

CONTROVERSIES IN EDUCATION

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In the first number of Education 2000 I raised some issues on Inclusive Education. Written response was encouraging, but more promising was feedback from teachers who actually debated the issue during the limited time they have for discussion - mainly lunch break.

This edition's *Controversy* concerns the question of Discipline, Order and Punishment. I am reproducing some reflections one of my students made after some observations in a primary school class. This is how she interpreted what was happening:

“Control was exerted through shouting and corporal punishment (slapping them on the head and ears, pinching their necks and slapping their hands with a ruler or a piece of wood)”



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...The word ‘discipline’ confuses me, mainly because what I see happening around me does not make sense. Some say that discipline is beneficial yet when it is applied it is sometimes applied with hatred. I cannot understand how a thing that is beneficial to someone is given to him through pain. What does a person know about another person’s inner feelings, what right has a person got to punish an equal being especially when he is still an innocent child?

Unfortunately this is what I had to experience during my school visits. Control was exerted through shouting and corporal punishment (slapping them on the head and ears, pinching their necks and slapping their hands with a ruler or a piece of wood).

Once during my school visits I was quietly writing down some notes when the children started talking amongst themselves. The teacher stooped and with a dry smile on his face called one of the boys to his side and told him:

“Mur s’ghand Mr.X u ghidlu jaghtini ċ-ċikkulata”

(Go to Mr. X and tell him to give me the Chocolate”

At first I thought that it was someone’s birthday but I soon changed my mind when I saw the boy coming back with a piece of wood. The children got a sharp slap on their hands; they went back to their desks with red hands and tearful eyes.

From then on I changed completely. I thought that that if I had to take this class for six weeks, then I had to do a good job and prove to myself and everybody that this way of punishment was ineffective and harmful. I was discussing the syllabus with the teacher when he suddenly said:

“Jien naf li s-swat m’huwiex permess imma ha nghidlek Miss, ma’ dawn it-tip ta’ t’fal hekk trid timxi, il-bqija ma tasal imkien. Tant kemm ma tistax tfehemhom li ghalxejn tuza metodi ohra.”

(“I know that corporal punishment is not allowed, but with these kind of pupils this is what one has to do, otherwise it’s all for nothing. They’re so thick that you can’t explain to them in any other possible way”).

I wanted to say something but I kept calm and urged him to tell me more. He said that he first received many complaints from different parents but then he held a meeting with all the parents of the children in his class and somehow explained to them that corporal punishment is the best way of dealing with them.

As time went by I started noticed certain that did not make sense and were to blame for the children’s behaviour. The following are some points that I noticed and with which I did not agree.

A) Since the boys are all clustered in one group and the girls in another they have a lot of chance to talk among themselves, tease one another and bully each other;

B) The teacher is inconsistent in his methods. Why is it that after break class is disrupted (they do not go to class in a proper manner) and then, once they are in class they are expected to obey?

C) Students are imitating the teacher, slapping each other with the ruler and bullying each other. I was somehow reminded of Darwin’s theory: ‘Survival of the fittest’;

D) It seems that the stronger the blow the child receives, the more heroic he feels and the better the image he gets in front of the whole class.

I strongly disagree with such a system for one simple reason: My parents never used corporal punishment, yet both my brother and I have succeeded in life, have many interests, never got into trouble, and always respected and tried to help each other, especially our parents...

The children in the class obviously do not like such a system. For example, when the children were told that I was to take over the class for the following weeks one of the children came to me and said:

“Miss, int ma taghtiniex bir-riga hux?”

(“Miss you’re not going to hit us with the ruler are you?”).

At first I did not know what to say but I reassured him that I would not. However I made it clear from the start that there were going to be a couple of rules and ideas to be applied in class, these including....

What are your comments on the above experience? How should teachers act in order to safeguard the rights of children? If a colleague of yours inflicts pain on children, whether psychological or physical, what can you do? Do you report him/her to the Headteacher, the Division or phone Support Line on telephone number 179. Or persuade yourself that it is not your class and so not your business. Is the above incident an isolated one, or is the infliction of pain on children common in schools.

Please send us your comments to: The Editor, Education 2000, Faculty of Education, University of Malta or e-mail: jgio@eis.um.edu.mt