

## Coping with Suicide in Secondary Schools: Are Teachers Prepared?

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The presence of suicidal ideas in the past week was reported by about two in every five students in the survey of 161 secondary school students. Assuming that suicidal ideation and completed suicide lie in the continuum of suicidal behaviors, this alarmingly high rate underlies the importance of school-based suicide prevention programs. Another 110 secondary school teachers surveyed however felt that they were inadequately prepared to handle suicidal behaviors. When faced with student suicidal behaviors, they would resort to rational explanation in postventive efforts. Their under-emphasis in attending to students' emotional reactions revealed areas at which teacher preparation need to be addressed.

在一百六十一名中學生中，每五名學生中約有兩名報道他們有自殺的念頭。假若自殺念頭和成功自殺是輕微到嚴重的自殺行為，校本自殺預防實在重要。調查一百一十位中學教師的結果卻發現他們感覺對處理學生自殺行為的認識和事前準備都不足。若面對學生自殺行為，他們會向學生理性解釋，他們普遍不大着重對學生情緒的處理是教師準備工作應該注意的地方。

In the past few years, growing public concern over the increased number of reported attempted and completed suicides for school-age adolescents in Hong Kong has prompted suicide prevention activities at the school level (Chan, 1991a, 1993). Consequently, teachers and educators are forced to act hastily on this compelling problem even in the absence of empirically derived knowledge on which to base social action. Nonetheless, evidence in Western countries has been accumulating regarding characteristics, precipitants, and warning signs associated with suicidal behaviors (Berman & Jobes, 1991). Epidemiological research has also indicated that the best single predictor of death by suicide is probably a previous suicide attempt (Shaffer, Garland, Gould, Fisher & Trautman, 1988), suggesting a continuum of severity of suicidal behaviors, from suicidal ideation to suicidal threats, to attempts, and finally to completed suicide. In general, suicidal ideation has been found to be relatively common. In a US study, for example, Smith and Crawford (1986) found that 62.6% of students in a Midwestern high school reported some suicidal ideation or behaviours. Assuming that an adolescent is unlikely to be at the extreme risk end of the continuum without progressing through the less risky behaviours, research on the prevalence of suicidal ideas and their identification among adolescents is important.

While certain programmatic response plans may be formulated on the basis of current knowl-

edge derived in Western countries, such programs need to be evaluated against empirical investigation and psychological autopsy on Hong Kong suicidal adolescents.

Further, it is said that school-based programs, no matter how well intentioned, may become ineffective, inefficient, and even potentially deleterious without the full support and understanding from school officials and teachers. Therefore, assessing the attitudes and preparation of school officials and teachers should perhaps precede the development of school-based suicide response programs.

This paper reports on some of the preliminary results from findings of a larger project on stress and coping of students and teachers in Hong Kong. Specifically, the report will focus on the occurrence of suicidal ideation among a sample of secondary school students, and the perceived preparation of another sample of teachers to handle suicidal behaviours in secondary schools.

### Method

#### *Subjects*

Two samples of teachers and students participated voluntarily in the research project. The teacher sample consisted of 110 secondary school teachers (40 males and 70 females) aged between 20 and 55. Most of the teachers were relatively young, as about 95% of the teachers

were below age 40. These teachers were either enrolled as part-time students for postgraduate training at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, or enlisted to participate through the help of the first group of teachers. Eight teachers also reported that they had the experience of handling suicidal behaviours in schools.

The student sample consisted of 161 secondary school students (37 boys and 124 girls) from senior classes in four secondary schools in Hong Kong (3 co-educational and 1 girls' schools). They were between the ages of 15 and 18 ( $M=15.90$ ,  $SD=.74$ ), and were enlisted to participate through the help of their teachers in the teacher sample.

### Materials and Procedure

All students responded in small group sessions to the Chinese version of the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI; Chan, 1991b) for the assessment of their suicidal ideation. The teachers were requested to complete a brief 6-item questionnaire designed specifically to assess teachers' perception of their preparation for adolescent suicidal behaviors in schools. The brief questionnaire was semi-structured and teachers were encouraged to

give free responses. The first three questions explored teachers' perception of the adequacy of their preparation in the case of the occurrence of a suicide attempt in the school, whether they felt capable in dealing with the situation, and the target person from whom they would seek help or consultation. The remaining three questions asked teachers' personal reactions in the case when the victim of a completed suicide was a student of the school, how they would confront classmates of the deceased, and what they would do to help prevent other students from imitation.

## Results

### Suicidal Ideation Among Adolescents

Table 1 presents students' report of suicidal ideas in the recent one week. It can be seen that close to 40% of the students had suicidal ideas, and about 7% had the desire to commit suicide. While girls appeared to be more likely to harbor suicidal ideas and expressed explicitly the intention, gender difference on the presence of suicidal ideation was nonsignificant as indicated by a nonsignificant chi-square ( $X^2(1)=2.41$ ,  $p > .05$ ).

