

CONNECTION AND RELATIONAL ENGAGEMENT IN A YOUTH SUICIDE PREVENTION PROGRAM

Lyndsay Wells

Abstract: Vancouver Island Crisis Society has developed a unique approach to suicide prevention for youth and is encouraged to observe the positive impact these programs have had in the lives of students and on school communities as a result. This is the story of the evolution of two such school-based suicide prevention programs: (a) GRASP (Growth, Resilience, Acknowledgement, Suicide, Awareness, Personal Safe Planning); and (b) Speak Out, Reach Out, Help Out. While suicidal despair often thrives in isolation, what power might human connection have to combat it? And could that sense of connection be interwoven into youth suicide prevention programs, not to diminish what is already there but to enrich and enliven current best practices, and research-based information? Throughout this article, I will uncover the possibilities of what can emerge when practice is informed by the professional literature and a purposeful intent to create a sense of connection and relational engagement.

Keywords: youth suicide, youth suicide prevention, school-based suicide prevention programs, connection, engagement, relational engagement, adolescent

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Lyndsay Wells is the Public Education Program Coordinator for Vancouver Island Crisis Society/Crisis Line. She is a Certified Crisis Intervention Worker, a Suicide Bereavement Support Group facilitator, an ASIST Master Trainer, and an innovative program developer with a passion for working with youth to help them uncover and acknowledge their own potential, and strengths. Prior to coming to the Crisis Society in 1996, Lyndsay was a constable with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. E-mail: lyndsay@vicrisis.ca

I came to the field of youth suicide prevention mostly by accident, beginning my professional career as a police officer who sensed early on that my desire to help people might override my ability to arrest them. Armed with this desire to make some kind of a difference, I still was disinclined to delve into the murky waters of suicide prevention.

One afternoon during a presentation for a room full of police colleagues about the issues facing youth, I experienced a foreshadowing (though I did not know it then) that my road might take a different course. A group of 10 young people – all of whom had faced their fair share of troubles including thoughts of suicide – were asked to seek out the officers in our crowd they would most likely turn to for support. All 10 approached me.

I joined the police force with a desire to help people, and though I left the force shortly after the above experience, I still wished to engage in meaningful work and so eventually re-routed my career in the direction of crisis and suicide prevention. I was determined to use whatever “it” was that caused those students to come to me as a way to help others. Though the experience dims with the passage of time, I continue to contemplate and reflect upon it, puzzling over the notion of human connection, how it ignites, and what might emerge were it to be the central theme that informed my practice. While the dark and solitary beast of suicidal despair lurks as an entity that actually thrives in isolation, what power might human connection have to combat it? Moreover, could that sense of connection be interwoven with youth suicide prevention programs, not to diminish what is already there but to enrich and enliven current best practices, and research-based information?

This is the story of the evolution of two school-based suicide prevention programs: (a) GRASP (Growth, Acknowledgement, Suicide Awareness, Personal Safe Planning), and (b) Speak Out, Reach Out, Help Out. Throughout this article, I will explore the possibilities of what can emerge when practice is informed by the professional literature and this sense of “something else” that I am calling connection. I also discuss how safe spaces for learning might be created between youth and practitioners in classrooms.

Early Experiences of Unexpected Vulnerability

The first time I ever walked into a classroom was in 2005. After having spent the better part of the previous eight years as a telephone-based crisis line worker, and later a crisis line trainer, the bulk of my experiences was with adults and adult learners. Following the tragic suicides of three students in our school district in 2003, the mandate of our organization began to shift and we embarked on providing school- and community-based education on the topic of suicide prevention.

We began with the school district, bringing together a multidisciplinary team with a vested interest in creating prevention, intervention, and post-intervention protocols along with annual training for school staff and administrators. The next step was to begin the process of implementing a program for students. Our organization purchased a well-recognized research-endorsed program which consisted of standardized lesson plans, presenter’s notes, a power point presentation, and a video that featured a young person helping a friend who is having thoughts of

suicide. As an adult educator, I appreciated the way it was laid out and looked forward to entering classrooms, seeing this as an opportunity to inspire young people. Reality, however, does not always meet expectation and the sense of connection I alluded to in my introduction was palpably absent as I walked into the florescent lit classroom with my co-facilitator, Heather. We stood before row upon row of blank-faced Grade 10 students to impart information that, we believed, had the potential to save lives.

