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Violence and anti-social behaviour in schools – How big is the problem?



Violence is considered by many to be one of the biggest concerns in Mauritius. Besides this, there have been increases over the past decade in the number of violence and antisocial behaviour related issues linked to the youth especially those in schools.

The 'stories' unfolding the school premises are not only shocking, but the gravity is seemingly deepening. Gang fights, use of harmful weapons, drugs and alcohol use, teachers being assaulted and extreme bullying now figure amongst mostly reported incidents. Are violence and antisocial behaviours in our schools reaching its peak? News on Sunday investigates.

The phenomenon of violence and anti-social behaviours in schools is no mystery. It has existed in the past but was more or less isolated due to the minuscule intensity of the misdemeanor. We have all had the odd verbal slaying match and punch up here and there. The striking difference between now and then is that at the end of the day we would all kiss and make up. Nowadays the grudge channels on to much greater depth.

Today our youngsters have graduated to assaulting teachers, consuming alcohol and drugs, open sexual behaviour, gang fighting amongst others. Whereas in the past, violence in schools was encompassed to disruptive behaviour in class, truancy, petty theft, damaging school property, bullying, smoking, use and writing of foul language on desks and in the toilets, etc.

According to statistics from the Central Statistics Bureau, 190 cases of assault in an educational institution in 2011. Upon observing the level of violence we hear and witness many declaring that such statistics do not reflect a true picture and that many more incidents go unreported. There are serious and worrying allegations that the number and intensity of violence and antisocial behaviour in our schools are rising at a rapid and unforeseeable rate.

The above allegations are backed by a 2009 report by the World Health Organisation (WHO) concerning the violence in Mauritian schools and other educational institutions. WHO states that this phenomenon has taken such a high proportions that the government should take immediate steps to put a brake to this before it gets out of hand.

The report which was released in 2009 indicated that 43% of students took part in physical fights and that 27% students had been attacked by their classmates in the previous year. The report also indicated that 40.9% of students in Mauritius were subject of ragging in school premises. The report also deplored the violence of teachers on pupils.

WHO claimed to be shocked by the high number of accidents that take place in school premises. Whether or not actions were taken or are being taken to prevent violence and antisocial behaviour in our schools is one issue that can be profoundly debated. Nevertheless, one thing is for sure though: our future schooling environments will

never be the same again.

Gangs in schools?

As News on Sunday dug deeper, we noticed further statistics from the central statistics bureau revealing a rise in juvenile offences reported in 2011: total of 1572 juvenile offenders. First and foremost we have to understand that a juvenile delinquent is a person who is under age (usually below 18), who is found to have committed a crime.

Many of these young offenders attend an educational institution, whether they want it or not as going to school is compulsory by law. And though the seriousness of some of their criminal acts varies, there is no doubt that certain aspects of this violence and antisocial behaviour will be brought on to the school premises. Could this increase in juvenile delinquency rate be linked to allegations that gangs are alive and well and operating in some of our schools?

Contacted by News on Sunday, J. V who attends an educational institution in the capital tells us that he has been involved in violent clashes with fellow students within and outside school premises and has even had problems with police officers. "Just because some of us express ourselves through anger it does not mean we are gangsters – it is an exaggeration don't you think? Maybe because we hang out with our own groups, people tend to believe this. Many of my friends are short tempered but they have immaculate school results.

However, there is no doubt that the intensity of violence is nowadays on the ascendant. To get a point across, students are willing to adopt all methods, even violence. The last school yard fight involved a belt and a helmet. As for violence with teachers, people need to understand that the way some teachers treat students nowadays can be very disrespectful. Hence, we inflict the same lack of respect on them."

J. V also told us that he believes the media has had a big influence on how kids act nowadays. "Films and television shows teach us to stick up for ourselves. They portray rebellious teens and how their actions are permissible in modern society. My older brother was part of what you can say a decent generation. I am from a worsen and more violent one. Although I hate to admit it, I am dreading the upcoming generations."

Reasons and ways to combat violence in school

Contacted by News on Sunday, Mushiira Khodabux explained the need to address this problem promptly as the better future of the country and children depend on it. She told News on Sunday that school violence is a many-faceted problem, making it difficult for authorities to pinpoint its causes. The different forms and intensity of violence varies with age groups and school institutions.

