

parenting Verve

verve feedback

E-mail verve@nl.co.za

SMS 32546 (Each SMS costs R1)



Fear stalks South African schools as discipline gives way to classroom unruliness, even violence. Tough love is the way back, says educationist Brigitte Thompson, director of Positive Behaviour Management. She speaks to Helen Grange

She's been stabbed, bitten and hit over the head, so Brigitte Thompson knows what she's talking about when it comes to school discipline.

A seasoned teacher who spent five years in some of the UK's most unruly schools, she endured these assaults during her three-year tenure at the Wilton Centre in Scotland, a school for kids with behavioural problems.

"It was like a war zone," says Thompson. "But after a programme of assertive discipline, 80% of the kids went back into mainstream education."

Returning to South Africa four years ago, she was "devastated" to see the state of our own schools, especially in the poorer communities.

"The classes are too big, the teachers are demoralised and

huge percentages of teachers have left the profession for greener pastures," she says.

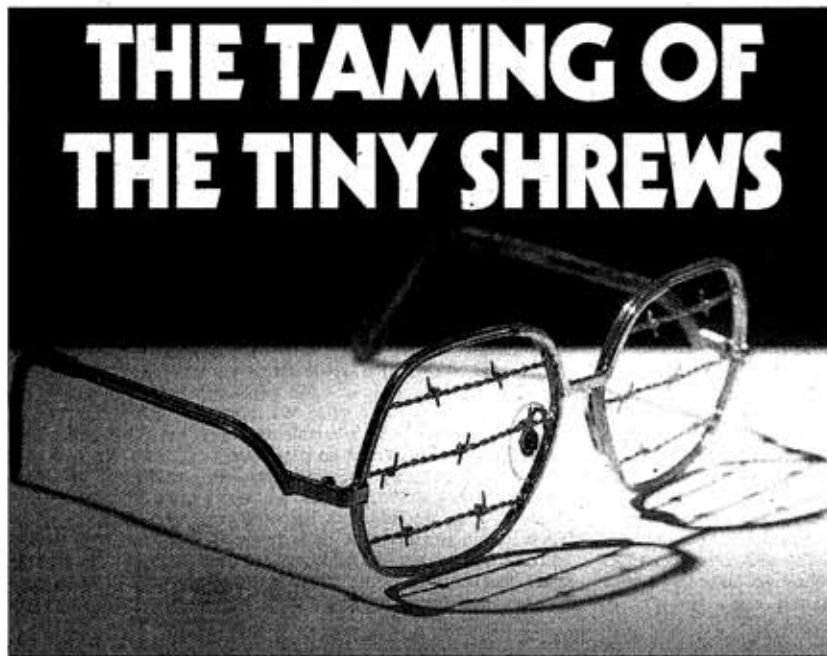
Add to that the alarming new statistic from the SA Institute of Race Relations: only 23% of children feel safe at school.

Trained in American educationist Lee Canter's "Assertive Discipline" method, Thompson and her team are contracted by provincial governments to train teachers in some of the country's most problematic and dangerous schools.

Their mission is to help them rein in renegade learners and get South African classrooms under control again.

And they are accomplishing that mission, with good results.

At a number of schools in Joburg with severe discipline problems, her team has helped to create structures and behav-



PICTURE: HAWARUK LEVISON/REUTERS

THE TAMING OF THE TINY SHREWS

our plans for learners, which have turned these environments around.

"Her programme is very effective," remarks Charlotte Struwig, principal of Buccleuch Primary School.

"It is hard work for the teachers to change their mindsets, but the difference is noticeable and very rewarding."

Parents who've seen the firm, but non-violent, disciplinary child-rearing techniques used on TV's *Supernanny* will recognise the "Assertive Discipline" philosophy.

As in the TV programme, Thompson has found that parents are often the root of the problem.

Youngsters, from disadvan-

tagged communities particularly, tend to be left to their own devices much of the time as parents spend long hours at work and commuting.

"The children have no boundaries at all," says Thompson. "Parents can be so neglectful that they don't even know what grade their child is in."

Children from affluent homes aren't necessarily better off. Rich parents are prone to be selfish and emotionally absent, leaving the parenting to teachers or nannies.

"There are also cases of middle-class careerists going overseas on five, six-month contracts, leaving their child with a domestic worker," she says.

