

Differential Disciplining Measures in Indian Schools on the Basis of Class and Gender: A Critical Review of Educational Inequality and Inclusive Schooling

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Abstract:

School discipline is an essential part of the educational process because it helps maintain a supportive learning environment, encourages responsible behaviour, and develops self-regulation among students. However, disciplinary practices do not always operate equally for every child. In the Indian school system, the treatment of students may be influenced by their socioeconomic background, caste location, gender, language, academic performance, and the expectations held by teachers and school authorities. This paper critically examines differential disciplining measures in Indian schools, focusing particularly on social class and gender. It explores the forms of discipline used in classrooms, the social assumptions that may influence teachers' responses, and the results of unequal disciplinary measures for students' psychological well-being, academic participation, self-esteem, and educational opportunities. Drawing on existing literature, policy documents, and sociological perspectives, the paper argues that disciplinary inequality should not be understood merely as a matter of individual teacher behaviour. It must also be examined in relation to institutional culture, social hierarchy, gender stereotypes, and unequal access to educational resources. The paper further discusses the legal framework governing corporal punishment in India and proposes practical strategies for developing fair, gender-sensitive, socially inclusive, and child-centred disciplinary systems. It concludes that effective discipline should be based on mutual respect rather than obedience through humiliation and fear.

Keywords: school discipline, socioeconomic class, gender discrimination, corporal punishment, educational inequality, inclusive education

1. Introduction

Schools are expected to provide children with opportunities to learn, develop social relationships, discover their abilities, and become responsible members of society. Maintaining discipline is necessary for achieving these objectives. A classroom in which students can concentrate, participate, ask questions, and cooperate with others is generally more conducive to learning than one dominated by disruption or fear.

Nevertheless, the meaning of discipline is not always understood in the same way. Some teachers associate discipline with punctuality, respectful communication, regular attendance, and responsible behaviour. Others may place greater emphasis on silence, unquestioning obedience, strict conformity, and compliance with institutional authority. These different understandings influence how students are rewarded, corrected, reprimanded, or punished.

An important concern arises when similar behaviour receives different responses depending on the identity or social background of the student. For example, a teacher may interpret a confident response from one child as leadership but consider the same behaviour from another child disrespectful. A boy who speaks loudly may be described as troublesome, while a girl who behaves similarly may be criticised for being improper. A student who cannot afford the prescribed uniform or learning materials may be treated as careless, even when the difficulty results from financial hardship. Such examples illustrate the possibility of differential disciplining: the application, severity, frequency, or interpretation of disciplinary measures may vary according to students' social positions rather than the seriousness of their behaviour alone.

In India, this issue requires particular attention because schools serve children from diverse economic, linguistic, caste, religious, regional, and cultural backgrounds. Differences in school resources, family circumstances, institutional expectations, and teacher preparation may shape the disciplinary experiences of students. UNICEF India (n.d.) recognises that social divisions involving gender, caste, economic circumstances, language, and location can influence children's experiences of education.

Research also demonstrates that corporal punishment is not simply a question of maintaining classroom order. **Kumar et al. (2022)** found that corporal punishment was associated with poorer cognitive outcomes among children in India, while teacher praise was associated with more favourable outcomes. Their analysis also identified differences in the effects across caste groups. The central concern of this paper is therefore not whether schools need discipline. Rather, it is whether disciplinary practices are fair, educationally constructive, legally compliant, and sensitive to the different circumstances in which children learn.

2. Objectives of the Study

The paper has the following objectives:

1. To explain the concept and educational significance of differential disciplining in Indian schools.
2. To examine how socioeconomic class may influence students' disciplinary experiences.

3. To analyse the influence of gender stereotypes on disciplinary decisions.
4. To discuss the interaction between class, gender, caste, and other dimensions of social inequality.
5. To examine the psychological, educational, and social consequences of unequal disciplinary practices.
6. To review the relevant Indian legal and policy framework.
7. To suggest practical measures for developing fair, inclusive, and constructive school discipline.

3. Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative, conceptual review approach. It draws on selected scholarly publications, sociological theories, educational research, child-protection reports, and relevant Indian legislation and policy materials. The literature is examined thematically under five broad areas: disciplinary practices, socioeconomic inequality, gender expectations, consequences for children, and alternatives to punitive discipline. Particular attention is given to research concerning corporal punishment in Indian schools and the relationship between social disadvantage and educational experiences.

