

# An Exploratory Study of Discipline in Primary Classroom: Some Reflections and Experiences from the Field

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## Abstract

*This paper is an attempt to reflect some of the observations on discipline in primary classrooms of government schools in Delhi. The qualitative data was analysed in the light of the theoretical lens of psychologists, theorists and educators. It was found that certain rules are imposed on children to be followed in order to regulate their behavior during classroom processes and the teachers act as an authoritative figure to maintain a strict level of discipline in the classroom by treating children as inactive beings. A child who disobeys the rules had to face some kind of penalisation as a consequence of misbehavior. The teacher uses different strategies both implicitly and explicitly to regulate the behavior of children. The teacher considers children to behave as passive beings who should work silently during the classroom processes. Students who display any form of behavior which goes against the prescribed rules of the classroom were highly disapproved and discouraged by the teachers. In the name of "discipline" children are expected to refrain from indulging in any form of activities which are required as their basic needs of survival. The study reveals that discipline is perceived as a process to control the physical mobility of children, maintaining silence and maintaining physical order. This paper suggests that effective classroom management is not possible without discipline, and the teacher plays a crucial role in inculcating the value of discipline; not just to achieve immediate goals but also long-term aims of education which emphasises self-discipline among children. Teacher education programs should improve the quality of teacher education in bridge the gap between the educational theories and praxis which are used to discipline children for effective classroom management.*

**Keywords:** Discipline, Classroom management, classroom processes, primary classroom

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## Introduction

It is commonly observed that the value of effective classroom management is only realised in its absence. Learners are actively engaged in learning when classrooms are effectively managed and they can become chaotic and leaving little opportunity for meaningful learning to take place in the absence of discipline (Santrock, 2011, pp. 477).

Discipline is a prerequisite for creating a positive learning environment in the classroom. Teachers are expected to maintain strict discipline in the classroom and are often given broad authority. This can include punishing students for their behavior, such as by making them stand outside the classroom or by giving them extra homework. The emphasis on discipline as a part of hidden curriculum in Indian primary classrooms

can have both positive and negative effects on students.

An attempt is made in this paper to understand the meaning of discipline through the lens of selected philosophers' and psychologists' perspectives. It has evolved considerably from conventional to contemporary times. The traditional view of discipline emphasizes the use of rules, regulations, and punishment to maintain order and control in the classroom and assumes that students are naturally inclined to misbehave and need to be disciplined in order to behave appropriately. It often relies on rewards and punishments to motivate students and reinforce desired behaviors.

On the other hand, the progressive view of discipline as a part of classroom management emphasizes the importance of creating a positive learning environment that encourages self-discipline and self-motivation in the educational process. Friere (1970) believed that discipline in the classroom should not be imposed from the top down, but should instead be based on a democratic relationship between teachers and students and effective classroom management is about creating a positive learning environment that empowers students to take ownership of their own education. Krishnamurthy (1974) emphasized that discipline does not mean to conform, to imitate and to be obedient; rather it's important to be human beings. He believed that students should develop their own sense of punctuality and regularity, rather than simply enforcing rules and regulations. In lieu of the same,

on 4th August, 2009, the Government of India passed the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act 2009, which, among other things, banned the use of corporal and other harsh forms of punishment on children in schools. In the light of this discussion, this study attempts to explore how discipline and punishment are negotiated in a primary classroom to manage the class.

### Objectives

1. To study the classroom processes to maintain discipline in the classroom.
2. To study the notion of discipline in the context of the primary classroom.
3. To develop an understanding of traditional and progressive views of discipline in the classroom.

### Method

Data was collected in a naturalistic setting through the observations of the primary classrooms of three government schools in the vicinity of South- Delhi. Both participatory and non-participatory forms of observation were recorded. Observations were taken for approximately six months from October 2022-March 2023 in Delhi. Data was collected from the field in the form of field notes which were then translated into English and was analyzed qualitatively. Themes emerged in the analysis were studied using the theoretical lens of the selected educationists, psychologists, philosophers and practitioners in the field of education.

