

Violence and Indiscipline in Schools
The Experience of Schools in Trinidad & Tobago
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Introduction

Violence and Indiscipline had always been a very minor part of school life. This is no longer so. Incidences have become more aggressive and rampant. In 1988, Trinidad & Tobago held a National Consultation on Violence and Indiscipline in Schools in an attempt to treat with the crisis. In April 2008, the Minister of Education convened the 2008 Consultation on Violence and Indiscipline in Schools when a secondary school student was stabbed to death by one of his colleagues in school during class time.

Sanctions

In keeping with international policy and for obvious human rights reasons, corporal punishment has been outlawed. This is included in the Children's Act. Previously, corporal punishment was the medium to treat with misbehaviour and not an 'incentive' to learn. Corporal punishment can be viewed as violence perpetrated by adults who are supposed to care. With the proposed review of the Education Act, the appropriate adjustments would be made.

Many years ago, the principal was the authorized agent in the school to administer discipline via corporal punishment with precise guidelines. Now the principal is the one to effect the suspension process. Circular Memorandum No.4 Student Discipline In and Out of School dated January 14, 1997 describes measures to be taken. The introduction is quite clear as to the expectations on the Ministry of Education:

‘The Ministry of Education hereby draws the attention of Principals in their capacity as front line managers, to the need for them to exercise their authority firmly, fairly and swiftly in matters relating to discipline.’

Four offences were described as ‘reprehensive’ and needed to attract severe sanctions:

1. Possession of illicit drugs, regardless of the quantity
2. Possession of arms and/or ammunition
3. Extreme violence to anyone

4. Any form of assault on any member of staff of any school.

Section 44 of the Education Act describes the suspension process. It is to be noted that the period of suspension is up to one week with opportunity to request extension based on reports and supporting documents.

What happens to students on suspension? They do not attend school. They go home, presumably. It is presumed that there is some parental or adult supervision but there are no checks, nor is any form of constructive or remedial activity assigned.

And what are the sanctions for non-‘reprehensive’ misdemeanors? Schools have had to devise humane and psychologically appropriate measures to suit the nature and the regularity of the offence. This is the philosophy behind the ‘Discipline Matrix’ which all schools are expected to have as part of their operations.

Most cases of suspension were for the following reasons:

- Possession of marijuana
- Assault with/without a weapon; Fighting
- Robbery
- Extortion
- Breaking classes
- Disrespect to Authority; Threats of attacks on teachers
- Destruction of School Property
- Gambling
- Sexual Misconduct; verbal Sexual Harassment of female teachers

Ministry of Education Initiatives

There have been several initiatives to address the issue of violence and indiscipline in schools since the National Consultation in 1988.

1. Deans and Heads of Departments

The first arising out of the Symposium was the establishment of a pilot project of Deans and Heads of Departments. This was not a post or position but rather, carried an allowance. The teaching load was adjusted so that there was time for consultations and other interventions required.

This has taken a new turn: The Deans and HoDs system is now a promotional post in all schools. Deans are charged with the pastoral care of students, while the Heads of Department focus on delivery of the curriculum. Unfortunately, schools are expected to make the necessary arrangements timewise to allow the Deans and HoDs to conduct their duties.

The teaching load is 50% - 66 2/3% of the timetable and there is no additional staff to pick up the shortfall with teaching.

2. Student Councils

All schools, primary and secondary, were mandated to have a student council where students had a voice in school management in the belief that students, being the clients, should be part of the management process.

3. Deshifting and Conversion

This system of two 'schools' operating at two different times in the same day caused the problem of lack of supervision of thousands of young people. The twenty-five junior secondary schools operating on a shift system were to be deshifted and converted from three-year to five- and seven-year schools, thereby giving students the assurance that they were receiving the same opportunities as students of other schools. This deshifting and the conversion of the senior comprehensive schools to five and seven-year schools was to be completed by September 2008. Several inadequacies have surfaced: improper physical infrastructure (practical workshop and laboratory areas, washroom facilities for students and staff), Staff - recruitment and training for CXC CSEC and CAPE programmes of study, introduction of new curriculum, to name a few.

