

# A Case Study of the Suicide of a Gifted Female Adolescent: Implications for Prediction and Prevention

Laurie Hyatt  
Barton College

*In this case study focusing on a gifted adolescent female who took her life at the age of 18 using a firearm, the researcher investigated the personal, environmental, and cultural variables that may have contributed to her suicide. Data were collected from interviews, documents, and other artifacts, including a videotape that was a compilation of events throughout the subject's life. This was a psychological autopsy in which the thoughts, feelings, and actions of a brilliant yet tormented young female were studied after her death by suicide. The purpose was to determine what factors led her to end her pain by choosing death over life. Implications from the findings include the need for changes in the education of gifted children and adolescents. In addition, parents, teachers, and counselors need more in-depth information about the characteristics of gifted students and about the warning signs for suicide so that suicide can be prevented.*

In 2006, the last year for which final data were available, suicide was the third leading cause of death in the United States for young people ages 15–24, with a reported 4,189 suicides in that age group (National Center for Health Statistics, 2009). These numbers may be low because some of the reported “unintentional injuries,” which account for most of the deaths among the young, could have been suicides that were not reported as such for personal or insurance reasons (Dixon & Scheckel, 1996; Pfeffer, 1986).

Although the rate of suicide among those ages 15–24 tripled between 1955 and 1995, a slight downward trend occurred until 2004, when the rates again increased to the highest level in 6 years (National Center for Health Statistics, 2009). In the United States, White males have had the highest suicide rate and have exceeded females by a ratio of 4:1, probably due to the males' propensity to use firearms when taking their lives, a method that is usually lethal.

---

Laurie A. Hyatt is an assistant professor in the psychology department at Barton College in North Carolina.

*Journal for the Education of the Gifted*. Vol. 33, No. 4, 2010, pp. 514–535. Copyright ©2010 Prufrock Press Inc., <http://www.prufrock.com>

Females have usually taken their lives by poisoning and by cutting. In the 15–24 age range in 2006, 1,978 suicide deaths were by firearms, 1,509 by suffocation, 342 by poisoning, and 360 were not specified (National Center for Health Statistics, 2009). At present, there are no data verifying how many of these deaths are of gifted individuals (Cross, 2008).

This article describes a case study of a gifted adolescent female who took her life at age 18 using a firearm. The personal, environmental, and cultural variables that may have contributed to her suicide were examined through interviews of family members, original documents, and other artifacts, including a videotape that was a compilation of events throughout the subject's life. The purpose of this psychological autopsy was to determine what factors led her to end her pain by choosing death over life.

Research on suicide has concentrated mostly on the incidence of suicide in the general population (Berman & Jobes, 1991; Maris, Berman, & Silverman, 2000; Maris, Canetto, McIntosh, & Silverman, 2000). Some researchers have developed theories in which they attempt to explain the causative factors (Shneidman, 1985; Stillion, McDowell, & May, 1989). In his 1996 book *The Suicidal Mind*, Shneidman listed what he believed to be 10 commonalities of suicide. In general, the commonalities include the purpose of suicide, which is to escape unbearable pain by ceasing consciousness; feelings of hopelessness and helplessness; and a constricted way of perceiving in which alternative solutions are not seriously considered. In addition, intent to take one's life was communicated certainly by the act itself but also often in the way of clues beforehand. Last, he noted that this act was a summation of a pattern of coping that was pervasive throughout the person's life. Many of the people he studied had an "all or nothing" cognitive style and a tendency to give up and escape life's difficulties. There are many similarities between Shneidman's theory and the suicide trajectory model of Stillion et al. (1989). Both are multicausal theories that include consideration of psychological, cognitive, and social attributes. The suicide trajectory model has four categories, which include biological, psychological, cognitive, and environmental. The biological contributors to suicide in this theory include a genetic basis, neurological factors, and male gender. Psychological and cognitive factors include depressed mood, poor self-esteem, lack of coping strategies,

and existential questions. Feelings of helplessness and hopelessness are noted in this theory as in Shneidman's theory. Negative self-talk accompanies suicidal ideation, using words such as "failure" to describe the self. Many who take their lives have existential questions about the meaning and purpose of their life. The trajectory model also considers family dynamics such as discord and negative life events (e.g., loss). The availability of firearms also is included in this model.

In addition, researchers have studied the negative and sometimes life-threatening effects of perfectionism (Hill, 1995; Kerr & Cohn, 2001; Roeper, 1995; Silverman, 1993; Speirs Neumeister, 2004). Although striving for perfection would seem an admirable trait, for gifted adolescents, perceived failure can lead to guilt, depression, anxiety, and even suicide (Hayes & Sloat, 1990). Roeper (1995) stated, "These children carry an enormous burden of imagined responsibility way beyond their years" (p. 73).

