



Precarious spaces: Risk, responsibility and uncertainty in school-based suicide prevention programs

Jennifer White*, Jonathan Morris

University of Victoria, School of Child and Youth Care, PO Box 1700 STN CSC, Victoria, BC, Canada V8W 2Y2

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ABSTRACT

We report on findings from an in-depth qualitative case study designed to closely examine the social practices of planning and implementing a four-part (six hour) classroom-based suicide prevention program within two classrooms in one secondary school in Vancouver, British Columbia. Representing a departure from traditional evaluation research studies in suicidology, we examine *how* school-based youth suicide prevention programs get brought into being in “real world” contexts. Using a discursive, critical constructionist methodology, we aim to illuminate the complexities of this work. Based on our analysis, we suggest that suicide (and its prevention), in all its complex and culturally situated forms, simply cannot be conceptualized through singular, stable or universalizing terms that transcend time and context. Implications for (re)- conceptualizing suicide prevention education are discussed.

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Introduction

Youth suicide prevention education, as a complex social practice exists at the nexus of dominant health, education, and scientific discourses. Thus it comes as no surprise that many mainstream suicide prevention education programs are predicated on medicalized constructions of the suicidal subject, static and technical models of teaching and learning, and granted legitimacy through the explication of cause–effect relationships. These ways of thinking about the work and the accompanying vocabularies for analyzing the practice of youth suicide prevention education are largely taken to be self-evident (Marsh, 2010; White et al., in press). In this article, we call into question some of these narrow, pre-determined, and standardized approaches to school-based youth suicide prevention education, which typically privilege a singular (i.e. individualist) reading of suicide. At the same time we recognize the burden of responsibility placed on educators to practice in ways that are deemed “safe” and “effective.” Based on a more expansive, pluralistic, and discursively informed approach to conceptualizing suicide and its prevention, we invite consideration of alternative pedagogical and methodological practices.

In the sections that follow we present findings from an in-depth qualitative case study designed to closely examine the social practices of planning and implementing a four-part (six hour),

classroom-based suicide prevention program in one secondary school in Vancouver, British Columbia. Based on a discursive, constructionist analysis of classroom talk and interviews with community educators and students, we document how suicide prevention programs like this one get brought into being in “real world” (i.e. shifting, fluid, value-laden, diverse) classroom contexts. By studying *how* these programs get discursively constructed and negotiated and by calling attention to the linguistic resources and frameworks of meaning that participants draw from to make sense of suicide risk and generate potential solutions, we aim to illuminate the uncertainties, complexities, and fresh possibilities of this work.

To our knowledge, discursively oriented, constructionist investigations into classroom-based suicide prevention education practices have not been undertaken. As a way of situating our inquiry, we begin by providing a brief review of the mainstream literature in this area.

Schools as sites for youth suicide prevention

School-based suicide prevention education programs began to make their appearance in the 1980's in response to a significant rising trend in suicide rates among youth (aged 15–19) in many Western industrialized nations. While overall youth suicide rates have started to show a slight decline, suicide continues to be the second leading cause of death (after traffic fatalities) among youth aged 15 to 19 in Canada. In 2006, suicide claimed the lives of 152 Canadian youth, aged 15 to 19; a rate of approximately 7 per 100,000 (Statistics Canada, 2010).

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 250 721 7986.

E-mail address: jhwhite@uvic.ca (J. White).

School-based suicide prevention programs can take many forms, including universal suicide awareness programs which target all students in their role as peer helpers (Ciffone, 2007; Portzky & van Heeringen, 2006), school-based screening programs which are designed to detect and refer those at potential risk for suicide (Aseltine & DiMartino, 2004), social support enhancement and skill building for “high-risk youth” (Eggert, Thompson, Randell, & Pike, 2002); school gatekeeper training which teaches school personnel how to recognize and respond to a potentially suicidal student (King & Smith, 2000); and multi-level programs that combine several of these strategies (Zenere & Lazarus, 2009).

Previous efforts and findings

Several attempts have been made to evaluate universal, school-based suicide prevention education programs. These programs, like the one we are reporting on here, are designed to increase students’ knowledge about suicide and improve responsible help-seeking. Despite the mixed findings from some of the “first-generation programs” (Kalafat, 2003), a number of recent studies have suggested that these programs can lead to increases in student knowledge and influence attitudes in the desired direction with no evidence of undesirable effects (e.g. increased levels of hopelessness) (Ciffone, 2007; Portzky & van Heeringen, 2006). Using a randomized experimental design, Aseltine and DiMartino (2004) found the school-based program, Signs of Suicide (SOS), which was implemented in a select number of high schools in the United States, led to a reduction in self-reported suicide attempts among participating students.

