Evaluating New Forms of Discipline and Punishment: Voices from Kolkata Classrooms

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Abstract: This paper looks at the issue of discipline and punishment in schools of Kolkata since the ban on corporal punishment according to the Right To Education Act, 2009. Using the qualitative methodology, perceptions of teachers and students regarding the effectiveness of the methods of punishment now allowed in different schools has been studied. Two specific areas of effectiveness have been considered: classroom order/discipline and socialization/moral development. By giving a unique insight into the stakeholders' own evaluations of the effectiveness of the ban, this article has tried to analyse uncharted territories of the education system in Kolkata.

Keywords: Classroom Discipline; Corporal Punishment; Mental Harassment; Child Socialization; Right To Education Act, 2009.

Introduction

On 4th August, 2009, the Government of India passed the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act to improve the condition of literacy in the country. Section 17 of the Act legally abolished the use of harsh punishments, physical or mental, to discipline students in the classroom, leading to a sudden change in the Indian education system in which corporal punishment has been commonsince the ancient times. In the traditional Indian guru-shishya system of education,the guru was given a fatherly position and physical punishments were expected and accepted from him. However, punishment was not a major aspect of the traditional education system and greater stress was laid on discipline of students in ancient texts like the Dharmasutras or the Puranas. Certain texts like the Manusmriti (tr. Buhler 1886) did prescribe corporal punishment of students but in the form of light beatings only, emphasizing on the need to protect children as they were weaker sections of society. Simultaneously however, the conduct of teachers was also given great thought. Teachers could also be 'punished like a thief'

(Chatterjee 1999: 31) according to the Puranas if they failed to perform their duties to the students.Ancient Indian texts and mythologies describing child-rearing practices tell us that children were pampered and protected (Kakar 1981) and thepower of the guru over the shishya was not absolute.

In the West, the birth of mass schooling led to the emergence of the conception that 'children should be controlled before they were to be taught' (Harris 1928: 16) and strict corporal punishment became the norm, encouraged by Christianity. The same happened in India when mass schooling replaced the caring and fatherly guru with the dictatorial British school master, described by Kumar (2014) as the "meek dictator" since he was but a lowly officer of the regime, whonormalized the use of brute force to discipline students. While no formal records of punishments exist, literary works of the time have given us abundant insight into the probable forms of punishments prevalent in colonial Kolkata schools. Sen (2015), for example, documentsvarious brutal and painfulpunishments like intense beatings, making students assume painful postures, etc.as described inchildren's literature in British Bengal. As corporal punishments became more and more entrenched in colonial Indian schools, the West began to adopt a protective attitude towards children from around the 17th century, discouraging harsh punishments (Donnelly 2005). Theunquestioned acceptance of the authority of teachers also began to falter with the emergence of 'legal and cultural challenges to disciplinary discretion by school personnel as well as the more general demands for expansion of student rights, including freedom of speech, due process, and privacy' (Way 2011: 349-350). In recent times, the role of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in protecting children from violence in institutional settings such as schools has been important to bring about legal and cultural changes in the way the West and the rest of the world looks at children and their discipline and socialization. India's ratification of this Convention in 1992 reflected the intention of the Indian leaders to create a society where children are protected from violence and their rights are realized. An expression of such an is the ban on corporal punishments in 2009 in the RTE Actcausingmajor changes in the disciplinary culture of different schools in Kolkata which is the focus of this study.

Methods Used

This paper is part of a larger study carried out within the qualitative methodology using grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Charmaz 2006) as a sensitising guideline. Respondents were selected fromschools broadly divided into two

categories–Category A (low-cost schools, owned or sponsored by the government, serving the working class and lower middle class clientele such as lower level government employees, small shop owners, etc.) and Category B (mid-level and expensive/elite schools, privately owned, serving the rich and upper-middle classes such as entrepreneurs andhigh-salaried employees). The study collected data throughpurposive and convenience sampling. The sample size arrived at by using theoretical sampling was 38 among whom there were 7 teachers and 31 students. Among the 7 teachers, 3 were from Category A schools and 4from Category B schools.In-depth interviews were conducted with them with the help of semi-structured interview schedules. Out of 31 students, in-depth interviews were carried out with 8 out of whom 3 were from Category Aschools and 5 from Category Bschools. Focus group discussions were held with 23 students out of whom 13 were from Category B schools and 10 from Category Aschools.The data analysis was carried out by first transcribing interviews and then codingand thematically categorising them which were then analysed with the help of relevant theories. With this brief outline of the methodology, we now move on to the main findings.