Bullying has become recognized as a contributing factor in some suicides (Hazler & Denham, 2002; Ross, 1996). Hazler and Denham (2002) noted that "Peer-on-peer abuse has been recognized as a precursor to potential youth suicides" (p. 403). British authors Marr and Field (2001) defined "bullycide" as a suicide caused in part by unrelenting bullying and harassment. Critical of the lack of intervention on the part of adults, particularly in schools, these researchers acknowledge that once a child dies by suicide, parents often find out that the bullying had been going on for months. Even though school officials knew about the bullying, they did nothing to intervene. From interviews with adults regarding their childhood memories of being bullied, the authors stated that almost half of the participants who were bullied contemplated suicide. Twenty percent attempted suicide, some more than once.

Cyberbullying, or bullying by text message or e-mail, has been blamed for the suicides of young people (Belsey, 2005; Willard, 2006). A recent case in the news involved a young girl who hung herself after being deceived and bullied online. Her friends in the neighborhood knew of her history of treatment for depression. An adult neighbor pretended to be a boy who was interested in her and then changed over time to not being interested and wishing she were dead. In a lawsuit file by the mother of the girl who committed suicide, it was claimed that her daughter took her life because she was bullied. This

was the first case in which someone was accused of a crime involving harassment over the Internet. Several websites are devoted to the memory of children who were bullied and then took their lives. Suicide.org is a nonprofit organization and website focused on youth suicide that contains articles on bullying and suicide. The National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center (<http://www.safeyouth.org>) also has information on bullying and suicide online.

Being bullied and harassed is a frequent occurrence for gifted adolescents (Cross, 2001; Gross, 1998; Kerr & Cohn, 2001). Torrance (1962) wrote that “in most classrooms the child runs a calculated risk every time he asks an unusual question or advances a new idea for fear of the ridicule of his classmates and perhaps his teacher” (p. 74).

Research has also focused on possible explanations for suicidal ideation and completed suicides among gifted youth (Cross, 1996, 2001; Cross, Cassady, & Miller, 2006; Delisle, 1986; Dixon & Scheckel, 1996; Ellsworth, 2003; Hayes & Sloat, 1990). Researchers examined psychological, emotional, and environmental factors that may have contributed to the suicides of gifted adolescents through psychological autopsies that are conducted subsequent to a suicide (Cross, Cook, & Dixon, 1996; Cross, Gust-Brey, & Ball, 2002). Some of the findings from the psychological autopsies of three adolescents who took their lives in 1994 while attending a residential high school for academically talented students (Cross et al., 1996) are especially notable when compared to the results of this study. The Cross et al. (1996) study included the following findings: (a) the adolescents who took their lives had participated “in peer group discussions about suicide methods” (p. 406), (b) had exhibited mood swings, (c) seemed to be influenced by the suicide of Kurt Cobain, and (d) kept journals in which they divulged thoughts that they did not share with others. Following the publication of an article about these psychological autopsies (Cross et al., 1996), Dr. Cross was contacted by the mother of Reed Ball, requesting a psychological autopsy of her son, who had died by suicide. The findings from this psychological autopsy included the fact that Reed (a) complained about being bullied, (b) had suffered from suicidal ideation from age 13, (c) struggled to find a meaning for his life, (d) had insomnia and mood swings, and (e) felt that he was losing his sanity (Cross et al., 2002). Some of the aforementioned

findings will be compared later in this article with the findings from this psychological autopsy.

### **Methods Used in the Current Study**

The perspective of the constructionist epistemological stance used in this study is that individual human beings construct meanings as they interpret their experiences (Collin, 1997; Crotty, 1998). Collin (1997) stated that “social reality is generated by our interpretation of it” (p. 2). Reality is dependent on the way we think about it. This is different from the position of positivism, for example, in which “truth and meaning reside in their objects independently of any conscious” (Crotty, 1998, p. 42). Constructionists are interested in in-depth understanding and insight within a historical and cultural context. The emphasis is on how an individual’s background and experiences affect how that person constructs knowledge (Patton, 2002).

Within this constructionist framework, symbolic interactionism is a theoretical perspective that seeks to understand experiences and behaviors by focusing on how individuals interpret their world through interaction with self and others (Blumer, 1986; Crotty, 1998). Through the interactions, individuals create perceptions, attitudes, values, and meanings (Crotty, 1998; Moustakas, 1990). Blumer (1986) emphasized the role of meaning in determining a person’s behavior. He was concerned that many psychological and sociological explanations for human behavior omitted a consideration of the unique meaning attached to objects and experiences by the individual (Blumer, 1986). He stated that an individual “acts toward his world interpreting what confronts him and organizing his action on the basis of the interpretation” (Blumer, 1986, p. 63).

