The Dark Side of Zero Tolerance

by Arthur Joseph
School of Education, UWI, St. Augustine

In recent times, many of our secondary schools, particularly state schools, have been plagued by a high incidence of student indiscipline and student violence. In response, many schools have attempted to implement various disciplinary measures to curb or entirely eliminate deviant behaviour. However, there has been little success. Problems of student indiscipline originate in the society, therefore an effective response requires a systemic approach rather than the piecemeal approach reflected in policies of suspension and expulsion from school.

Successive political administrations, as well as the teachers' union, TTUTA, have been advocating an approach to student indiscipline referred to as "zero tolerance." Without fully understanding the origin, significance, and possible consequences of this approach, the entire national community is being asked to legitimise this strategy. However, one needs to reflect on its origin and the results generated by this strategy in dealing with indiscipline generally.

"Zero tolerance"—referring to policies that punish all offenses severely, no matter how minor— was an invention of the US government in support of state and federal drug enforcement policies in the 1980s. From the outset, the harsh punishment meted out under this strategy provoked considerable controversy, and by 1990 the US Customs Service had very quietly discontinued its zero tolerance programme.

Ironically, at the same time, public schools in the US began to embrace the concept. By 1993 zero tolerance policies were being adopted by school boards across the US to deal with drugs, weapons, and other offences such as school disruptions. Apparently without conducting adequate research on the effects of zero tolerance on schools in other countries, politicians, officials from the Ministry of Education, and TTUTA have been attempting to institute similar policies.

Over the last two decades, the growing incidence of school violence has left educators shaken and nervous about the potential for violence in their own schools. It might therefore be hard to convince some that they are overreacting, especially since a walk through the corridors of some of our new sector secondary schools would appear to support the belief that school behaviour is worsening. However, we need to make a realistic assessment of the extent of violence in the nation's schools.

The hard evidence seems to contradict our gut feelings. From my long involvement in the educational system at all levels, and also from my interactions with school principals on this subject, it appears that the incidence of serious misdemeanours in our nation's schools is statistically insignificant compared to the overall set of behaviours that can be deemed inappropriate.

When I asked principals and teachers of schools I visited over the last five years to list what they considered serious or moderate problems in their schools, they most frequently cited problems

such as tardiness (approx. 40%), absenteeism (approx. 25%), and physical conflicts between students (approx. 21%). The more serious critical incidents of misdemeanor were defined as drug use (approx. 9%), gangs (approx. 2%), possession of weapons (approx. 2%), and physical abuse of teachers (approx. 1%).

It seems almost inconceivable that there are so few incidents of truly dangerous behaviours and that the situation is not necessarily getting worse. Yet the fear of random violence is clearly the motivation for the proposed adoption of zero tolerance approaches to school discipline.

Studies conducted in the US have indicated that zero tolerance policies have not worked as well as anticipated. A survey of principals, after many years of implementation, found that schools which use zero tolerance policies are still less safe than those without such policies. There has been virtually no data to suggest that these policies reduce school violence. On the contrary, some data suggest that certain strategies such as strip searches and metal detectors may create emotional harm or encourage students to drop out of school.

The data appear to suggest that the long-term effects of zero tolerance may multiply when one looks more closely at its central component—school exclusion. Indeed, the relationship between suspension and dropping out may not be accidental. In ethnographic studies, school disciplinarians report that suspension is sometimes used as a tool to "push out" particular students—to encourage "troublemakers" or those perceived as unlikely to succeed in schools to leave.

Recent studies in developmental psychology explore the relationship between suspension and dropping out. It is argued that during the primary school years, students who are at risk for developing conduct disorders exhibit disruptive behaviours, below average achievement, and poor social skills. Together, these deficits cause them to become increasingly alienated from teachers and peers. As they proceed to secondary schools, these youngsters become less interested in school and seek the company of other antisocial peers, perhaps even gangs. At the same time their families often fail to monitor their whereabouts, allowing more unsupervised time on the streets. In such a context, it seems unlikely that suspension will positively influence the behaviours of the student being suspended. Rather, suspension may simply exacerbate delinquency by giving a troubled youth with little parental supervision a few more extra days to "lime."

Instituting zero tolerance policies without providing alternative programmes for students who are suspended is a recipe for social chaos. Without such programmes or social services, schools may simply be dumping problem students on the streets, only to find them causing increased violence and disruption in the community later. Teachers, principals, politicians, and other stakeholders may therefore wish to identify alternative strategies.

I believe that we need to confront the fact that there are children whose families set no limits for them and that these children soon become out of control and uncontrollable. We also need to realise that schools will degenerate into chaos if aggressive, violent, and disruptive behaviours are tolerated. However, the indiscriminate use of force without regard for its effects must be seen for what it is—the hallmark of authoritarianism, which is incompatible with the functioning of a

democracy. Should we rely primarily on zero tolerance strategies to preserve the safety of our schools, we will be accepting a model of schooling that teaches students that preservation of order demands the suspension of individual rights and liberties.

Seriousness of purpose in seeking to avert the tragedy of school violence does not necessarily demand rigid adherence to harsh and extreme measures. There are alternatives to politically facile, get-tough strategies; alternatives that rely on a comprehensive programme of prevention and planning. The following approaches have been suggested for dealing with indiscipline in schools:

1) establishment of programmes of conflict resolution and school-wide behaviour management to facilitate the establishment of a peaceful climate; 2) screening and early identification of troubled young people, which can be critical in preventing the eruption of violence; and 3) establishment of safety or behaviour support teams made up of regular and special education teachers, persons from related services, administrators, and parents to ensure consistent and individualised response to disruptive behaviours.

There are those who would prefer quick-fix approaches such as zero tolerance to the complex and careful planning that such programmes demand. However, zero tolerance strategies may turn our schools into supplemental law enforcement agencies, while long-term comprehensive planning and prevention could build safe and responsive schools over time.