

School Discipline

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Within recent times, reports in the print and electronic media have highlighted astonishing incidents of violence or assault against teachers in our schools. I suggest that such behaviour reflects symptoms of profound turbulence in our society.

Some educators and activists argue that we now live in an extremely liberal age, which is characterised and guided by a type of pragmatism that allows individuals to do almost anything with impunity. This trend is seen on our roads, in public places, in church, and yes!, even in Parliament. Others tell us that it is difficult for organisations or institutions to escape the values, norms, and mores of the wider society. We should not be surprised to find behaviour among young people that reflects what is taking place among adults in society.

We are without doubt victims of cultural imperialism, as seen in the speech, mode of dress, forms of entertainment, and general lifestyles of our youth. This supports my view that individuals are the products of their experiences. Many of our older citizens display conservative behaviour because this is what they experienced at home, from the books they read, from the news about local and international events, and from the movies and popular songs of the time. On the other hand, our youths today are increasingly bombarded by indiscipline, disorder, mayhem, terrorism, and man's inhumanity to man. How then can they be different from what now obtains? Where are their role models—both national and international?

In education, we talk about the hidden curriculum, which teaches students in a manner that is more inadvertent than deliberate. Through their behaviour, attitudes, and mannerisms, administrators and teachers help to teach students behaviour that they would never deliberately teach.

As I see it, our schools are too ineffectively organised. In our bid to strive for academic excellence, too much attention is directed at filling the minds of our children with knowledge and information. On the other hand, little energy is discharged in attempting to cultivate caring propensities towards others, a deep understanding of the nature and dynamics of democracy, a healthy work ethic, and a deep sense of patriotism. Indeed, our school leaders do not appear to know how to cope with the new imperatives of school governance and how to struggle successfully with the negative impact of the media, the arts, and the bad examples so generously displayed by the forces of evil in the world today. Some of our teachers never had socialising experiences different from their students. So the syndrome continues with no other social legacy to pass on.

What can we as a nation do to win back our society? Whatever we do, we must accept that we now live in a world that has been made wide open by the Internet, globalisation, and travel. As a result, any strategy we propose is subject to constraints and limitations. Like crime in society, we cannot completely eliminate indiscipline and violence in our schools. However, we can reduce or contain these destabilizing influences.

For example, we can as a nation demand high-performing schools from our education system. High-performance schools tend to be orderly places, characterised by high standards, high expectations, and a caring environment. They must be places where misbehaviour is dealt with quickly, fairly, openly, and without prejudice.

Research has shown that this cannot be done if administrators and teachers fail to ensure a school climate characterised by: 1) clear, firm, and high teacher and administrator expectations; 2) consistent rules, with direct consequences for breaking them; 3) a decided and well-implemented emphasis on the self-esteem of all students; and 4) public and private acknowledgement and rewarding of positive behaviour by students.

Apart from these characteristics, writers on school discipline agree that administrators and teachers must believe that schooling and learning occur in groups operating in a caring, inspiring, and peaceful environment. Administrators and teachers must also believe that an orderly environment can be best achieved through the promotion of simple rules and standard operating procedures, policies, and strategies that promote self-regulation of behaviour, rather than policies and strategies that enforce compliance with elaborate control mechanisms and which overuse punishment.

Finally, leaders in our schools must accept that school discipline is enhanced when teachers teach for understanding and behave in an orderly and exemplary way, with emphasis on professional ethics and standards of dress that are more inspiring than alluring. Indeed, managing school discipline may be viewed as attempting to address the turbulence in society.

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