Teachers' Experiences of Working with Students Who Have Attempted Suicide and Returned to the Classroom

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Abstract

Student suicide is a serious issue facing intermediate/secondary schools. Teachers have the potential to play important roles in addressing such risk. This study utilized semi-structured interviews with six intermediate/secondary teachers in Newfoundland concerning their experiences of working with a student who had returned to the class-room after an attempted suicide. Coding was utilized to determine common themes among the data. Findings indicated teachers experienced shock, uncertainty, anxiety, and fear in terms of how to handle such situations. Participants also discussed various issues around access to student information and some noted limited knowledge of appropriate courses of action. They recommended proactive and inclusive policy/program development as well as teacher preparation in the area of preventing student suicide attempts. Study results are discussed in the context of the needs of teachers, along with a focus on

teachers' perceptions of what they needed to support their students. The role of the wider school system in supporting teachers and students when it comes to suicide is also a major consideration.

Keywords: mental health, student suicide attempt, teacher

Résumé

Le suicide des élèves est un problème sérieux auquel sont confrontées les écoles intermédiaires/secondaires. Les enseignants ont le potentiel pour jouer un rôle important afin de répondre à ce risque. Cette étude s'appuie sur des entretiens semi-structurés menés avec six enseignants d'écoles intermédiaires/secondaires de Terre-Neuve à propos de l'expérience qu'ils ont vécue en travaillant avec un élève revenant en classe après une tentative de suicide. Un codage fut utilisé afin d'extraire des données des thèmes communs. Les résultats indiquent que les enseignants ont ressenti un choc, une incertitude, de l'anxiété et de la peur lorsqu'il leur a fallu gérer de telles situations. Les participants ont également discuté de différents problèmes sur l'accès aux informations relatives aux élèves, et certains ont noté une connaissance limitée des lignes de conduite appropriées. Ils ont recommandé un développement proactif et inclusif des programmes/politiques, ainsi qu'une préparation des enseignants en matière de prévention des tentatives de suicide chez les élèves. Les résultats de l'étude sont discutés dans le contexte des besoins des enseignants, en se concentrant également sur les perceptions des enseignants sur ce dont ils ont besoin pour soutenir leurs élèves. Le rôle du système scolaire élargi en termes de soutien des enseignants et des élèves dans le contexte du suicide est également un élément majeur de la discussion.

Mots-clés : enseignant, santé mental, tentative de suicide d'un élève

Introduction

Teachers are expected to be knowledgeable and capable of addressing a host of student issues and complaints, yet it would be impossible to prepare teachers for every student issue they may encounter. Many students in junior high and high school experience significant stress and report signs of mental health issues; the risk for suicide remains a serious concern among this group (Statistics Canada, 2010). Despite this, teachers are rarely prepared to address such student issues (Freedenthal & Breslin, 2010). We know that having a significant relationship (with a teacher or another person) can act as a buffer against mental health problems and even suicide risk (Harter & Whitesell, 1996). As well, when youth feel as though they matter and are important to someone, they have a greater sense of self-protection (Elliot, Colangelo, & Gelles, 2005). Despite this knowledge, youth still report feeling alone, isolated, and as if they do not matter.

When a student attempts suicide, or commits suicide, there can be a range of services put in place for that student as well as other students and teachers in the school (e.g., see American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2011). This is typically an immediate response and is geared toward supporting the entire school community, but especially the students. At some point following the suicide attempt, the student most often re-enters the school, potentially returning to the same classroom and teacher. Such students are often being followed by mental health providers and receive a variety of services. What is less clear, though, is how the teacher is impacted by having the student attempt suicide and then return to his/her classroom. As well, we know very little about what teachers believe they need in order to support students in such circumstances. Such knowledge is key for the protection of the teacher's well-being and also for supporting the teacher's role in helping the student. This study included two primary objectives:

1. To identify what teachers need for themselves when a student attempts suicide and is then subsequently returned to their classroom.
2. To identify teachers' views on what they need to be able to effectively help students feel connected, valued, and safe.

To accomplish these objectives, the current study focused on Newfoundland and Labrador junior high and high school teachers' experiences of working with students who had attempted suicide and then re-entered the schools. Research on adult responses following adolescent attempted suicide is sparse, especially perspectives from within the

school system. The authors utilized a qualitative approach, in part informed by phenomenology, so as to facilitate an in-depth and exploratory focus on this topic. The following literature review on adolescent suicide, social support, and teacher stress is presented as a means to provide context for the current study.

Adolescent Suicide and Social Support

Christianson and Everall (2009) wrote in their paper on school counsellors' experiences with client suicide that "when adolescents look at their reflections in the mirror, they see one of the greatest dangers they will face during their youth as adolescents" (p. 157). In Newfoundland and Labrador, suicide is the second leading cause of death for adolescents, and adolescents have been identified as one of the age groups with the highest rate of attempted suicide (Statistics Canada, 2007a, 2007b, 2010). In addition, students with disabilities may be at even greater risk for suicide, potentially due to less social support and increased risk of depression (Wachter, 2008).

