Commentary

Youth Suicide as a "Wild" Problem:
Implications for Prevention Practice

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Abstract: The intent of this article is to explore the idea that youth suicide –which is conceptualized here as an unstable, historically contingent, and unruly problem – cannot be solved, nor contained, through an exclusive reliance on pre-determined, universal or standardized interventions. Informed by a constructionist perspective, social problems like youth suicide are understood as constituted through language and other relational practices. Based on a close reading of the mainstream school-based suicide prevention literature it is argued that youth suicide has largely been constructed as a "tame problem," and this in turn places certain limits on what might be thought, said or done in response. By re-imagining youth suicide as a "wild" and unstable problem that is deeply embedded in local, historical, and relational contexts, more expansive possibilities for thinking, learning and responding might become available. Implications for school-based suicide prevention are discussed.

"...problems are problems because of the ways in which certain ideas, ideologies, practices, and discourses frame them as such" (Kameniar, et al. 2010, p. 15)

Contrary to what some contemporary discussions on the topic might suggest, youth suicide does not carry a singular meaning, nor is it a stable, certain or "tame" problem. As such, it cannot be solved, nor contained, through an exclusive reliance on pre-determined, standardized, de-contextualized interventions. Borrowing from Rittel and Webber (1973) who first distinguished between "tame" and "wicked" problems, it is suggested that youth suicide might be more fruitfully understood as a wicked and unruly (i.e." wild") problem that is associated with high levels of instability,

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uncertainty, unpredictability and complexity. This re-conceptualization is not meant to suggest that the project of youth suicide prevention is futile, nor is it meant to suggest that contemporary approaches are wrong or bad. It is however an invitation to think differently and expand our repertoire of responses.

Specifically, this article is devoted to exploring the possibilities that might be available when we consider alternatives to the dominant biomedical framework for conceptualizing suicide. For example, what opportunities might be opened up for prevention practitioners and young people themselves when youth suicide is understood as something other (or more) than, a singular, knowable, object of scientific knowledge (Marsh, 2010)? By unsettling the stable, singular and individualized construction of youth suicide and by re-imagining it as a "wild" and unruly problem that is deeply embedded in local, historical, political and relational contexts, it is suggested that more expansive possibilities for thinking, learning and responding might become available.

Before moving on, it is important to acknowledge at the outset that questioning the current orthodoxy is not without its hazards. As Marsh (2010) astutely notes, by loosening the grip on conventional ways of thinking about the problem of suicide (i.e. as directly linked to individual pathology) we may invite fear (and criticism) that we are being reckless and possibly risking further suicide deaths. And yet, when we hold our practices up for critique and contestation, we explicitly recognize the inevitable limitations of all paradigms and practice frameworks (including the one presented here), and also create space for fresh ways of thinking and acting. Jenkins (2008), who is inspired by Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, writes "In offering a critique, then, we do not stand outside a practice as its external judge; rather we offer a *responding* practice" (emphasis added, p. 46). To be clear,

> [w]hat is sought is the enabling of new freedoms of thought and action in place of those that have come to be constraining and problematic in themselves – not new freedoms whereby it becomes easier for people to kill themselves, more the creating of a space where a wider framework for understanding and responding to the reality or possibility of such acts could arise (Marsh, 2010, p. 8).

With this commitment in the foreground, the next section begins with an introduction to constructionist ideas. There are multiple, overlapping, and at times contradictory strands of "social (or relational) constructionism," each reflecting different traditions and communities of practice (McNamee & Hosking, 2012). For the purposes here, a particular postmodern perspective is adopted. Specifically, rationality is understood to be a communal process, language is conceptualized as constitutive and performative (i.e. words do things), and all knowledge is understood to be local, relational and contingent (Gergen, 2000, 2009, McNamee & Hosking, 2012). Next, Rittel and Webber's classic typology of "tame vs. wicked problems" is introduced (Grint, 2005). By unpacking some of the assumptions of contemporary school-based youth suicide prevention practice as reflected in the scholarly literature, the next section highlights how youth suicide has largely been constructed as a tame problem. A critical examination of the implications (and limits) of what might be thought, said or done in response is then explored. Finally, some alternatives for extending and re-conceptualizing current suicide prevention practices, with a particular emphasis on the school context, are provided. The central argument being advanced here is that when we limit what can be thought or done in the name of youth suicide prevention by adhering too tightly to a singular form of knowledge, and when we attempt to respond to a problem like youth suicide, *as though* we had certainty on our side, we may be unnecessarily restricting our creativity and limiting our vision of the future as prevention practitioners and educators.