Underlying qualitative research is the assumption that there are many interpretations of reality (Merriam, 1998). Criticisms of the trustworthiness of qualitative research have included researcher bias and subjectivity and the fact that the researcher served as the interpreter of the data. Many qualitative researchers have addressed these concerns (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Glesne, 1999; Merriam, 1998; Ratcliffe, 1983). Glesne (1999) noted that “the use of multiple data collection methods contributes to the trustworthiness of the data”

(p. 31). Verification procedures that increase the credibility and trustworthiness of the data include prolonged engagement and persistent observation, audiotaping, triangulation, member checking, and thick description (Creswell, 2002; Seale, 1999; Silverman, 1993).

I collected and analyzed data over a 3-month period, working persistently to discover patterns and themes. The initial interview was followed 2 months later with a second interview. Interviews were audiotaped, and I personally transcribed the interviews. Member checks with the family included sending interview transcripts to Amber's mother so that she could check for accuracy and perhaps think of additional topics that she would like to add or clarify. This process was fruitful because she did make corrections and add situations and conversations. The three forms of data that I collected and analyzed included interviews, documents, and artifacts. Among the artifacts were photographs, a videotape of Amber from her early years until shortly before she died (and including the high school graduation speech), Amber's drawings and pottery, and her many trophies. Thick, rich description from my observations and the process itself added to the validity.

Data collection and analysis for this case study began in 2006 and was completed in April 2007. After planning to conduct a psychological autopsy focusing on a gifted adolescent female, a notice was posted on several Internet sites whose participants include family members of individuals who completed suicide. A female was needed to fill a gap in the research, as previous psychological autopsies of gifted adolescents had focused on males (Cross et al., 1996; Cross et al., 2002). Participants were to be family members of a gifted adolescent female who had taken her life at least one year prior to this study. They had to be willing to be interviewed on two separate occasions and to share documents and artifacts.

## **Participant**

The subject of this study was nominated by her mother in response to the Internet solicitation. Amber (pseudonym), had taken her life 10 years before, when she was 18 years of age. Amber had an IQ of 140 and had scored in the 98th and 99th percentiles in the math and language

portions of the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills taken in second grade. She was served by gifted classes in school, was a member of MENSA, and was recognized as “Most Intelligent” by her high school senior classmates. Amber was also a prolific writer of poetry and prose and the parents had kept the writings, which would be made available to me.

I made two trips to the home of Amber’s parents to collect data. In the initial consent form, I had specified that two separate interviews would be conducted. My initial trip was in October 2006, and the second visit was in December 2006. There were two main reasons for requesting two interview sessions. First, after the initial interview, I had time to think of additional questions and areas that I wanted to pursue more deeply. In addition, the participants had time to think of additional information that they would like to share. A specific example of additional data from the second trip was the videotape that was found by Amber’s father. The fact that there was a videotape chronicling many events in Amber’s life was recalled by the parents during the initial interview. On the second visit, her father located the video, and I was able to see Amber during various times in her life, including her high school graduation speech given just 3 months before her death. Even though Amber was deceased and her brother lived with his wife in another city, each had a designated room in their parents’ house, a home they moved to many years after Amber’s death.

During the first 4-day visit, I stayed in the room dedicated to Amber. All of the documents were filed neatly on wooden shelves on the wall to the right of the door, so I had unlimited access to them. I spent hours each day and night reading the documents, which included at least 100 pieces of Amber’s poetry and prose. I copied and made copies of documents. In addition, I had access to letters to Amber from friends, medical records since she was a baby, letters of reference from teachers, achievement test profiles, the autopsy report, a posthumous psychiatric evaluation, newspaper clippings about the death, and an article that her mother wrote after Amber’s suicide. During this visit, I informally interviewed Amber’s mother and father. I took notes during these conversations, but I did not audiotape them. This experience of initial informal conversations contributed to a wonderful rapport between us.

I began by asking general questions about Amber’s personality, activities, and school experiences that were not emotionally loaded

and obviously specific to her suicide during the first interview. During the second session, which was audiotaped, we talked specifically about the day that Amber died and about her mother's recollections from before and after her death. Because we had such a warm rapport, I felt comfortable asking her very difficult questions. For example, I asked her what she would do differently if she had known that Amber was contemplating suicide. Her answer was, "I would have listened more." On this second visit, I also viewed the videotape that contained a chronological compilation of events in Amber's life. I saw Amber visiting the Cabbage Patch hospital, singing for family members, playing dress-up with friends at her home, competing in talent competitions, dining with a date before a dance, enjoying one of her birthday parties, presenting an address at her high school graduation, and driving around with her boyfriend. Because I obviously never met Amber, this video was invaluable in giving me insight into her personality and interests.

