

How Do We Discipline?

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Introduction

Whether the conversation is about schools, education or children, the word discipline is sure to figure in it. One of the main purposes of sending children to school is to have them learn discipline. The expectation is that, keeping in mind their roles in society, the school must try to teach them some form of discipline and succeed in it to some degree at least. It is not being argued that there should be no defined way of functioning. However, the form, nature and amount of discipline need to be analysed. While, each school has its own definition of discipline, the most popular and prevalent understanding seen in schools is that disciplining is synonymous to meting out punishment. They do not have separate existence. Therefore, there is no disagreement on the principle of punishment per se, but its degree and nature sometime become causes of concern. Not only teachers, but most parents also believe that children can be taught discipline only by beating, scolding or imposing other such coercive methods. There may be a few households where the guardians do not approve of the idea of beating children, but they too believe in the practice of inculcating good behaviour by rewards and enticements. The spectrum of views on discipline may thus appear varied but at the core they are the same. The real issue is whether there can be any radically different alternative spirit to understand discipline. In this article, I will share my experience of working with children in the school and in this context, discuss the notion of discipline in a classroom and in the school.

The Classroom and Children

The exploration around discipline arose in the context of exploring the interaction of children with the new set of text books that had been prepared for them. We were interested in finding out issues like: how appropriate the new textbooks were for the children, do they like them, can they understand and do the tasks given and other similar issues. My colleagues and I decided to work with some classes to look for answers to these questions.

After talking to the head-teachers and teachers, each of us selected a school and a specific class to engage with and observe children. I chose class III of a school. The plan was that in the first three days, we would observe the class so that we could understand the

children as well as the dynamics of the classroom. We also wanted to simultaneously plan how we would engage with children using the textbooks. The three days of observation went off well, perhaps because I did not have to do anything much. The teacher was teaching and I was merely observing and writing my report. On the fourth day, the teacher handed over the classroom to me as he had to go for a training programme, for a few days.

I think the children perhaps came to know that their teacher was not there and that I would be their teacher for a few days. Even from far, I could hear that there was a lot of noise in the classroom. Children were playing, running around and fighting over the durries (due to their shortage). Due to the noise, they had to shout loudly to converse. And so when I entered the room I too had to shout out the instructions - 'Sit down, sit down, don't shout and please sit down!' When the noise had somewhat subsided, I thought we could begin some work. I asked the children to take their Hindi books out and open the chapter that I had chosen. I showed them the illustration on the first page of the chapter. Some children were able to do this on their own while I started helping the rest. Not even two minutes had passed when a child asked, 'Madam, can I go and have water'. I permitted the child to go and started speaking, when another voice spoke up, 'Can I go too'. This went on and every two minutes, some child or the other would ask for permission to go to have water or visit the washroom. The limit was when there was a stampede to rush out from the classroom at the bell, for the short break, like the exodus of passengers from the overcrowded busy Mumbai local train. There was a lot of noise, jostle and pushing - pulling. And when the bell sounding the end of the break was rung, many children did not come back. I had to send a few children out to fetch those who had not come.

I thought that it was the problem of the first day, but this continued on the second and the third day as well. I was unable to understand what was going on in the class. I was a bit worried that while a few students listened to me, I was not able to do much with the class as a whole. I was in a fix; it was wrong to hit children so what do I do? I thought it was best to share my concern with them and told them that I could not teach them if they kept making noise,

and that no one could make out who is speaking and what was being said. I said, 'I have to shout to say what I want to say and that makes my throat pain. So please do not make a noise. You can talk, but screaming or talking loudly is absolutely forbidden. If it is absolutely necessary to ask something or tell someone something then you can talk.' The second thing I suggested was that after the prayer, they could visit the washroom or drink water before coming to the class. After that no one would get permission to go out of the classroom till the brief recess. Since there was no wall clock in the classroom I drew a clock on the board. At the commencement of the class at the arms were at 10:15. I told the children that at 11:00 I would shift the hands of the clock to indicate 11 and then they could go out. I made it clear that there should be no snatching of durries, throwing of bags or hitting each other. The durries were to be spread and each sit down one after the other. A tug of war with the durries would only lead to them getting torn.

Gradually, I started feeling that the children had understood what I was saying. The noise level reduced and so did the seeking of permission to go out. We started to do some work, even though children slipped back to talking in loud voices or again asking permission to go out. Yet I felt that they were understanding me. It was obvious that the situation had become better than it was before.

But every other day something would occur that would get me to wonder how the situation could be dealt with. Examples of such situations are children eating in the classroom and not cleaning up afterwards, throwing the shoes around, moving the classroom furniture around in a rough manner continuously, writing on the furniture, not spreading out the mattresses properly, not waiting for their turn to get notebooks checked or to speak, sometimes getting in to a fight and hitting and hurting each other, not coming to the classroom in time, etc. All this led me to feel that children needed to understand some rules of behaviour so that not only the classroom work can carry on, but children appreciate that the classroom and the school in which they are studying, belong to them and it is their responsibility to take care of them. Some work was done in the direction of children understanding this. This included conversations with children about it being right to do a particular thing or not, and if not, why not? It also included telling them my concerns and limitations, listening to their concerns and expectations, understanding them, working together with them on specific tasks like cleaning the classroom, spreading the durries, arranging the shoes properly, etc. Gradually many things improved.

