Doctoral Research Abstract

A STUDY OF PARENTAL PRACTICES OF DISCIPLINING CHILDREN IN THE MIDDLE CHILDHOOD STAGE

Rationale for the Study

The main objective of this research was to explore the Disciplining Practices of Parents of children in the middle childhood stage. The review of literature shows that middle childhood has several important physical, emotional and social developmental milestones for the child. It is also a critical stage in the child’s development; the transition from pre-school to full time schooling at age six and from middle childhood to pre-adolescence at age eleven. Since disciplining is one of the core activities of parents for their children, it was thought important to investigate the range of present disciplining practices of parents in a complex urban environment.

Objectives

To study:

1. Parents’ understanding of disciplining
2. Parent related and Child related factors that impact disciplining choices
3. Children’s perception of parental disciplining practices
5. Differences, if any, of disciplining practices of fathers and mothers and disciplining boys and girls.
6. Observations/experiences of school teachers about parents’ disciplining skills over the last one decade.

Methodology

This was a mixed method research using both quantitative and qualitative research methodology. Stratified random sampling method was used. Parents of 50 children (that
is, 100 parents from each school; total 200 parents) from two schools each; English and a Marathi medium formed the units of analyses of this research. There was equal representation of the parents of both girls and boys. Overall, two hundred and three parents were interviewed. In addition, twenty-four children, six boys and six girls from each school, and twelve teachers from both schools (total 24) who had more than ten years of experience were also interviewed. Three sets of interview schedules with both quantitative and qualitative components were used for all the respondents. Since most of the data was categorical the statistical significance among selected variables was determined using the Pearson’s chi-square test (level of significance 0.05) using statistical software SPSS Version-20. Answers to open-end questions were collated into emerging themes and then tabulated as uni-variate, bi-variate and multiple response frequency tables. Demographic data of the parents were also analysed using the Pearson’s chi-square and Fisher’s Exact Test (level of significance 0.05).

A pilot survey to gauge the necessity of the research and the pilot testing of the tools both in English and the Marathi translation were conducted analysed and changes incorporated in the tools.

Ethical Considerations

The purpose and the process of this study were clearly outlined, shared and permission gained from the concerned schools, parents and children. Avenues of redress of grievances put in place. All participation was completely voluntary.

Findings

The findings of the research are divided in two parts. The first explored the broad contextual forces; i) profile of parents, ii) parents understanding of disciplining and iii) the experiences of parents; their own experiences as children, their present interpersonal relationships and the immediate context of the disciplining practices. The second part explored a range of areas and topics of the actual disciplining practices of parents where the primary respondents were the parents themselves and supportive respondents were the children and teachers.

Parental responses were sought to understand; disciplining practices in daily life activities, in various situations and various ages within the middle age, frequencies of discipling, the impact of the present environment on both the child and the parent, grading themselves in their skills and the ease of discipling children, problems in discipling and the need of strengthening their disciplining practices. Children responded to; hypothetical situations and a creative art activity in the quantitative section regarding
disciplining practices they experienced. Teachers gave an overview of the ten and more years of experience of observing disciplining practices and interacting with parents and children.

Emerging findings highlighted that there were statistically significant differences in the profiles of the two sets of parents in most of the areas. This made a compelling case for some cross-sectional analysis. Secondly, eighty percent of the English medium children and sixty-eight percent of the Marathi medium children were perceived to be problematic to be disciplined by their parents.

Parents had identified three goals of disciplining namely; to help the child become culturally valued, develop good habits and behaviour and to be well adjusted to a global world. However, obedience was a focus that cut across most of the responses of the parents which would make it a bottle neck towards achieving the goals. Migration and the largely nuclear families of many children have weakened the connections with extended family. Parents were rarely consulting their support system, most children had no other caretakers other than their parents, Marathi medium parents had mostly either ad hoc or planned practices whereas the English medium parents had a mix of both and parents were mostly depending on their own past experiences in disciplining children. All these factors were more acute with the Marathi medium parents.

The practices show that overall English medium parents tend to be authoritative while the Marathi medium parents adopt a mix of the three practices; authoritarian, authoritative and permissive. More parents were overall strict and flexible, and the Marathi medium parents, especially the fathers were stricter and had more fixed practices. Practices differed with the situation and the age of the child and fathers were more likely to have a difference between their thoughts and their practices in a given situation. More than fifty percent of the Marathi medium and less than thirty percent of the English medium parents believe that there are differences in the practices of mothers and fathers as well as differences in the practices for girls and boys. The impact of the environment on the child was minimal so also the impact of the stressors of daily life on the parents. Less than forty percent of the parents made changes in the practices which they themselves had experienced though some of them mentioned practices they had experienced and stated as having a positive long term impact on them, which were clearly punitive and controlling. However, regarding the impact of stressors on themselves and their children, it was seen that parents had not reflected enough on these impacts on them, as later responses showed; they had shared manifestation of stress on them.

The responses from children show that the boys especially from the Marathi medium are experiencing more vacillation of practices whereas the girls are largely disci-
plined authoritatively. The English medium boys were most controlled and their parents were less forgiving when expectations were not met. Boys are experiencing more curative and girls more preventive practices.

Teachers have given an indication that the numbers of parents using negative and clearly abusive practices were not small. They say; while increased education of the Marathi medium parents over the last decade has helped the child as the parents are more proactive and open, the same has not helped the English medium child as the parents have little time for their children due to increased activities outside the home for both and increased expectations. Children overall were becoming self-centred, and competitive and friendships were transient. They were being more closely monitored and controlled. They were friendlier with their teachers and parents but also more ‘disrespectful’.

The English medium parents do not appear to be able to adequately translate their understanding regarding modern day disciplining into practice, whereas with the Marathi medium parents, concurring or sequentially following mix of practices and their tentativeness due to being much younger, lesser educated, lower incomes and having to bring up more children with much lower exposure to the urban and global world, may not necessarily be conducive to the correct combination, leading to problems in discipling for both sets of parents. Responses show some parents also seem to be more stressed then they are aware of or admit. Very few parents have mentioned their own handling and skills in disciplining their children as being problematic; hence it is obvious that they have not made the connection between parenting attitudes and practices and difficulties encountered in discipling. Many of the findings from teachers and children must be also contributing to their problems in discipling children. Since children belong to a different age cohort than their parents, they are exposed to a global technological world where cultural boundaries are blurred; therefore their information and understanding are different from their parents at the same age, leadings to problems in discipling children.

**Recommendations**

- Workshops for parents on all aspects; developmental milestones, child psychology, various practices and skills in different situations etc. They have to realise that the present of the child matters as much as the future and the child should be always at the centre of their decisions.

- Further research: of disciplining practices of parents for each of the strata’s of society and geographical areas, research in correlation between practices and outcomes and further probing into the problems in discipling children.
Limitations

- This research throws light on general perspectives and an overview of the field of disciplining of children in the middle childhood stage. However, in actuality, the practices would change depending on situations and at different points of time. The findings may not also hold good for different age groups of children and strata’s of society.

- Working from within formal structures has the disadvantage of some reservation in responses from the respondents.