Adolescents who have attempted suicide, or those at high risk of committing suicide, have been found to spend significant time alone or to lack social supports. In a recently developed theory of suicide and attempted suicide, Joiner Jr. and Van Orden (2008) claimed that the desire to commit suicide stems from a perceived sense of a burdensome existence and failed belongingness. Research has shown that feelings of loneliness are common for adolescents (Culp, Clyman, & Culp, 1995). Mazza and Eggert (2001) reported that youth contemplating suicide spend significantly more time alone in solitary activities such as watching television as compared with youth who identified as non-suicidal.

The existence of a social support system and a place to belong plays a role in healthy adolescent functioning (Bergmans, Langley, Links, & Lavery, 2009; Rutter & Behrendt, 2004). Studies have found that adolescents who perceived their relationships with those close to them as positive and supportive often showed signs of resiliency and were less likely to exhibit suicidal behaviour (Harter & Whitesell, 1996). They also had positive outlooks for their futures and possessed effective coping mechanisms (DeWilde, Kienhorst, Diekstra, & Wolters, 1993). Importantly, such support can come from many sources (peers, family, other significant adults). On the other end of the spectrum, low social competence in an adolescent can be an obstacle for the creation of social supports

and has been found to be related to the existence of suicidal ideations and behaviours (King et al., 2001). Among those adolescents who had a history of suicide attempts, prior social support was reported as something they felt they lacked (Bostik & Everall, 2007).

Given established relationships between social support and suicide, researchers have suggested that an effective strategy would be the development of social supports and the establishment of positive environments for at-risk adolescents (Granello & Granello, 2007). Also, in terms of accessibility, it would be beneficial for these developments to occur in the adolescents' general environment such as the school.

Role of School Professionals
in the Prevention of Adolescent Suicide

Research has suggested that education directors, school administrators, guidance counsellors, and educational psychologists can all have important roles to play in student suicide prevention (Christianson & Everall, 2009; Harris & Jeffery, 2010; Range, 1993). Research has focused on the teacher–student relationship and has demonstrated the impacts that such a relationship can have on various student outcomes (e.g., academic, personal, vocational) (e.g., Klem & Connell, 2004; Kosir & Tement, 2013). It has been widely suggested that teachers are on the front line and thus have the potential to recognize risk factors for adolescent suicide and to potentially intervene. Teachers are the personnel in the school system spending the majority of time with students, providing both formal and informal education to students every day, and having the greatest opportunity to bridge communication between the school and the parents (Range, 1993; Stephan, Weist, Kataoka, Adelsheim, & Mills, 2007).

Teachers, although not trained as mental health professionals, do have the potential to assist students who have attempted suicide. In one study completed by Elliot, Colangelo, and Gelles (2005), 2,004 adolescents between the ages of 14 and 18 participated in a telephone interview during which they participated in the Youth at Risk 2000 survey. What was discovered was a significant effect of "mattering" on suicide ideations, with ideations dramatically decreasing as perceptions of "mattering" increased. According to the researchers, mattering, or the perception that a significant other is caring about one's welfare and that one can make a difference in the world, was significant to adolescents' self-esteem or recognition of strengths and motivation to improve weaknesses. This finding highlights

the importance of those dealing with suicidal or potentially suicidal youth to show them that they matter by acknowledging their presence, investing in their welfare, and displaying an appropriate reliance on their existence and talents (Elliot et al., 2005). In Bostik and Everall's (2007) research with adolescents who have experienced the transition from being suicidal to being non-suicidal, it was found that an essential component in their healing process was the development of at least one significant relationship with another who showed friendship, understanding, and caring. A number of adolescents not able to find adequate support from their family or peers named their teacher as this person.

Teacher Stress and Strain

Although the above research highlighted the potential importance of teacher involvement with students who have attempted suicide, other research has found that external demands placed on teachers contributes to teacher stress and possible strains in the classroom. This can result in a lack of connection between the teacher and the student. It is reasonable, then, to recognize that there are many stressors that teachers work with on a daily basis and that the request to assist with student mental health may add yet another role contributing to stress and burnout.

Younghusband (2007) interviewed 16 high school teachers in rural and urban Newfoundland in 2002 about their perceptions of their work environment with a focus on stressors. The balancing of multiple demands was one stressor these teachers identified as playing a major role in their work stress. More specifically, they acknowledged that the demands from the general public to do more than teach and the expectation that they help to manage a student's upbringing contributed to their stress levels. The teachers described the stress and the worry they experienced in dealing with the social and emotional issues that students brought to school each day. Some teachers believed that too much was expected of them and the schools in dealing with mental health issues (Wyn, Cahill, Holdsworth, Rowling, & Carson, 2000).

