Discipline and Punishment

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How important is punishment to discipline a child? Are there other ways of disciplining children? Read on to find out.

Sermonisation, (‘sermon’ from Middle English and old French ‘sermmo’ meaning speech, conversation), probably the kindest form of punishment, is one of the many punishments meted out to children regularly by teachers and parents, in fact by all concerned adults, to communicate the norms of societal behaviour to ‘youngsters’ hoping to ‘bring them in line’ and pursue the beliefs and goals that the concerned adult thinks should be held by all.

‘We live in a disciplinary society, not a disciplined one’ an observation by Michel Foucault, 18th century French thinker, is something we have to take note of if we are in the field of education and schooling. Schools and the classroom reflect in microcosm all of that social strata which they serve with dreams of upward mobility that will be achieved with schooling. Corporal punishment, which means punishment inflicted on the body, the least of which takes the form of caning in school, and slapping and spanking in the home, is against the law. But the types of punishment inflicted in school vary and there is a wide consensus and common justification for punishment as a means of maintaining discipline in society and consequently all institutions including in schools.

Vidyaranya High School is a 54-year-old institution named after Acharya Vidyaranya who was the architect of the Vijayanagara Empire (about 1336-1669). Surprising, though it maybe, not every one at Vidyaranya knows who Vidyaranya was and the students are not compelled to learn about yet ‘another great man’ let alone honour him and have his words thrust down their throat. This is representative of the overall environment in the school.

‘How can you work in a school without formal rules, a dress code, definite supervision of syllabus coverage by teachers and assessment through a regimen of unit tests, quarterly, half-yearly and finalexaminations that seek to select and reward the “best”? is a question often posed. ‘How is discipline maintained’?

Issues of discipline do not seem to pose a major problem at Vidyaranya. Isolated acts that violate societal norms of acceptable behaviour are dealt with in small group discussions and the larger middle school or senior school assemblies depending on who is involved. Problems in primary school require that adults, both the teacher and parent(s), be involved. Discussion in groups and/or with individual students (staff and students) almost always brings to the surface, not only the person(s) directly responsible but also other important constituent factors like home environment. Almost inevitably there is some crying but this usually comes as endorsement by the child or member of staff of their acknowledgement of their part in the problem and willingness to conduct themselves differently in future.

John Dewey examined the role of discipline in education, particularly in education for democratic citizenship. As he views it, ‘A disciplined person is trained to consider his actions and undertakes them in a deliberate manner; an intelligently chosen course in the face of distraction, confusion, and difficulty, and you have the essence of discipline.’ Children can learn to act with discipline, and the way they do so is by discovering that by so acting they can reach their goals more consistently as is essential for democratic living in a democracy. As the individual and common good are tied together in a democracy, the lack of discipline makes effective pursuit of either impossible.

Discipline is not the outcome of reading a chapter in a book, although included in numerous fast-selling school textbooks and self-improvement workshops. Dewey’s point is that if children cannot see the reason for an activity as their own purpose, then the activity cannot be intelligent, and therefore cannot be educational. Educational experiences are those in which looking ahead to their ends, we check the actual outcome of actions against the expected ones to see if they are getting closer to their goals. Without goals, there is no aim; without aim, we cannot exercise foresight; without foresight, we cannot determine the best sequence of actions, taking into account the obstacles in the way; we cannot, therefore, consider alternative courses of action that might have a higher likelihood of success. All of this is what Dewey considers
acting intelligently; if the child’s purpose is not part of the action, then the action cannot be intelligent, nor can it be disciplined.

The school bell, which is now electric in most schools, rings every forty minutes as it does in factories, prisons and barracks and places of religious worship well as from time immemorial, to mark for every participant member of the institution, transitions in the activity. In a school these activities are specified in detail by timetables, the making of which is a well-honed skill. But, at Vidyaranya the bell rings minimally—five times; once to mark the start of the school day, once to mark its end and three times to herd into class students let loose for break time when the large old brass temple bell is brought out of its place by Moin who solemnly strikes it. As far as most people are concerned, Moin is a repository of all information pertaining to the school to serve as the school’s enquiry counter or front office personnel in plusher places. In these duties first by Zahiruddin, Moin and now Shankar, all have a sense of deep pride in their contribution to the school of which they are a part.

I do not know whether there is a downward percolation of such attitudes and values of work ethic or whether it is upward absorption; whether it comes from within or from four decades of a philosophy that is neither counter to common sense nor estranged from technological development and the scientific method.

In fact, Jiddu Krishnamurti, whom the founder of the school has been influenced by (refer recently published biography by her of JK, Sahitya Kala Akademi, 2005), dwells at length on the education that develops intelligence—true intelligence that is not shackled by generations of conditioning nor controlled by ambition and fear, but an intelligence that is sensitive, free and true. Krishnamurti speaks of fear and how deep-rooted acknowledged and unacknowledged fears rise up like demons to paralyse us; competition not only kills the spirit of learning and prevents true intelligence from emerging but also distorts mind and personality.

Schooling, however free from the visible discipline used by authority to maintain order, depends on almost unrecognisable roots in fear to be set in place from above.

The subjects we teach are subjects based on the ‘disciplines’ we have mastered. You cannot be a mathematician unless you subject yourself willingly to the demands of the study itself. However, there is an interesting paradox in this view of discipline: one masters a discipline in the act of submitting to it. So long as one resists the demands of mathematical discipline, one never quite becomes a mathematician. But when one yields to the discipline of the subject, one becomes at the same time its master.

Discipline must be a way of life.

*This article, by Laksmi Rameshwar Rao, was first published in Teacher Plus in August 2007 and has been published here with changes.*

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