

School of Occupational Therapy and Social Work

**Making sense of suicides by school students in Bhutan:
documenting a societal dialogue**

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Doctor of Philosophy
of
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Declaration

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgment has been made.

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

Human Ethics (For projects involving human participants/tissue, etc) The research presented and reported in this thesis was conducted in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007) – updated March 2014, and received human research ethics approval from the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee (EC00262), Approval Number #.HR 84/2013

Signature:

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I am not if You are not

I am because You are.

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Abstract

This research uses a narrative inquiry approach to explore and stage a Bhutanese community dialogue on the recent troubling rise in suicides by school students. Forty-four individual interviews and seven group interviews were conducted. The voices of secondary school students, key policymakers, a parent, school principals, school guidance counsellors, and a Buddhist teacher represent the Bhutanese education community. A community dialogue on suicide is timely and illustrates that collective efforts can generate systemic changes.

Prologue

I recollect my personal story from the past which has been the impetus in choosing to undertake this research. I immerse myself in memories, placing myself back in time to recall answers I seek now as an adult. Time had let those memories slink away into silence; perhaps they did not have a purpose in my life until I kept hearing news of suicides by adolescents. The news of a thirteen-year-old school girl who had brutally killed herself by using an electric wire around her neck struck me with worry for other young adolescents. I started wondering what possible reasons or despair would drive them to undertake such painful acts. There were rumours that she had failed in her exams and feared going home to her family that day. She didn't want to tell her family that she failed in her exams. At that moment a part of me could relate to that heart-wrenching fear; of being chided, of that desperate hopelessness in your parents' eyes, and fear of becoming a burden to your loved ones.

I can't remember if I was eleven years, but it feels close to that age, when I hid behind my grandmother's bedroom door, like most days when I would be in sheer anguish and desperate tears, wanting to rip apart every fabric I could grasp. But at that moment, nothing felt enough, the gnawing thought of wanting to disappear from whatever was occurring around me was strong. I remember the old cupboard with multiple cabinets next to the door. Each cabinet opened toward the front like a window with tiny metal latches, and each window looked like a door painted in traditional art. But none of those mattered when I opened the top cabinet to grab a bottle of medicine, which was in powder form and swallowed. I am sure nothing happened because my memory fades after that.

But my second memory haunted me for a while and perhaps through this story I can relate to versions of some who did not survive what I survived. I was 15 years

old, and my class 10 result was due the next day, I knew I did not study well enough. My father was worried. He said 'if you can't get through to a college scholarship you can join the teacher training college (which I dreaded then), and if you fail then you can stay at home'. Hearing this, and knowing I did not have many options, I was scared. I must have had about Ngultrum 20 (Bhutanese currency) in my cheap fawn coloured purse. In the evening before the results day, I walked to our local drug store to buy two strips (with ten tablets each) of sleeping pills. It was very cheap. At the store, I was scared that I would be refused and questioned, but none of that happened. I walked home with a sense of triumph for securing the pills; 20 sleeping pills tucked away in my pocket. I slept in fear but also comfort thinking at least I have the tablets. That night I slept with the pills under my pillow and a mug of water next to my bed. The plan was to wait for my exam results in the morning and if it was the worst, I thought pills were an easy, painless option. I was saved by my aunt pulling me out of the bed at 6.30 am congratulating me for passing and securing top marks. Years later, as an adult, I narrated this incident casually to a close friend of mine who is not a Bhutanese. She was stunned and asked "but why would you think of doing that? Did you think you saw it in the movies or read about it somewhere? How could such a young brain think of killing oneself instead of doing something else?" These questions made me more curious too.

And I give textual life to these memories of the past fearing and hoping this may pass silently without the notice of my parents, for I know this will hurt them. They never knew of these attempts, just as many tiny naughty stories hidden from our loved parents, this one is too. But if they come to glance over here, let them know this that the pain of seeing them grieve over me is far greater to fathom. And this I realized as I matured with time, that we mean more than numbers, ambitions, careers to our parents, and I learnt to preserve, survive and nurture instead.

But this story needs to be told because it is not just a story of me, my father, and a careless drug store man. It is also a story connected to a school where I was known as a bulldozer because I was overweight for my age and I lived with a reputation of getting into fights with boys. I dreaded being called by that name every second of my day in that school. The name calling ceremonies were and are rampant, but not just by the students but by some teachers. I was only 12 years of age when I was called bulldozer by a science teacher in front of the whole class. I still remember his name and the smell of the chalk on the duster as he hit me on my head. Yet again this science teacher is a part of an education system that demanded proof of school success in terms of academic marks, and I must have been one of those 'stupid' students who only managed to pass. I tell these stories because they must not be hidden behind closed doors and books. Stories like mine, like those told by many young adolescents in my counselling room, need to be discussed so that they may be understood and addressed. And so I began this quest...

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Chapter 1: Introduction

If, since it is the negation of the strongest of all human instincts, that of self-preservation, suicide is always anomalous; it is even more so when the suicide takes place in childhood since we believe that youth combines an undiminished life force with an indestructible will to live. (Paul Friedman, 1967, p. 34)

One Saturday in the year 2010, I was returning home to my parents' house for the weekend. On my way home I saw people in groups with solemn expressions. I stopped my car to say hello to someone I knew and asked what was going on. I was told that one of the sons' of the caretaker had died. The caretaker and his family lived in our neighbourhood and the caretaker worked in the same office as my father. When I reached home, my mother told me that the young school boy had committed suicide. The caretaker had eleven children including the deceased and they had struggled to make ends meet. The deceased, an adolescent, was found dead in the early morning hours in one of the office buildings. He had hanged himself. Neighbours and young students rumoured that the boy committed suicide because he did not have new shoes and an outfit which was required by the school for an upcoming cultural program. People spoke of the unfair demands made by schools without regard for family circumstances of the students. It was and is a common practice in most schools to have colourful costumes for students for their school programs, especially if it involved competitions, as costumes would get marked. During such events, parents may be required to provide the costumes. But whatever the reasons, a young boy was lost to the society. As stated by Friedman in the epigraph, it was hard to imagine why someone so young, and filled with life would just kill themselves. Everyone in the neighbourhood was shocked and quiet. Perhaps they didn't know what to say because it was not common to hear of suicide, let alone a young boy committing it.

I remember seeing the brown-skinned boy with big eyes. He seemed quiet. He and his siblings would follow their mother to work for wages on the weekends. I

couldn't help wondering what may have been occurring in his mind, how he may have seen himself in his life, and what occurred in that moment. Could it be that he was filled with desperation like the rumours said? Did he feel alone, or perhaps there was something else which we cannot know, or perhaps never know. Such disturbing stories of suicides by young students gained media attention in the coming years, but the troubling question of why still remains amongst the Bhutanese.

Suicide in Bhutan ranks among the top six leading causes of deaths, there is an average of 73 suicide cases in a year or six suicide deaths in a month. According to Kuensel, the Bhutanese National newspaper, three hundred and sixty-one completed suicides were reported from 2009 – 2013 (Pelden, 2015). About 69 percent of completed suicide cases were youth and young adults (Pelden, 2015). These figures indicate that the most productive years of the population is at risk. The population median age is 24.7 years as of 2014 (NSB, 2014, p. 2) suggesting that almost fifty percent of the Bhutanese population is below 24 years of age in the country. The youngest death by suicide was reported as a seven-year-old school student in 2013 (Pelden, 2013) . Kuensel reported the first student suicide in 1990 with the highest spate of suicides by students recorded in 2011 (Pelvar, 2013, p. 14). Suicide is globally reported to be the second leading cause of death among 15 – 20-year-olds, and out of this 75% of suicides occur in low and middle-income economies (Milner, McClure, & Leo, 2012; WHO, 2016). The completed suicide rate in Bhutan is 10 per 100,000 population, Bhutan has a population of .773,914 people (NSB, 2016). Suicides and self-harm among the Bhutanese students have become common over the years.

Suicide by young people is also identified as a troubling paradox in Bhutan ("A Suicidal GNH Society," 2011). Increased youth suicide and associated social awareness of this problem stand in marked contrast to Bhutan's adoption of Gross National Happiness (GNH) as the country's guiding development philosophy.

Known to the world as a happy Buddhist country, or the last Shangri-la, Bhutan faces the world's curiosity, cynicism and appreciation (Brunet, Bauer, De Lacy, & Tshering, 2001; Clayton, 2007; Page, 2009; Pelden, 2010; Williams, 1958). The challenging task for Bhutan seems to be partly to live up to the outside world's expectations as the country of happiness while struggling with its share of social distress. The phenomenon of suicides amongst students in Bhutan is one of the confronting issues provoking shock and a desire amongst the Bhutanese to address the issue. Besides the Gross National Happiness Survey undertaken in 2010 that sampled for suicidal ideation (CBS, 2016), no formal work into studying suicide was initiated until 2015. Recognizing suicide as a national concern, the Royal Government of Bhutan initiated a Three Year Action Plan (July 2015 – June 2018) in 2015 (RGOB, 2015). This PhD research started before the recent 2015 Government initiative and focuses on the education sector and school students.

This study seeks to understand and identify appropriate responses to the issue of suicides among secondary school students of Bhutan. The sub-objectives are to:

- Articulate storied beliefs, values and views of young people and other members of the education community.
- Describe the interpretations of differently positioned members in the education system with regard to suicides by school students.
- To work collaboratively towards developing ideas and recommendations for suicide prevention in secondary schools in Bhutan.

Suicide amongst the younger generation is described as a malaise of modern societies ("A Suicidal GNH Society," 2011). It may be that the Bhutanese younger generation are caught up in a tug of war between tradition and modernisation of the country. A canvas of this disposition is detailed in the sections below. The

significance of this study is also outlined and the chapter concludes with a brief synopsis of subsequent chapters.

Background

One of my treasured pictures of my father is from 1980, chauffeuring his cousins to the grand annual Paro Tshechu (Buddhist local festival) in an old tractor. Seemed like the tractor then was equivalent to a Land Cruiser today. My father now drives a red Kia Sportage, a Korean car which was unheard of when tractors and horses were in use as transport. A lot has changed in terms of cars, houses, education, fashion, jobs and relationships. The rapid social changes are causing a shift in the relationships amongst people and their environment in Bhutan. But still, during the Paro Tshechu festival, village people dressed in their most colourful costumes drove their Power tillers to the get to the festivals. Paro valley, my hometown, is the region hosting Bhutan's only international airport. It is also a strange hub of the modern and the traditional, where Suzuki, Kia, Honda, and Hyundai cars share the roads with local cows and horses. The offspring of modernity and the rustic share the same road, although once in a while a car gets knocked over by the cow, or a horse is injured by a car.

The account above demonstrates the rapid journey of Bhutan into modernisation; the tussle of seeking a balance between the modern and tradition. On one hand, development, an outcome of modernisation, implies improvement with material benefits, but at the cost of cultural values, environmental degradation increased rural-urban disparities and income inequalities and other ills (Walcott, 2011, p. 253). Moen (2006, p. 57) says the social contexts individuals encounter are based on where they are at any particular point in time. And so the journey of the Bhutanese society's gains and losses must be accomplished amidst its social doldrums which may include suicide amongst students.

Bhutan's road to modernization; a generational leap

Bhutan is a landlocked predominantly Buddhist country located in the Eastern Himalayas. It was never colonised and has been ruled by monarchs for a century. Modernisation was introduced to Bhutan during the reign of the Third King. Bhutan referred to as a strange survivor from medieval times, joined the 21st-century race of the modern world late (Tshering, 2012; Williams, 1958). The comment from C Wright Mills on the changes in American civilization feels most apt for Bhutan, he says “in the course of a single generation, one-sixth of mankind is transformed from all the feudal and backward into all that is modern, advanced” (1959, p. 11). Bhutan remained closed off from the outside world with a culture untouched by modernity (Williams, 1958, para 2). The advent of education in Bhutan was the first link to the outside world and to modernization. The first school in Bhutan was established in 1914 (MoE, 2013) and a country-wide modern education system started in 1961 based on the English model. During this period, Buddhist monasteries (in the Vajrayana tradition) have continued to play a significant role in the lives of Bhutanese, as has the monarchy.

The beginning of modern education also started foundations of modern health services through training of the first health workers in the country (Dorji & Melgarrd, 2012, p. 5). Until then Buddhist beliefs around illness, death and healing influenced the country. Religious rituals and Tibetan medicine were the first steps in dealing with diseases and illness, and continue to do so. This has resulted in Bhutan's “integrated services of both traditional and Western biomedicine offered by health centres across the country” (Dorji & Melgarrd, 2012, p. 5). The first hospital was established in 1956 (MoH, 2001). This was followed by construction of the first roads in 1962, establishment of the first National Newspaper in 1967 and postal services in 1969. The kingdom of Bhutan joined various international organizations and in 1972 became a member of the United Nations. In the same year, the Fourth King of Bhutan coined the term Gross National Happiness as a

guiding philosophy for the country's development and it still remains. The speed of Bhutan's modernization picked up with introduction of controlled tourism in 1975; introduction of Druk Air airline in 1981; introduction of television in 1999; and internet in 2000. In 1999, under the leadership of the Fourth King, hereditary monarchy evolved to a constitutional monarchy and parliamentary democracy started in 2008.

Bhutanese values, cultural and community practices are mostly influenced by Buddhism. The Buddhist belief on the interdependence of lives and beings are strongly embedded in the Bhutanese communal beliefs. Responsibility and respect are integral guidelines in social functioning, and this influences the hierarchical nature of social relationships in the culture. However, historical conditions are constantly changing, and this results in changed contexts and opportunities for learning and development for its people (Moen, 2006, p. 57). Rapid changes impacted differently on the population in terms of the share of economic growth and social disruptions. The extended family structures and old ways of community vitality in Bhutan are being thrown into disarray. The dramatic cultural change in Bhutan is likely to result in the loss of a coherent sense of traditional practices providing cultural safety for young people transiting to adulthood.

In the face of sweeping global change, relationships are rapidly changing everywhere in all directions to all points. Globalisation has caused a worldwide circulation of lifestyles (Gergen, 1999; Milner et al., 2012). All aspects of contemporary social life and economic transactions within and among cultures are widespread. Emerging social distress in the form of crime, unemployment, drug use and suicides correspond to the startling changes impacting the Bhutanese society. Young street gangs, drug use and crime is on the rise, especially in the urban areas. Chandler & Lalonde (1998, p. 193) in their study of Indigenous communities across British Columbia, established that radical personal and cultural change could heighten the risk of suicide.

In addition, unemployment amongst the young has been a troubling issue for the Bhutanese government for years. Young people are under pressure, the fear of failure is strong and made worse by adults in the society who keep commenting and asking 'have you got a job yet?' In recent years, Bhutanese enter job markets on completion of their undergraduate studies, but the trend is changing. More and more undergraduates are now struggling to find appropriate employment. I see my young cousin stumbling from one job application to another, running between offices, sometimes walking long distances because taxi charges are high. He and his friends share stories of how the soles of their brand new shoes gave way because of the walking they had to do to submit job applications. I am certain many more shoes will lose their colour and longevity as they get rubbed off onto the dusty roads of the capital city. These young people made it through their school education and completed college aspiring for brighter futures but their despair deepens in the face of labour market reality. If this is the state of those who are called graduates, one can only imagine the plight of school dropouts because they have not made it past high school.

Although the recent national report showed a steady decline in unemployment by 0.3 percent, there is a mismatch of young job seekers' aspirations and the labour market; and poor coordination amongst the agencies is a serious concern (Tshomo, 2015). The Bhutanese education system is once again accused of creating a mismatch between the world of work and their preparation of students in the schools and institutes (Hernadi, Rathore, Dorji, & Dawala, 2012). There may be tensions between traditional family values, education school policies and what young people learn from the Western industrialized world through television and the internet. In addition, a small percentage of students study overseas after class 10 or 12, their studies sponsored by Government scholarships or their parents. These young Bhutanese are exposed to different cultures while they live there, and they bring their experiences of those cultures with them when they return home

to Bhutan. However, for the majority of young Bhutanese, they are educated in Bhutanese schools.

The traditional social practice of allocating responsibilities to youth (Rorty, 1976, p. 269) has been disrupted. Most young people no longer join their family in the fields or help in gathering feed for animals. The roles of the younger generation in Bhutan seem confined to their academic achievement in schools. In these schools, a failure or low performance is the equivalent of a “personal Armageddon” (Harvey, 1998, p. 63). While the Bhutanese education system is figuring out a balance, what remains unclear is how values and practices are changing and how the identities of school students are shaped by this. It seems the Bhutanese are confronted with profound questions of what is worth valuing, holding on to, or as Gergen (1999, p. 2) says “worth defending, and what can be abandoned in favour of the new and exotic?” The question by Dewey, “how shall the young become acquainted with the past in such a way that the acquaintance is a potent agent in appreciation of the living present?” (Dewey, 1986, p. 246) remains at the heart of Bhutanese society. The following section will provide a further understanding of the education system in Bhutan and its relevance to suicides by school students.

Journey of education system in Bhutan

In the early 1990’s parents would hide children from the education people, because they did not want to send their children away from home (Lhamu, 2013, p. 46). Parents also feared to lose a helping hand in their fields. But the same children who were forced into schools became the first literate and privileged elite of the society. There were approximately 300 students in 1945 (MoE, 2013, p. 3). They were few in numbers and opportunities for employment were ample. But the opportunities have turned into a surge of competition over the years. Bhutan currently has 539 schools, both private and government, hosting 172,857 students (PPD, 2015). Schools in this context refer to the primary schools which include classes pre

primary to VI, secondary schools which follow a six-year cycle (grades VII-XII) comprising two years of lower secondary (grades VII-VIII) and two years of middle secondary (IX-X) schooling, also known as basic education. This is then followed by two years of higher secondary schooling from grade XI-XII (PPD, 2015, p. 5).

Within a decade, education became highly valued by Bhutanese communities, the youth literacy rate in 2012 was estimated at 86.1 % (PPD, 2015, p. 2). Yet at the heart of these aspirations, there is a constant debate that the education system is not up to date in responding to the changing needs of its community ("Looking Beyond Pass Percentage," 2016).

Recently, I was enjoying a casual conversation with my Australian friend Julie. We joked about dissecting frogs in our biology classes while in school. But suddenly, it dawned on me that Julie who is almost forty years older than me and I share a similar story; mine within the Bhutanese education system, and hers within the Australian education system. We lived a similar experience of education almost forty years apart. I wondered if our common story was perhaps evidence of a primitive education system in Bhutan, even in the twentieth century, that while the Western industrialised world had leapt ahead, we were still cutting and stitching frogs in the early 1990s. At present, most of the schools are immersed in the era of using chalk and dusters. Except in the capital and urban regions, students have limited access to computers (desktops), and they can access the computers at the school computer labs. The limited computers are cherished in these schools and often kept covered with embroidered traditional cloth for protection from dust and dirt.

Also, modern education brought in a new school curriculum. English, Hindi and the National language Dzongkha were taught in most schools in the early days. While Hindi is not used now, English remains as the main medium of instruction in Bhutanese schools along with Dzongkha. This measure was to enable students

to go outside Bhutan for further studies (MoE, 2013, p. 13). Most literate Bhutanese can write and converse in English. Gergen says that within the discourse of knowledge, language is a critical feature of power relations (1999, pp. 38-39), and in Bhutan, if a student can speak English fluently they are seen as the intelligent ones. Also because the English language is not the first language, most Bhutanese students struggle in reading, writing and speaking in English. One would think it may be easier to learn the national language Dzongkha, but most students experience difficulty reading and writing in Dzongkha too.

Bhutan is attempting to chart its own course, not only of cultural identity but also of educational opportunity with the goal of retaining traditional values while providing quality schooling for all its children (Gordon, 2013, p. 286), but the attempts are not without struggles. For instance, conflicting views on the usefulness of corporal punishment amongst Bhutanese educationists and parents still exist in the 21st century; the tussle continues. In addition, although teachers are respected, for years training to be teachers has been the last option Bhutanese students pursue (Roder, 2011, p. 148). For many Bhutanese high school graduates, the teaching profession is not as posh as the Civil Service positions or compared to students pursuing medicine or engineering courses. Because of this, there seems to be a general assumption among the Bhutanese that teachers may not be very intelligent, and consequently, most teachers may lack motivation and have low morale.

Adults often sense “older ways of feeling and thinking have collapsed or [are] collapsing and that new beginnings are ambiguous to the point of moral stasis” (Mills, 1959, p. 11). Bhutanese adults may be struggling to adapt to the changes. On the other hand, the younger generation seems confused and unsure with added conflicts of modern cultures. Perhaps the elders are trying to make sense of the dramatic cultural shift, they are attempting to ascertain what forms and practices to teach the younger generation so that it is “valid and recognizable” (Myerhoff,

2008, p. 13). The tensions in the transmission of culture from one generation to another are vividly captured by Myerhoff (2008) in “Ritual and Storytelling: A Passover Tale” describing a Yiddish Passover Seder. Myerhoff sees chaos, negotiation and innovation as part of the transmission process. The ritual is based on the belief that the younger generations are the future custodians and hope for the continuity of the culture and practices and so they must own the process and contents. A similar process and transmission ceremonies seem to be occurring at varying levels in Bhutan or any changing culture. Addressing the need to change unhelpful cultural practices, Dzongsar Khyentse, an influential Buddhist teacher in Bhutan says change is inevitable and must be embraced progressively (2015). He draws on the analogy of old wine in a new cup, that the essence of the wine remains the same- the heart of humanity remains the same but customs and tradition are vehicles, like the cup they may need changing. In the same vein education is not

something like a bag of potatoes in a relay race that one generation hauls it forward, and the children pick it up and continue with it. Education is not a mechanical thing that you thrust onto the youth, and they take it and continue it; education is what occurs in the transmission of culture from one generation to another. (Myerhoff, 2008, p. 12)

Similarly, questions of “what are we going to preserve and what are we going to change” are dominant concerns within cultures moving towards modernization (Preissle, 2011, p. 693). This small underdeveloped nation is trying to survive and taking pride in thriving to stay true to the core values of Gross National Happiness (GNH). In 2009, the Educating for GNH movement commenced as an intervention to infuse GNH values into the school curriculum. As a part of the movement, schools pledged “Green Schools for Green Bhutan which aspires to inculcate environmental, intellectual, academic, social, cultural, spiritual, aesthetic, and moral dimensions of the learners” (MoE, 2013, p. 51). In this vein, Bhutanese leaders seek to balance progress developmentally. The question of how to maintain

an ancestral identity and values while embracing the advances of industrial and information technologies remains a key discussion point among policy makers in Bhutan. In the midst of this, Buddhist values of human life being sacred are shaken through acts of suicide by the young Bhutanese.

Suicides by school students in Bhutan, an emerging phenomenon

Acts of suicide by adults were traditionally seen in Bhutanese rural communities. Elders interpreted this practice as being an act by those possessed by spirits. Stories of heroic martyrs sacrificing their lives can be found in traditional stories. However, suicides by school students were not heard of until recent years. Various sources in Bhutan suggest that suicides are becoming common among younger people, especially those of school age. Current statistics of suicides by students are uncertain because of the lack of a formal recording system. Although Bhutan reports mortality statistics to the World Health Organization (2011), suicide is not included as a cause of death in these reports. The Ministry of Health does not have a reporting system for suicide (C. Dorji, personal communication, June 30, 2012). The only records on suicides in Bhutan are held by the Royal Bhutan Police and the national media archives.

The troubling question of “how someone so young with a whole life ahead of them” (“Suicide: Some Sad Answers,” 2011) could kill themselves is widely discussed amongst education policy makers and teachers. Journalists sometimes try justifying suicides, saying “they gave up on life because they were frustrated, depressed, and financially unstable or had unsuccessful love affairs” (Gyeltshen, 2010). These stories and concerns are amplified by the increasing number of media companies in Bhutan.

In addition, school discipline policies are claimed to negatively impact students so that some give in to acts of suicide as a result. A recent suicide pact in a secondary school was reported as being propelled by the unaccommodating school discipline

policy on relationships (Rai, 2014). The school policy condemned the romantic relationship between the deceased boy and the girl. Around the world, the education system is known to contribute to stress in students and their families (Coughlan, 2015). Similarly, academic stress and cut-throat competition in the schools seem to pose immense pressure for Bhutanese students and their families. The question of whether the Bhutanese education system is doing the right thing is asked by many in the society ("Looking Beyond Pass Percentage," 2016).

The school guidance and counselling programs were established to respond to emerging student needs in the schools. The program commenced as career counselling for secondary schools in 1999. In 2010, the first twelve full-time School Guidance Counsellors (SGCs) were placed in schools formalising guidance and counselling programs in these schools (MoE, 2010). The SGCs provide counselling services, plan and facilitate the school guidance curriculum. There is no set guidance curriculum for school guidance classes and programs, but varied topics such as parenting education, life skills education and career education are commonly covered by the SGCs. Presently, 73 SGCs are placed in the secondary schools, and training of new ones is underway. The Department of Youth & Sports administers the school guidance and counselling programs. Recently, the Department has been under pressure from the government to develop suicide prevention programs in schools (RGOB, 2015).

Why the topic suicide? A personal quest

Clandinin and Connelly state that “our own narratives of experience” influence the projects and stories we pursue (2000, p. 121). My quest to research the topic of suicide by school students involved personal and professional reasons. This concern was born through many stories told in my office, sitting there with young people after office hours, frantic phone calls from suicidal students in the middle of the night. I look at children and adolescents and see unimagined possibilities, but I

realize that children themselves may not see it. In my twelve years of practice as a youth counsellor with the Department of Youth & Sports (DYS) within the Ministry of Education, Bhutan (MoE), several suicidal students were referred to our office by schools and their family members. Statements such as “I want to die, I don’t see a reason why I should live or I don’t care about my life anymore” were not uncommon among the young clients who came to seek counselling services. Concerns about such student feelings were raised by the teachers and counsellors from the schools. Not knowing how to respond to students struggling with suicidal thoughts has been a troubling dilemma discussed during the supervision meetings with school counsellors.

Amongst many other stories, there are two stories that stayed with me and gradually pushed me into looking at my own story which I presented as prologue and taking up this inquiry. One is the story of a caretaker’s son from my neighbourhood which was told at the beginning of this chapter, and other is the suicide by a 13-year-old young school girl that I mentioned in the prologue. These two stories and mine made me wonder how parents can help their children in distress and desperation. How can the gaps be bridged so that children know their parents may only wish well for them? Perhaps this study will provide answers to these questions as well. Human minds are complex and one can only attempt to understand why people do things they do, why some people kill themselves, while others stagger to survive. Stories like this are everywhere, they must be recalled and told because they make a difference: a difference to our lives, our communities, our cultures, our politics (Plummer, 1995, p. 16). These stories must be told and retold with a hope that it may provide some answers and possibilities in understanding why students think of suicide.

Significance

This research project has three significant purposes. The project is the first to launch an inquiry into the phenomenon of suicide in Bhutanese schools. It is the first intervention in some ways as I am facilitating a collaborative dialogue on a sensitive and silenced topic. This starts an unfolding event in constructing community dialogue to address a painful subject of suicides by school students in Bhutan.

Second, this project is strengths-based including students, principals, parent and counselling practitioners as “collaborative partners” (Silburn, 2010, p. 99). This qualitative study using narrative inquiry prioritises the views of school students in their attempts to address this social problem of suicide. The study demonstrates the usefulness and power of narrative inquiry while engaging with vulnerable groups and talking on sensitive topics.

And third, the outcome of this study provides informed ideas for discussions and actions in preventing suicides in the secondary schools of Bhutan and contributes to discourses on suicide prevention within Bhutan. It contributes toward developing informed policies within the Bhutanese education system. In addition, school guidance and counselling in Bhutan can draw on the outcome of this research as a resource for practice and policies.

Thesis map

The thesis is organized in 10 chapters. Chapter 1, the introduction, discusses the background to the problem and states the problem of suicides by school students in Bhutan.

Chapter 2 reviews extant literature on suicide by seeking explanations of suicide in different cultures. Focus is drawn to adolescent suicides and recommendations for

suicide prevention initiatives in Asia and Indigenous communities. Research situated within the framework of a sociocultural construction of youth suicide which attempts to understand an individual as a part of their physical environment, social, cultural and institutional context is selected.

Chapter 3 elaborates on the methodological foundation using narrative inquiry for this research. I describe the usefulness of narrative inquiry in investigating cultural meanings around suicide and in seeking appropriate responses. Selection of participants, methods, and ethics in engaging with vulnerable groups while talking about a sensitive topic is addressed,

Chapter 4 sketches adults' concerns and experiences of suicides by school adolescents. Their views and beliefs and reasoning around the acts of suicide are discussed. Throughout the thesis, I have used smaller fonts and quotation marks to cite short quotes from participants, and smaller fonts without quotation marks to show longer quotations

Chapter 5 presents stories of the school adolescents. Their beliefs and views of suicide are sought and composed as explanations around acts of suicide.

Chapters 6 and 7 present ideas and aspirations described by adults and students as suggestions for suicide prevention and intervention measures. Discussions on policies, curriculum, program practices, school care system including counselling programs and parent-school collaborations are presented.

Chapter 8 presents a new format in comparison to the earlier chapters, it features a three Act play titled Opening Doors. The purpose is to stage an imaginary space for school adolescents and adults in different roles to come together in dialogue on the issue of suicide. It also demonstrates contrast and similarities in the stories presented by adults and school adolescents. The play provides multilayered views,

including my own as the story teller and the narrator. The play ends with reflections from the narrator.

Chapter 9 discusses sense-making of suicide by participants, suicide as a troubling paradox, and presents evolving practices as responses and recommendations. I also offer my reflections as cautions.

Chapter 10 draws the thesis to a conclusion by highlighting the key findings and reflecting on the process and outcome of the study.

Chapter 2: Literature review

Overview

Everyone, I suppose, agrees that scientific advance is cumulative: that it is not the creation of one man but the work of many men revising and criticizing, adding to and subtracting from one another's efforts. For one's own work to count, one must relate it to what has been done before and to other work currently in progress. (Mills, 1959, p. 141)

Mills states that scientific knowledge is cumulative, that in order to make new claims it is important to situate one's work in the existing systems of knowledge. Accordingly, the aim of this chapter is to provide a background for the empirical research and theoretical framework informing this qualitative study and its discussions. The literature review includes studies from the fields of sociology, education, culture and psychology. The aim of this research was to understand varied responses to the issue of suicides among secondary school students of Bhutan. The sub-objectives were to articulate storied beliefs, values and views of young people and adult members of the Bhutanese education community; describe the interpretations of differently positioned members in the education system, and significant societal members; and to work collaboratively towards developing ideas and recommendations for suicide prevention in secondary schools in Bhutan.

Peer-reviewed articles were searched by using keywords Suicid* AND Asia; Suicid* AND students; Suicid* AND school; Suicid* AND culture; and Suicid* AND examination. Peer-reviewed articles and research reports from 1999 to 2016 were sought on the ProQuest, Web of Science and Informit databases. Literature was also selected by hand searching through the reference lists of relevant articles and books on adolescent suicide.