The paper does not claim to present new survey findings, classroom observations, interviews, or experimental results. Its conclusions are interpretive and are intended to identify significant issues, develop a theoretical understanding, and suggest directions for further empirical research.

One limitation should be acknowledged: Indian schools differ considerably across states, rural and urban locations, government and private management, and educational stages. Therefore, the patterns discussed here should be understood as potential mechanisms and documented concerns, not as universal characteristics of every school or teacher.

4. Understanding Differential Disciplining

4.1 Meaning and Nature

Differential disciplining refers to situations in which students receive different disciplinary responses because of characteristics such as socioeconomic background, gender, caste, disability, language, academic standing, or perceived social status. It can involve differences in:

- The frequency with which students are reprimanded.
- The severity of punishment for comparable behaviour.
- Access to warnings, explanations, and opportunities to correct mistakes.
- The willingness of teachers to listen to students' explanations.
- The use of praise, encouragement, exclusion, humiliation, or physical punishment.
- The recording and reporting of disciplinary incidents.

Differential treatment is not automatically discriminatory. Younger children may need different guidance from older students, and a response may appropriately vary according to the seriousness of an incident or a student's individual support needs. The concern arises when irrelevant social characteristics influence the decision, or when supposedly neutral rules impose unequal burdens

on disadvantaged students. For example, requiring every child to bring a particular textbook may appear to be an equal rule. However, publicly punishing a child who cannot afford it overlooks the difference between deliberate non-compliance and economic inability. Fair discipline requires both consistent standards and sensitivity to individual circumstances.

4.2 Common Forms of Disciplinary Measures

Disciplinary measures in schools may be broadly divided into constructive and punitive approaches. Constructive approaches include discussion, reminders, restorative conversations, counselling, collaborative problem-solving, positive reinforcement, and the teaching of self-regulation. Punitive approaches may include public reprimands, insulting language, threats, exclusion from activities, excessive detention, physical punishment, or the withdrawal of privileges.

Not every consequence is necessarily inappropriate. A proportionate, non-discriminatory consequence may help a student understand the effects of an action. However, humiliation, violence, discriminatory treatment, and punishment that denies dignity cannot be justified merely by calling them disciplinary measures.

Mondal and Prasad (2012), in their study of teachers in secondary schools in Kolkata and Durgapur, examined teachers' views concerning corporal punishment and classroom discipline. Their work illustrates the importance of considering teacher beliefs and classroom conditions when studying disciplinary practices. The wider question is how institutions can maintain order without making punishment the principal means of classroom management.

5. Differential Disciplining on the Basis of Socioeconomic Class

5.1 Economic Inequality and School Expectations

Socioeconomic class influences children's access to learning materials, private tuition, digital devices, suitable clothing, transport, nutritious food, and supportive study environments. These differences may become visible in school through homework completion, examination performance, punctuality, attendance, and classroom participation. Teachers may sometimes interpret these visible differences as evidence of motivation or character without considering the circumstances behind them.

Consider two students who repeatedly fail to submit homework. One has a quiet room, internet access, and help from family members. The other shares a small living space, helps with domestic work, and has limited access to books. If both receive the same reprimand without an examination of their circumstances, formal equality may conceal substantive inequality. This does not mean that expectations should be abandoned for economically disadvantaged children. Rather, schools should distinguish between unwillingness to meet a reasonable expectation and an inability to meet it because of circumstances beyond the child's control.

5.2 Disciplining Students from Economically Disadvantaged Families

Students from low-income households may face several forms of disadvantage. First, punishment for material deprivation. A child may be criticised for having incomplete stationery, an old uniform, worn shoes, or insufficient learning materials. If these difficulties are treated as personal failures,

discipline can become a means of expressing social prejudice. Second, assumptions about academic ability. Students whose parents have limited formal education may receive less encouragement or may be regarded as less capable. Such expectations can affect the level of support offered to them. Third, public comparison and humiliation. Ranking children by marks, displaying unpaid fees, or making insulting comments about family occupations and financial circumstances can turn ordinary school requirements into experiences of social shame. Fourth, unequal access to explanations and second chances. A student from a socially influential family may find it easier to explain an absence or negotiate a deadline. A disadvantaged student may have less confidence in approaching the teacher or challenging an unfair decision.