After returning home, I transcribed the 4 ½ hours of interview. I sent a copy of the transcript to Amber's mother for two reasons: so that she could check for errors as there were a few times that I could not understand what was being said, and so that she could think of additions or clarifications that she would like to make. This member check was fruitful not only because errors in the transcription were corrected, but also because her mother was reminded of additional conversations and situations. We continued to communicate by e-mail until after the research project was completed. I underlined key words and phrases and made notes in the margins of my copy of the transcription. As I worked with the data from the interviews and from Amber's writings, the separate words and phrases were condensed into main points and themes.

I kept a journal throughout the process of data collection and analysis. Writing is considered to be a method of data collection itself and can also play an important role in data analysis (Charmaz, 1995; Richardson, 2000). Through the journaling, I detected patterns, gained insight, and formulated ideas. Another vehicle that helped me to synthesize the data was a 3' by 4' dry erase board, a surface larger than a computer screen, needed to enter thoughts and ideas. Because it was erasable, I could work and rework my ideas. For example, one day I wrote "Individual," "Environment," and "Culture" at the top of the



board. As ideas developed, I added specifics. This was an important part of the synthesis of the data.

Another aid in the collection and analysis of the data came from experience working as a licensed mental health counselor. I had worked with clients who were grieving the loss of loved ones. This was especially pertinent because the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at my university insisted that I validate my ability to know what to do if a participant in my study became overcome with grief. In addition to my credentials proving that I could handle situations in which an interviewee became emotionally distraught, I also provided to the IRB the names and phone numbers of other counselors who could be called in the case of an emergency.

### **Limitations of This Study**

Because this was a case study of one individual, the findings cannot be generalized. However, the findings can be compared to the findings from other similar studies, and the findings from this study certainly raised questions for further research. I was the only researcher who collected and analyzed the data. I could not process all of the data that was available to me because of the large number of documents to read and analyze. I chose to include some documents and to exclude others. I made these decisions based on the relevance to the study. For example, poems that Amber wrote that reflected suicidal ideation, depressed feelings, confusion, anger, and hopelessness were included in the analysis. I did, however, increase the validity of my findings through peer review. I consulted with other professionals on what to include and regarding the actual analysis of the data.

### **Findings From This Study**

Findings from this study focused on Amber's individual characteristics; her family, school, and extracurricular experiences; and her cultural influences. For the purpose of this article, however, with the emphasis on the relevance to education, I will delineate only four findings in particular. First, Amber's frustration, anger, and unhappiness

seemed, at least in part, to be directly related to her experiences of being bullied, rejected, and misunderstood at school. In addition, I discovered that Amber had contemplated suicide for 7 years prior to her death and had colluded with school peers about possible methods of taking her life. For example, she wrote that a peer gave her instructions to blow up her car. Another peer suggested jumping in front of a train after ingesting pills and liquor. Another wanted to complete suicide with her. These findings regarding the variables of bullying, the contemplation of suicide for years, and the planning of the suicide with peers correlated with the findings from the psychological autopsies conducted by Cross and colleagues (1996, 2002). Amber anguished and vacillated for years about her decision, giving direct and indirect clues that went undetected as indicators that she planned to take her life. This was also a finding from the psychological autopsy of Reed Ball (Cross et al., 2002). Reed, too, had struggled with suicidal ideation for years before taking his life. Third, Amber's perfectionism contributed to an inability to see her life as having value. Her mother shared many specific examples of Amber's aspirations to be the best, such as her plan to be the class valedictorian. Amber also wrote of her feelings of failure when she did not become valedictorian. Finally, Amber very specifically, through her words and through her actions, expressed a lack of trust and a resistance to communication with adults who might have been helpful to her. These main points will be discussed in more detail in the following pages.

### **Being Bullied, Rejected, and Misunderstood**

Amber was bullied, rejected, and misunderstood by peers, teachers, and administrators. Even in kindergarten, Amber was called names by her peers. "I remember in kindergarten she came home crying that the other children called her ugly," her mother related. She was obviously not ugly and her mother tried to explain to her that they were just trying to bother her and to ignore them. Since Amber's suicide, her mother has worried that she inadvertently gave her daughter the message not to confide her feelings.

In addition to feeling rejected by the children who were bullying her at school, Amber also felt misunderstood by teachers. In the second grade, her teacher called Amber's mother to complain that

Amber was misbehaving in class by being restless and wearing her sunglasses during a standardized test session. After some discussion of her concerns, the teacher admitted that she did not know anything about giftedness and that perhaps Amber was bored in class rather than purposefully being difficult and oppositional.

In some of the honors English high school assignments, Amber was chastised in written feedback by the teacher for seeming to make light of a serious subject. Amber's writings sometimes reflected her thoughts that the assignment was busy work or that the position of the author was obvious. On one occasion, a teacher wrote that Amber was not to write her own opinion or use the word "I" in her critique of a piece of literature. This obviously frustrated Amber as evidenced in her original poem, "Inculcations," which she wrote 2 years before her death:

T = Teacher; S = Student

T: How do I teach? How do I preach?