Newberry and Davis (2008) found that teachers who viewed students as being challenging in the classroom tended to report having a reduced connection to those students. More compelling is the finding that these results remained even when the teacher was aware that the behaviour was out of the student's control. This was relevant in the case of students who have attempted suicide because such students were often faced with

issues such as depression, substance abuse, and social isolation that would most likely present challenges in the classroom. A fear of legal repercussions may also have presented an obstacle for teachers in becoming involved with a student who had attempted suicide and who might likely attempt it again. Research examining teachers' knowledge of suicidal behaviour has often found that teachers were not trained, were unaware of warning signs, had little or no information on suicide, and were often unwilling or uncomfortable to take any type of action that could place them in a role of responsibility (Freedenthal & Breslin, 2010; Malley, Kush, & Bogo, 1994; Scouller & Smith, 2002). It has also been found that few schools have written policies concerning student suicide (Davidson & Range, 1999; Malley et al., 1994; Younghusband, 2007). Some research has highlighted that teachers view school-based services as being less than optimally effective at addressing student mental health needs and, that when compared with counsellors and school psychologists, many teachers rate issues such as attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder as being more serious than depression and suicide (Repie, 2005).

Adolescents are at an elevated risk for suicide. Social support and mentorship play important roles in protecting youth from such risks. Teachers have the potential to make positive inroads with students who are at risk for suicide; however, balancing such demands with already overwhelming roles and responsibilities is challenging.

Methodology

The main question in this study was: What were teachers' experiences in working with students who had attempted suicide and were returning to school? In exploring this question, a qualitative approach was taken (Creswell, 2007), which was, in part, informed by phenomenology. The study included a primary focus on interviewing teacher participants to explore and describe their experiences. During the interviews, the use of follow-up questions, reflection of meaning and affect, and probes encouraged free-flowing interpretations. In this way, the interpretations put forward by the interviewer could be tested against the participants' reactions. This free exchange of interview dialogue allowed for the facilitation, during the interview, of shared meaning-making and ultimately a deeper understanding of the experience under discussion. The major goal was to explore and describe participants' experiences as they described them during the interviews, including new realizations, meanings, or perspectives gained through the act of talking with the interviewer about, and reflecting upon, the experience.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a valuable framework when attempting to understand the essential meanings of peoples' experiences (Patton, 2002). At the core of this framework is a desire to understand the essential meanings of human experience; thus, ensuring that participants had such an experience was critical. Within this study, participants were selected based on having had the experience of teaching a student who had attempted suicide and was returning to their classroom. As well, the participants had to be willing to reflect on their experiences. Phenomenology is consistent with research approaches and philosophies (e.g., community-based research, humanism) that encourage and facilitate the participants' active engagement in the research process. Participants are respected and encouraged to engage in the recollection processes of their experiences (Moustakas, 1994) in order to make sense of them and to reach deeper, essential meanings.

In the current project, this was facilitated primarily through the interview itself. Frankl (1988) notes that phenomenology focuses on the participant's own reflections and own personal meanings versus the researcher's assumptions of what an experience means for the participant. This requires a willingness and ability to reflect on one's experiences and is a hallmark of phenomenological investigation. The researcher and participant become partners in this journey of discovery. Husserl (1931) described the importance of intentionality and consciousness in the process of phenomenological investigation. Reflecting and becoming aware in an interview of the meaning ascribed to the experience itself is a central tenant of phenomenology (i.e., noetic cycle) (Husserl, 1931). Analysis and description stemming from a phenomenological framework should reflect a process of reflection on the interconnected meanings of the experience.

Participants

The participants were six teachers employed in junior high or high schools in Newfoundland. The criteria for participant inclusion included having had worked with a student after the student's attempted suicide but not currently working with that student. Five of the participants reported having more than one student who had attempt suicide over their careers. Convenience, snowball, and unique case sampling processes were employed to recruit participants in this study (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). Participants were selected among two school districts in Newfoundland. Unique case sampling was utilized as the

study focus was on junior high and high school teachers. Also, due to the difficulty in identifying potential participants, sometimes teachers or guidance counsellors suggested potential participants.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews and journaling were the sole means of collecting data. This approach was appropriate for the study's purpose and it fit well with qualitative studies, which often depend on first-person descriptions and rely on data collection which involves "minimum structure and maximum depth" (Lester, 1999, p. 2). The semi-structured interviews lasted approximately one to one and a half hours. The first author conducted these interviews. The purpose of using a semi-structured interview was to gain an in-depth exploration of the participants' social and personal experiences. In this study, the questions not only asked for a description of what happened but also asked about what the experiences meant to the participants (Farber, 2006; Polkinghorne, 2005). As described above, this helped to facilitate the noetic cycle (Husserl, 1931) and allowed for awareness of deeper meaning during the interview. The flexibility of the semi-structured interviews put the participants more at ease. Participants also seemed eager to share their opinions and experiences. Some of the sample questions included:

1. Describe your relationship with the student at the time of the attempted suicide?
2. Were there any changes in your role or relationship with the student upon their return to the classroom? From your perspective, why did these changes occur?
3. Were there any apparent changes in the classroom environment in regards to the other students in the class?
4. What, if any, resources were available to you at this time? Were you aware of these resources?
5. What were your feelings concerning the support directed toward you at this time (i.e., from administrators, counsellors, and educational psychologists)?
6. What do you think were the strengths and weaknesses of the education system in assisting you during this time?