**Table 1- Description of the schools**

S.No.	Type of school	Level	Medium of language	No. of boys	No. of girls	Total no. of students
1.	Co-educational	Primary (1-5th)	Hindi & English	249	210	459
2.	Co- educational	Primary (1-5th)	Hindi & English	213	197	410
3.	Co-educational	Primary (1-5th)	Hindi	225	198	423



### Discipline as maintaining physical order

[6:57am, morning] observation of class 4: Before assembly children's arrival in the school. As soon as the students reached, most of them placed their bags in their respective classrooms and rushed to the playground, played and talked in small groups. There is a huge lively morning energy flowing in the playground. The bell rang. Everyone rushed back to their classes. Classroom wise lines were made. Boys at the end and girls were in the beginning of the lines. Lines were made according to height. Next bell rang. Children started moving. The class that was located near the stairs moved first and followed by other classes. Children started moving by keeping one hand on their back and the other hand's finger on their lips. They went to the assembly ground and stood at their designated positions.

In the observed school, it appeared that maintaining discipline was understood as maintaining physical order. One of the practices followed in the school was to walk out of the class and walkback in a single line. It was found that on the first bell of assembly, children went back to their classes from the playground and made a single vertical line in ascending order of their height, and on the second bell started moving to assembly ground and stood at their fixed positions. This practice can be seen as an example of behavior shaping as to maintain discipline which is based on Skinner (1953), principles of operant conditioning. The observed practice in school is reinforced by the positive consequences that follow it. For example, when the students walked in a single line, they received praise from the teacher, which serves as a positive reinforcement for their behavior. These findings also find resonance in Iyer's (2013) observations that maintaining discipline was valued as an end in itself. She further notes that discipline was understood as children maintaining 'physical order'.

### Discipline as controlling the child's physical mobility

[10:33am, morning] observation of Class 5, During snacks break (Mid-day meal)

Teacher was giving instructions about the craft related activity that would be held after snack break. Bell just rang. Three students moved out of the classroom without taking permission from the teacher.

Teacher : बुलाना उन्हे... यह कौन बिना पुछे गए हैं? (Calls them... who are they?..gone without permission?)

Priya : Mam.. शायद करन ,भरत और राहुल है। (Maam, May be Karan, Bharat and Rahul?)

Teacher : जाओ बुलाके लाओ उन्हे...(Go and call them.)

Priya went out of the classroom and called them. Three of them entered the classroom.

Teacher : हाँ जी... क्लास खत्म हो गई है?... बताओ? मैं अभी कुछ बता रही थी ना... तुम तीन किस से पुछ कर बाहर गए हो? (Yes. Is the class over? I was telling you something. Right? From whom did you take the permission to go outside?)

Karan : Mam बस हाथ धोने जा रहे थे बहुत भख लग रही थी। hands. Feeling very hungry.) (Ma'am, just going to wash our

Teacher : आज आप तीन खाना सबसे आखरी में खाओगे। (Today you three will take a meal at the end

According to Friere (1970) "Any situation in which some men prevent others from engaging in the process of inquiry is one of violence; ... to alienate humans from their own decision making is to change them into objects". It highlights that this approach can lead to a disempowered and alienated learning environment, which can have negative consequences on students' motivation, engagement, and overall well-being. In the given instance, discipline can be seen as an example of an externally imposed control that may conflict with a child's basic physiological needs for survival such as hunger and thirst (Maslow 1943). This approach restricts their autonomy and

creates a sense of dependency on the teacher and limits the child's ability to explore their environment and make decisions for themselves (Kumar, 1991).

### **Discipline as directly proportional to maintaining silence**

Teachers used various reinforcement activities and strategies followed by rewards and punishment to maintain silence in the classroom.

#### **Activity 1**

Class was divided into teams. Division was done row wise. Names of the list of the rows were pasted on almirah- Mandy Mandy, swings wings, roly poly and inky pinky. Teams which follow the discipline guidelines were given stars. Teacher reiterated the guide lines every time when children made noise. Discipline guidelines include the aspect of sitting smartly, clearing their benches, eyes on the teacher, maintaining silence and followed by no complaints. Teacher gave a star to team – Roly poly for sitting quietly and said, “रोली पॉली टीम को मैं एक तारा दे रहा हूँ क्योंकि वे स्मार्ट और शांत बैठे हैं।” (I am giving a star to the team Roly poly because they are sitting smartly and silently). The team which does not sit smartly and quietly, their extra play time was reduced. Teacher told the team which got the most stars in the star jar were given extra play time.