Constructionist Perspectives and Relational Understandings

Rather than representing a singular reality or objective truth, social constructionists argue that problems like youth suicide are products of social negotiation and relational meaning making (Gergen, 2000, 2009; Hosking, 2008). In other words, these problems are made intelligible through complex discursive practices that take place within specific local communities. Importantly, this is not meant to suggest that social problems like suicide, poverty, bullying, homelessness, or child abuse do not have real, material, consequential negative effects on the lives of children, youth and families. It just means that that the meanings are not inherent to the problems themselves and the problems are not beyond the reach of social influence (Weinberg, 2009).

Such discursively oriented, postmodern and poststructural perspectives are by no means new, and yet apart from a few notable exceptions (Fullagar, 2003; Marsh, 2010), they have rarely been taken up in the field of suicidology. On the other hand, these theories have been usefully put to work in a number of other diverse fields and professional contexts, including education, communication studies, organizational development, therapy and counseling, and child welfare (McNamee & Gergen, 1992; Hosking, 2008; Parton & O'Byrne, 2000; St. Pierre, 2000), suggesting that the field of suicidology might benefit from expanding its traditional base to be more inclusive of diverse theoretical perspectives and critiques.

In their 1977 text on the construction of social problems, Spector and Kituse suggested that rather than understanding social problems as objective conditions, they should instead be understood as a *kind of activity* (Loseke, 1999). Thus rather than being "out there" awaiting discovery, in the constructionist perspective being explored here, problems like youth suicide are actively constituted through language and other social practices which take place within specific local communities. As Loseke puts it, "Problems don't spring up into our consciousness; we have to categorize our experiences; we have to name them; in naming them we give them meaning" (p. 177).

Constructionist approaches typically call into question the taken-for-granted quality of certain ideas, many of which are the mainstay of professional and scientific discourses (i.e. knowledge, truth, objectivity, facts, reality, evidence, etc.). They foreground the role of relational understandings and social practices and

pay particular attention to the place of context, history, language and discourse in generating communal knowledge (Gergen, 2000). They also illuminate the uncertainties and ambiguities of everyday practice and recognize that there are multiple understandings and interpretations of what is real, good, and true. Of relevance here, "[r]elational constructionism explores the ways in which differences in assumptions generate different forms of practice" (McNamee & Hosking, 2012, p. 16).

It is important to emphasize that this orientation is not meant to dispute the painful reality of youth suicide; "… after all there are dead bodies and grief"(Marsh, 2010, p. 6) to contend with. It is however meant to show that our contemporary way of making sense of suicide (i.e. as an individual tragedy linked to mental illness) is not natural, required, universal or fixed (Weinberg, 2009). Furthermore, this call for greater diversity in our theories and practices arises out of a context in which the current knowledge about preventing suicide and suicidal behaviours among youth is extremely limited (Miller, Eckert & Mazza, 2009). Because so many questions remain regarding the promise and potential of youth suicide prevention practices, and definitive answers will likely never be forthcoming, multiple, alternative formulations are worth entertaining. It is quite likely that there are several ways of thinking about and responding to youth suicide that could potentially be useful, especially if we are permitted to think, know and understand in more expansive and less regulated ways (Rorty, 1999).

Languaging Problems Into Being

As a way to illustrate how discursive social practices bring different realities into being, it is useful to consider a few brief examples from different practice contexts. First, focusing on the eradication of the "use of children as weapons of war" achieves a different effect than focusing on "child soldiers." The former implicates others who use "children as weapons" while the latter treats the category of "child soldier" as natural, and invites a focus on the children themselves in their capacities as "soldiers." Second, a focus on the "prevention of the sexual exploitation of children" invites a different set of considerations than does a focus on "youth prostitution." Finally, "female circumcision" is quite likely to invite a different reaction than a discussion of "male circumcision," which is different yet again from a discussion of "female genital mutilation."

