

Arresting Violence and Indiscipline

Phaedra Pierre

The disturbing trend of increasing indiscipline and violence in our school system manifests itself in various ways. The newspaper headlines on any given day provide compelling evidence that the adult stakeholders in the system are becoming increasingly hostile towards each other. The latest example is the brutal slaying of Evelyn James in Tobago. This tragic incident represents the ultimate outcome of a scenario in which we see repeated incidents of parents threatening teachers on the school compound and in the community.

Another type of violence is student-student aggression, which has existed from time immemorial. The literature is replete with stories of school bullies, but the difference now is that these acts of violence are becoming more deadly, with students using bottles, knives, and even guns to extort a mere pittance from their more docile colleagues. From informal reports, the phenomenon of bullying is very common, especially on large school compounds where teachers cannot, or will not, patrol certain areas to ensure that students are where they are supposed to be, and doing what they are supposed to be doing. Security officers are posted at the front gate and do not tour the school compound to ensure that the legal entrants are not transgressing. In too many cases, the bullies are known to students and teachers, but they are not apprehended because of lack of evidence, fear of reprisal, or powerlessness.

A more disturbing aspect of the current situation is the emergence of student-teacher violence. Gone are the days when Miss or Sir was revered and valued throughout the community. Teachers can no longer assume that they will be accorded high esteem and respect as a matter of course. Numerous news reports provide vivid illustrations of how teachers are increasingly coming under threat from students. In response, many teachers approach the school and classroom with trepidation instead of eager anticipation.

Since schools are a microcosm of the wider society, we should not be surprised at the escalation in the number of young criminals and youthful offenders. However, trying to assign blame serves no useful purpose.

We are faced with many challenges in bringing up our children. Technology and the media have changed the entire experience of entertainment. No longer do the “bad guys” in cartoons, movies, and video games look like animals or non-humans. Instead, they are very human in form and very inhumane in action. At the community level, we have to examine the kinds of examples we are setting for our young people. Do we as adults show proper respect for authority? Do we do our best to act within the parameters of the law? Do we actually wait for the green light and slow down on amber? Are we courteous with others and with our children? Do we speak respectfully to others even when we disagree with their opinion? Do we exhibit patience with each other and know when to let things pass instead of inviting a fight on every issue? Our young people are modelling their behaviours and setting their standards by the examples we set, and we have to be careful to set them on the right path so that their behaviours do not come back to haunt and terrorise us.

Quite a lot has been said about the deterioration in family standards. With our changing and hectic lifestyles, our children are suffering from neglect and lack of guidance. Although many of us try our best to provide the physical resources—clothes, books, food, and shelter—for our young ones, many youth are crying out for the emotional resources to help them to mature into

decent and wholesome adults. We adults have to ensure that our meetings, appointments, and fetes do not exclude us from our children's lives. Time spent together, even just watching TV or playing a game, is time well spent. Families need to take full advantage of family traditions and occasions for celebration or else we will meet for trials and wakes.

Sadly, in some cases, the school system is not helping the situation. In fact, there are instances where the government is sending mixed signals. How can the Ministry of Education be proposing a system of continuous assessment and attainment of certain competencies for promotion at one level, and automatic promotion/full placement into secondary school at another level? The experts know that some students now in Standard Five are not ready for secondary education. To exacerbate the problem, in many cases the necessary support systems have not been put in place to cater to the real needs of these special students when they get into the secondary schools.

Our school system therefore has its part to play in addressing the crisis. We need a total reorientation towards appropriate interpersonal behaviours and moral values. This will not happen automatically and magically. It has to be systematically introduced to all of our children, from the pre-school level all the way up to the tertiary level. A comprehensive programme of peace studies, communication studies, values clarification, anger management, conflict resolution, and decision-making strategies has to be introduced in each school as a requirement; not as the principal sees fit and not by the whim of the board (denominational or other) governing the school. A way of monitoring the course and evaluating the results has to be incorporated into the formulation of the curriculum or else it will just be another exercise in futility. In addition, although time is of the essence and immediate action is necessary, this should not be taken as a call to institute some corrective undertaking in September 2003. Such a programme has to be well thought out, prepared, pilot tested, and resourced for it to be effective. It must not be used as a tool of political expediency, as so many recent school reforms have been.

This is one part that the school can play, but it should not be seen as a panacea for all of society's ills. In fact, each component of our community—politicians, health personnel, the church, the business community, local government, and many more—need to “put ah hand” to ensure the rescue of Ella Andall's “Missing Generation.”

School of Education, UWI, St. Augustine