#### **Activity 2**

*[12:18 pm, afternoon] observation of Class 4*

A voice level chart was pasted on the white board. On which Level 0 was no talking, 1 as whispering, 2 as talk within a small group and partners, 3 as normal voice, 4 as speaking in front of class or presentation and 5 as voice level reaching outside the class was written. The teachers used these levels to control the voice level of the class. Teachers instructed the students to read the chapter by themselves at 0 level and use level 1 when the teacher was present in the classroom. According to the teacher, the class should be disciplined and if there is a discussion then only they could raise their hands.

There should be no talking in class and voice level should be 0 otherwise no stars and no extra play time will be given.

#### **Activity 3**

*[09:33 am, morning] observation of Class 5*

Another chart was also pasted about the performance of the children. Charts were labeled with a picture of the star and three emoticons such as happy, neutral and sad emoticons. The names of all the students were pasted on a neutral face. When the teacher spotted the student's talking, she put his/her name pasted on a sad emoticon. Students who were speaking to others had their names taken down from that position. Students who maintain silence and sit smartly— teacher pasted their names on happy emoticon and said, “क्लस आज कोई शोर नहीं मचाओगे. मैं उन विद्यार्थियों को घर बुलाऊंगा जिनका नाम सुनकर चेहरे पर उदासी छा जाएगी।” (Class today you all will not make noise. I will call those student's homes whose names will put on a sad face.)

#### **Activity 4**

*[11:33 am, morning] observation of Class 5*

A chart of planets was also pasted on a wall on which only the sun and a planet named Mercury were pasted and named class rewards. One of the students told me that the teacher will award them with a planet for good behavior and maintaining discipline and said, “आपको वो चार्ट दिख रहा है? जब सभी गृह कुंडली पर होंगे और यह पूरा हो जाएगा तब मैं ममोज की दावत दूँगी, लेकिन अब तक इसमें केवल एक ही है।” (Are you able to see that chart? Ma'am will give a treat of momos when all the planets will be on the chart and it will be completed. But till now it has only one.)

It has been found during the observations that various types of reinforcements were given to children through various activities to shape their behavior. Disciplines viewed as directly proportional to maintain silence in the classroom. These findings also resonate with Kumar's (1986) observations that the behavioristic approach to classroom discipline is based on the assumption that



students need to be controlled and shaped through external rewards and punishments. This approach reduces children to mere objects that can be manipulated through the use of reinforcements, such as praise, grades, or tokens. In such a system, the teacher holds all the power and authority, while the students are expected to conform to the teacher's expectations without question. Moreover, Kumar (2011) argues that equating discipline with maintaining silence is a narrow and limiting understanding that ignores the rich and diverse nature of human expression. By privileging silence over other forms of expression, such as discussion, debate, or dissent, the behavioristic approach may stifle students' creativity and critical thinking skills.

### Use of teacher's directions during teaching

*[12:05 pm, noon] observation of Class 3*

The seats of students are fixed and students are not allowed to change seats to reduce everyday hassle and to maintain discipline in the classroom. Computer teacher did counting to settle the class. He said in 5 seconds, everyone was back to their seats and counted till 5 and everyone was settled. Whenever he observed that students were talking in the class, he said, 'eyes on the board, eyes on me in class.' He used his eyes and raised the tone of his voice to control the children. He started staring at the child who was not doing the task given in the class or talking with others.

It has been found during the observation that teachers used different teaching Practices to engage students in the learning process and promote a sense of order and structure. But these were used primarily to keep students in line, rather than to facilitate learning and can become an obstacle to student-centered and inquiry-based approaches to teaching and learning. According to Sarangapani (2003), it may be more effective to address the underlying causes of such behavior, such as student disengagement, lack of motivation, or emotional distress.