This chapter is structured into five sections. The first section provides explanations of suicide from psychological and sociological perspectives. The works of Douglas

(1967), Durkheim (1952, 1969), Giddens (1971) and Mills (1959) ground the study of suicide in a social and relational context. Suicide in transitional societies is discussed with a focus on studies in Asia and Indigenous cultures in the West. Comparisons are made between Western Industrialised and traditional societies in their views of suicide. Particular attention was paid to culturally relevant approaches in understanding suicides.

The second section introduces and establishes suicides in adolescence as a societal problem. I then focus on suicides by adolescents in schools. Section three outlines suicide prevention programs in schools and an international comprehensive school suicide prevention program is discussed. Section four presents ideas for suicide prevention from the Indigenous communities in Canada and Australia. Section five is a consideration of possible suicide prevention programs in schools in the developing countries of South Asia. Here an alternative approach is proposed by drawing on practices of Indigenous communities. The final section discusses the socio-cultural construction of suicide as relevant for this study.

The meanings and explanations of suicide are contested and vary. This literature review has focussed on studies following the Durkheimian approach, the notion of the “social self” in the modern world, and a person as being-in-society. This has been further developed and contextualised by contemporary sociologists (Giddens, 1971; Mills, 1959; Wallwork, 1972). International literature mainly from Australia, Canada and America, and studies based on Asian and Indigenous cultures were selected. There was no existing scholarly literature on suicide in Bhutan.

Explanations of suicide

If suicide offends the public conscience, as has been established, it seems impossible not to see in it a phenomenon of social pathology (Durkheim, 1952, p. 361).

Here I lay the foundation to understand suicides, by bringing together some principal architects in the study of suicide. Studies on suicide did not advance much before the middle of the nineteenth century. According to Halbwachs (1978, p. 3) the subject of suicide provokes curiosity, awakens sentiments of pity and terror, and offers rich and paradoxical materials for discussion. Robbins posits that “when we ask for explanations for suicide, we are in a real sense asking for theories, for the question why do people kill themselves? Is far from settled” (Robbins, 1998, p. 34). Suicide has explanations and descriptions particular to various traditions of thinking and disciplines. Each of these meanings reflects the multidisciplinary components of its study (Shneidman, 1985, 2001). In addition, the discourses on suicide are shaped by experts’ particular concepts within social institutions, and their individual experiences of society (Jaworski, 2010a, p. 680).

Shneidman, known as the father of suicidology, provided a psychological explanation saying

in the Western world, suicide is a conscious act of self-induced annihilation, best understood as a multidimensional malaise in a needful individual who defines an issue for which suicide is perceived as the best solution. (1985, p. 203)

This psychological perspective guided by the individualist thinking of certain Western modernist philosophies tends to attribute agency to the suicidal individual (Grimbly, 2012, p. 342). Victims are solely held responsible for their suicidal behaviour. Suicide is viewed within an individualistic mental health framework (Berman, Jobs, & Silverman, 2006; Bloch, 1999; J. A. Bridge, Goldstein, & Brent, 2006; Chamberlain, Goldney, Taylor, & Eckert, 2012; Graves, 1991; Lester 1972, 1988; Lester & Miller, 1990; Paulson, Stone, & Sposto, 1978; Young, 2011) . According to Shneidman (1998, p. 246)

the author of suicide is pain with various names: despair, loneliness, fear, anxiety, guilt, shame, depression, angst, and other more-or-less technical labels such as schizophrenia, affective disorders, depression, alcoholism, mental illness.

Suicide in this sense is formulated as a way out to discharge the pressure of unbearable psychological pain, where reason is outwitted by recklessness. To some researchers (Diggory, 1976; Leenaars, 1999; Shneidman, 1976, 1985) suicide is a symptom of the pressures caused by modern societies. Other psychological studies establish suicide as pathology (Apter, Bleich, Plutchik, Mendelsohn, & Tyano, 1988; Brent et al., 1993; Kandel, Raveis, & Davies, 1991; Shaffer et al., 1996). Psychiatric diagnosis and studies of risk factors are associated with suicidal behaviours. It is believed that suicidal individuals need correcting and special expert attention for treatment (Marsh, 2010, p. 4). Additionally, suicide has been conceptualised in the West as tragedy, and according to Kant, “monstrous and morally wrong” (Uleman, 2016). Wittgenstein renders suicide as the ultimate sin of mankind, he states “if suicide is allowed then everything is allowed. If anything is not allowed then suicide is not allowed” (1961, p. 91e). In this sense, suicide is judged as morally wrong and a disease. Marsh (2010) critiques the view of understanding suicide as a disease. He draws on Foucault’s work and states that reliance on the medical and pathological framework on understanding suicide limits the discussion of suicide.

Durkheim (1952) on the other hand argued that suicide is a social phenomenon. As stated in the epigraph at the beginning of this section, he says that acts of suicide are affected by conditions which are social in nature and the impact is felt by the society. *Le Suicide* by Durkheim establishes a model for sociological investigations of suicide (Giddens, 1971; Shneidman, 1985). Durkheim has defined suicide as “all cases of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act of the victim himself which he knows will produce this result [death]” (1952, p. 41). Durkheim, known as an eminent father of sociology, who was researching in

France at a time of immense cultural change, highlighted social explanations in contrast to psychological explanations, and the psychiatric dimension (Atkinson, 1978; Scourfield, Fincham, Langer, & Shiner, 2010). He established that suicides are related to the social environment and can be usefully understood sociologically (Durkheim, 1952, p. 299). For instance, suicides in the name of Hara-Kiri were sanctioned as honourable and altruistic practices in ancient Japan (A. L. Beautrais, 2006; Iga & Ohara, 1971; Takai et al., 2010). Traditional practices of Sati in India can be seen as another form of suicide and a gendered violence against women (Farberow, 1975; Rao, 1975). Marecek (2006) named suicides by young women in Sri Lanka as dialogue suicides intended to communicate and express their anger to other members of their society about gendered oppression. However, Durkheim did not deny the usefulness of a psychosocial perspective (Atkinson, 1978, p. 25). He asserted that psychological investigation of individual cases can complement sociological research, and in this vein Halbwach, an early follower of Durkheim stresses the importance of psychology in the explanation of social conduct much more than Durkheim (1978).

Similarly, Shneidman's formulation of psychological theories of suicide, although seen as contemporary and separate from the sociological investigations of suicide, does not discount the traditional sociological theory of Durkheim. Shneidman like Durkheim resists the psychiatric pathologised view of seeing suicides analogous to depression. Leenaars (1999, p. 349) highlights Shneidman's most famous Fables and Facts of suicide that suicide is neither the rich person's disease nor the poor person's curse. Studies of hundreds of genuine suicide notes indicated that although the suicidal person is extremely unhappy, he or she is not necessarily mentally ill. So, Shneidman's work provides a useful link to sociological thinking. Giddens also suggests the interrelatedness of the individual thinking of psychology and society by stating "personality develops largely in and through society" (1971, p. 106). At the end, any viewpoint rests upon the overall questions that hold the study (Mills, 1959, p. 149), and in this research, I take a sociologically and culturally influenced

viewpoint of the study on suicides by school students in the Asian Himalayan Kingdom.

Durkheim's classical sociological theory on suicide opened doors for several researchers toward a broad interpretation of the social context of suicide (Atkinson, 1978; Bauman, 1992; Chandler & Lalonde, 1998; Chandler & Marcia, 2003; Giddens, 1971; Grimby, 2012; Hendin, 1987; Lester 2011; Maimon & Kuhl, 2008; Marecek, 2006; Silburn, 2010; Slee, 2014; Wexler, 2006; Zayas, 2012). His general ideas emphasised and clarified social influences in the genesis of suicide, and have remained influential amongst sociologists (Atkinson, 1978; Halbwachs, 1978; Hankoff & Turner, 1980). Both Halbwach (1978), an early follower of Durkheim, and Atkinson (1978) extend and present a meticulous review of the Durkheimian approach.

Nonetheless, Durkheim's methods were also criticised for their datedness and technical problems with the inaccuracy of suicide statistics, and his method of analysis (Douglas, 1967; Halbwachs, 1978; Hood-Williams, 1996). Douglas (1967, 1971) rejects the analytic methods employed by Durkheim and proposes an alternate sociological approach to the study of suicide. He contends, in order to understand social meanings of suicide, sociologists must "develop scientific methods of observing, describing and analyzing communicative actions [verbal and non-verbal] concerning real world cases of suicide" (1971, p. 133). He makes a move away from formal statistical methods and opens an invitation to the qualitative dimension of constructing meanings of the social actions through linguistic forms defined by actors. He boldly asserts that abstract, predetermined, genetic theories of action may dangerously falsify the nature of human actions which are complex and fluid (Douglas, 1971, p. 133). Social, cultural, and moral dimensions that may have contributed to suicide must be explored and understood through descriptive material and analyses of such materials (Douglas, 1971; Fitzpatrick, 2014).

Mills in his book *The Sociological Imagination* also states that the use of statistics to understand a social problem and its sensibilities are inadequate (1959, p. 18). Formulation of problems should be understood through the concept of the “interplay of man and society” of “self and world”, with explicit attention to a range of public issues and of personal troubles. They should open up for inquiry the causal connections between milieus and social structure (Mills, 1959, p. 145). Personal troubles are private too, when cherished individual values are threatened, and changes occur within the character of an individual and within their immediate relations with significant others. Public issues are described as matters that threaten public values and are widespread in social institutions. Mills (1959, pp. 15-17) demonstrates with an example of unemployment, that if one person is unemployed, that is a personal trouble. But if in a nation of 50 million, 15 million are unemployed, that is identified as a public issue, and private troubles are caused by social structures and changes in its institutions.

Douglas contends that suicide does not have any clear and distinct meanings. The meanings of suicidal actions then must be constructed by the individuals committing them and by the others involved (1971, p. 135). There are no “earthly means of interviewing suicide” (Giddens, 1971, p. xv), for those dead do not speak for themselves. So the meaning of suicide does not reside in the individual who commits suicide, but also in those who experience the suicides of others (Lester 2011, p. 88). Hence, suicide is established as a relational act, a discursively produced phenomenon in cultures (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998; Giddens, 1971; Jaworski, 2010a, 2010b; Roen, Scourfield, & McDermott, 2008; Scourfield et al., 2010; Tatz, 2005).

Other studies (Cheng et al., 2010; Kelleher & Chambers, 2003; Milner et al., 2012; Stack, 2001; Tighe, McKay, & Maple, 2015; Zeng & Tendre, 1998) have suggested that the cultural context of each country is different and suicide must be studied

within its unique cultural context. The next section will discuss literature with an emphasis on developing nations, and traditional societies in transition.

Suicide in transitional societies

An individual is not separate from the society but an active co-creator of the social environment, and an actor of it (Giddens, 1971, p. 108).

Giddens in this epigraph highlights the interrelatedness of individuals' actions to their social environment, suggesting suicide as an act impacting society and society's role in influencing an individual's action. This concept begins the explanation of suicide in transitional societies around the world.

Suicide in Asia

Suicides are prevalent in underdeveloped, developing, traditional and primitive societies. Hankoff & Turner call primitive societies those free of urban and industrial pressures (1980, p. 280). According to Chu et al. (2010), Durkheim's theory (1952) helps explain the tensions seen as relevant in the current time and era and especially for developing countries. Weakening societal and family bonds present a failure to integrate an individual into the society, thus making the individual feel isolated and disconnected. Recent studies further support Durkheim's theory that any change to social order creates greater social stress and increases the risk of suicide; suggesting a correlation between the impact of globalisation and suicide (Jegannathan, Kullgren, & Dahlblom, 2016; Kelleher & Chambers, 2003; Milner et al., 2012).

Economic and social distress in Asia is described as disruptions caused by globalisation and have been associated with increased rates of suicide in the region (Jegannathan et al., 2016; Milner et al., 2012). Hutton & Giddens describe globalization as the sum of complex changes throughout the world (2000, p. 61). These complex changes, including the increasing interconnection of media, provide multifarious information, mediated experiences which impact on specific

forms of choices for individuals (Fullager, Gilchrist, & Sullivan, 2007; Giddens, 1991; Jegannathan et al., 2016). Traditional bonds and once cherished values which previously sustained people are shifting and giving way to an unknown future.

Societies are confronted with the complex social life of larger worlds that suddenly may cause despair when the meaning of these epochs are not understood (Durkheim, 1952; Halbwachs, 1978; Mills, 1959). Societies going through rapid social and economic transitions have a higher rate of suicide. Studies have shown that many countries in the Asian region are experiencing complex changes (A. L. Beautrais, 2006; Jegannathan et al., 2016; Shiho, Tohru, & Shinji, 2005; L. Vijayakumar, Najaraj, & Pirkis, 2005; Wu, Chen, & Yip, 2012; Yip, Lui, & Law, 2005). An ecological study conducted from 1980 to 2006 by Milner et al. (2012) confirmed increased suicide rates in Asian countries including India, Japan, Hong Kong, Thailand, Taiwan, and Sri Lanka. Suicides claim approximately 1 million lives worldwide each year, and as many as 60% occur in Asia (A. L. Beautrais, 2006; Chen, Wu, Yousuf, & Paul, 2012; Wu et al., 2012) .

Wu et al. (2012) established that suicide methods in Asia vary according to the socio-cultural context of the countries. Other studies in Asia show that hanging, poisoning and jumping from heights were common methods used to commit suicide (Ho, Hung, Lee, Chung, & Chung, 1995; Jollant, Malafosse, Docto, & Macdonald, 2014; Jordans et al., 2014). Although there are some variations in the gender patterns between Asia and the West, suicide rates for women are still higher in Asia (Chen et al., 2012; Marecek, 2006). A scoping review by Jordans et al. (2014) found that suicide is generally high among young women in the 15-29 year age group in Asia.

While Western modernist psychology and psychiatry explain suicide in relation to mental illness and depression, mental illness is seen to play a less significant explanatory role for suicides and self-harm in most parts of Asia. Instead, suicides

are among the young in Sri Lanka and India are explained in relational terms involving family conflicts, severe stress at home, and conflicts with friends and loved ones (Marecek, 2006; Sharma et al., 2006). Chen et al. (2012) found that suicide in Asia reflects sociocultural situations and economic transitions in the region, causing social unrest and stress. Several other studies concluded that suicide is also constructed as a protest against oppressive traditional norms (Aaron et al., 2004; Chen et al., 2012; S. Lee & Kleinman, 2000; Marecek, 2006; Meng, 2002; Rao, 1975).

Suicide in Indigenous communities in Canada and Australia

Suicide is a concern for Indigenous communities around the world (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998; Chandler & Proulx, 2006; Firth, 1971; Fullagar, 2003; Kirmayer, 1994; Resnik & Dizmang, 1971; Tatz, 2005; Thorslund, 1992; Wexler, 2006). In Australia, suicide rates among Aboriginal children younger than 15 years of age have been increasing (S. Bridge, Hanssens, & Santhanam, 2007; Leo, Sveticic, Milner, & McKay, 2011; Tatz, 2005; Tighe et al., 2015). Young people aged 12 to 24 years are found to have suicide rates up to four times higher than non-Indigenous Australians in the same age group (HRSCA, 2011, p. 10). Studies have established a close relationship between cultural attributes and youth suicide (Eckersley & Dear, 2002; Roen et al., 2008; Thorslund, 1992; Zeng & Tendre, 1998). Around the world, rapid globalization has disrupted cultures in developing nations and Indigenous world; young people and adolescents are lost in these developmental transitions (Black & Krishnakumar, 1998; Desjarlais, Eisenberg, Good, & Kleinman, 1995; Harpham & Blue, 1995; Kelleher & Chambers, 2003; McDade & Worthman, 2004; Wexler, 2006).

Giddens says “traditional cultures do not prize individuality as known in the modern times” (1991, p. 75). Individuality is known as a modern phenomenon. Jollant et al. (2014) emphasise that individuality is blamed for selfish acts of suicide,

and the ways of the modern world are seen as fragmenting the collective responsibilities and practices once valued in traditional societies. The moral framework to guide and provide a sense of purpose are shifting in these traditional societies. Adolescents and youth are often most sensitive to changes in the value system of any society (Arnett, 1999; Kelleher & Chambers, 2003; Schlegel, 2000).

Suicide in adolescents

We only become human in our relations with others: we approach our being through others, adopting their habits, imitating their techniques of living and being, and also learning modes of dying from them. (Secomb, 1999, p. 114)

The literature on the prevalence of suicide among adolescents show suicidal thoughts are generally common among adolescents (E. Evans, Hawton, Rodham, & Deeks, 2005; headspace, 2011; K. King, 2001; Paulson et al., 1978). But of concern are reports that suicides in adolescents have more than tripled since the 1950s, and currently rank as the third leading cause of death among 15-to-24-year-olds in the world (Eckersley & Dear, 2002; Gair & Camilleri, 2003; K. King, 2001). In 2011, suicide was recognised as the leading cause of death among young people in Australia (headspace, 2011). Further, the suicide rate among younger males and females was found to be higher than the older males and females (HRSCHA, 2011). The highest male suicide rate for the 15-29 age group is in the South East Asian region (Varnik, 2012), while the majority of suicides are committed by females in China (Madelyn, Shaffer, & Greenberg, 2003).

Friedman (1967, p. 34) contends that suicide in adolescence is defying the “belief that youth combines an undiminished life force with an indestructible will to live”. Diverse studies have attempted to seek explanations and identify factors of suicide in adolescents. Eckersley & Dear (2002, p. 1891) in their study of youth suicides in the Western and developed nations describe suicide in adolescents as the “tip of an iceberg of suffering”. Bettridge & Favreau (1995) call it a cry for connection, and Fullager (2003) claims suicides by adolescents are an act of giving up or throwing

away life. Suicide is also constructed as threats used by adolescents in absence of valid choices (Cox, 2010; Tatz, 2005; Tighe et al., 2015). Acts of suicide in adolescents are also “learned social em-bodiment”, wherein the child imitates other people's actions (Tighe et al., 2015, p. 4). Bourdieu's (1977, p. 87) statement succinctly illustrates the notion of learned social em-bodiment, he says “in all societies, children are particularly attentive to the gestures and postures which, in their eyes, express everything that goes to make an accomplished adult”.

Some factors seen as impacting suicides in adolescents are discussed below.

Psychosocial theory of adolescence

Erikson's (1950) psychosocial development of adolescence suggests that adolescent suicides are distinct from adult suicides. Adolescence is described as being a transitional phase in identity development facing a surge of psychological, physical and sexual changes (Chandler & Marcia, 2003; Erikson, 1950, 1968; Erikson & Erikson, 1997; Haim, 1974). Berman et al. (2006) and Kastenbaum (1986) emphasise that the adolescence developmental phase can be inherently complex, and it is in adolescence that one deeply engages with the notion of living and dying, and of oneself in the world. In this transitional phase where adolescents find themselves engaging with the concept of life and death, it is suggested that an added significant external stress may drive them to self-destructive acts (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998; Chandler & Marcia, 2003; Eckersley & Dear, 2002; E. Evans et al., 2005; McDade & Worthman, 2004). Chandler & Lalonde in their study of youth suicide among Canada's first Nations found that adolescents experience tendencies to self-harm when faced with difficult transitions in their “usual course of identity development. This, triggered by life's routine hardships, empties them of their personal significance, making suicide an actionable possibility” (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998, pp. 197-198).

Some studies have found that the probability of suicide increases in both males and females as the children grow older (Madelyn et al., 2003; Miller, 2011). On the other hand, Westfield et al. provide a distinction between suicides by preadolescents and adolescents (2010). They define preadolescents as children under 13 years of age and have established that suicide among this population is a recent phenomenon and growing. The developmental stage of childhood is seen to present risks and challenges uncommon to older adolescents (Barrio, 2007; Westfield et al., 2010). Erikson & Erikson (1997, pp. 55-56) describe the preadolescence age from 5 to 12 years, and as the fourth stage of psychosocial development “industry vs. inferiority”. Preadolescents at this stage are described as developing significant relationships with their peers, and relationships at school. During this stage, they seek to learn and demonstrate the need to accomplish, at the same time struggling with valuation by others.

Impact of media on adolescents

There is strong evidence in the literature that imitative suicides may occur in adolescents and young people (Berman et al., 2006; Gould & Shaffer, 1986; Hawton, Saunders, & O'Connor, 2012; Phillips, 1974; Pirkis & Blood, 2001; Zeng & Tendre, 1998). The same studies state that it is unclear to what extent the nature of media portrayal of suicide impacts the actual rate of suicide. In light of this doubt, some studies suggest it would be better for the media to focus on reporting help-seeking behaviours rather than portray dramatic depictions of suicides (Hawton et al., 2012; S. Morgan, Rolfe, & Mienczakowski, 1999; Pirkis & Blood, 2001). There are consistent recommendations that suicides should be reported and represented with responsibility by all forms of media, including the music industry (Jegannathan et al., 2016; Martin, 1998; Pirkis & Blood, 2001; Westfield et al., 2010). In addition, Berman et al. (2006) establish that preadolescents are vulnerable to potentially wrong information on suicide from their peers and the media depictions. This may be an added risk as “children may not conceive death as permanent” (Kelleher &

Chambers, 2003, p. 171). The concept of death in children is often seen to develop only after the chronological or mental age of 9 (Mitchell, Wesnr, Brownson, & Dysart-Gale, 2006).

Familial and cultural factors

Adolescence is also described as a complicated time when young people seek a sense of autonomy yet want to belong - a paradoxical state (Berman et al., 2006; Nelson, 2002). Studies (Berman et al., 2006; Thorne, 2000) have shown that relationships with family and friends play a significant part in their development and wellbeing. Adolescents look for connections and any problems or conflicts with their family or key relationships may increase their risk of being suicidal. Cultural child-rearing practices, family problems and high divorce rates have been widely implicated in adolescent suicides (Eckersley & Dear, 2002; Kelleher & Chambers, 2003; Kok & Goh, 2012; Sharma et al., 2006).

Nelson emphasizes that children start developing and learning at home in their infancy; the family context impacts the children's sense of identity and its development (2002, p. 31). On the other hand, adolescence is a time when they start to take responsibility for their performance in all spheres of life central to becoming an adult (Fullagar, 2003; Orbach, 2003). Failure can be potentially humiliating and devastating as they may not yet have the life experiences to respond maturely. Literature also suggests that the growing generation gap between adults and children result in children not feeling understood (Mead, 1969; Waddock & Freedman, 1998/1999). The younger generation feels 'unsupported' by the adults in the society, and this is shown to create added strain to the adolescents (Waddock & Freedman, 1998/1999, p. 55).

Studies have also reported a correlation between bullying in schools and adolescent suicides (Winsper, Lereya, Zanarini, & Wolke, 2012), and between substance misuse by adolescents and suicides (Shaffer et al., 1996). Mostly, adolescent suicides

in Asia have been reported in relation to family conflicts and school problems (Ho et al., 1995; Madelyn et al., 2003; Sharma et al., 2006).

The relationship between school and suicide

Zeng & Tendre (1998) suggest that adolescent suicide is governed by forces not specifically related to schools, and academic pressure cannot be held solely responsible. However, the majority of studies in Asia claim that adolescent suicides are linked to school stress mainly caused by the rising academic pressure in the schools (Anderman, 2002; Ang & Huan, 2006a, 2006b; Bossy, 2000; Deb, Strodl, & Sun, 2014; E. Evans et al., 2005; R. Evans & Hurrell, 2016; Hansen & Lang, 2011; Kouzma & Kennedy, 2000; M. Lee & Larson, 2000; Li, Feng, Mei, & Yao, 2007). Academic pressure can be “understood in terms of excessive study workload, pressure to perform well in ... exams, meeting the expectations of the parents, teachers, society” and their own expectations of themselves (Madnani & Pradhan, 2015, p. 570). Education is prized in the developing countries in Asia, it provides pathways to livelihood and advancement in life. In such societies, a good academic performance is also attached to the social status of the family. Adolescents then face added pressures and expectations from the parents and cultural demands for academic excellence (Ang & Huan, 2006b; Deb et al., 2014).

Dewey states that amid all uncertainties, there is one permanent frame of reference, namely, the organic connection between education and personal experience (1986, p. 247). A systematic review by Evans & Hurrell (2016) found that some school environments increase the risk of self-harm and suicide in the students. Students experience themselves as being evaluated in terms of their academic performance, and the pressure to excel is an important measure of their success as a person. It is therefore not surprising that adolescents who attempt suicide often have problems in school and academic related pressures “push young

people to perform or perish” (Madnani & Pradhan, 2015, p. 568). These ways of valuing school education in the developing world create intense competitiveness.

In addition, limited options offered through the education curriculum also create a high potential for failure (Ang & Huan, 2006a; Bossy, 2000; Lu, 2008). In this sense, the different abilities and capacities of school adolescents are not often acknowledged or nurtured by the schools. In a sense, adolescents are put through hierarchies of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment to perform regardless of their abilities (Slee, 2014; Teese, 2013). As Dewey states the structures embedded in the education system and schools forbid much active participation by students (1986, p. 243). It seems adolescents may feel trapped between the lack of opportunity in the present and a bleak hope for their future because the demands of employers now influence the structures of schooling which in turn offer narrower alternatives to students (Slee, 2014; Tighe et al., 2015). Amidst this push and pull of expectations and pressures of school cultures, students are struggling in their effort to find meaning, find an identity (Bruner, 1996, p. 42). Education is a complex business, it is shaped and restrained by the demands of society, both local and global.

Durkheim suggests the objective of education is to develop in the child a certain number of physical, intellectual and moral states which are demanded of the child by the political society as a whole (1969, p. 71). Furthermore, the works of Bruner (1996) and Dewey (1986) provide philosophical insight into the issues of education structures, cultures of schooling, and the purposes of education in a society. Although their thinking evolved in the West, they provide a well thought-out “philosophy of the social factors that operate in the constitution of individual experience” in the education culture in Asia (Dewey, 1986, p. 245). Together Dewey and Bruner do say there is a gulf between subject matters in the schools and an equally risky changing the world in which the students are living. The methods of learning and behaving are foreign to the existing capacities of the students (Bruner, 1996; Dewey, 1986).

Children and adolescents actively participate in selecting from a broad range of cultural and social processes and experiences available to them, and in turn are impacted by them (McDade & Worthman, 2004, p. 65). This view is also extended by the Secomb's epigraph at the beginning of this section. In Durkheim's terms, adolescent suicide can be understood as responses to social circumstances and complex interactions of the social and education structure (Slee, 2014). Throughout research literature, there were several studies suggesting suicide prevention ideas in the schools and they are discussed next.

Suicide prevention in schools

Studies have shown that suicides are preventable (Erbacher, Singer, & Poland, 2015, p. 13; Giddens, 1971; headspace, 2011; Leenaars, 1999, 2010; Loh, Tai, Ng, Chia, & Chia, 2012; SANE, 2014; Turecki & Brent, 2016; WHO, 2016). People contemplating suicide indicate their intention to others, so a timely effective support is known to be helpful (Giddens, 1971; Leenaars, 1999; Orbach, 2003; Turecki & Brent, 2016).

Leenars (2001, p. 215) state that the role schools could take in suicide prevention was documented by Friedman (1910/1967) well before the formal emergence of suicide prevention programs in the Western industrialised societies. Recent studies (R. Evans & Hurrell, 2016; Katz et al., 2013; Ryzin, 2011) suggest that schools can provide supportive and nurturing environments. Schools play an important role in shaping the development of school students and can provide opportunities to prepare students to respond to life stresses (Kalafat & Elias, 1995; Orbach, 2003). Other literature (Calear et al., 2016; Erbacher et al., 2015; Miller, 2011; J. White, Morries, & Hinbest, 2012) also suggests that schools have the potential to reach out to most adolescents. They are ideally positioned in terms of human resources and potential structures to provide suicide prevention programs.

Comprehensive school suicide prevention program: a mental health program

Recent studies show that there is no universal effective school suicide prevention program (Calear et al., 2016; Katz et al., 2013; Robinson et al., 2013). Overall, school-based suicide interventions that are multifaceted, integrative and tailored to cater to diverse student needs are seen to be most effective (Calear et al., 2016; K. King, 2001; Orbach, 2003). International literature broadly suggests the use of a comprehensive suicide prevention plan in the schools (Caplan, 1964; K. King, 2001; Leenaars, 2001). A comprehensive suicide prevention plans can be further classified as interventions which are described as universal, selected/targeted and indicated (M. Silverman & Maris, 1995).

Wallace (2001) states that the suicide prevention movement in the US started alongside the establishment of suicidology in the 1960s. The initiative was influenced by the growth in community mental health in the US, and suicide was seen as a community mental health problem (Shneidman & Farberow, 1970, p. 99). According to Wallace (2001, p. 246), this was a “beginning to seeing suicide as an acute state of mind of an ambivalent individual in a larger social context, rather than as a symptom of a mental disorder”. The psychologically driven school suicide prevention programs began their appearance in the 1980s in the US. It began in response to a significant rising trend in suicide rates among youth (aged 15–19) in many Western Industrialised nations (Shneidman & Mandelkorn, 1967). Since then, the field of suicidology has had a significant impact on the international suicide prevention field including suicide prevention programs in schools.

Leenaars (2001, pp. 216-231) argues that the “best model” of addressing suicide in schools includes prevention, intervention, and postvention; an approach developed by Caplan (1964). This model is detailed and supported by other studies (Berman et al., 2006; K. King, 2001) as the framework for comprehensive suicide prevention programs. King (2001) describes a comprehensive school suicide prevention plan

which included primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention components. Primary prevention encompasses universal interventions that target all the school populations (Berman et al., 2006; Katz et al., 2013; Robinson et al., 2013). Some studies (Calear et al., 2016; Kalafat & Elias, 1994; Robinson et al., 2013) have found that effective universal interventions focus on school policy which is committed to student suicide prevention, suicide awareness curriculum, and gatekeeper training. Although gatekeeper training is shown to be implemented with variations across schools (Kalafat & Elias, 1994), the underlying principle remains to train students and caregivers in the school to recognize warning signs of suicide, assess risk, and provide basic responses. A systematic review by Katz et al. (2013) of the school suicide intervention programs in Canada also identifies evidence of effective school peer assistance programs and activities aimed at increasing school connectedness to the community as an important part of the universal intervention.

King (2001) describes a secondary prevention (intervention) plan as encompassing practices that ensure student safety, assess suicide risk, determine the mental health services needed, ensure the student receives appropriate care and debriefing of school staff. Further studies show this plan to include selective interventions such as early identification of students at risk (Kalafat & Elias, 1994; Robinson et al., 2013). King (2001) refers to tertiary prevention (postvention) as school activities occurring after a student has threatened, attempted, or completed suicide. These activities are also mainly aimed at minimising ripple effects of a suicide, such as copycat suicides, and providing responses to trauma through counselling services, and other forms of emotional support (K. King, 2001; Leenaars, 2001).

There is evidence in the literature of effective universal programs developed in schools but few reports on selective and indicated interventions (Berman et al., 2006; Calear et al., 2016; Kalafat & Elias, 1994; Robinson et al., 2013). These studies report that schools without specialised mental health services may not be equipped to deliver specialised interventions for at-risk students. Robinson et al. (2013) also

found less evidence of schools with effective postvention models. Overall the comprehensive school suicide prevention program originated from the mental health interventions. Although the framework may appear practical and comprehensive, it assumes the presence of mental health service providers either at the school or at referral sites. The absence of referral sites and expertise within the school may create barriers to the efficiency of such programs (Calear et al., 2016; Robinson et al., 2013).