The material was consistent with recommended best practices in this area (Kalafat, 2003). The curriculum included the following: warning signs for suicide, suicide myths and facts, why we should never keep suicide a secret, asking about suicide, and help seeking. Sadly, the yawns and tired faces suggested a distinct lack of student engagement and an overall disconnection from the information we were trying to share. This was validated when one young man, in his post-questionnaire comments, suggested that we “make the presentation less boring.”

Throughout the school year this sense of disconnect with the students continued to be our experience. Now, along with a feeling of impending doom every time we had to set foot in a classroom – situating ourselves as “experts” while feeling intensely vulnerable – I wondered if students were capturing any of our messages. More importantly, I began to wonder if conceptualizing our roles as “message transmitters” was even appropriate. Was “mastery of content” the only thing to consider when doing this kind of work (White & Morris, 2010)?

Parsons and Taylor (2011) acknowledge that, “If the environment in which learners explore is sterile and lacks context, there is a chance transference of knowledge will not occur beyond the classroom” (p. 39). By having to stick so closely to a script there was definitely a sense of sterility for me. We also constantly worried that if we veered away from sanctioned material we might get something wrong. There are many eyes on a presenter coming into a school, each with their own set of expectations. Students, parents, teachers, administrators, counsellors all have strong ideas about the topic of youth suicide prevention. In the field of suicide prevention, “getting something wrong” comes with its own set of dire implications. A personal reflection from Jennifer White exemplifies this:

An unspoken concern that threaded through all of my work as a suicide prevention educator was the idea – and fear – of inadvertently facilitating contagion or imitative suicidal behaviour. For as long as I can remember we were sensitized to the fact (through literature and professional conversations) that there might be a vulnerable student sitting in the classroom who was seriously contemplating suicide. We had to hold this imaginary vulnerable student in mind as we facilitated discussions and worked our way through the curriculum, making sure that we weren’t doing or saying anything to glamorize suicide as an option or make it seem like an attractive way out... Uncertainty, conflicting opinions, and occasional anxiety about potentially doing harm were thus a backdrop of this work. (White, Morris, & Hinbest, 2012, pp. 339–340)

In a very real sense, the weight of responsibility, vulnerability, and fear I felt probably led me further and further away from a relational form of engagement. I also began to wonder what was going on in the minds of students; wondering if they too had fear and anxiety around the subject of suicide. White, Morris, and Hinbest (2012) suggest that, “suicide prevention education is by no means a straightforward technical task of information dissemination. On the contrary, it is a site where multiple identities, ethical relations, and possible future worlds are constructed”

(p. 341). Bearing this in mind, I wonder what we might have been missing if none of these unspoken tensions were ever addressed?

With the school year coming to a close, it seemed clear that our programs needed some refreshing. We began to make some changes which were informed by recommendations from the *Youth Suicide Prevention School Based Guide* produced by The Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute at the University of South Florida (Doan, Roggenbaum, & Lazear, 2012). Recommendations to educators included the following:

- Avoid using a brief (2- to 4- hour) one-shot approach in assembly presentations or classes.
- Use a more prolonged approach when using curriculum delivered to students.
- Consider implementing suicide awareness curriculum within the context of established classes such as health classes or a life management skills class. Consider incorporating problem-solving skills, coping skills, and self-esteem building skills into the curriculum.

Back to the Drawing Board: Designing a Pilot

Based on these recommendations, we decided to move away from our standard presentations of 80 minutes duration and secured funding from The Vancouver Foundation to create a 12-hour pilot gatekeeper training program, originally called “Youth Crisis Intervention Skills Training” or YCIST.

The pilot took a two-pronged approach. First, self-awareness and coping skills would be taught. Second, students would be supported in learning to identify peers in crisis and would be taught how to take appropriate action. The pilot was taught in four different schools for students in Grades 9 to 12 who expressed an interest in becoming peer helpers. Based on a series of pre- and post-tests along with written and verbal feedback, the students let us know that they had not only learned meaningful, life changing skills, they also felt connected to the program. In other words, they were actively engaged in the learning process. Somehow we had created a program that had relevance.