Each of these ways of constructing the problems achieves different, consequential effects and they all emerge from specific communities and traditions. Even the construction of these as "problems" (as opposed to situations, issues, conditions, or responses), achieves particular

effects.[1] The meticulous attention paid to how "social reality is put together and assigned meaning" (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009, p. 3) is what social constructionist orientations in all of their theoretical diversity, enable us to more fully appreciate. More specifically, when social problems are understood to emerge from local language practices, sociohistorical processes and complex relations of power, different understandings of what the problem is, where it is located, who is responsible, and what (or who) ought to be the target for intervention, can be entertained (Walton, 2011). (For a classic example of how mental illness might be viewed as a coordinated, discursive accomplishment, see D. Smith, 1978).

Finally, accepting the constructed nature of social problems does not automatically lead to the view that all constructions are equally useful, valuable or preferable, at least not in the version being advanced here (Rorty, 1999). It is well understood that there are multiple, ongoing threats to young people's well-being all over the world. Protecting and caring for those who are vulnerable and taking a stand against harmful practices of domination, exclusion and oppression, while staying open to multiple and contradictory understandings of suicidal behaviour, are explicit ethical commitments guiding this work.

Constructing Youth Suicide

As others have cogently argued (Marsh, 2010; Szaz, 1999), meanings of suicide are always in flux. For example, despite the current, western understanding of suicide as the tragic, individual action of a person who is "mentally ill," suicide has been understood in multiple, often contradictory, ways throughout human history, revealing its flexible, socially constructed character. Specifically, suicide has been variously described as a philosophical problem, a crime, a sin, an honorable action, an act of freedom, a form of terrorism, a rational response, a goal-directed behaviour, an act of resistance, and as evidence of psychopathology (Hewitt, 2011; Marsh, 2010; Szasz, 1999). We now live in a time of suicide bombers, murder-suicide, autoerotic asphyxiation, self-immolation, assisted suicide, and suicide-by-cop. Recognizing its contingent and unstable character, Marsh (2010) has recently observed that,

> *Suicide as a discursively constituted phenomenon, will always resist complete description, if for no other reason than as a cultural product it lacks any unchanging essence*

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[1] The author is grateful to the insightful contributions of Raaya Ghul at Canterbury Christchurch University who persuasively argues for the need to move away from problem-focused language altogether; towards more expansive conceptualizations as a way to foster greater curiosity, mutual understanding and flexibility.

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that could act as a stabilizing centre by which to secure such a description (p.7).

Despite its unstable meaning throughout history, in our contemporary times, youth suicide fits with what Loeseke (1999) calls a "social problem." For example, youth suicide is understood to be a troublesome problem of widespread concern. It is a problem that is perceived to be amenable to human intervention. There is also general agreement that something should be done about it. These four specific features – troublesome, widespread, amenable to change, and a situation against which a stand should be taken – collectively constitute a social problem according to Loseke (1999). Since these characteristics are not inherent to the problems themselves and not all troublesome conditions get regarded with same level of seriousness or urgency, Loseke suggests that a certain amount of "work" (i.e. human activity) is required to "…convince others that a troublesome condition is at hand and something must be done about it…(p. 19). This discursive work is, in part, a focus of this article.

Youth Suicide as a Tame Problem

The characterization of certain problems as "wicked" (vs. "tame") was first suggested by Rittel and Webber in 1973. In their typology, tame problems were those that could be managed through the deployment of specific processes and procedures. Even though a tame problem may be complicated, it "…is resolvable through unilinear acts because there is a point where the problem is resolved and it is likely to have occurred before" (Grint, 2005, p. 1473). Kameniar and colleagues (2010) offer a useful example of a tame problem within an educational context,

In the case of a large, but harmless, spider being found in the classroom and a number of the children becoming frightened, the problem…is likely to be seen as a relatively "tame" problem which might require management *of the situation by using a set of stabilizing strategies developed through previous experiences with similar situations…the problem is easily defined and a solution is relatively self-evident* (emphasis in original, p.11).