4. School Security

a. In order to stem indiscipline in schools, the Ministry of Education partnered with the Ministry of National Security and created the position of School Safety Officer. These persons were expected to assist the Principal with maintaining discipline within the school via interventions – counseling, investigating, lecturing etc. The persons recruited had come from the police or military services and too often their sense of rigidity may have posed concerns in their interactions with students. They tend to bypass school administration to refer matters to the Police.

b. Other projects for 'repeat offenders' are Military Led Academic Training (MILAT) and Military Led Youth Programme of Apprenticeship and Reorientation Training Programme (MYPART) – versions of 'boot camp'. TTUTA has no reports available of the feasibility of these.

c. Some schools now have high-security fences built at great cost to the taxpayer.

Unfortunately, these fences tend to bring to mind the image of prisons rather than schools.

d. The Ministry has contracted an organization (National Maintenance Training and Security Ltd) to provide Security Officers to schools. On any given day, the contracted number of officers at any school is not present. This is critical for schools in high-risk areas. These officers are not armed since they are in schools and therefore may expose students to danger. The Ministry is also exploring the viability of 'Internet Protocol Security Systems' where school compounds would be monitored from an external site.

5. Curriculum Enhancement

The Teacher Professional Development Unit has been set up to enhance teacher development. Several programmes were run in July and August 2008 and this is expected to continue. In-service training is ongoing. However, when teachers are attending training programmes/workshops/seminars, there is no one to teach the students. Another system recently set up is the Substitute Teacher programme which has many hiccups.

The core curriculum has been expanded to include such areas as Dance and Drama and Technology Education. Unfortunately there is a lack of teachers for these and other areas such as Music, Physical Education, Visual Arts and schools find themselves with unsupervised classes. Remedial Teachers have been hired to engage in programmes that are expected to help reduce the illiteracy rate. However, these are retired teachers who have no qualifications in this area.

6. Stakeholder Liaisons

The Ministry had set up links with other ministries – Health, Social and Community Development, Sports to develop programmes that would assist schools in the holistic development of students. Parents complain that their children are being distracted and are not being taught.

The Trinidad & Tobago National Council of Parent Teachers Association Inc has been given the mandate to 'set up shop' in all schools. The focus is on encouraging parents to be more responsible, working with the school towards the development of the child. The Association has appointed itself watchdog of teacher 'absenteeism', blaming teachers for every ill in the school society.

The Ministry of Education has engaged the services of 'Families in Action', a non-governmental organization, to deliver a training programme – Peer Mediation-to a cadre of students in all schools. This programme covers a variety of topics such as Conflict Resolution, Anger

Management, and Leadership. Students are empowered to treat with their peers where they perceive there may be concerns or when their peers seek them out for advice.

7. Support Systems

I. Local School Boards

These have been set up in all schools to assist in the administration of schools in every area except curriculum. The terms of reference and composition of these Boards are quite specific.

II. Student Support Services Division

Guidance Officers were to be appointed to all schools. Unfortunately, the first mandate of Guidance Officers is to provide career guidance. Few schools have their own Guidance Officer. Primary schools were to have school Social Workers.

In January 2003, Dr. Michael Alleyne, consultant with the Ministry of Education, had proposed The Peace Promotion Programme: Putting People on the Path to Peace.

Several initiatives were recommended for students, teachers, parents and the community. In October 2003, the then President of TTUTA, Mr. Trevor Oliver, had presented 'TTUTA's Proposed Strategies to curb Violence and Indiscipline in the Education System'.

Some of the recommendations included:

- Development of a code of conduct by all schools

- Filling of all vacancies

- Out of school constructive suspension

- Developmental supervision

- Zero tolerance

- TTUTA-MOE discussions on curriculum

- Student and teacher support groups

- Police patrols

- Development of a culture of peace

- Teacher training and orientation.

With the death of young Shaquille Roberts in school, the Minister of Education, the Honourable Esther Legendre appointed the committee to investigate the national crisis.