All interviews were recorded by two recorders. Researchers used journaling throughout the data collection process to record notes following the interviews along with their impressions, ideas, reactions, potential biases, and questions following the

interviews. Journaling helped to facilitate an ongoing commitment to avoiding a natural attitude or avoiding everyday ways of knowing (i.e., epoche) (Moustakas, 1994). Researchers also used their journal notes when considering how the participants' comments reflected the experience itself, how the potential underlying meanings ascribed to their experiences, and how the participants' experiences were interrelated.

Data Analysis

The first author transcribed all interview recordings to facilitate a deeper level of understanding and meaning of the interviews. Burnard's (1991) method for the analysis of semi-structured interviews that have been transcribed in whole was used**.** From the time transcription began, it was important to write memos regarding anything perceived as important. The transcripts were then read again five times with the aim of recording any possible headings or themes that could be seen as describing any aspect of the teachers' experiences. This process is known as open coding (Burnard, 1991).

The number of headings was then reduced to a manageable number by combining those that were closely connected under broader headings and the transcripts were then reread with those in mind to ensure that they provided an accurate representation of the material. The initial data were then coded to identify the heading they reflected and were then copied to a separate document, using Microsoft Word, where all the information representing each heading was compiled. The original location of this data was recorded. Once all the initial data representing each heading were copied to their appropriate location, headings were again combined to those used in the final results. This analysis allowed for the interpretation of the themes. Importantly, phenomenology maintains a holistic orientation. In the current study, thematic results were interpreted as being interconnected. Textual descriptions helped to facilitate this approach (Moustakas, 1994).

Trustworthiness

The authors used member checking in the current study (Mays & Pope, 2000) as a way to ensure accuracy and as a way to continue the reflection process. Participants were sent a copy of their interview transcripts and a summary of the main interview points. If discrepancies were noted, or participants wanted to add further information, they were invited to do so, but none were noted. The authors also tried, wherever possible, to provide examples

of participant quotes so as to give the reader direct views of what participants themselves had said. Finally, the authors used journaling as a means to record their own reactions and perceptions toward the data, helping to facilitate epoche and enhance awareness of personal beliefs and biases through the data collection and analysis. These notes also helped to inform the analysis of the data and the discussion points in this manuscript.

Results

The analysis included a narrative depiction describing each study participant. These narratives have been shortened from their original forms and abbreviated versions are presented below. The analysis of interviews also resulted in multiple overarching themes. The thematic interpretations of how the teachers in this study experienced working with students who had attempted suicide and returned to their classrooms are also presented below. Overarching themes were identified as such if the theme was discussed by a majority of the participating teachers and had a certain weight of importance placed upon it, typically through multiple mentions or a specific expression of importance. Quotes taken directly from the interviews are used within each section to demonstrate the breadth and perceived importance of each theme and subordinate headings.

Participant Narratives

Ms. Green has been working in the education system for 20 years, holding both bachelor's and master's degrees. Her teaching experience has been with junior high and high school students, teaching courses mainly in the disciplines of science and mathematics. She has taught in both northern Canada and Newfoundland. She aimed to use a student-centred approach to find the balance between teaching the curriculum and preparing students for life outside high school.

Ms. White has been working for 20 years in the school system. She has worked in schools catering to Grades 7 to 12, but has mainly taught Grades 7 and 8. She described these schools as being moderately sized, not too big but not too small. Ms. White has taught a variety of subjects and has also spent some time working with student support services and students with challenging needs. Her work in student support services involved students who have learning disabilities as well as other difficulties with reading and writing.

Mr. Plum has been a teacher for seven years. He has worked as a special education teacher, a support teacher in the classroom, and a regular classroom teacher, predominantly at the junior high levels. His teaching focus was mathematics, but he has also taught in areas such as the humanities and health. He has also spent some time teaching younger students (kindergarten to Grade 9) in the fields of mathematics and behavioural supports.

Ms. Violet has been working in the school system for over 20 years. She has taught in a regular classroom as a substitute teacher and as a special education teacher. She has also worked with students dealing with mental health issues in a school context. Ms. Violet's approach to teaching was very individualized. She liked to accommodate the needs of each student as best she could.

Ms. Brown has been teaching for close to 30 years, mostly in Grades 10, 11, and 12. The courses she has taught were usually related to physical education and science. Her experiences included teaching in Newfoundland, western Canada, and locations outside Canada. Her class sizes have varied dramatically, depending on course offerings, and she has spent most of her teaching career working in one medium-sized school. She explained her approach to teaching as one that was a balance between firmness and a relaxed "open, fair, and honest" relationship.

Mr. Olive has taught in western Canada, Labrador, and Newfoundland. This has involved mainly students in small junior high/high schools, although he also has some experience teaching primary/elementary students. He has taught physical education, health, and technology, among other subjects. In the past, he has also spent time as a school administrator. His approach to teaching was to treat students in the way that he would like to be treated, emphasizing respect and fairness as well as having a bit of fun.

The following sections outline the thematic results.

