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## FALLING IN LINE: A CASE STUDY ON SITUATING STUDENTS IN THE ARRAY OF THE DISCIPLINARY PRACTICES OF A SCHOOL

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**Abstract:** Since their conception, schools have replicated in their systems and practices, the hierarchies and differences that prevail in the larger society. . The research paper aims to explicate the findings of a study conducted in a school in Delhi with the perspective of exploring how normalizing practices feature in that school. The broad research question was “what are various attributes of a learner that are targeted to be trained and disciplined; and, in what forms are power and control present and exercised in a school’s everyday practices?” Since the research questions aimed to find out the discursive practices at the grass root level where power and control operate, therefore observation and interviews as tools in qualitative research were adopted.

**Keywords:** Disciplining practices, Michel Foucault, Normalizing patterns, Student behavior.

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**Introduction:** Rouvanjit Rawla, a student of a prestigious school in Kolkata committed suicide on February 12<sup>th</sup>, 2010. Rouvanjit had been caned by the school principal and allegedly by four other teachers as well. The child’s ‘crime’ was that he was ‘naughty’, irregular and didn’t do his homework on time (TOI, June, 2010). He could not bear to live with the emotional scars of the physical torture inflicted on him at school. What was truly despicable was that the school principal had no regrets about the incident and had admitted as much to the school’s Board of Governors and the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) investigating the case (ibid). A child of Class II in Delhi died of heat stroke after she was made to squat in the sun. A child in a prestigious school of Bangalore was caned by the teacher as well as got a rap on his thighs by his classmates for not bringing color pencils to school. In 2006, a student in Mumbai died a day after he was beaten and made to climb three flights of stairs on his knees for being late to school. Thousands of children have their stories to tell of the torture they face in the name of being disciplined. The NCPCR receives numerous letters from children who complain of the physical, mental and emotional abuse that they face at school.

The National Curriculum Framework (2005) conceptualizes discipline as something that must enable the performance of, or be conducive to, the task at hand. It must enable freedom, choice and autonomy both in students as well as in teachers. Furthermore, it realizes that rule-making in a classroom must be a collaborative process between students and teachers so that students learn to make rules and inculcate self-governance through the process. Despite this approach and vision, the episodes coming to light in India reveal that teachers as well as parents believe corporal punishment and verbal and physical abuse as important tools towards disciplining children. Discipline has always been at

the helm of a student’s school life, so much so that the degree to which it is imposed often connotes a direct relation to the reputation and prestige of an institution. Courtesy some shocking incidents, its negative impact on learners have been brought to the forefront. Although corporal punishment had been banned over a decade ago, it is still employed as a major means to discipline ‘errant’ students. In light of the context described above, there was a felt need to undertake the present study. Therefore, the researcher chose to investigate the very nature of disciplinary techniques that structure the working of a schooling system and the inherent power relations embedded in its practices of control and domination.

### **Objectives Of The Study:**

The following objectives would guide the research in its conceptualization and collection of data from the field:

- ◆ To understand the various norms, ethics and values that the school aims to inculcate in its learners.
- ◆ To examine the various forms in which power, control and discipline exist in the school’s everyday practices.

**Methodology:** The nature of the study was exploratory and descriptive, therefore qualitative approach had been followed in order to capture the field in its most natural settings. The research questions as stated above aim to find out the practices at the grass root level where power and control operate, therefore observation as a tool in qualitative research had been adopted. The study has been conducted as a case study of one school. The school was visited over a period of 5 months from January 2011 to May 2011. Along with the classroom practices, the practices outside the classrooms were also observed since they too form an integral part of the school’s decorum. Essential to fulfilling the objectives of the study was to comprehend the notion of discipline and the rationale underlying the

disciplinary techniques enforced by the school. Considering that “the qualitative research interview attempts to understand the world from the subjects’ point of view, to unfold the meaning of their experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations” (Brinkmann and Kvale, 1996:1), interview as a tool was also used. In particular, semi-structured, open ended interviews were conducted with some select staff and students of the school. Documents pertaining to children’s protection and rights were analyzed to gain an understanding of the legal assistance available to children in case they are physically and/or mentally harassed in schools. It was observed that the School Diary held an illustrative importance in the working of the school, therefore a rigorous analysis of the same has been done.