### Discipline as controlling the child's physical mobility during teaching-learning

*[10:05 am, morning] observation of Class 4*

Mathematics teacher told everyone to open their math notebook.

Teacher: "सभी बच्चे अपनी नोटबुक निकालेंगे चुपचाप से बिल्कुल।" (Everyone please open your notebook (Completely silently). (Ayush was making some noise.)

Teacher: (Sarcastically) "आयुष कैसे निकाले नोटबुक शोर करते हुए? टेबल के आवाज करते हुए?" (Ayush, how will we open the notebook? By making noise. Noise on the table.)

Teacher: "फिरसे 'नो' क्या करना है आपको अभी अभी बताया है मैंने कि थम्सअप और थम्सडाउन करना है यस और नो नहीं बोलना जिसका मुँह खुला वो क्लास 3 में जाएगा पढ़ाई करने के लिए।" (Again 'No'. (What do you have to do? I just told you to show thumbs up and down. Do not speak, 'Yes' or 'No'. One who will speak now will go in Class 3 for studying).

She also said, "मेरे पास बहुत कुछ है पढ़ाने को ज्यादा शोर करोगे तो पढ़ाई नहीं होगी फिर।" (I have lots of things to teach. If you will make a lot of noise then study won't happen).

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This approach may not be suitable for all students, particularly those who may have difficulty expressing themselves through non-verbal means or those who may need to clarify information through

verbal communication. Additionally, the threat of punishment for speaking out by turn may create a sense of fear and anxiety in students, which can negatively affect their learning experience. Friere (1970) discussed the banking concept of knowledge, he argued that teachers treated students as passive receptacles of knowledge, who are expected to absorb and memorise information without questioning it. He argued that students can become active agents in their own learning, and in the process, develop the critical consciousness needed to transform society and create a more just and equitable world. Kumar (1986) also considers talk as a resource and it is a fundamental component of the learning process. Students must be given opportunities to express their ideas and engage in meaningful dialogue with their peers and teachers. When students are encouraged to express themselves freely and engage in open and respectful discussions, they are more likely to develop critical thinking skills, creativity, and confidence (Yunus, 2014).

### **Display of the rules to be followed to maintain discipline**

Teachers had class rules and discipline measures were pasted on the wall of the classroom near the reading corner and white board. Students were not allowed to go near the teacher for doubts and copy-checking. A routine time table according to a particular time for each subject was created and followed during the day. A chart was pasted to display different responsibilities that were distributed to different students in the classroom to better manage it. It can be inferred that the rules of discipline are imposed explicitly on children. Dewey (1938) believed that discipline should not be viewed as a set of external rules and regulations imposed on students, but rather as an internalised sense of responsibility and self-control. He argued that true discipline arises from students' engagement in meaningful and purposeful learning activities, which encourage them

to take ownership of their learning and behavior. He also emphasised the importance of creating a positive learning environment that encourages students to develop self-discipline and take responsibility for their actions. Various types of reinforcements were given to children through various activities to shape their behavior. Discipline is viewed as directly proportional to maintain silence in the classroom.

### **Conclusion**

Discipline practices in the observed school, rely on rewards and punishments to motivate students and reinforce desired behaviors. According to behaviorists, learning is a process of conditioning that occurs when a response is reinforced or punished. Maintaining discipline was understood as maintaining physical order and can be seen as an example of an externally imposed control that may conflict with a child's basic physiological needs. Teachers try to privilege silence over other forms of expression and various teaching strategies were used primarily to keep students in discipline, rather than to facilitate learning, which becomes an obstacle to student-centered and inquiry-based approaches to teaching and learning therefore it can be concluded that the teachers role in classroom management is influenced by their own philosophy of discipline which has a direct influence on teaching-learning processes of the classroom. Teacher education should work

upon to bridge the gap in the theory and praxis so that teachers will not be only dependent on one approach of discipline rather they should have an in depth understanding of theories as well as their application in the actual classroom wherein they use multiple approaches like humanists and behaviorists, they should find a balance in their approach to discipline for better learning through self-discipline rather than imposed discipline on children.



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