

BUILDING SCHOOL ATMOSPHERE THAT CONTROLS INSTITUTIONAL VIOLENCE AMONGST STUDENTS

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Abstract

Control of school violence has been observed not to be a problem peculiar to some set of schools. It may not be so popular in some schools due to the fact that such schools are young; young with smaller students in terms of age and the population still manageable. It could be also that students of such schools are from homes that are morally good. Such students have been brought up to obey constituted authority, to love and accept others; never to bully others. Government, parents, peer groups and teachers, all have parts to play in controlling violence in schools. This paper suggests ways of controlling, and perhaps total eradication of, violence that will give rise to conducive school atmosphere.

Introduction

Many methods/programmes whose purpose is to prevent violence and inappropriate behaviour in schools are also programmes that could be used to prevent disaffection, dropping out of schools. Such programmes can also be used to deal with school problems like drug and alcohol abuse, poor academic performance. Students with one or two of these school problem are those that promote violence in schools.

It has been noted that violence is a school problem that destabilizes the climate/atmosphere of the school, making the school atmosphere unpleasant for learning. School atmosphere is the feelings each student and staff has about the school environment over a period of time. Their feelings have to do with the comfort each enjoys in the school. Is the environment conducive for learning that is organised and safe? Atmosphere could also relate to other positive or negative feelings regarding the school atmosphere. When the school atmosphere is comfortable and supportive, these will promote effective and efficient learning and teaching as well as rightful students' behaviour and attitudes. Negative feelings like fear, frustration, loneliness, neglect, hunger, surely will affect learning and behaviour negatively. School atmosphere will determine the type of environment one should expect. It could affect the learning outcome of the school.

According to Kelly et al (1986), school atmosphere could be assessed through teacher-students relationships, security system of school, maintenance, administration, students' academic orientation and students' disposition. School violence is not a problem peculiar to some set of schools. Rather, the tone of the school controls the rate of violence in any school. Schools with younger students and fewer students may not experience much as schools with older students and larger number on admission roll. When a school is too large, there will be enough opportunities for students to play some pranks.

Students from good homes are a bit better, but not all. At times students from good homes get to school only to be influenced by bad ones. They turn out to be the worst students around. At times, the good ones are better influence on evil ones, the bad ones may turn out to be the best. All depend on the type of atmosphere existing in the school.

Approaches to Improvement of School Atmosphere Moral Education

The teaching of moral and civic values in our schools cannot be overemphasized. A successful school, like a successful business, is a cohesive community of shared values, beliefs, rituals and ceremonies. The community celebrates its sage by relating stories of heroes and heroines who embody the core values of the community. The students will be discouraged to emulate the values of such past personalities.

Parents and religious institutions have more roles in this process of teaching and modelling of the morals of the students. Moral education could be divided into two:

- (a) Education in civic virtues and qualities that build students on the forms and rules of citizenship in a just society also,
- (b) Assisting them to be personally adjust, that is qualities that will make them to be productive, dependable and reliable citizens.

Moral education must accomplish the following in order to have a good school atmosphere.

- (1) Promote mutual respect and co-operation among students.
- (2) Foster capacity to think, feel, act morally in and out of the school.
- (3) Development in and out of the school, a moral individual based on fairness, caring and also

having consideration for others.

For the above goals to be accomplished, Lickeona (1988) advocates four processes that he feels should be followed in the classroom which are:

- (1) Building self-esteem.
- (2) Sense of community.
- (3) Learning to co-operate and assist others.
- (4) Good and mature decision making.

Specific Qualities Sought in Students for Moral Development

- (1) Self-respect derives from positive behaviour towards others -be kind, share with others and listen to others.
- (2) Social perspective taking-that asks how others think and feel.
- (3) Moral reasoning about the right things to do.
- (4) Moral values such as kindness, courtesy, trustworthiness and responsibility.
- (5) Citizenship values-making your school and community better in vote, be good neighbours, obey laws, rules and regulations, respect for authority and protection of their environment.

Effect of moral education programmes like other programmes/activities in schools that has logical and common-sense value. Violence and inappropriate behaviour in schools are among the causes of deteriorating home and community values as well as poor moral judgment by the student perpetrators. Although the moral education programmes may not change the attitudes or behaviour of chronically disruptive students, moral education may positively affect other students in a preventive way and provide meaning for their pro-social behaviour.

Parent and Community Involvement

Parent involvement promotes a healthy and consistent learning atmosphere, by creating mutual goals between parents and teachers and by the use of activities that cut across schools and homes. Creating a family-school situation is a co-operative process of planning that brings together school, staff, parents, children and community members to maximize resources for the child's achievement and development. Although effects of parent involvement on school violence have not been felt, increased parent involvement can result in better home environments (atmosphere) that are more conducive for learning. This will improve communication and consistency and understanding between home and school which will also foster learning. These changes can lead to safer, more responsive schools.

