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MRC UNSOLICITED RESEARCH GRANT SCHEME:

Indiscipline and Violence in Secondary Schools

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Indiscipline has nowadays become a matter of great concern in the field of education. Rapid transformation registered in the economic structure and social fabric, brought about by globalisation have meant, among other things, additional pressure on secondary schools. The response of schools to the challenges of revisiting content, curriculum, teaching strategies has varied from country to country depending on the resources available and the political will to effect the desired changes.

The past decades have witnessed a 'degeneration' (a) of students' behaviour, both within and outside school premises, within or outside the class, (b) between teachers and students and (c) among students themselves. At different instances, the question of indiscipline has been placed at the forefront of the educational debate. Questions have been raised and issues discussed. The present study represents the laying down of the basic foundations of research in that area. Its aims and objectives are:

- (i) to explain the disruptive classroom and outside classroom behaviour of secondary school students;
- (ii) to understand the extent to which indiscipline and violence are affecting the Mauritian secondary schools;
- (iii) to identify and describe the different forms of indiscipline and violence in schools;
- (iv) to examine the attribution of students and teachers about the issue of indiscipline and violence;
- (v) to explore the mechanisms that exist in schools to deal with problems of indiscipline and violence.

A survey was carried out over a period of nine months to collect data from a number of schools using instruments which would allow for breadth and depth of understanding and to this end, a wide range of tools have been used for different categories of stakeholders. To allow us to listen to the plurality of voices, the interview is used with teachers, students, rectors and support staff. Additionally, a questionnaire has been devised and administered to allow for representativeness and breadth of data. The questionnaire has enabled us to gather both quantitative and qualitative data. The conceptual framework adopted in the context of the project is strongly grounded in current literature and demonstrate our understanding of the issue of indiscipline and violence at school.

The interactive nature of group interviews enabled us to collect quality data that helped to validate the experiences of each individual participant by presenting them with the experiences of others in the group.

From what we have heard, read and analysed, it is clear that the scope, impact, and complexity of the problem have substantially increased. To make the rules and regulations more stringent is but a short-term solution which, no doubt, will not work to the satisfaction of everybody. The findings generated clearly show that

- (i) there is no set 'profile' of the indisciplined student either psychological, pedagogical, economic or social. Though an appreciable percentage may share a common set of characteristics, there are no defining variables that could predict whether a student will indulge in acts of indiscipline. Sometimes students coming from well to do background and having high academic achievement may indulge in serious acts of indiscipline as has been repeatedly observed;
- (ii) the problem of indiscipline affects all schools irrespective of gender and school type, though the degree and magnitude vary from school to school. Cases of violence though less common, occur more often outside than on school premises;
- (iii) the measures taken to deal with both indiscipline and violence are barely adequate given the fact that there exist no administrative or legal guidelines which could be referred to in such cases. Actions taken are often ad-hoc and uncoordinated both within and across schools of the same type;
- (iv) teachers, most prominently, feel disempowered to deal with cases of indiscipline and violence because of lack of support from the relevant authorities, political interference and an incapacitated school administration;
- (v) it is perceived that confessional and private schools have a greater "marge de manœuvre" in taking sanctions and measures because the management and administration have a degree of autonomy in taking decisions;
- (vi) the factors enhancing school and classroom discipline is a complex matrix of both internal and external variables involving, on the one hand, pedagogical efficiency, teacher personality, leadership and management style, parental collaboration, students' expectations of school and education, teacher-pupils relationship and school culture. On the other hand, the school is also at the receiving end of a number of societal problems such as the collapse of the family, an increasingly economic conception of education and the frustrations and delusions of too large a section of the population;
- (vii) teacher professional status has seriously declined in the past few years leading to an erosion of teacher's authority in classrooms;
- (viii) there is a differential perception as regards the causes of indiscipline and violence in our schools. Students point out to the obsolescence of the curriculum with heavy academic bias, the inability of schools to respond effectively to their legitimate expectations and aspirations, the lack of professional commitment on the part of a large number of teachers and a 'laissez faire' attitude on the part of school management and administration that engenders an unfair, sporadic and often biased application of sanctions;
- (ix) adults within the school set-up attribute the increasing occurrence of discipline problems, inter-alia, to the changing social mores, demise of parents and authorities from their responsibilities as well as the all pervading influence of the media;
- (x) each school has developed its own set of rules and regulations and the provisions for some vary across schools. In some they are elaborately framed with the focus on a code of conduct that is expected of students, in others, and a large majority, they are only very superficially framed and focus on punctuality, school uniform and attendance. However, what is also blatantly missing from these documents is an explicit procedure that defines the application of sanctions and the role of various stakeholders in the enforcement of those rules or code. Since such a procedure is very rarely defined, it almost inevitably follows that clear-cut and coherent measures cannot be taken.

Given the situation described above, it becomes clear that a multi-pronged approach should be adopted to effectively bring about a permanent solution to the twin problems of indiscipline and violence. It is also equally obvious that considering the issue as an appendage to more general concerns related to pedagogy, curriculum, school management, leadership and teacher training will not only be ill-advised but preclude the implementation of any long term solution.