

School Violence

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The last few months have been particularly tragic for all stakeholders in the education system, given the spate of violent incidents that have been reported to the police and highlighted in the media. Some of the worrying media headings include: “Student stabs student” and “Fight breaks out in school in south.”

While school violence may not have been a critical problem in Trinidad and Tobago a decade or so ago, it has assumed a high profile in many of our schools today. It wears many faces and ranges from well-planned gang activity, through bullying and intimidation, to theft and verbal slurs. It incorporates the use of knives, cutlasses, ice picks, and even guns. It is perpetrated against teachers, students, administrators, and even security personnel. The question of how to maintain school order has taken up and continues to take up a lot of time, energy, and effort at the administrative levels of the education hierarchy. Experts in the field of psychology and sociology, as well as experienced educators, are consulted regularly in attempts to address this issue in our schools. The general opinion that emerges from all consultations is that there is no one-size-fits-all solution to the problem/s. In fact, schools are inherently different based on geographical location, student intake population (both in number and range of academic abilities), and whether a school is a government school or government-assisted. Therefore, programmes and approaches that might work in one school may not work well in another.

The literature on school violence identifies several methods that could be implemented in attempting to maintain order in schools, including those related to school management, those related to environmental changes, and those related to educational and curriculum approaches. In the local context, all of these have been tried to some extent in many schools, but their effectiveness is often not apparent.

In terms of school management, all schools have rules by which students are expected to abide, and non-compliance with these rules attracts a specified punishment. Most schools have their rules printed in large font in a prominent place in the school compound or in the classrooms, and it is expected that teachers and principals would refer to these on a regular basis so that students understand that it is not a choice, but a necessity to comply. This, however, is usually not the case. “No chewing gum,” for example, might seem like a trivial, perhaps useless, rule, but the principle that underlines this apparently simple rule is the same as that for the rules relating to more serious offences. Adherence to these rules, whether relating to simple or serious offences, is necessary for the maintenance and upkeep of the schools and to ensure that order is maintained, whether in the classroom, the corridor, or the playground. The problem with enforcement is that either teachers

[and principals] are not sufficiently alert at all times or that they are lenient on occasions. While chewing gum might be a simple example, the principle is the same for using abusive language or wearing jewellery. The bottom line is that if a single student “gets away” on a single count, that may provide sufficient leeway for other students “to take a chance” on other counts.

With regard to environmental changes, which include measures like introducing security guards, building high walls around the school, or installing surveillance cameras, the effectiveness of these is limited to the extent that students are able to devise ways and means to outwit them. High walls have not yet stopped students from leaving school whenever they feel like it, nor have they prevented unscrupulous elements from infiltrating our schools. School security still leaves much to be desired.

Educational and curriculum-based measures, such as conflict resolution and respect for person, peers, and property, have the potential to be successful, but there must be continuity and follow-through in classes, schools, and even extra-curricular activities. In her book entitled *Hearts and Minds: A Public School Miracle*, Trinidad-born educator and author, Sandra Dean, showed that cultivating respect in the minds of our students is a powerful and effective way to get students to develop compassion and concern for their fellow students thereby diminishing the likelihood of violence among them. Ms. Dean and other experts have worked with the Student Support Services Division of the Ministry of Education, the arm of the Ministry concerned with dealing with the problem of violence and indiscipline in schools, among other problems confronting the educational sector. The Division’s strategic goals include the provision of support, through counselling and specialized intervention strategies, for at-risk students and the provision of social work services for students with psycho-social and behavioural difficulties.

Whatever the approach adopted, it cannot be done haphazardly or only for a short time. Measures to control school violence have to be as essential a part of schooling as the curriculum, examinations, and certification. Isolating the approach that is most suitable in a particular school may take some time, and will require trial and implementation of several approaches in order to determine what works best in that school environment. Much emphasis is now being placed on this aspect of schooling because it is difficult, if not impossible, to improve the quality of education without addressing school violence. Regardless of how good the teachers or the curriculum are, violence makes it difficult for students to learn.

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