Research suggests that student engagement may be influenced by several phenomenological factors, including relevance of instruction and perceived control. With respect to instructional relevance, students are more likely to become engaged with authentic academic work that intellectually involves them in a process of meaningful inquiry to solve real life problems that extend beyond the classroom. (Newmann et al., as cited in D. Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider, & E. Shernoff, 2003, p. 159)

The core concepts being taught in the pilot version of YCIST were informed by the training we conducted with crisis line volunteers and included basic listening skills, recognizing our biases and how they affect our ability to listen, crisis as dangerous opportunity, using a crisis helping model, suicide myths, warning signs (IS PATH WARM), asking about suicide, the danger of keeping secrets, and how to seek appropriate help.

While we were encouraged by the feedback coming from our pre- and post-tests, there was still an intuitive sense of something lacking in the program. We wondered whether we had created enough of a connection or sense of safety, or whether we were still positioning the youth

as passive observers rather than active participants. They were engaged, the content seemed to resonate, but there still remained a chasm not yet crossed between teacher and student..

Part of this may have been about the facilitation itself. Even though we had redesigned the program, we were still operating on a set agenda and I can remember feeling pressured to move conversations along in order to accommodate the complete range of pre-set materials. I have to wonder whether the students sensed this and complied by refraining to comment or question further.

There was also a part of me who was still not fully comfortable presenting for groups of young people. In retrospect, it is probable these feelings of insecurity on my behalf were also contributing to the chasm, or sense of disconnection that I speak of. It is noteworthy that the ease of delivery I now feel in a classroom has come after years of experience, self-reflection, and effort. Later sections of this article will address the relevance of experience and how it contributes to the creation of relational engagement. I also hope to add to a discussion already begun by White, Morris, and Hinbest (2012):

Our lived realities as practitioners, educators, and researchers, which include the joys, missteps, and uncertainties of this work, are important to include. For one thing, they trace some of the animating forces that have shaped our curiosities and they also show our deep embeddedness in the everyday practice of youth suicide prevention. (p. 340)

These lived realities that I will call my experiences played a part in creating a sense of disconnect in the classroom; however, through the practice of self-reflection, they also played a part in learning how to narrow the chasm between student and presenter.

Back to the Drawing Board, Again: GRASP

It was back to the drawing board. Keeping the idea of cultivating a safe and open space for learning in mind, my co-facilitator, executive director, and I were all in agreement that the name “Youth Crisis Intervention Skills Training” sounded somewhat daunting. It also failed to accurately portray what we were trying to do. Over the course of a three hour brainstorming session, we narrowed down the field of possible names to the one we all agreed best described our vision: GRASP – an acronym that stands for: Growth, Resilience, Acknowledgement, Suicide Awareness, and Personal Safe Planning.

We also decided that though we were no longer operating as a pilot project, we were not going to develop a static version of GRASP but would rather attempt to leave it as open-ended as possible to reflect changes in emerging literature and technologies. In this sense, we felt the program was unique. We were willing to let it move, and grow, and become along with us as we learned more about working with youth and how to engage them.

It was around this time that I was introduced to Dr. Jennifer White in person. In keeping with her ideas about “blurring the sharp boundaries that traditionally exist between researchers and practitioners” (White, Morris, & Hinbest, 2012), she invited us to be a part of a Collaborative Inquiry Team that would include the voices of researchers with practitioners as a way of looking at youth suicide prevention programs from a whole new lens. I cannot even begin to express the feelings of relief we had when we heard from others working in the field that they

shared the same fears, vulnerabilities, and uncertainties that we did. I left my first Collaborative Inquiry meeting with a new sense of hope and purpose and when I returned to my office tacked the following quote from Rainer Maria Rilke (1954) to my bulletin board where it remains to this day:

Perhaps all the dragons in our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us act, just once, with beauty and courage. Perhaps everything that frightens us is, in its deepest essence, something helpless that wants our love.