Despite these promising findings, a recent systematic review examining the overall evidence base for school-based suicide prevention programs was undertaken and the authors noted that many of the evaluation studies published between 1987–2007 were judged to have a number of methodological flaws (Miller, Eckert, & Mazza, 2009). In keeping with other reviews of this sort, only studies that were based on an experimental or quasi-experimental design were included in the review. A common criticism was that most studies failed to use “... analytical techniques to identify which identifiable components of their prevention programs were related to statistically significant primary outcomes” (Miller et al., 2009, p. 180). The reviewers, who based their conclusions on standardized criteria common to this research tradition, stated, “... it is clear that the current scientific foundation regarding school-based suicide prevention programs is very limited” (Miller et al., 2009, p. 180). Thus, after two decades of quantitative investigations, including at least three systematic reviews, many questions remain regarding the promise and potential of pedagogical interventions for preventing youth suicide.

We do not find this surprising. Given the complexity of the emotional lives of young people and the discursive resources they deploy to make sense of their existence (Fullagar, Gilchrist, & Sullivan, 2007), the range of culturally specific ways that a worthwhile life might be conceptualized and imagined, and the multiple local and sociopolitical meanings of suicide and suicidal behaviours (Marsh, 2010; Roen, Scourfield & McDermott, 2008; Wexler, 2006), it is unrealistic to think that *any* single strategy could ever adequately respond to the complexities and indeterminacies of youth suicidal behaviour. Acknowledging suicide as a discursive event that is shaped by multiple historical and cultural forces, and recognizing the inadequacy of narrow approaches and simple solutions is not meant to suggest that suicide prevention programs are not worthwhile. On the contrary, we simply want to take these multiplicities, complexities, contingencies and relationally constructed meanings as our point of departure. Thus, we began our work with an understanding that standardized, content-driven, universal approaches to youth suicide prevention, which rely on

a restricted range of methodologies to examine their effects, ought to be regarded with considerable suspicion.

Towards more contextualized analyses

In this way, we depart considerably from most mainstream approaches to the conceptualization and study of school-based suicide prevention education. First, unlike many current approaches, we do not understand suicide prevention education as the one-way transmission of neutral, expert knowledge – what one of the community educators in our study aptly referred to as “teaching by bullet points.” Second, many suicidologists believe that the current “lack of evidence” regarding school-based suicide prevention programs justifies a call for more rigor in the design of quantitative methodologies. We believe that an equally valuable alternative is to open up a new line of investigation; one that focuses on contingent forms of knowledge and relational processes of meaning-making (Gergen, 2000). Taking inspiration from Hosking (2008) who reminds us that “to inquire is to intervene,” our constructionist approach to inquiry seeks to expand options, invite new questions and perspectives, accommodate ambiguity and multiplicity, while making no attempt to freeze meaning, silence alternative views, or curtail innovation; processes that we consider to be vital to the “doing” of youth suicide prevention.

In this way, our work aligns well with others who have adopted more discursive (Bennett, Coggan, & Adams, 2003), post-structural (Fullagar, 2003; Marsh, 2010; Roen, Scourfield, & McDermott, 2008), participatory (Wexler, 2006), and constructionist methodologies (Bourke, 2003) to study suicide and its prevention. These more recent intellectual pursuits, many of which are located outside North America, include efforts to scrutinize the taken-for-granted quality of the dominant discourse in suicide prevention, which largely conceptualizes suicide in singular, narrow, medicalized, and apolitical terms, what Marsh (2010) refers to as a “compulsory ontology of pathology” (p. 31), whereby practices produce particular truths that emphasize a causal relationship between “mental illness” and suicide. By building on this work we hope to invite alternative readings of youth suicide, thereby opening up fresh possibilities for thinking and doing school-based suicide prevention education.

Finally, it is important to be explicit about the fact that by engaging in this critical, constructionist, discursive type of analysis we are by no means questioning whether suicides among youth should be prevented, nor are we attempting to supplant those who have chosen a different scholarly path from our own. We have devoted our careers to this work and we want to continue responding to young people’s experiences of hopelessness, oppression, and emotional suffering in useful, just and compassionate ways. We join with others who want to promote youth well-being, strengthen social connectedness, and ultimately reduce suicide through non-pathologizing, de-colonizing, sociopolitically attuned, relational, and accountable practices (Fullagar, 2003; Marsh, 2010; Wexler, 2006).

