

Comment

I WAS raised "behind de bridge", on Lavenille Road. It was my 17 year-old mother, granny, one-year-old brother and I, all sleeping on a bed in a tiny two-room apartment with outdoor toilet and kitchen.

I remember hearing what sounded like bullets being fired within the Plannings across the street from Eastern Boys' Govt Primary School. Our teachers didn't care that most of us came from Lavenille but they cared deeply about our success; they held us to such high standards.

Some Lavenilleans would often call me the young Dr Williams; this community support lifted my spirits and my dreams that this little black boy could grow up to be a Dr Williams. And so I did. I left Lavenille, attended one of the best universities in the world and now I often return to Trinidad doing work in communities.

My research is on school violence in Trinidad, so here's some bad news upfront: there's no quick fix. Simply put, violence in schools reflects a violent society. We can't expect more than one murder a day, deficient enforcement of adherence to existing laws, poor crime detection, rampant corruption among politicians/business people/policemen, sexual, physical and psychological abuse of students, domestic violence against women, high poverty rates, gang warfare, international proliferation of guns and the drug trade, lack of psycho-social mechanisms to help students deal with trauma, unhealthy notions of masculinity, an antiquated educational system where many students feel like

rejects, and expect our youth to grow up well-adjusted and comprehensively prepared to be confident stewards of our nation.

I present this litany because violence has many "causes" and this will need multi-pronged, long-term approaches. Unfortunately, this is bedevilled by an election system where the opposition is ushered in and undoes or shreds (or presses, indefinite pause on) some existing programmes, and often without little evaluation of the impact up until that point. The violence we see today in schools didn't happen overnight; we have sowed the seeds of educational and community neglect for years. This is merely harvest time. But I'm hopeful, if we as a nation are willing to roll up our sleeves and commit to the requisite long-term investment.

Whatever interventions we craft to address school violence, they must take into account international, regional, national, community, family and individual influences, and straddle several ministries so they have a multi-inter-disciplinary reach. But key to all this is the involvement of people from across our society: students, parents, teachers, school administrators, guidance counsellors, psychologists, social workers, business people, artists, activists, you name it! We must overcome the arrogant view that expertise resides only with the credentialled. Wisdom resides in people's expertise.

Addressing school violence

ences, and it is vital to bring them all together to facilitate an ongoing dialogue.

In tackling school violence, we need both negative peace and positive peace approaches. Negative peace, which is reactive, involves the cessation of direct violence: a necessary but insufficient component of the equation. Positive peace, which is proactive, is focused on the skills and knowledge needed to disrupt societal inequities and different forms of discrimination that reinforce the status quo. The suggestions given below do not constitute an exhaustive list but will render a sense of the road ahead.

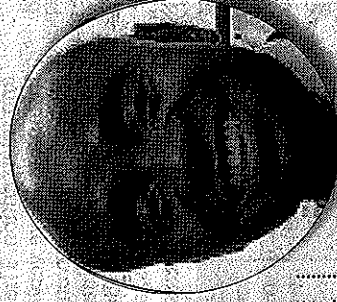
Let schools become community hubs by hosting parenting classes and youth after-school programmes. Invest heavily in sports and arts. Disrupt the prestige/non-prestige binary; it demotivates too many students and teachers (i.e. we will have to revisit the Concordat if we truly care about tackling educational inequity). Schools need more social workers, psychologists and special education specialists. Former junior secondary/senior comprehensive schools need many remedial teachers; students who can't read in Form One at age 16 may immediately reject school and act out in destructive ways. Strengthen systems to remove students from homes where they

are being abused and give them the care they need to process that trauma. Radically change the curriculum to honour the differential types of intelligences so that each child feels acknowledged; this will involve re-tooling teacher education to include critical pedagogies. Train teachers and students in peer mediation, conflict resolution, anger management and restorative circles; research shows that suspensions don't work; we send students to homes where they often lack supervision, they then lose out on instructional time and become increasingly marginalised from school, leading to drop outs. Corporal punishment was banned from schools but alternative training didn't take place.

Decentralise the Ministry of Education to include communities in the decisions the MoE makes: it is time we decolonise entrenched processes of hierarchisation within our current systems. Tackle teacher absenteeism and punctuality; violence occurs more often when students aren't supervised for extended periods.

These are just some suggestions. They are *all* needed plus some. But they must be done in a very coordinated, systemic fashion. However, what must undergird it all is a national commitment to civic-mindedness. I ask each Trinitagonian to think about and implement ways in which he/she can make a difference in an underprivileged school.

We can create a peaceful country, but are we ready to do what it takes?



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