



WORK MATTERS

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COLUMN

Poverty School Violence And Crime In Trinidad And Tobago.

Lately, there has been an intense debate revolving around schooling in Trinidad and Tobago. Perhaps because we expect our schools to do so much. The most visible school problem is the lack of discipline and outright violence. For the past two decades, much public attention was directed to the problem of school violence. There are many media accounts of children victimized at school by other children. As a sociologist, I have hypothesized that violence in the nation's schools is intimately related to community factors that are frequently out of the control of school administrators and the victimization of both students and teachers.

I believe in an effort to maximize the safety of students and teachers, public and private funds must be made available to schools to develop a plethora of programs to guard school premises and resolve conflicts among students. There is little doubt that poverty has a strong connection to persistent violent offending. Children living under dire economic conditions are more likely to be victims as well as offenders.

Preschool children living in low-income families characterized by poor housing and unemployment are at especially high risk to become delinquent and become victimized. Poverty in this context refers to a situation in which the basic resources to maintain an average standard of living within a specific geographical area are lacking. Having a low income affects people in different ways. For example, the values of different ethnic and cultural groups provide a cultural context wherein poverty is perceived differently. There are subgroups in society who will perceive material deprivation as more accepted if everyone else within the cultural context is in the "same boat."

Poverty influences the family in many ways, not the least of which is the impact on parents' behaviour towards children. The stress caused by poverty in urban settings is known to diminish parents' capacity for supportive and consistent parenting. The stress situation creates a coercive and highly aggressive method of child con-

trol. Parents that use aggressive and violent tactics are operant conditioning the child into a cycle of violence. It is important for us to note that the great majority of poor children and adults are law-abiding citizens and children and adults from families of higher economic status do engage in serious delinquency and crime.

The most sensitive area of the school violence debate has persistently remained as a political football for the last thirty years with ideologies centered on one's socioeconomic status and ethnicity. Ethnic identity is an element of one's self-concept and, as such, corresponds to how one's membership in an ethnic group contributes to one's identity. Ethnic identity conveys one's attachment to their ethnic group, indicating how positive and important group membership is to the individual. Ethnic identity is fluid and can change with age or in response to situations.

The links between acculturation, ethnic identity and educational outcomes raise the question as to what underlies these associations. We consider the potential roles of self-fulfilling prophecies, stigma consciousness, and stereotype threat because each reflects a core theme of social psychology by specifying how beliefs and expectations shape behavior and performance. These processes are relevant to African descent Trinbagonians who bring their own culturally influenced norms, attitudes, and behaviors embedded in the mainstream culture. Acculturation and ethnic identity could initiate or strengthen self-fulfilling prophecies, stigma consciousness, and stereotype threat.

I hypothesize that a self-fulfilling prophecy is linked to the social problems of modern society by virtue of its creating social inequality and decreasing the educational achievement of students in the lower socioeconomic strata.

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