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PREVENTION OF DELINQUENT BEHAVIOUR

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(Factors leading to delinquent behaviour by high school students, and methods I may employ as a health and physical educator to overcome this problem.)

I was somewhat surprised and disappointed to learn last month that a Year 9 Aboriginal student, whom I have taught since he arrived at high school last year, had broken into the Home Economics section of his local primary school and embarked on a spree of damage and destruction. What could have possessed this lad who can be friendly, helpful and positively trouble free for much of the time at school, to follow such a course of seemingly unprovoked and senseless action. My school, Murgon State High School, frequently plays host to delinquent behaviour by both Aboriginal and European descent students. In the past 16 months I have been physically threatened, sworn at and deliberately disobeyed. Fortunately for my self-respect's sake, I have not been alone in receiving this tirade of abuse and disrespect. We have 120 Aborigines in a school of 480, and delinquent behaviour is not peculiar to either group.

Looking further afield, Meyerson (1975) informs us that, in 1967 in Great Britain, 50 per cent of all crimes committed were by persons between the ages of ten and twenty-one. He further states:

It is at the turning point from early- to mid-adolescence, i.e., at the point of beginning movement towards heterosexuality and intercourse, real or fantasised, that delinquent acts are at their highest for both males and females.

So clearly Murgon High students are not alone in their delinquent behaviour. In this paper I shall examine some of the factors that may lead to delinquent behaviour in general and at Murgon State High School in particular. Further, I shall consider methods that

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I may engage as a health and physical educator to overcome this ,
behaviour.

Social psychologist Erikson sees adolescence as a crisis in identity, and as a period of exploring alternatives and decision making. If before, during or after this process is in operation, the various aspects of one's self-image are in disagreement, then internal conflicts will eventuate. Erikson further suggests that, if the personal identity search founders or self-doubts become excessive, then self destructive (delinquent) behaviour may be the result. Myerson sees a delinquent act as -

an expression of despair - failed hope, resulting in
a desperate act to establish, by hook or by crook, a
sense of belonging.

We have students at Murgon High who must have grave doubts about their sense of belonging. Information related to me by administrative staff, the Aboriginal teacher aides and, at times, by the students themselves, indicate that many Aboriginal students particularly do not live with either parent and in some cases are not even sure who both parents are or where these people now live. They live with different families for short times, and face the added ignominy of being subject to racism. (For example - Aborigines are seldom, if ever, chosen for jobs as shop assistants in the town of Murgon, as shop proprietors feel this will evoke such a negative response from customers that they may spend their money elsewhere.) These may well be reasons why some of these students engage in delinquent behaviour, perhaps in some attempt to 'get back' at others better off than they are, or to make their mark and prove or establish their identity. Students at my high school seem to be almost obsessed with writing their names on anything from a fence post to the grandstand or, of course, under desks. The advent of liquid paper and felt-tip pens has proved a great boon to our devoted autograph writers. I see this as behaviour of adolescents trying to gain some feeling of identity. Meyerson (1975) believes this feeling may arise during the perpetration of a delinquent act, and may occur when the adolescent is confused, frightened or anxious.

The same writer gives insight into why we may have so many fist fights at Murgon. He believes violence is the simplest 'proving' offence for the strong adolescent, and drinking and drug taking may be easier alternatives for the weaker ones. A number of our students are confirmed petrol sniffers. Ingenuity is able to overcome lack of money and other more conventional drugs, in a bid to get 'high'. One female Aboriginal student - who was later permanently excluded for persistent delinquent and antisocial behaviour - very nearly did herself permanent damage by eating liquid paper.

The Aboriginal students of Murgon High are taught exclusively by 'white' teachers. We have two Aboriginal aides but no qualified Aboriginal teachers. Reid (1975) has demonstrated the potential problems of this in writing:

Some pupils were anti-school, rejected its values and those of teachers and could be seen as behavioural problems or delinquents. The explanation for this was partly in terms of a cultural clash between pupils and teachers.