How do I punish when my laws you breach?

S: You say, 'Be creative with all of your might,'

But if our thoughts differ, then I'm not right.

T: I'm older, I'm wiser, had more school than you;

Only I'm right, and this postulate's true:

Follow just old ways, reject all this new,

Jump on the bandwagon to be a Big Who.

S: A winner, alone, consists never of two.

To know I'm the best, to know that I've won,

Then I have to be in a group of just one.

Rejection can sometimes be demonstrated through treating someone differently than others are treated. In high school, Amber was going to be suspended for carrying pepper spray to school in her backpack until her parents intervened. Her parents had given her the pepper spray because Amber often drove home after dark due to participation in the debate team. Other students had pepper spray and were not threatened with school suspension. Amber was very upset by the differences in treatment, according to her mother. Amber also felt misunderstood and devalued when the school administration was going to vote on possibly discontinuing gifted classes in the school

system. Amber personally made her views known to the administration. Her mother confided that Amber felt as if the needs of gifted students were not recognized and that her own efforts to excel were not valued.

### **Suicidal Ideation and Collaborating With Peers**

Shortly before her suicide, Amber wrote about specific “Reasons to Leave,” “Reasons to Stay,” and “Plans.” In a list of 23 Reasons to Leave, she included “I’ve strongly considered it since 5th GRADE!!! I’m obviously serious.” I was not able to identify any particular stressor that occurred in the fifth grade or before that would have caused her to contemplate suicide at such a young age. She was, after all, still in elementary school. An accumulation of many factors apparently led to her feelings of hopelessness and unhappiness. In the fifth grade, she wrote a mixture of poetry and prose in a spiral notebook. She wrote of fears of her mother getting hurt, yearnings to be rich and famous, worries about people who were hungry and her desire to help them, frequent insomnia, and, yes, she indirectly wrote about death. Her alluding to death was in poems and prose in which she personified a tree as if it was herself and wrote of what would happen if it died. She seemed to also have a concern, here again, masked by using third person in her writing, that she was insane and would die of that insanity. So, as early as age 10, she thought that she was so different that she might be unstable and that instability might prove to be lethal. Amber wrote of cutting her wrist when she was 11 years old, but did not carry out this plan because her mother came home. In a freshman high school honors English assignment, which Amber titled, “Suicide,” she wrote of her desire to take her life. The teacher put a big red check by it, indicating that she was getting credit for completing the assignment, but obviously the teacher did not really read the content. Amber’s pattern of behavior at school also changed overtly in her junior and senior years. She showed anger at the school librarian. She walked out of class a couple of times. She went along with classmates who wanted to change a video being shown by a substitute teacher who had a habit of showing a video and leaving for the rest of the class period. This was a significant behavior change from previous years.

Many adolescents knew of Amber's plans, but no one confided their concerns to an adult or even to a peer who would get help. One student shared her knowledge of a previous suicide attempt by Amber with Amber's mother a week after her suicide. "Why didn't you tell me?" her mother asked. The friend's response was that when Amber did not go through with it, she thought that Amber was not serious. This may indicate a need to educate young people about the importance of sharing their knowledge of another's suicidal ideation or suicide attempts with those who can be helpful in preventing the suicide. Two other pieces of evidence indicate that Amber had included others in discussions about suicide. She received a letter from a male friend, which was found by Amber's mother after her death, in which suicide was discussed. In her list of "Reasons to Leave," "Reasons to Stay," and "Plans," under "Plans" she listed three ways that she had considered taking her life, two of which involved specifically named people. These findings are similar to the findings of previous psychological autopsies (Cross et al., 1996) in which suicide was discussed among peers as a "viable and honorable solution" (p. 409).

## **Perfectionism**

In her study on perfectionism, Speirs Neumeister (2004) concluded that not only do parents, teachers, and peers influence young people to feel as if they have to be perfect, but this can also be a self-determined drive. She categorized perfection into two types, socially prescribed and self-oriented. The author prefaced her research study with a personal example of her own perfectionism that she could only attribute to her own personality, not to any pressure from outside. The destructive effects of perfectionism have been studied by many researchers (Hill, 1995; Kerr & Cohn, 2001; Roeper, 1995; Silverman, 1993). Although striving for perfection would seem an admirable trait, for gifted adolescents perceived failure can lead to guilt, depression, anxiety, and even suicide (Hayes & Sloat, 1990). Many gifted adolescents do not give themselves permission to be less than perfect (Alvino, 1991). Their emotional need to be perfect is, of course, unrealistic, Roeper (1995) claimed. When the prodigy Brandenn Bremmer was asked about his giftedness in an interview with Alissa Quart in 2004, less than a year before taking his life at age 14, he responded, "America

is a society that demands perfection” (Quart, 2006, p. 142). Quart (2006) noted that “it was interesting that I had asked him about giftedness, but the word *perfection* was foremost in his mind” (p. 142).

