

One Morning at School

"States Parties to the present Charter shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that a child who is subjected to schools or parental discipline shall be treated with humanity and with respect for the inherent dignity of the child and in conformity with the present [African] Charter."

- African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child

Hitting
people
is
wrong.
Children
are
people,
too.

It was 7 AM on a Friday morning. I sat in the round thatched hut that served as the staff room, waiting for the Assembly to begin. In my mind, I was preparing the announcement about football practice I would soon make.

The bell rang and I walked to join the other teachers on the classroom block steps, facing a hundred and fifty students. Arranged in six ranks and dressed in varying degrees of school uniform, they stood blinking in the early morning sunlight. I greeted the other teachers present. The headmaster, unusually young for his post, shook my hand warmly.

The metalwork teacher gripped my hand and pumped it vigorously while assaulting me with loud and high-pitched Mandinka greetings. An ex-soldier, he was small, muscular and very stern with his students. At any time of day, his frenzied threats to beat students could be heard in the peanut fields surrounding the school.

The school sang the national anthem, held together by a handful of girls at the front, and we turned to the East to pray. With the formalities out of the way, the headmaster ran through a lecture about the need to be disciplined and hardworking, and a reminder to pay school fees.

He then began to recall an event that had taken place the previous evening, as he was leaving the school premises with the Chairman of the PTA. They had come across

two boys fighting outside the school gates. When they were instructed to stop and tuck their shirts in, one of the boys had apparently insulted the PTA chairman. There was a growing sense of anticipation amongst the students as the headmaster reached the conclusion of his story. They all knew that he would finish by naming the offender and the assembly would end with a beating. Those students who knew nothing of the event began to excitedly guess who the culprit was.

It was an eighth grade student named Pa Lamin. He struggled in lessons, excelled on the football pitch and spoke very little English. By the look on his face, I could tell he didn't know what the headmaster was talking about until he heard his name.

The ranks of the students parted, and Pa Lamin was pushed to the front by his excited friends. The metalwork teacher was shouting about how hard he was going to flog the boy, and prefects were sent into the bush to bring back a selection of sticks. I noticed a distant wailing and for a moment I thought someone was grieving in the village behind the school. I then realised that the sound was coming from Pa Lamin. He began to shriek in panic and beg not to be beaten. His friends laughed nervously.

The prefects returned with a choice of sticks and the metalwork teacher took his time in selecting a thick one, almost a meter in length. The

prefects forced Pa Lamin to kneel down and they held his arms to the side to prevent him from protecting himself.

I began to feel sick. I'd been a teacher at this school for a year, but I couldn't confront the headmaster in front of the entire school and try to stop what was about to happen. I walked briskly back to the staff room. As I reached the doorway, Pa Lamin began to shriek hysterically, and soon afterwards the cracking sound began.

The cracks came in short bursts and I imagined Pa Lamin writing on the ground as the metalwork teacher circled him, positioning himself for the next assault. The cracks continued even after the shrieking stopped.

After what seemed like a long time, the assembly dispersed and everyone continued the school day as if nothing unusual had happened. The students began milling towards their classrooms, gossiping excitedly about what they had just witnessed. The teachers ambled into the staff room, talking of how it was good to make an example of such a stubborn student. Was this so normal that nobody felt any guilt or pity?

As I carried my books to my first lesson, I saw Pa Lamin limping out of the school gates to his one-week suspension. There was blood running down his legs.

(This article was submitted to the CPA by a former teacher in the North Bank CRD.)