

Students' Behaviour Problems are Rooted in the Family—Parents to be Held Liable

Bernard Moswela

University of Botswana, P.O. Box 301317, Tlokweng, Botswana

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ABSTRACT This article argues that a child's behaviour is influenced mainly by its family background and as such the parent should take full responsibility and accountability for the child's behaviour at school. The proposition to involve and make the parent more accountable should be legislated so that the courts should take action against parents who fail to do so. This argument is made following general concerns that parents are unduly relinquishing their pastoral roles to schools, thus making schools 'dumping grounds' for problem children. Proposals on how parental full participation in students' behaviour can be achieved end the paper.

Most of the research studies on pupils' troublesome behaviour deal with the types, causes, and strategies on how to contain the behaviour. The strategies directly target the students and measures include corporal punishment, suspension, expulsion and counseling. Studies on parents' accountability in Botswana are sporadic and anecdotal despite undocumented abundant evidence that most discipline problems originate at the family level or outside schools. The point and purpose of this paper is to argue that for schools to focus only on changing the pupils' behaviour attitudes without attending to the root cause, they fall short of unraveling the dynamics of the problem. Also, schools are being unfairly held to take major responsibility and accountability for the behaviour problems of students when in fact the root cause of such behaviour resides within the family or home. The author pursues this point of view notwithstanding the fact that such behaviour can also be partly influenced by peers. The child as a social being cannot, at some level in life, escape the vagaries of peer influence. As Dreikurs et al. (1998) noted: "The approval of its peers become more important to the child than that of adults" (p. 130).

The argument of the paper is predicated on the assumption that every school-going child has a family or is under some guardianship (natural or fostered), and that the family or guardian has fundamental responsibility for its social upbringing that includes behavior, despite external influences. Although external influences are inevitable and can be strong, families should not allow these influences to draw their children into hard core social deviants. The responsibilities of

schools to children should not, for all intents and purposes, be boundless but be limited only to the reinforcement of the efforts families make in the child's upbringing process. One sees schools' responsibilities as limited to minor misdemeanors such as pilfering, moderate punishment, respect for others and for authority and they should not spend too much time on the things that could be done by relevant others in society particularly parents. This would help schools pay more attention to the core business of teaching and learning. The paper is informed and illuminated by developments in developing and developed education systems such as Botswana (developing) and the UK and the USA (developed). It makes particular focus on Botswana.

SCHOOLS AS LIMITED AGENTS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

Barrow (1981) has argued that one cannot set a limit on the concerns and responsibilities of schools because schools perform a socializing function in society that involves familiarizing the child with and initiating it into the customs, conventions, and expectations of society. This perspective views schools as public mirrors upon which the culture of a society is reflected. Emphasizing this point, the former UK Secretary of State Clarke (2002) stated:

....education is about values as well as knowledge and skills. Values such as respect, courtesy and consideration are the foundations of a civilized society that includes respect for others and respect for authority. Heads, teachers and other school staff deserve respect. There can never be justification for subjecting them to

assault – verbal or physical. Residents living near schools and older people in particular also deserve respect, they should not have to put up with being jostled or abused while waiting for buses or walking near their home or shopping at the local store (p.1).

Educationists in the USA are longing for the “good old days” when the responsibility for transforming children into competent adults was mainly the job of the family, shared by the school. To-day the family no longer wields the kind of influence on the child that it once did. This has left schools as the primary institutions for shaping the child (Wolk, 2004). Schools no longer can cope because the growth of the requisite resources that include human skill and equipment has not been commensurate with the radical changes in the students and the world (Wolk, 2004). The story is not very different in Botswana. At a school annual gala attended by teachers, students, parents and the local community the head teacher decried the tendency by parents to push every social problem to schools (Gabathuse, 2003). The head teacher also decried to his audience, the tendency by some people in society including parents, who attack schools for not doing enough to curb the growing anti-social behaviour of students. In an era where discipline standards in schools are on the decline, one may long for the not very long-lost times when the socialization of the young into the values and culture of society was the responsibility of every prudent adult. These times are now gone and most probably forever as they are fast being replaced by a world of popular culture that is influenced by the media and the free movement of people between countries with different cultures and races. What is more disturbing is that when school discipline and performance decline, as noted, blame is quickly apportioned to the schools by the very people who have abdicated their parental roles.