It is the cornerstone upon which GRASP and later, Speak Out, Reach Out, Help Out were built.

The Evolution of a Program

We continued to develop GRASP and began to conceptualize it as a positive youth development program. Positive development is defined as “programs that provide opportunities and support to help youth gain the competencies and knowledge they need to meet the increasing challenges they will face as they mature” (Roth, Brooks-Gunn, Murray, & Foster, 1998, p. 423). Thus, we aimed to provide students with the tools to recognize troubled peers and also supported them to be alert to their own struggles so that they might more willingly engage in healthy coping strategies and help-seeking behaviours.

We also looked to recommendations from the report published by the British Columbia Coroner’s Office (2008), *Looking for Something to Look Forward to: A Five Year Retrospective Review of Child and Youth Suicide in BC*. We were particularly interested in the section of the report that focused on the subject of school connectedness, a theme we saw again in the State of Florida through *The School- Based Youth Suicide Prevention Guide* discussing school climate (Lazear, Roggenbaum, & Blase, 2003). We also wanted to place more explicit emphasis on skill-building. According to Doan, Roggenbaum, and Lazear (2012):

Pro-social behavioral skills training that focuses on problem solving, coping, and conflict resolution strategies have shown positive results on distress coping skills... and may be one of the most effective ways to prevent adolescent suicide. (p. 4)

We set to work and divided the GRASP program into a quartet of three-hour sessions. We developed learning modules that were explicitly focused on creating empathetic connections since this was one of the ways we could promote coping strategies in a safe and supportive learning environment. It was becoming evident, however, that students didn’t always know what we meant by creating an atmosphere of “acceptance and non-judgment” and we’ve had many enlightening conversations to this effect. Most commonly, the students express hesitation in responding to others in a validating way for fear that it might come off as “phony” or contrived. During the course of these conversations it has also become evident that few students have been the regular recipients of non-judgemental validation – for example, being told that they are smart, funny, or even worthwhile. For the most part, students seem to be more accustomed to criticism, whether constructive or otherwise, but have never questioned the validity of this criticism in the same way they question the validity of validation. Further, even when they understood the importance of reaching out to others and championing climates of inclusivity and belongingness in their schools, there was a gap between knowledge and action.

Learning these things came as a surprise. GRASP is an experiential program where the students actively practice listening skills, validation, and enquiry. Though they seem to understand concepts, such as why being empathetic and non-judgemental are positive helping skills, they don't always have the language or the confidence to validate one another, ask defining questions, open difficult or unusual conversations, or enquire about suicide. These were areas students had improved on when we did pre- and post-testing with Crisis Intervention Skills Training but we were learning that knowledge of the material wasn't translating as practical skills they were comfortable actually using.

Further, individual schools have distinct personalities that vary based on factors like administration, socio-economics, and geographic location. As such, there are social constraints that routinely take place, for instance less “popular” or younger students not being as participatory for fear of ridicule, Aboriginal students being hesitant to take the program, or students with an image to maintain acting out as a way of protecting that image. These are a few examples of the ways a student's perceived social position within a school can create barriers to learning. This is especially so in a program like GRASP where the facilitators only have a brief window of time to talk about potentially vulnerable topics.

I share these things as a way of illustrating what a facilitator might be up against when entering a classroom – in other words, there are more dynamics at play than a simple transference of knowledge. I also believe it is imperative that the students' individual fears, beliefs, and values be taken into account. If the social climate in a school, or a student's own fears, values, or insecurities preclude them from taking action on behalf of themselves or others, what might occur if we allowed space for these kinds of discussions, even if it meant occasionally veering away from our agenda and prescribed program?

The Power of Transparency

These ideas stir up new questions for me and I continue to wonder if we have become too sterile (i.e., focused on content) in our approach to youth suicide prevention. I have come to appreciate the depth of emotion young people are capable of expressing. In order to help them get there, however, it has been my experience that transparency with my own emotions and vulnerabilities helps to take down walls and perhaps reduce stigma. By being transparent about my own fears and imperfections, I am able to help young people see that it is normal to make mistakes, feel sad, victimized, angry, or overwhelmed and still be a happy, successful person. By making our presentations personal we are able to help students recognize that struggles, even to the extent of having suicidal thoughts, aren't about “other people” but are rather another part of the human condition. When I can achieve a balance between being a practitioner with research-informed material and a human being with struggles to share, a transformation often occurs in the classroom.