It was not that the conversations among children stopped entirely or they did not jostle in getting the notebooks checked, or completely stopped fighting with each other, but there was some difference in the way that all this occurred. This made the classroom function smoothly. In this context I would like to highlight another aspect. During the initial phase, when I was unable to manage the classroom, some children from the class told me that I should threaten them by saying that I would complain about them to a particular teacher, who was notorious for hitting children. Few students of class V came to my class and said, 'Madam, if you need our help, let us know. We will ensure that all of them are quiet. You would have pin-drop silence. You do not know how to make these children quiet but we know how to do it. In other words, it is fine if you do not want to hit these children, give us the permission to beat them and they will become completely well behaved'. Thus the common perception was that there was only one way to discipline children, give them a few blows with a stick. After studying in the school for five years these students had also understood that the practices of the school - meaning discipline or in other words, following instructions, and the rules - can only be internalised when beaten by the stick and there is no other way to it. It is not just the children, but the parents and even the teachers who believe that children cannot learn discipline without being hit or punished. How should we understand discipline? We must recognise that by the age of three or four, children have already learnt a lot. We also know that children have an immense capacity to learn. They absorb like a sponge absorbing water. This is often said in the context of language, but it holds for many other aspects like behaviour pattern, manner of interacting with others, how to talk and converse, listening to the others, learning how to respond and whether a response is even needed or not, how to function in different situations, etc. They learn all this and improve their understanding day-by-day. All this, they learn by being with us adults and in the course of conversations with us. Therefore what and how children learn depends, to a great extent, on us adults as well. We keep giving them instructions. For example at home and in school we tell them things like, 'don't do this, do this in this manner, sit down quietly, don't play in the mud, stand in a queue, participate in the prayer quietly without moving, don't talk, walk in a line', etc. Nobody talks to children about why these instructions are being given to them. I also felt that the way we think about children - our perspective on them and their capabilities - impacts the way discipline gets defined and practiced. Thinking of children as mere 'kids', i.e., 'they are still too young and do not understand anything', or, 'it

is not possible to engage them in a dialogue on the instructions as they cannot understand them', are wrong beliefs.

The second point is that many years ago (about 90 years ago), Gandhiji, in the context of curriculum for Nai Talim, said and also wrote a lot about self-discipline. The most important idea was that one main purpose of education is to make children learn self-discipline and discipline cannot be imposed on children. Sharma, in her article, says, 'It (Nai Talim) is an integration of gyaan (knowledge) and karma (action), resulting in joy. It is an education for non-violence. It is founded on freedom and mutual cooperation. And the aim is to be free from fear. It is for self-reliance of body needs and for independent and critical thinking and wisdom. It believes that education should develop social consciousness among students, as well as the attitudes and habits of doing things in cooperation with others. The social principle of Nai Talim is that all human beings are to be equally respected and that education is to achieve self-discipline and build character and one should not be dependent on eternally forced discipline. Nai Talim is a continuous process of learning.' (Sharma, 2017).

Children will learn discipline when they are given responsibilities, freedom to express themselves and to do what they want to do, when their ideas are understood and given importance. It is only then that they would feel that they too have a role to play in the class, the school and in the society. And if all this is with the teacher, with her support and to support her, then it would have a real and deep impression. Since the role of children in making the school function well keeps changing, they are able to automatically perceive and sense contextually appropriate and inappropriate behavior. This helps them feel their role, its importance and usefulness. Functioning in these different roles demands that the child has a continuous internal dialogue with herself, in the context of different situations and the associated aspects; dialogues in which she is the speaker, the listener and the decision maker. As Vinobha Bhave says in his Basic Education, 'Our plan for education is a plan for discipline, its mainspring, that is to say is not self-indulgence but self-control. Our chief aim should be that our children should learn from their earliest years to keep their sense, mind and intellect under control. Their speech must be imbued with the spirit of truthfulness; we must train them to

express their thought clearly, and to choose words for their fitness, not for fashion. I would like to invite your attention to this difference between fitness and fashion. I have one more thing to say if we are to carry out this task of creating a spirit of discipline and self-control - basic education must be entrusted so far as possible.' Today we still talk about basic education, but the number of schools where such a curriculum is followed are far and few. If we want our children to understand and to learn discipline, then we have to include facets of basic education in the curriculum. We need to take steps towards making these possible in the classrooms and in the schools.

Conclusion

If we look at children as individuals, as independent entities, then the way that we deal with them will automatically change. We will share our thoughts and our concerns with them, listen to and value their perspective, not just give them instructions to do or desist, but discuss with them why we want to do something and if we do not do it then what could be the possible consequences of that. The under-pinning of this way of relating to children is the understanding that children are to be respected; they also observe, understand, analyse and are capable of taking decisions. When children feel that they have a role in the classroom, the school and in society - and that role is certainly there - then they themselves feel a sense of responsibility. Slowly, they begin to understand their responsibilities and learn what they need to do to fulfill them. They also begin to fulfill their responsibilities. In Nai Talim also it is evident that children must begin to understand their responsibilities right from the beginning. We expect that children will grow up and contribute to the society, but forget these expectations while dealing with them at home, in classrooms and in the school. After all, home, classroom and the school are components of the society.

References:

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