Parental responsibility and accountability are becoming weaker despite growing evidence from research studies that only a small proportion of the problems presented by schools start at school. A child’s behaviour is influenced by family circumstances and not by genes (Dreikurs et al., 1998; Daniels and Garner, 1999). The way a child is raised at home can determine its social relationship with its peers (McManus; 1995; Moore, 2002), and a child who experiences parental neglect may seek attention by being

aggressive to others (Moore, 2002). Schools do not sell liquor nor do they sell drugs to students. Students access them from their communities and sometimes from their families who sell them to earn a living. The source of the lethal weapons like knives students bring to school can also be traceable back to their homes. At school a student who uses a weapon on another or who is caught drinking or smoking gets punished. Punishing the student for wrong done using items obtained outside the school without involving the parent, the writer argues, makes the student an unfair victim of circumstances. It is, as an old teacher once put it: “Action outside the school and reaction inside the school”. Taking action on an offence whose source is outside the school can only offer a temporary solution to the problem. A more lasting solution would be to trace the origin of the items or substance used to do wrong and take appropriate action. This argument imposes a limit to what schools can achieve alone without the support and cooperation of parents and the community in curbing students’ misbehaviour.

SCHOOLS DO THINGS THEY SHOULD NOT DO

Barrow (1981), after his statement that one cannot set a limit on the concern and responsibilities of schools, was quick to point out the restraints of pushing everything on to schools. He objected to schools being asked to do things (referring to the social pressures of the day) that would hinder them from doing things they should do. Although schools are not the main root causes of students’ behaviour problems as argued by Dreikurs et al. (1998) and Daniels and Garner (1999), they still tirelessly keep on finding ways of curbing disruptive behaviour to a point of sometimes over-doing it. They often play the roles of *quasi* policemen; lawyers; counselors; and even medical doctors. For their own survival, schools should learn to say ‘no’ to some of the things society ‘asks’ them to do. They have a specific job to perform; curriculum implementation. This is not to suggest that discipline is not important. It is, and there is no doubt that it can impinge directly on school performances (Lovell and Wiles, 1983). Good discipline is the basis upon which a good learning environment rests. When discipline does not exist in a school, the teachers will teach nothing and the students will learn nothing of significance (Steifert and Vomberg, 2002).

Be that it may, still, discipline should be a shared responsibility between schools and relevant others in society. Some cities in the USA, notably Philadelphia and Chicago have put metal detectors in all their high schools and middle schools respectively. Other schools have installed security cameras and additional guards (Morrow, 2004). The monitoring of these security measures is done by guards and not by teachers. This example serves to emphasize the notion that teachers should concentrate more on the teaching and leave serious disruptive behaviour to parents and other relevant institutions. One can argue that the pressure on schools in Botswana to 'do everything' including doing things that are incompatible with or anti-educational has been exerted upon them by the Ministry of Education's over-emphasis on performance. Schools are publicly ranked according to performance as if they were some football league. This has put them under enormous pressure to the extent that they sometimes over-react to students' problems (with one thing in mind, performance in the national examination) particularly with regard to behaviour and counter-behaviour (punishment). They become oblivious of the fact that pressure on students can generate counter-pressure by the students (Moswela, 2004). The escalating rate of violent behaviour characterized by vandalism to property is a case in point in Botswana schools. Criminal cases should be referred to the law enforcers as clearly they are not the business of schools. Schools' involvement here ought to be limited to the facilitation of case investigations and not for them to judge and punish. Investigating theft and punishing drunken students while the rest of law-abiding students are not being taught is not only denying the well-behaved their right to be taught but performing tasks that are beyond the teachers' scope of operation.

What legal right do teachers have to conduct searches and make seizures on children's property? Searching students does not only lower the dignity of the majority who are innocent, it is also an invasion of a person's rights and therefore illegal. The law states that if there are reasonable grounds for suspecting that a person is in possession of stolen property, the judicial officer can execute a warrant of search to policemen of the rank of Sergeant or above. Only in exceptional cases can policemen of this rank search without authority from the judicial officer (Republic of

Botswana, 1939). Also, some schools keep and administer mild drugs to the sick instead of referring them to a medical doctor. These are risky undertakings by the schools which do so. The legal or cultural implications of doing so can have far reaching implications to schools. For instance, some cultures in Botswana forbid their children from taking conventional medicine (Motsokono, 2004; Staff Writer Mmegi, 2004) and some children are allergic to certain drugs. Teachers are simply not medical doctors and therefore have no knowledge of medicine. Besides, law forbids anybody who is not a medical doctor to prescribe medication to a patient. This is despite the part of common law duty of care that states: A teacher should do whatever a reasonably prudent parent would do in the same circumstances (Gilliatt, 1999). Perhaps ignorance of the law by teachers contributes to their performing functions which are not necessarily mandatory to them.