Different constructions and understanding of suicide lead to quite different responses (Scheurich, 1994; J. White et al., 2012). Some studies argue that suicide has roots in the social structure, and the society that helps to produce it must change to counter the social phenomenon (Fountoulakis, Gonda, & Rihmer, 2010; Kelleher & Chambers, 2003; Stack, 2001; Wexler & Gone, 2012). These studies recommend culturally sensitive interventions and community-based interventions as useful suicide prevention initiatives. These ideas from the literature are discussed next.

Ideas for suicide prevention from Indigenous communities

Despite the fact that research literature links youth suicide with mental illness, this is not necessarily an approach that helps us to understand young people's perspectives on suicide. If we were to step away from a mental health frame of understanding, and approach suicide as a psycho-social phenomenon that occurs within cultural contexts and impacts on whole communities, we might be in a better position to understand how suicidal possibilities appear to young people. (Roan et al., 2008, p. 2090)

Roan et al. argue that understanding youth suicide as a cultural and communal issue, and seeking meanings around suicide as discursively produced by the society may provide better possibilities for suicide prevention. In a similar vein, Chu et al. (2010) and Stack (2001) argue that suicide prevention approaches must not be limited to a psychologically based and individualistic understanding of suicidal behaviour as it tends to obscure the complexity and fails to account for the multiple possibilities in understanding suicide. It also limits alternative ideas for prevention.

In addition, other studies (Thorslund, 1992; Wu et al., 2012) posit that although psychologically driven responses have their usefulness, prevention schemes must attend to cultural meanings of suicide, local resources and skills, and create local community support.

Research literature (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998; Chandler & Proulx, 2006) from Indigenous suicide research in Canada suggests that Indigenous groups that have reasserted a sense of their own cultural continuity report low rates of youth suicide. Community-based initiatives that value cultural beliefs and practices, and reinterpret these practices for the younger generation have been found useful in Indigenous communities responding to youth suicides in Canada and Australia (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998; Thira, 2014; Wexler, 2006; Wexler & Gone, 2012). Suicide in most Indigenous communities is viewed as a social crisis. According to Thira (2014, p. 158) suicides amongst Aboriginals in Australia are constructed as a “community crisis with social cause”. In this sense, responses to suicide are collective and community-based, an opportunity for the enhancement of “individual resilience, family healing, and community transformation” (Thira, 2014, p. 179).

Wexler et al. (2015, pp. 893-894) posit that ways and knowing of the Indigenous communities are different from the Western scientific communities, and research embedded in the Western individualist approaches undermines the “sociocultural, economic, historical, and political risk factors of these communities”. Wexler (2006) reports that practices embedded in Western paradigms and epidemiological perspectives were found unhelpful and oppressive to some Indigenous communities. Contrary to psychological interventions that focus on the present and future, restorying the past and creating a future have been found to be integral practices for individual and communal healing in Aboriginal suicide prevention approaches (Silburn, 2010; Wexler et al., 2015).

Wexler et al. (2015) propose that suicide prevention in Indigenous cultures offers rich insights into minority cultures around the world. Indigenous suicide prevention programs take a relational and communal approach by creating opportunities for collective responses. Unlike the psychological mental health framework that treats suicide as a disease, Indigenous suicide prevention acknowledges suicide as a socially constructed phenomenon. The intervention focuses on resilience, protective factors and social and emotional wellbeing. These interventions recognize culture and community as resources and emphasize collaborative practices that also build the capacity of the communities (M. Morgan & Drew, 2010).

Suicide prevention in the developing countries in Asia

Henden (2008) reports that although suicide rates among young people in the developing Asian region have been increasing, suicide prevention efforts are limited. Lack of financial resources in the region, cultural and religious beliefs causing stigma are identified as barriers to suicide prevention initiatives (Lakshmi Vijayakumar et al., 2008). In addition, the poor quality and availability of suicide data for monitoring and surveillance are seen as another common feature in most Asian countries leading to fragmented preventive approaches (Chen et al., 2012; Jordans et al., 2014; Wu et al., 2012).

Available studies on suicide prevention in Asia emphasise that the importation of Western suicide prevention schemes are unhelpful without addressing the sociocultural factors (Chen et al., 2012; Jegannathan et al., 2016; Milner & Leo, 2010; Wu et al., 2012). According to Beautrais (2006) and Sharma et al. (2006), Asian countries need to develop suicide prevention programs tailored to fit the specific profiles of suicide in their respective cultures, instead of importing ideas which are relevant elsewhere.

According to the South Asian literature most of the elements required for comprehensive school suicide prevention are lacking in South Asian schools (Deb et al., 2014; Milner & Leo, 2010). School counsellors, school psychologists, school nurses and mental health experts are recent phenomena, especially in the developing region of South Asia. Deb et al. (2014) recommend that strong family and community ties in the region need to be involved in the design of appropriate community-based suicide intervention programs. In this vein, schools and their unique communities in the South Asian region have much to learn from community initiatives from the Indigenous communities in Canada and Australia. Suicide loss impacts the whole school, the whole community and society, and so responses must be systemic (Erbacher et al., 2015, p. 6).

Other studies have associated suicide prevention with religion and spirituality (Birnbaum & Birnbaum, 2004; Wilchek-Aviad & Malka, 2016). Birnbaum & Birnbaum (2004) commend on the usefulness and positive impact of guided meditation with diverse populations in working with suicidal clients. Similarly, Wilchek-Aviad & Malka's (2016) study using questionnaires to research relationships between religiosity and suicidal tendencies among Jewish school adolescents aged 15 – 18 years conclude that religion is able to serve as protection against suicidal tendencies. A recent study by Jegannathan et al. (2016) on young people and suicidal behaviours in Cambodia emphasize the need for suicide prevention in the region to consider its socio-cultural complexities. Attitudes and religious beliefs, prevailing societal views on suicide and ambiguous media messages are seen as pertinent factors influencing suicidal behaviours amongst the youth in developing nations. The study by Jegannathan et al. (2016) explores the impact of societal attitude, media and Buddhist religion on suicidal behaviours of Cambodian school students. Findings from the focus group discussions suggested the presence of "suicide-ambiguity" in the Buddhist religion practised amongst Cambodians (Jegannathan et al., 2016, p. 118). According to the study, suicide was seen as a sin and unacceptable culturally but also seen as a karmic result of past

deeds. Gendered religious discourses which portrayed women as the “lower being” and not fit for Nirvana were seen to increase suicidal behaviours in women. Nirvana is the state beyond suffering and known as the realization of the ultimate truth or Buddhahood (S. Rinpoche, 2012, p. 400). However, other studies (Becker, 1990; Promta & Thomyangkoon, 2009) suggest that Buddhism does not perceive suicide as a sin but instead as morally unacceptable because suicide is self-killing. According to Becker (1990), Buddhist religious scripts contain stories of self-sacrifice by the Buddha, and suicide is seen as a selfless act driven by compassion. Death is not seen as an end but a transition. Although Buddhist principles remain the same, scriptures and text are seen to differ according to the ways Buddhism is practised across cultures and Buddhist traditions. In this sense, Buddhist texts are seen as being open to interpretation and hence the presence of ambiguity (Promta & Thomyangkoon, 2009). Bhutan is predominantly a Buddhist country and mainly influenced by Mahayana Buddhism. Bhutanese law (RGOB, 2004) does not criminalize suicide but similar to Japanese Law, holds it a crime to assist (Becker, 1990) or instigate suicide. The Bhutanese are raised with similar ambiguities, along with Buddhist beliefs and ways of life that are different to many Western modernist beliefs and practices.

Wexler et al. (2015, p. 894) contend the need to advance alternate research practices and claims that acknowledge diverse worldviews of whole communities. Practices in suicide prevention that investigate for and with those marginalized groups, by empowering them must be developed. Research practices that focus on larger sociocultural, and structural interactions must be innovated. Hence, collaborative practices and partnerships for suicide prevention in the schools of Bhutan will be sought by drawing on narrative inquiry approach introduced below.

Social-cultural construction of youth suicide

Wexler & Gone (2012, p. 804) contend that a cultural and social understanding around causes of suicide and responses lead to the development of culturally based preventive interventions. The cultural meaning of suicide can be ascertained only by interviewing individuals in various cultures. According to Knight, Furnham & Lester socio-cultural studies in suicide lack rigour especially in non-Western cultures (2000). The majority of suicide studies in South Asia are empirical using standardized measures and are dominated by rather Western approaches to knowledge making (A. L. Beautrais, 2006; Wu et al., 2012). Although these studies have been shown useful, they lack the potential to provide detailed socio-cultural explanations of suicide from the perspectives of community members.

According to Chung-Do et al. (2016) consulting with young people, and including them as partners in youth suicide prevention programs increases their ownership, and strengthens the chance that young people find the process and plans more relevant (HRSCA, 2011, p. 36). There is very little research that draws on the narratives of adolescents themselves, though some studies (Fullagar, 2001; Fullager et al., 2007; Roen et al., 2008; Wexler, 2006) provide young people's own understandings of suicidal behaviour.

There is no scholarly work on suicide in Bhutan. This project will be the first to explore the narratives of school students not as suicidal subjects but as active local and cultural resources.

Summary & conclusion

Most research has been done in Western countries into the incidence of youth suicide, psychological explanations and descriptions of school-based interventions programs. Less reported, but relevant to this research, are socio-cultural explanations following Durkheim's theories, and Indigenous approaches to

understanding and responding to suicides. They suggest whole of community approaches, the involvement of young people to look for explanations and interventions which are collaborative and culturally relevant. These findings were important in the selection of the methodology for this research which is discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Overview

This chapter provides an overview of my methodological choice of a qualitative approach. In particular, I explain my decision to adopt a social constructionist framework, influenced by narrative inquiry methods.

This research is positioned in a social constructionist knowing that people are born into a web of meanings that are immersed within the larger cultural context. Meanings are relationally constructed between people who are dependent and inseparable from their institutional and natural environment (Gergen, 1999, p. 48).

There are different kinds of narrative inquiry (Polkinghorne, 1995; Riessman, 2008) and for this study, I will be drawing on explanatory and descriptive approaches of narrative inquiry (Glover, 2004; Polkinghorne, 1995). Every research has an exploratory aspect to it, and narrative inquiry encourages exploration of the “stories typically born in trouble” (Bruner, 1996, p. 142), and is useful when not much is known about a particular topic (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008, p. 245). As detailed in Chapter 1, suicide by school students in Bhutan is a troubling emerging phenomenon which has remained unexplored. The aim of the research was to understand and identify appropriate responses to the issue of suicides among secondary school students of Bhutan. The sub-objectives were to

- Articulate storied beliefs, values and views of young people and other members of the education community.
- Describe the interpretations of differently positioned members in the education system with regard to suicides by school students.

- Work collaboratively towards developing ideas and recommendations for suicide prevention in secondary schools in Bhutan.

Explanations about suicide among the school students in Bhutan were sought through the telling of stories of their experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 12) and drew on the “explanatory approach of narrative inquiry” (Glover, 2004; Polkinghorne, 1995). Further, this inquiry sought to understand individuals’ or groups’ experiences of suicides, and how they account for reasons, expectations, and motives (Glover, 2004; Richardson, 1990). This descriptive narrative inquiry generates how individuals and groups express themselves and make sense of others’ actions of suicide. Attention is drawn to the cultural and social stories told around events of suicide and the construction of self and others in the process of their storytelling. In addition, valuing the constructionist view that people “are experts on their own lives”, and people always attempt to progress to a solution (Polkinghorne, 1995; M. White, 2001), these views form the basis for recommendations that may contribute to suicide prevention in Bhutan.

The rest of the chapter details narrative inquiry as the methodological framework, ethical considerations and researcher’s positioning, details of the participants and recruitment procedures, selected methods and their application, an overview of the data collection, data analysis and limitations.

Methodological framework

This research draws on Durkheim’s (1952) classical sociological theory on suicides as a phenomenon discursively produced by society. Durkheim’s theory of suicide was explained in chapter 2. This research provides an alternate view to the individualist frame of understanding suicide. It starts from an understanding that individual behaviours and problems have their origins in the social setting rather

than the pathology of an individual. It seeks a broad interpretation of suicide in the social context considering “social conditions such as cultural, social, and institutional narratives under which people’s experiences and events are unfolding” (Clandinin & Huber, 2010, p. 436). Experience is continuously and relationally constituted between the “personal, social, and the material environment” (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 39).

For the purpose of this research, I define narrative as a “frame through which people make sense of their lives” (Leavy, 2009, p. 27) and in this case in relation to acts of suicide. Descriptions of how and what participants spoke about themselves and others in making sense of suicide by school students was sought, to explore how the social facts of the Bhutanese phenomenon of suicide by school students are grounded in local understandings and broader societal discourses. The research revealed how participants cast themselves and others into roles and expectations, and how they constructed versions of their selves within the wider cultural discourses in Bhutan. This process made visible the relationship between personal narratives and cultural narratives around suicide.

Narrative methods of inquiry are situated in a relational context (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 2008). In this I wanted to explore the possibility of the researcher and the participants engaging in “dialogue and conversations” (Plummer, 1995, p. 20) about what is seen to be happening in the Bhutanese society.

Squire explains that narrative inquiry is

particularly useful for looking at phenomena where you're trying to find out things about things that are quite new, unknown, perhaps not spoken about very fully, difficult sometimes to speak about because when doing narrative research you give people some space and time to develop what they're saying. So

you get a more complex and deeper picture than with some other forms of research.
("Narrative Research: An interview with Corrine Squire," 2013)

Squire refers to the in-depth exploratory and collaborative capacity of narrative inquiry methods on new and or silenced topics of investigation. This underscores the good fit of narrative inquiry for this research on the topic of suicides by school students in Bhutan. People naturally tell stories about “Why did this happen? How did this come about” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 15) while searching for answers and explanations. The explanatory narrative inquiry approach was used to gather answers from the participants. This was achieved by piecing together subjective information from participants who contributed to accounts of causes of suicide among the young in Bhutan.

While navigating a sensitive topic, a well-designed and executed narrative project may politically empower participants. This qualitative narrative inquiry explored the narratives of young Bhutanese students’ not as suicidal subjects but as active local and cultural resources. The views of young people were an important aspect of this research reflecting a desire to empower them by creating a context for young people to express their stories, and understand them (Elliott, 2005, p. 6). The intention was to “make visible” voices that are usually spoken to by the adult members of the Bhutanese educational community (Clandinin & Huber, 2010, p. 438). This was also in line with the social construction belief that to talk is to act on, and different versions of relationships and selves are constructed through dialogues. Providing opportunities to engage in conversations draws the person from a state of feeling isolated to being in a community (Drewery, 2004; Richardson, 1995). This process was significant to unveiling silences around the topic of suicide, and for a group who may not otherwise receive invitations to express their views. Also, to avoid paying a high price for the “advanced [Western] borrowed ideologies” presently shaping Bhutan, I wanted to explore developmentally and culturally appropriate strategies (Stewart Fahs et al., 1999, p.

230). It was important to seek, articulate and document collective shared values and commitments that are more life-enhancing for the Bhutanese youth in schools and for the culture.

Positioning

Individuals are part of an interdependent whole (Drukpa, 2014, p. 172). The world as we know is like breathing, quintessential, but often taken for granted. As life cannot be divorced from the breath so the “interrelation between lives and social contexts” is undeniable (Elliott, 2005, p. 4). I refer to the Buddhist concept of interdependence and interconnectedness to all living beings as a way of partially introducing myself, a Buddhist researcher, in the active co-authoring of this research. This assumption is in line with the social construction of realities wherein relations among people are inseparable from and interdependent on our surroundings. We all live profound relatedness which may be comprehended in multiple ways (Gergen, 1999, p. 48). Similarly, Vygotsky’s idea of “complex wholes” argues that individuals exist as a part of the whole and explanations for problems need to be sought through this thinking (2000). Steeped in Buddhist beliefs, Bhutanese communities see a relationship between the “hours of our life and the centuries of time” (Morgan-Fleming, Riegle, & Fryer, 2007, p. 82). Karmic connections and the interconnectedness of life are beliefs embedded in the culture. Narrative framings can acknowledge such time and site-specific ways of understanding human experiences. It led me “to find a method that is locally appropriate and resonant with narrative wisdom” (Willox, Harper, & Edge, 2012, p. 127), and that would fit for the Bhutanese.

Researchers co-create experiences through the relational inquiry process, and this makes clear that as narrative inquirers we are part of the metaphoric parade and are complicit in the world we study (Clandinin & Connelly, 2006, p. 46). I include myself as an insider, the inquirer and as an active participant in the narrative and

its interpretation. Although this research took place between two cultures, Bhutanese and Australian, I am influenced by my past, my culture and that influenced the decisions I made to co-create and retell stories. My professional, cultural, and insider knowledge of working with young people and Bhutanese educators assisted in facilitating rich narrative productions and “thick descriptions and interpretations” (Denzin, 2001; Geertz, 1973). I call myself an insider because of my “familiarity with the phenomena, experiences,” culture and context in Bhutan (Vickers, 2002, p. 619). My autoethnographic accounts provided an added depth to “my insider status” on the subject of suicide as a young adolescent with self-harming tendencies. These reflections validate my experiences and familiarity with the phenomenon with an intent to create connections with other stories told by participants (Leavy, 2009, pp. 40-42). My position with the participants was different on each occasion. I was perhaps a counsellor to the students, as the concept of a researcher is new in Bhutan. To the Principals and other adults I was a counsellor, a researcher, and part of the Ministry of Education involved in school counselling initiatives. With some participants, I have shared close working relationships, including clinical supervisory roles. These experiences and my history influenced the stories from the field.

Also, it cannot be denied that my decisions are impacted by the guidelines and knowledge I have garnered in an Australian education setting. In this position as a researcher, and studying away from Bhutan, I am an outsider to the participants.

Methodological rigour

The focus of this research, guided by a narrative tradition is meaning- making. The analytical goal was to interpret the meanings and function of stories embedded in interviews (Riessman, 2008, p. 60). As an enquirer, my task was to connect fragments of stories across members of the Bhutanese education community and to “bridge individual and group meaning making” with an intention to understand

the phenomenon under inquiry (Paulus, Woodside, & Ziegler, 2008, p. 230). My thinking was guided by Riessman's argument that "narrative truths are always partial-committed and incomplete" (2008, p. 186), as researchers we work at fluid boundaries and what we capture are stories told within those temporary time capsules. In this way our research "work is similar to literary readings of a poem or a novel" (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998, p. 170), a process involving interpretation, which is influenced by the reader's perspective and understanding. In a sense, the reader is influenced by plotlines and storytellers at the same time. Similarly, as a researcher, I was influenced by the storytellers (participants) and their stories as they were by me and my provocations. This is a process of negotiation and collaboration which was, for a short time, emergent and ongoing.

I asserted the spirit of "the evidentiary narrative" by approaching validity-as-reflexive accounting (Altheide & Johnson, 2011). A proper set of criteria for assessing validity entails considering the place of evidence in an interaction process between the researcher, the inquiry, the intended effect or utility, and the audience for which the project will be evaluated (Altheide & Johnson, 2011, p. 593). I have explained my choice of methods. My personal story and its narration add to the persuasiveness and "trustworthiness of the stories" I collected and retell (Riessman, 2008, p. 185). Throughout each stage of the research, I wrote and reflected in my journal, engaging in the "internal dialogue" (Leavy, 2009, p. 49), recording the discomfort, the pain, lost-ness, and joys throughout this research journey. Another dimension which Leavy (2009, p. 49) calls the "external dialogue" was conducted in discussion with my supervisor at the University and colleagues from social work and counselling.

I present in this thesis detailed descriptions of analytic procedures applied, and how they enhanced the reliability of the analytic stories. In addition, sharing preliminary themes (appendix 9) with the participants were part of the validation process which allowed me to assess what some participants thought of my textual

representations of our conversations. Researchers' textual representations have the power to strengthen or undermine the stories of participants given in research conversations. Narrative research is about taking care of participants so that they may feel strengthened, and this is another significant validity issue addressed by this research (Riessman, 2008, p. 198).

As a researcher, I was in the privileged position of naming and representing other people's stories (Ribbens & Edwards, 1998, p. 139). The "final shift of power between the researcher and the respondent is balanced in favour of the researcher, for it is she who eventually walks away" (Cotterill, 1992, p. 609). I paid attention to this power shift and have drawn attention to this positioning throughout the thesis.

Ethical considerations

This study was considered high risk as it involved working with adolescents on a sensitive topic (NHMRC, 2007). In order to minimise risks for the adolescent participants, the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee reviewed the safety protocols put in place. Only schools with SGCs were invited to participate in the research. This was done to ensure students has access to psychological support at all times during the course of the research. Students could have their counsellors present during the interviews if they preferred. However, none of the students took this option during the actual interviews. Schools also had to have student Peer Helpers. Student Peer Helpers were considered an additional layer of psychological support for the participants. Further information on the Peer Helpers is provided under the Participants and Recruitment section. A risk management plan and adverse events protocol (Appendix 2) were developed and shared with participants along with emergency contact details for support. As a counsellor my I offered my counselling skills and support when required.

Even with institutional ethical requirements above, relying on “procedural ethics” (Ellis, 2007, p. 4) and interview guides are not enough because they do not and cannot capture the tales that unfold and are co-created in the field. There are sensibilities not covered by procedural ethics in working with adolescents.

Additional factors contributing to student vulnerabilities

Adolescence is considered a period of grappling with accelerating developmental phases that are internal and external (Lalonde, 1998, p. 197). Navigating “life’s routine hardships” may seem different and often harder during adolescence because the wisdom from experience has not yet presented (Lalonde, 1998, p. 198). Furthermore, navigating the troubled subject of suicide poses complex dilemmas and distinct challenges for researchers. The topic of suicide has potential to “arouse powerful emotions and distress” (Corbin & Morse, 2003) that our best intentions and responses may not mitigate. However, researchers must ensure safety and establish continued forms of support for the participants.

While working with adolescents, researchers are required to “respect their developing capacity” (NHMRC, 2007, p. 55). In the same vein, adolescents may be seen as vulnerable by the adults, which could mean their decisions are given little value. In a traditional Bhutanese school setting, standards and rules are set by adults based on what they think is good for children. Like most developing Asian countries, Bhutanese schools are influenced by both traditional and modern ways, trying to democratise yet not wanting to abandon customs. Although, in recent times, young voices and views have been invited by the government, decisions and policies within most schools remain top down in Bhutan.

I sought permission from the Ministry of Education and the individual schools before commencing data collection. The National Statistics Bureau in Bhutan authorizes all census surveys conducted in the country. There is no governing ethics body to oversee human research in Bhutan. This means that schools can be

and have been subject to intrusions from various research interest groups and individuals. School administrators and teachers are gatekeepers who may not be aware of the ethical considerations of research. Students rely on their Principals and teachers judgment and may be exposed to diverse research projects.

Although Corbin and Morse warn that “to assume all interviews are potentially harmful takes away the participant’s agency” (2003, p. 337), it is important to think about agency while working with adolescents interviewed at school. Bhutanese students are generally respectful and feel obliged to present themselves and their views cordially. It was crucial for this research design to remain sensitive to these practices in a school setting and ensure that the participants were “empowered by the inquiry design” (Stephen & Judith, 2004, p. 541).

Addressing complex and delicate situations is laden with trials and tribulations, questions and dilemmas, especially while engaging in conversations around difficult topics such as suicide. “There are no definitive rules or universal principles that can tell you precisely what to do in every situation or relationship you may encounter” (Ellis, 2007, p. 5), and we err as humans. Sometimes as researchers we make errors because of unforeseen factors in the field or even ask potentially hurtful questions which otherwise had different intentions. Our questions could provoke anxiety in a participant and must be rendered with care and sensitivity. In this research, participants told their stories in their own time and when they found the courage and comfort to do so.

As researchers, we have ethical, moral, emotional and aesthetic responsibilities throughout the project (Bochner & Ellis, 1996, p. 4). These responsibilities extend to those with whom we enter into dialogue every day (informal and formal settings) on the topic of our inquiry. The subject of suicide evokes questions, multiple emotions and points of view across communities. Researchers must approach these with integrity. Research, like everyday life, often generates ethical

dilemmas over what is right or wrong (NHMRC, 2007, p. 13), and as the researcher, I aimed to maintain compassionate vigilance throughout.

Next, I introduce recruitment procedures and the participants, the setting and their roles in this project and recruitment procedures. I then present the different methods selected for both collection and analysis of research information. I explain reasons for the choices and how they were employed in this research.

Participants

Participants were purposefully chosen, guided by time and resources available to cover the range and depth of different positionings in the Bhutanese education community, while also addressing the ethical concerns integral to the conduct of research on this sensitive topic (D. Silverman, 2000, p. 234).

Six secondary schools participated representing fifty percent of the schools which had SGCs in 2013. Forty-five individual interviews and seven group interviews were conducted. Key education policy makers, parent, principals, SGCs, students from secondary schools, media personnel, a psychiatrist, a representative from alcohol and drug aftercare services and a Buddhist teacher (Rinpoche) were interviewed. To highlight the stories of young students as active local and cultural resources, the majority of participants were students. Thirty students aged 11 to 19 years participated.

Table Participants profile

<i>Age ranges</i>	<i>Number of participants</i>	<i>Sex</i>
<i>11-19</i>	30	Female 14 Male 16
<i>20-29</i>	0	Female Male
<i>30-39</i>	10	Female 1 Male 9
<i>40-49</i>	7	Female 2 Male 5
<i>50-59</i>	4	Female 0 Male 4

Recruitment

Detailed accounts of the recruitment process and roles of the participants follow.

Participants from the schools

Six secondary schools included two boarding schools and four-day scholar schools.

Invitations were extended to schools which met the following criteria:

- Presence of SGCs
- Presence of student Peer Helpers

Peer Helpers are student volunteers trained to provide emotional support to other students in the school. They are usually the first point of contact for students in need of help, so it was expected that input from them may reflect the views of students generally. They are also a source of support for other participating students. The Peer Helpers program was initially introduced as student peer counsellors in 2005. I was involved in spearheading the development and piloting of this programme until 2011.

A mix of schools with a high incidence of student suicides reported to the Department of Youth & Sports (DYS), MoE, and schools with no of recorded incidents for the last 10 years participated. Although the first inclusion criterion for schools to have professional counsellors (SGCs) was a limitation, efforts were made to include schools from different regions. Schools from the central, north and south of Bhutan participated. Three schools were in the capital city and two were from the southern part of Bhutan.

Students

A total of thirty students, five from each school participated. While trying to minimise disruption in the schools, a fair representation of age and gender was sought. An invitation (Appendix 6) to participate was announced at each school through the principals and the counsellors. Those volunteering were screened for appropriateness by the respective school guidance counsellors (Appendix 7 Student Recruitment Guidelines). SGCs were encouraged to interview students by explaining the information sheet (Appendix 5), assessing the student's interest to participate and their emotional readiness.

Participation was voluntary and Informed Consent (Appendix 4) was sought ahead of the interviews with the help of their respective SGCs. Parents and guardians provided informed consent for the participation of minors (under 16 years of age). However, potential student participants were consulted before approaching their parents and guardians. This practice of seeking permission of the adolescent students participating in this research recognizes that they are capable of making decisions for themselves. It also ensures they are comfortable with the involvement of their parents or guardians. Students were from classes 6 up to 11, and 10 of them were student Peer Helpers. Although, not intentionally, three students (two boys and a girl) had a history of suicide attempts and were screened as appropriate to participate by their SGCs.

Counsellors

Six SGCs and one teacher counsellor participated. Teacher counsellors are full-time teachers who take up guidance and counselling programmes as additional tasks. Teacher counsellors were the only counsellors in the Bhutanese schools before the role of full-time counsellors (SGCs) was operationalised. They are trained to provide basic counselling support and organize guidance programmes in schools where SGCs are not yet present and also to support the SGCs in schools with a larger student population.

The teacher counsellor volunteered to participate, offering his views and experiences of a suicide in his school one year prior to the interview.

The decision to consult the Bhutanese SGCs was based on a central assumption of the research design that counselling services play a key role in the school care system. My past professional role as a counsellor educator, youth counsellor and a policy maker within the MoE in Bhutan influenced this assumption.

SGCs played a pivotal role during the two phases of data collection. They coordinated the recruitment and screening of participants from their schools. They acted as a bridge between the school administrators and myself to a large extent. The status and positioning of the participating SGC within their school may have influenced how I was received at the school sites.

Six SGCs, comprising five male and one female, participated in the focus group. Four of them represented the participating schools and two others from other secondary schools volunteered to participate in place of the two counsellors who were unable to make it. One female counsellor had left the country for further studies, and a male counsellor had to attend to an unforeseen family situation. The two volunteer counsellors were invited by the other four as they all belonged to

the first batch of SGCs in the country, and so they were considered very suitable for the purposes of the inquiry.

School Principals

Six school principals participated in the individual interviews. School principals are the ultimate authority in the school, administering school policies and managing practices as they see fit. Any change must be agreed to by them. They are accountable to the community and supervisors within the government system. Principals' knowledge, concerns and critical views are central to this research because of their leadership roles in the schools.

Parents

Six parents were invited, but only one parent came forward who was also a teacher. School principals had delegated the task to seek parent participants to the SGCs. SGCs shared that parents were busy with daily work and household duties. Some of them hesitated as they were illiterate and perhaps believed they could not contribute to the project. I was informed by the SGCs that verbal invitations were extended to a limited number of parents they knew. It was unclear to me what had actually transpired between the school and the parents. Because I had limited time for field work and additionally I did not know the school community, I had to depend on the school principals and the SGCs. Based on what I was told I could only assume. However, this outcome left me curious about the contact between school and parents. I wondered if this outcome revealed the nature of collaboration between the parents and the school.

Essentially, this experience also left me wondering about ways to approach potential parent participants for future research collaborations, in particular, parents who are linked to schools. I would need to rethink my strategies to engage with the parents, especially if they are illiterate. I understand now there is a critical

need to explore and understand taken for granted assumptions around parent participation so that constructive pathways may be sought. This experience with parents' recruitment demonstrates that there is more to be curious about and enquire into as a future project.

Policy makers from the Ministry of Education

Two senior officials from the MoE participated. Both officials started their career as teachers then became school principals and directors at the time. One of them directed the school guidance and counselling programmes and was someone with whom I shared a close working relationship. The other official had been directing the overall school system for years.

Other significant community partners

A Buddhist (Vajrayana tradition) spiritual master, also known as a Rinpoche, consented to participate. Rinpoche is a prominent figure in the international community and works closely with Bhutanese schools, and especially with young people in the drug and alcohol field. Rinpoche was consulted as an authority to present and clarify Buddhist beliefs and interpretations on acts of suicide.

A psychiatrist from the National Referral Hospital under the Ministry of Health participated. Bhutan currently has two practising psychiatrists at the hospital. They work as direct referral points for the schools, especially in Thimphu (the capital city). The psychiatrist's experiences and views of suicide among students in Bhutan alongside his medical perspective was invited.