These examples describe plausible mechanisms of class-based differential disciplining. Their actual prevalence and severity require systematic observation and research in particular school settings.

5.3 Government and Private School Contexts

The distinction between government and private schools is important, but it should not be reduced to a simple claim that one sector is always more punitive than the other. Government schools may face challenges involving large classes, staff shortages, limited counselling facilities, and pressure to manage diverse learning needs. Private schools may have more resources in some settings but may also impose strict expectations concerning appearance, punctuality, examination performance, fees, and parental satisfaction. In either context, discipline can become problematic when institutional reputation, examination results, or administrative convenience is given greater importance than the child's dignity. For example, a school may treat low academic achievement as evidence of laziness rather than investigating language barriers, learning difficulties, interrupted attendance, or inadequate access to educational support. A fair approach requires school authorities to assess behaviour in context while maintaining clear expectations for all students.

5.4 Caste, Class, and Social Hierarchy

In India, class cannot be fully understood in isolation from caste and other historical forms of social exclusion. Economic disadvantage, caste-based stigma, and unequal access to institutional power may overlap, although they are not identical. **Balagopalan and Subramanian (2003)** examined the educational experiences of Dalit and Adivasi children and highlighted the importance of understanding schooling through the wider social relationships in which children participate. **Kumar et al. (2022)** provide more direct empirical evidence concerning disciplinary inequality. Using data from the second round of the India Human Development Survey, they investigated corporal punishment, teacher praise, and children's cognitive skills. Their findings suggest that corporal punishment is associated with poorer cognitive outcomes and that the effects of punishment and praise differ across caste groups. These findings are significant because they indicate that a disciplinary measure may not affect every child equally. Children who already experience social disadvantage may have fewer resources to recover from repeated humiliation or reduced teacher support.

However, caste and class should not be treated as interchangeable categories. A meaningful investigation must consider their distinct effects and the ways in which they interact with gender, region, and school type.

6. Differential Disciplining on the Basis of Gender

6.1 Gender as a Framework for Judging Behaviour

Gender expectations influence how adults interpret children's behaviour. In many social contexts, boys are expected to appear strong, assertive, competitive, and physically active, while girls may be expected to demonstrate restraint, obedience, neatness, and emotional control. Such expectations can enter classroom decisions, even when teachers believe they are treating everyone equally. A boy who challenges an instruction may be regarded as aggressive or disobedient. A girl who challenges the same instruction may be criticised for being disrespectful or insufficiently modest. Conversely, a confident boy may receive praise for leadership while a confident girl may be judged as argumentative. These examples show how the same behaviour can acquire different meanings depending on the student's gender. The problem is not that teachers must respond identically to all conduct. It is that the interpretation of conduct should be based on evidence, context, and reasonable educational standards rather than stereotypes about masculinity or femininity.

6.2 Disciplining Boys

Boys may experience disciplinary responses associated with the assumption that they are naturally more aggressive, physically active, or difficult to control.

Such expectations can result in:

- More frequent reprimands for movement or loud behaviour.
- Greater use of physical punishment.
- Pressure to suppress fear, sadness, or emotional vulnerability.
- Labelling as troublesome before an incident has been properly examined.
- Exclusion from activities because teachers anticipate disruptive conduct.

UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report on gender equality discusses the relationship between gender norms, school violence, and unequal educational experiences. It also reports evidence that boys may be more likely to receive physical punishment in some contexts, while girls may experience gender-specific verbal abuse (**UNESCO, 2019**). These findings should not be interpreted as proof that all boys are punished more often than all girls in India. They indicate that gender expectations can shape disciplinary practices in different ways.

A boy who cries after being reprimanded may be told to behave like a man. Such a response communicates that vulnerability is unacceptable. Over time, the child may learn to hide distress rather than seek help. Similarly, assuming that every active boy is deliberately disruptive can prevent teachers from identifying individual learning needs or addressing problems in classroom design and engagement.

6.3 Disciplining Girls

Girls may experience disciplinary practices connected with expectations about appearance, modesty, obedience, and appropriate social behaviour. These practices may include criticism of clothing or hairstyles, restrictions on participation in sports, scrutiny of friendships, and reprimands for speaking confidently in class. In some contexts, comments about physical appearance, weight, perceived respectability, or future marriage prospects can also become instruments of humiliation. **UNESCO (2019)** discusses research from India in which girls experienced gender-specific verbal abuse, including comments about their appearance and marriage prospects. Such treatment moves beyond classroom management into the enforcement of social expectations about femininity. For example, a girl who questions an unfair decision may be criticised for her attitude rather than having her concern considered. A girl who participates actively in sports may be discouraged because the activity is viewed as unsuitable for her.