By refraining from responding and taking action on any problem that comes the teachers' way is not necessarily shunning the realities of teaching. Behaviour problems would escalate in schools if teachers did (Mosca and Hollister, 2004). It is also a fact that schools that do not keep the students busy throughout and that are not caring, respectful and consistent tempt their students into mischief (Mosca and Hollister, 2004). Teachers in Botswana schools are encouraged or required to carry out counseling duties though they have received little or no training in these specialized areas. The guidance and counseling programmes that have been integrated in the Botswana secondary school main stream curriculum have pastoral care units to strengthen them. The introduction of these programmes in schools followed a recommendation by a commission that was to review the status of the country's education system. The commission (Republic of Botswana, 1993) had recommended:

... the establishment of pastoral care units in schools to improve the guidance and counseling programmes by giving the coordinators offices, a reduced teaching load so as to effectively attend to the diverse social problems presented by the individual students (p. 175).

The function of the school counselors was not to replace professional counselors. This arrangement was made in recognition of the fact that as they are 'on the scene of operation' tenders are better positioned to identify or receive cases and where need be, refer them to the professional

counselors. Admittedly, the circumstances of schools can be unique, which perhaps explains part of the reason why they perform functions that can be better performed by other specialized support services outside the school. But as much as possible they should resist doing everything and focus more on their core business of teaching and learning processes through the maintenance of reasonable order. After all the teachers' tertiary education (at least in Botswana) did not have components of law, medicine or even first aid.

PARENTS TO BE MORE ACCOUNTABLE FOR THE BEHAVIOUR OF THEIR CHILDREN

Recent public debates on the state of discipline in schools in England have focused, more than ever before, on more visible involvement by parents and the likely sanctions they can face if they failed to support schools in their quest to fight pupils' bad behaviour. In his State's Speech on discipline in schools in December 2002, the then Education Secretary, Mr. Clarke listed a number of measures that would see a decrease in the number of truanting pupils and crime in schools. The measures include, among other things, the strengthening of Home-School Agreement where parents would be legally required to attend parenting classes with the aim of improving the pupils' behaviour. This would be backed by a court-imposed Parenting Order if they refused to comply (Clarke, 2002).

Although the current England Education Secretary's (Mrs. Kelly) approach to tackling the problem may differ with her predecessor's, both agree on some fundamentals of making the parents have a share of their children's troublesome behaviour. She is also pushing for a new drive by local authorities to use Parenting Orders to reinforce parents' responsibility for dealing with child's behaviour. She declared that:

Parents too must support school's behaviour policy and not automatically assume, when their child is punished, that their child must be in the right and the school in the wrong. Where parents do not take responsibility for their child's unruly behaviour, then it is right that action is taken to ensure that they do, through Parenting Orders administered by courts". This is because "any poor behaviour is too much and should not be tolerated. We need to re-draw the line in what is acceptable (p. 1 and 2).

This perspective by Kelly (2005) is yet implied evidence (consistent with that expressly made by Daniels and Garner, 1999; Moore, 2002) that home environments indeed have a major influence on a child's behaviour. The Minister of Education (Botswana) has made similar sentiments when he proclaimed a zero tolerance to deplorable behaviour in schools particularly with respect to vandalizing school property (Staff Writer Guardian, 2005). The latter's zero tolerance to ill-discipline, is only limited to soliciting the support of parents to their child's school and for teachers to ruthlessly deal with unruly cases. It does not suggest how government can take the lead in coherent and sustained programme resources, and let alone what sanctions would be imposed on parents who are negligent to the bad behaviour of their child.

Needless to reiterate that the danger of punishing students alone without making the parents feel the pinch as well is that the problem can only go through a relapse then re-surface because the root(s) is still alive. Weeds cannot be permanently removed by cutting them, but by uprooting them. Similarly, hair from the head (except through baldness) cannot disappear forever by trimming it. The problems of school discipline persist because both schools and homes have been adopting a 'trimming' or reactive rather than a proactive approach to the problems. There has been no bold and consistent approach to nip the problem at the bud by targeting the homes and the communities where pupils are drawn from. Educators generally and other interested parties in schools are looking forward with keen interest to the eventual outcomes of the bold proposals by Kelly to combat disruptive behaviour in schools in England. The propositions have the potential to challenge the widely held general view that a school is a 'Mr. Fix it for the whole nation'. It is expected that the proposals would make parents take a more responsible stance to their children's schooling. Other countries might take a cure and benefit from the successes that the proposals purport to bring. However, it should be appreciated that countries differ in conditions and the level of development. Parents in more developed countries would have a more informed participation in schools than those from countries with less developed education systems. In Botswana the full enforcement of parents' accountability to their children's behavior would be constrained by the fact that a

sizeable number of schools are boarding and are spread throughout the country. Parents would have little influence on the behaviour of their children in such schools.