When singer Judy Collins was 15 years old, she attempted suicide because of her fear of not being good enough, of not pleasing her father. Her father asked her to play the piano at an organized event in Denver. She related being so terrified that her performance would not be good enough that, rather than sharing her fears with him, she took an overdose of aspirin in a suicide attempt. He later apologized for being a perfectionist himself and putting so much pressure on her. However, she noted that most of the pressure was self-imposed (Collins, 2003).

Amber’s high expectations for herself are reflected in her writings about her disappointments about not achieving the honor of class valedictorian, not being accepted by Harvard or Princeton, and not having enough friends. Even though she was accepted to a university with a very good reputation, she wrote that one “Reason to Leave” was “Won’t go to a good college.” Amber’s mother stated that when she did not achieve the status of valedictorian, an aspiration that she had since eighth grade, she gave up. She had to be the best or life was not worth living, in her estimation.

### **Lack of Trust**

Amber’s perception was that adults could not be trusted. She refused to go to a counselor when her mother suggested it after a breakup with a boyfriend. Amber retorted that she could talk to her friends about her problems and that the counselor would focus on what was wrong with her. As Amber expressed in the “Inculcations” poem, she perceived teachers as being rigid authoritarians. She felt that she would not be heard. She also wrote of “Conformity” and felt that adults want young people to conform to their ways and are not open to new ideas. In other words, adults do not listen. She did not confide her thoughts of taking her life to her parents or to any adults. Amber and her mother often disagreed about topics ranging from school teachers to relationships. Once, after becoming angry during an argument, Amber declared that she would not confide again—and she did not.

## Discussion and Implications

This case study raises many questions about the dynamics that influence young people to take their lives and, hopefully, adds to the urgency of the need for further research regarding suicide among gifted adolescents. Some of the factors that seem to have influenced Amber to take her life were also experienced by adolescents who were studied in other psychological autopsies. Four of the contributing factors discovered in this article were being bullied, the influences of peers, perfectionism, and a lack of trust in others.

Amber was bullied beginning in kindergarten and came home crying from school. In addition to complaining to her mother about the hurtful remarks of schoolmates, she also wrote about the hurt that she experienced from the negative remarks of others. How much influence did being bullied have on her decision to take their life? Apparently a great deal because she wrote that two of her “Reasons to Leave” were “Fear of further rejection” and “Unbearable loneliness.”

How much were Amber’s plans to take her life influenced by others? The influences of peers were reflected in a letter from a male friend who suggested suicide to Amber. In addition, under “Plans” in her writings she stated, “Something with Shawn,” and “Blow car via Danny’s instructions.” Also, her third plan to place herself in “Front of train and lots of pills and liquor” was referenced in other prose as being an idea of a peer.

Amber’s perfectionism seemed to be a third contributor to her choice to die. She wrote in “Reasons to Leave,” that “I’m on top now and can only descend” and “Won’t go to a good college.” She added that she felt rejected when she was not valedictorian and irrationally stated “I accomplish nothing.” Her high aspirations were shared when she wrote in a piece titled “If I Could Be Anyone for a Day,” that “Harvard and Yale would both build statues and dedicate them to me. They would read: This statue is dedicated to the rich, famous, and beautiful lawyer . . . who got her doctorate here.”

Amber wrote that she had contemplated suicide since the fifth grade in her “Reasons to Leave” column. How could she have suffered in silence and not confided in adults while writing of her struggles in her numerous poems, prose, and journals? The findings of other psychological autopsies of gifted youth are similar (Cross et al., 1996,

2002). Although the adolescents in those studies wrote introspectively about their difficulties and even obsessed about their troubles, they confided in other adolescents, but not in adults. Amber's parents did not know that she was thinking of taking her life. Why did Amber and the adolescents studied by Cross and colleagues (Cross et al., 1996, 2002) not confide in adults who may have been able to help them through their difficult times? Willard (2006) stated that children often do not confide in adults because they perceive that "adults, teachers, or parents will not understand" and that adults might overreact (p. 29). Amber wrote that "I would die before institutionalization." Adults are the ones who have the power to have someone committed to a hospital. Lack of trust in adults was expressed by Amber to her mother when she refused counseling, saying that a counselor would just find something wrong with her and that she would, instead, talk with her friends. She also did not trust teachers and administrators in the school system. She was furious when she was not allowed to make up school work after missing some days at school. Up until that point she was in line to be the valedictorian. She expressed frustration with teachers in her poem "Inculcations," included earlier in this article, in which she berated adults for thinking that they are always right. A librarian was the target of Amber's anger when she was restricted from reading some books due to her age and grade in school. Amber confided in her best friend that she was contemplating suicide but did not share her plans with an adult who would have provided guidance.