Approach to inquiry

The purpose of our case study was to document the planning and implementation of a four-part, classroom-based suicide prevention education program within one secondary school as a way to better understand how it is conceptualized and experienced. Put simply, we wanted to know how the program was enacted and with what potential effects. Such discursively oriented, constructionist approaches to studying youth suicide prevention education practices are almost non-existent. By closely attending to the ways in which participants rely on specific language practices to construct the identity of the “at-risk suicidal youth” and by illuminating some of the complex processes that participants engage in to justify their

work when practicing in the midst of uncertain knowledge, we aim to show that suicide prevention education is by no means a straightforward exercise in “knowledge transmission.” A discursive approach informed by a critical relational constructionist methodology (Hosking, 2008) was judged to be particularly well-suited for pursuing our research interests. In this research paradigm, fluidity, diversity, contingencies and complexities are expected and accommodated and not seen as “...problems to be controlled for in the interests of reliability and validity” (Moss, 2005, p. 408).

Program, context and participants

Middleton Secondary School (grades 8 through 12; the name of the school has been changed) is located in a relatively affluent neighborhood in Vancouver, British Columbia and serves an ethnically diverse student population, including many students for whom English is a second language. Two grade 11 English classrooms that were scheduled to receive the four-part suicide prevention curriculum as part of their regularly scheduled program, comprising approximately 20–25 students each, provided the site for our case study. Middleton School, which enrolls approximately 1000 students each year, was chosen by the community-based organization to be the first to receive their newly designed youth suicide prevention program based on the school's longstanding commitment to promoting student well-being and their willingness to provide feedback on the new program.

Consistent with other school-based programs described in the literature, the suicide prevention program focused on teaching students the “facts” about suicide and placed emphasis on encouraging youth to enlist the assistance of an adult if they encountered a potentially suicidal classmate. Specific topics included: sources of distress among youth; coping and stress management skills; recognizing warning signs and responding to suicide risk; and how to help. Learning activities included brief lectures, small group discussions, and the presentation of a 20-min DVD. This film featured young people talking about their past experiences with suicidal behaviour, and it also included a scripted scenario that demonstrated a peer-to-peer intervention. One feature that distinguished this particular program from others like it is the fact that four full blocks (1.5 h each) of classroom time were made available for the program to be implemented.

Our study commenced after receiving ethical approval from the Human Research Ethics Office, University of Victoria and the local School District. Over the period November, 2008 to May, 2009, we observed five different community-based educators (who worked in pairs) deliver the four-part (90 min each) youth suicide prevention education program to two grade 11 English classrooms, providing us with a total of 12 h of observed classroom time. All sessions were videotaped.

Supplementing the 12 h of observed and recorded classroom time, we conducted a series of in-depth interviews with all five of the community educators. Six students also agreed to be interviewed. We interviewed the majority of these participants at least twice for approximately one hour (at the start of the program and at the end of the program), leaving us with a total of 20 in-depth interviews. For a more detailed description of our methodology see White et al., *in press*.

Analysis

All classroom sessions and interviews were recorded and transcribed. The qualitative software analysis program, MaxQDA was used to store the data and to support a systematic reading across the data corpus. All transcripts were closely read multiple times by both authors. Our analysis was broadly focused on *how* the program

was locally accomplished in the course of social interaction (Hosking, 2008). Specifically, we aimed to identify some of the cultural resources and social practices that participants relied on to bring this particular youth suicide prevention education program into being. First, we focused on the discursive constructions of suicide and risk across individual interviews and classroom transcripts in an effort to make visible some of the ideologies and discourses that support particular versions of the problem as well as their corresponding solutions (Potter & Hepburn, 2008). Second, we closely examined the rhetorical work of educators and students as they took positions, addressed present and imagined others, and responded to “...that which has gone before” (Taylor, 2001, p. 14).

While the concepts of validity, reliability and replicability have traditionally been used to evaluate studies in the positivist tradition, these criteria are not appropriate for assessing qualitative studies that are informed by a constructionist, anti-foundationalist epistemology. In our study, knowledge is understood to be relational, situated, contingent and partial and as researchers, we are always actively present in the knowledge-making process (Taylor, 2001). Based on these epistemological assumptions, we propose three criteria by which our study might be judged: fruitfulness, coherence and practical application (Taylor, 2001). Fruitfulness refers to the extent to which the study invites further work by other researchers. Coherence refers to the systematic quality of our investigation and the persuasiveness of our arguments, while practical application refers to the degree to which our study invited new perspectives among school-based suicide prevention educators.