Results

The disciplinary culture differed starkly between the two categories of schools. Category B schools seem to be averse to the use of bureaucratically determined "harsh" punishments and are instead devising novel methods of disciplining students such as CCTV surveillance, counselling, giving rewards and incentives, etc. Such changes are clearly in line with the Indian government's vision of protecting children and their rights as per the RTE Act. In Category A schools, corporal punishment is still common and openly practiced. These distinctions and respondents' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of the different forms of punishments have been studied keeping in mind two specific aspects of everyday school-life: classroom discipline/ order maintenance of not only students and teachers and socialization/moral development of students.

Effectiveness of Act for Student Discipline

Students and teachers have felt that the RTE Act has significantly reduced the effectiveness of non-corporal punishments to deal with indiscipline, often in new forms that children display today influenced by technology, ideas of child rights, pro-child laws and policies, etc. According to most respondents in Category B schools, preventive measures andlow-impact punishments that are allowed are

ineffective andhave increased the "frequency", "intensity" and "offensiveness" of indiscipline.Punishments legally still allowed such as complaining to parents or being removed from theclassroom or even positive disciplining methods such as giving special responsibilities to errant students were touted as ineffective in dealing with misbehaviour and indiscipline, especially in the long term, equally by students and teachers.Some students even acknowledged that they often deliberately misbehave when a teacher they do not like is teaching so that they would be removed from the classroom and could then go play football or chat with friends. Letters of complaint from the schooloften would not reach parents and even if they did, many parents did not show up citing lack of time, thus hampering the disciplining process of the student. Moreover, counselling, the most popular method of dealing with indiscipline nowadays, was also written off as ineffective, especially by high school boys in Category B schools and by almost everyone in Category A schools. Responses revealed that most counsellors act as moral science teachers and students rarely visit them for their problems.A Category A high-school boy said, "the only time counselling works is when teachers use it along with physical punishments". It is interesting to note that even though this student lost his hearing in one ear due to corporal punishment in school, he still feels that such a method is effective in attaining discipline simply because it creates fear. Fear emerged as the singular most effective method of discipline and its lack in the current disciplinary culture of schools was felt acutely and equally by teachers and students. The overwhelming majority of students said that they would rather have some physical punishment back because of the fear of it. A combination of corporal punishment and dialogue coming from teachers who were respected and loved by students was considered most effective to ensure discipline in the classroom.

Students, however, made a qualitative differentiation regarding the effectiveness of fear based on its source. The fear from a looming threat of physical punishment was somehow more acceptable to them than the fear of being "humiliated" and "bullied" in public by the teacher. Such mental and emotional harassment has become especially common in Category B schools since teachers want some way to express their power over students at a time when corporal punishment is not allowed, as explained by some teacher respondents. Students have argued that such methods of disciplining have long term negative psychological effects andalso hamper their relations with such teachers. A beating seemed more preferable to students, especially boys, of all age groups and they generally wanted a return of physical punishments. Female students however, especiallyinCategory B schools, felt that the removal of corporal punishment is a good move to "protect the mentally

weak students today", as one girl put it, who, she and most other respondents felt, are prone to taking drastic measures and harming themselves if they feel abused or disrespected.While they felt thatcounselling is a good alternative, they also recognize that it is not used effectively in most schools. Female students of Category A schools were not completely averse to the use of corporal punishment and felt that an escalation technique that ends in corporal punishment is the best method of dealing with indiscipline and they felt that a good beating is often necessary to quickly counter indiscipline. This shows that gendered perceptions of effectiveness do differ between the two categories of schools.

Overall, it was found thatsofter forms of punishment, where practiced, were not very effective in countering classroom indiscipline and the majority of respondents felt that corporal punishment is the only and best deterrent to indiscipline in any school due to the fear it creates.