We have had many teachers express surprise over the level of student engagement during our presentations and youth consistently tell us that our transparency and willingness to share is what they find most memorable. It is important to note, however, that each personal story has been well thought out and carefully chosen to complement the underlying messages of hope, and compassion woven into the program. In this sense, I echo Cooper, Clements, and Holt (2011) that mental health and adolescent suicide prevention programs be “proactively and skillfully addressed” (p. 701). This is a theme I will address in greater detail later in this article.

Connection and Compassion

Crisis line work and suicide prevention activities are loaded with emotion and yet in our well-intentioned ways of trying to fix things, we run the risk of squeezing the feelings out of it altogether. Human compassion, the acknowledgement of our collective frailty, and the power love might have to combat suicide are mostly absent when we talk about suicide prevention. I wonder what youth suicide prevention might look like if a greater sense of empathy and compassion was consistently built into the delivery of these programs. What if we taught students how to communicate this sense of compassion and empathy to others? And what if we also explored what it is to be compassionate and empathetic toward ourselves?

Though we had initially developed a series of learning objectives that would correspond to the words Growth, Resilience, and Acknowledgement, Suicide Awareness, Prevention and Safe Planning, we noticed unexpected themes beginning to emerge when we allowed the learning space to emerge. In essence, the students were letting us know that the concerns in their lives were far more complex than we might have originally imagined and that by allowing this unravelling, while being transparent ourselves as facilitators, we were creating dialogue that was authentic.

According to Dunleavy and Milton (2009), “The work students undertake also needs to be relevant, meaningful, and authentic – in other words, it needs to be worthy of their time and attention” (p. 34). In this sense we began noticing a shift, not only in what was being shared during GRASP, but also in the students’ willingness to explore the notion that compassion and empathy might have a role to play in suicide prevention and to more seriously examine the role they might each play as caring individuals.

We developed experiential activities to help students learn how to self-reflect before passing judgment, and to look and listen “beneath” what is being presented in order to have a deeper understanding of the people and the world around them. Our hope is that in helping students understand these concepts, a ripple effect might resonate outward from GRASP and into the culture of a school.

GRASP’s Effect

Since its humble beginnings as Youth Crisis Intervention Skills Training, over 300 students have participated in the GRASP program. Of those, 25 have taken the program more than once, and five were trained this year as GRASP mentors, having gone through the program twice. These outputs further validate what Dunleavy and Milton (2009) had to say about students’ perspectives on what it would take for them to feel fully engaged in learning. In school they imagined they would:

- Solve real problems.
- Engage with knowledge that matters.
- Make a difference in the world.

- Be respected.
- See how subjects are interconnected.
- Learn from and with each other and people in their community.
- Connect with experts and expertise.
- Have more opportunities for dialogue and conversation. (p. 10)

Observing students eager to re-experience the program and take on new roles as “Mentors” has given us a unique perspective for program evaluation. We have had opportunity to see first-hand how a young person might make meaning of a suicide prevention program that explores the potential that empathy might have and makes space for meaningful connection and engagement.

Another output of the program has been the students’ ongoing connections to us, sometimes several years after they have taken the program. To date, one GRASP student has gone on to become a crisis line volunteer, three have volunteered for our agency at a suicide awareness event, and several remain in touch via social media.

On their own initiative, students at one high school created a group called “Empathy” and they actively engage with the student population to create a safer, more inclusive school. This group helped to plan and stage our first Youth Connection Day at the end of the school year in 2012, bringing together 53 GRASP students from across two school districts to meet and explore further possibilities for suicide prevention and safety. On “YouthCon” Day we asked the students to create cards to be distributed to a group of mental health and addictions workers known as “the downtown team” in Nanaimo, British Columbia. These cards would go to people struggling with homelessness and addiction. The students were asked to share messages of hope and inspiration on the cards and it was relevant to note that 42% of the cards carried one or more of the tagline messages from the students’ experience in GRASP: You are Awesome; You are Valuable; You Matter.