As a way to assess and track the ongoing practical implications of our work we engaged in ongoing consultations with two of the community educators who participated in our study. This included inviting them to participate as members of a collaborative inquiry team with other suicide prevention educators and inviting their commentary on draft copies of our manuscripts. We also regularly presented our preliminary findings at meetings with other school-based suicide prevention educators. These processes enabled us to get ongoing feedback from those who do this work regarding the resonance, relevance and persuasiveness of our findings. We also engaged in a systematic process of analysis which included looking for patterns and identifying some of the shared discursive resources used by educators and students when doing youth suicide prevention, based on a critical constructionist discursive methodology. Finally, we continually consulted the research literature to locate our findings in relation to previously published work.

Findings

Throughout this section we present excerpts from classroom transcripts and interviews with educators and students to highlight the multiple discursive formulations of risk and suicide. Each of the different ways of thinking about the issue brings different “solutions” into relief, highlighting the locally negotiated and socially constructed quality of suicide prevention education (Hosking, 2008).

Since ideas about prevention and proposed solutions to the problem of youth suicide are tightly tethered to current understandings of why young people kill themselves, we begin with an examination of the dominant views about “suicide” and “risk” that were implicitly and explicitly endorsed by most of the participants in our study. Next we go on to explore more contingent, less certain understandings of suicide that emerged amongst students and educators.

Dominant constructions of risk

Most of the community educators and students we interviewed endorsed an understanding of suicide that was consistent with

dominant Western views. Specifically, with minor variations, the most common conceptualization was that the suicide of a young person was generally considered to be an unimaginably sad, tragic, deeply regrettable, *personal* event that was most often linked to depression and/or overwhelming pressure that exceeded the person's ability to cope (Fullagar, 2003; Marsh, 2010). Within the classroom presentations, depression and/or stress were typically singled out as the primary explanatory frameworks for making sense of suicide.

Depression and mental illness

Among the students we interviewed (all names below have been changed), suicide was often understood in a way that was directly indexed to depression. As William, one of the students told us, "Well, I think you have to be really depressed to consider suicide." Very often students' understandings and explanations of suicide closely corresponded with the educators' intentions and lesson plans. Students' ability to reproduce the formal sanctioned knowledge of the dominant discourse of suicide prevention was often apparent before the first class even began. Thus it is clear that students are not coming to the topic "cold." As Taylor, one of the students reminded us, "A lot of these things have been addressed to us constantly. All though elementary school and stuff."

Jake, a student whom we interviewed just prior to participating in the suicide prevention program, exemplifies this dominant view of suicide:

Interviewer: If someone were to ask you, what is suicide? What would you say?

Jake: The act of wanting to kill yourself, through depression.

The inescapable, symbiotic relationship between depression and suicide – where "wanting to kill yourself" is directly attributable to depression – exemplifies the "compulsory ontology of pathology" described by Marsh (2010). Interestingly, in Jake's understanding, suicide is viewed as an action not an outcome. Rather than endorsing an understanding of suicide that centres "killing yourself," Jake focuses on *wanting* to kill yourself. Intention (or desire) is thus introduced into the equation. In Jake's particular rendering, desire for living is constrained and desire for self-killing is enabled – *through* depression.

Close analysis of classroom talk among educators and students also revealed recurrent discursive formulations of suicide that were tightly indexed to categories of mental illness, including "depression," "anxiety," or "bi-polar." In the following excerpt we see Rebecca, the community educator, explaining the relationship between suicide and mental illness to the students:

...what we also know from research is that a lot of people who end up attempting and completing suicide have an undiagnosed mental illness...Or bi-polar, which some people call manic depression. .. We know that if those experiences aren't being treated or supported, it does put someone at higher risk.

Here we can discern the influence of dominant psychiatric and scientific discourses. For example, Rebecca (much like we have done many times) relies on "findings from research" to produce an authoritative, credible and final account. Specifically, she draws from the mainstream suicidology literature where it is frequently observed that "...an average of 90% of teen suicides have an acute psychiatric (Axis I DSM-IV) disorder" (Berman, Jobs, & Silverman, 2006, p. 126). On the one hand, Rebecca (and we) could be said to be practicing in an "evidence-based" way. At the same time, when we substitute authoritative pronouncements, for more open-ended, critically oriented approaches to teaching, we wonder if other ways of knowing or alternative conceptualizations for thinking about suicide, distress, mental health, and well-being might be silenced. More specifically, when a medicalized understanding of distress is

authorized as the only (or dominant) way to understand suicide, sociopolitical factors and structural arrangements that benefit some groups while disadvantaging others, quickly fade from view.