Traditionally, parent and community involvement have been limited to activities such as Parents-Teachers Association (P.T.A.) meetings. Parents involvements could be as following:

- (1) Parents/community can nurture students from childhood on proper way of behaviour at home, school and in the public. An example is on learning how to appreciate others, living in love with others, respecting their elders, obeying rules and regulations.
- (2) Assisting their children to develop the attitude of independent reading, learning to do their home-work without being forced.
- (3) Inculcating in their children the art of good time management that is, planning their time without wastage. Time for play, time for resting, time for reading must be well planned and clearly stated. (4) Good communication manners:-They must be taught to act, relate with others politely.

According to Williamson (1997), he is of the opinion that there should be numerous support contacts for both parents and staff and also regular staff training and supervision meetings during which issues concerned could be addressed.

Also, parents and the community must be provided the opportunities to get involved in voluntary services. These services will increase parental and community involvement,

Parents involvement is positively associated with student's success, higher attendance rates, and lower rate of suspension for students. It has led to greater teacher satisfaction, improved parent understanding and parent-child communication, more successful and effective school programmes. Parent involvement provides an important opportunity for schools to enrich current school programmes by bringing parents and community members into the educational process.

Effective parent and community involvement programmes are built on a careful consideration of the unique needs of the community. To build trust, effective approaches to parent involvement rely on a strength-based approach emphasizing positive interaction. Parents' involvement activities share the goal of

increasing parent-school collaboration to promote healthy child development and safe school communities.

Parents' involvement has been observed to produce better students who are ready to be of good behaviour. This has reduced the number of students on suspension. Involvement of parents has also brought about satisfaction of the teachers, it has also improved parents' understanding of the school system. It also promotes better parent-child relationship, i.e. communication between them. The school atmosphere is more healthy with everyone being satisfied and everyone getting involved, contributing to build trust, self-reliance, peaceful school atmosphere-resulting to production of healthy student and safe school environment.

Violence-Prevention and Conflict-Resolution Curricular

Violence prevention and conflict-resolution curricula direct students to use other meaningful methods than violence when resolving their personal and interpersonal problems. It will assist students to change their perceptions, attitudes and skills. It also helps students in understanding the feelings of others and their own and how to avoid violence. They will understand the evil effect of violence, other ways to express one's ill-feelings like negotiations, reporting to higher authorities and also waiting for a reply when one makes any report either written or verbal. Exposing students to better things like singing, dancing, drawing, writing, artwork should be done instead of their being idle and having time to think of vengeance. Schools should create some social programmes like clubs, e.g. Mathematics, Geography, Man-O-War, Boys Scout, Girls Guide, Red cross, organizing of extracurricular activities like sports, debates, quiz competition, rag days, parties (picnics, class parties, house parties, etc). There should be boxes at strategic places for students' opinions and suggestions' which must be attended to promptly. Other gathering like questions and answer time, air-your-view period, where students can ask questions through submission of written notes to the appropriate quarters without any disciplinary measures attached to it. Though, such questions must be constructive and meaningful.

If students are allowed active participation in these programmes without being punished, the school atmosphere will be healthier. There will be improvement in classroom atmosphere, students' self-esteem, reductions in fighting and other disciplinary violation. There will be reduction in the number of suspensions, number of drop-outs in school will be reduced. Teachers will teach under fine atmosphere without fear of molestation, they will listen more to the students. At times, violence-prevention and conflict resolution curricula may be time consuming but if planned properly and well supervised, the result will be good. There will be a good school with well-disciplined students and teachers with presentable academic result.

Peer Mediation

This is a negotiation group that helps students to resolve conflict amongst themselves. According to Bodine and Crawford (1998), mediators help keep minor school problems/conflict from getting out of hand. A means of resolving conflict without any problems will be introduced to mediators and disputants will be educated to see mediators as friends and not enemies. In the process of training, mediators learn that conflicts can be settled constructively and that their role as mediators is not that of a judge or an enforcement agent that will force an agreement or solution. Instead, students come to mediators voluntarily and are guided by peer mediators to move from blaming each other to devising solutions acceptable to all concerned. School can select and train some students to act as mediators. According to Lant and Patti (1996), schools should introduce some programmes that will teach all students in the school processes to mediate disputes. If all students are trained to act as mediators, it means that all are mediators and can resolve disputes anytime, anywhere. If the quality of a mediator is in build in all, they all will possess the potentials to resist violence.