In future qualitative studies, researchers could include interviews with gifted adolescents who have attempted suicide and with friends of adolescents who have died by suicide. Questions of those who have attempted suicide might include a focus on the reasons that adults were not consulted. If it is established that friends knew about suicidal plans but did not reveal what they knew to adults, then questions about the cognitive process involved in deciding not to share this with adults would be included.



## Conclusions

Findings from this study can serve as catalysts for the following actions:

1. *Reduce bullying.* Effective education for students, teachers, and parents regarding the destructive effects of bullying and preventative measures is needed. This could be done through mandatory character education training beginning in kindergarten. Teaching empathy can be incorporated into the class curricula. An inspiring example is the rural Tennessee school whose eighth-grade students, teachers, and principal engaged in a project to teach respect and consideration for the feelings of others. The project, which was developed between 1999 and 2004, is shared in the documentary “Paper Clips” (Fab & Berlin, 2004), available on DVD.
2. *Create personal connections between adolescents and adults.* Establishing relationships of trust between students and teachers, counselors, and administrators requires time spent together individually as well as in classes and groups. With smaller classes of under 20 students, teachers can be more aware of individual needs and issues. Counselors should meet with each student individually two times per year, not because there is a problem, but because they wish to establish trusting relationships. Education should include a change in the role of counselor from the person who diagnoses pathologies, solves problems, or worse yet, disciplines, to a guide who can be helpful and is available to every student. This, of course, requires the hiring of one counselor for every 100–200 students, a goal that seems far fetched in our large schools. However, it can be done. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation established a number of small high schools throughout the country. The Performance Learning Center in Athens, GA, for example, which accommodates students who have dropped out of high school or who are at risk of dropping out, has a school population of fewer than 150 students, a principal, a receptionist, and a counselor.
3. *Educate parents, teachers, and administrators on the characteristics and social and emotional issues of gifted adolescents.*

Parents, teachers, administrators, and gifted students themselves would benefit from classes or workshops in which the characteristics of gifted children and adolescents are taught. Knowing what to expect as a result of being gifted helps to identify what behaviors might be attributed to giftedness and what behaviors might be attributed to depression or feelings of worthlessness. Also, what are the vulnerabilities associated with being gifted? An example would be the likelihood that gifted children and adolescents will be made fun of and isolated just because they are different. Georgia State University, for example, holds a Saturday School for gifted children. While the children are engaged in stimulating math and science activities, the parents attend classes taught by college and university teachers and teaching assistants in which they can ask questions and express concerns about their children's vulnerabilities to emotional difficulties.

4. *Teach adolescents that self-worth is not dependent on being perfect.* As implied earlier in this article, Brandenn Bremmer was aware that his own perfectionism stemmed from societal messages. Post messages on school walls and websites emphasizing the fact that no one can be the best at everything and that success is not defined by perfection. Television spots could highlight this point. In the now-syndicated television program, *Mr. Rogers Neighborhood*, Fred Rogers articulated the message, "I like you just the way you are." Emphasis at school, in the home, and in the media on uniqueness rather than perfection would relax the stressful pressure to be perfect.

In conclusion, preventing suicide among gifted adolescents is contingent on establishing meaningful relationships at home and at school, creating an atmosphere of emotional safety and trust at school, incorporating the teaching of empathy into school curricula, and teaching young people that self-worth is defined by uniqueness rather than perfection. Realizing that a child's perceptions are molded by the culture in which he or she lives, we must scrutinize the cultural messages that young people are internalizing and acting upon. How can we recreate the school

environment so that children feel valued and safe? How can we shift the cultural messages on television and the Internet from an emphasis on perfection to an emphasis on uniqueness? How can close, trusting relationships be established between adults and adolescents so that young people seek out adults for guidance? When we as a society have taken constructive action on these issues, then a firm foundation will be developed on which talented and creative souls like Amber can flourish.

### References

- Alvino, J. (1991). An investigation into the needs of gifted boys. *Roeper Review*, 13, 174–180.
- Belsey, B. (2005). *Cyberbullying: An emerging threat to the always on generation*. Retrieved from <http://www.cyberbullying.ca>
- Berman, A. L., & Jobes, D. A. (1991). *Adolescent suicide: Assessment and intervention*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Blumer, H. (1986). *Symbolic interactionism: Perspective and methodology*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Charmaz, K. (1995). Between positivism and postmodernism: Implications for methods. In N. K. Denzin (Ed.), *Studies in symbolic interaction: A research annual: Vol. 17* (pp. 43–72). Greenwich, CT: JAI.
- Collin, F. (1997). *Social reality*. London, England: Routledge.
- Collins, J. (2003). *Sanity and grace*. New York, NY: Penguin Group.
- Creswell, J. (2002). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Creswell, J., & Miller, D. (2000). Determining validity in qualitative inquiry. *Theory into Practice*, 39, 124–130.
- Cross, T. L. (1996). Examining claims about gifted children and suicide. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 18(3), 46–48.
- Cross, T. L. (2001). Social/emotional needs: The rage of gifted students. *Gifted Child Today*, 24(2), 43–45.