Stress

Another way that both educators and students in our study made sense of suicide was through the lexicon of stress. For example, when asked why he thinks people might become suicidal, Jake, one of the students, replies, "No one to go to, so problems. And then [they] implode." Ida, another student describes the relationship between stress and suicide this way, "...pressure from outside and ... they kept it to themselves and they weren't able to release that emotion." Both Jake and Ida draw from a familiar stress discourse in which external stressors and problems are thought to build-up inside the person over time, and eventually, in the absence of support, the person literally implodes from the isolation, unmanaged stress and unreleased emotion.

During a research interview, Pilar, one of the educators, explains her understanding of the link between stress and suicide, thus providing justification for teaching stress management in the context of a youth suicide prevention curriculum.

My understanding is that when you are under stress, if that is not something that you find a way to manage or to cope with, eventually you get into a crisis situation. When you are in crisis, you experience overwhelming emotions, you can't think straight, you get tunnel vision. If life becomes unmanageable in that way, there is the possibility that suicide becomes the only option that you see.

The familiar trajectory of overwhelming stress, an absence of coping skills, leading to crisis, which in turn leads to a loss of rational thinking (i.e. "you can't think straight") and cognitive constriction (i.e. "you get tunnel vision"), is commonly deployed as an explanation for the emergence of suicide "as an option." In this familiar formulation, the focus is on the individual person as the site of accumulated stress, unmanaged emotions, and highly restricted vision (Roen et al., 2008). This conceptualization was made visible in the classroom when we observed the educators teaching students cognitive re-framing techniques and other individual "stress busters" for coping. For example, here is Rebecca providing the students with a quick review of what they covered the previous week,

There is lots out there that can be stressful. After we did that, we tried to figure out how we know when we are stressed out. What happens to the way we are thinking? ...After that we did the first part of moving towards solving a problem, and that is identifying when we're speaking [to ourselves] in unsupportive ways which may sound a little silly at some point, but it actually has a huge affect on us...It is changing those phrases and changing it to a more positive attitude that is realistic though.

During our interviews we became curious about whether the educators thought there might be some problems that young people might face that might not be so easily resolved using the problem-solving techniques being taught in class. Rebecca had this to say,

There are lots of things that you can control, that you can choose to react in a certain way to things, but there are a lot of heavier things that happen in life that you can't necessarily control. They are out of your hands. How do you then cope with whatever it is that is coming your way? It is not that you are necessarily going to solve the problem. Maybe it is not your problem to solve. But it is how you deal with those things coming your way and prevent yourself from maybe taking it on personally or going into a depression because of some other thing happening. Those coping tools are huge.

Even though Rebecca clearly recognizes that some problems are not in students' control, and some problems may not even be theirs to solve, the "solution" that is offered continues to be one of successful self-management (Fullagar, 2003). While such "coping tools" have an unproblematic, common sense quality to them and may even benefit some students, we wondered how such strategies might inadvertently deflect attention away from those social arrangements and practices (e.g. heterosexism, patriarchy, colonialism) that potentially fuel hopelessness and suicidal despair among some youth.

Interestingly, the "stress model" view of suicide has been seriously challenged in the mainstream suicidology literature in recent years, but not based on the critique of the individualistic humanist discourse like the one we are advancing here. Rather, it has come under fire on the grounds that it is factually *incorrect* and misleading. For example, educators have sometimes been chastised for being irresponsible and "unscientific" by failing to teach students about the unmistakable role of psychopathology in the emergence of suicidal behaviour.

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

While most of the constructions of suicide risk deployed by participants in our study drew from familiar individualistic and scientific discourses, it is interesting to attend to other, less certain possibilities for thinking about suicide and its prevention. These more fragile and contingent understandings represent potential openings for re-conceptualizing this work and hint at the possibility that things could always be otherwise (Gergen, 2000).

Uncertainty, multiplicity and unpredictability

In contrast to the familiar, specific, and definable categories that educators and students both relied on to make meaning of suicide risk, a deep sense of instability, uncertainty and contingent knowing also threaded through many of our participant interviews. This suggests that conceptualizations of suicide are highly unstable as well as dependent on the context.

Uncertain knowledge

First, considerable uncertainty emerged as educators acknowledged that final, universal or singular explanations of suicide were impossible. For example, when asked how she might respond to a student who asks, "why do young people kill themselves?" Mia responds,

I would probably say that it is a great question and that there are tons of reasons. ...Bewildering is not the right word, but it is kind of a fascinating thing. Really I don't know the answer, but I would be interested in hearing their thoughts too, what they think.

Colleen explains how the educators attempt to convey the limits of their own knowledge, while reinforcing students' roles as active knowledge seekers,

...we don't answer a lot of questions anyways, the answer is often "well I'm not really sure. If you want to know more, you might want to go and do some research." Or "this is really as much training as I have gotten on this, I'm not an expert...We are going to introduce some ideas here, and if you want to go further, then that is great."