Effectiveness of Act for Teacher Discipline

While students are becoming more fearless in the classroom, the Act has seemingly successfully created fear of punishment among teachersand wasrather effective in ensuring disciplined conduct of teachers in Category B schools. These teachers are continuously monitored (through CCTV cameras or physical checks by authorities) not only for their performance but also for their interactions with students.Any complaints from students, which according to a few teachers are at times at least partially fabricated, are taken very seriously by these school authorities because they do not want their images to be tarnished by parents via social media or legal actions against the schools. Punishment for teachers for failing to abide by the rulesof conduct,which in some schools even covers something like the words that the teacher cannot utter inside the classroom, can range from warnings to loss of employment. What teachers fear more is the tendency of these parents to express their protests and displeasures against teachers and schoolsin the mass mediaand to "expose teachers" as one teacher said. In order to prevent such consequences,teachers said that they try to be aloof from students and they did little more than fulfil academic requirements, admitting that disciplining students was not their priority anymore. One teacher said that the Act is making them follow rules and laws mechanically, not being convinced about their effectiveness regarding student discipline.

Teachers of Category A schools did not seem to have the same fears. Corporal punishment, practiced openly and without hesitation, apparently often encouraged by parents, exposes a lacuna in the implementation of laws. A teacher said that

this is because of monitoring of teachers' activities in these schools owing to the lack of infrastructure such as CCTV camerasas well as an apparent lack of drive of the school authorities to physically monitor the classes. Teachers are "overburdened" and "can end up physically reacting" to indisciplined students which is "understandable"according to him. In fact, he justified the prevalence of corporal punishment in these schools by saying that it is the only "language" these students understand being used to physical punishments at home. He emphasized that parents want teachers to use such punishments and there are usually no complaints made.However, when rare complaints are made, most teachers can get away with it unscathed because of their strong political networks and the cycle of violent punishments continues. Thus, the effectiveness of the new laws for disciplined conduct seems to be rather inconsistent. Category A schools are unable to ensure protection of students being unable to monitor teacher conduct while the Category B schools have quite effectively moulded teacher behaviour to fit the laws, even though the change has largely been superficial. Discipline is directly related to the socialization of students and the effectiveness of schools and teachers as agents of socialization has been discussed next.

Effectiveness of Act Regarding Socialization

Schools and teachers have a duty of citizen training and are important secondary agents of child socialization.Category B schools have explicitly stated in their mission/vision statements that they want to create individuals who are of use to the society by teaching them certain skills and values. Category A schools, however, do not hold similar positionsby going above and beyond the demands of academic and administrative works. The perceptions of effectiveness among the respondents, however, did not always match the official standpoints of schools. The current generation of students in Category B schools do not think that the school, teachers or punishment have much of a role to play in their socialization.Most students felt that teachers hardly interact with them to get to know them and instead are quick to judge or ignore them. Studentsdid not feel respect or adoration for such teachers to learn values or habits from them. Most of them felt thatpunishment at home is much moreeffective in socialization and personality formation becauseparentshave a greater right to punish them than teachers. One student gave specific reasons for this – (i) teachers often punish based on a biased judgement of students but parents would never do that; (ii) teachers are often unnecessarily rude with students and do not express love or concern after punishment but parents do; (iii) parents' entire

attention is only on their own children and it is not spread over numerous children, ensuring greater care and concern for the individual child which teachers cannot afford to do. It is probably for these reasons that most of these students said thatthe emotional impact of punishment at home is much less than in school. As such, students felt that teachers and punishment in school do not have any significant role to play in socialization, especially for older students whose personalities have mostly solidified. Yet, many studentsin Category B schoolsactually do expect better socialization in school even though they do not encounter teachers who are "invested" enough in them, as one student put it, to teach them much beyond academics. Teachers in theseschools recognized that their role in child socialization has reduced but at a time when the school and teachers need to do more to socialize studentssincebusy families are unable to give sufficient time for it.This reduction has come about because teachers have developed a wary attitude towards students for fear of complaints and penalties which students often interpret as a lack of interest or attachment on their part, according to the teacher respondents.Thus, serious deficiencies in child development and socialization are seen in many cases according to the teachers.