A senior representative from BICMA (Bhutan InfoComm and Media Authority) participated. BICMA regulates information, communications and the media industry in the country. The media representative was invited for views on the phenomenon of suicides by students and the reporting of suicides.

A representative from the youth alcohol and drugs aftercare service called Chithuen Phendhey volunteered to participate upon hearing about the research project because of his concern and interest. He offered his own views of young people who came to the Centre for help with self-harm and substance misuse.

All community partners had a significant impact as planners, community advocates and service providers to the young people in Bhutan. The purpose of inviting participants from outside the education system was also to allow for alternative, perhaps unheard views to emerge. As insiders within the education system, one may miss alternate points of views, or perhaps remain silent to keep to the system norms. These views and stories from a different range of participants were gathered in a variety of ways.

Multiple methods of data collection offer possibilities for “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) of the phenomenon under inquiry. Methods of inquiry for this study included unstructured individual interviews, hybrid cooperative inquiry/focus group, focus group inquiry, field notes and documents review. Triangulating these methods secures an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 5). Each method provided an insight or an explanation that may not have been visible through the other methods of inquiry.

Selected data collection methods and their application

Mills states that “you must learn to use your life experience in your intellectual work continually to examine and interpret it” (Mills, 1959, p. 216), while Myerhoff suggests working with the “familiar makes them more intense and more effective” (2008, p. 10). I refer to the interview method and the art of interviewing, and being in dialogue with others as an experience familiar to me. My past training and practice were shaped by narrative work (M. White, 1997) and my position as a trainer and a policy developer required myriad consultations and collaborations

with a wide range of partners within and outside the education system. Dialogue and conversations shaped these endeavours, and curious questioning created a gateway to knowledge and resources. It made sense to weave the inquiry method with my practice, skills and knowledge embedded in counselling and education.

Stories are jointly and actively co-constructed in a dialogue between the researchers and the participants (Moen, 2006, p. 61). For this research, a variety of interviews were used to achieve research objectives 1 and 3 which were to

- Articulate storied beliefs, values and views of young people and differently positioned adult members of the education community with regard to suicides by school students, and
- work collaboratively towards developing ideas and recommendations for suicide prevention in secondary schools in Bhutan

I sought personal narratives in verbal and visual forms that gave shape to experiences around suicide.

Unstructured individual interviews

Unstructured interviews are relatively open-ended, used to study unexplored topics and conducted inductively (Firmin, 2008) . The interviews in this research were informal and carried out in a conversational style (Hollingsworth, 2007, p. 169). This form of interview is suited to navigating through sensitive and potentially distressing topics as it allows participants to present versions of their views, and stories without the pressure of answering all questions. The unstructured interviews were led by a question. Interview guide questions (Appendix 8) were prepared to anchor the conversation when needed but were not necessarily brought into the conversation. They were also developed acknowledging that Bhutanese students usually do not speak unless they are asked questions.

In total forty-four unstructured individual interviews allowed participants to author their stories. Unstructured interviews were employed with adults and with students separately, because of their distinct differences in preparation and the complex implications for practice. The description of methods and application are presented together.

Unstructured individual interviews with students

Most students engaged in conversations after reading the participant information sheet I provided before the interview. Some started with what they thought about the topic and a few had to be prompted by asking questions. I joined in to clarify details and invited participants to expand their stories after ensuring they were comfortable to proceed.

Bhutanese students are often accustomed to memorising answers, and a few students had memorised facts and figures on suicides in the country. Open-ended questions helped these students expand their thinking and views as they continued to speak. On the other hand, “the essence of trust and conversational intimacy of unstructured interviews can be potentially therapeutic or harmful” (Corbin & Morse, 2003, p. 338), as participants may expose intimate and traumatic accounts of their lives. The constant fear of saying and asking something wrong that may jeopardize the delicate state of the participants is embedded in the problem of talking about suicide. This responsibility felt greater while talking to the students. As a researcher, I relied on my interviewing skills as a counsellor. This presented a dilemma at times as the interviews were not therapy sessions and Kvale’s cautionary statements on the need to address ethical issues of mixing the roles of research interviewer and therapist sparked doubts (2003). My researcher self and counsellor self-were constantly in conversation; trying to balance care for the students and responsibility for what was to unfold, at the same time holding researcher curiosity.

Some of the statements and questions that I found myself asking the students throughout the interviews were:

- What would be a good question to ask you now? Or what would be a good question to ask the next student?
- Would you prefer to talk or express yourself through drawings and letters?

These questions were intentionally crafted when I realized a few younger students only responded to questions with brief responses and stopped, not knowing how to proceed further. With these questions, students were invited to collaborate in restructuring interviews which had not yet taken place. All student participants were invited to ask questions about this research project and myself prior to and during the interview. These interviews initially scheduled for 30 minutes ranged from 20 minutes to 48 minutes.

The individual interviews with students additionally provided opportunities for rapport building between the student participants and myself. I could also understand the participant's needs and assess if he or she was interested and able to participate in a group interview. Holding in mind that individual interviews evoked painful, intimate stories, consent was once again sought at the end of individual interviews for the group interviews that were scheduled later in the day or the next day.

Unstructured interviews with adults

Fourteen adults took part in the interviews that lasted from 30 minutes up to an hour. All adults except for the SGCs took part in the individual interviews. Participants were aware of the research, and they would start with a question that sounded like 'what would you like to know? Or what would you like me to say?' I explained that the interview did not have any set questions or structure, and they were welcome to start with what came to their mind. I clarified the purpose of the

interviews and reiterated the research aims to help participants frame their views, which along the way took different turns. Their initial storylines shaped my questions and responses simultaneously.

Where relevant I would share points of view of other participants to enrich our interview. Perspectives and concerns of students were drawn into the interviews. At least four adults asked “what did students say?” or “what are children saying about suicide?” This practice of bringing the voices of other participants into individual interviews marked the beginning of a community dialogue, which lent itself to developing suicide preventive ideas and recommendations. I present more details of community dialogue in Chapter 8.

The interviews with adults were longer in duration and more smoothly conversational than with the students. Compared to my experiences with students, the interviews felt less demanding on myself. During every interview, I was greeted with a cup of tea and snacks, a customary practice in Bhutan, a courtesy welcoming guests into your space (home or office). All interviews took place in the participants’ offices.

Group interviews

Group interviews were held for the students and the SGCs separately. The structure and purpose of the group work for students were different from the group work for the SGCs and they are detailed in the following sections.

Hybrid cooperative inquiry/focus group with students

This group work inquiry design was a hybrid of “cooperative inquiry” (Heron & Reason, 2006; Stephen & Judith, 2004) and “focus group” (Oliveira, 2011). Use of focus groups has evolved over time with different researchers adapting the inquiry method to the ever changing landscape of research and theories but the common function remains to engage a group of people and promote collective dialogue to

understand and address critical issues (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2011, p. 546). Focus groups are found to be useful research methods to work with vulnerable groups and when engaging in dialogues on sensitive topics (Marimpolski, 1989; Oliveira, 2011). In addition, this group work drew on the participatory, right to withdraw, and transformative (benefit in the process of participating) features of cooperative inquiry group (Tee & Lathlean, 2004, p. 538). Cooperative inquiry principles of equality, transparency and democracy were encouraged throughout recruitment, developing group work process, framing activities and guide questions for groups, and group outcome. As in cooperative inquiry, the “design and management of the inquiry was agreed between the participants and the researcher” (Stephen & Judith, 2004, p. 537). Groups from each school contributed to the inquiry design and process in their school by providing feedback on the group structure and activities during and after the group work.

Six group interviews were held with the students from the participating schools. The group work was conducted after the individual interviews. The same group of students who had participated in the individual interviews participated in the group work. Each group was composed of five students with a mix of age, sex and classes. Most students knew each other as they were in the same school. The group composition was ideal because it secured bonding and was easier to encourage trust and accountability. Group work ranged from 1 hour 30 minutes up to 2 hours.

The goals of the groups were to

- offer safe and supportive contexts within which to explore their rich knowledge and experiences
- produce powerful testimonies that were a “blend of public and personal explanation” (Warr, 2005, p. 201)
- empower participants who otherwise may not have been heard
- seek students’ knowledge on suicide prevention for secondary schools in Bhutan

The group inquiry process was guided by a plan of activities which was discussed with the student participants and open to change. Overall, the group activities were divided into two parts. Part one included the introduction of participants to the cooperative group inquiry and focus group principles, setting ground rules and reflecting on the individual interviews. Reflecting as an activity was important because most individual interviews were relatively short, especially for those students connected to an event involving suicide. Students were invited to reflect on their experiences of the individual interview; this was encouraged as a way of honouring themselves, people and stories they brought into conversation; and expressing their views in regard to suicide. People live multi-storied lives “and in the telling they reaffirm them, modify them and create new ones” occasioning new layered selves to emerge through these stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998, p. 155). The practice to reflect and retell was created to allow a preferred version of themselves to emerge while their group members stood witness. This process was created by inviting students to share their reflections with the group while the other members of the group were encouraged to attend and listen to the telling respectfully. Other members were also invited to reflect back if they connected to the stories that were being shared.

Part two included discussions on preventive ideas wherein students chose to either reflect individually by expressing their ideas using visual compositions. Some groups decided to have group conversations.

The artwork was encouraged as an alternate mode of expression for the students who may have felt constrained verbally. The artwork is a non-verbal form of communication where creativity is involved and “has within it inherent self-healing process” (Jones, 1996, p. 8). Students chose to express themselves through letters, poems, songs and drawings. They used old magazines, art materials, dried twigs, and anything they felt captured their emotions. Because creativity and flexibility are utmost to navigate and address delicate situations, this activity

aspired to offer a safe space for the students to acknowledge, appreciate and care for their stories and themselves. In this sense, the group work also provided reflection on self-care opportunities for participants. Likewise, students seemed more connected to the topic after the group work. I noticed a shift in the way students spoke of suicide during the group work as compared to the individual interviews. Students seemed more at ease. The group work provided opportunities to explore their views and experiences further, and also engage in conversations which addressed their concerns as a group. Not only were individual concerns woven into a collective story but students found camaraderie.

All groups concluded by reflecting on the group inquiry process and offering gratitude. I was involved in sharing my responses to the final reflections. As participants told and enacted a version of their stories, the researcher and other group members became their audience, as well as the actors of these stories.

Depending on the school location, and time permitted by the school administration, four group interviews were held on the same day as the individual individuals, and two groups were held the following day. This variation in time was intentional and indirectly aimed to assess differences in students' comfort, reflection and presentation of stories during the group work. The one day gap was created, hoping students would have time to rest after a potentially distress provoking conversation. I hoped that they may reflect upon their stories, and engage in conversations with their friends seeking ideas in preparation for the group work. Having this gap was an added element to ensure consent and the interest of the participants as they had the choice not to attend. Despite the time variation, there was not much difference in the interactions, except students who had the one day gap between their interviews seemed more at ease. All students attended all interviews, and as stated by Corbin and Morse (2003, p. 336), I found that without exception all student participants "were grateful for the interview experiences".

A focus group inquiry with the Bhutanese School Guidance Counsellors

The SGCs were invited to a focus group to specifically discuss preventive ideas and recommendations.

The focus group is an intentional collective engagement to promote dialogue and to achieve higher levels of understanding of issues critical to the development of a group's interest and/or the transformation of conditions of its existence. (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2011, p. 546)

A focus group interview was used to address the third research objective that is to work collaboratively in developing ideas and recommendations for suicide prevention in secondary schools of Bhutan. "Focus groups are drawn from existing social groups" (Warr, 2005, p. 202) because they are effective when interviewees are similar and interaction among participants is likely to yield the best information (Creswell, 2012, p. 164). All participating counsellors had similar education, roles and counselling training. At the time of the interview, except for one male counsellor who was in his mid-forties, participants ranged from 30 years to 38 years in age. The time and resources available for this activity necessitated an effective method of inquiry to answer the research aims. This focus group method offered an avenue for "a concentrated interaction on a topic in a limited time, which otherwise would not naturally occur" (Gamson, 1992, p. 192).

The importance of consulting this group (SGCs) became clear during the stage I data collection. All individual interviews referred to the school counselling services as a significant response strategy within the schools. Although this could have been influenced by my role as a counsellor, the SGCs' prime involvement in the recruitment and logistical arrangements for the interviews may have also drawn attention to the counsellors' role. Keeping in mind these dynamics, the purpose of the focus group was to consult the SGCs and seek their knowledge of what may be

happening within the schools, their views on current policy and programs that may be working within their schools, and their hopes for changes.

Also six months before the focus group interview, the SGCs had participated in the first Annual Counselling Conference for School Guidance Counsellors held by the CECD. A panel discussion on preventing suicide in the schools concluded with a list of recommendations for prevention and intervention. I had requested a copy of the one-page document summary to get a sense of the ideas already existing and in progress, and to ensure that the focus group interview offered an opportunity to extend their previous ideas for new possibilities. This focus group design acknowledged that ideas may be re-presented in new and familiar settings. Old views are validated layered with richer accounts, and the possibility of refining individual stories into the group story, the collective accounts (Paulus et al., 2008, p. 233) is manifold and fluid.

My reflections

Although focus groups decentre the authority of the researcher (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2011, p. 550), after hearing cautionary tales from academics at Curtin University on the impact of my previous privileged position as a supervisor to the participating SGCs, I decided to seek another group facilitator. I worried that my prior position as SGCs' clinical supervisor and trainer could influence the power dynamics in the group. Unsure of my decision, I laboured as a scribe. A female senior counsellor working outside the MoE, but who had prior experience as a school teacher facilitated the focus group discussions.

I proposed the focus group structure to SGCs and invited suggestions for change at the beginning of group interview. No changes were recommended and the group discussions progressed with the presentation of preliminary themes from stage I interviews conducted with the students, principals, and a parent. In addition, de-identified artwork from students was put up in the room to introduce views of the students. The facilitator opened the group discussion with two questions

- In an ideal secondary school, how can suicide be prevented?
- What will it take to prevent suicide in an ideal secondary school?

The idea of an ideal secondary school represented a school system where suicides are preventable. This idea acknowledged tendencies of self-harm among students and invited ideas for prevention and intervention that may not have been considered prior to the discussion. Other questions included

- What is already working within the schools that help prevent suicide amongst students?
- What needs strengthening? What needs to happen less?
- Is there any particular question that you think is critical and have never been asked before or you did not think about with regard to youth suicide and suicide prevention strategies in the secondary schools?

The total duration of the focus group interview was approximately 2 hours and took place on a Sunday. It was held in the meeting hall of the Department of Youth & Sports (DYS). The venue naturally lent a formal working atmosphere for myself and the participants. It had been my office when I was their supervisor and where I had held discussions and seminars with the same group of participants. Even so, this arrangement was not intentional but influenced by time and the resources available. The MoE instructed no movement of school teachers and counsellors during academic sessions so a special request had to be made to invite the counsellors to the capital city. The CECD office had organized two days supervision training for 17 selected SGCs. I was invited to sit in as a consultant for day one supervision training; that provided some insight into the expressed concerns of the SGCs. On the second day, the CECD office allocated one full day for me with the six SGCs for my focus group interview. These continued gestures from CECD, DYS

throughout my data collection reassured me of its keenness and support for the project, and I remain grateful for it.

The focus group created a meeting of like minds to address a common concern, in this case, suicide by students. Individual accounts and opinions of the participants were tested and contested as they engaged in dialogue with one another. “Meaning was jointly created, contested, and reworked within the processes of the group” (Warr, 2005, p. 203), points of view converged, and diverged providing new possibilities. “Joint construction of explanations” (Barbour, 2014, p. 319) from this group was also a resource for comparison with the student and other adult narratives to ascertain commonalities and divergences in understanding suicide prevention in the Bhutanese schools.

My reflections

I also offer my final reflection on this group work by acknowledging that different interviewers with varied skills influence the group dynamics and stories told differently. It may be that my decision to step back to the role of a scribe was in a way casting myself further as an outsider to the participants. It may be that I partly felt I lost an opportunity to direct, expand, and develop new ideas as a facilitator. But group discussions can go in varied directions. The keen facilitator self in me remained muted during the group conversations but my attentive observer and listener self-was more present.

I entered the field for the focus group interview in two minds; to facilitate or not to? As Robert Frost (Frost, 1916) said: “two roads diverged in a wood, and I took the one ...that has made all the difference”. I experienced a sense of uncertainty at the beginning, but reflecting on it I wonder if having taken this road was like taking the conversation wider to another group through a different facilitator. That we had to go over what we knew and establish an understanding of shared meanings with the next group so that the dialogue could continue to grow. And on this road, I discovered new lessons, practices and perspectives which may not have been available otherwise.

Reflective Journal

“All social research bears certain features of participant observation the researcher participates in the social world in some role or other” (Fielding & Fielding, 1986, p. 39) and such aspects can be captured through journals. My journal notes carry my observations and reflections. The purpose of the journal was to record and practice “reflexive accounts” (Elliott, 2005, p. 164) noting dilemmas, difficulties and thoughts I encountered throughout the design, data collection, analysis and reporting of this research. It has comments and reflections on activities, events, feelings and senses of my journey alongside the research. I included myself as the insider and the outsider, the participant and the observer. I present an aspect of my reflection including a poem I wrote after noticing that I felt more hopeful after my second field trip, that it was not all dark and hopeless as I had thought a year before.

Journal notes

Dated 15.04.2015

It is not all bad, something is right. The young Bhutanese never looked smarter and never had more opportunities than they do now. I attended Paro Tshechu after more than a decade with my family, and there they were, trained and well-groomed students helping in crowd control and helping the old and those that needed help. I felt a tug of joy and pride in my heart as I looked at the students from various high schools representing different groups; the community police in their uniform with their vest on, and the student scout leaders in the smartest selection of uniforms. They were gentle, smart, grateful and most of all genuine. That is the face of Young Bhutanese.

Amidst the musical crickets

Your stories were sung and stung

The weeping willows drop in colours green and blonde

To honour stories were spoken; of lives gone and changed

Courage of those that spoke and lived and lived well

Gratitude for lessons of hope and value of life

Surely there is something uniquely Bhutanese as not celebrated yet.

A reflective journal is also a way of discovering our journey in the inquiry, writing is in itself an inquiry (Ely, 2007, p. 571). Reflective journals capture, mirror and engage thought processes which cannot be accessed through other methods.

Use of documents: Newspapers, websites and official documents

Bhutanese newspapers were the primary source of reference for documents. In the absence of official records and reports, newspapers have played a key role in informing and provoking the Bhutanese society into dialogue and action on social issues, suicide being one of them. Stories of suicide as portrayed by newspapers had a major contribution to the backdrop of this research problem. With their share of criticism, they still remain the prime site for “researching private lives and placing accounts in the public arena” (Mauthner, Birch, Jessop, & Mille, 2001, p. 1). They caught the attention of the public, the government, and certainly mine.

The purpose of drawing from these documents was also to attend to themes from the newspapers which could be compared to views of participants. Stories from the newspapers also represented a critical voice (Rector-Aranda, 2014, p. 807) outside the education community. The Journalists views question the education system within the country in some ways.

The media stories were considered important as they had negatively impacted the school and families. An example of the media’s role in disrupting and provoking is reflected below

The Ministry of Education and the Principal ofSecondary School, say they stand by their earlier statement on the two reporters ...who covered the news on the suicide of a student. They say they are not happy with the findings Bhutan InfoComm and Media Authority (BICMA) has come up with.

... the private newspaper blamed the principal for the death of a class VII student who committed suicide in May. The police have confirmed it as suicide, the education minister had said earlier. But, BICMA's findings say the complaint made by the Principal... against the alleged misbehaviour of the two reporters was not supported by the evidence collected by BICMA... ("Education Ministry refutes BICMA's finding," 2012)

The case quoted above had stirred arguments between the education sector, families of the deceased and media.

An overview of data collection

Data was collected involving fifty-one participants at two stages in total and is described below. All information was collected in Bhutan.

Stage I

I spent three months in the country for this stage of data collection. I was offered a workstation by the CECD. Activities undertaken during this time included

- seeking approval from the MoE in person. It would have been inappropriate, both culturally and officially for me to seek approval of the Secretary through email. My meeting with the Secretary secured Ministry approval and support for the study and their interest in the outcome.
- Phone calls, email and fax contacts with the participating schools to confirm their participation and schedule dates.
- Travelling to three regions in the country to interview the students in their schools. Students were offered lunch during the interviews.
- The completion of forty-three individual interviews and six group interviews.

Preliminary findings from this stage informed the next field work. A discussion on the preliminary findings and the process of their composition is provided under the analysis section at the end of this chapter.

Stage II

Data collection at this stage was shorter and scheduled for two months. The main focus was the focus group discussion (described earlier) with the SGCs; validation of stage I findings and one final individual interview.

I was able to check my findings by sharing transcripts and preliminary themes, with twelve of the 30 participants I had interviewed in stage I. I visited the lower and the middle secondary school as the students were still in the same school, except one student who had left on scholarship. I was informed by the SGCs from the other four schools that the students I had interviewed had left school. Some of them had graduated to other schools or left the country for further studies. Because the adults had provided their email addresses, transcripts and preliminary themes were emailed to them. I received responses from only two of 12 adult participants. I was not interested in replication or absolute representation (Fielding & Fielding, 1986, p. 43) but I wanted to ensure I had understood participants in a way they preferred. The purpose of validation was also to meet the participants, and share tentative findings and seek their feedback (D. Silverman, 2000, p. 208). Although an array of practical difficulties in terms of time, resources and connecting with participants were involved, as a narrative inquirer I continued to remind myself to care and contribute to those I worked with and worked for. During my visit, students who had participated felt proud to be a part of the research project. They said they were part of something important, and meeting them again reinforced that sense. I experienced that students were more vocal and comfortable meeting me the second time, even though it had been almost a year. Students and I felt

much at ease with each other. In addition, I had the opportunity to conduct an individual interview with the Rinpoche.

Analysis

Data collected comprised of forty-four individual interviews and seven group interviews. All interviews were recorded using two audio recorders. Analysis occurred at several stages. It began when I was in the room taking notes during and after the interviews, and as Silverman posits “in making field notes, one is not simply recording data but also analysing them” (2000, p. 126). I acknowledge data generation and analysis was influenced by the interaction of the interviewer and the interviewee as well as other contextual factors including my prior relationships with the participants. Acts of discernment were involved at several stages of data analysis and are described below.

Transcription and data preparation

Interviews were transcribed, speech was “cleaned up” to make it readable and protect anonymity (Elliott, 2005, p. 52). Pauses, repetitions and “speech utterances (such as um or ah)” were edited out to retain the focus on content (Luttrell, 2003, p. 94).

Interviews were in the English language but because English is not the main language in Bhutan, most participants struggled to articulate their expressions. Participants used words and sentences in Dzongkha and other local dialects. I transcribed these spoken native sentences and words into English. Fifteen individual interviews were transcribed using NVivo 10 (CAQDAS coding) software and the rest were done manually. With my prior experience of doing data analysis using survey data on NVivo software, I launched into doing the same. Transcripts were imported to NVivo and I commenced with initial coding.

However, I also experienced discomfort in using NVivo as it was limiting my view physically and this was limiting my thinking process. I felt the need for a more spacious way of working and looking at the emerging themes and patterns. So I resorted to a manual analysis by using coloured chart papers and notepads. I would mark the statements, note topics and write them on notepads and paste them on the chart papers which were put up on the walls.

Data from students and adults were analysed separately. It was important to retain the analytic locus separately in order to hear the views of Bhutanese students and adults from their own positions within the society. This process also allowed for generational differences, if any, that may impact the identities of young Bhutanese in the 21st century and how that may be influencing the acts of suicide.

Identifying preliminary themes

Thematic analysis was used to explore for preliminary themes regarding beliefs and perceptions related to the suicide. I listened to the audio recordings and repetitively read the transcripts until fragments of themes were visible. I paid attention to aspects of their telling that echoed their concerns and beliefs, statements they spoke with conviction and meanings embedded in those statements, and how they positioned themselves, including reference to the singular and collective voices as they narrated.

To add to the process, I used the auto coding feature of NVivo 10 by performing word frequency query and text search queries to get a sense of some frequently occurring terms and concepts. The exploratory coding process with NVivo was helpful to triangulate and refine manually identified preliminary themes.

Tesch's eight steps (1990, pp. 142-146) were useful in "winnowing the data" (Creswell, 2012, p. 186). Similar topics were arranged into columns as major, unique, and leftover topics. This was conducted to ensure I did not miss out

important phrases and meanings which were more visible in the column form. The topics were clustered into descriptive themes with various subthemes/topics related. While making decisions in wording the preliminary themes, I paid attention to the following questions which are in line with the sub-objectives of this research

- What participants said about suicide? Their feelings, beliefs, views and attitude toward suicide?
- Their understanding of what drives young people to these acts?
- What may they see and understand to be happening in the schools and Bhutanese communities?
- What needs to be done?

Ten preliminary themes (appendix 9) were identified, seven from the students, and three from the adult interviews. These themes were presented to the SGCs during the focus group discussion of stage II data collection.

Thematic narrative analysis

Upon return from my stage II data collection. I revisited the preliminary themes and returned to the transcripts again. Bounded segments of text related to suicide were identified. Group interviews were transcribed in the same manner as the individual interviews and a search for themes were performed.

I listened to the recorded audio tapes to note phrases and ideas that stood out; transiting between reading the transcripts and listening to recorded interviews to once again activate the context and enliven the texts, identifying common elements and the details the teller provided about it (Lieblich et al., 1998, p. 63). Coding for preliminary themes during initial analysis helped in reducing data and clustering ideas to scan for what was occurring, but I needed to move beyond coding lines of thinking. Coding was not enough at this stage, as I also had the group interviews

from the SGCs. The process felt fragmented. To uncover common themes or plots in the data (Polkinghorne, 1988), thematic narrative analysis was applied to tell “a story about telling the story” of making sense of suicides by adults and students (Myerhoff, 2008, p. 10).

Thematic narrative tradition is guided by prior theory and is case centered with an attempt to keep the story intact for interpretative purposes rather than take segments of data apart for naming (Riessman, 2008, p. 74). For this project, literature from sociology, education, psychology, cultural explanations and modernization theory on suicide was consulted. Relevant segments of transcripts to elicit and support the themes were selected. As I progressed in identifying, naming and refining themes, I returned to the literature to check for “p priori concepts with what I noticed in the primary data” (Riessman, 2008, p. 66). The analytic development of a story from the gathered data involves recursive movement from the data to an emerging thematic plot (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 16). This process helped in making sense of my analytic process while allowing primary data to be refined by existing literature.

Naming the themes was critical and complex. Finding a phrase or a word to capture the complexity of emotions and experiences described by participants can tend to be reductionist ways of making sense. This naming process was guided by themes from existing literature, and frequently occurring terms searched on NVivo. The process ensured that the analytic process sanctioned locally used terms and contexts, such as metaphors and unique phrases used by the participants.

After identifying and naming a theme, I returned to the interviews to select segments of transcripts and particularly to focus on interviews that spoke densely about the themes. This added to the story telling about the themes. Although I was attentive to all the interviews, there were a few that stood out for me with detailed

storylines I wanted to pursue, often narratives of those who had attempted suicide in the past. While writing the themes I paid attention to

- How were the themes spoken of and by whom (students or adults)?
The context of the schools; their location, boarding or day school and history of suicide in the past.
- How were themes connected to the broader discourses and cultural forms in the Bhutanese society?

Also, I listened to the students' group interviews attending to storylines that helped build the meanings that I was constructing from the individual interviews. Artworks from students were presented alongside identified themes to layer the "richness and purpose that lie behind" and beyond words (Jorgensen, 2009, p. 70). Quotations from participants were employed to add dense texture to the themes and to the claims I made. This process followed thinking through ways of representing the results, on how I would re-present the views and their meanings. Student views are presented by using their pseudonyms. The views of the adults are presented differently, they are positioned to speak in the roles they were invited to speak from for this project.

Dialogic narrative analysis

The opportunities for data checking stopped and I entered a different phase of analysis. To move from the stories of themes and to "write in forms that honour complexities" and make visible the layered stories (Ely, 2007), I constructed a play in Chapter 8. The play fits Ely's (2007, p. 590) description of narrative representations through drama. The process of analysis draws on features of dialogical narrative analysis described by Frank (2005, 2010, 2012). The play makes possible the recounting of the past into the present, recounting of what is seen as happening and make visible some possible versions of the future. The previously told stories are drawn into "layers of stories" and cast into a play (Ely, 2007, p. 592).

These layered stories include stories told by the participants, stories told amongst themselves, and stories I bring them to tell in the play.

Dialogical narrative analysis means choosing and linking stories in ways that expand the dialogue among different groups, and viewing each of these groups as resources. The dialogical narrative analyst works to connect multiple stories, of possibilities imagined and not yet taken. It also increases audibility of some stories which may be neglected (Frank, 2012, p. 50). In this play, characters have been created to speak the dialogue. The aim of this process is to amplify those stories which otherwise may remain silenced and to allow characters to speak in ways which may not have occurred otherwise. The purpose is not only to emphasize and broaden the previously mentioned themes but also to represent participants' "struggles in all their ambivalence and unfinalizability" (Frank, 2005, p. 972). In this play no one is right and wrong, and "no one [especially the researcher] ever has the whole story", stories are never final but ongoing (Frank, 2010, p. 103). The play aspires to open a dialogue on suicide by school students in Bhutan, and question with an intent to invite previously unimagined possibilities.

In Chapter 8 I provide details about the composition of the dialogue in the form of a play and the processes involved in the construction of the characters.

Finally, we cannot subtract ourselves from the inquiry relationship (Clandinin & Huber, 2010, p. 436). Just as there are diverse participants, there are multiple researcher positionings: positioning in regard to the participants, to the topic under inquiry, to the audience of the project (Darlington & Scott, 2002, pp. 160-161). I have included myself as part of the dialogue as "the researcher is the narrator of the story, and often the story is told in his or her voice" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 19). My inquirer self, my counsellor self, my outsider and insider self actively remain wondering, noticing, describing and narrating alongside voices of the participants in the subsequent chapters.

Limitations

Silverman states that our data is always partial (2000, p. 39), it is never absolute but context dependent. Schools without SGCs could not be invited as it was an ethical requirement for this study to invite participants only from schools with SGCs. As a result, this research presents feedback on the school counselling programme, but may not speak for schools without SGCs.

It may be that my prior position in the field influenced views of the participants and the inclusion of student Peer Helpers and the SGCs could have added to this tendency.

As with most research, there were limitations of time and resources. While interviewing participants from the schools, I was conscious not to interfere with students' regular classes. Because of the larger number of students I was interviewing, I had to limit the time allocated for each individual interview.

I could not ask participants to review their interview transcripts because seventy percent of the student participants did not have email addresses. So follow up with the group meetings was done instead.

Finally, thematic narrative analysis has limitations like all methods and that is the assumption "everyone in a thematic cluster means the same thing by what they say (or write), obscuring particularities of meaning in context" (Riessman, 2008, p. 76). Second, there are many possible modes of interpretation and analysis, multiple possibilities to interpret and re-present all kinds of data at different points in time. The play in Chapter 8 is my attempt to re-present the research information in a dialogic form, imagining a community dialogue in action, and inviting the community to continue the dialogue.