- Cross, T. L. (2008). Suicide. In J. A. Plucker & C. M. Callahan (Eds.), *Critical issues and practices in gifted education* (pp. 629–639). Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.
- Cross, T. L., Cassady, J. C., & Miller, K. A. (2006). Suicide ideation and personality characteristics among gifted adolescents. *Gifted Child Quarterly, 50*, 295–306.
- Cross, T. L., Cook, R. S., & Dixon, D. N. (1996). Psychological autopsies of three academically talented adolescents who committed suicide. *Journal of Secondary Gifted Education, 7*, 403–409.
- Cross, T. L., Gust-Brey, K., & Ball, B. (2002). A psychological autopsy of the suicide of an academically gifted student: Researchers' and parents' perspectives. *Gifted Child Quarterly, 46*, 247–264.
- Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*. London, England: Sage.
- Delisle, J. R. (1986). Death with honors: Suicide among gifted adolescents. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 64*, 558–560.
- Dixon, D. N., & Scheckel, J. R. (1996). Gifted adolescent suicide: The empirical base. *Journal of Secondary Gifted Education, 7*, 386–392.
- Ellsworth, J. (2003). *Adolescence and gifted: Addressing existential dread*. Retrieved from <http://www.sengifted.org>
- Fab, J. (Writer, Director), & Berlin, E. (Director). (2004). *Paper clips* [Documentary]. New York, NY: Ergo Entertainment.
- Glesne, C. (1999). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction*. New York, NY: Addison Wesley Longman.
- Gross, M. U. M. (1998). The “me” behind the mask: Intellectually gifted students and the search for identity. *Roeper Review, 20*, 167–174.
- Hayes, M. S., & Sloat, R. (1990). Suicide and the gifted adolescent. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted, 13*, 229–244.
- Hazler, R. J., & Denham, S. A. (2002). Social isolation of youth at risk: Conceptualization and practical implications. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 80*, 403–409.
- Hill, K. (1995). *The long sleep: Young people and suicide*. London, England: Virago Press.
- Kerr, B. A., & Cohn, S. J. (2001). *Smart boys: Talent, manhood, and the search for meaning*. Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press.

- Maris, R. W., Berman, A. L., & Silverman, M. M. (2000). *Comprehensive textbook of suicidology*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Maris, R. W., Canetto, S. S., McIntosh, J. L., & Silverman, M. M. (2000). *Review of suicidology*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Marr, N., & Field, T. (2001). *Bullycide: Death at playtime*. New York, NY: Success Unlimited.
- Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Moustakas, C. (1990). *Heuristic research: Design, methodology, and applications*. London, England: Sage.
- National Center for Health Statistics. (2009). *Causes of death report*. Retrieved from <http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/wisqars>
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluative methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Pfeffer, C. R. (1986). *The suicidal child*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Quart, A. (2006). *Hothouse kids: The dilemma of the gifted child*. New York, NY: Penguin Press.
- Ratcliffe, J. W. (1983). Notions of validity in qualitative research methodology. *Knowledge, Creation, Diffusion, Utilization, 5*, 147–167.
- Richardson, L. (2000). Writing: A method of inquiry. In N. D. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 923–949). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Roeper, A. (1995). *Annemarie Roeper: Selected writings and speeches*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Press.
- Ross, D. (1996). *Childhood bullying and teasing*. Alexandria, VA: ACA Press.
- Seale, C. (1999). *The quality of qualitative research*. London, England: Sage.
- Shneidman, E. S. (1985). *Definition of suicide*. New York, NY: Wiley.
- Shneidman, E. S. (1996). *The suicidal mind*. New York, NY: Wiley.
- Silverman, L. K. (Ed.). (1993). *Counseling the gifted and talented*. Denver, CO: Love.
- Speirs Neumeister, K. L. (2004). Understanding the relationship between perfectionism and achievement motivation in gifted college students. *Gifted Child Quarterly, 48*, 219–231.

- 
- Stillion, J. M., McDowell, E. E., & May, J. H. (1989). *Suicide across the lifespan: Premature exits*. New York, NY: Hemisphere.
- Torrance, E. P. (1962). *Guiding creative talent*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Willard, N. E. (2006). *Cyberbullying and cyberthreats: Responding to the challenge of online social cruelty, threats, and distress*. Champagne, IL: Research Press.