Colleen highlights the dilemma that community-based educators, many of whom are volunteers, experience as they attempt to

negotiate their identities as credible, yet constrained "knowledge-holders." The clear deflecting of expectations (i.e. "I'm not an expert") may be a strategy for managing the overwhelming sense of responsibility that educators experience when doing this work.

Uncertainty also became visible as educators recognized that the evidence regarding the effectiveness of suicide awareness programs is clearly mixed. Here we see the tensions that Colleen experiences as she acknowledges her own uncertainty,

Geez, nobody really knows much about school programs. I don't mean about the whole field, but nobody really knows much, , it is so early in the knowledge gathering, evidence gathering phase. There is a temptation to pull the plug, a real temptation to pull the plug and go, "you know, we don't know what we are doing here, who are we?" Then in my gut going, "do something."

This is an excellent example of the moral burden and confusion that community educators experience as they try to reconcile the demand to "do something" about this serious and complex social problem with the frank observation that "we don't know what we are doing here." Later, the interviewer asks Colleen how she actually went about deciding whether components of the suicide prevention program they were developing might have been harmful.

Interviewer: Where did you look to find that out, that it might be risky or that it might be useless? How did you come to that?

Colleen: ...Places like New Zealand weren't letting you talk about suicide anymore because they felt that the potential for harm was there, and there was no evidence of value. So err on the side of caution...

Here, Colleen is referring to an unpublished report from New Zealand entitled, *Evidence for Student Focused School Based Suicide Prevention Programmes: Criteria for External Providers* (Bennett, Coggan, & Brewin, 2003). This report, informed in part by published studies from the United States which suggested some early generation suicide prevention awareness programs led to unintended negative effects, including increased hopelessness among some students, has presumably provided some of the fuel for Colleen's anxiety. For example the New Zealand report includes this dire warning, "The unforeseen negative consequences of suicide prevention efforts can be catastrophic, and evaluation measures should be designed to detect and prevent such consequences. Safety for participants is paramount" (Bennett, Coggan, & Brewin, 2003, p. 6).

The idea that suicide prevention education programs can lead to potentially "catastrophic" consequences places an immense burden on those who do this work and no doubt places all sorts of constraints on educators' ability to be innovative, responsive, relationally engaged and flexible. Educators are caught in a dilemma. On the one hand, both the educators and the students want the learning experience to be engaging. Here is Taylor, one of the students, describing how *she* would go about designing a suicide prevention program if she were given the opportunity,

I would probably make it more discussion based. We like to talk a lot. I don't know what forms of discussion it would be, but bringing up topics, debate about it. Bring some examples in, say key things about them, guests maybe, what they are going through, learn about it after. Show what you assumed, and show how it is different from what you assumed.

The interviewer asks Taylor what she would have to say to those who might suggest that certain approaches to teaching suicide awareness might actually increase some students' risk. "I don't think that is true," she says and then later adds, "It is kind of like undermining their [students'] ability to take things in. I think we can handle ourselves pretty well."

Taylor's comments notwithstanding, in addition to being engaging, community educators want to ensure that the programs they develop and deliver are not causing any harm. Even though one of the central educational messages is "talking about suicide won't give people the idea," and recent studies have suggested that neither suicide awareness programs (Ciffone, 2007) nor screening programs show any evidence of harmful effects (Gould et al., 2009), much doubt still lingers. As Colleen remarked, "The more I read, the more I went "Wow! What am I doing here? Who do I think I am? What if I am wrong?"

Based on her reading of the mainstream literature, Colleen expresses both incredulity ("Wow!") and self-doubt as she comes to recognize the tenuous and contested knowledge base upon which these programs are predicated. Such expressions of doubt, ambivalence and uncertainty emerged as recurrent discursive themes in our interviews with other suicide prevention educators. For example, many of them felt challenged to maintain their positions as "content experts" who deliver a "neutral curriculum" to a group of learners who have historically been constructed as potentially risky subjects; subjects who could at any time, literally self-destruct. While all of the educators were deeply committed to making a positive and meaningful difference in the lives of young people, several unanswered questions regarding the overall value of this work were always close at hand.