In some communities, the

grandparents are doing all the parenting while the parents are working, but discipline isn't applied, and it shouldn't be the role of grandparents anyway, Thompson believes.

In other cases the child's home is an unhappy or abusive place, due to, say, a parent dying, sexual abuse or a single parent entertaining a string of lovers.

In the poorest areas, children are going to school hungry, getting one meal a day, then going back to homes without electricity.

Thompson and her team counsel parents where they identify the need, teaching them how to assert discipline and control without resorting to corporal punishment or

abuse.

"Most parents co-operate. They are able to express their woes, too," Thompson says.

Social ills are also an issue, but one that must be dealt with by the police or relevant organisations. In the Cape Flats, for instance, gangsterism is rife and it filters into the schools. Gangsterism causes behavioural problems in mostly boys, but today girls are increasingly affected, Thompson says.

"Girls are carrying knives and joining gangs," she says.

Back in the classroom, however, teachers have a critical disciplinary role to play and a deplorable number of them are failing miserably.

"Where classes are massive, teachers are just not coping.

"The kids have too much free rein."

The old system of merit and demerit, where detention or corporal punishment – which is alive and well, incidentally – is the standard punishment, doesn't work. It focuses on the negative, whereas it's the positive you need to encourage, says Thompson.

In one of the worst schools she has worked in, she found one teacher had clocked 37 days of sick leave. Another was coming to school drunk every day.

In instances where staff management is the rot, Thompson will assist in implementing proper disciplinary structures.

But her work lies mostly in empowering teachers with a five-step corrective plan that she says has been proven to turn situations around each and every time – if applied consistently.

"In a typical classroom, 5% of kids are intrinsically motivated, 5% have emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBDs)

and 90% are what we call 'tourists', average kids who follow the direction of where all the focus is.

"If the focus is all on the kids with EBDs, that's the behaviour the 'tourists' will tend to emulate," she says.

The trick is to encourage good behaviour in the class, and stop shouting, hitting or chastising the kids with EBDs. They should be dealt with in isolation.

Attention deficit disorder is a common problem among difficult children, but so is pent-up anger.

Thompson provides anger management courses for children, letting them express their feelings and assuring them that it's OK to feel angry.

"We have 'circle time', a lesson-based programme in which the children sit in a circle and talk about how they feel today. We do role-plays with themes like bullying, friendship, a new sibling, divorce," she says.

Gambling is a huge factor, she adds, saying stabbings are often the result of one child owing another money.

"Teachers should be aware of the patterns leading up to violence and act when children say things like: 'That child stole my money.'"

In Thompson's behaviour management programme, every child's behaviour patterns are monitored on a tracking sheet and it soon becomes apparent which children consistently misbehave.

The irony is that kids with discipline issues tend to be very intelligent and perceptive, with strong personalities, says Thompson.

"They can be turned into leading lights by reinforcing good behaviour, proving it is a

more powerful tool in getting attention. In our system, rewards for kids like feel-good sticker charts and raffles are built in. It's about building their self-esteem."

If all else fails, a five-step corrective plan kicks in. The first step is to issue a reminder when the first rule is breached. The second breach requires the teacher to pull the child aside for five minutes and ask why they are not making good choices today.

"This is when you might establish the underlying cause, like: 'Mom went to the casino and didn't come home last night,'" says Thompson.

The third step is getting the child to fill out a journal, explaining their behaviour and exploring what they could have done instead.

The fourth step is to contact the child's parents and establish possible factors at home.

The fifth breach requires the intervention of the head of department or principal, who will exercise all options with the most serious being an external disciplinary hearing.

Expulsion is a thing of the past, says Thompson, but the child can ultimately be suspended or referred to a school like Boys Town.

But every effort can and should be made to reverse the disciplinary crisis in schools now, warns Thompson.

"Schools in the UK are much worse," she says. "Discipline has been lost altogether. If we don't act now, that's where we will end up and we don't have the resources to come back from there."

Thompson can be contacted at thompson@positivebehaviour.co.za or brig@rmweb.co.za. Website: www.positivebehaviour.co.za



SUPERNANNY IN THE CLASSROOM:

Brigitte Thompson uses a method very similar to the firm but non-violent disciplinary techniques shown on parenting TV programmes.