Summary & conclusion

This chapter presented my methodological choices and research design and outlined the stages of the research process. Choice of participants, recruitment and theoretical underpinnings of the methods were discussed. The process of thematic narrative analysis as the first analytic tool is presented. The dialogic narrative analysis is described as the second level of analysis. I explained my positioning in the narration and representation of various participant views. The subsequent Chapters 4 and 5 present views of the adult and student participants. Chapters 6 and 7 present their suggestions for prevention leading into Chapter 8, an imagined dialogue.

Chapter 4: Adults' concerns

Overview

During my first data collection in Bhutan, the informal conversations with adults within the Ministry of Education and senior community members communicated a sense of despair, confusion and helplessness while talking about suicides by school students. Everyone was concerned about the issue. Most adult participants had lost someone to suicide.

Adult participants were deeply concerned that suicides among students were increasing. They felt responsible and questioned what was going wrong in the society and within the education system that contributed to suicides by students. The overarching theme of responsibility was clear in the statement made by a senior policy director within the Ministry. She said, “we blame everybody except ourselves”. A statement that seemed to be questioning all members of society including the speaker, asking if they were all being responsible enough. The same speaker said “students suffered in silence” while the adults were figuring out who is accountable for the lives lost. The tendency to explore for stories in order to justify was a sense making process for all participants.

This chapter explores adults' concerns, views and beliefs on suicides by school students. Participants were invited to speak in their role as a parent, school principal, counsellor, key policy maker, and significant societal members outside the Bhutanese education system. Stories from different positionings are discussed by highlighting the topics they most emphasized. The intention is to illustrate what adults in varied roles said about suicides, about their own roles; and about other members of the society in relation to suicides. In doing so the views of adult participants are situated in the roles for which they were invited to speak, they are presented as below.

A parent's story

The only parent participant was a male who is also a teacher at the school. Although I requested the parent to speak from the place of being a parent, his identity as a teacher was present. This meant that the parent participant played a dual role representing the parent community and as an education service provider. However, it may be argued that since all adult participants except for one were parents, their storylines were partially influenced by their selves as a parent.

Views of school principals

Stories from six school principals which included one vice principal. They were all male with two managing boarding schools.

Views of policy makers

They include two representatives from the Ministry of Education, one male and the other female.

Views of significant societal members outside the education system

These were participants who were not service providers within the Ministry of Education. They include views of a Rinpoche, a psychiatrist, a representative from a youth alcohol and drugs aftercare service, and a representative from BICMA (Bhutan InfoComm and Media Authority)

Views of counsellors

This represents views of the SGCs and a teacher counsellor.

Although the stories were cast in their roles, participants presented context-specific views. For instance, the principal from a boarding school spoke of concerns related to the school context as opposed to a day school. Similarly, Rinpoche made context-specific statements.

This chapter starts with a parent's story as the only parent participant in this study. It is also because his views lead into the concerns about the education system, which is then extended by the school principals, and the policy makers. This is followed by the significant societal members outside the education system adding alternate views to the sequence. The views of the counsellors are presented at the end to link this chapter to the subsequent chapters on recommendations leading to the community dialogue.

I also acknowledge that my position in conversations with the participants shaped the stories of the participants, and how I textually re-presented them. For the participants I was a PhD student at Curtin University; a counsellor representing CECD, and responsible for overseeing the school guidance and counselling programmes; representing the MoE; a colleague; and a Bhutanese woman in her thirties. Their views were further influenced by the topics I invited them to speak of, and our responses influenced the statements and questions that followed.

However, my role in presenting this chapter remains as narrator and inquirer. I link stories, telling stories alongside, reflecting and wondering. And hence I report and narrate what and how adult members in their roles within the Bhutanese education community were talking about suicides by the school students.

At the end of the chapter, I provide a summary bringing together views of different participants.

A parent's story

Parent said the old ways of the Bhutanese culture are changing. He said the traditional network of care in Bhutanese families and communities are unique in which children respected and took care of their parents and elders in the society. Members of the community would rely on help from each other, but this was now widely seen as being influenced by Modernisation, and Western influences. The

Bhutanese society, he said is becoming materialistic people are driven to work for money, to gain material comforts. He said, “in this new busy lifestyles, we tend to forget our parents.... that is the crack, the fissure in our culture”. He seemed to speak with a sense of disdain and worry that the “unique Bhutanese identity” is changing.

Parent also acknowledged that these changes brought in by Westernisation further widened the gap of understanding between adults and the younger generation. He said

our children think that we as parents still hold our old culture. Though as a parent I try to change myself but still somewhere in mind, every heart and soul also that old culture might be there also, that, we would not be able to remove in a flick of time.

Parent’s statement about holding old culture sounded to me like he was holding an expectation which the child may not agree with because he continued to say that holding of old culture made him feel narrow towards the feelings of the child. Parent saw this narrow adult view, if ignored, may “make the child feel that their life is useless”. Parent said children of the current generation are different in their values, their understanding of relationships is influenced by the Western ways. He said

this generation entered into like a transcendental stage, they enter in but they forget to go, not knowing where they are unable to know what is exactly happening.

The metaphor of transcendental here seems to refer to a hypnotic state, of being lost. Parent seemed to be saying that children of the current generation seem lost because they are heading into a sea of change which has “no end to it”. This he says is aggravated because the adults who are responsible for their care are equally confused.

As a parent he was making efforts to change so that he may better understand the children; his own and the current generation, but he found it hard to let go of 'that drop of culture in him'. A culture that he cherished seemed to include family values of taking care of elders and parents, the culture of care, and being able to depend on one's children; "as a son and daughter [they].. will look after me as I depend on them". A sense of worry appeared in Parent's words as though he wondered about his old age and thoughts of being without care. His voice also seemed to echo similar concerns of other Bhutanese adults, as the younger generations live busier lives, the elderly population may be left behind in terms of care and may be economically disadvantaged. The interesting point to notice was the tussle between Parent's sense of responsibility and his expectations of his children. He felt responsible for preserving the "valued tradition", responsible for being an understanding parent for his children, and at the same time, he expected his children to honour tradition. However, Parent said both his sons were doing alright, he was happy and proud because "my kids didn't do that [suicide]". As a parent, he was relieved to see his sons got through the troubled teenage years, but also proud thinking he had delivered his responsibility as a parent. This statement seemed to indicate the presence of stigma concerning suicide, that society holds parents responsible if something goes wrong with their children, especially if it involved suicide.

In addition, Parent said children may be troubled by various situations involving school and romantic relationships. But amidst these troubles, if children do not feel supported and understood, it may become "a trigger for suicide". He said there was a generational gap between parents and their children, and between the teachers and the students. The "dubious" borrowed components from Western education system was another troubling "trigger" which he was also "unable to understand even as a grown up".

Parent said Bhutan's education system leapt through rapid developments with tremendous achievements but education must also teach about

our family, the union [family bonds] are different so therefore these aspects have to be considered then only it will become a great success . Our future children will definitely benefit from it, but how to, I also don't know.

Parent felt the school education system and curriculum must teach more than books and “imported” knowledge, but he was unsure how it could be practically delivered. His complaints and concerns on how the current Bhutanese education system and schools were influencing suicide amongst students are described below.

Exam oriented education system stress; ‘children are not free to choose’

Parent described his understanding of the struggles faced by children in the schools. He said the current system “is totally exam oriented”, teachers are compelled to focus on teaching subjects that may or may not be useful to the children. The competition-driven system mandates a teacher to ensure school children score high marks or else they would be left behind. Parent said the competition and opportunities get narrower as children reach classes 9, 10 and 11. But “a child does not feel secure about their future” because they know not all of them will be successful to qualify for government scholarships.

Parent also emphasized the stress of future job prospects faced by school children because their options and opportunities are limited. He said, “children are not free to choose, it is a very stressful situation for the child”. As a parent and as a teacher he hoped and wished for a future where “the child feels secure knowing” they have opportunities in other areas besides what is visible or shown to them currently.

At the end of the interview, Parent mentioned the lack of modern resources and technology for teachers. He said there were much excitement and expectations from the government but the reality was the absence of “technology and facilities” such as the internet, laptops, and audio-visual teaching aids. It also felt like Parent through his comment on the lack of modern resources was referring to the gap

between aspirations and reality. As parents and adults, they had aspirations and wishes for their children and the younger generation, but they felt unsure what and how to practically achieve them.

Views of school principals

Principals said suicide was on the rise alongside other youth problems such as substance abuse and bullying in the schools. Suicide was viewed as a social problem and this thinking was expressed by one principal saying

if we really think from the bottom of our heart why suicide, it is because the problem erupts from the society, the family, the community.

Suicide was not a decision made by someone who is an “alcoholic” but seen to be caused by factors experienced by an individual as a result of being a member of a group (community and society); factors for students were “stress and tensions”. First, was progression of stress “problem after problem, and it piles up”, then “they were not able to express their problems”, they being “children” find the problems unbearable which may propel a person to “killing themselves”. Students being “children” were cast as not being capable of coping. According to the principals, children were immature, meaning at a developmental stage of their lives, and unlike an adult, any stress factor may overwhelm the children. Children were seen as being vulnerable because of their age, and requiring help. The comment that children were not able to express their problem could mean suicidal students were unable to seek support by talking about their problems.

In this sense, suicidal students are seen as those without supportive relationships, and living under stressful external conditions. Principals said they could do little to help when homes and communities are the main stress factors for some of their students, “certain things are beyond our control, [and] children may have serious problems at home”. This statement was made by the principal of a school where two

suicides had occurred within the span of five years. Although the principal was unclear of the specific dates because there were no records in the school, he clearly remembered the second one and spoke of circumstances he felt contributed to the suicide.

Both suicides had occurred in their homes, and one happened during the school holidays. According to the principal, both students, a boy and a girl, were known to be living under a “lot of family pressure”, and came from “broken homes”. Broken home was a term used for separated and divorced parents, and in both cases, the deceased students lived with their step-parents and families. These families seemed to have their conflicts which the school was aware of. The principal said he did not know details of the boy’s “home problems” much, as he was not the principal at the time, but he and his team were involved in providing support to the girl, who he thought survived for “so long” because of their support until the school holidays. Whilst the girl student had the help of the SGC, student Peer Helpers and her class teacher, her parents were “uncooperative” and uninvolved. The principal said they made efforts to reach out to the family and sent them several letters, the only thing left for them to do was a home visit, which would be an “intrusion” by the school. It seemed the principal was reflecting on how far the school can go, he said “mandates” from the Ministry were unclear, and more than that “we don’t know how to make the parents accountable”. The principal referred to a recent court case two students of his school were involved in, and he had to be involved as the school principal. The process was “unpleasant” and he thought the Ministry needed to provide some legal backing.

Further, parental and family support were identified as crucial to the wellbeing of students. The principal said that schools were responding to a multitude of issues, and could be left to fend for themselves without policy support. He added, that the issues faced by his school were endless because they had to deal with

social problems in a diverse community, a community where most members have migrated from other regions to the capital, a community mostly comprising of low-income families.

In this community, families were impacted by their economic conditions and the school felt challenged as they were constantly responding to varied troubles emerging in these communities that impacted their students' well-being. Principals and teachers contributed funds to support the students so that they could continue their education. There were issues of resources in the schools, and the realities of families were equally complex. Schools seemed constrained by time, resources and expertise, and some families were challenged financially, especially if they were large families.

Two principals added that the communication between the children and parents as not open. Although students spent most of their time at home, parents may not often be aware of what was occurring in their children's lives. In this sense, poor collaboration between the school authority and the parents was associated with past student suicides.

It also seemed to me that these stories were drawing attention to an identified need for additional support for "at risk" students in their homes.

These cases pertained to the day schools. Although there were some similarities, the principals from boarding schools presented other issues. In particular, their expectations and collaboration with parents presented different challenges as the parents lived at a distance from the school and sometimes in other regions.

Problems in a boarding school

One boarding school principal said schools are like

one family, in a family at home we have two to three people, and even in a small family like that, we do not agree on curry, some like chilli, some do not, and here in the school we have over five hundred people with different minds and tastes.

By providing an analogy of a large family, the principal said boarding schools are faced with the complexity of responding to diverse needs of students. This particular boarding school had over eight hundred students from classes PP to X, meaning the ages ranged from five years up to eighteen, or sometimes older. The principal from the other boarding school added that students were more in number compared to the caregivers (teachers), and because of this it was possible for some students who were “vulnerable” to go unnoticed and remain invisible.

These stories seemed to reflect the reality of schools having to accommodate large numbers of students, which meant the quality of care may be compromised unless as the principals said they had an adequate number of caregivers. The issue of the care system which includes teacher-student relationship was brought to the fore here. It seemed the principals from the boarding schools were implying that the institution of care in the boarding schools needs to be more intricate and intimate. Unlike students in day school, student boarders spend all their time in the school except during the school holidays. During the school semesters, the school caregivers (principals, teachers, matrons, wardens, counsellors, etc.) are a family in a certain sense to the students, so the duties seem complex and demanding.

The notion of some students being “unnoticed and invisible” was mentioned by the principal while talking about the suicide by a 16-year-old student in his school. He said, he and most teachers and students did not seem to know the deceased. Part of the reason was because it was the boy’s first year in that boarding school. The suicide had occurred in the boy’s dormitory which complicated the issue. Most students witnessed and were directly impacted by the suicide. He said students

were complaining that they cannot stay in the hostel, so there was a lot of chaos, especially he had three best friends, a group of friends. After that, they created some more problems. ...telling us they saw him under the steps, they saw him coming in the rooms, they were complaining and after some time, right after about like two to three days, we sent these three children home.

This story seemed to highlight the ripple impact of any incident in a school, especially a boarding school. The story also reflected the need to understand and address cultural beliefs and practices around death. Customs of taking care of the dead in the Bhutanese culture and beliefs that influence these practices are particularly significant, as they seemed to be impacting the students, and practices of the school.

The discourse around death in Bhutan is influenced by Tibetan Buddhism. Death is considered another form of reality, and a human body as a temporary form that we leave behind. A great Tibetan Buddhist Master Sogyal Rinpoche provides the Tibetan Buddhist views on life and death in his book *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* (2012). He says “life is nothing but a continuing dance of birth and death, a dance of change” (2012, p. 33), our entire existence can be divided into four realities which are life; dying and death; after death; and rebirth (S. Rinpoche, 2012, p. 12). After dying the person enters the stage of Bardo which is commonly referred to as the intermediate state between death and rebirth. This stage may be an average of 49 days and at a minimum, one week. Some people may become stuck as spirits and ghosts. In the first few weeks of this stage, not aware of their death, the mind or consciousness or soul returns home, to places and people they would have been with when they were physically alive. But after 49 days the future unfolds, and rebirth is determined by one’s karmic actions (S. Rinpoche, 2012, p. 296). For the school students, their complaints about feeling scared of spirits and ghosts after the death of their friend most likely reflected the beliefs around Bardo.

Returning to the suicide incident of the 16-year-old boy in the dormitory, the principal said it was tiring for the school because they had to go through the official channel in reporting the death to the District education officer, the hospital and the police. Then the school was “left fearing that there may be another crisis” amongst other students, and as a result, they had to conduct expensive religious rituals. He said the school was not prepared for anything like this especially, not a suicide. The principal stated that he did not know the student who had committed suicide, nor he had any prior or post contact with the parents of the student. The post relationship with the parents of the deceased was damaged by the involvement of journalists. The principals discussed the media.

Impact of media

Two schools with recent suicide incidents emphasized the need for media responsibility while reporting suicides. Both principals confirmed “aggressive” responses from grieving parents and the public after the newspaper reports. Newspapers exposed details of the deceased which had “no benefits” to the readers but worst their “bad mouthing” and blame stories created conflicts. Already strained relationships between the parents and the school authority were made worse by the journalists without acknowledging the sorrows felt by the parents and the school: “the same sorrow, parents lost a child and we also lost a good student”. The school principals had negative experiences with the media. Furthermore, both schools while having to provide complex post suicide responses, said they felt “harassed” by having to respond to various newspaper accounts and questions raised by the grieving parents, the public and the government. Principals said schools were vulnerable to “torturous” intrusion from the newspapers that also “tarnished the name” of their school as though “it is their [reporters’] work to do so”.

These stories perhaps drew attention to the ethics of media reporting involving suicides. It also indicated the presence of stigma around suicides in the schools, and that perhaps schools were seen as failing in their responsibility to care for students.

Another principal wondered if the media provoked a suicide by a nine-year-old student which had occurred a year ago. He said television programs and movies projected acts of death, although the actors were seen alive in other movies, or some survive onscreen in their acting roles. The onscreen performances were seen to influence younger “children with a misconception of death”, children may think that they can come back after dying just like in the movies. The principal said it was otherwise hard to provide a rational sense making of suicide by someone as young as nine years old.

Principals acknowledged that the policies and practices of the current education system created extreme stress for the students. The pressure associated with school academic performance was rated as a significant factor contributing to stress in students.

School policies and practices

Principals said that the pressure for academic performance created expectations and competition among students, and among schools.

Success and status of schools were judged by their students’ academic performances, especially student results of classes 10 and 12 (middle and higher secondary schools). Some principals, driven by the idea of success, were known to turn away students who may not have made the cut-off marks requiring admission to their school. One principal said,

every principal wants their school to be the best and on the top but at what cost? Schools must be a place for opportunities and hope, not a workhouse that turns mediocre out.

He said when students are turned away by the schools, “thrown out of the school where can they go?” This particular principal was concerned that schools instead of providing hope and accommodating students, are instead “reducing children to the streets”. This principal said that the Ministry of Education needed to review their policies on failing students. The current policy did not allow a student to repeat in the same school if they failed their exams for two consecutive years, and most principals found this policy unhelpful. Because of such screening measures or demanding selection criteria, students faced extreme stress during their exams. Their exam results sealed their future prospects. Just passing was not enough, they needed to score higher marks to progress to a senior class, or move to another school, or acquire scholarships.

One principal provided a detailed account of the level of stress faced by class 12 students before their examinations. He said

sometimes they collapse, their body will be tensed. Now if as a principal, a teacher, as a parent, we are not concerned at that stage, and if we say that is pretention, then we are never going into deeper aspect of how that stress is making the person feel, we never try to realize that, we never try to study that.

This statement also indicates how students’ responses to stress may be misread as pretend stories of children; this adds to the common concern that adults are struggling to comprehend the troubles of the school students. The principal seemed to be asserting that examination and marks should not be the priority, but instead the wellbeing of the students. He shared incidences where he had to disregard education examination policies to support some students. He said he had to relieve students on medical grounds, and he collaborated in the process with the parents

to ensure parents are not exerting undue pressure on the students. He felt it was important to have parents on board for such decisions and explain the impact of stress and anxiety of the exams to the parents. He said it was crucial to collaborate and create support in such incidences without judging the child or else the student would see themselves as a failure. In this way, principals expressed a need for the parents to be more involved in the care of the students.

One principal said, “we are all equally responsible for educating all Bhutanese children, education is everyone’s business and a serious one”. Although the term “we” seemed to carry a general reference to the Bhutanese society, specific reference was made to other school principals and policy makers. Principals provided evidence of unfair enforcement of education policies by some schools and wondered if stringent reporting and monitoring by MoE would help to streamline the policy enforcement. For instance, one unhelpful policy and practice related to school admissions meant that some students were turned away from schools because those schools had high cut-off points for admission, meaning students had to have high academic scores. One principal said, the admission practice created labels of “elite” school, “good” school or the “dustbin” school. “Dustbin” schools were the ones that embraced students with low marks.

School discipline policies were identified as another problematic area. Schools expelled or suspended their students from the schools on discipline grounds. Some principals said the decision was found to be unfair in the case of a few students as they were left “without anywhere to go”. One principal said his school took in a few students expelled or suspended from other schools so that these students have a future. He said the same students later did very well for themselves at his school.

Another principal said

in some schools, students are expelled in the first one or two instances, people get frustrated and demoralized, and some provide corporal punishment in

the assembly and don't see the level of students, their age factor and all those, so naturally all these will culminate further into emotional disturbances.

Although the education policy bans the practice of corporal punishment, it seems it is practised publicly in most schools. An interesting point that drew my attention is the comment on the use of corporal punishment and age of the student and level (meaning class). The principal implied that it was perhaps alright to use corporal punishment on younger children, whilst it was inappropriate for the older adolescents. This reminded me of a general assumption amongst the Bhutanese that older children will be ashamed or “demoralized” if they are beaten, and especially beaten in front of others. Older children are mature enough to feel shame so corporal punishment may be seen inappropriate to them. Overall, these measures according to the principals “chased students” out of the schools; and those schools succeeded in closing doors to students and their futures. One principal said education policies that excluded and rejected students from the schools need to be reviewed. Principals grappled with the complexity of tasks at school, and the diversity of issues faced by and with their students. Principals urged a change in the school policies to address the pressures on the students, and on schools.

Finally, all principals said schools were “burdened” with too many programs and activities instructed by the Ministry of Education, or other agencies and donors. They suggested that schools be empowered to choose and implement programs they see as useful and necessary. Principals from suburban regions argued the need for robust support and monitoring from the headquarters. They felt Ministry officials needed to visit schools located outside the capital city so that they could see the field realities.

Views of policy makers

Policy makers asserted their concern and affirmed that the numbers of young people “taking their lives” were increasing in the Bhutanese society. They were troubled by the same question asked by all adult participants; “why young students from all walks of life took their lives?” Policy makers maintained that educators have a vital and moral role to shape the lives and identities of young Bhutanese. They felt the schools and the teachers could do better jobs in providing care for the students; “I believe our schools can do much better in terms of care and support”.

One policy maker posited that almost all students who had committed suicide were perhaps misunderstood by their respective principals and teachers. Students were left without anyone to turn to for help and support. The policy makers felt students experienced difficulty in connecting to and communicating with most teachers in their school. This gap between teachers and students could be that teachers are still “traditional in their bearing”. This statement was made by a senior policy director, who felt it was important to be open and create ways to connect to students so that students could reach out for help. He said the post-suicide reports from school authorities contained views of the deceased student “as someone least expected to commit suicide, or those were normal and silent students”. These views were seen as evidence to show that some students were potentially left out and “misunderstood” within the schools.

The senior policymaker shared his concern over some school principals’ attitudes. He said after hearing about cases of suicides, he would call the school to assess the situation, and often the principals “they would talk as though there was and is nothing they could and can do” to help in a situation involving suicide. He said it was concerning that some students may be lost in between people who were responsible for their care. The senior policymaker said teachers needed to be responsible and genuinely supportive of all students, “not just think of them as jobs”

because “unless you solve all other problems, teaching and learning cannot happen”. Schools and caregivers were required to be proactive. He said they must constantly improve, “as complacency may cost another young life”.

Both policymakers acknowledged that policies around student-teacher ratio and discipline policy need reviewing, but mostly they felt it all depended on the quality of teachers. However, the quality of the training of teachers was equally seen as factors requiring attention.

The policy people acknowledged the practical difficulties faced in schools. They said student numbers were large and it could be difficult to provide concentrated quality care but this they felt was possible.

I present adults’ suggestions and storied evidence of possibilities in Chapter six under responses to suicide prevention.

In light of the recent conflict between the media, school and the ministry, both the policy people felt media’s role was powerful.

What about media responsibility?

One policymaker said, “all of us need to know that all of us play a role in each other’s lives and it is important for all of us to do a bit and not go around blaming each other”. The comment was made in reference to the blaming and conflict between journalists, the school, the parents of the deceased student, and the Ministry of Education after the suicide by a 16-year-old student. Policy makers suggested that the media take a responsible and moral stand in reporting suicides. All textual, spoken, or written information in any form about suicide influences the views of children and “bears consequences”.

Another reference was made to a recent article in a local magazine wherein suicide was “glamourized” and the story promoted suicide as “an option”. Policy makers were concerned that the Bhutanese media in all forms provided negative depictions of young people. They said the Bhutanese society is morally and ethically responsible to “teach children the need to respect life and love life”. While policy makers felt that media and the schools were contributing to distress amongst students, they were aware that the rest of the community members held the Education Ministry responsible. They said when a student completed suicide or if something went wrong with a student, Education faced the “brunt of it”.

They seemed right in saying so because the views from outside the education system were critical of the Bhutanese education system.

Views of significant societal members outside the education system

This section represents views of participants from a range of positionings outside the education system. I will be referring to them as the participants when drawing on common ideas, and then referring to them as the psychiatrist, Rinpoche, media representative and participant from the alcohol and drug Centre when presenting individual views. Some views that may be viewed as critical yet pertinent will not be sourced to the original speakers but simply referred as a participant, so as to minimize conflicts and risk of identification of the participants.

The participants explained their views of suicide by students as “a way out of problems”. Suicide seemed like a desperate act when faced with tremendous stress, tensions, and pressures. They felt suicidal students must have felt isolated without care and support. Suicides were linked to rapid social transitions, the impact of media impressions and the role of education and schools. Family and schools were

seen as two crucial institutions that must work well and together or else every effort will fail. I discuss these explanations in the sections below.

Bhutanese society in transition

Reasons for suicide in our society...the obvious answers ...there is growing tension in our society, [it] is going through rapid developmental process, is in transition, the strong traditional bonds and extended families or communities are fast breaking down. (Psychiatrist)

The psychiatrist said that relationships, roles and values of the Bhutanese society are changing as a result of the country's development. Changing family and community bonds, the influence of the media and drive for materialism were identified as aggravating factors to other problems that influence suicidal tendencies among the youth.

Rinpoche shared that the Bhutanese are being impacted by outside (overseas) influences. Practices and concepts that are Western are seeping into the Bhutanese culture. Expectations and values in relationships are seen as changing, he said

a simple example if you watch a modern [Western] movie, you will see a child who is crying because he is playing baseball and his father did not come to watch it . Father forgot to come and watch the baseball, and the child is very sad. So what message does it [the movie message] give to the child, that the child must want his father to be there present, physical presence, so that is creating a demand in the child.

My understanding was that the media depicted versions of realities that young people draw from, and their expectations and knowledge of how things ought to be, are influenced by media depictions.

Rinpoche said, traditionally, the younger generation were taught to respect and look up to elders, and the elders were responsible for caring for the younger ones; there was harmony in this reciprocity. But current “borrowed” notions of equality were replacing the traditional Bhutanese views of “equality”. Equality in the modern days is demanded like a “right”; hence, children need to be taught to be reflective, to have understanding and wisdom, so that they may also understand what they are asking for and those they are asking from. Rinpoche said that the television, films and online media in Bhutan portrayed versions of pop and fashion cultures which are appealing to the Bhutanese youth. Rinpoche said the young Bhutanese have tendencies to compare their version of self to those depicted on screen, comparing their culture and ways of the glamourized virtual world. Young people are exposed to diverse, sometimes contrasting views of realities, for example, most Bhutanese youths want to look like the “Koreans because they think Koreans are better looking than the Bhutanese”. He said, the cost of these glamourized virtual impressions on most Bhutanese youth is the pressure of “not feeling good enough”. Rinpoche reflected that this feeling of “not good enough” is not just with the youth but also adults and family members. Everyone wants more and they strive to achieve material gains, Rinpoche felt that may be the price of becoming linked to modern societies. Rinpoche said material possessions such as cars, money and houses were viewed as the new measures for success,

there is a very strong concept that to be happy you must have money, car, house and that is a must. So parents tell children you must become a doctor because you will make good money.

Adding to the story of growing materialism in Bhutan, the media representative said parents in urban settings worked longer hours and children could be left on their own without supervision and care: “sometimes no one is home waiting with hot meals when children come home from school”.

The psychiatrist said, although health facilities, living conditions and education had improved, there was another troubling situation the society faced, “situation demanding survival of the fittest”.

All participants described Bhutan as being a competitive place for young people. The growing upheavals in the society also included unemployment. The participant from the youth alcohol and drugs aftercare service compared Bhutan to a waking child, not mature enough for the modernized world.

The education promises and pressures

Education was seen as a means to achieve successes, the psychiatrist said

it is difficult to change the perception of our community at this stage because it has happened in a lifetime, that all Lyonpos [Government Ministers] have walked from their village to the school, and they found their road to success.

It is true that the current Bhutanese Ministers and people with “status” belonged to a generation when there were no roads in the country. They walked to school in their villages, and they succeeded because they excelled in their studies.

Furthermore, the participants said parents exerted pressure on their children to get a good education so that they may live successful lives. They said, even though times have changed, expectations have remained the same, most parents continued to expect their children to have access to same opportunities that the earlier generations had. Reflecting upon the challenges faced by the current generation, the psychiatrist said

when I went to college I think we were forty to fifty odd guys in the whole of Bhutan and easily absorbed in any job but the reality has changed now.

According to the participants, school students are squeezed between social changes and an education system laced with constant competition, and perhaps some “obsolete” curriculum. The current education system expected all students to be academically strong, and “if you are not, then you are a failure”.

The psychiatrist said, “children are with different abilities, why to push them to the edge by putting everyone into the same mill, it is like one size fits all”. He said the structure of the Bhutanese education is unfair. Children with special needs are required to compete with other students in the same manner. These children face added stress on top of “neurological and intellectual problems” they are already dealing with.

The participant from the youth alcohol and drugs aftercare service said some illiterate parents demanded unrealistic academic performances from their children, and when the children couldn’t perform as expected they may humiliate their children. He said, these unrealistic expectations aggravated by the seemingly unsupportive behaviours of parents, or conflicts in the family could push children to think suicide is a way out.

A participant wondered whether the education system had its priorities right,

Is there a need for hard examinations especially for students in classes six, eight, and all, and is there even need for it if the idea is to provide universal education till class 10?

This one participant spoke with immense concern and frustration and said that although the Bhutanese society valued education as a means to success, school children are facing the anxiety to compete and succeed.

The participants seemed concerned that the opportunities and choices for students were limited within the school education system. Students had limited subject choices, with barely any opportunities to nurture their unique skills. The

participants were concerned about the mismatch between what was taught in the schools and skills and knowledge required in the world of work. They said college graduates could not get a job because they did not possess the required skills and knowledge. Participants recommended that the Bhutanese education and society teach children not to limit opportunities but to be creative.

Finally, the quality of care in the schools was identified as needing improvement. The participants argued that teacher education was just as important as selecting candidates for doctors and engineering field. This view was linked to the government scholarship selection interviews where students with high academic scores were selected to be trained as doctors and engineers.

A participant said the current Government must review their priorities to improve teacher education in the country so that those interested and capable are chosen as teachers and leaders for the Bhutanese schools. He said teaching is not just a mechanical practice of teaching subjects, “but teaching must be done with care and love too”.

I was left wondering if this participant was hinting that the quality of caregivers and managers in the Bhutanese schools needed review. This issue is similar to the issue of quality of teachers and principals raised by the policy maker in the previous section.

Family disintegration

Another compelling factor described by the participants from outside the education system were concerns around rising family disintegration in the country.