The Many Hats of the Teacher

All participants noted that the role of the teacher has expanded beyond teaching the curriculum. Teachers have become expected to wear multiple hats to not only facilitate student learning but also to assist in various other roles. Teachers experienced feelings of care and worry similar to that of a parent of a student in crisis. They also believed that they had made and could make an impact on the lives of the student by creating a safe environment for all students.

Student-Centred Approaches

Teachers commonly cited a student-centred approach to teaching. This approach often involved a focus on academics and beyond. As Ms. White noted, "We gotta be more than just academics, we have to be getting into the lives of the children." At times teachers were aware of situations outside the classroom faced by individual students. In the experience of Mr. Plum, "You might call yourself a math teacher or a math support teacher or a language support teacher but mostly what you're dealing with are issues of home, family, self-esteem, morality, those sorts of things." It was difficult to ignore the effect these experiences had on the students, to just teach the curriculum without consideration of how these factors affected the students.

In Loco Parentis *to the Whole Student*

Teachers also considered dealing specifically with the mental health issues of the students in their class as another hat. Mr. Olive directly expressed the extra hat concept, saying, "You have to take it as an extra hat. You have to be aware of all these things [mental health issues] that you're not really trained for but in the same sense you know it is necessary. I mean not like we don't wear enough hats as it is, but here's another one." While Ms. Violet expressed that "we try to do it but we can't be their teacher and their counsellor . . ." These teachers took the role of *in loco parentis* (in place of a parent) seriously, which they assumed in their role as teacher. Mr. Plum seemed to be very passionate in assuming this role: *"*I call them my kids because they are very much my kids."

Making an Impact

Teachers also wore the hat of being a resource for their students. Ms. White described this responsibility: "In the end young people are young and they don't always have a whole lot of experience to make informed decisions and you need to guide them a bit." The teachers believed they could impact their students and thus could assist students in distress. Mr. Plum shared similar thoughts: "A teacher is a professional who has the greatest impact, they're on the frontlines every single day and in a lot of cases the teachers in those kids' lives have a greater impact on their lives than their own parents." Teachers suggested they desired to be available for students facing attempted suicide and to provide them with resources (e.g., guidance counsellors, pastors, other teachers).

The School in Crisis

The final hat described by teachers, the responsibility of caring for *all* students, was precipitated by the attempted suicide of students they knew well. Teachers became much more aware of the possibility that students in their classes could be dealing with significant issues. Many teachers interviewed decided to assume that every student in the school could be experiencing some form of crisis since it was impossible to accurately identify all at-risk students. Ms. White reported: "You look at all your students then and you start to think the same thing. What's going through their heads? And you start thinking you have to treat them with the utmost respect all the time and try to help them because you really don't know." Once it was assumed that all students could be experiencing significant problems, teachers decided they would make the school environment as safe and welcoming as they could.

Thoughts and Feelings of
Shock, Sadness, Uncertainty, Anxiety, and Fear

The many roles and responsibilities the teachers in this study assumed when working with students in their classrooms, along with the additional roles they assumed when working with students with mental health issues, especially in the area of student-attempted suicide, seemed to contribute to teachers experiencing certain thoughts and emotions, such as shock, sadness, uncertainty, or anxiety. Many of these cognitions were incorporated into five different subordinate titles within this theme: shock upon first hearing the news, sadness of the event spurring a desire to help, uncertainty of how to approach the student/situation, anxiety or worry about what to expect and what to say or do, and fear of doing something wrong.

Shock and Devastation

Teachers expressed initial shock when informed of the attempted suicide, especially when they believed that such an attempt was unlikely. Ms. White remembered that, when she was first informed, she "was devastated." Ms. Brown recalled that she "didn't know at the time, I didn't know [the student] even had emotional problems or issues at all." This shock could be very intense and affect the teacher personally. Ms. Green described shock as being among her initial feelings: "I was really, really shocked and, I don't know, the

feeling is [like] something inside you just drops. It's hard to describe and for some rea-son—and I probably wasn't aware of it at the time but I am now when I hear things like that—I just get extremely tired."

Sadness and Compassion

A common initial reaction to the news of a student's suicide attempt was sadness. The thought of how scared and alone the student must have felt was almost overwhelming, especially since the student was in their care. Ms. Brown recalls her first feelings upon hearing the news of an attempt: *"Oh my god, like why? What did he/she do and how bad must you feel to want to end your life. You know, what kind of profound sadness is that?"*

Uncertainty

Uncertainty was a common experience of the teachers when they were informed about the suicide attempt and the student's return to the classroom. There was a time period of a couple of days to a number of months between when the teacher was told and when the student returned. Initially, participants questioned whether they had contributed to the suicide attempt, if they could have prevented it, or how they could have missed some-thing so pivotal in that student's life. Ms. Green described this as uncertainty: "There's a lot of uncertainty, people are scared, people don't want to be the ones, they don't want to believe—they really don't want to be the person who could potentially make a child feel so awful that they would think about taking their life." Other uncertainties described were ones concerning more practical considerations of what to do upon the student's return to the classroom (e.g., What should be said? What about grading and evaluation?).