TABLE 1  
*Proportion of Adolescents Reporting Suicidal Ideation*

	Boys (n=37)	Girls (n=124)	Total (n=161)
Reporting no suicidal ideas	.73	.59	.62
Reporting suicidal ideas but with no intention to commit suicide	.24	.34	.32
Expressing desire to commit suicide	.03	.04	.04
Expressing intention to commit suicide given the chance	.00	.03	.03

### Teachers' Preparation for Suicide Attempts

Table 2 shows the distribution of the percentage of teachers who responded to how they perceived their preparation for the occurrence of suicide attempts in the school. It can be seen that over 99% of the teachers felt that they were inadequately prepared in knowledge and training, of which about 20% felt that they were totally unprepared. While a relatively small percentage of teachers (16%) were confident about their ability in handling a suicide attempt, most teachers (62%) were more reserved, and less than a quarter of the

teachers (23%) felt that they were minimally competent. Over half of the teachers (57%) had identified the school social worker as the expert for advice and consultation, and about half of the teachers (48%) sought support from colleagues. In all these responses, there was no significant gender difference as indicated by nonsignificant chi-squares ( $p > .05$ ). However, teachers who had the experience in handling suicidal behaviors in schools reported that they felt more competent than those who had no experience ( $X^2(2)=7.88$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

TABLE 2  
*Teachers' Preparation for Handling Suicide Attempts (N=110)*

Item		% Respondent
1. Perception of adequacy in preparation in knowledge and training	Adequate	.9
	Inadequate	99.1
2. Perception of competence in dealing with the situation	Competent	15.5
	Somewhat competent	61.8
	Minimally competent	22.7
3. Person first consulted	Principal	9.1
	Colleague	48.2
	School social worker	57.3

The percentages of responses to each item may not add up to 100%.

TABLE 3  
*Teachers' Reaction to Completed Suicide (N=110)*

Item		% Respondent
1. Personal reaction	Upset and shocked	69.0
	Remaining calm	30.9
2. Confronting classmates of the deceased	Discussing rationally with students about facts	86.4
	Leaving social worker to counsel students	20.0
	Expressing grief and allowing students to ventilate	2.7
3. Postventive efforts with other students	Explaining to students that suicide does not solve problems	90.0
	Leaving social worker to counsel students	11.8
	Arguing against suicide as an act of weakness	3.6
	Avoiding talking about suicide to prevent imitation	2.7

The percentages of responses to each item may not add up to 100%.

### *Teachers' Reaction to Completed Suicide*

Table 3 summarizes the reactions of teachers and what they thought they would do in the case of a completed suicide. It can be seen that most teachers admitted that they would be shocked and upset but some felt remaining calm was important. When they confronted classmates of the deceased, most teachers (86%) would choose to discuss rationally with students, but few (3%) would put emphasis on allowing students the chance to ventilate emotionally. When dealing with other students, most teachers (90%) would again employ rational explanation about suicide, very few teachers would resort to avoidance or belittling. In both cases, some teachers however felt that they should

leave counseling students to the hands of professional school social workers. In this set of responses, there were again no significant gender difference nor any significant difference between teachers who had the experience in handling student suicidal behaviors and those who were inexperienced, as indicated by nonsignificant chi-squares ( $p > .05$ ).

### **Discussion**

Although it has been said that Hong Kong adolescent suicide rate has remained relatively constant in the past decade (Hau, 1993; Pritchard, 1993), public concern over adolescent suicide is justified in the light of the findings that some 40%

of adolescents in the present sample reported the presence of suicidal ideation in the recent past week. Assuming that suicidal ideation and completed suicide are on a continuum of severity, efforts to identify these students to prevent undesirable progression from ideas to acts of commission need to be carefully considered as part of school-based suicide prevention programs.

The findings of teachers' perception of their preparation to handle suicidal attempts are also enlightening. It is reassuring that although nearly all teachers surveyed felt that they were inadequately prepared, a substantial proportion of them however felt confident that they were somewhat competent in handling suicidal attempts, and about half of these teachers identified the school social worker as an expert for consultation and advice, and would seek support from colleagues. These findings suggest that suicide prevention programs directed to teachers may precede programs for students, and the development and dissemination of explicit school policies for identifying and referring suicidal students will be a beneficial component of these programs.

As dealing with student reactions may become the frontline responsibility of teachers in a class with a completed suicide, the findings of teachers' responses in postvention revealed areas in which teachers were poorly prepared. The fact that teachers did not report excessive restraint in expressing their emotions was encouraging, as this might help the victim's classmates ventilate and validate their grief and emotions as nonpathological. However, most teachers also reported that they were likely to resort to rational explanation of the realities of suicide rather than attending to students' emotions. In contrast, some teachers recognized the importance of affective regulation in students as revealed in their free responses. One teacher wrote that allowing students to grieve silently was important, and another wrote that comforting the victim's parents and classmates was necessary.

In postventive efforts with other students, most teachers again would resort to rational explanation of the undesirability and ineffectiveness of employing suicide as a coping strategy. Their free

responses added that some teachers put emphasis on suggesting alternative coping and stress reduction strategies, and educating students about the value of living. Thus, the general under-emphasis on the affective regulation of students revealed an area at which teacher preparation, both in-service and pre-service, programs should address.

The findings reported in this paper could hardly be claimed to be representative as the data were intended to be descriptive and exploratory, the samples were haphazard, and teachers were requested to respond to hypothetical situations in schools. Admittedly, the student sample was also overrepresented by girls as the data were collected from two classes in a girls' school and three girl-dominated Arts stream classes in three co-educational schools. Nonetheless, the results suggest directions for future research, and underline the importance of preparing teachers to rise to the challenge of the rising tide of adolescent suicidal behaviors in schools.

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