**Reviewing The Related Literature:** It was felt that within the context of this study the works of Michel Foucault would provide relevant insights, since he explains the history of schooling within the central idea of discipline. Majority of the content reviewed is of western origin. This largely stems from the reason that Foucault has not been used a theoretical framework to understand concepts like power, discipline and authority within the Indian schooling system. This is because the writings that were most helpful in building my understanding have been given priority for being shared with fellow researchers. In understanding the concepts of power, knowledge, techniques of surveillance, Governmentality and bio-power the writings by James Marshall were very helpful. Written in simple language, they are a starter’s guide to understanding Foucault’s oeuvre. The writings by Barry Smart and Gail McNicol Jardine are helpful in understanding the relevance of these concepts in reference to school organization and in matters of classroom orientation, classroom management, student profiling, information gathering and the examination procedures and remediation thereafter, if any. The evolution and transformation of discipline has been very comprehensively illustrated by Roger Deacon (2006) in his writings. The book *Discipline and Punish* (1977) by Foucault explicated in detail, sometimes disturbingly, the barbaric procedures of the sovereign rule in ancient times. It was helpful in getting acquainted with the scenario in the wake of which Foucault advocated his strong views about the State’s unfair and tyrannical regimes. The study by Welland (2001) was helpful in understanding how one may go about researching with a similar aim as it locates itself within an educational setting and has similar objectives.

**Conceptual Framework For The Study:** In order to understand Michel Foucault in synchrony with the

Indian social scenario it is imperative to be conversant with the basic tenets of his critical theory. Foucault’s main reference point were the power dynamics that governed the practices of various social formal (e.g. schools and military camps) and informal (e.g. family and relationships) institutions. The concept of ‘**power**’ is the starting point of Foucault’s critical discourse. He conceptualized it as a ‘complex strategical situation’, as a ‘multiplicity of force relations’, as simultaneously ‘intentional’ yet ‘non-subjective’ (Foucault, *History of Sexuality*: 92-97). For Foucault, closely tied to power, is **knowledge**, since it is through forms and means of knowledge that power finds legitimacy. Foucault claimed “the exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge, and conversely, knowledge constantly induces the effects of power” (1980:52). The prevailing ‘truth’ is constructed to the liking of the powerful, and that attains the form of knowledge.

The **body** has been identified as the means through which power/knowledge is served its cause. Genealogical analysis reveals the body as an object of knowledge and as a target for the exercise of power. The body is shown to be located in the political field, invested with power relations which render it docile and productive (Smart, 2002:75). It is the body that is manipulated by various forms of control, surveillance, prohibitions and constraints in order to exercise power. Foucault develops his discourse based on the triangulated set of concepts concerning the body and its articulation with relations of power and knowledge. When the body is subjected to such excessive authority, the self, which is the central point of Foucault’s discourse, is not completely autonomous as it is believed to be prepared through education and freedom. In such circumstances, Foucault believed, the self may be constituted in two ways-which he termed as ‘technologies of domination’ and ‘technologies of the self’. ‘**Technologies of domination**’ are essentially concerned with the organization of spaces, time and capacities. These are concerned with controlling the bodies of individuals through strict routines and norms. It was as part of ‘technologies of domination’ that Foucault conceptualized the ‘tools of domination’, namely hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment and examination; that can be located in all the school setups worldwide today, in form of seating arrangements, knowledge reserves, student-student, teacher-teacher and student-teacher dialogues, morning assemblies, time tables, different penal mechanisms for different offences, examination practices, and assigning of ranks and rewards. These provide individual to examine themselves in relation to the norms set by the school. Foucault conceptualized ‘**Technologies of the self**’ based on

people's belief that it is possible to tell the truth about oneself to another person, mostly to professionals. The therapy provided thereby leads to an overhauling, a reconstruction of the self and 'enables' the individual to experience happiness, fulfillment and perfection. Foucault opines, "technologies of the self permits individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom perfection or immortality" (Foucault, 1982:18). The fields of medicine, psychiatry, psychology, law and education belong to this domain of govern mentality.

**Situating The Students In The Array Of Norms Upheld By The School:** Various facets of the students' personalities were focused upon by the school to be monitored, controlled and groomed according to institutional and social ideals.