While it is clear that "suicide" can take multiple forms, and can mean quite different things in different historical periods and contexts, suicide is now "…read, almost always, as a tragedy, one caused primarily by pathological processes internal to the individual that require expert diagnosis and management" (Marsh, 2010, p. 4). Such a conceptualization not only promotes "a particular view of persons" (Fitzpatrick, 2011), it also legitimizes a rather narrow range of solutions. Specifically, the dominant construction of youth

suicidal behaviour as a response to underlying psychopathology combined with the recent proliferation of one-size-fits-all standardized approaches to risk assessment and crisis intervention (Rogers & Soyka 2004), collectively work to produce an understanding of youth suicide as a relatively tame problem.

Another way that youth suicide starts to become tamed is by turning it into an object of scientific study (Marsh, 2010). For example, many suicidologists have dedicated themselves to identifying the constellation of risk factors that are most likely to lead to a suicidal outcome in the hopes that these deaths may be averted through early detection, screening and intervention. Several empirically validated risk factors and warning signs for suicide have been identified through research studies and many practitioners consider this knowledge to be quite helpful as they assess risks for suicide or implement youth suicide prevention education programs (Rudd, 2008).

At the same time, it is worth considering how current approaches to studying suicide, may also impose certain limits on what can be recognized and documented. As McNamee and Hosking (2012) remind us, "…we all, always, 'see' the world from somewhere, on the basis of particular assumptions" (p. 18). Many suicidologists draw from a ("post-positivist") tradition that seeks to generate unbiased observations about an independently existing external world (McNamee & Hosking). For example, there is a long tradition in the field of suicidology of relying on retrospective analyses (e.g. the psychological autopsy) to identify specific risk factors for suicide. These risk factors are often conceptualized as having an independent and stable reality that is readily available for social scientists to discover and verify through the use of specific methods, rules and procedures. Frequently, the variables of particular interest are those that are the most amenable to being recognized, counted and measured. Many suicidology researchers bring a psychiatric or individualistic orientation to the task, and thus it comes as no surprise that the findings generated from these studies almost inevitably point to the role of psychiatric symptoms, mental disorders, and personality traits as risk factors for suicide. Thus after several decades of risk factor research, one of the most oft-quoted statements to emerge from this vast body of work is that "…an average of 90% of teen suicides have an acute psychiatric (Axis I DSM-IV) disorder " (Berman, Jobes & Silverman, 2006, p. 126).

While these approaches to studying suicide are not wrong, they are not the only ways that youth suicide might be theorized or rendered intelligible. The point being made here is that conventional methodologies, which are predicated on control, measurability and replicability, very often produce

findings that imply certainty and coherence; imposing a kind of premature closure on what can be known (Law, 2004). Yet messy, wild problems like youth suicide, which are characterized by multiplicity, instability and flux, almost always exceed the very tools that have been designed to capture their essence. In a similar critique, Hjelmeland (2011) has referred to the "biologification" of suicidology, whereby the "suicide brain," neurotransmitters, and other biological markers of suicide risk are given precedence over cultural and sociopolitical explanations of suicide. As John Law (2004) writes in his book, *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research,*

> *...while standard methods are often extremely good at what they do, they are badly adapted to the study of the ephemeral, the indefinite and the irregular...the problem is not so much the standard research methods themselves, but the normativities that are attached to them in discourses about method. If 'research methods' are allowed to claim methodological hegemony or (even worse) monopoly...then when we are put into relation with such methods we are being placed, however rebelliously, in a set of constraining normative blinkers* (p. 4).

School-Based Youth Suicide Prevention

Of particular interest here is the way in which the findings from such a narrow range of methodologies are re-transmitted through suicide prevention education programs, as though they are complete and impartial truths; quickly becoming the only vocabulary for making sense of suicide. A few excerpts from the published literature can help to make this point. For example,

> *[d]eaths by suicide almost always occur in the context of a psychiatric illness (often unrecognized and undiagnosed). Failure to address this* fact... *[emphasis added] are points where the identified school-based program seem out of touch with current scientific knowledge"* (Clark, cited in Ciffone, 1993, p.199).