Miller and Kvaraceus (1959:144) add weight to this suggestion in writing:

A conflict of culture between school administrators and lower-class students is precipitating delinquent behaviour.

But we at Murgon High must teach on regardless. Aboriginal students in many cases have different speech patterns and vocabulary from their teachers. The traditional Aboriginal custom of sharing becomes cheating in class, and no doubt there are many other Aboriginal traits - some or many of which I may have no idea or appreciation of - that may be in conflict with what a teacher expects of his class. Further, what we present for students to learn may be not of the slightest bit of interest to them, and therefore not be serving their needs.

As a health and physical educator I feel there are several methods I can employ to help alleviate this problem. Of critical importance, I believe, is my attitude to students. It must be important to accept them for what they are and treat them absolutely fairly, showing genuine affection and friendliness where possible, and never being racist.

Investigations, observations and interviews by Carl Werthman (1963) showed that negro students "would not stand for any reference to race, dress, hair or ability". Werthman argued the most critical factor in these students accepting a teacher's authority was fairness in the awarding of grades. This is in keeping with my experience of students at Murgon High, and indeed at all other schools I have been associated with. Werthman also discovered that the negro students preferred to be requested to do things and rejected demands or insistence. This is certainly the case with a majority of Aboriginal students who are often visibly upset by strong demands and insistence. Frequently this leads to delinquent behaviour in their refusing to then follow the direction, and ultimately swearing at the teacher and/or threatening physical abuse.

Reynolds (1976) has carried out investigations that have strong implications for Murgon High. He explains that in his studies the more successful schools - producing fewer delinquents, having better pupil attendance and performance than other schools - tended to be smaller, have lower staff turnovers and smaller classes. Staff turnover at Murgon High is usually relatively high and I believe this adds to student insecurity and consequently a greater chance of delinquent behaviour. My second year has certainly been easier than my first, and other teachers have also found this. Part of the reason may be the students feel they now know me, therefore feel more secure and are less likely to become a part of delinquent behaviour. Smaller classes certainly allow you to spend more time with each student, get to know them better and establish more positive relationships with them. This should allow them more affection and attention, fewer self doubts, and consequently lead to better behaviour.

As subject-area-moderator I have a great opportunity to help potential delinquents by ensuring the content of the courses they undertake is relevant to them, interesting, enjoyable and well worthwhile. This should mean the greatest chance for success in the course and avoidance of the negative feelings that would accompany disinterest and failure.

Physical activity in the practical units of Health and Physical Education should help students burn up energy and release aggressive tendencies in an acceptable manner. It must be better to expend one's aggression in a foot race or tennis match, than in a fight behind the toilet block.

In addition, the feeling of achievement in physical training and activity should also mean a more positive self image and again less chance for delinquent actions. Myerson believes "adolescence is a time of hyperactivity and hyper impulsiveness". Physical Education's ability to channel this activity in positive directions and reduce impulsiveness is obvious.

On a more individual basis Myerson claims pairs are important to delinquency, arguing that healthy pairing is crucial both in preventing delinquent acts and in treatment. Physical Education is an activity subject. During activity it would then be advantageous to have students working in carefully selected pairs for partner activities. I learned this very early in my teaching career and have many times had to split up boys who, when together, just could not keep out of trouble.

In the light of Werthman's studies, I feel it would be beneficial to discuss with classes our expectations of each other. I would hope the result would be that for their hard work and good behaviour they could expect fair marking, effective, interesting teaching of relevant subject matter in a very positive and friendly manner.

Such actions may not be able to wipe out the hurt and scars of many of my students - particularly Aborigines - but it may go a long way towards showing that someone really cares for and about them. Hopefully, positive feelings and a higher level of self-esteem will reduce their chances of engaging in delinquent behaviour - a step in the right direction by anyone's standards.

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