- **Physical Attributes of the Students:** Foucault (1977) laid great emphasis upon the training of the bodies of the subjects during every disciplinary regime. To him body was the starting point from which the training of an individual started and progressed towards the individual's psychological subordination. Punishments such as standing with hands raised up for some time, or sitting in a cock's pose, pulling one's own ears, running the circumference of the field, cleaning the class, doing others' chores for a week- all are aimed to tire out the body so that it sends a strong and long lasting message to the psyche of the child to not commit the mistake again. By controlling the bodily gestures and movement the thinking capacity of the individual could be altered and controlled. Similar attitude towards training the bodily gestures, spacings and movements were observed in the school where the study was done. Surveillance was carried out in every way possible inside the school. Every day after the recess got over, the teachers who had been appointed as discipline incharges positioned themselves in the playground to oversee that all girls returned to their classes in two lines. A lot of students were frequently picked out while returning from recess and were made to plait their hair right then. Lots of students were also 'caught' and fined for applying nail polish after the morning assembly. In order to check these and many other similar 'offences' the authorities practiced the right to frisk the students at any point of time during school hours. The emphasis laid on the physical appearances and the control that the school exercises on pupils' bodies is reminiscent of Foucault's excessive focus on the controlling of bodies, in his discourse. The body has been identified

as the means through which power/knowledge is served its cause. Genealogical analysis revealed the body as an object of knowledge and as a target for the exercise of power (Smart, 2002: 76). It is the body that is manipulated by various forms of control, surveillance, prohibitions and constraints in order to exercise power.

- **Attitudinal traits of the Students:** Apart from explicating a code of conduct for the right movement and the right code of conduct for the students, a lot of effort is invested towards ensuring that students' attitude is groomed in a conventional manner. Since in our society girls are traditionally expected to be submissive, docile and silent, therefore the school engages in inculcating similar trait in the girls. During the classroom processes it was observed that it was taken care that girls don't behave in an unfeminine and unruly way. It was expected of them that they talk in a low tone of voice and maintain their body language and general physical appearance in a docile and submissive manner. The monitoring of the physical disposition and bodily gestures could be observed on many occasions. Self-reflection as a regular practice was frequently highlighted by the teachers towards the students. Teachers reminded students that it was their duty to keep a regular check of their work and behavior. Teachers reminded students that it was their duty to keep a regular check of their work and behavior. "Is your instruction equal to your implementation?" was a poster commonly seen in many classrooms. Very often teachers rebuked students for not doing their various duties such as cleaning the classrooms, doing their homework, revising their lessons, collecting the notebooks, looking after their conduct, dressing properly, speaking properly. For such students there were punishments as well as rebukes. In her interview, the discipline incharge expressed that raising fear through rebukes and punishments was essential since it would be self-regulatory later on. Foucault (1982: 18) argued that "technologies of the self permits individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom perfection or immortality". As expressed by teachers this act of frequent self regulation was not for the good of the students, but was infact good for the normalizing tactics of the school that aimed to train a student to adhere to the norms inside the school, and also after they leave the school.

Personal grooming of the students was kept limited only to the absence of dirt and germs and

convenience in activities. Aspects of sophistication and good presentation were not encouraged. Students were not allowed to wear fancy dresses for their birthdays after class fifth, and the same was mentioned in the school diary. The reason cited behind this by the vice principal is that "it is believed that by this age a girl starts growing up and so she should be expected to shed her childhood fancies." Not taken under consideration here is that every age brings with itself its own emotional needs and self-awareness, that the school chose to overlook.

On many occasions students were penalized for not plaiting their hair properly, or restyling their hair after the morning assembly. Such incidences brought to the attention their growing self-interest in themselves which is part of adolescence. Curtailing this, along with failing to acknowledge their unique identities and self-interests could be seen as shaping

their identities in a rigid way where students are expected to look at themselves the way they are told by the teachers.

**Conclusion:** The holistic aim of the study was to understand the school's perspective and practices towards maintaining discipline. It was essentially to capture the dynamics of power and control that existed within the school. Students were approached but since gaining their point of view was not the major aim, hence their representation has not found reasonable space within the present study. Locating the stance of students, who are at the receiving end in the whole mechanism of discipline, and examining the extent to which schools are able to inculcate the attitudes they deem essential could be looked into in future research endeavors. The agency that students adopt to express themselves and the resistance they practice are worthwhile areas of study.

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