In this case we see that educators and prevention practitioners who do not rely on psychiatric formulations for explaining youth suicide are chastised as being irresponsible and "out of touch." In a similar vein, Garland and Ziegler (1993) suggested that, "By deemphasizing or denying *the fact* that most adolescents who commit suicide are mentally ill, these programs misrepresent *the facts* [emphasis added]" (p. 174).

More recent descriptions of school-based youth suicide prevention programs reiterate this theme. For example, the Signs of Suicide program (Aseltine & DiMartino 2004) teaches students that "…suicide is directly related to mental illness,

typically depression, and … suicide is not a normal reaction to stress or emotional upset" (p. 446). Meanwhile, Ciffone (2007) argues that the main purpose of these programs is to "…frame suicide in the context of its being a manifestation of a mental illness that results from, includes, or exacerbates certain thinking errors" (p. 46). In this case, it is clear that the stage is being set for teaching students strategies for overcoming their "thinking errors." In a final example, Miller, Eckert and Mazza (2009) undertook an extensive review of school-based suicide prevention programs. One of their recommendations was that "…programs should ensure that they are providing accurate information to students, including emphasizing the link between suicide and mental health problems" (p. 182). They also recommend teaching students specific skills such as coping and problem solving.

A Responsive Critique

It is useful to pay attention to how language practices are mobilized to stabilize certain truths or realities about youth suicide. By doing so we can gain "…insight into how people's constructions of the world are designed to counter potential or actual challenges and to undermine alternative versions" (Phillips & Jorgensen, 2004, p. 113). In the examples above, there is a strong, persistent, and unvarying effort to explain youth suicide by unequivocally linking it mental illness as well as an active effort to refute any alternative explanations (i.e. "suicide is *not* a normal reaction to stress or emotional upset"). Findings from research are treated as incontrovertible facts as opposed to products of certain traditions, discourses and authorized ways of making meaning. From a constructionist perspective, it is interesting to ask, why have the "facts" come to be assembled in this way? And perhaps more pointedly, "…what is being denied by [these] assertion[s]" (Edwards, 1997, p. 8)?

When a psychiatric or medicalized understanding of distress becomes the only way for making sense of youth suicide, broader sociopolitical factors and structural arrangements that contribute to the emergence of hopelessness and suicidal despair among youth quickly fade from view. The consequence is that problems come to be understood as being located inside persons, and young people (not social contexts or sociocultural conditions) become the primary targets for change.

As just one example, many youth suicide prevention programs emphasize the importance of teaching students problem-solving, coping, and decision-making skills (Miller, Eckert & Mazza, 2009). Learning such "coping strategies" may benefit some students. At the same time, when young people, whose so-called irrational beliefs,

mental health problems, accumulated stressors and/or unmanaged emotions become the targets for change, the broad social factors which contribute to distress and suffering, such as racism, heteronormativity, material deprivation, social injustice and political inequities, remain invisible and untouched. As Walton (2010) rightly asks, "How might the dominant narrative of the problem belie broader social complexities, controversies, inequities, and contexts" (p. 136)? Alternatives to the dominant way of framing (and taming) the problem of youth suicide are considered next.

Youth Suicide as a Wild Problem

As a way to highlight the constructed character of social problems, it has been suggested that it might be more fruitful to think about "… 'framing problems' rather than 'types of problems' (Kameniar et al., 2010, p. 15). Accordingly, youth suicide might be more usefully understood and responded to if it was framed as a wicked or wild[2] problem. In contrast to a tame problem, a wild problem is usually unprecedented, often difficult to place clear borders around, and associated with high levels of uncertainty.

> [A wild] problem is complex, rather than just complicated, it is often intractable, there is no unilinear solution, moreover, there is no 'stopping' point, it is novel, any apparent 'solution' often generates other 'problems', and there is no 'right' or 'wrong' answer, but there are better or worse alternatives (Grint, 2005, p. 1473).

Examples of problems among children and youth that might be appropriately framed as wild include: poverty and solvent abuse among Inuit youth in Nunavut, the recruitment of children as weapons of war in Uganda, or the sexual exploitation of minors in downtown Vancouver. Given that science alone cannot solve these highly complex, elusive, seemingly intractable problems, and in light of the complex social, historical, cultural, ethical and political dimensions that constitute them, these problems have much in common with the problem of youth suicide.

