

New approach needed to discipline children

By Kusum Jain

NEW DELHI, November 28. On November 10, Deepa Pandey, a 14-year-old schoolgirl in Lucknow, lost her life for not wearing the right uniform to school. On October 18, Ojaswi Khanna, a 14-year-old Delhi schoolboy, lost his hearing in his left ear after being slapped by his maths teacher for not bringing a compass to school.

Many children prefer to play truant or drop out of school altogether rather than suffer a beating by their teachers. Others continue to attend school but fail to learn anything after being consistently humiliated by teachers or principals.

There are numerous instances of corporal punishment for minor infractions. Such behaviour on the part of insensitive school authorities can have serious consequences, both physical and psychological.

No statistics are available regarding the number of children who have been disabled or paid with their lives for annoying school authorities. No committee has been set up to investigate the ill effects of corporal punishment on children.

The children themselves are frequently too ashamed and scared to share their agony with their parents. Even if they do, some parents fail to empathise or are afraid to complain for fear of offending the school authorities. Thus violence against students in schools goes unchecked.

The National Policy on Education, 1986, states: "Corporal punishment will be firmly excluded from the educational system in order to have a child-centred approach." Endorsing this position, a review committee noted in 1990 that "corporal punishment is already excluded on paper in most of the states/Union territories. Yet it persists in most parts of the country. Therefore the policy would have done well to emphasise measures to control the socio-cultural, psychological and educational factors that justify corporal punishment in the minds of the teachers.

The Delhi Education Act, 1973, allows corporal punishment as a disciplinary measure but states specific conditions regarding who, how and when it can be used. But these rules are violated every day. Rule 18 of the code of conduct for teachers in the Delhi Education Act states that a teacher can be held guilty of misbehaviour or cruelty towards any parent, guardian, student, teacher or other employee of the school.

A teacher found guilty is liable to disciplinary action specified in Rule 115 which allows a suspension order. But how many teachers have been suspended for violating the code?

Beating is an irrational and barbarous way to discipline children. It forces children to submit to the violence of adults for disobedience but it will not make them responsible for their behaviour. It shatters their self-confidence and self-esteem, induces

fear, and, worst of all, sanctifies violence as a way of dealing with a problem.

Last year, the Parents' Forum for Meaningful Education asked for a ban on corporal punishment in schools when invited to present its views by the Chandla committee set up by the Delhi government to review the 1973 Act.

How can children learn in a fearful atmosphere? Even verbal assaults aimed at humiliating children vitiate the atmosphere of schools. Albert Einstein, who himself experienced such treatment, said in 1936, "To me the worst thing seems to be for a school principally to work with methods of fear, force and artificial authority. Such treatment destroys the sound sentiments, sincerity and self-confidence of the pupil. It produces the submissive subject."

Government reports on the high dropout rate and low level of learning in schools do not acknowledge corporal punishment as being one of the main reasons. The 1994 report of the District Primary Education Programme of the ministry of human resource development revealed an alarmingly low level of learning but failed to consider corporal punishment as a cause. A UNICEF report in 1993 finds an unattractive school environment as one of the reasons for students dropping out.

The government has enacted laws to punish parents for not sending their children to school, but it has

failed to recognise the problems parents have to face with schools. Even the poorest parent would like to send a child to school. But are teachers held accountable for physically and emotionally crippling children and pushing them out of school?

Child-beating should be considered an offence. Most people lack the patience or inclination to listen to children. It is argued that parents often beat their children to punish them for disobedience; why object if teachers do the same?

This approach should be replaced by another. For instance, at the Centre of Education in Pondicherry, children are not usually scolded, though discipline is the key word at the ashram. Schools should adopt other rational ways to induce discipline in students: counselling and discussions with students and parents, showing empathy towards children and making them see the consequences of their irresponsible behaviour.

Teachers' associations should be strengthened to allow parents to play an active role in sharing problems.

To create an environment of mutual love and respect conducive for learning, Einstein suggested: "Give into the power of the teacher the fewest possible coercive measures, so that the only source of the pupil's respect for the teacher is the human and intellectual qualities of the latter."

(Kusum Jain belongs to the Parents Forum for Meaningful Education)