

Another Look at Indiscipline in our School System

Raymond S. Hackett

Indiscipline in our education system has been constantly discussed over the past three decades. Yet, to date, nothing substantial seems to have been done to address it. All attempts so far seem to have been superficial and with quick fixes in mind.

A number of factors may be responsible for this alleged turbulence in our schools. These include our culture, the orientation to student control in our schools, the personalities and lack of expertise of some of our administrators and teachers, and the personal problems of some of our students. This article, however, focuses more on our culture and the approaches of our schools to student control.

Our Culture

William Demas, one of our truly great intellectuals, frequently lamented that cultural imperialism was impacting too negatively on Caribbean societies. Today, his concerns are harshly reflected in the lifestyles of our underworld, in our youth, and clearly in the culture of our schools. Indeed, the “rude boy” image is now openly admired and promoted in song and the movies. Perhaps what is even worse is our failure to create a *counter-culture* for our youth. Since independence, what have we as a society deliberately defined for our youth to model? What aspect of our history and achievements, what loyalties and commitment, what pride and esteem have we as a nation highlighted? Have we really created a philosophy of purposefulness and a culture of order for future generations?

Student Control in Schools

Sociologists argue that no institution in society can rise above the wider society. Schools are important components of the institution of education. Therefore, how schools ensure discipline must be important to order in society.

Two broad approaches to order and discipline exist in the literature on student control: the custodial and the democratic humanistic. Given our colonial history, we have always embraced the custodial. Perhaps, if we strive to establish systems of democratic humanistic control in our schools, there may be fewer incidents of indiscipline. Indeed, if administrators, teachers, and students see the school as a sanctuary of respect, warmth, and caring, then it may be easier to convince students that indiscipline is not the way to go.

Many researchers argue that indiscipline is frequently an indication that all is not well with the quality of teacher-student and student-student interaction or relationships in schools. For them, genuine attempts at establishing democratic humanistic systems of student control can help a great deal.

Of course, much training and reflection among our teachers and administrators will be needed. Administrators, deans, and teachers will have to reconceptualise their perspective on discipline and acceptable student behaviour. Also, they will have to reconfigure the network of relationships in schools.

Simply establishing appropriate systems of student control will not ensure order and harmony in our schools. We must also provide structures and support systems. Structures can be reflected by effective and democratic student councils, and a variety of youth groups for cultural and sporting activities to help promote healthy interaction among students in and among schools. Also, it is necessary to have in place professional and humane services to meet the needs of those students who have personal and interpersonal problems.

Misguided Perspectives

It is to be noted that there is no single way to solve the problem of indiscipline in schools. It must be recognised that the problem is universal and a product of the societies in which it emerges. There is also no overnight solution. What can be done, however, is to address this problem now so that it can become manageable in the future.

There are many in our society who believe that the answer is to bring in foreign experts to solve the cancer of indiscipline in schools. As an independent nation, it is more than time enough for us to understand that national problems must be tackled by nationals. We have to spend much time and exert great effort and expertise on data gathering and analysis in order to ensure a safe, productive, and caring society. We also need to avoid politicisation of the issue.

Whatever we do with respect to indiscipline in our schools, we must recognise and accept that the Ministry of Education cannot solve it alone; that schools by themselves are powerless; that parents today no longer have absolute control over their children. Clearly, the solution lies in the combined effort of all stakeholders in education. The Ministry, however, can play an important role in mobilising and bringing stakeholders together.

Recommendations

Schools must be safe and secure places if meaningful learning is to take place in them. The reality in Trinidad and Tobago suggests that much has to be done with respect to providing safety and security in our schools. Perhaps one of the worst manifestations of improper safety and security is indiscipline, which can lead to violence and an inability on the part of schools to attain effectiveness.

The following recommendations are offered to help address indiscipline in our schools:

- As a matter of urgency, the Ministry of Education should take steps to professionalise all teachers and administrators. Of course, this will take time. The ultimate goal should be that the teaching sector must be characterised by professionals and not by

people employed as educators. In fact, no untrained teacher or administrator should be allowed to operate in our schools. At the same time, certification *per se* should not be the emphasis.

- The Ministry, the media, the church, the arts, PTAs, the corporate sector, and teachers' organizations must all find a way to come together to ensure quality education in our society.
- More attention should be paid to the findings of research conducted by students and staff of the School of Education, UWI, St. Augustine.
- The Ministry of Education should continue to refine its policies for handling recalcitrant and deviant students in schools.

School of Education, UWI, St. Augustine