Teachers of Category A schools, in comparison,do have a say in how students behave in classand they are usually looked up to by parents and students for education and socialization. These stakeholders feel that the only way to get out of the cycle of poverty is through proper education and by learning the dominant values and behaviours of societyandthat teachers alone are credible sources of such values. Even so,one Category Ateacher felt that most of such teachers are failing at effectively socializing students because of the strong influence of a violenthome environment that is difficult to challenge in school. This is exactly why many of these teachers said that they "have to" be violent with the students to educate or socialize them effectively, no matter what the law says. He also admitted that character development of students is not something that is given serious attention to in these schools. To illustrate, he talked about a colleague who busies herself with her cell phone in every class, ignoring indisciplined and violent students. He also talked about many teachers being habitually absent, thereby hampering any scope of education or socialization of students. Thus, in these schools too teachers are not exactly active agents of socialization as in Category B schools although for very different reasons. What comes out from these responses is that the quality of in-school experiences, especially with regards to the protection of students and their rights, is rather different in the two categories of schools depending on their ownership and clientele. At the same time, responses have also shown that even

though school administrations have different attitudes towards laws, the teachers in all schools are more or less similarly positioned regarding their rolein discipline and socialization.

Discussing Perceptions of Effectiveness

Respondents'desire to revive corporal punishment is a testament to Baumrind'sworks on spanking which she considered an effective method to discipline without aiming to be violent. According to her, light forms of punishments or reprimands are excellent in controlling student behaviour, provided the teacher-student relationship is positive (Baumrind 1997). She termed such forms of punishment as prudent negative consequences and characterized them as 'consistent, immediate, calm, private, and specific' (ibid.: 179). Students' responses show that they prefer prudent negative consequences from teachers they are fond of, corroborating Baumrind's theory. Such teachers are not negatively perceived by students even if they punish to teach moral lessons, especially when punishments areaccompanied by reasoning. As Baumrind (1996) explains, by 'being paired with punishment, reasoning becomes a discriminative stimulus that noncompliance will be punished. Once this connection has been established, reasoning alone may suffice to obtain compliance' (410-411).

Responses indicated, however, that such teachers are few and far between and it is the authoritarian teacher who is much more commonly found in schools. The authoritarian teacher is demanding of students, not permissive of any freedoms, often punishes students on the basis of prejudices and in ways that are humiliating. Students tend to resist authoritariandisciplining or socialization and, by their own acknowledgement, have no respect for such teachers even if they have to accept the punishments meted out by such teachers. Arum and Way (2003) have written in this regard that when 'the teacher's moral authority is doubted, then respect for social values and obligation to obey may fail to develop within the child, an outcome which is important not only for school order but ultimately for the general social order as well' (168).Mental harassment and bullying as alternatives to physical punishment commonly used by authoritarian teachers especially in Category B schools were perceived negatively by students. Baumrind described such methods of punishment as imprudent negative consequences. i.e., 'reprimands delivered late, inconsistently, explosively, publicly, and non-specifically' (Baumrind 1997: 179).Combined with authoritarian styles of teaching and disciplining, imprudent negative consequences can be very harmful. As Larzelere and Baumrind (2010) explained,'the most detrimental forms of power assertion were verbal hostility and

psychological control' (85) which explains why students said that they would rather be spanked.Students do not appreciate displays of power by the teacher. Students want assertive discipline (Canter1988) from teachers which requires clear and consistent rules and expectations of behaviour laid down by teachers who have been allowed maximum control over classroom matters including matters of discipline and socialization.

Some respondents, however, were happy with the changed laws because they felt that it is difficult to determine at what point punishments might be perceived as abusive by a student. As Kazdin and Benjet (2003) point out,'it is not clear whether, how, or at what threshold the brain makesthe distinction between child abuse and spanking. As a result, the circumstances under which spanking might also have deleterious effects is uncertain' (102).Many respondents claimed that today's children have a low threshold of tolerance compared to what children had before due to various influencesof the modern world and even the slightest punishments and displays of authority may be considered as abuse.

While students see teachers as authoritarian figures, new laws haveeroded much of teachers' authority, especially in elite and private (Category B) schools, limitingtheir freedom to take matters of disciplining andsocialization into their own hands.As Arum and Way (2003) had suggested, the moral authority of teachers is being questioned in modern society.In manyKolkataschools, the Act has led to an undermining of the teachers' authority at a time when the role of parents in socialization has reduced due to the demands of the job market. Teachers are acutely aware of this but they cannot step in since they are not given the freedom they want and have been accustomed tofor disciplining and socializing students. Teachers have urged that they need to be freed from external control to restore their legitimacy. Instead, the state is invading more and more aspects of education to control schools' and teachers' activities to create the ideal education system. However, differences seen in the acceptance of teachers' authority based on the clientele of schools points to the fact that social and cultural capitals (Bourdieu 1986) are highly important determinants of not just the quality of knowledge and pedagogy in schools but also the experiences of discipline, punishment and socialization as well as perceptions of their effectiveness. Differences in these capitals are exacerbated by the influences of neoliberalism and privatization and their impacts on the education system have ensured that differences in pedagogy and experiences of overall school environment remain.