The national committee comprised four working groups:

1. Policy,
2. Student/Teacher,
3. Parent, Home, Community
4. School Security.

Members of these groups represented all stakeholders.

Valuable information was provided by Professor Ramesh Deosaran in his report (June 17, 2008) entitled ‘Empowering the Teacher to Reduce student Violence and Delinquency. He noted that this survey was part of a project entitled “*Benchmarking Student Violence and Delinquency in the Secondary School: Towards a Culture of Peace and Civility*”.

Several offences were identified; a few of which are:

- Being loud and unruly in class
- Answering back or disobeying teachers
- Cursing/using obscene language
- Not doing homework
- Gang involvement
- Drinking alcohol
- Using illegal drugs
- Hitting/fighting with/without a weapon.

Teachers were asked to indicate effective sanctions. Some suggestions are:

- Shouting/staring at the student
- Sending student to Principal/Dean
- Use of corporal punishment
- Penance/detention/suspension
- Call police/ parents

Students’ responses of negative behaviour at school and at home revealed the following:

Behaviour	School	Home
Students’ use of obscene language	75%	40%
Spreading rumours	45%	
Skipped school/missed classes	30%	
Willfully damaged property	20%	38%
Gang misbehaviours	16%	12%
Stole	10%	20%
Did not do homework	55%	30%

Smoked cigarettes	7%	15%
Drank alcohol	20%	50%
Used drugs	3%	6%
Fighting	22%	30%

Professor Deosaran surmised that student indiscipline was linked to the decline in family structure.

The Ministry of Education has deduced that student indiscipline was as a result of teacher absenteeism.

The national committee's four working groups submitted their findings and recommendations in June 2008 to the Minister of Education. She had indicated that the recommendations would be discussed and a plan of action defined. This plan would be presented to the committee for ratification and media conferences held.

Last month TTUTA found out via the press that the Ministry of Education was launching the 'Academy for the Prevention of Violence', an innovation selected by the Ministry hierarchy who selected a provider from the United States of America. To date, TTUTA has not been included in these deliberations.

Conclusion

Despite all the interventions, violence and indiscipline in schools continue to be a deterrent to effective learning and a manifestation of the socio-economic ills that are not adequately addressed. We need to ensure that we have the appropriate support systems in implementing new strategies. We cannot expect to eliminate the problems if we are merely putting plasters on sores at great cost. Yes, conflict is healthy, conflict is a natural part of school life – especially with adolescents, but setting and maintaining standards, knowing each individual child in our care and giving them room to develop positively would help minimize the anxieties and fears and rage that develop into violence and indiscipline.

TTUTA'S PROPOSED STRATEGIES
TO CURB VIOLENCE AND INDISCIPLINE IN THE SCHOOL SYSTEM.

1. All schools develop a code of Conduct – A collaborative effort involving students, teachers and administration – to be ready for the new term.
2. A collaborative effort between the Ministry of Education and media to highlight positive happenings at schools. TV, Radio, Newspaper.
3. Functioning of student councils in all secondary schools by the beginning of the new school term January 2004.
4. Filling of vacancies in all schools.
5. Out of school constructive suspension for ringleaders in violence. Suspension must be continued where this is necessary. Suspension must be rehabilitative in nature.
6. Organized developmental supervision in all school particularly high risk schools. Principal management team and relevant school supervision.
7. Organized referral system for all high risk schools.
8. Management Evaluation Committee involving representatives of the Ministry, TTUTA, PTA, Principals' Associations.
9. Zero tolerance – law enforcement and judiciary to act expeditiously in cases where criminal activities are involved.
10. Discussions on the new curriculum between TTUTA and the Ministry of Education to determine relevance etc.
11. A minimum of 4 security guards to be placed at all Junior Secondary and Senior Comprehensive Schools. Communication to solicit assistance as required.
12. Setting up of student and teacher support groups.
13. Total ban on incendiary devices. Fireworks to be done by the Fire Services or other competent authorities.
14. Frequent police patrols around high risk schools.
15. Speedy implementation of a supply teacher programme.
16. Development of a culture of peace for the schools.
17. Teacher training and orientation.

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