Anxiety and Worry

Many of the teachers described uncertainty as leading to anxiety. Ms. Green expressed feelings of anxiety: "I was really apprehensive, really almost scared. I would say nervous cause you really don't know what to do and I don't know if there was a right thing to do. Like any other encounter, it simply unfolds the way it unfolds and you're more reacting." Anxiety also seemed to stem from the realization of what the student was capable of and the thought that it may happen again. Mr. Plum describes this: "There's a level of anxiety associated with that because I have this person in my class. I know this is a likely situa-tion or a potential situation. Whether likely or not, the potential is there to do something

as drastic as suicide, but you don't know what the signs or symptoms [are] or what you should be looking for." Once the student returned to their classroom, the teachers found themselves being hypervigilant for potential signs of another attempt. These teachers were on high alert for any changes in the student or in his/her interactions with others. The student leaving the classroom for the washroom was mentioned by a number of teachers as a source of anxiety.

Fear

There was one common fear expressed by all the teachers: after the student returned to the classroom, the teachers were afraid that they might inadvertently aggravate the situation, even spurring a future attempt. Teachers were aware that, when a student attempted suicide, there was an increased chance he/she could attempt it again. This knowledge instilled fear in a number of teachers. Ms. White wondered "if it would happen again, being scared that something like that would happen again," and Ms. Violet thought, "OK, they're OK now but how about the next time? If not now, when?" Mr. Olive believed that "you don't expect it the first time but I mean, if you're not watching for the second time, it's your own fault type of thing. If you can help it, help it."

Coping: A Feeling of Relief

Teachers reported needing relief from the above-noted cognitions. These teachers relied on a number of different tools to help them cope. Examples of such coping strategies included life experience, knowledge and use of connections to others, communicating with those around them, working toward maintaining normalcy in the classroom, and positive self-talk.

Life Experience

Many of the teachers reported they dealt differently with a student-attempted suicide early in their careers versus later in their careers. Years of teaching students, experiences of student suicide, and relational experience with suicide or mental health issues were all experiences they used to approach the current student-suicide attempt from a new and informed perspective. Ms. Green recalled, "As I got older I became less shocked and less hesitant about talking to people about the issues in general." Experience with student suicide seemed to make subsequent occurrences of suicide something they could more realistically address. The different experiences of these teachers helped them to react in different ways.

Knowledge and use of connections to others

Teachers described having a close connection to supportive administrators, guidance counsellors, and educational psychologists in the school, as well as knowing that these professionals had a close connection to the student at the time, as being beneficial and as providing them with a sense of relief. Mr. Olive noted, "The nice thing is I know [that] if something comes up and I don't know how to deal with it, then there are people here who should know or can find out and that's their job to find out how to deal with these things, so that's encouraging."

Another source of relief for the teachers was the health care system. Mr. Plum expressed the relief he felt when a health care professional took over: "But what I found, and not to sound cruel, [was] that there was a level of relief on my part because there was someone with more expertise who was more in the loop, who was better equipped to deal with that situation [and who] was now in charge." For Ms. Violet, trust in the health care system was a source of relief for another reason: "Generally, when they come back, we have the knowledge that they have been considered stable enough [by the health care professional], that they don't think there's a great danger of them doing anything."

Communication

In preparation for the student's return to the classroom, teachers communicated with the guidance counsellor, other staff members who were aware of the situation, the parents of the student, and, in some cases, the student. This communication provided the teachers with a strategy to handle the situation and with someone to discuss the struggles with. Teachers believed that communication was essential in their efforts to support the student. Ms. White noted: "I talked to the guidance counsellor at the time. I remember that and I talked to the parents, [and] I had talked to [the student] while they were out of school . . . So that worked out really well . . . because I had that bit of communication."

Maintaining Normalcy

Several teachers worked at maintaining as much of the regular classroom routine and environment as possible, after the student's return. Ms. White focused on the relationships and interactions within the classroom: "They don't want to come back and their whole relationships with their friends and teachers have changed. That must be totally devastating. So keeping that as close to normal as possible [is important]." After some time had elapsed

following the student's return to the classroom, Ms. Green observed: "Things go back to some kind of normal and then [the] daily grind kinda takes over and the routine sorta picks up. You feel a little more comfortable with the way things are. It's like a new normal."

Self-Talk

Teachers generally experienced uncertainty and anxiety while working with a student who had attempted suicide. Despite not being certain of exactly the right thing to do, they did gain relief knowing that they were doing the best they could with the knowledge and experience they had. Ms. White noted: "I guess you just do your best in a situation like that," and "I think if you keep the child's interests at heart then I think you're going to be fine. You might not do everything correctly, by the book, but if you have the child's interests at heart, I think that's the key and that's what I tried to do." Ms. Green recognized that a student surviving a suicide attempt meant a second chance for the student: "People attempt suicide and, you know, don't complete it, and there is a possibility of coming back from that and having a positive and full life, and . . . knowing that makes a big difference in how you talk about it and how you discuss it."

Confidentiality: To Tell or Not to Tell

The teachers in this research had different opinions about the confidentiality surrounding the attempted suicide. Some teachers believed that confidentiality should be consistently applied, while others would have appreciated more knowledge about the student's situation and what was being done to help.

