

The ABC of Violence

Susan Herbert

During the last few weeks, the media have continued to highlight the issue of violence in schools. In separate unrelated stories, we have also been informed about the death of children at the hands of a parent(s)/caregivers; of parents who selected unprintable names for their children and who, like so many others, were raising them in very abusive and squalid environments; and of the experiences of some children at the hands of caregivers in institutions. These reports seem to have become quite commonplace, and we are probably no longer surprised at the kinds of experiences that some children have before they enter the school environment.

But what is the fate of the children who manage to survive such conditions and who then enter the school environment? The recent literature seems to suggest that these students are more likely to be at risk for subsequent psychological, behavioural, and physical problems, which include aggression, violence, substance abuse, and depression. These symptoms are obviously signals of some underlying problem—a cry for help. Without degrees in psychology or sociology, the average citizen could write the following script for the lives of many of these children—failure at school, poverty, and a continuation of the cycle of violence.

Scientific research seems to point to the same conclusions. Whitfield, Anda, Dube, and Felitti investigated factors that contributed to the cycle of violence. In a study conducted in the USA, they explored the relationship of childhood physical or sexual abuse, or growing up with a battered mother, to the risk of being a victim of intimate partner violence (IPV) for females, or a perpetrator of IPV for males. It was found that each of these violent experiences increased the risk of victimisation or perpetration of IPV approximately twofold. Among persons who had all three forms of violent experiences, the risk was increased to nearly fourfold.

These predictions are not in any way meant to suggest the kind of cause-effect relationship that is usually made when natural scientists develop laws for the behaviour of inanimate objects. Even when such laws are made, many persons forget that most scientists describe the conditions under which the cause-effect relationships hold, and that they acknowledge the conditions under which some of these laws do not hold. The predictions made with regard to the children who are raised under the conditions of extreme abuse and violence are meant to suggest that the effects described above are more likely to occur than if the child experienced a non-violent, non-abusive home environment.

However, there are persons who interpret any statement of relationship as a cause-effect relationship in the scientific sense, and then they provide examples to illustrate how the challenges have been overcome. These examples are then used as evidence to disprove the misinterpreted cause-effect relationship, without any reference to other confounding variables that could have affected the outcome. They often do not mention, for example, that there were interventions by significant persons, which were successful.

The following is suggested as an ABC of violence when there have been either no interventions (in the form of programmes or strategies to help the youth to deal with and to manage their interpersonal relationships) or when the interventions were unsuccessful. Children who are violent are children who have been:

A	abused, abandoned	P	punished incessantly
B	beaten, bitten, burnt	Q	quibbled at
C	cuffed, cursed	R	restrained from questioning, repressed
D	denied simple privileges/justice	S	sexually abused
E	exploited	T	tied up, threatened, taken advantage of, teased continuously
F	forgotten	U	unloved
G	gang-raped	V	violated
H	hated	W	without a caring environment
I	ignored	X	X'ed (everything they do is wrong)
J	joshed (ridiculed)	Y	yielding to negative peer pressure
K	kicked	Z	zilched.
L	locked away		
M	manhandled		
N	neglected		
O	overpowered		

School authorities may think that the children who experience such extreme forms of abuse are in the minority (as well they might be) and, as such, may decide that the numbers do not warrant any changes in the culture/activities/ways of behaving in the school. They may reason that it is this minority who should change. On the other hand, we might also want to admit that while these examples are somewhat extreme, there is a continuum of behaviours between parent and child, and child and teacher that might constitute violent interactions at home and at school, and so more children might be at risk for antisocial behaviours than would ever be reported. But even without the unreported cases, it has become apparent that a minority of children can disrupt an entire school system.

What then should be the response of educators? Many proclaim that it takes a village to raise a child, and the proponents believe that this statement conveys a positive approach to child rearing. But perhaps with modernisation and the transfer of the factory model of production to all aspects of life, we have become very compartmentalised, and somewhat impersonal in our approach to everyday experiences. We refer to inputs and outputs, to teachers as being responsible for academics, to the churches as responsible for religion, to the family as responsible for teaching values that enable success at schools, and see these all operating independently of each other.

Perhaps, if we are to operationalise the belief that it takes a village to raise a child, then the school system may have to become part of the village that teaches the child some of the skills required to meet the challenges of life, including the challenges of experiences

that may seem to be far outside the realm of academics, examinations, and certification. We may agree that there is need for a more holistic and humanistic approach to education in schools. Such an approach would include the adoption of practices that allow us to relate to students as persons; the inclusion of programmes that address conflict resolution, anger management, health, and family life issues; increased numbers of social workers and guidance counsellors in schools; teacher training programmes that can help teachers to transform their practice so that there is as much emphasis on the child as on the subject (chemistry, physics, literature, maths); support programmes for parents; and media campaigns on children's rights.

It seems that we waste our energies when we try to point fingers and assign blame to one group or the other. If our children are indeed asking for help and guidance, the only question is "how should we respond?"

School of Education, UWI, St. Augustine