These practices can limit opportunities for leadership, self-expression, and independent decision-making. However, girls should not be portrayed only as victims of discipline. They may also receive favourable treatment under certain circumstances, such as being excused from physically demanding activities or receiving more encouragement for neatness and compliance. Whether such treatment is helpful depends on whether it expands opportunities or reinforces restrictive expectations.

6.4 Gender, Dress Codes, and Personal Appearance

Uniform and appearance policies are often justified on the grounds that they promote equality and reduce visible differences between students. Clear, reasonable, and consistently applied rules may support a shared school identity. Nevertheless, appearance-related discipline can become discriminatory when requirements are enforced more harshly against one gender or when they interfere unnecessarily with participation in education.

For example, repeatedly excluding a girl from classes over a minor appearance-related violation may be disproportionate when a warning and an opportunity to correct the issue would suffice. Likewise, interpreting a boy's hairstyle or personal presentation as evidence of poor character can transform a minor rule violation into a moral judgement. School authorities should ensure that appearance policies are clear, educationally justified, proportionate, and respectful of students' dignity.

6.5 Gender Diversity and Inclusion

Disciplinary systems frequently assume that all students fit conventional categories of masculinity and femininity. Students who do not conform to these expectations may experience teasing, social exclusion, harassment, or inappropriate scrutiny. Schools should not treat gender nonconformity as misconduct. Nor should they tolerate bullying disguised as jokes or ordinary student interaction. An inclusive disciplinary policy should protect students from gender-based humiliation, provide confidential reporting mechanisms, and ensure that rules concerning participation, uniforms, facilities, and behaviour are implemented fairly.

7. The Intersection of Class and Gender

Class and gender do not operate independently. Their combined influence may shape a student's exposure to punishment, ability to defend themselves, and access to institutional support. An economically disadvantaged girl may face expectations to undertake domestic work, restrictions on mobility, limited access to digital learning, and pressure to remain quiet or compliant. If she misses homework because of family responsibilities, a teacher may interpret the problem as carelessness rather than recognising the conditions affecting her education. An economically disadvantaged boy who works after school or contributes to family responsibilities may struggle with attendance and preparation. If his behaviour is interpreted through stereotypes about aggression or irresponsibility, he may face harsher disciplinary responses.

These examples illustrate how gendered expectations can combine with economic disadvantage. They are illustrative scenarios, not findings from a newly conducted field study. Caste, disability, language, religion, and geographical location may add further dimensions. A girl from a marginalised caste living in a rural area, for instance, may experience a different combination of constraints from a girl attending a well-resourced urban school.

The concept of intersectionality, developed by **Crenshaw (1989)**, provides a useful theoretical lens for examining how multiple systems of inequality can interact. Although originally developed in the context of legal and social analysis, it can help educational researchers investigate why the experiences of students cannot always be explained by considering gender or class separately. The practical implication is that schools should not rely exclusively on broad assumptions about categories of children. They should investigate the circumstances of individual incidents while examining whether institutional patterns disadvantage particular groups.

8. Theoretical Perspectives on Differential Disciplining

8.1 Bourdieu: Social Class and Cultural Capital

Bourdieu (1986) explained how cultural capital contributes to social advantage. In educational settings, children arrive with different levels of familiarity with the language, communication styles, expectations, and forms of knowledge valued by institutions. Students whose family experiences resemble the school's preferred cultural norms may find it easier to communicate with teachers and meet implicit expectations. Others may be misunderstood because their speech, confidence, clothing, or family practices differ from institutional norms. Applied to school discipline, this perspective suggests that some behaviour labelled disrespectful or inappropriate may reflect differences in social experience rather than deliberate misconduct.

This does not imply that schools should abandon shared rules. Instead, they should distinguish between essential standards of respectful conduct and unspoken cultural preferences that may unfairly disadvantage certain students.

