Punishment in schools

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A FEW weeks ago I read in this newspaper the story of an eleven-year school student in a school in Haripur who tried to commit suicide after his teachers beat him up badly because they suspected he had stolen a muffler. This, to me, showed the shocking state of education in Pakistan.

The incident has tormented me for days and made me reflect on my responsibility as an educationist. I thought about why this sad incident had taken place and what could be done to ensure that such backward and cruel practices are forever banished. The foremost question that comes to mind is: why was the child beaten up severely for several days without any other teacher, the school administration, people in the community or his parents intervening? And, is the fact that sufficient attention is not paid to these issues the primary reason why such cruel actions happen against the weaker sections of the population — especially women and children?

Perhaps, this is one reason why we have so many street children. They run away from their homes because of the physical, and with it mental, abuse that they experience. Is physical punishment in schools one of the reasons that there is a high dropout rate in our primary schools? Recent research shows that one of the most important reasons for young children running away from homes and becoming street children is physical abuse at home and at school.

Above all, I see this critical case as an important indicator of the kind of quality education that the government provides to our young children in public schools. It also highlights, to a large extent, the widening gap between educational institutions in the private and public sectors.

The news item tells us that the victim was detained by his school teachers when suspecting him of a petty theft. He was then beaten up by several of his school teachers for a number of days. The child kept pleading his innocence and even threatened to commit suicide if beaten up again. However, the cruel and savage teachers beat him up repeatedly thus forcing the small boy to burn himself in a state of desperation and helplessness. One pssibility could be that the victim's pleas went unheard or that fearing more punishment he did not ask anyone for help. The other more chilling possibility could be that everyone else knowingly looked the other way.

This wakeup call from one of the young victims of our flawed school systems is heart rending indeed and must get attention of all the stakeholders, especially those in some position of authority. Violence has become a hallmark of our primitive society and its cruel ways. The weaker segments of our society, women and children, are becoming frequent victims of these male aggressors. The fact that some of these tormentors are in fact recruited in our public schools is something that the educational authorities must take a serious note of. The use of physical abuse must he banned in schools and the teachers indulging in these cruel acts should be punished accordingly. Awareness-raising campaigns by NGOs should be organized so that preventive and corrective measures are put into place. What is required above all is an attitudinal change in society so that the rights of women and children are accorded greater respect.

Schools are considered a haven for young children so that they can be educated in a safe and secure place. Legislation should be passed outlawing physical punishment in educational institutions and should be implemented so that the victims or their parents can seek help without any fear of reprisals. In this particular case, the teachers should not only lose their jobs they should also be severely punished.

We read frequently about what the government is doing to increase literacy levels. Normally, the solution seems to be based around having as many schools as possible so that enrolment rates can go up. Sadly, this one incident tells a different story. Outdated curriculums, obsolete methodologies and a dearth of physical resources are not the only problems plaguing our public school system. Intricately enmeshed with them are the intolerant backward and rigid attitudes that some of school principals and teachers have and this is why corporal punishment is so common. While the government does pay attention to issues such as curriculum development and teaching methods, little or nothing is done to tell teachers to be kind and caring with students.

The government has to do something to ban physical abuse and corporal punishment in its schools. The ministry of education should give this issue the priority it deserves as should NGOs and human rights organizations. ■