The school where the students created “Empathy” has decided to make Empathy a curriculum course that will be taught alongside GRASP. According to Ciffone (2007, as cited in Cooper, Clements, & Holt, 2011) “The greatest strength of a curriculum-based program is not the content that is taught but rather the effect that it has on the milieu of a school” (p. 699).

This sentiment was carried a step further by the Vice Principal of the school who shared, “The school is different this year, it feels different in the hallways, it feels more positive.”

Speak Out, Reach Out, Help Out

Despite the growing success of GRASP, we were still only reaching a small percentage of the student population and the schools were beginning to request our 80-minute presentations. These shorter sessions are now called Speak Out (speak out about suicide) Reach Out (reach out to others) and Help Out (there are things we each can do to make a difference). During the academic year, there were two suicides in the district, a male in Grade 8 and another male in Grade 12. Although neither student was known to us personally, one of the deaths took place in a school we had been actively involved in. I remember having feelings of guilt and fear once again

that we weren't doing enough, or worse, that we had done something wrong. Although I knew from a rational perspective that neither was the case, my past experience as a police officer carried with it a desire to "do the right thing" and I found myself having to rely on the support of colleagues so as not to succumb to my own feelings of inadequacy and despair. I share this as another example of the complex nature of suicide prevention education and encourage others in the field not to work in vacuums but to instead surround themselves with supportive teams they can turn to in times of stress.

These deaths prompted an increased interest on the part of administrators in providing suicide prevention education sessions to more students. As part of the district's protocols for suicide post-intervention, the Crisis Society was called upon to lend support during the aftermath of both tragedies and help guide the schools in providing post-intervention support to the students. It is difficult to describe the feelings of fear and responsibility that come with being relied upon during the tragic and tenuous days following a suicide. These were real lives, and real tragedies, and we were constantly on guard to do the right thing – whether that meant talking to the media, or advising a school not to hold a large public memorial.

Through it all, the schools wanted more information and training. Over the years we had tried to present "Speak Out, Reach Out, Help Out" in a variety of different ways, but nothing was connecting in a manner that felt "right" to us as experienced facilitators. Further, we began to question the veracity of presenting information about "what to watch out for" as opposed to "how to stay safe". Cooper et al. (2011) note:

Kalafat (2006) also notes that some older studies have shown that programs that enhance protective factors may be more effective than those that address risk factors; specifically there is longitudinal evidence that programs that enhance protective factors may be more effective. (p. 701)

This observation resonated with me based on some past experiences in policing. As a young officer, I noticed that many of the people who ended up in the back of my squad car were not "bad" per se, but were individuals who had not been well supported in their lives; people who made poor decisions, or had minimal problem solving or coping skills. In that sense, it was compelling to explore the role these kinds of protective factors might also play in suicide prevention.

Further to that, I wondered what might make a suicide prevention presentation interesting enough to engage students in safe, non-threatening ways, but still leave them with tools and strategies for coping (i.e., protective factors) that they would remember and actually employ later. Research tells us that music can enhance learning. Specifically, "multimedia and technology (cameras, video, and video editing, projectors, SmartBoards, sound recording equipment, animation and gaming software, and ubiquitous PowerPoint) have proven helpful in engaging students in learning about subjects, in exploring ways to present their learning, and more importantly in helping students control their learning" (Parsons & Taylor, 2011, p. 41).

Today's youth are accustomed to living in a world that moves and changes rapidly and it made sense to me that they would respond to programs that are designed with this reality in the forefront. As Parsons and Taylor (2011) argue:

The literature repeatedly states the need to re-examine our assumptions about learning and about learners; there is a common call to revisit traditional teaching pedagogy and, if not change altogether, at least infuse our daily classroom offerings with student engaging pedagogy based on more recent neurological, cognitive, and demographic science and human development research. Our past (and current) practices and measures have focussed almost entirely on academic achievement. There is little definitive research on what enhances...or engages them in learning. (pp. 5–6)

With this in mind, we began using popular music videos that carried messages of resilience and hope in our presentations.