In Favour of Complete Respect of Confidentiality

Ms. Green fully supported the family's right to privacy and applauded the school and the guidance counsellors for maintaining confidentiality. This teacher believed that "just because a child is in your school does not mean you should know every last thing about them. They have a right to privacy. And sometimes I find that is the hardest thing for adults or teachers to understand." She also offered an explanation for why teachers may want more information: "Because when you know or when you've been involved with something, you want to know that something has been done." When asked about confidentiality, Mr. Olive also highlighted its importance: "I suppose, if they don't know, they can't help, but then they can't hinder either, not intentionally. So, yeah, it's not really the school's place to make that public knowledge."

In Favour of Providing Teachers with Confidential Information

Mr. Plum noted that he was given very little information about a student in his class who had attempted suicide. His response to this was: "We're professional enough to be responsible for them for five hours a day . . . but it seems strange that I'm not professional enough, for lack of a [better] way to put it, to be filled in on the loop and the needs of those kids." Ms. White had a different experience with confidentiality. She was one of the few people who were aware that the student had attempted suicide. When discussing this, she said: "Maybe people who really, really were in contact with this person all the time should have known more so they could have helped more in this situation. I think the healing process [for the student] would have been better." Ms. Brown had a different experience in that she had been informed about the student's suicide not by the administration but by a student in the class. The attempt had occurred during a holiday, so the student did not miss class. When school resumed, another student told Ms. Brown about the incident at which time she followed up with administration. In her opinion, "It's important to know if there's something that somebody knows, that the teacher, that other teachers in the school, don't know, then teachers should know. So something doesn't hit you right out of the blue."

Difficulty in Knowing

Although many of the teachers reported wanting to know more about the situation, there were a couple of teachers who expressed potential concerns with knowing more information. Mr. Plum explained: "Would it have made my job any easier? No, probably not, because with increased information comes a greater responsibility and a greater desire, a [greater] drive to prevent those situations." Ms. White being one of the few professionals in the school who knew about the suicide attempt had several things to say on the difficulties she experienced. She experienced difficulty maintaining confidentiality and honesty. She did not enjoy needing to tell "half-truths" to students and colleagues. She also noted, "It was very difficult; I think that's what made it hard, you know. You couldn't even talk to your fellow teachers because they weren't aware and that made it more difficult, I think."

Talking to Students

One aspect of confidentiality that many of the teachers agreed on was that information about a student's attempted suicide should not be shared with other students. Any assistance

the teacher provided to the student should be kept separate from others in the class. For example, asking the student if he/she was okay or other similar questions that were not typically asked in the classroom might be heard by other students and raise suspicion.

Discussion

Social Support and Reducing Future Suicide Attempts

Adolescents contemplate and act on thoughts of suicide when they feel they are not cared for and believe they have little impact on others. Such adolescents spend a significant amount of time alone. They may report feelings of loneliness and a sense that they do not matter. They often lack skills to build positive social relationships and feel they have few people to talk with (Bearman & Moody, 2004; Culp et al., 1995; Elliot et al., 2005; Joiner & Van Orden, 2008; Mazza & Eggert, 2001). If these beliefs are not addressed following a suicide attempt, there is a risk the student will make another attempt (Harris & Barraclough, 1997). Schools that have encouraged positive support networks have had fewer students consider suicide. Some students, following an attempt, have reported that finding support from caring teachers can make up for a lack of support from peers or family (Bearman & Moody, 2004; Bostik & Everall, 2007; Kidd, Henrich, Brookmeyer, Davidson, King, & Shahar, 2006). Teachers have an opportunity to provide support since they spend so much time with students; in some cases, they may be one of the only support options available.

Teachers in this study demonstrated a willingness to provide support to the students despite a high degree of uncertainty and anxiety in several cases. Examples of this desire to offer support included a willingness to learn more about suicide and a desire to reduce the pain students may be experiencing. The teachers in this study believed they were able to help with the entire well-being of the student in addition to addressing the student's academics. Caring and "mattering" were also demonstrated by the sadness and empathy reported by the teachers upon learning about the attempted suicide. Teachers aimed to stay positive, to have positive occasional conversations with the students, to encourage them, to help them feel okay in the classroom, and to ensure that they were aware the lines of communication were open if the students wanted to talk. These actions closely resembled the types of helpful activities named by adolescents who have found

their teachers supportive. They described such teachers as doing more than their job, talking to them during lunch periods and after school, showing an interest and caring in their lives, allowing them to help out around the classroom, and encouraging their strengths and abilities (Bostik & Everall, 2007).