The psychiatrist said family conflicts, increasing divorce rates and substance use by the parents resulted in the neglect of their children. Another participant added that neglect led to child sexual abuse, which may be “inflicted by trusted relatives”. The

participant from the youth alcohol and drugs aftercare service said girls were often the victims of sexual abuse carried out in their homes. Girls were seen to be facing more stress at home because they had to complete domestic chores at home and did not have adequate time to focus on their studies.

Another form of conflict or difference identified by the participants was the widening gap of misunderstanding between parents and their children. These conflicts and differences were described as demanding parents' expectations, or parents unsure how to respond to problems faced by their children. The participants said it is crucial to educate parents and families in recognizing that their children need their help.

Critical role of media in reporting suicides

The participants identified media as a powerful medium of information for the public and the government. Media in this context included the newspapers, television, films and internet. Media is seen as a facet of modernization with its pros and cons.

First, the participants stressed the need for media reporters to be responsible and sensitive while reporting suicides. Although a spate of sensationalized news by the local newspapers on suicide had alarmed the parliamentarians and led them towards formulating national level survey on suicide, participants feared these print media reports may have also influenced "copycat" suicides among students. The psychiatrist said the glorified news had the potential to "fuel and feed another act, or a possibility of daring an act such as suicide". On the other hand, the media at one point was cautioned not to depict "gaudy" details of suicide and they seemed to completely stop reporting suicides. The participants said the danger of no news on suicide made the suicide issue "invisible" to the public as though "there are no suicides".

The media representative said that media houses in Bhutan are new and they need to mature. The Journalists' code of ethics are in place, and BICMA (Bhutan InfoComm and Media Authority) is in the process of drafting codes and rules that would guide all forms of media representation in Bhutan. He acknowledged that violations of the journalists' code of ethics were frequent in the past, and Bhutanese reporters need to report with responsibility and within rules.

Cultural and religious views linked to suicides

I consulted Rinpoche on the commonly talked about notion “if you kill yourself once, you will do so for the next 500 lives”; this was widely spoken about by the students. Rinpoche distinguished between the Buddhist notion of self-sacrifice and suicide. A self-sacrifice is a selfless act performed by Bodhisattvas who have reached the first Bhūmi, Rinpoche said: “these are acts of generosity guided by compassion and wisdom, and so it must not be generalized and compared to suicides committed by ordinary beings”.

Let me explain about the notion of Bodhisattvas, in common terms, they are the enlightened beings. According to S. Rinpoche (2012, p. 368), Bodhisattvas are those beings who choose to return to devote their wisdom and compassion to the whole world, and they take on the suffering of all sentient beings. The story of self-sacrifices by the Lotus King (Tashi & Wangdi, p. 48) who was the Buddha in the stage of Bodhisattva can be found in Buddhist texts and scriptures.

Rinpoche said acts of selfless self-sacrifice were not possible for ordinary human beings. On the other hand, some students may contemplate suicide thinking they were a “burden” to their parents if they failed in their exams or were not able to secure scholarships. Rinpoche said this showed that there is “love between parents and their children”. He said children are concerned about the wellbeing of their parents, but perhaps there may not be wisdom in their thinking. Rinpoche defined suicide as an intent without wisdom, a wisdom to weigh the consequences.

Human life was seen as being precious by all participants, and killing oneself or committing suicide was described as an act driven by pain, and despair. Rinpoche said that human beings

are creatures of habit, and suicide is a mental habit of giving up. That this consciousness may carry on in the same way in the next life. If suicide leaves a strong imprint on one's mind, then the tendency to commit suicide may be possible in the future rebirth.

He also emphasized that the Buddhist view is that lives are made of cause and conditions, and not determined by a final destiny. He said human beings in a way “have control over our lives; one's choices, decisions, actions and reactions” determine the future one is creating a moment to moment.

The final topic raised by members outside the education system is the need for mental health services, and this was raised by the psychiatrist and the participant from youth alcohol and drugs aftercare service.

Need for mental health services

The psychiatrist reflected a need for specialized mental health services and mental health professionals in the country. At the time of the interview, and now, Bhutan has only two psychiatrists who are located at the National referral hospital. They cater to the mental health needs of patients throughout the country.

The psychiatrist felt that mental health is neglected while the need for services is clearly on a rise. The psychiatrist said they receive quite a number of students referred by the school counselling services, or the Police. He said stress, anxiety and drug use are common concerns presented by the students.

In addition, self-harm and threats to kill oneself were seen as common among people struggling with substance abuse. The participant from the youth alcohol and

drugs aftercare service reflected that these constant threats and behaviours can be misunderstood as “manipulative protests” by parents, family members, and service providers. He sounded concerned that his Centre did not have the professional capacity to respond if a client at his Centre committed suicide. He recognized the need to incorporate suicide education and screening procedures which were absent. He saw it as imperative for any other counselling centre to incorporate self-harm and suicide protocols.

I now move to the views of SGCs, and the only teacher counsellor. They are presented as counsellors’ story to include the SGCs and the teacher counsellor’s views.

Views of counsellors

This section presents selected concerns and problem constructions drawn out of a group discussion of counsellors which focussed on preventive measures. The group work discussion mainly dwelled around “what should the schools do? What can we do?” Aspects of what was seen to be contributing to suicides were drawn from these discussions and presented here. This section draws together counsellors’ views in preparation for the community dialogue.

Although the format of this section is presented in a summary, it demonstrates an intimate knowledge of student issues because most counsellors have worked in close contact with students. The intention is to create a collective counsellors view.

Why are students resorting to suicides?

The counsellors described suicides by students as an “act of giving up” because they face a compound of not one problem but so many problems. One counsellor shared that the girl student who had committed suicide in his school was living in a home where her parents were on the verge of separation. He said there were rumours in

the school that her boyfriend had threatened to desert her. The girl also had some physical ailments around that time.

In this way, the counsellors seemed to describe suicidal students as those not feeling accepted, not understood and isolated.

Counsellors also said students constantly battled with fears of failure. Students were required to score higher marks in the schools. The schools, teachers and their parents demand this performance of them. Pressure and expectations from their parents made it harder because if they failed their parents called them *Go Machoep* (good for nothing). Counsellors said these views and judgments of failure reduced a child to thinking “they are good for nothing”. The counsellors felt that the current Bhutanese education system did not recognize the varied abilities in students. Numbers and scores graded their abilities, students are either the “intelligent” lot who are seen as the successful candidates, or seen as the “failures”.

One counsellor said

say for example like a person A is having 80 percent of marks but the person B is having 50 percent of marks and then definitely who do you think the people will offer the job to, definitely oh this person with 80 percent.

The need to score high marks was important to get to higher classes, to seek scholarships and for future job interviews. This and the current increase in unemployment in the country were seen as adding stress to the students.

Then there were other cases of students feeling like a “misfit”. The counsellor who came from a suburban school said some students, being a mature aged student in a lower grade, felt ashamed amongst other younger students. They felt “incompetent” and struggled to adjust. Another counsellor presented a different scenario of parents’ inability to accept that their children have a different sexual orientation.

He emphasised that some students struggled with sexual identity in the school, but they felt more distressed when their parents rejected them. So, when “children” for any reason may not feel accepted by their family and communities, they first resorted to substance use, and this the counsellors said is often a gateway to suicidal tendencies. This meant substance abuse and suicide were interrelated, counsellors said students, and especially boys, would resort to using drugs and alcohol.

Furthermore, religious beliefs were viewed to have both helpful and unhelpful impacts. One counsellor spoke of a girl student who was told by a Lama (a local religious head) that she had killed herself in her previous life and that she will repeat the act in this lifetime too. Following this prediction, the student kept talking about killing herself, the counsellor said

I had a difficult time convincing the girl that it is all in your hand (meaning you have a choice), and I was also trying to talk to her about this [belief] is not true.

But this belief held a strong impact on the girl because someone with the religious authority predicted it for her. The counsellor said that the girl did not commit suicide because the counsellor brought in her whole family to intervene.

Bullying was also seen as directly influencing suicides in the students. One counsellor said bullying was like a “cancer” at one point in his school, and bullying occurred in different forms. He said intentional isolation of one person was seen as a form of bullying behaviour among girls, while boys showed physical forms of bullying.

Finally, counsellors discussed and agreed that

schools [are] bogged down with so many other activities, like agriculture, scouts, sports games, and besides instruction periods so, therefore, I think [there] is time constraint to do anything.

Counsellors said students were facing a multitude of issues, and schools have but limited time to focus on those issues. Counsellors were concerned that they had limited time and reach to the students. These discussions will be expanded in Chapter six where the counsellors recommend responses to the issue of suicides by students in Bhutan.

Methods of suicide

It was evident from the interviews that students resorted to hanging, use of tablets, cutting, substance abuse and jumping from high places (river and houses) to harm themselves or commit suicide. The psychiatrist said it was concerning to know that most young people resorted to the method of hanging as this method he said had a higher success rate.

Summary & conclusion

Acts of suicide by students were described as throwing precious lives away. Adult participants thought students resorted to suicides when they saw no other choices, and when they felt isolated from supportive networks such as home, schools and communities.

Overall, adults viewed rapid economic and social changes in the country, and the competitive education system as influencing suicide amongst school students.

Social changes in the country were seen as impacting cultural and communal practices. Modernisation and Westernisation were described as influencing changes in parenting practices, lifestyle and changing expectations in relationships. Adults feared to lose the unique cultural values that contribute to Bhutanese identities. They struggled between the need to preserve old customs and staying open to emerging changes. In addition, adults felt the media had powerful influences on the children. The Western influence from the media impacted young

people's attitudes and values, which the adults found hard to appreciate. These tensions were seen as impacting relationships between adults and the younger generation.

Family conflicts and disintegration were seen as adding stress to the students. Collaboration between schools and parents was recognized as a requisite to ensure better care for students. Adults also feared that reporters in the country were not sensitive to reporting suicide. According to adults religious views and cultural beliefs around death and dying impacted students.

Adults, especially those who are not part of the education system were concerned that the Bhutanese Education system is exerting extreme stress on the students. Participants urged a review of the current education policies to address unnecessary academic pressure and enable schools to provide a better quality of care for the students. The policy makers felt teachers and principals could do better. The integrity and quality of teachers were considered of greatest importance.

Adults seemed to be aspiring for the Bhutanese education system to produce possibilities for the future of its diverse learners, and to nourish its youth by providing a sense of belonging to its culture, but adults also seemed unsure about how the education system would strike a balance in ensuring students study well and yet not feel unrealistic pressure? As an inquirer, I was left wondering if I was sensing a tussle between aspirations of the participants and on the ground realities.

During the interviews with adults, I was asked *Alu tsu gee gache labthey?* (In Dzongkha), which directly translates to “what are the children saying?” The next Chapter responds to this question.

Chapter 5: Views of the school students

Overview

This chapter addresses the first sub-objective of this research, to articulate storied beliefs, values and views of students. I attempt to sequence and compose this chapter considering the “ethics of listening” that calls for a responsiveness and a sensitivity to the nuances of everyday experiences of the young and the different speaking positions they occupy (Fullagar, 2003, p. 296). I see expressions of the Bhutanese school students as co-created narratives in which my voice as a narrator and inquirer is actively present. The chapter will be presented in three parts: effects of suicide; naming acts of suicide; and students’ explanations for why acts of suicide occur.

To create an entry point for students’ views, an analogy of the musical chairs game for children is apt. I recall watching a musical chairs game organized for children during a formal Bhutanese cultural gathering in 2015. I noticed a musical chairs game is played at most functions in the Bhutanese schools, although it is not a traditional custom. The game may be one of those ice-breaking activities that came with the modern school syllabus.

There were ten red plastic chairs and ten excited children aged five to ten years. The older ones seemed to know the rules of the game while the little ones appeared lost. Alas, as the MC in his childish talk, explained the rules, the music started children began running in circles, some of them in opposite directions looking lost. Mothers had to intervene and correct the direction they were running in, but the music did not stop as the DJ had his back turned to the participants (to abide by the rules of the game). The music stopped, some children were knocked over by others,

each desperately trying to grab a chair to sit on. But one had to go because there were only nine chairs left behind, the game conductor had removed one chair while they were running. The game continued with opportunities getting narrower each round, some children were into bouts of hysterical crying, some silently sulked away when they lost a chair. Parents and their guests clapped their hands to the music, cheering and laughing, watching their children at play. Some parents looked proud to see their child win, while some embraced their child to soothe them saying it is only a game. The game ended with a single winner, who stood with a sense of achievement, and received an award; often a box of chocolates or a packet of sweets. The prize was simple and inexpensive, but the actual prize was not the wrapped box; the grand prize was and is hidden in the process of the game, the fight to win a competitive game which otherwise would have caused embarrassment.

Like in the musical chairs game, it seems there may be tensions in children misunderstood by their parents and other members in society. Their little fights seem funny, to compete, push someone, or sulk may all be part of a game bound by societal rules. Children are thrust into the game while parents and others members of the event contribute, unaware that something as simple as a musical chairs game teaches a child a certain mode of being, believing and thinking about themselves, and the world they are in. The analogy of this game might not be identical to the social world, but the tensions and moves of the game do not seem so different to the changing rules and realities of a fast developing nation like Bhutan. In this game, there may be the rhythm of music to run to, chairs get reduced in numbers, the opportunities reduced and parents want their children to succeed. This seemingly basic analogy poses questions such as

- What other forms of the musical chairs game exist in our society? What do the chairs stand for?

The opening analogy and questions draw attention to matters which the students echo in their interviews. They reflect the competitiveness of the game, the pressures in the push and shove of the process, pressure and expectations of the parents, losing and fear of failure, and the idea of success.

Before I lay out what students said about suicide, I need to highlight a key event that may have influenced the interviews. Two months before the interviews, a popular college student in the Capital city had completed suicide. He was a singer celebrity among the young people. Ninety percent of student participants talked about his suicide during the interviews. This meant that students were in a sense more aware of suicides than they would have been without the incident. This particular suicide was a point of reference to start their interviews, especially for those participants who did not have experience of losing someone to suicide.

Before presenting students' views, I introduce them using their pseudonyms, age, sex and the key roles they played in this study. There were a few students from the higher secondary schools who did not provide their date of birth so their age is not known. The table below provides a brief introduction of the participants

Name	Sex	Age (NA for not available)	Key roles
Tendral	M	18	Peer helper and past suicide attempt
Namgay	M	NA	
Neelam	F	13	Peer Helper
Yodzer	F	16	
Wangchuk	M	18	School captain. Self-harm in the past
Rinzie	F	15	
Thuji	M	14	Peer helper
Kado	M	16	
Yangki	F	15	
Nima	M	14	Peer helper
Phuntsho	M	18	Peer helper
Karma	M	16	Suicide by a close family member
Kiba	F	16	
Tshetan	M	16	Peer helper
Tika	F	16	

Tara	F	18	Peer helper. Suicide by a family member
Shraddha	F	16	Past suicide attempt
Bhim	M	16	
Dolma	F	19	Peer helper
Singye	M	18	
Nono	F	17	
Pema	M	16	School captain
Dema	F	14	Peer helper
Binita	F	16	
Dorji	M	18	One of the captains in the school
Leki	M	NA	
Seday	F	NA	
Dema	F	14	Peer helper
Penjo	M	NA	
Tandin	M	NA	Peer helper

I start from the position that stories can be written and read in varied forms, there is no end to possibilities and alternatives (Gergen, 1999, p. 47). Artwork from group work by students in the form of images and poems is presented to enrich the storylines.

Effects of suicide

Students expressed sadness, helplessness and a sense of responsibility. Students with a history of attempted suicides spoke of remorse for their past actions.

Sadness

At the outset, students expressed a need to talk and share their views on suicide. Pema said “I am happy whereby our views and idea will be reflected in a book” - Pema surely meant my thesis when he said book. A comment made by another student, Dorji was “I was feeling hurt about the suicide case but through this interview and research, I felt safe”. Dorji’s comment left me wondering about his meaning of feeling safe. Could it be that he felt hurt and worried about losing people around him to suicide? If so, could this worry involve a sense of responsibility to do something about suicides, or helplessness in not being able to? It may also be that hurt meant

scared or constricted for not being able to talk about the issue of suicides and that the interview provided the opportunity. The notion of safety suggested to me the need to provide safe conversations around a sensitive topic such as suicide while engaging with students.

Most students had been exposed to death by suicide in their families, schools and communities. These experiences engaged their thoughts around the concept of dying or “dead bodies” (a term commonly used by the student participants). Students reported feelings of sadness, for instance, Dema said: “as a young Bhutanese I feel very sad seeing all those things”. Dema’s school did not have a history of student suicide but she was aware of a recent suicide that occurred in her community. Pema added to the emotion of sadness, he said: “there is so much sadness associated to suicide that we can’t even talk about it”. Pema said he felt overwhelmed by sadness over a recent suicide by a 16-year-old boy in his school. He was directly impacted by the event as he was the captain on duty for the night study when a friend of the deceased reported the incident to him on that night. Pema said he rushed to break the door to the deceased’s room in their dormitory but it was too late to save the boy. Pema expressed a sense of guilt like other students who lost their peers, family members and friends to suicide. They spoke of their guilt in not being able to help or save the deceased. This aspect of guilt and sense of responsibility is discussed below.

Feeling responsible- ‘I couldn’t help and feel guilty’

While interviewing students from the school where a young girl had suicided four months before the interviews, student participants who knew the deceased expressed remorse; a mixture of grief and guilt. Phuntsho while narrating the story leading to her death said: “I couldn’t help her and feel guilty”. Another student Tshetan said, “I really really feel guilty for not having been a better friend”. Friends and peers were feeling guilty for not being able to help or make themselves present to their friend (now deceased) as they would have wished to. Phuntsho talked about

not knowing how to respond emotionally to the news of her death. He said his group of friends grew apart and stopped talking to each other after her death. Phuntsho like other students did not speak out the name of the deceased, instead, they referred to them as Jongme (meaning the deceased). This is a general cultural practice in Bhutan that the names of the deceased are not spoken because it is believed that the soul is wandering in Bhardo for the next 49 days (I explained about this cultural belief in Chapter 4). Bhardo is described as the intermediate state between death and rebirth (S. Rinpoche, 2012, p. 11). It is said that the soul often does not know it has left the body and it wanders, and so their names must not be called as they will be disturbed from their journey onward to rebirth.

Returning to this sense of responsibility, it may be that students felt responsible for the lives of their friends, or perhaps enacting the good friend persona. Students recounted positive bonds with the deceased and wished they had opportunities to make things better. Another student Shraddha had lost her best friend to suicide a year before. It seemed that grief over the loss of her friend influenced her own state of distress and her suicide attempt. She spoke of her relationship with her deceased friend

it feels as if it happened right now, I cannot go over it, we had a tough time after she left, as somebody rightly says that in the absence of somebody we miss them the most, but when they are present we don't really accommodate them, but after she was gone every time I think I was the closest to her, because she was kind of older than me, I am the youngest in the group and she used to care for me just like an older sister. She used to take care of me even during school, if she hears I am sick then she used to bunk school, look after me, take care of me, sometimes stay back at home, that way I feel as if it never happened, I wish this was just a dream.

Perhaps, Shraddha's story also highlights the importance of attending to grief and loss issues, which appear complex in cases involving suicides. Shraddha was trying

to make sense of the sudden absence of her best friend from her life, and feeling the loss. Shraddha also seemed to feel responsible and guilty for not being able to help her friend more. She said she and her other friends spoke about the suicide but beyond that their family members or teachers did not engage in discussions around the suicide. Suicide seemed to be identified as a silenced topic in cases presented by Shraddha. I wondered if adolescents were constrained by these silences, making their experiences of death and loss harder to understand.

Frightened

In cases where a suicide had occurred in the vicinity of the school, students said they felt frightened afterwards. Dorji is one of the captains, and he said he feared that someone else might do it again

that was the first time I saw a dead body, ... and sometimes I feel scared because again I'm really scared because we don't know if our other school friends are planning for that because we don't know their problems and they are unable to share so I was something-- And when I heard the news from other corners of the country I felt scared.

Alongside the fear of another death, Dorji also expressed his concern and responsibility for other students. This responsibility he felt may be part of his role as one of the captains. His words also reflect his view of suicidal students as having problems and unable to reach out for support.

Also, cultural myths and beliefs around wandering souls and spirits of the deceased seem to affect the students. Shraddha felt that her best friend was still around her, she said

I used to get goosebumps, feel as if somebody was present around me, because after her death I don't know, whether somebody was playing a joke or something, but one day I noticed that when I went for lunch, my teddy bear pencil

bag which I use to keep on my table every time was wet, there was water dripping from my pencil bag.

Shraddha and Dorji both seemed troubled by discourses on dead spirits. These beliefs around what happens after death (which I explained in Chapter 4) seemed to constrain students from their daily activities. Dorji spoke of students taking leave from the school because they were scared to stay in the dormitory after the suicide incident at the dormitory. Views around wandering spirits also confused their responses and sense-making because Shraddha was in a sense wondering if her best friend's spirit really was around, or someone else playing pranks on her. Her response could be seen as a mixture of fear, curiosity and longing.

Guilty of my past

Tendral who survived two suicide attempts said: "I don't know why I thought like that, and did that, it is really a stupid thing to try". He said he could not make sense of his past suicide attempts, and questioned them from his current position,

I have done a foolish thing because committing suicide and giving up our life at a young age, not knowing anything about the future, not knowing what is beyond that moment. Too early to give up on life.

Once again there was a mention of suicide being an immature decision, an act of giving up. When Tendral said he did not know why he committed the act, he seemed to say he was unsure why he thought of suicide as a way to get through his troubles. Tendral reported feeling grateful for having survived. He said he found his past experiences helpful in his role as a student peer helper. However, I was left wondering if Tendral, Tshetan and Shraddha who had attempted suicide continued to carry guilt. They judged their own acts as "foolish" attempts.

Students provided their views depending on their experiences in relation to suicide. For instance, most students spoke of suicide by others, the others here

included their classmates, school mates, neighbours or recounting stories they heard on the news or rumours. Some like Pema narrated the acts and events intimately, and then there were stories of suicides by close siblings and best friends. Three students narrated and explained their own suicide attempts. The next section details how suicides are being named by the students.

Naming acts of suicide

Suicide by 'them'; the 'othering'?

Most students situated acts of suicide as stories of others, Yodzer said

some of them, they want to kill themselves, they don't want to live anymore, most of them just have something wrong with their life, something that's missing, they just want attention, they want people to hear them so they do that.

Reflecting on this quote, Yodzer initially situated suicidal people as those without the will to live because something was wrong in their lives. She then contradicted this by saying the suicidal people were seeking attention. Yodzer's views of suicide as attention seeking, her other view of identifying suicidal people as those without the will to live, showed she may be unsure about her positioning. It seemed to me she was drawing on some common explanations in society. However, like most student participants, Yodzer distanced herself from the students who had committed suicide by implying that suicide is something that would never occur to her.

Student participants used the words "they", "them" and "those" while referring to students who had committed suicide, for instance, Neelam said, "I wouldn't blame them, I mean, I think that they are misunderstood". I wondered if these ways of speaking made them feel safe if it could be a way of protecting themselves from being vulnerable. It could be that it felt difficult to make sense of killing oneself

that one would have to be in extreme pain to inflict such pain and damage to oneself. Namgay said

it is human tendency to self-preserve at any cost, you try to gather all the options, stuff, and then try to judge and weigh things down, and then I would say like but if you think suicide is ending your life, then I don't think anyone can do that until and unless it is very traumatizing.

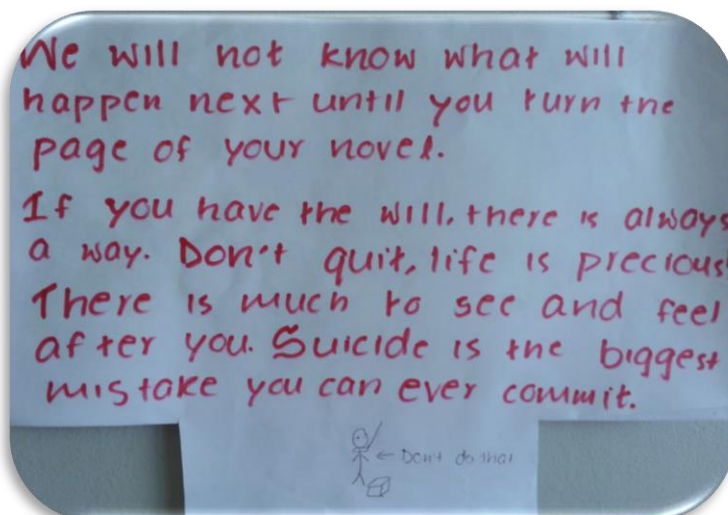
This way of seeing acts of suicide and people who engaged in these acts led to further describing the acts of suicide as morally unacceptable, irrational and desperate.

Suicide as irresponsible and irrational

Student participants interpreted suicide as an irresponsible act. Tshetan called suicide a selfish act, "a rage to kill yourself without regard for others". Pema said suicide "is an irresponsible act as it creates tension to parents and the country". Most common comments called suicide as "foolish act".

Figure 1 Giving up

This artwork by Penjo presents his view of the uncertainties of life, about unseen possibilities and hope, and the belief around the preciousness of life. Suicide is criticised as quitting, a sense of failure attached to the act, with a figure asking not to commit suicide.



Students were calling suicide a selfish act without thought for the consequences or regard for others. I also noticed a sense of resentment when another student Nima said: “how much their parents have suffered themselves in taking care of him or her”. Here I understood that there was a sense that students who committed suicide did not feel a sense of responsibility towards their parents, the community and the government. He said they did not appreciate the free education provided by the Bhutanese government; suicide was seen as an ungrateful act. Nima, through this expression, presented himself perhaps as responsible and grateful.

Describing suicide thus also meant family members of the deceased were left with awkward silences. Seday said there is a stigma associated with suicide “because suicide is not a natural death. People talk down and don’t respect the family of the deceased”. This discourse of blame was strengthened by the views of sympathizers like Neelam who said

she had some family problem, financial problem, so I heard that she had stolen money from her teacher. So all rumours created in our school. So she I think, she felt embarrassed so she committed suicide.

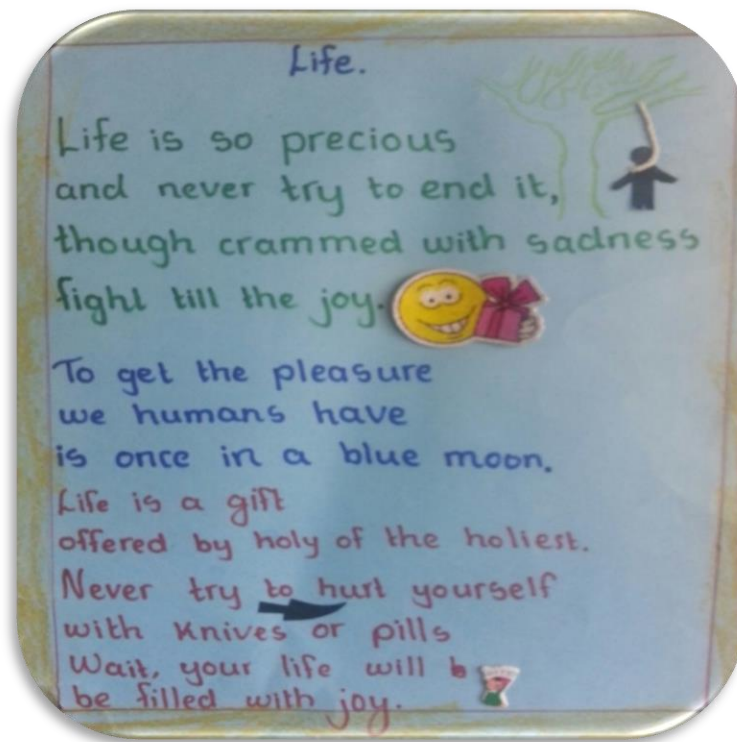
Parents, family members or teachers, in this case, were left to bear the responsibility for suicide, Dema said the parents were “shown as very shameful persons in the community”. My sense here was suicide is not just an individual act but interpreted as a relational failure. It meant that other members of the society failed to support the person so they committed suicide and in that sense, the deceased was identified as lonely and isolated. Elements of the blame also seemed present in these stories.

Student participants condemned the acts of suicide from their moral position even when they sympathized. The view that “human life is precious” features in all student interviews. Thuji said “human life I think is very important ... it is really hard to get a

human life but students make fun of this life by committing suicide, taking drugs and substance abuses”.

Figure 2 Life is precious

This artwork by Wangchuk is representative of his view of life as precious and negating self-harm and suicide. The poem conveys life as a stream of sadness with occasional joys. The student seems to process views around living an obligatory life as a fight, while there is a sense of waiting for joy.



Other ways in which students rendered suicide as irrational and wrong were shown in comments such as “suicide is another dishonouring way to your friends, family and everybody and everything you know... it is a sinful act” (Tshetan). Kado adds to this view by saying “I think it is not good because we human beings get our life once and if we do not care about ourselves then no one will care”.

These examples show that the values and beliefs of the students may be influenced by wider cultural beliefs. The Bhutanese believe human life is precious and one will have to take many living forms, such as insects, animals, other living beings, and the fruition of one’s good deeds find merit in human form. Children are told

to be kind to all forms of life as they may have been related in their previous lives, this notion of rebirth and valuing lives is taught through the school curriculum. Thuji said he learned about this belief at home from his parents and from *Gyelsey Laglen*, part of the Dzongkha (national language) subject curriculum taught from classes 9 to 12. Grandparents, as a source of cultural moral stories, were referred to by another student Penjo who was told by his grandparents that “according to religion if we suicide once then we will not get a human life and if we get one, we will be reborn 500 times to commit suicide” (I explained about this view on committing suicide for 500 lives in Chapter 4).

In addition, the cultural belief around preciousness of life was explained in more detail by Seday who drew on a story from the school text book. She said

according to religion it takes thousands of years for a person to get rebirth as a human being and in *Sheting* (Dzongkha school text) we learn that there is a turtle in the ocean, and that every thousand years that turtle has to pass through that hole and one life is said to be granted if the turtle is able to cross. And it is said that the turtle is blind, so he has to pass through and our hope to get one life, so I think they should realize how difficult it is to get a human life.

The analogy of the blind turtle drawn from the school text seemed a compelling story with a moral theme to appreciate human life. These stories are taught in the secondary schools of Bhutan. When reflecting on this, Seday seemed immersed in the story and went on to say that perhaps the Bhutanese government should punish people for taking their lives. Seday was aware that suicide is not a crime in Bhutanese law, and she wondered if it should be, and if that could stop people from committing the act. Seday like most participants struggled with her contradictory responses toward suicide. It seemed like a mix of compassion, worry and anger. This included the notion of punishment being a remedy to rectify the problem.

Further, the story of the blind turtle also introduced the notion of rebirth and this was interpreted differently by another student Namgay, who said

I think if we talk in the Bhutanese context I would see it is not really ending their life but actually but they are trying to find something new like some think this life is not worthwhile anymore maybe the next life could be.