"It is accepted that anti-social behaviours and violence amongst young school students today is associated with physiological, psychological, domestic and cultural aspects. The environment in which a child is brought up as well as the media influence is also considered to contribute greatly to the increase in aggressive behaviour and attitudes. However, there are cases where children are stable in all forms, but despite this react violently. These are rare instances - the majority of violence related incidents among the young concern the above stated reasons," stated Mushiira Khodabux.

"Specific measures can be adopted to reduce this already underrated problem. For instance, love and attention from parents as well as teachers is essential-Love and attention conquers all forms of violence. Parents should also be cautious not to act violently in front of children. This maybe the cause to increase in violence among primary school pupils as they will think that violence is the way forward as their parents indulge in the same manner. Frustration can also lead to violence - parents and teachers need to provide full guidance to children during their difficulties. This in turn helps in reducing their violent behaviour. Counselling in schools can also contribute massively in reducing violence in schools," said Mushiira Khodabux.

Mushiira Khodabux also told us that the influence of the media over the years has also been a major cause of violence in schools. "Parents should check the kinds of films and TV shows their kids are watching. If they see violence they will develop violence in their attitude as well. Although unintentional, certain media exposures are impairing with the future of our children."

Vinod Seegum : "We will eventually need to import teachers for our schools"

Vinod Seegum, president of the Government Teachers' Union (GTU), agrees that the level of violence in our school has definitely increased over the past years. He is convinced the root cause being the societal pressures we endure in our everyday lives. "Children see elders express their frustration through violence and they adopt that same violence in school."

"Previously, teachers were equipped to a certain extent where they could take matters in their own hands. Today there is restriction at all levels - teachers have been disarmed. Students are aware of this and are not afraid of punishment any longer. Hence, they continue to dish out violence upon teachers, fellow students and even citizens on roads. Mauritius will eventually be forced to import teachers from abroad as local teachers will be unwilling to work with students with such high level of violence," stated Vinod Seegum.

"The solution is straightforward. The ministry needs to seek advice from local teachers and local school principles instead of taking advice from foreign over from various scales. Likewise the solution will be different.

The local educators are principal witnesses of violence in schools and only they can give a true picture of this reality. As for parents, they need to realise that it is time for them to take responsibility. There have been many instances where parents themselves participate in verbal and physical violence with teachers and this lack of support needs to stop. They need to understand that education starts within the barriers of one's home. We need to get our school premises back to the state when children and teachers felt safe," he added.

The GTU president also enlightened us on his recent meeting with the Minister of Education and Human

Resources, Dr Vasant Bunwaree.

"My recent meeting with the minister was effective. We made him aware of certain issues. For instances, we believe that the 'class repeaters' system in primary schools should be removed. These students need to be sent to other more suitable institution for them as they can at times cause disruptions and show upsetting forms of violence towards others students. He acknowledged the matter and would look to work on it soon."

Dr Vikram Ramharai: "The way our society is evolving is the main cause"

Contacted by News on Sunday, Dr Vikram Ramharai, Assistant Professor at the Mauritius Institute of Education states that the problem of violence in schools portrayed a serious matter of concern when signs first surfaced a few years ago. However, he now claims that the situation has reached critical level and that serious measures need to be taken by all the responsible parties. This includes parents, teachers, the ministry, students themselves and members of society as a whole.

"People are oblivious to the seriousness of this issue. This is disconsolate considering its influence on the future outcome of Mauritius. When the cases of extreme violence in school first emerged a few years back, there was a swift reaction from the authorities. However, whether anything was done from stopping it repeating itself is still a debatable issue. Today it is obvious to see that the problem is far from being resolved. It has got to a point where teachers are scared to teach and parents refuse to act on their kids' violent behaviour. There are common instances where teachers have punished students because of their violent behaviour which has resulted in outsiders being called onto the school premises to threaten teachers," stressed Vikram Ramharai.

News on Sunday also queried Dr Ramharai regarding the possible solutions and measures that could be taken to tackle this phenomenon. He told us that there is no single and straightforward remedy to the problem.

"When a cyclone awaits, we take precautions by closing all our windows. This is similar and it needs to be addressed from all the possible angles. We need to close all the gaps; teachers, parents, the ministry and all those concerned need to sit down and come up with ideas to tackle the problem in its initial stage – even at kindergarden. We cannot singularly pinpoint culprits; we cannot blame the parents, we cannot blame the teachers; everybody need to take responsibility and come forward with effective measures on a regular basis."

