishment are: i. Not keeping to time and cleanliness regulations – e.g., late to school, not coming in uniform etc.; ii. Academic related issues – e.g., incomplete home assignment, below expected academic performance, not taking a book to school, etc.; iii. Not meeting classroom expectations of school authorities – e.g., inattentive, talking in class, making noise in class, etc.; iv. Troublesome behaviour – e.g., disturbing other children in class, lying, stealing etc.; v. Offensive behaviour, causing hurt or injury to others – e.g., bullying, aggression towards peers, stealing (violating rights of others), vandalising, etc.” (p.13). The typical punishments given to students who have misbehaved or broken some of the rules, are placing the student in the back of the classroom or asking him or her to sit down on the ground.. But for serious offences which include fighting, defiance, bunking class, the punishment involves removal from the class or suspension or calling the parents to meet the teachers. . The rationale behind disciplining students itself is often covert. “There are layers of beliefs and practices that cloak corporal punishment under the guise of love, care and protection, when it is actually

an abuse of authority that harms the child. This follows from the belief that those in whose care children are entrusted in school or other institutions are ‘in loco parentis’ and will therefore always act in the interests of the child. This notion needs to be reviewed in the light of the widespread violence that exists in all institutions occupied by children.” (NCPCR, 2008, p. 5). It is in this context that this paper has attempted to study the perceptions of students facing punishment.

Research Methodology

The research objectives which guided this research were:

- To study the techniques used by teachers in disciplining students in a classroom.
- To examine the punishments used by teachers.
- To study the opinions of students who face punishment.

To meet the above mentioned research objectives, non-participant classroom observations were conducted in class VIII of a private school. The school consists of boys and girls section. The classroom observation revealed that the incidences of punishment were negligible in girls section as compared to the boys section. Therefore the interviews of 13 boys who had faced punishment in the classroom, were conducted. This school is near a slum area. The slum also existed in the present situation from more than six decades. School enrolment shows that more than 95% of the students are from the slum area.

Major Research Findings

Common disciplinary actions used by teachers in the classroom were observed as standing at the back of the classroom, sitting on the floor and completing the homework, scolding the students to maintain silence.

When the researcher observed the classroom, the most striking feature was that there was no discrimination in giving punishment in either boys’ or girls’ section. But the girl students were mostly seen to complete their homework on time (they completed Home Work in their free time such as library, lunch time etc.) and were engaged in studies more than boys.

Special Mention of the Incident in relation to the Act of Stealing (Girls Section)

Once on a Thursday, when Special Morning Bhajan was over, a student of class VIII lost her shoes. She was worried about those shoes as they were new. She found in place of her own shoes a very tattered pair which was worn out. She was crying in front of the teacher. The teacher helped her to find her shoes. The girl who stole the shoes was a class VII student. When the teacher saw the condition of the shoes and inquired about them, the girl admitted her mistake. The girl also told that her shoes were actually stolen and she didn’t knew what to do so she stole the new shoes. The teacher didn’t shout or embarrass the Class VII girl nor asked her why she had stolen. She was deeply hurt to see the conditions of the shoes. Teacher searched for shoes again but was unable to get back the shoes to class VII student. The teacher promised to buy a pair of shoes for class VII student. The teacher asked the class VII and class VIII students not to talk about this issue further in the school and while outside the classroom. When the researcher inquired about the whole situation that teacher told was “*aap dekh hi rahi thi ki shoe ki halat kitni kharab hai... or class VII student..wo bahut garib hai...ladki hone ke karan ho sakta hai usko is saal shoes hi na mile...humare bacche hain...galti ho gayi...par uski condition bhi to theek nahi hai...hame bacchon ko darana nahi hai...samjahana hai ki aage chalke wo sahi rasta chune...bas yehi koshish hai...Garibi bahut pareshan karti hai* (You yourself can see that the condition of the shoes was very bad.and that VII class student is very poor...being a girl it is possible that her parents may not buy her new shoes...they

are our children... mistake has been done...but the condition was also not good... we are not here to scare the children...we have to explain to them to choose the right path...this is what we can try... poverty is really troublesome)". Next day onwards researcher purposefully observed the VII class student. The girl didn't skip classes. The students didn't talk about what had happened the previous day. The observations were undertaken for a period of one week to inquire about the reaction of the school student towards that girl.

Boys Section

Once a teacher in the Hindi classroom told the students that if all of them completed their homework, then the teacher will tell stories in the next class. This was a very effective method as all the students completed their homework at the prescribed time. When the teacher had completed checking their work, she told moral stories in the classroom till the period finished.

Once students returned from the games period, and were engaged in talking to each other. When the teacher entered the classroom, they continued talking. The teacher was annoyed by the excessive noise in the classroom, so she made all the students to stand for the whole period. She continued teaching and did not sit herself during the entire time.

During classroom observations, the teacher never slapped or pinched on the cheek of the students. Most of the time teacher scolded the students for their misbehaviour in the class.

Episode of Scolding the students

Once a student insulted a senior teacher (class teacher) in the class in front of another teacher (subject teacher). The class teacher came to know about this incidence. Next day in the class, the senior teacher (class teacher), explained the students " *agar aapko koi teacher pasand nahi hai*

to bhi aapko kisi bhi teacher ke bare mein bura ya kharab nahi bolna chahiye...aap sab ek aache school mein padtein hain....aap logon ko badonki izzat karni chahiye...bhale hi aap un ki baton se sehmat nahi hain...aap koshis karenge to sab kar saktein hain...(if you don't like any teacher, then also you should not talk ill about them...you study in a good school...you all should respect the elders.. even though you don't agree with them..if you try anything is possible).The teacher didn't point that student and didn't even mention his name, so that he does not feel terrified or insecure in class. The teacher explained to the students when they broke any rule of the school.