A discernible variation in perceptions was seen in terms of gender. Female students, for the most part, were more receptive of the changes than male students. According to Hurwitz & Smithey (1998) , an individual's perceptions related to

'crime and punishment are often thought to flow from feelings of vulnerability' (90). The female gender, being much more vulnerable in our societythan the male gender, tends to be more conforming with the rules of society and the laws of the state. Moreover, due to differences in socialization, more women tend to be negatively oriented towards violence than men. While men operate under an "ethic of justice" (Gilligan, 1982), women operate under the "ethic of care" (Worden 1993) that focuses on interconnections and on nurturing and 'protecting the vulnerable' (Hurwitz & Smithey 1998: 93).

Girls are generally taught to not only be submissive but also nurture and care for others indicating why girl students were mostly negatively oriented to the use of violence in punishment and socialization. As Hurwitz & Smithey explain, the socialization of boys is based on power-oriented techniques and that of women is based on compassion policies. This can explain why more boys than girls included in this study wanted the revival of corporal punishment which is a display of power more than anything else. Women, being socialized in compassion policies and the ethic of care, are more receptive of counselling as a method of dealing with indiscipline even though they agreed that it does not always work in its current form. However, while this is the general trend, it is also important to note that some girls have said that they would prefer an escalation technique of disciplining that uses physicalpunishments if needed. Not only that, female teachers have also been labelled as prone to punishment by many students. Moreover, even though boys prefer power displays, they did not like the display of power through psychological forms of punishment. As such, it is important to look at the issue of gendered perceptions of punishment in terms of 'emphasis and degree' (Hurwitz & Smithey 1998: 96) rather than as universal absolutes. This point is clearer when we look at the intersection of class and gender. While most Category B school girls have been against the use of punishments, girls from Category A schools are open to the idea since they are used to it at home as per responses. Thus, perceptions of effectiveness of corporal punishments vary by degree and emphasis not only between genders but also within genders depending on otherfactors like class. Therefore, in order to fully understand how methods of punishing and socializing students vary across and within different schools, it is important to consider these matters at the intersection of various structural factors like class, gender, etc.

Conclusion

The perceptions of effectiveness of the new forms of punishment since the ban have been generally negative. The overwhelming majority of respondents want a

revival of corporal punishment and attest to its necessity owing to the fear it creates which is necessary for discipline and socialization according to them. As such, there seems to be a lag in the implementation of laws on two levels. One is on the level of disciplining methods adopted in different schools typicallybased on the clientele they serve. A clear difference in experiences of discipline and socialization can be found based on whether or not a school is influenced by neo-liberalization and privatization. The lag is also at an ideological level since the stakeholders in schools that are most affected by privatization and consequent obedience to laws have not been able to internalize the ethos behind these protective laws. This shows how resistant cultural mores and traditions can be even in the face of legal changes. This ideological lag has resulted in lowered involvement and investment of teachers in students' discipline and socialization because they want to protect themselves from penalizations in this new environment where they are constantly controlled and watched.

It is a matter of survival of the fittest and it seems from teachers' responses that the fittest teachers are the ones who keep the greatest distance from students. This distance is felt by students and is cited as the reason behind their belief that teachers do not have a role to play in their socialization or disciplining. It seems that because of the new laws that limit teachers' authority, more and more students arerealizing that the authority of teachers and the school can be disregarded with minimum harm to self thereby eroding teachers' legitimacy beyond the realm of test-based knowledge disbursement. Thus, the laws that are trying to create a pro-child education system are not really successful and have caused negative unintended consequences such as lack of legitimacy of teachers' authority and reversing power dynamics within the classroom and loosened attachment relations between teachers and students. Therefore, there is a need to include the voices of the actual stakeholders in the process of policy-making in order to avoid the negative consequences of positive intentions.

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