What Has Emerged from Speak Out, Reach Out, Help Out

In the 2011/12 school year, over 1,000 students from Grades 8, 9, and 10 experienced Speak Out, Reach Out, Help Out. In that time, counsellors have reported surprise over the number of students who were not aware they could visit their school's counselling departments for anything other than career planning. They have also noted an increase in students coming in to "unpack their problems" which is language directly from the Speak Out, Reach Out, Help Out program to express why they are there.

Moreover, several calls have come into the crisis line from youth who have taken Speak Out, Reach Out, Help Out that required some kind of suicide intervention and one youth stopped us in the halls at a school to say "thank you." He had been the recipient of one of those caring interventions. We were also learning that the level of skill required to create engagement in classrooms should not be undervalued. This is further validated by Dr. Jerry Hinbest (White, Morris, & Hinbest, 2012) who asks:

How can we understand the curriculum as a living process, which facilitators change based upon context, but also based upon their own strengths and capabilities? How do facilitators develop skill and knowledge about when or whether to go beyond the curriculum, and to be responsive to the needs of students? How is the process facilitated or prohibited by the actions of other stakeholders? How do they introduce new ideas or concepts from the literature, or practice knowledge from other contexts, or from discussion with co-facilitators, ongoing research or professional development? (p. 346)

I believe the answer to this lies in cultivating educators with a vested interest in what White and Morris (2010) describe as having a "constructionist approach to inquiry that 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 in the 'doing' of youth suicide prevention" (p. 2188).

As a facilitator I continue to cultivate within myself a constructionist approach to practice that seeks to create authentic moments, an acknowledgement of real world struggles, self-analysis, reflection of practice, and an open willingness to meet youth where they stand. Though I doubt any program, researcher, practitioner, facilitator, or clinician will have the last word on the prevention of youth suicide, there is life in being a part of the conversation and in being open to the creativity, compassion, real world knowledge, and ideas youth bring to the table when they are relationally engaged and feel connected.

Concluding Remarks

I'm brought back to that presentation so many years ago in the room filled with uniformed police officers. What was it about me, also in uniform and carrying a gun that suggested to young people that I might be a safe person to talk with? It occurs to me that to a group of teens, the room filled with police officers was potentially a threatening place, and though I will never know for certain, my guess is that as a young female officer who was gentle by nature, I was the least threatening or perhaps the most open and responsive person of the bunch and, therefore, the person they were drawn to.

If I were to compose a list of comparisons between the feelings in the room that day and the feelings I might have prior to a suicide prevention workshop, I would identify them as a “complex social process where uncertainty, resistance, and negotiated meanings are defining aspects” (White, Morris, & Hinbest 2012, p. 353). I believe that when we have an understanding that suicide prevention is “Far from being a straightforward technical enterprise where the facts about suicide are neutrally conveyed to a passive audience” (p. 353), we free ourselves to be more open and responsive as facilitators, thus making it more likely for connection and relational engagement to occur.

And so I circle back to my original question: Could a sense of connection be interwoven into youth suicide prevention programs, not to diminish what is already there but to enrich and enliven current best practices, and research-based information? The simple answer is yes, and certainly, the work has been richer and the outcomes encouraging when students are engaged in the process. I believe, however, that for this to occur, it is essential that we not undervalue the role of a suicide prevention educator. We do youth a disservice when a subject with the kind of complexity and intricacy that suicide holds is given over to less experienced hands.

Suicide prevention education needs educators and trainers with excellent practice who embrace and understand this complexity, practitioners who have experience working with youth, an ongoing commitment to staying current with literature, technology, and media, who possess an appreciation and passion for the process, and have the “skill and knowledge to know about when or whether to go beyond the curriculum” (White, Morris, & Hinbest, 2012, p. 346). It involves equipping ourselves with the insights from research-based evidence and remembering the “something more” that can occur when educators know how and when to be transparent and share space with students in a way that acknowledges our collective frailty and resilience. Just as we expect skilled instructors to teach our children mathematics, history, or language arts, the same need be said for those entrusted with youth suicide prevention.

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