8.2 Foucault: Discipline, Surveillance, and Normalisation

Foucault (1977) examined how institutions regulate behaviour through surveillance, examination, classification, and normalisation. Schools use timetables, attendance registers,

examinations, seating arrangements, uniforms, rewards, and behavioural records to organise student life. These practices can support learning and coordination, but they can also establish narrow standards of acceptable behaviour. A child who consistently questions instructions may be recorded as troublesome, while a child who remains silent may be considered well behaved. Yet silence does not necessarily indicate understanding, and questioning does not necessarily indicate disrespect. Foucault's perspective encourages educators to examine how institutional routines define normality and whose behaviour is considered problematic. It also invites a distinction between discipline that develops self-regulation and discipline that merely produces outward conformity.

8.3 Critical Pedagogy and Inclusive Education

Critical approaches to education emphasise dialogue, participation, reflection, and the relationship between schooling and social power. From this perspective, students should be helped to understand why rules exist and how their actions affect others. They should also have appropriate opportunities to explain their experiences and question decisions respectfully. This approach does not eliminate teacher authority. Instead, it encourages teachers to exercise authority transparently and responsibly.

An inclusive classroom recognises that students differ in their needs, experiences, and opportunities. Discipline becomes more educationally meaningful when it supports participation and responsibility rather than reinforcing social hierarchy.

9. Consequences of Differential Disciplining

9.1 Psychological Consequences

Repeated humiliation, unfair punishment, and discriminatory labelling can undermine a student's sense of dignity and belonging. Students may develop anxiety about making mistakes, become reluctant to ask questions, or begin to view themselves as incapable. Some may respond by withdrawing from classroom activities, while others may become defensive or openly resistant.

The consequences are not identical for every child. They depend on the severity and frequency of the experience, the availability of supportive adults, peer relationships, and the child's previous experiences. Nevertheless, discipline that repeatedly communicates inferiority can weaken trust between students and teachers.

9.2 Academic Consequences

Fear-based discipline can interfere with the learning process. Students who are worried about ridicule or physical punishment may concentrate more on avoiding mistakes than on understanding concepts. **Kumar et al. (2022)** provide relevant evidence from India, finding an adverse relationship between corporal punishment and children's cognitive skills, alongside a favourable relationship between teacher praise and those skills. Their findings support the educational importance of examining not only whether a child is punished, but also how the child is supported and encouraged. Where students are repeatedly excluded from lessons, discouraged from participating, or treated as incapable, disciplinary practices may further reduce their opportunities to learn.

9.3 Attendance and School Engagement

A child who anticipates humiliation may become reluctant to attend school or may avoid particular teachers, subjects, or activities. This concern is especially important when a student already faces barriers such as transport difficulties, household responsibilities, disability, or financial insecurity. A negative school experience may compound existing pressures. **UNICEF India (n.d.)** identifies violence, discrimination, and poor educational quality as concerns affecting children's learning and participation. These issues demonstrate why a safe and inclusive environment is an essential part of meaningful access to education.

9.4 Social and Gender-Role Consequences

Differential discipline can reproduce social stereotypes. Girls may learn that silence and obedience are more valued than assertiveness. Boys may learn that aggression is acceptable but emotional vulnerability is not. Similarly, children from disadvantaged backgrounds may internalise the idea that they are less capable or less deserving of respect. These messages can influence students' future relationships, willingness to take leadership roles, and expectations of institutional authority. Schools should therefore examine the values communicated through everyday disciplinary decisions, not merely the immediate behaviour those decisions seek to correct.

9.5 Consequences for Teachers and Institutions

Unfair discipline can damage institutional trust. Students may become less willing to report bullying, explain difficulties, or cooperate with teachers. Teachers may also experience difficulties when disciplinary practices are inconsistent, when rules are unclear, or when administrative pressure encourages quick punitive responses. A fair and transparent system can benefit the entire school community by clarifying expectations, reducing conflict, and improving communication.

10. Legal and Policy Framework in India

10.1 The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009

Section 17 of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 prohibits physical punishment and mental harassment of children covered by the Act. Section 17(2) provides for disciplinary action under the applicable service rules against a person who contravenes the prohibition. The Act establishes an important principle: physical punishment and mental harassment are not legitimate methods of educating children. Schools should not interpret discipline as an unrestricted authority to inflict pain, threaten students, or subject them to humiliation. The prohibition also needs to be reflected in everyday school procedures, staff training, complaint mechanisms, and administrative accountability.

10.2 Constitutional Principles

The Constitution of India provides a broader framework for educational equality and child dignity.