More specifically, the contested nature of the research findings, and the sheer lack of "evidence," meant that educators were always open to criticism and could never be completely assured that what they were doing was good, useful or right. Ball (2003) captures some of this tension well when he describes how "performativity," as the new mode of state regulation in Euro-Western educational contexts, requires teachers to constantly organize themselves in response to targets, evaluation, calculation and measurement. Ball's (2003) description of the "terror" that teachers live with as they attempt to justify their work in such a context echoes the uncertainty and self-doubt we heard from some of the suicide prevention educators:

We are unsure what aspects of work are valued and how to prioritize efforts. We become uncertain about the reasons for actions. Are we doing this because it is important, because we believe in it, because it is worthwhile? Or is it being done ultimately because it will be measured or compared? It will make us look good! Do we know we are good at what we do, even if performance indicators tell a different story...Again, much of this reflexivity is internalized. These things become matters of self-doubt and personal anxiety rather than public debate (Ball, 2003, p. 220).

Unanticipated learning

In addition to picking up on the educators' anxiety and uncertainty, we also noticed that students often learned things that were not taught, highlighting another form of complexity that is rarely documented. For example, William, a student we interviewed midway through the program, provided his understanding of why people kill themselves, "Oh, I guess it is people are depressed and that kind of happens when you are an adolescent." Elaborating further, he said "I think it is mostly just caused by the depression. Partly externally caused, but mostly I think it is just part of being a teenager thing...I think some people manage to get through adolescence without being depressed, but I think for most it is reality."

Even though we see William invoke a medicalized discourse of depression when explaining suicide, he also implicates adolescence itself as a potential cause of depression and suicide – "it's just part of being a teenager thing." While this idea was not taught in the program, William nonetheless draws from the dominant developmental discourse which provides its own vocabulary for making

sense of suicide. It is interesting to imagine how such taken-for-granted assumptions such as William's might be brought forward for critical examination so that students could be given the chance to explore and debate them, trace their history, examine their implications, and in keeping with Taylor's earlier suggestion "make it more discussion-based."

Meanwhile, Meaghan, provides her evolving understanding of suicide,

I think it is not seeing any way of getting yourself out of what you have gotten yourself into. It could even be something that is in someone else's eyes not that bad. But for you, you just have got into a rut, and you can't see the light, as some people might put it. I don't know. It is hard to put myself in that situation.

Even though Meaghan relies on the familiar metaphors of "restricted vision" and "tunnel vision" to account for why someone might become suicidal, and she endorses an individualist understanding ("getting yourself out of what you have gotten yourself into"), she also expresses a clear level of uncertainty that seems linked to her inability to "put herself in that situation."

Likewise, Jake also formulated suicide as something that is unfamiliar; that happens *outside* of here.

Jake: Here it is pretty stable. It is not like some other places. Everyone has a family, jobs and stuff like that.

Interviewer: Say a little bit more to me about that. Stable? Jobs?

Jake: Grades are good. Two parents, not just living with one. Not bullied. Respected.

Here, Jake identifies those factors upon which suicide is *not* contingent. Two-parent families, steady employment, having friends that respect you, and not being bullied are offered as examples of things that keep suicide at bay, which are decidedly "not like some other places." The "unimaginable" and "not here" quality of suicide endorsed by both Meghan and Jake echo the findings of Roen et al. (2008). The youth in their study very often constructed the suicidal person as Other. The consequences of such formulations are not insignificant. As they suggest, these discursive practices "...locate suicide as being against the community's religious beliefs, as not happening in 'normal families', but as being something that is more expected from 'druggies' and not in 'nice streets'. In a sense reproducing through suicidal discourses a moral order" (Roen et al., 2008, p. 2091).

Interestingly, these uncertain, ethically infused and local understandings of suicide are not typically elicited in classroom discussions. This is not surprising given that the emphasis of most school-based programs is on conveying "facts" and correcting students' "misperceptions." In addition, the subtleties, questions and idiosyncratic understandings that students bring to the topic are rarely captured in traditional program evaluation designs. This suggests that there are some limits to program evaluation designs that rely exclusively on "thin assessments" of students' ability to reproduce received knowledge. In the next section we discuss some of the implications our findings have for the design and delivery of school-based suicide prevention programs.

Discussion

While the dominant mental illness discourse is one way to conceptualize suicide and such an approach may accrue specific benefits to some young people and their families, it is not the only way that suicide might be rendered intelligible (Roen et al., 2008). As others have suggested,

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 that could act as a stabilizing centre by which to secure such a description (Marsh, 2010, p. 7).

Similarly, traditional, scientific “evidence-based” approaches to studying suicide prevention education need not be the only way to study this complex social practice. Holmes, Murray, Perron, and Rail (2006) suggest that by valuing only one way of knowing, the discourse of evidence-based practice potentially thwarts creativity and silences other ways of knowing and forms of knowledge. Holmes et al. (2006) write,

An evidence-based, empirical world view is dangerously reductive insofar as it negates the personal and interpersonal significance and meaning of a world that is first and foremost a *relational* world, and not a fixed set of objects... (Holmes et al., 2006, p. 182).