Namgay was the only student who proposed this thinking of suicide as an escape to another beginning, to another life by drawing on the notion of rebirth. This Tibetan Buddhist belief on rebirth is explained by a Buddhist Master Sogyal Rinpoche in his book *The Tibetan Book of Living & Dying* (2012). The notion of rebirth stems from the belief that our consciousness lives on, and that the body is only a form that changes. Rebirth is believed to be dependent on karmic forces, and our state of mind at the time of death can influence the quality of our next rebirth, meaning the form we are born into (S. Rinpoche, 2012, p. ix). According to Buddhist teachings, suicide or any form of death resulting from pain and unrest will not result in a happy rebirth. In Bhutan human life is called Me lu Rinpoche, meaning precious and rare to be born into, so any harm to one's life is considered an unwholesome act. The Bhutanese students who commit suicide with hope for a better rebirth may have misunderstood the meaning of rebirth. If so, it seems that the moral lessons provided through the school texts, and spoken by elders are being interpreted in different ways by some students. These interviews and artwork indicate that the current school generation is still influenced by traditional cultural and religious beliefs.

Suicide an act of immaturity – ‘the tender hearts’

School adolescents are young with tender hearts and immature to respond and understand problems they are faced with, they end their lives.. [for] just small problems, and they just give up (Neelam)

The theme of adolescence as a formative phase with its uncertainties and immaturity contributing to suicidal tendencies was woven through all student interviews. In addition to Neelam's view of adolescents being immature, Rinzie said "there are pressures given to the children who are too innocent to understand why they are going through such problems... they think suiciding is the only way to be free". Suicide was seen as a way out of everyday pressures by the students who may not have had the capacity to conceptualize and think through the everyday problems they faced.

Wangchuk further explained the notion of immaturity by reflecting on his experience of growing up to where he is now. He said

I also used to think that maybe I could make my parents feel guilty or make them regret doing such things when they argued... but as I grew I learned that it's not going to change anything by doing all wrong things... I just started seeing things differently, I started appreciating people.

Wangchuk also situated suicide as a wrong act, prompted by expectations from others. He felt he was too immature to understand his parents' lives. According to Wangchuk, adolescents may blame themselves as the cause of familial problems; they find it hard to separate themselves from conflicts. He said the maturity to discern that one is not always to blame, and appreciate oneself comes with age. Suicide was once again constructed as a wrong-doing by Wangchuk.

Suicide a cry for help?

All student participants phrased suicide as a way out of problems. Dema said people committed suicide to end their problems, and similarly, Shraddha, who had attempted suicide, said suicide is

getting relief from all the pain, running away from all the problems and trouble that I had. I felt that I was dropping down and the floor under me was

opening up , I felt as though I was invisible, nobody would bother me so at that time, I felt really low.

Shraddha provided dense descriptions of her state of mind and emotions leading to her suicide attempt. She said

when we take a decision to do all these things it doesn't come at once, we keep hurting bit by bit and it grows bigger and bigger, finally all you think of is let's finish it up, if I die then maybe somebody will feel that oh she died because of all these things, somebody may feel guilty for me, I would at least go peacefully...felt like I am not needed anymore, I will be rid of my life, I am suffering too much... I could hardly hear somebody calling me... I felt as though I was invisible, nobody would bother me, so that time I felt really low.

Shraddha emphasized feeling invisible and small. She described how her problems seemed bigger and blocked her view of the way forward and dying would separate her from the hurt. She felt alone, disconnected, and not loved. I wondered if Shraddha's story also strengthens the view that people contemplate suicide over time, and that it is not a sudden impulse.

On reflection, these excerpts imply that suicide occurs when something is not right. All student participants said suicide is a possibility when someone has problems and does not have support; when they are in a state of isolation, distress and disconnected from support. Binita said suicide happens "when they have lots of problems, they cannot share with others and they think about it a lot". Students felt that suicidal people were inhibited and unable to reach out for help because they had no confidence to come forward because they didn't have someone to trust or they could not voice problem. It could also be that the student is alone, and struggling to integrate or connect to others thus becoming the invisible one in the crowd. Students provided evidence that sometimes when they reached out for help,

instead of support they felt mocked. These experiences shattered their confidence in believing there was a help and or they were worthy of it.

Students also described a state of loneliness, hopelessness and looking for a way out. Problems included family disintegration and conflicts, school pressure, betrayals and rejections, and negative peer pressure. Students then constructed suicide “as an option or an alternative” way to get out of the problem situation. Finally, suicide was explained as acts of defiance and resistance.

Acts of defiance or resistance?

Suicide and self-harm were explained as acts of defiance or resistance to pressures. Adolescents resorted to self-harm or suicide attempts to express their anger at others, especially parents, romantic partners or teachers. Wangchuk said, “when I was younger, like 13 or 14, I used to think that maybe I could make parents feel guilty or make them regret doing such things....when parents argue in the house.”

Yangki spoke of her friend’s indulgence with drugs because her mother and stepfather had constant arguments at home; her friend felt uncared for. Drugs made her “feel calm, and she says she feels happy”. From the interviews, it was evident that drug use was present, especially among the boys.

Amphetamines and marijuana are commonly used substances in Bhutan, and marijuana is very accessible. Students, especially boys, took drugs to escape from unpleasant environments at home or school, to find some relief, and then some of them got hooked on to it, and according to Tendral “making things worse”. Tendral also connected drugs misuse and self-harm, he said: “this substance abuse totally affects our brain, our thinking and when they are high, they try cutting their hand and showing it off”. He said he was high on tablets when he jumped from his room, but he survived with a neck injury. He thought drugs and alcohol impaired his rational thinking, lowered his inhibition and propelled him to act upon his impulses.

On the other hand, Thuji who described himself as a devoted and pious participant said: “taking drugs is like suicide when you are afraid of dying but equally afraid of living”. Students established a correlation between suicide and drug use; both acts were negatively constructed and seen as a way out of problems. Having presented student views of suicide, I move on to focus on why participants thought people committed suicide.

Students’ explanations for why acts of suicide occur?

Namgay said suicides are caused by circumstances in relation to others, it may be like an unfulfilled expectation “when you suicide many people would say that someone committed suicide because of their desire but it’s actually like an external factor or the absence of external factor is causing.” Reasons and events leading to suicide were not always visible, and this thinking was demonstrated through the following figures 3 and 4 drawn by Namgay. He said that the reasons behind suicide may be hidden but a little light is required to see it all.

Figure 4 Lost



Figure 3 Lost II



In figure 3 Namgay had written the issues faced by students, but these were not visible on the black paper, unless the paper is turned towards a bright light. Through this depiction, Namgay wanted to show that on the outside the school students may seem alright, but they are torn between multiple issues. In the

figure 4 Lost II I have written Namgay's words on a light background to display the hidden words in Namgay's actual artwork-figure 3.

Another student Seday portrayed feeling like a castaway in society. She said "others do not bother about our presence, whether we live or not. We are discriminated. We are not given the rights that we should have". I understood these expressions to reflect how the Bhutanese student adolescents felt at this point in time, their developmental stage and the country's stage of cultural transition. They seemed to be figuring out and negotiating how to be, what to expect and how to get through these transitions.

Suicides left family members, friends and school mates in a state of shock. Seday said the suicide of her brother's best friend was sudden, and unexpected. Like many students, Shradha was trying to come to terms with the death of her best friend. Everyone was looking for reasons to make sense of suicide. Pema said, "when I think of suicide, I instantly think of why people do it, like a question mark, why suicide is rising and reasons people do it". While some hunted for stories they could believe, close friends and family members of those who had committed suicide felt responsible to justify. Karma spoke of his elder brother's suicide and said "I don't know what he was doing... I don't know the reason why he committed suicide". Rationalizing acts of suicide and wondering why people did it remained at the centre of all interviews. Scanning for reasons, all student participants first tried to locate problems with the deceased's family, then moved to other aspects of relationships. The following sections describe these explanations in different contexts and stories. In addition, three stories stood out amongst many, they were told by three students Tendral, Wangchuk and Shradha who had attempted suicide in the past. Their points of view provide unique insights regarding suicide attempts.

Relationships

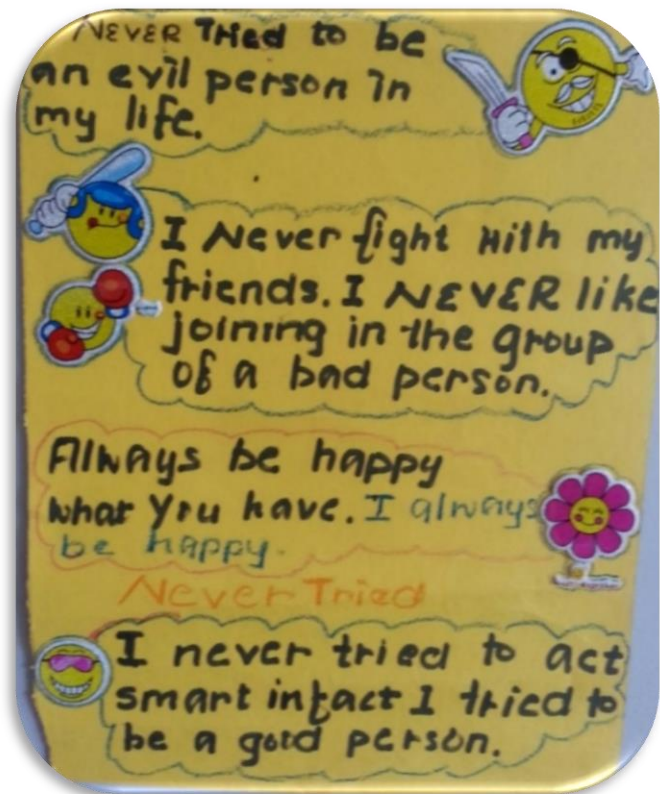
Students seemed to evaluate the meaning and purpose of their lives through their relationships with parents, romantic partners, peers, teachers and the wider culture. Shraddha said

it's like I want to be what they want me to be, and what they want me to be is really connected to what I want to be, because I want to be loved by all, and when I do what they love me to do, well then that makes me happy and that's what I want to be, I want to make myself to be happy.

I understood this as Shraddha's expression of her identity and how she wanted to be seen was connected to how she preferred to be seen by others. She evaluated her sense of self through others. Similarly, most students spoke in a collective voice, for instance Tashi said "we were born to do something or achieve something good or better, helping others and all and bringing happiness into other's life and all". I noticed that the collective voice was stronger than the individualist use of I amongst most of these Bhutanese adolescents. They saw themselves as a part of a community, a wider family. This notion is consistent with the cultural Buddhist belief about interdependent lives. It also meant that school adolescents measured their sense of worth in their relationships with others. Tashi mentioned that the purpose of one's life is to help others, and bring happiness, being a good person was presented as important.

Figure 5 Being a good person

The figure suggested Binita's ideas of what makes a good person. By combining the emoticons and words, Binita is making a distinction between the evil and the bad versus the good, happy and smart person. She also seemed to be claiming to be a good person.



The desire to be a good person and not a bad person emerged in most student interviews. They seemed to

feel an expectation from others to be good which implied avoiding bad company, taking care of family and fulfilling family aspirations.

Also expressions such as “I like to be a good person taking care of family” by Yangki, and “I don’t want my parents to be sad” by Wangchuk illuminated the significance of their relationship with their parents. Kado said, “my dream is fulfilling my parents dream, and Nima added I cannot live without my parents”. These comments indicated that students’ sense of purpose, hopes and dreams were reflected in connection to their parents, suggesting when the stability of their homes are shaken, students may lose these connections, their present is troubled and future not yet visible. Family disintegration and neglect were described as critical features adding to distress amongst students. It was identified as a common feature in the stories of completed student suicides narrated by the participants. Family primarily alluded to their parents with rare references to their grandparents and siblings.

Family disintegration and discord

Family disintegration and discord involved divorce, conflicts and arguments between the parents related to alcohol issues, family adjustments for a parent with mental illness, and strained communication between a parent and their children.

Students shared that four students who had committed suicide came from separated families. Newspaper accounts and adult interviews confirmed these facts. In one of the participating schools, a girl student had completed suicide four months before the interviews. All five student participants told accounts of her domestic struggles. Phuntsho said despite the help she was provided at school she “killed herself”. Tshetan said, “she wasn’t depressed at all, she was really happy, energetic, young woman in the school, I believe it is her family...she never got along with her mother and stepfather”. Tshetan presented the story of the girl not having enough time to study at home because of domestic chores. He also seemed to resist the belief that suicides are caused by depression.

Karma, another participant from the same school, had lost his elder brother to suicide two years before the interview. Karma seemed quiet, and did not speak much, nor did he make reference to domestic conflicts. He was living with a large family including his step-siblings. His late elder brother was studying in the same school, and he said, had been good friends with the girl who had completed suicide from the same school. The two suicide cases in this school were two years apart, and this made me wonder about the connections between them.

Tendral chose to depict the impact of parental conflict and disintegration on children through Figure 6.

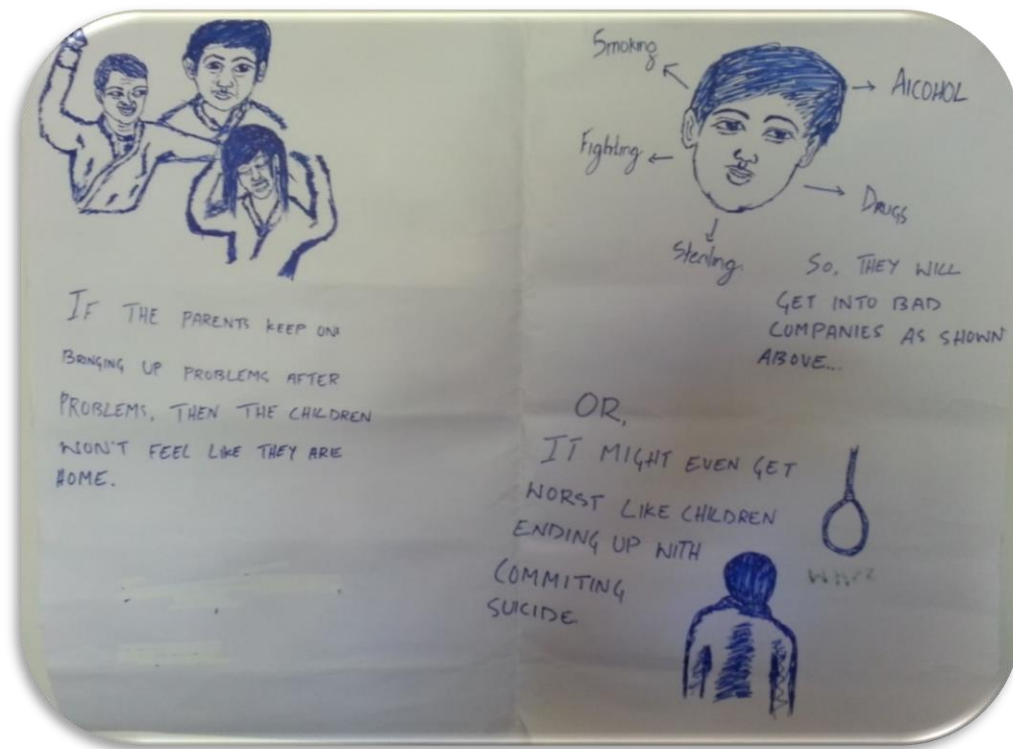


Figure 6 Family problems

This figure seems to illustrate the impact of conflict and violence at home on children. The picture demonstrates violence perpetrated by the father, and the son helplessly watching in the background. As a result, the boy cries out by resorting to alcohol, smoking, drugs and leading to stealing and fights. And suicide then is depicted as another way of coping. The picture of a rope perhaps showing the common method of suicide.

Tendral said he attempted suicide twice,

First I tried to cut my hands with a knife and for the second time, I jumped from my room.... It is a two storey building... personally, I have been in this situation because of my father, my father and mother got divorced and now it's been around six years. My father is living with a new wife and they will have a new child soon, a daughter, because of his new wife we had some conversation.

Tendral is the eldest son in the family and the separation of his parents was traumatic. The loss of stability at home was amplified by his father's new family. Amidst making adjustments to living in separate homes, dealing with the loss of a

familiar home, a sense of rejection was heightened with the anticipation of a step-sibling whose presence was not welcome in his life. Tendral like many boys resorted to drugs and alcohol which worsened his relationship with his father, and he was sent out of his father's house. He said he was living with his single mother.

Students reported that alcohol use by a parent led to family discord. Parental mental illness was another factor that contributed to distress amongst school students. Neelam spoke of her friend who had attempted suicide by taking pills but was saved at the hospital. Her friend was sad and hurt because her parents were constantly fighting. Her mother had problems with alcohol.

Wangchuk thought about suicide because his parents fought all the time and he thought his suicide "could make my parents feel guilty or make them regret doing such things"; Wangchuk's revenge and anger were present. Although parental divorce was identified as a dominant factor, Yangki's story asserted that divorce by itself was not the factor but how children are affected in the process, and whether they feel rejected or supported. Yangki was the eldest of three children, and they were being raised by their single mother after the divorce of her parents. Yangki said she adored her two younger brothers and spoke with appreciation about her mum, "she is doing all by herself, and she didn't have step father [meaning did not marry again] also. She cares very much as if we have our dad". It also sounded as if the presence of a new person, in Yangki's case a stepfather, would have disrupted the positivity she experienced in her home. Yangki felt trusted by her mother. She said she took care of the house and her siblings when her mother travelled for work. Yangki said she also earned money for the family by weaving traditional clothes, she said the money enabled her to financially help her mother and siblings, she said

I think I am a good child for my mother because I help in everything she needs and I discipline myself and not abuse anything. I don't create any problem in the school and take my own responsibilities.

Yangki constructed a version of herself as a responsible, able and caring family member at home, and an intelligent and caring student Peer Helper in the school. While listening to Yangki, the Westernised brain of mine started wondering if she is doing too much for her age, and I asked her how she managed time for her studies. Yangki was prompt with her response saying “I get enough time”. Traditionally in the Bhutanese culture, people took pride if they were granted responsibilities at home, in the school (captainship/leadership roles) or in their communities. It meant that one was thought capable of performing allocated tasks. However, this may be dependent on how these responsibilities are communicated to the students. They may be endowed or pushed upon by others.

Strained communication between a child and a parent or parents could impair children’s sense of well-being and their relationship with each other. Kiba spoke of her multiple attempts at suicide and said “I feel sad, I feel alone in the world, and worst is I try to hurt myself... I wonder why I was born in this world”. Kiba seemed to say that she was not feeling understood, and she was feeling invisible. Her conflict was mainly with her mother. She shared accounts of being told she is good-for-nothing by her mother. She explained that her mother was always suspicious of her moves (not trusting) and never appreciative of her efforts. Kiba said she constantly felt compared to her elder siblings. Kiba spoke of her struggles in negotiating her roles in the school. Her role as a girl being chased by boys; and struggling to meet the school academic expectations. However, Kiba wanting to feel understood and to be seen positively by her mother was at the centre of her story. She turned the anger and misery toward herself by cutting herself on two occasions: jumping off the veranda of her room, and trying to hang herself in her room. She said she was saved by her mother on both occasions. When I asked about her sense of care for herself, she said: “my parents don’t love me so I don’t care, I didn’t care I thought as long as I am dead, my parents will be happy, they may cry once but they will forget me.” Kiba’s mother was a housewife, and I wondered about her circumstances and how they may be impacted by the changing lifestyle and

thinking of the younger generation. On the other hand, Kiba was the youngest of three children and traditionally it is possible that the youngest is the most protected. Kiba is also a female, often seen as the weaker sex and vulnerable to be taken advantage of by boys or men. Maybe, Kiba's mother viewed her way of communicating as the only possible course of action, which clearly did not seem to work for them. Kiba said

my mum is always shouting, every time I come home she is shouting and when I say something she cries and then my dad sees her crying he scolds me, even my elder brother and sister.

Kiba thought her mother hated her, and it did not make sense to her that the person who gave birth to her did not want her. Like most school adolescents, a part of Kiba seemed to seek independence by wanting to spend time with her friends, but she felt imprisoned at home. Equally, she desired to feel wanted and to belong at home.

In Bhutan, children are called Alu (child/kid), and this generally includes adolescents too. Bhutanese society was and continues to be a hierarchical society where children must not speak back to their elders as a sign of respect. Children are spoken to and must not interfere in the affairs of the elders. Kado said, "if I have problems I will not go home but go to my elder brother and tell him so that he can talk to my parents". Adolescents like Kado and Kiba did not openly talk to their parents. Kado had siblings to bridge this gap but Kiba felt resentment toward her siblings.

Children expect their parents to have a far greater responsibility, sometimes to compromise their preferences for their children or at least involve and consult their children in their decisions. Students seemed to be saying that divorce and parental conflicts impact them significantly. Parental discord was described as playing an integral role in driving the four students to suicide. Perhaps, this view was also strengthened by Tendral's and Kiba's story.

Just as in the musical chairs game, even though the game may be competitive, even though the child may have lost a chair, it soothes a child to have the loving presence of their parents around them. Parental love and support regardless of changing circumstances are expected, Rinzie said: “it is parents’ duty to take care of their children”. The stories provided evidence that these participants expected home to provide stability for children and adolescents.

Romantic relationships and friendships

Break-ups in romantic relationships were identified as another trigger to distress. The Bhutanese schools normally call them “boy-girl relationships”, although this term seems to take for granted that only opposite sexes can be attracted to each other.

Dolma narrated the story of her friend from school who had hanged herself in the dormitory and completed suicide three years back; “she was a good girl, good in studies and frank also... she was in class 10”. Dolma said the deceased was rejected by her boyfriend and also had a minor problem with the school matron. Dolma described her friend as feeling rejected and lonely. Dolma said her friend has expressed a desire to kill herself to her other friends “who did not take her words seriously”. Dolma’s friend was found dead the next day with a suicide note written for her boyfriend.

Shraddha’s version of her best friend’s story was an “obsessive” crush. Her best friend had a crush on her teacher, according to Shraddha, a one-sided “possessive craze”. It sounded as though her friend was looking for something to invest in, a ceaseless impulse and pursuit involving telephone calls to the teacher and obsessing over him. This typical romanticized version by Shraddha also implied family discord but the story did not have details of the family. Shraddha said her best friend remained removed from their group, lamenting about her unreturned love.

Shraddha said her friend had committed suicide to escape from the painful reality of forbidden love (because he was her teacher).

The tone in which stories of romantic relationships were presented by the students indicated romantic love was “forbidden” for the students in the schools. Stories of romantic relationships seemed constrained by hints of disapproval from the school authorities and such accounts were covered by the local newspapers (Rai, 2014b). Forbidden, because students were not allowed to engage in “boyfriend and girlfriend business”. Some students viewed it as inappropriate to engage in romantic relationships, Dema said: “relationships problem like in our young age is not the right age”. Traditionally and even now, schools in Bhutan find romantic relationships unacceptable within the schools. A students’ job is only to study and not become distracted, romantic attachments continue in secret. Most students used the word illicit to refer to any form of romantic relationships in the school amongst students because it was against the school rules. In most schools, the idea or knowledge of someone having a boyfriend was spoken about as morally wrong.

Girls were seen as the weaker and sensitive ones in comparison to the boys, Nono said

girls do that [suicide] when they are in relationships and girls when they are deeply in love they become like that, and boys act intensely initially and then later they break off so girls get hurt.

Dema narrated another story of a “girl who tried to commit suicide but luckily was saved, she had about 32 tablets and I also heard that it is because of the relationship problems, and all happening”. Furthermore, Seday said a girl could be labelled a “loose character” if she had a boyfriend and even worse if she had more than one boyfriend. There was a common assumption that girls resorted to self-harm more because they are more emotionally ‘sensitive’ than boys. Student participants, both boys and girls, thought self-harm to be more present among girls; cutting hands

and wrists and making tattoos by writing the names of their boyfriends were seen as trendy. Boys were reported as resorting to using of illicit drugs and alcohol.

The gendered accounts between boys and girls navigating through romantic relationships and falling victim to suicide were intensified by stories of teenage pregnancies and harassments. Although there is no evidence provided in newspapers or other formal sources in Bhutan, the majority of female participants thought teenage pregnancies were driving some girls to suicide. Dema said “if pregnant, one is discriminated in the school”, the conservative Bhutanese society blamed girls for ending up in an unhealthy relationship and sometimes girls were even called “prostitute”. Few students remarked some girls may be sexually abused by their stepfathers or uncles and even aunties. The added vulnerability and stigma to unwanted pregnancy were seen to propel some girls to fear, shame, and isolation. They may be then driven to end their misery.

Relationships with teachers

A few students referred to troubles and conflicts with teachers. Rinzie cited an example of their math teacher who was dreaded by students and who demanded absolute silence in the class, but no matter how he threatened the students, the students would still “bunk his classes because they did not like being there, he frightened us, and we can never approach him”. On the other hand, when students knew they were cared for and supported by a teacher, they made efforts to do school work and remained in the presence of that teacher. Rinzie compared the math teacher to her class teacher. According to Rinzie, her class teacher had received a transfer order to go to another school but chose to remain back so that she and her students would exit the school together. This gesture by the class teacher resulted in building supportive bonds between the class teacher and the students, and amongst the class students. This experience was verified by another boy student from the

same class. He expressed his appreciation for his class teacher for her care, and implied his dislike for the math teacher.

Another story reflecting the relationship between teachers and students was the story of a 16-year-old boy who hanged himself in his dormitory when the rest of the boys were at their night study. Student participants from this school said he seemed to have come from an average family and was the eldest son. According to the stories he killed himself fearing his parents may be called by the school authority to discuss his misdemeanours. The deceased before the night of the suicide said to his friends “if the principal calls my parents it is better for me to suicide” and he completed the act in the night. The deceased and his friends had bunked (absent without leave) school (boarding facility) and had gone home. They were caught by their school principal on their way back, and all of them were warned that they would be paraded in front of the morning assembly and that their parents were going to be informed. Although they were in a group, the deceased seemed most affected, for he committed suicide that same night. It may have been that the fear accompanying the principal’s warning was one trigger. From the stories told by students, it sounded like he also felt unsettled in the boarding school, and maybe there were other factors that only he could have experienced and known but did not live to tell. Students and teachers spoke of him as quiet and “shy” and he was invisible to many teachers and students, as though disconnected. Student participants said they did not know the deceased until he died, one common feature of most student suicides. Reflecting on the 16-year-old boy’s story, it seemed that an aspect of fear that the principal would report to his parents could be possible. It may have been that his fear was of not wanting to hurt or belittle his parents. It did not sound like he felt unloved at home or else he would not have run home from the hostel, which got him in trouble with the school. But this assumption may be wrong. It did sound as if he was not settling well in a boarding school, and other students said it was his first year in a boarding situation. Another student Nono from the same school said “our school is like a prison”, and in my mind, I couldn’t

agree more because the location of the school is no paradise. However, her comment must have indicated more than the physical appearance and location of the school. The story of the boy's death reflects how someone can slip by without the knowledge of those meant to nurture and care for students. Only his death got him the attention. Perhaps his cry was heard then, loudly because the newspapers elaborated details of his death.

The suicide of this 16-year-old boy also touched on the topic of adjustment to a new school or setting for school students. Entering a new establishment such as school or an institute seemed to pose a new challenge for students, especially if they are alone without friends or familiar teachers from their previous school. Tika another student talked about her experience of arriving at her current school. She was an extremely quiet and shy participant and did not speak in the group discussions either. She chose to write during the group discussion, and she wrote: "I was sad and lonely when I started my new school until two girls came to me and made friends, and now I am happy".

Additionally, some schools may have strict rules that are not well explained or do not make sense to the students, for instance, Kado said

as a school boy, we like to keep our hair long and make the style of it. But the teachers do not allow us with these styles. That is why some boys bunk from school and get into trouble like taking drugs, forming gangs.

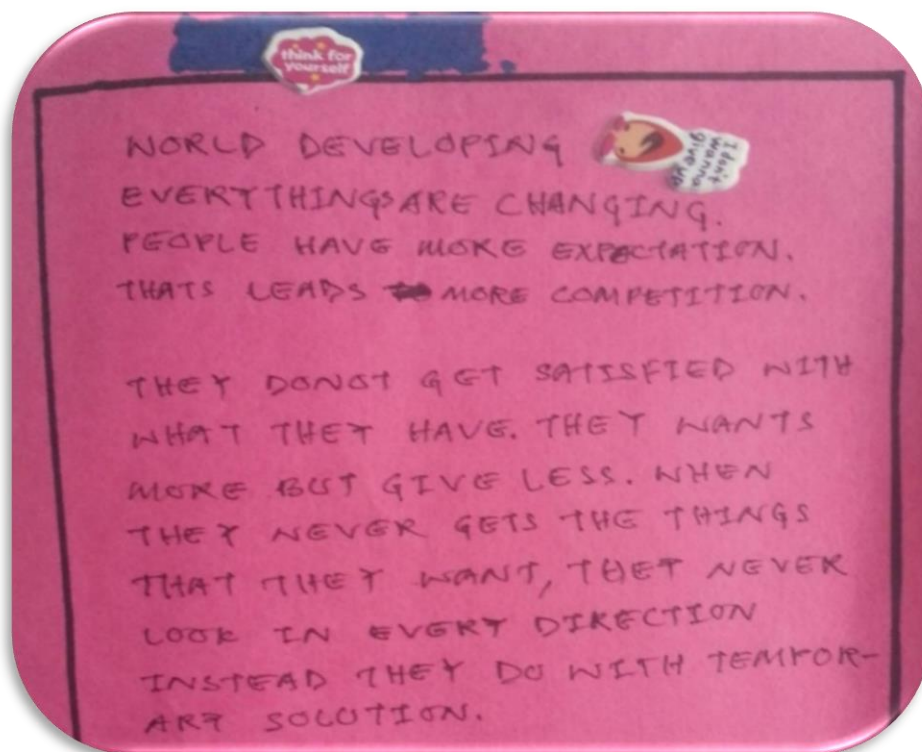
Issues may appear trivial to adults but they seemed to matter and impact the students greatly. Bhutanese schools have complex responsibilities because they are challenged to cater to unique situations and unique individual needs. Students may be looking for a second home in the schools and although challenging for the schools, it does not seem impossible to create a supportive community or family. Rinzie's and Kado's accounts provided evidence of the positive impact of one devoted class teacher.

Pressure and expectations

What you are trying to bend suddenly breaks. Suicide is not just a momentary impulse, a decision you make just once but something when several factors build up, like a gas pipe that piles on and on until it can hold no longer, that's the end of the road (Namgay).

Namgay provided a befitting description of distress presenting an analogy of a bursting gas pipe because the pressure is beyond what it can contain. He seemed to say that the Bhutanese children faced competitive and narrow choices. School academic performance and competition were seen as factors contributing to distress. The majority of students said they felt extreme pressure in their studies; Tendral said: “another reason to go for suicide is especially getting pressure in their studies”. Another student Rinzie added, “there is exam pressure, the world is becoming a competitive world to live in”.

Figure 7 Temporary Solution



The poem by Nima seemed to imply that suicidal people are faced with expectations and competitions which are influenced by economic development. They are

dissatisfied, 'give less' - I am assuming meant selfish, and finally they resort to suicide because they have not explored other options (look in every direction).