Episode of Rule breaking and Type of Punishment

Once two children went outside the school premises during lunch break and didn't return for a long time. The subject teacher came to know. So in that class she didn't teach them the regular lesson, but explained to the students that it's the responsibility of the school to take care of them in the school. If they do such type of the 'rule breaking act' and something happens to the students 'outside the school' then who should be blamed and held responsible. The teacher explained to the students in a loving and caring manner that the students also agreed with her. It was observed that mostly when the teacher scolds the students for their naughtiness, not a single student appears unhappy or terrified. Instead, the students tend to smile. And when the class gets over, not a single student criticizes the teacher.

Students' Perception about Scolding and Beating
All the students believe that the teacher always scolds with love in their heart. They believe as they come from disadvantaged background where their parents do not 'take a heed' about their behaviour, teachers always wants their 'good'. Some students are of the view that the teacher 'loves' us, so those who love, have a right to scold also. A student says " *jab hame danat ya mar padti hai to hame*

apanapan mahasoos hota hai..esa lagta hai koi aapna hame daant raha hai..or bade hamare bhale ke liye sochate hain..."(whenever I am scolded or beaten then I feel close to teacher...it's like some close person is scolding me..and elders always think of our good only).

Overall Analysis

The study revealed that belonging to slums and low socioeconomic status, the students never felt disheartened and had a positive attitude, even in relation to punishment and scolding. This is not in accordance with many psychological researches of the past. "Psychological research has indicated that youths are likely to disengage from school and academic pursuits if they perceive negative information about themselves or their racial group within the school environment" (Rocque & Paternoster, 2011, p.636). The students who received punishment or scolding continued to attend the school regularly. They didn't have any ill feeling for the teachers and continued their studies. The school adopts the philosophy of Sri Sathya Sai Baba, who believed in teaching every student with love, care and respect. According to Sri Sathya Sai Baba (Divine Discourse, March 8, 1981):

"The educational system must be based on the four principles of Truth, Righteousness, Peace and Love. But, this has not happened. Therefore, we find it burdened with problems. It is full of conflict and confusion. Humility, detachment, discrimination, eagerness to serve others, reverence, renunciation - such virtues are absent among the educated. No one is prepared to give up; everyone is anxious to grab. A garland can be made only when we have flowers, thread and needle. A system of education needs intelligence (flowers), devotion (thread) and the spirit of renunciation and service (needle) to become beneficial. Raising the standard of living must also mean raising ethical, moral and spiritual standards. Then only can education lead to progress in human values and harmony in social life."

The teachers abide to the philosophy of the school and act accordingly. They understand the cultural differences among the students and are empathetic to the children. While taking care of these children, teachers also understand the psyche of the children. In the involving the stealing of shoes of another student, the teacher instructed the other students not to talk on this issue. This was a great step as it will not compel the student (VII class student) to be embarrassed and take any drastic step

Conclusions

The punishment for the betterment of the student is needed but how can these disciplinary actions be communicated/ transacted depends on the school and teachers. The present study throws light on the different modes of transacting punishment to the students. The school and the teacher recognize the backgrounds of students and the stress accompanying adolescent years. It shows a totally different approach to deal with the problems arising in classroom situations.

References

- Bernstein, B. (1990). *The structuring of pedagogic discourse. IV, class, codes and control*. London: Routledge.
- Bourdieu, P. & Passeron, J. (1990). *Reproduction in education, society and culture*. Berkeley: Sage.
- Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 8, 'The right of the child to protection from corporal punishment and other cruel or degrading forms of punishment' (Arts. 19; 28, Para 2; and 37, inter alia) (42nd session, 2006), UN Doc. CRC/C/GC/8 (2006)
- Sri Sathya Sai Baba.(n.d.). Divine Discourse. Retrieved from <http://www.cri-evh.com/articles.php?lng=en&pg=2767>



- Foucault, M. (1979). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Heather A. Turner, H.A., & Finkelhor, D. (1996). Corporal punishment as a stressor among youth. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 58(1), 155-166. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/353384>
- Cheruvath, R., & Tripathi, M. (2015). Secondary school teachers' perception of corporal punishment: A case study in India. *The clearing House: A journal of educational strategies, issues and ideas*, 88 (4), 127-132. DOI/10.1080/00098655.2015.1045821
- Holmes, S. J., & Robins, L. N. (1988). The role of parental disciplinary practices in the development of depression and alcoholism. *Psychiatry*, 51, 24
- Irby, D. & Clough, C. (2015). Consistency rules: A critical exploration of a universal principle of school discipline. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 23(2), 153-173, DOI:10.1080/14681366.2014.932300
- Maurer, A. (1974). Corporal punishment. *American Psychologist*, 29, 614-626
- NCPCR(National Commission for Protection of Child Rights) (2008) . Guidelines for eliminating corporal punishment in schools.
- Noddings, N. (2005). *The challenge to care in schools*. (2nd ed.). New York: Teachers College, Columbia University
- Rocque, M., & Paternoster, R. (2011). Understanding the antecedents of the "school-to-jail" link: The relationship between race and school discipline. *The journal of criminal law and criminology*, 101(2), 633-665
- Straus, M. A., & Donnelly, D. A. (1993). Corporal punishment of adolescents by American parents. *Youth and Society*, 24, 419-442
- Straus, M. A. (1994). *Beating the devil out of them: Corporal punishment in American families and its effect on children*. Boston: Lexington