Without undermining the possibility that a highly structured and directive approach may be the most appropriate response to a person in distress, especially in crisis situations where someone appears to be in imminent and grave danger, the recent emphasis in the literature on using pre-determined, standardized, evidence-based approaches to responding to the emergence of

suicidal despair among youth may limit the exploration of other equally useful approaches. For example, by framing youth suicide as a wild problem (i.e. complex, contextually embedded, uncertain, and impossible to predict), more emphasis can be placed on creativity, responsiveness and innovation instead of regulation, prediction and control. Practitioners can adopt a stance that is open to multiple, emergent and jointly produced meanings of suicidal behaviour as opposed to having a pre-formulated understanding of what it always means and how it should be addressed (Rogers & Soyka, 2004). They are free to explore a range of diverse and creative strategies, including for example those that privilege the "insider knowledge" of young people and communities (Denborough, et al, 2006; Madigan, 2011; White & Epston, 1990), strategies of collaboration (Jobes, 2006), narrative representation (Fitzgerald, 2011), and "justice doing" (Reynolds, 2011). Many of these approaches resemble what Fox (1995) refers to as "care-as-gift" whereby,

> The objective of care in this perspective is to do with becoming and possibilities, about resistance to discourse, and a generosity towards otherness. It is a process which offers promise, rather than fulfilling it, offers possibility in place of certainty, multiplicity in place of repetition, difference in place of identity. It is care-as-gift which expects no recognition (p. 122).

These alternative practices invite creativity and hope and support openness towards an unknown future. They also stand in stark contrast to professional interventions that tend to favour techniques of standardization, control, regulation, and surveillance – practices that Fox (1995) refers to as "care-as-vigil."

Less Certainty, More Creativity

Meanwhile, in educational contexts, where the goal is to heighten understanding about youth suicide and generate helpful and caring responses among peers, the framing of youth suicide as a wild problem may permit a greater level of critical and creative engagement among students. Rather than conceptualizing the goals of school-based youth suicide prevention as the one-way transmission of expert knowledge, educators could be invited to understand their roles as "conversational hosts" whose job it is to "…invite reflection, expand possibilities, and open space for the consideration of alternative experiences, views, and action" (Madsen, 2007, p. 329). In other words, wild problems like youth suicide might be most usefully responded to with strategies that emphasize multiplicity, interpretation, dialogue and negotiation instead of certainty and expert control. More specifically, the goal "… is to ask the right *questions* rather than provide the right *answers* because the answers may

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[2] Given the association of the term "wicked" with evil or moral wrongdoing, the term "wild" is preferred as a way to capture the free, uncontrolled, unruly and proliferating quality of certain problems.

not be self-evident and will require a collaborative process to make any kind of progress" (Grint, 2005, p. 1473, emphasis in original).

Such an open, less certain, and more dialogical approach stands in sharp contrast to the dominant trend in the field of suicidology, which tends to favour highly regulated, empirically supported practices of expert intervention which are based on narrowly defined conceptualizations of "scientific rigor" (Joiner, 2011). In the next section, some potential alternatives for the practice of school-based youth suicide prevention are explored. Drawing inspiration from Kameniar and colleagues (2005) it is suggested that, "… educational sites are places in which *leadership*, with its emphasis on deliberative questions, negotiation, and openness, rather than command and management, is the most desirable and appropriate form of authority that should be taken up in many circumstances" (p. 11, emphasis in original).

Expanding the Possibilities

Resisting the temptation to "tame" the problem of youth suicide by bringing it under highly regulated control, and instead recognizing the benefits of multiple strategies for addressing such a wild and complex problem, school-based suicide prevention education could become a creative site of "doing hope with others" (Weingarten, 2000). Inspired by narrative therapy practices of curiosity, witnessing, generating multiple meanings, and creating communities of belonging (Denborough, et al., 2006; Madigan, 2010; White & Epston, 1990), suicide prevention education can thus be re-imagined as a site of enlivened conversations and narrative transformation (White & Morris, 2010). Rather than *telling* students about the straightforward relationship between youth suicide and mental health and having them memorize the warning signs, classroom activities could be organized in such a way that would permit multiple perspectives to be explored, critiqued and debated. Enlisting young people as knowledgeable consultants is an important place to begin.

