TTUTA ON TUESDAY

Holistic approach to school violence and indiscipline

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CONSIDERING THE continued spate of violence in our school as well as in the wider society, TTUTA on Tuesday reproduces this article which first appeared here in 2017.

This unabated run of violence is wreaking havoc with our schools, in our homes and the wider society. There is need for a national conversation around this issue since it's one that affects all of us directly or indirectly. Acting like the proverbial ostrich with our heads buried in the sands can only result in more grief and distress as the net of victims widens.

To effectively address school violence and indiscipline begins with an understanding of the nature of the problem. Being able to answer the questions, "What is this?" "How will we recognise it?" represents a place to start.

School violence has been defined as youth violence that occurs on school property, on the way to school and from school or school-sponsored events, or during a school-sponsored event. A young person can be a victim, a perpetrator, or a witness of school violence.

School violence may also involve or impact adults (Centers for Disease Control, 2016). School violence includes bullying, fighting, weapon use, electronic aggression and gang violence, examples of which we can identify in our own contexts from reports of various incidents across TT.

It is important to also note that school violence is not only a school or educational issue; indeed, it is also a public health issue since school violence may result in both physical and psychological challenges that impact on the entire society – children, teachers, families and communities.

Additionally, while school violence typically involves people between the ages of 10-24 years, pathways to youth violence can begin in early childhood. The burning question of course is, "What do we do about it?"

There is no gainsaying that a multipronged and layered approach is needed to address this problem. However, at this juncture it is important to sound a note of caution: there is no quick fix to this problem. It did not happen overnight, and it is an ever evolving phenomenon influenced by broader societal factors.

Whatever course of action we decide to embark upon to address this we must recognise that we are in it for the long haul. The actions must be systemic, broad-based and sustainable.

So, back to the layered approach which consists of four layers to the solution: the individual, relationships, communities, and societal.

At the individual layer, we first need to recognise that there are multiple factors that may give rise to an individual's involvement with violent behaviour – experiences, knowledge, and skills. Deficiencies in any of these areas leave children and youth with the inability to effectively solve difficulties or participate in pro-social activities that may significantly reduce the risk for violence.

One useful evidence-based strategy is universal, school-based violence prevention programmes that focus on emotional self-awareness, emotional self-control, pro-social skills, social problem-solving, conflict resolution and teamwork – all aimed at self-empowerment.

It is important to note that at the school there must be buy-in by all stakeholders that make this a reality. The violence impacts everyone associated with the school – everyone must be involved. Moreover,

even as this is happening at the level of the school, there are parallel activities that must take place in the other layers.

Through the universal school-based programmes described above, a climate that supports healthy relationships among peers, teachers and students, and the school and families help enhance protective factors, and reduce risk factors. Children learn how to resolve conflicts without resorting to violence, teachers learn strategies for building respectful and supportive relations with students and the line of communication between the home and the school is enhanced.

Traditional approaches of a separation between home and school are no longer viable in this volatile context. Intentional, sustainable efforts must be made to bridge any existing divide as we find ways to address this problem with an aim at eliminating it where possible.

At the community level, there is a need to provide more structured after-school programmes to support children and youths, particularly in those communities that are prone to violence, characterised by low income or poverty.

Furthermore, on the societal level, supportive policies and systems must be put in place to support all the foregoing layers. There is really no other way. This is not just a parent problem. This is not the Government's fault or responsibility. We all have a part to play to resolving this problem.

Addressing violence and indiscipline in school must be a collaborative effort.