Article 14 establishes equality before the law and equal protection of the laws. Article 15 prohibits specified forms of discrimination by the State. Article 21 protects life and personal liberty, while Article 21A provides for free and compulsory education for children aged six to fourteen years.

These provisions are relevant to the broader goal of an educational environment in which children can participate without discrimination or violence. Their precise legal application depends on the circumstances and applicable law.

10.3 National Commission for Protection of Child Rights

The National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) has issued guidance on eliminating corporal punishment in schools. Its materials emphasise children's rights, institutional responsibility, and the need to address physical punishment, mental harassment, and discrimination. The Commission's annual reports also discuss implementation of Section 17 of the RTE Act and awareness initiatives concerning school corporal punishment (**NCPCR, 2024**).

The existence of legislation and guidance is an important foundation, but effective implementation requires awareness among teachers, students, parents, school management committees, and education officials.

10.4 Policy and Implementation Challenges

A legal prohibition does not automatically remove harmful practices. Teachers may have inherited disciplinary traditions in which physical punishment is viewed as normal, while some parents may support harsh measures because they associate them with academic seriousness. Large classes, inadequate teacher preparation, limited counselling services, and weak reporting systems may further complicate implementation. Schools therefore need more than written prohibitions. They need practical alternatives, clear accountability, supportive leadership, and a culture in which students can report mistreatment safely.

11. Recommendations for Fair and Inclusive School Discipline

11.1 Establish Clear and Non-Discriminatory Rules

Schools should publish understandable rules concerning attendance, classroom conduct, homework, bullying, respectful communication, and the use of school property. The same core standards should apply to all students. Differences in consequences should be based on relevant factors such as the seriousness of the behaviour, age, safety considerations, and individual support needs—not on gender, caste, family income, or social influence.

11.2 Replace Corporal Punishment with Constructive Alternatives

Physical punishment and mental harassment should not be used as disciplinary tools. Appropriate alternatives include private conversations, reminders, restorative discussions, counselling, collaborative problem-solving, and reasonable opportunities to correct mistakes. For example, a student who repeatedly interrupts lessons can work with the teacher to identify triggers, practise appropriate ways of participating, and agree on clear behavioural expectations. The objective should be to improve conduct and protect learning rather than inflict suffering.

11.3 Develop Gender-Sensitive Teacher Training

Teacher education programmes and in-service training should address gender stereotypes, unconscious bias, respectful communication, classroom power relationships, and the management of conflict.

Teachers can be encouraged to ask themselves:

- Would I interpret this behaviour in the same way if the student were of another gender?
- Am I responding to the actual incident or to an assumption about the child's background?
- Is the consequence proportionate and educationally useful?
- Have I given the student a reasonable opportunity to explain?

Such reflection can make disciplinary decisions more transparent and defensible.

11.4 Address Socioeconomic Barriers Before Punishing Students

When students fail to meet requirements, schools should investigate possible barriers. A student who repeatedly lacks homework materials may need access to books or a different arrangement for completing work. A student with irregular attendance may need support concerning transport, family responsibilities, or health-related difficulties. Reasonable accommodation should not be confused with the absence of accountability. Students can still be expected to participate and make progress, but the school should ensure that its expectations are achievable and fair.

11.5 Use Restorative Practices

Restorative approaches focus on understanding harm, accepting responsibility, and repairing relationships. When an incident occurs, the teacher can ask the student what happened, who was affected, what needs to be repaired, and how similar situations can be prevented. These conversations should be age-appropriate and voluntary where necessary. They should not force a victim of bullying or violence into an unsafe confrontation with the person responsible. Restorative practices are most effective when supported by clear safeguarding procedures and consistent institutional leadership.

11.6 Strengthen Student Voice and Complaint Mechanisms

Students should know how to report unfair punishment, bullying, harassment, and discrimination. Schools can provide confidential complaint channels, designated safeguarding staff, accessible reporting procedures, and clear explanations of how complaints will be addressed. Students should not face retaliation for raising concerns in good faith. Where allegations involve serious harm, the school should follow applicable legal and child-protection requirements.

11.7 Monitor Disciplinary Patterns

School authorities should examine disciplinary records for possible inequalities.