For example, one way to do this would be to share stories and experiences from young people (in the form of letters or other first-person accounts) who have successfully overcome hopelessness and suicidal despair with a group of students who have been assembled for the purposes of learning about youth suicide prevention. These first -person accounts could describe in rich detail the types of strategies that these young people found to be the most useful for "living through tough times" (Denborough, et al. 2006). Then, based on a modified version of "therapeutic letter writing" developed by narrative therapists (Madigan, 2010; White & Epston, 1990), classroom students could subsequently be invited to write responses to these

young people. As a form of outsider witnessing practices, these responses could document how the stories moved them, what resonated for them, and the effects these stories might have on them in the future (Madigan, 2010). Thus, young people who have lived through the experience of suicidal despair become positioned as consultants with important "insider knowledge" to share. This knowledge is honoured and witnessed in a way that recognizes them as valuable consultants and helpful resources. Classroom students are in turn actively engaged in the process of making meaning of suicide on their own terms as opposed to being positioned as passive recipients of other peoples' expert knowledge. These pedagogical practices are premised on friendship, acknowledgement, solidarity, hope and relational ways of knowing.

Another approach would be to invite students to consider the multiple, flexible and politicized meanings of suicide and to assist them to recognize that no description is final, natural, or impartial. This would be consistent with an understanding of suicide as a wild problem. To start, students could be asked to review a diverse selection of media stories, websites or other public documents about youth suicide. Historical and contemporary texts could be used. Then in small groups, students could be invited to discuss what the various accounts evoke in them and identify some of the questions they are left with.

Questions for reflection, adapted from Morrison (2010), could include for example: As you read the stories of youth suicide, which particular images or expressions caught your attention? What did these words or images suggest to you about the lives of people who are struggling with the problem of suicide and their carers? What is it about your own life that explains why these images caught your attention? What will you take with you into the future as a result of this experience? (p. 61)

To deepen their thinking even further, students could be asked to consider why they think certain descriptions, categories and explanations have evolved in the ways that they have. They could discuss how different explanations of youth suicide invite different "solutions" and responses. They could be asked to pay attention to how these different formulations position young people. They could also be invited to attend to the absences and gaps in the texts; in other words, what might be concealed from view? Finally, they could be asked to critically evaluate these different constructions and begin to generate some guiding principles of their own for how they might like to respond to the problem of hopelessness and suicidal despair among young people.

Such practices are designed to generate richly layered descriptions of the problem, create possibilities for new understandings, mobilize resistance to stigmatizing identities or "thin descriptions" of youth, and invite multiple, creative responses for addressing youth suicide that are generated by young people themselves. Such an approach is in keeping with a narratively informed approach to curriculum. As Winslade and Monk (1999) suggest,

Knowledge would always be taught as a cultural product rather than as absolute reality. Postmodern questions about the dominance of a particular narrow range of rational thinking as the one way to establish truth would be opened up for young people to think about. Power relations as they are expressed in discourse would become subjects of study. Evaluation methods would not focus in a judgmental way so strenuously on the individual, but would serve purposes of appreciating and elaborating conversations and communities (p 118).

Concluding Remarks

To conclude, these ideas and practices have been used by narrative therapists for decades yet their adaptation as pedagogical resources for use with young people in educational contexts remain underexplored. An explicit aim of this work would be to move beyond the identification of suicide risk factors and the individualization of social problems when planning and implementing prevention programs towards more expansive and innovative approaches that are guided by young people themselves. Young people's theories and understandings of suffering and hope may offer a fresh new direction for conceptualizing and implementing youth suicide prevention programs for youth. By assisting students and future practitioners to critically reflect on both what and how they know and by supporting them to pay attention to how relational understandings, language practices and taken-for-granted assumptions position people and problems, new and accountable spaces for re-imagining youth suicide prevention are created.

Acknowledgements

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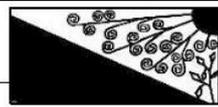Jobes, D. A. (2006). Managing suicidal risk: A collaborative approach. New York: Guilford Press.

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