Teacher Stress and Coping

One of the main themes in this study was teachers wearing multiple hats or being expected to assume multiple roles. Research has identified a common teacher stressor as students coming into the school suffering from a variety of issues caused by external factors. According to past research, teachers believed there were too many expectations put on them to deal with student mental health issues (Howard & Johnson, 2004; Wyn et al., 2000; Younghusband, 2007). Teachers in the current study expressed many of these stressors. They described external factors students were facing, uncertainties in assuming various roles, as well as a general worry about the well-being of their students on more than a curricular level. Despite these stressors, teachers in this study wanted to help their students. They did report wanting the stress to be eased through greater preparation and education. These teachers wanted to be a support but did note a concern that they lacked the necessary tools to do so. Research has found that teachers are not trained in suicide intervention, are often unaware of warning signs, have limited information on suicide, and are often uncomfortable accepting a role of responsibility in relation to student suicide (Freedenthal & Breslin, 2010; Malley et al., 1994; Scouller & Smith, 2002). Some of the teachers in this study had completed training in suicide intervention, citing it as extremely helpful in reducing stress associated with the situation. Others reported wanting to learn more about suicide intervention through workshops and professional development.

Strategies adopted by teachers in this study to cope with student suicide attempts seem to correspond with research on how teachers address stress in their careers. As teachers in this study discussed their experiences, at no point did they talk about experiencing a crisis. They did indicate a desire for enhanced supports, knowledge, and policies, but they did see themselves as dealing with the experience quite well. Previous research has found that resilient teachers faced with career stress have had a strong belief in their ability to face and solve problems, although stress associated with working with students who have attempted suicide is sparse. They believed they handled situations as

appropriately as possible with the knowledge they had and did not place guilt or blame on themselves. These internalized cognitions meant that these teachers may have been high in the theoretical and empirical concept of self-efficacy. Typically, those with high self-efficacy place more effort and time into obstacles they face and are active in building coping strategies (Bandura & Adams, 1977; Howard & Johnson, 2004; Jepson & Forrest, 2006). In their positive self-talk at the time, teachers told themselves they were not certain of exactly the right actions to take but they knew they were doing the best they could do with the knowledge and experience they had. A large component of the self-efficacy demonstrated by these teachers was this self-talk.

Program Recommendations

Few schools have policies and programs developed to specifically address adolescent attempted suicide (Davidson & Range, 1999; Malley et al., 1994). Participants in the current study reported that they were unaware of any programs in their schools to address this issue. This suggests that the development of such programs/policies is as important as how such programs/policies are made available to teachers.

Policies developed for suicide prevention and support of mental health issues must keep teachers and other gatekeepers informed of and prepared for their role (Hayden & Lauer, 2000; O'Carroll, Potter, & Mercy, 1994). Kalafat (2003) found that gatekeepers in the school should be prepared to recognize signs and risks, to know how to respond when facing crisis, and be aware of additional supports. In the current study, teachers emphasized the importance of additional training and information in the areas of student mental health, including student suicide. They noted the importance of pre-service and professional development in education focusing on the signs of student crisis and what is beneficial for students who have attempted suicide, especially for students returning to the classroom.

Teachers in this study spoke to the value of proactive policies/programs which would involve the entire school community and beyond. Kalafat (2003) has reported the importance of gatekeepers feeling connected to other adults working in the schools. Having a trusting relationship with other professionals in the school (e.g., guidance counsellor) and knowing that they had a close relationship with the student, was named as both a benefit and a relief for teachers in the current study. Previous research has suggested that the connection with a guidance counsellor in this situation was particularly important for teachers (Christianson & Everall, 2009).

The current study has also highlighted the needs of teachers as they deal with student suicide attempts. Participants reported a host of cognitive and emotional reactions to this issue along with a range of ways they coped. This information can be important for other teachers experiencing student suicide attempts and can also be useful for administrators and support teams to consider when they offer support to the school community around student suicide attempts and when students return. The teacher(s) should also be offered support throughout such experiences/transitions.

Study Limitations

There were some study limitations that should be taken into consideration. First, the research sample, although appropriate for qualitative research, was a small representation of teachers working in Newfoundland. Care was taken to provide rich detail as a way to describe the teachers' perceptions and views. It is important to note that the purpose of this study was to describe the teachers' experiences and the meaning they ascribed to those experiences, and not to generalize beyond them. Finally, teachers were reporting a subjective experience they recalled from the past and in no way were these experiences directly observed or explored at the time they occurred.

Concluding Thoughts and Future Research

Adolescent suicide is a serious issue in junior and high school settings. Teachers in this study described experiences addressing the social and emotional needs of their students, talked about the stressors they experienced in dealing with student-attempted suicide, along with their strategies for easing this stress. Teachers can play a significant role in the prevention of student suicide; however, they need a clear mandate, broad support, and professional preparation. Clearly, teacher education programs and professional planning need to take into account student mental health and suicide risk. This study highlighted how teachers are personally affected by student suicide attempts and what they do to cope with such experiences. This is an important first step in understanding the impacts on teachers when a student attempts suicide and what they perceive their own personal needs to be. It highlights key considerations for supports that could be put in place for teachers following a student's suicide attempt and what teachers need when the student returns.

Future research could consider how preparation in the above-noted areas could best be delivered (e.g., through pre-service teacher preparation programs, workshops for teachers, intensive institutes, on the job mentorship). Future research should also consider best practices to support and prepare teachers in their role as part of a team to help students return to the classroom following a suicide attempt. Finally, research should continue to explore the nature and implications of information sharing between the school and the teacher regarding a student's suicide attempt.

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