Useful questions include:

- Which students receive repeated reprimands?
- Are similar incidents followed by similar consequences?
- Do disciplinary exclusions disproportionately affect a particular group?
- Are boys and girls treated differently for comparable behaviour?
- Are children from disadvantaged backgrounds offered opportunities to explain their circumstances?
- Are complaints investigated consistently?

Records should be collected and analysed responsibly, with attention to confidentiality, data protection, and the limitations of small samples. The purpose should be improvement, not the creation of new labels for students or teachers.

11.8 Engage Parents and Communities

Parents and community members can help schools understand the circumstances affecting student behaviour. Regular meetings should communicate the school's disciplinary principles and explain why violence and humiliation are inappropriate. Families should also be encouraged to share relevant information about learning difficulties, attendance barriers, or other circumstances that may require support. Community engagement must not become a means of blaming families for structural inequalities. Its purpose should be to develop shared responsibility for children's learning and safety.

11.9 Build an Inclusive School Climate

An inclusive climate depends on more than disciplinary policy. It requires respectful teacher-student relationships, accessible learning materials, fair participation in classroom activities, and protection from bullying and discrimination. Teachers should recognise different forms of student achievement, including effort, cooperation, improvement, creativity, and responsible conduct. Praise should be specific and genuine rather than based on gender stereotypes. For instance, boys and girls alike should be encouraged to demonstrate leadership, care for others, participate in sports, and express emotions appropriately.

11.10 Integrate Discipline into Teacher Education

Teacher preparation should include classroom management, child development, inclusive pedagogy, conflict resolution, and child-rights education. Prospective teachers should have opportunities to analyse classroom scenarios and practise responding to difficult behaviour without humiliation or violence. Teacher educators can also help students distinguish between maintaining authority and exercising power unfairly. A teacher's authority is strongest when students recognise that rules are reasonable, consistently applied, and intended to protect everyone's opportunity to learn.

12. Directions for Future Research

Further empirical research is needed to establish how differential disciplinary practices operate across India's diverse school settings. Future studies could compare government and private schools, rural and urban locations, primary and secondary grades, and different regional contexts. A mixed-methods design could combine anonymous student questionnaires, classroom observations, interviews with teachers and parents, and analyses of disciplinary records. Researchers should examine the frequency and type of punishment, the circumstances surrounding incidents, and the students' perceptions of fairness. Studies should distinguish between physical punishment, psychological aggression, exclusion, corrective feedback, and supportive interventions. They should also examine whether reported differences remain after accounting for age, behaviour severity, school resources, and other relevant variables. Gender and socioeconomic position should be analysed

together with caste, disability, language, and geographical disadvantage where ethically appropriate and methodologically feasible. Research must also protect children from retaliation, obtain appropriate consent and assent, preserve confidentiality, and provide safeguarding procedures when disclosures indicate a risk of harm.

Finally, intervention studies could evaluate whether teacher training, restorative practices, positive reinforcement, and transparent complaint systems reduce discriminatory treatment and improve classroom participation.

Conclusion

Differential disciplining in Indian schools is an important educational and social concern because discipline influences not only classroom order but also students' dignity, confidence, participation, and learning opportunities. Socioeconomic disadvantage may affect the resources available to children and the way teachers interpret their behaviour. Gender expectations may influence whether the same conduct is understood as leadership, aggression, confidence, or disobedience. These influences can intersect with caste, disability, language, and other forms of inequality. Existing research provides reasons for concern. Kumar et al. (2022) found that corporal punishment was associated with poorer cognitive outcomes and that its effects differed across caste groups. **UNESCO (2019)** also highlights the ways gender norms can shape disciplinary experiences. These findings reinforce the need to examine discipline as an educational practice embedded in social relationships. At the same time, it would be inaccurate to assume that every Indian school follows the same pattern or that every difference in disciplinary response constitutes discrimination. Fairness requires careful attention to context, behaviour, individual needs, and evidence. The central responsibility of schools is to maintain an environment where all students can learn safely and participate meaningfully. This requires clear rules, proportionate consequences, gender-sensitive teaching, attention to socioeconomic barriers, effective child-protection procedures, and regular monitoring of institutional practices.

Ultimately, successful discipline should help children understand responsibility, respect others, regulate their behaviour, and repair harm when it occurs. It should not make them fearful of their teachers or ashamed of their social identities. A school becomes genuinely inclusive when its authority is exercised with fairness and its disciplinary practices strengthen, rather than diminish, the dignity of every learner.

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