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Article rank | 27 Sep 2013 | *The Mercury*

Alternative ways, not corporal punishment, needed

I TOOK a risk and, with the help of a far-sighted businessman, Mmeli Ndwalane, brought a group of young people from two rural schools to an academic conference, Strategies for Non-violence in Education, at the Durban University of Technology (DUT). I feared it would not work, that they would not connect with researchers and would feel excluded.

I was wrong. They insisted on speaking, and spoke directly about what mattered to them. The effect was to ensure that the conference did not fall into the trap of pointscore, something that can happen at such events. There was a consistent comment from others who came, that the best thing we had done was to bring in the youngsters.

So what was their message? There was one theme, clearly angrily insisting that the key problem was the lack of corporal punishment – which, of course, assumed that the only violence was that by pupils.

I thought back to my own time as a teacher, long ago. Corporal punishment was still standard practice in the then Natal Education Department. I caned boys. And then my reading raised questions in my mind. When I moved to a rural town, and was on hostel duty for the first time, I had made a decision.

Two prefects brought a line of boys to be punished. Armed with the relevant ordnance, I said: "I am not allowed to cane them."

Indeed, even at that time the only legal caning was by a principal or by a teacher in the presence of a principal.

Unsurprisingly, that act of resistance created a lot of conflict. The prefects were furious. I had violated the whole structure of authority they believed in – which to my mind involved religion, masculinity and their belief in apartheid.

The second boy in line eventually said: "Sir, can you please just cane us so we can go?" I had forgotten this until he told me, 40 years later, after I discovered that he was now a senior colleague of mine at DUT. At which point I was extremely relieved that I had stuck to my decision. To humiliate someone and meet them years later is not good.

There is, in fact, a series of studies of the effects of corporal punishment, summarised by Professor Geoff Harris reported at the same conference mentored earlier. Their findings are remarkably consistent. Corporal punishment is negative for the mental health of children, and for their future mental health. It is strongly linked with greater aggressiveness in children. And so on.

Further, as Harris pointed out, having corporal punishment in place is like a drug; it stops teachers and parents from thinking about alternatives.

There are many alternatives. My own organisation works at times with young people, and needs their co-operation.

The issue of how people behave in relation to one another is addressed through negotiating agreement. Once that agreement has been reached, it tends to stick. And the reason for this approach is not only to achieve the right behaviour. It is to make a statement about what it means to respect one another.

There are some tough questions about our dishonesty in opposing violence while allowing violence to be part of the daily routine. For example, most of the boys I used to cane were destined to become farmers.

There is a seldom acknowledged and shameful practice of farmers beating farmworkers, a racist violence that humiliated parents in their families and left a long legacy of harm. How could I condemn this, ethically, when I had accepted the principle of violence as a way of controlling people?

I write this to challenge teachers and parents – not to condemn them. I think the main reason for those who do hit children is caught up in their own histories. That may help to explain, but it does not justify. We do, though, need processes to address the practice. For example, at one workshop, youngsters from a school volunteered to meet their teachers to assist them in finding an alternative to corporal punishment, an offer sadly ignored.

We need to find ways to speak with one another, honestly, as South Africans, and acknowledge how we have hurt one another and how we have been hurt. Within this process, we need to involve the thinking and perspective of young people. They need respect, not punishment.



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