These post-structural critiques, with their embedded values of epistemological pluralism and relational meaning-making, represent very important, yet radically different starting places for (re-)conceptualizing and investigating youth suicide prevention education. Some practical implications are elaborated below. It is no coincidence that the ideas we suggest for *conceptualizing* suicide prevention education mirror the very principles that we consider to be fundamental for *preventing* suicide.

Enlivening conversations

Picking up on Taylor’s vision of a more lively, “discussion based” approach to learning, what might happen if we re-conceptualized suicide prevention education as an “enlivening conversation” instead of simply a “safe conversation?” And what if we re-envisioned teaching in this area as “evoking” instead of just “telling?” While we do not want to replace one standardized approach with another by prescribing what a classroom-based suicide prevention program ought to include, we believe that our findings do offer a fresh platform for re-conceptualizing this work. For example, classroom activities that highlight the idea that descriptions of suicide are not neutral, that language is flexible, and that “facts” can be assembled in multiple ways can support the emergence of more critically reflective, generative conversations.

Specifically, students could be given the opportunity to reflect on the multiple social, historical and cultural constructions of youth suicide. The list is potentially endless: a moral sin; a personal choice; an individual right; a consequence of mental illness; a statement of resistance; a learned behaviour; a way of saving face; the ultimate act of self-control; a relational response; a political statement; a form of contagion; an impulsive act; a community norm; an ultimate mystery; or an important commentary on society. Students could be asked to think about what these multiple and changing conceptualizations of suicide might mean. For example they could be asked to compare contemporary efforts that liken suicide prevention to first-aid with other suicide prevention efforts that foreground dialogue, community-building, transformation and social justice (Wexler, 2006). Students could be invited to identify the unspoken assumptions of normal/good/right that are embedded in different discursive formulations of suicide and the potential beneficiaries of these various constructions. Finally, instead of focusing exclusively on individuals as the primary site for intervention, we could assist students to recognize the role of institutional, historical and sociopolitical forces in the emergence of hopelessness and suicidal despair.

We also hope the findings from our study will invite educators to re-think their received understandings of suicide and its

prevention. One of the specific ways that we are attempting to do this is through the creation of a community of practice that fosters ongoing critical reflection.

Collaborative inquiry and critical reflection

Through the creation of a collaborative inquiry team comprising suicide prevention educators and researchers, we have established an ongoing forum for critical reflection and collaborative learning. Among other things, we have come to recognize our mutual embeddedness in the current culture of “performativity,” whereby our own individual performances come to be judged as outputs and measures of productivity (Ball, 2003). The collaborative process has provided all of us with the opportunity to present our practice challenges, engage with new perspectives and critical readings, and question the taken-for-granted quality of our everyday practices as suicide prevention educators.

As one indicator of the influences of our study on everyday practice, Mia, one of the educators, comments on some of the new and emerging possibilities that are opening up for her as a result of her participation on the team,

As a result of these meetings, I feel less responsible for students coming to terms with or agreeing with the information we present. Instead, I believe more and more that it can, and possibly needs to, be okay to simply ask big questions with students, and even honour their current, unique perspectives, while carving out time and space to shed some light on new angles or approaches they might not have considered. ‘Grey is OK!’ could be the new motto.

Such a motto has enormous liberating potential, not only for educators but also for those who may be contemplating suicide. A shift away from black-and-white thinking means that nothing is fixed or final and reality is always in the process of becoming (Hosking, 2008). Mia’s reflection also suggests that there might be alternative ways of valuing her work besides relying on conventional “performance indicators,” which tend to measure student learning in terms of compliance.

Concluding remarks

To conclude, we have advanced two interrelated arguments here. First, echoing the work of Marsh (2010) we suggest that suicide (and its prevention), in all its complex and culturally situated forms, simply cannot be conceptualized through singular, stable or universalizing terms that transcend time and context. Second, it seems contrary to the overall aims youth suicide prevention to expect educators who do this work to rely exclusively on narrow “evidence-based” curricula that authorize expert knowledge to the exclusion of all other ways of knowing, locate problems inside persons, make no room for uncertainty or ambiguity, inhibit local and relational meaning-making, and stifle creativity by rigidly adhering to pre-specified and “safe” learning outcomes. Our modest hope is that by questioning the acceptable questions and bringing the uncertain, political and moral dimensions of suicide prevention work into view, our contribution can help us to see, understand and think about the practice of youth suicide prevention in more expansive and creative ways.

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