In Nigerian schools, peer mediators are in existence as friends and colleagues but not under any close monitoring of the school authority, though, little emphasis is laid during moral instruction, social studies lesson, extracurricular activities on the job/functions of mediator.

If peer mediators are well monitored, it will lead to other positive changes in our schools. Students' attitudes towards negotiation would become more positive, with students more willing to help friends and colleagues to eradicate fighting and solve problems. The belief that certain groups of students must be "beaten up" will be removed. Johnson and Johnson (1996) are of the opinion that if peer mediation is introduced into our school system, there will be reduction in fighting among students, fewer of them will be reported to the school authority for disciplinary action. Also, there will be reduction in suspension cases. Becoming a mediator increases one's self esteem and improves student's academic achievement.

It must be noted that the success of this programme is not automatic but it must be well planned and

supervised. It must involve the teachers, parents, school authorities. The goal of this programmes must be understood by all. If not well trained the students tend to force their own opinions on others, or at times, they are one sided.

A facilitator must be made to attend to some details. Peer mediators must be trained in assumption and processes of mediation. If all are well catered for, peer mediator is sure promising tools that will assist students settle their conflicts without resorting to violence.

Bullying Prevention

Bullying has detrimental psychological effects on students such as depression, withdrawal, low esteem, at times suicide. The act, at times, is overlooked in schools while many are being bullied. A student is being bullied when exposed, often times, intentionally injured or discomfort inflicted by other students. It could be physically or through verbal assault, making obscene gestures and being intentionally excluded. Bullying implies the use of one's power or strength to frighten or hurt weaker students.

A lot of students are bullied in schools. Most of the bullying occurs when there is no adult supervision on playground, library, classroom (during free periods), in hostels or on their way home. Bullies are bigger than their victims, and with more positive attitudes towards the use of violence than other less bullied ones. Victims are never known and are often very timid, shy, more anxious, and insecure in class and around the school. They react by crying, withdrawing from all activities, at times may refuse coming to school when regularly attacked.

Bullying has serious effect on victims, bullies and the school. According to Borg (1998), victims are always helpless, dejected, angry, have self-pity after any encounter. If not attended to adequately, victims' reaction could result to depression, physical or mental illness. Students who love to bully others may in future engage in criminal and aggressive behaviour if the act is not destroyed in his/her life permanently. According to Olweus and Limber (1999), in classes or schools where there is high rate of bullying problem, students tend to feel less safe and are less satisfied being in school. Some teachers tend to ignore or tolerate bullies because of fear of being attacked. At times, these bullies give such teachers some bribes.

Any programme set to prevent bullying should be an entire school programme. It must be designed to send messages that bullying will not be accepted in schools. Some well-planned and implemented programmes could be introduced to create good school atmosphere. Such programmes should involve parents, government (Ministry of Education), students, resource persons, etc and programmes like film shows (on the evil effects of bullying), seminars, workshop, debates (where subject will be argued out), parents/teacher forum, students/teachers' week, students/principal day, a school conference day to discuss the subject matter. People should be invited as role models to address the students-past bullies and-victims if possible. Moral instructions should be well taught, citizenship roles should be made very important to let them know their roles as Nigerians and not as fighter/killer. Effective bullying eradication programmes depend on some strategies to reduce and prevent bullying problems. With improved supervision, there should be rules against bullying, posters at strategic places, positive and negative reward for abiding and violating rules. Victims should report cases of attacks and the school authority must not disclose their source of information. Offenders should be dealt with immediately and publicly.

A well-designed bullying prevention programme will reduce, eliminate and prevent bully-victim problem. It will also improve the tone of the school. Anti-social behaviours like fighting, vandalism, and truancy will be reduced while students will enjoy being in school. All hands must be on deck. This is not the job of the school counsellors alone or disciplinary committee members or class/form teachers. It is the duty of all, including parents, and in the case of any occurrence, parents of the bully and the victim should be invited for discussion.

Government has really contributed to violence in our schools. There is no school authority given the power to inflict capital punishment to students freely, if they misbehave.

Recommendations

- (1) School authority should be given free hands to control students. Necessary disciplinary actions should be taken against any offender without necessarily referring such to any higher authority for approval.
- (2) Each school should have a committee of experienced people (parents, teachers, students) to handle cases relating to violence.
- (3) Fund should be given to schools to implement some extracurricular activities.
- (4) Moral instructions, citizenship training should be introduced at all levels of education.
- (5) Uncontrolled bullies should be sent to juvenile homes or psychiatric hospitals, depending on the degree of madness.

- (6) Students, at all levels, should be made to write an undertaking (together with their parent) to be of good behaviour before being given admission.

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