CONCLUSION

The problem of pupils' behaviour cannot be delimited to schools only. Schools should resist the temptation to indiscriminately attend to all students' social problems by involving parents and other government support offices such as the police and social educators. The police are trained to deal with, for example, drug education and with tackling bullying. The social educators have more relevant expertise in dealing with pupils who are truanting and those with social problems. The most obvious benefits of involving people with more relevant expertise in the behaviour of the youth is that behaviour is more likely to be reduced and schools can focus more on curriculum issues. The external behaviour support groups should also 'sell' their services to schools as some schools may not be aware of the services they offer. The strategies to make parents more responsible and accountable are made in the form of proposals below:

PROPOSITIONS

Behaviour problems shown by students in developing and developed countries, while they may be similar in many respects, in others they can be different. In the West, the concerns of schools and society are mainly associated with vandalism, truancy, and bullying directed at other students and sometimes to staff (Dreikurs *et al.*, 1998). In the UK: "Every day around 50,000 pupils miss school without permission" (Clarke, 2002). Whereas bullying and theft are also significant behaviour problems in developing countries such as Botswana (Moswela, 2004), the most common reasons for students' disruptive behaviour are class boycotts and strikes that result in extensive damage to school and personal properties. The students' actions usually follow their complaints about poor meals, poor teaching and learning facilities, poor hostel maintenance, repressive school rules and regulations. For example, the 1994 strike by students in a secondary school in Botswana was prompted by what students called repressive rules and regulations which were not applied to the different students with consistency

(Report on Students' Strike at Moshupa Senior Secondary School, 1994). A students' strike at Moeng College in 2001 that saw a number of students expelled (they were later reinstated following an appeal by the parents) was the result of what the school head described as "an entrenched culture of violence among students" (Briscoe, 2001:8). Although investigations into the cause of a fire that burnt down the boys' hostel at Kagiso Senior Secondary School in Botswana are still underway, popular belief is that the students had a hand (Radio Talk, 2005). Other previous students' unrests in the country have shown a similar pattern. The proposals for parents' accountability may therefore differ from country to country with more inclination on replacement value in developing countries, for example Botswana, (because of strikes that end up in extensive damage to property) than in the developed countries where parents, accountability may be required in ensuring that children attend school regularly. The following proposals are made in respect of Botswana:

- In proven cases of damage to school property, the parent of the culprit should be legally required to make good of the damaged property.
- Where a student constantly disturbs the learning of others by whatever means, they should be suspended from school for a specified period. Their return to the school should be conditional. Upon return, the parent should assure the school that they have been monitoring the child's behaviour regularly during the suspension period. The parent should make such a report in writing and a written undertaking that a repeat of a similar offence would end in the termination of the child from school.
- The parent should be responsible for literally handing to the school a student who does not attend school regularly.
- Parents of day students should be required to confirm on a regular basis (by signing the homework books) that their children do some work at home.
- It should be the parents' responsibility to send children with drug and alcohol problems to a social educator.
- Schools should not make conclusive solutions to criminal cases involving students. These should be reported to the police. This is one way of enlisting the involvement and

participation of the community in students' discipline.

On the average most parents have one or two children that attend school. If each parent were to ensure that their children's bags do not contain dangerous weapons before they leave for school, cases of misconduct would be reduced. These measures, if they can be strictly adhered to by all the parties concerned, can make the parents to understand that teachers are only secondary parents who reinforce efforts initiated at home. As secondary parents, the teachers' knowledge of the individual student is limited. The parent on the other hand, having to deal with only a few children and for much longer and in a more natural and relaxed environment, are in a better position to understand the behaviour of their children and how to deal with it. The requirement to take full responsibility of their children's behaviour, in addition to spreading responsibility, may also stop parents from literally viewing students as 'school children' and not theirs (perhaps the usage of the name 'school going children' should be preferred to 'school children').

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