Students shared stories of feeling under pressure to perform well in the schools and of feared failures. School academic pressure repeatedly featured throughout all interviews alongside family disintegration and discord. Penjor said

I want to stress about academic and family pressure. A girl had suicided mainly because she didn't qualify for class eleven and for some reason she was expelled from the school...she committed suicide and it brought a lot of impact to her family and her family were actually poor and suffered from financial and all the problems.

Penjor expressed his concern over the academic pressure claiming lives and through telling the story, positioned himself morally, and defined the act as irresponsible. Financial problems he referred to in this context may have included death rites and rituals which are a very long and expensive affair in Bhutan. After the cremation, death rituals go on for twenty-one days intensely and are further observed until the end of the 49 days after the death. Expenses involve feeding and paying the Lama, monks and workers who are involved throughout the death rites.

Students jumping into the river to kill themselves after failing in their exams are not unheard of, and participants narrated similar stories. Some stories were narrated from memory when they were younger. This meant that the pressure has been on for years.

Tendral said, "most of the parents don't think that they just put a lot of pressure on us, like asking us to do things we are not good at". Tendral's best friend was forced to leave school and join a monastic school by his father. His friend did not want to and could not adjust to the monastic life, so he left the monastic school without his father's knowledge and later got "bashed up real bad" by his father. Tendral said his

friend stayed with him or out on the streets most of the time. He also took to drugs, and at one point almost overdosed on tablets, “he had tried to kill himself”.

Leki said it was as though nothing else mattered to some parents besides good academic marks. When students come home after receiving their exam results or class tests, their parents ask how much did you score. Students said there was fear of discrimination, that if they failed they were judged as failures. It may also be that parents measured their pride and worth through their children’s performance at school because of which adolescents want to study hard and make their parents proud.

Everyone who grew up in Bhutan would be familiar with the phrase *la say ru cho ta ne may* (Dzongkha), meaning the only job you have is to study. Stories from the students confirm that students are taught that their goal in life is to secure high marks even if they were terrible at math or science or couldn’t construct a proper sentence for an English essay. Rinzie said “I haven’t got any scolding when I was 12 [years of age], now I am 15 and in class 9, they [parents] exert a lot of pressure on me. They say I have to study, next year I will be in 10”. Rinzie was referring to the class 10 examination which is competitive and seen as stressful for students. Their marks decided what courses they can further pursue if they have made the cut-off marks to enter class 11, or some with lesser academic capacities may be interviewed for technical schools.

Being intelligent or not so intelligent is how students described themselves or other students during the interviews. One’s self-worth is perhaps evaluated through marks, scores, and certificates, students said it was fundamental to study hard to have a future. The struggle to get into higher classes and secure top marks for government sponsorships is intense. The future is not easy because even if students make it through to complete their bachelor’s degree, “graduates” (generally referring to university graduates with bachelor’s degree) are having a “hopeless life

as they are jobless” (Nima). Students were concerned that employment opportunities were slimmer. Students are confronted with the fear of failures, they seemed to be saying their futures are obscure.

Summary and conclusion

Students expressed a sense of sadness around suicides. Friends and family members felt responsible for suicides and wondered if they could have done more to prevent the acts. People who committed suicide and attempted suicide were identified as lonely, isolated, selfish, foolish, rejected, and immature. Most student participants positioned themselves as separate from those who committed suicide, and they did not identify with ‘those’ who killed themselves. Suicide was described as a mistake, unacceptable and morally wrong; these views seemed influenced by the cultural Buddhist beliefs around preciousness of human life. In the same vein, students who had survived previous suicide attempts expressed guilt for their acts. They spoke of suicide being stupid, foolish and irrational, and they carried the experience of feeling suicidal to help their peers in similar circumstances. These students reconstructed their identity as experienced helpers and held roles of being responsible friends, children and citizens. They expected not to repeat “foolish” suicide attempts.

Students were impacted by the discourses around death, afterlife and the notion of rebirth. Stories of wandering souls and ghosts haunted the students. Students also thought that some found relief with a hope for rebirth, and this belief may have propelled suicides.

Students were keen to see themselves as good children, good students, good friends, they valued their relationships with their parents, teachers and friends. Similarly, the nature of relationships with the significant people in their lives seemed to impact students’ views of themselves.

The fear of failure in the face of competition was immense. Securing scholarships to higher grades were like the chairs in the musical chairs game described at the beginning of this chapter. School adolescents are running in circles and battling for chairs that keep lessening with time meaning the opportunities for government scholarships seem lesser as they progress in grades.

Storied beliefs and views of student participants revealed their sense-making process of the acts of suicides in the schools. Common themes expressed by students were the fear of ruthless academic pressure in the school; family disintegration; expectations from their parents to perform well in their studies; expectations of themselves; a growing competitive society with narrow opportunities; and scarcity of supportive services. These themes will be taken forward to become a part of the dialogue constructed in chapter eight.

Chapter six sets forth adult responses to concerns around suicide.

Chapter 6: Views on suicide prevention from adults

Overview

During my second field visit, which was undertaken one year after the first, I observed some shift in the adult participants, the sense of despair and helpless statements of “I don’t know what to do” had shifted into doing. Active government responses had commenced, government-level discussions and initiatives for suicide prevention were underway. One participant said, “we have woken up just now”. This process of shift left me curious about what may have caused this change.

Adult participants expressed concern, but they also expressed their aspirations and hopes for students to have nurturing school environments, stable and loving homes, and more future opportunities. This chapter draws on these ideas of aspirations and hopes leading into a possible formulation of suicide prevention for the schools in Bhutan.

I reflect back to the final statements presented in chapter four where adults exhibited expectations from other members of the society and presented a sense of responsibility to do something about suicide by school students. This chapter is an extension of their views and ideas of what they saw as necessary. Most views are from the School guidance counsellors presented during the focus group discussion held during the stage II data collection. The focus group discussion was aimed at identifying suicide prevention measures for the schools.

Similar to Chapter 4, the parent, school principals, policy makers, the counsellors and significant community members from outside the education system spoke from their positioning. Like in Chapter 5, this chapter is presented under common

themes, which I identified in the information participants suggested as integral components to prevent suicides.

Collaboration between parents and schools

A senior policymaker said schools need to know that suicides are preventable. He said schools must realize that they could have done something to save someone from committing suicide. He added ‘if you can save a person at that moment, you have saved that person’. He provided information about an incident from the days when he was a school principal, a story of saving a student from committing suicide. He said

she had actually jumped off the bridge into the river, then she was rescued by some monks or somebody who was washing their clothes. Then the uncle and father brought her to my school.

He said the student was suicidal, so her family felt helpless and requested her admission (enrolment) in his school. She was admitted in class nine, the school and her family provided constant monitoring. Teachers and parents took turns to walk with her between school and home because she was still seen as vulnerable. He said everyone made sure that the student was not left alone. The student survived and is currently working as a nurse. The policy maker through his story drew attention to the importance of collaboration between school and family.

In the same vein, principals said they had managed serious cases of suicidal students because of timely support and collaboration with the parents. Principals said education starts at home and ‘parents must educate their children equally’. By this, the principal meant that parents must engage in conversations around suicide and inform their children accordingly. Principals said students spend the most time with their parents, and this provided opportunities for parents to monitor their

children. Another principal said, “a very safe and conducive environment at home [helps] the child perform well in the school”.

A need to strengthen the relationship between the teachers and parents was identified as

we need to have a good interaction between the teachers and the parents, very honest. We need, to be honest. There are many parents who are not very open up. I think we need to open. (Principal)

The above comment also indicated that the school felt resistance from parents for various reasons. I wondered about the specifics of how open communication may be established between the schools and the parents and whether schools were aware of what may be the impediments.

Principals also commented that communication between the children and parents was not open. This meant parents were often not aware of what was occurring in their children’s’ lives. When schools were alerted to problems faced by the students, it helped to seek partnership with the family and address student issue jointly. This practice was seen as more relevant to the day schools. The principal from the boarding school said “seeking parent participation is a challenge” because the parents lived at a distance and sometimes in other regions of the country.

SGCs said parents’ involvement in the education of their child was a key preventive factor. SGCs suggested the involvement of parents in the decision making, especially policy decisions in the schools. They said, “currently parents seem absent from the education policy decision making”. SGCs described education as a joint venture between schools and parents. Both these parties must be attentive to the students. They said the “ownership and responsibility for the care” of students can be forged through a joint partnership between schools and parents. SGCs echoed that

education “starts at home” and any program including suicide prevention programs must be coordinated with and also conducted for the parents for it to be effective.

Creating and conducting suicide awareness and education programs was identified by the SGCs as a means to collaborate with the parents. Schools felt entrusted to provide awareness and education on suicide to the parents: “I think the school is a community where the learning takes place not only for students, even for parents”. However, a principal from the boarding school said for “schools to do sensitization to all the parents may be a challenge” because the programs were conducted by the SGCs. The principal felt his SGCs was already overloaded with responsibilities, having to reach out to over six hundred students in that school.

Regardless, the SGCs identified collaboration between the schools and parents as a key strategy in supporting and protecting children while in “distress”. They said suicides happen when children are home, and this amplified a need for awareness and education amongst the parents on suicide. In the next section, the participants explain what they mean by awareness and education on suicide.

Awareness and education on suicide

At the outset, all the adult participants stated a need for statistics on suicides. The policy maker said these data must include familial and contextual details of the deceased. He felt such data could help planners and policy makers understand the magnitude of the suicide phenomenon and “current issues that are driving” (Policymaker) children toward these acts.

Principals asserted the need for awareness and education on suicide for all levels of schools. The SGCs had commenced in conducting suicide awareness and education programs as a part of the school guidance and counselling in their school. As a result, the presence of a trained SGC was identified as a critical prevention component. For instance, one principal said that the school he was with a year ago

did not have an SGC, and they were not aware of the importance of suicide prevention education. He reflected the absence of awareness as dangerous and taken for granted as though nothing happened in the schools. This showed that the principals looked to the SGCs to initiate and spearhead suicide awareness and education programs. Noticing this practice and expectation, I was left wondering and concerned about the schools without SGCs who can deliver the tasks in the absence of SGCs? Do these stories indicate an urgent need for more trained SGCs? Maybe I could have had an alternate view to these questions if the study had included schools without SGCs.

Principals also acknowledged that currently, only a handful of schools with SGCs had initiated suicide awareness and education programs. Suicide was not discussed at all in the majority of schools, “the topic never came into light ...it was just a talk in the society that somebody has committed suicide, then forgotten” (principal). I assumed the principal commented thus because his school did not have any history of suicide, and so was referring to other schools where suicides had not occurred.

SGCs had only started delivering suicide awareness and education programs recently. These programs are delivered for students and teachers and they are found useful. SGCs shared instances of teachers saying they could now recognize signs and symptoms of suicidal ideation in their friends and understood they must render support. I understood that awareness and prevention programs included topics such as identifying suicidal signs and symptoms or identifying suicidal tendencies; perhaps also about providing support, but I was unsure of this aspect.

A few SGCs said they visited communities to provide awareness and prevention programs. The parents they met told them that the information was new and useful. According to the SGCs, parents felt that being able to recognize signs and symptoms would help them to support people feeling suicidal. I reflect that there was no mention of these parents talking about supporting suicidal children; instead,

conversations seemed to refer to suicidal adults. This could also be because the program was conducted in a community setting.

Further, one of the SGCs said: “timely awareness and education on suicide can save lives, suicide is real we must take it seriously”. This was said in the light of a recent suicide pact in a school. Two SGCs who were sent on site to provide aftercare felt that a timely awareness and education program on suicide in that school could have prevented the suicides. According to the SGCs, the school where these two deaths occurred had an SGC who was a new recruit, as well as being recently placed at the school. No awareness and education program had been initiated at the school. I sensed that the new SGC was partly held responsible together with the school administration for not creating a space for a suicide awareness and education program. The SGCs then asserted the need for all schools to treat the issue of suicides with urgency and initiate awareness and education programs at the beginning of every school semester. Another SGC reiterated the importance of timely awareness and education on suicide. He said the student who had committed suicide in his school was from, “the only class I did not take [for suicide awareness & education], for the rest of all the sections I completed the talk, that section was left and I felt so bad”. These stories also left me wondering if both the stories confirmed SGCs being cast as solely responsible providers of the knowledge on suicide awareness and education.

Reflecting on the previously mentioned suicide pact as a lesson, SGCs urged that the Ministry of Education mandate schools incorporate suicide awareness and education programs. They said, in the absence of specific orders from the headquarters (Ministry of Education), new SGCs could feel lost, and feel unsupported. From these statements, I understood that SGCs felt positioned as the responsible professionals but they may not have been receiving support from within the school. It seemed they may be in a complex position of being expected

to know and deliver but without administrative support. I return to this point later in this chapter.

Further, the SGCs reflected that the school suicide awareness and education program content must have clear aims. Developing the program content in consultation with their students and the parents was described as useful and practical.

However, one school principal felt that a separate suicide prevention program was not required, he said

I think..we do not need a separate program to prevent suicide. I think we need to take it as -- have ownership for the children. You don't teach a subject, we teach a life. I feel we are teaching the life. We are making them academicians but that is their head. We need to win the heart of the children. We teach children through their emotions and I think this is something I feel is more important.

From the principal's comment, I understood he was suggesting that schools were already overloaded with programs and another one may not make a difference. He seemed to say the school curriculum already has books and subjects that may not have much to teach about life. Instead, he felt students needed a different sort of attention and care for their emotions and heart. This aspect of care for students is discussed in the next section.

Nurturing school environments

I am a parent myself and then a teacher, I have my own children, I cannot be different to my children and different to other children in the school, it has to be at par, the treatment. So when I use all these qualities that I have within me to my children, why not with the rest of the children in the school. Because their success is ours, their failures are ours. (Principal)

The above comment by a principal was made in regard to the teacher-student relationships in schools. He spoke of the impact teachers had on students, and said it was unfair of any teacher to see their students different from their children. Students must be loved and cared for but in reality, he said, most teachers struggled to feel that sense of care. I was left wondering if his views were a reflection of his aspirations to be present in certain ways to the students and if it was really possible for every teacher to feel that sense of care for their students. I also reflect that all adults referred to school students as children.

The principal further proposed that students' welfare must be foremost. He said, "a loving and nurturing atmosphere" for the students was possible if teachers and principals connected to their students and took personal responsibility for the care of each student.

Another principal said most teachers and adults in the school

don't ask children to have the solutions for themselves. So, they give solutions to the children and they say, "this is good, this is bad," but children do not know why it is good, why it is not good? So, these are not actually explained to them. So, I feel we need to listen to them and solutions actually come from themselves.

The principal established the need to consult and listen to children instead of providing and telling them what to do. He also seemed to be saying that students need to understand what they are being told. This way they learn to discern for themselves. This principal was one of the senior participants who has been managing schools for the last 17 years. I realized I could have mistaken someone of his age and experience to be traditional and not open to views of the younger children but it seemed to me that the principal was identifying himself as a collaborative leader.

Furthermore, he said,

What makes them suicidal? We don't know why. So, that is really haunting us. ...if you need to help children, we need to deal with children from the heart. And these are the emotions, this is not a physical problem, it's an emotional problem. So, if the emotional problems are not taken care of seriously, I think that is why these things [suicides] are happening. So, I see many children, not listened by the caregivers [teachers], that's why they could not share.

The principal argued for a need to emphasize the care of students and to pay attention to their emotional needs. He said teachers needed to listen to students. Similarly, the policy makers also confirmed the importance of teacher-student relationships, and the need to review the structure of care in the schools. One policymaker said “maybe we have to look at the way we organize our schools no? Maybe the smaller number of students in a class with a system of good class teacher could help.”

The policy maker thought that perhaps reducing the number of students would allow better teacher-student relationships. He said class teachers were the first contact for students, and “they could be made accountable for their students” welfare. He wondered if mandating that the same class teacher for one class throughout the year would strengthen the relationship between the teacher and their students.

The presence of skilled SGCs was identified as a crucial element to providing quality care for the students in the schools. The views of different adults on school counselling and SGCs follows.

Counselling in the schools

Principals felt the SGCs were doing a good job in providing student care in the schools. Principals said they learned about suicide awareness through their SGCs. Trained and skilled SGCs were expected to reach out to the students, teachers and

even parents. Principals shared positive experiences of their collaboration with the SGCs in addressing student issues. One principal said

in my school this counselling aspect is going on well. The number of problems is coming down, the student behaviours are improving. This year I am very honestly saying that we didn't have, we just had around five to ten percent of the problem compared to last year and before last year.

Principals were stating the need for SGCs and their expertise. Their experience of having an SGC provided dramatic improvements in the students' behaviour. Principals said they did not feel helpless and unsure anymore. Principals felt that SGCs' services were urgent as

suicide is just now getting more momentum. But alcohol and drugs is very common, so when we don't have counsellors, teachers sometimes they shun away from the problem saying it is the Principal's job, it is only the warden's job, matron's job.

The comment left me wondering if SGCs who are already cast into the role to help students with behaviour problems also felt alone. That other teachers and caregivers in the school shy away from more because they have the SGCs. I was also reflecting on the comment "suicide is now getting more momentum". But alcohol and drugs is very common" (principal) and wondering if alcohol and drugs were seen as more pressing issues for this principal. Regardless, it appears there is the need stated for an SGC to step in for student care. Another principal recommended that a male and a female counsellor be provided for a large secondary school. He felt that girls faced complex issues and responded better to a female counsellor.

Policy makers said that while professionalizing counselling services was fairly new to the country, placement of the SGCs had proved significantly useful for the schools. The policy person responsible for spearheading the institutionalization of

school counselling in the country said “seeing the effectiveness of the first batch of SGCs, other schools stressed an urgent demand for school guidance counsellors for their schools”.

The policy makers felt that most SGCs were competently providing support to the students, their parents and the school. They said students were responding positively to the SGCs. They felt students connected better to the SGCs because SGCs did not confine themselves to “traditional teacher roles” (policy maker).

SGCs in some schools had commenced with awareness programs for parents using the Mental Health Facilitation manual. The Mental Health Facilitator (MHF) program was developed by the National Board of Certified Counselors International based in the US (NBCC). The collaboration between MoE Bhutan and NBCC international was forged through an NGO in Bhutan in 2011. Since then, some counsellors from the schools have been trained in delivering the MHF program, which provides basic information on mental health issues, which include suicide. The MHF curriculum also provides content to train people with helping skills. It seemed some SGCs who may have been trained in delivering the program were using the MHF manual as a resource.

SGCs were seen to facilitate communication between parents and school authorities. The policy people found such initiatives by SGCs encouraging. They emphasized the need for more positive and proactive roles by the current SGCs. There were 12 SGCs at the time of the interview. The policymakers acknowledged that SGCs had complex and diverse roles to deliver, which meant the astute selection of skilled and good people to be placed as SGCs. The Policymaker said SGCs need to learn fast and not be complacent. She said protocols for suicide and substance abuse were provided through the guidance and counselling framework (MoE, 2010) but some SGCs had not read them. She also recognized the need for support and care for SGCs as “they are dealing with difficult and delicate situations every

day in a big school”. At the time, I wondered if she was also voicing dissatisfaction with the performance of some SGCs.

The policy makers considered professional counselling services in the schools as one big suicide prevention initiative. They felt the placement and presence of the SGCs brought hope, but they can only do so much. Policy makers said despite the success stories of SGCs, other members of the school must not solely rely on the SGCs. Policy makers asserted that schools must also recognize the limits of SGCs and provide a collaborative effort, a whole school approach, “everyone must be wholly involved in opening up caring and nurturing experiences”. Reflecting on this comment I assume the SGCs’ roles were seen to be more facilitative within the school.

The parent compared a good and a highly trained counsellor to a “savior” for the children. He said some lives could have been saved and a lot of school problems reduced if counsellors had arrived earlier in the Bhutanese education system. He said counselling “is a serious business”, and so expected the SGCs to have a deeper knowledge of what they were dealing with. Parent asserted the need for the counselling and guidance programs to be contextualized so that they made sense to the Bhutanese children.

Parent believed counselling reduced suicide rates and wished it was offered to younger children from classes seven and above not only for higher secondary schools. He asserted a need for a stronger care system for students as an independent unit within the school. Since modernisation is inescapable, Parent suggested counselling may be the modern support for a new pace of life and new generations

we can’t remain like this and say these are western ones, we have to move forward so that in future we can incorporate in our ways, because in future, all our

future generations are going to be educated, we will not be there, our children will be all educated so they will happily accept this one.

Parent said as much as modernisation cannot be stopped counselling must find its way to Bhutan as a practice incorporated into the modern Bhutanese way of life.

The psychiatrist said counselling services in the schools were seen as a desirable initiative to support students. But he feared that the SGCs may be left on their own to deal with student problems, while other teachers shy away from their responsibility to provide care for students. He asserted the need for SGCs to be properly trained and be well equipped with the knowledge to work in a variety of settings while dealing with diverse student cases. The psychiatrist said there is no room for complacency because it is a sensitive profession. He said the SGCs are dealing with vulnerable students, which can also be emotionally demanding for the SGCs. Other participants agreed that because the recruitment and roles of SGCs were fairly new, professional supervision to maintain accountability as well as care for SGCs was seen as imperative. Amongst most participants, I noticed that the views from the significant community members outside the education system provided caution to have realistic expectations with regard to the school guidance and counselling initiatives.

What did the counsellors say about their roles?

SGCs surmised they had a great responsibility and proactive roles to render. They saw their roles to be beyond their school and linked to their neighbouring communities. Two SGCs said they were providing consultation to other local schools which did not have counselling services. All SGCs felt that they required more structured and specific training on suicide prevention. They felt they needed to develop better initiatives in their schools. They were especially concerned that the new SGCs were not trained well but expectations to perform professionally were high. I reflect on two things, first I assumed the current SGCs experienced

the magnitude of expectations and complexities in the schools as the pioneers. Second, it may also be that this knowing from their experiences of being the first provided them with an authority to hold certain expectations of the new SGCs.

SGCs said they were affected if a student from their school succeeded in completing suicide. One SGC said that he felt torn between his responsibilities to school, friends and family of the deceased, responding to media, and responding to phone calls from the ministry. He said he could not sleep at night because he felt pressured and felt like a failure: “I took it personally like I have lost my battle”. I understood that self-care and professional support for the SGCs at that point was identified as critical. However, in the absence of professional supervision, the SGCs said they found the peer support amongst themselves helpful, although it needed strengthening.

SGCs felt it was imperative to recognize and acknowledge that “some lives have been saved”, efforts are in place and effective in the schools. They said these stories and efforts were not visible to the public because the “media is looking for thorny youth issues”. In addition, some programs and elements of care seen to be helpful in the schools identified by the SGCs are explained below.

Peer helpers program

All SGCs agreed that student Peer Helpers worked as a bridge between students and the SGCs. One SGC said, “Peer Helpers are working wonders in my school’. SGCs shared accounts of how the Peer Helpers helped in identifying students at risk and connecting them with students who required support.

Life skills education

SGCs said they found the Life Skills Education (LSE) curriculum helpful as part of the school guidance programs. One SGC shared that the curriculum modules allowed them to conduct LSE classes for the teachers first and then these teachers

facilitated the LSE sessions for the students. They said LSE curriculum may be used as one of the suicide prevention strategies. However, one SGC said he had not received the complete set of guidebooks on LSE and struggled to make sense of the program for his school. Through their discussions, I understood that the program guidelines and resources from the Ministry located in the capital city may not be reaching all the schools. This reflected an inconsistent implementation of programs as was shared by the SGC.

These discussions reflect what may be missing or needing to be strengthened in the schools. The focus group discussion with the SGCs developed recommendations for change. These are presented in the next section.

Recommendations

School policies and practice

SGCs said that policy support was necessary for any program to be effective in the schools. They stated a need for the Education Ministry to review their overall policies and the school documents. Being new to the school system, the SGCs required relevant policies to support their work in the schools,

firstly we need to review our own policies, the school documents, everything idle should be replaced, what schools should do regarding this suicide, schools should be a caring place for children and that is first and foremost for any school in Bhutan , unless you have a policy document then how can we work.

SGCs said presently some policies were contradictory. Some SGCs said their school discipline policy and counselling services were in conflict. Several SGCs said they felt limited to render their services because of how discipline policy was formulated and practised in their schools. For instance, one SGC said students being suspended by the discipline committee need to be contested. They thought they needed to be

consulted so that support can be provided to the student, instead of sending the students out of the school.

In addition, SGCs said that the interpretation and implementation of policies mainly depended on the school principal. Programs in the schools were prioritized by the school management. SGCs said having a school principal who understood counselling made their task effective. In addition, SGCs were concerned that schools were

bogged down with so many other activities, like agriculture, scouts, games and sports. Because schools also have regular instruction periods to teach main subjects, it is impossible to do justice to any one program with everything rushed.

I understood the SGCs were asking if all these programs were required and useful in addressing students' needs. SGCs suggested that each school conduct a needs assessment and prioritize programs to address the general needs of the students. They also felt specific programs for at-risk students was a necessity. I noticed that in these ways, SGCs were creating forms of practices that they saw as suicide prevention for the Bhutanese schools.

In addition, SGCs suggested strengthening the student Peer Helpers. One SGC said the student Peer Helpers

go and observe and they are also trained to give a basic counselling because these people are the one who comes in close contact [with friends], they are easily accessible to their friends. The Peer helpers don't have any kind of apprehension to go and talk to their friends, they can do a lot and every Wednesday they give me problems of their friends, out of which suicide is one.

The SGCs said Peer Helpers had a reach that they as adults and SGCs didn't. It also seemed to me as though the SGCs were relying on the Peer Helpers to provide some

initial assessment of the problems faced by students. Concerned that students seemed to resort to suicide as an option or way out of problems, SGCs said they needed to teach them problem-solving skills.

Drawing on helpful cultural beliefs and practices

SGCs remarked that compared to other societies, Bhutanese society had less elderly suicide. This they thought was because of the religious beliefs embedded in the culture. Elderly people spend more time in prayers and they had something to believe in, SGCs said perhaps these beliefs and practices seemed to act as shields from thoughts of suicide or depression.

SGCs and other adult participants proposed that the school curriculum and programs emphasized teaching about the purpose and preciousness of human life; “our children need to be taught the value of life”. To me this view once again presented a presence of moral judgement on acts of suicide, indirectly stating that students who committed suicide were not aware of the value of life. However, Choeshed Legdrim was one program recommended and talked about as a way of imparting cultural and religious value to the students.

Choeshed Legdrim

SGCs felt Choeshed Legdrims (religious teachings held in the schools) could be taught in more helpful ways. Students could not connect with some traditional religious teachers because of their monastic method of teaching. I presumed the method here meant religious teachers teaching in Dzongkha which may contain dense meanings directly translated from the religious scriptures. Teachings in the traditional monastic sense can be a one-way transmission. This may be in contrast to the modern teaching and learning methods where there are attempts at more collaborative practices. Because of this, SGCs thought the students would connect better to the modern contemporary Buddhist teachers.

SGCs said it was important for students to be able to connect with their teachers, and understand and make sense of the content. They felt Choeshed Legdrim teachers should be able to relate to the current youth issues. SGCs said religious practices and concepts needed to be taught differently to the younger generation. They said, unlike the older generation, younger people have “questioning minds”, so teachers must be open to dialogue and exchanges with the students. I reflected that through these views, SGCs also seemed to suggest the kind of teaching methodology required for the schools in Bhutan, where teaching is not just “one-way traffic” (SGC). I was also wondering if the SGCs were making references to changing teaching practices in Bhutan. They were also reflecting their expectations of what may be appropriate or useful for the younger generation. The next section presents some general comments on the need to review curriculum.

Curriculum

Policymakers felt it was the time something changed within the Bhutanese education. They said it was perhaps time to change the curriculum taught for the teachers and students. One policymaker said, “teachers training focused on the pedagogy but not so much on the care”. He asserted the need to teach teachers to be sensitive to the needs of their students; “perhaps the aesthetics and sensibilities of care need to be incorporated in the teacher training colleges”. Another component identified by most participants was a need for suicide postvention responses.

School preparedness and responses after a suicide

Following the post-suicide experiences of two schools described in Chapter 4, the SGCs and principals suggested schools needed to develop post-suicide response plans. The principal from the school where a suicide had occurred said,

especially the media response, care for the other students, so these things, post-crisis. Before it was not there at all in the school, we didn’t know what to do, we did not have a proper system.

He felt the postvention plan could include a school media response team responsible for reporting to different stakeholders and a team focused on the care for other students. The care plan included observation, care and counselling of the friends of the deceased and other students, especially if suicide occurred in a school. Principals said they looked to the Ministry of Education for directives. In the case of suicides and conflictual cases, principals felt they needed strong guidelines addressing legal aspects involving the cases.

Impact of media

Finally, the participants identified the media as a potential educational medium with the responsibility to educate the public. The psychiatrist asserted that reports on suicide must attempt to “get to the bottom of the problem of why the person committed suicide” alongside information on the kinds of help the person could have sought in place of suicide. He said students needed to be informed about kinds of help available, such as “talking to a counsellor, a doctor, a teacher or their mother”. This he felt would help if students with problems think “they have run out of all options”. The media representative also said media in all forms could contribute to creating loving and caring values in the families, in the schools and the society.

Summary & conclusion

Adult participants confirmed and shared evidence of suicides being preventable. They identified school-parent collaboration, timely awareness and education programs and a nurturing school environment as helpful measures in saving lives. The roles of the SGCs were seen as integral to suicide prevention measures for the schools.

SGCs saw themselves as the facilitators to forge alliances between the school and the parents. They had initiated suicide prevention and awareness programs and felt hopeful of their effectiveness. However, the SGCs urged policymakers, principals

and the media for their support, to acknowledge the success stories of students in the schools. Additional recommendations offered as suicide prevention measures included a review of the school policies, drawing on helpful cultural beliefs and practices, reviewing curriculum for the students and the teachers, and being prepared for suicide incidents.

This chapter also presented some suicide prevention measures that are taking shape in the Bhutanese schools. I noticed that ideas seem big, abstract and even confused but the aspirations driving these ideas are important. That everyone seemed to want to do something and wanted someone to do something, but they knew they needed each other. I also reflected on the immense responsibility pushed to the new batch of SGCs, who were saying they are putting in efforts, they are making plans, and that they need support. Furthermore, this chapter also drew attention to the ways school counselling is positioned in Bhutan. It mapped the expectations the school communities have of the new batch of SGCs in Bhutan. Alongside tremendous expectations and multiple roles, SGCs of Bhutan are required to be professionally trained to be able to provide expert views on students' problems in the schools. These notions of positioning counsellors in the Bhutanese schools will be extended in Chapter 9 of this thesis.

The next chapter sets forth responses and suggestions from the school students, leading into the constructed dialogue staged in Chapter 8.

Chapter 7: What can be done? What can be improved? Students' perspectives

Overview

This chapter outlines suicide prevention measures identified by the students. These measures are a combination of practices currently seen as helpful or identified as needs by the students.

The structure of this chapter is similar to that of Chapter 5, and is presented in two parts: part I on creating spaces to belong sets the tone for part II by describing suicide as preventable. Part II provides specific topics identified by students as currently useful ideas for suicide prevention in the schools, and possible alternatives recommended for the secondary schools for suicide prevention.

Creating spaces to belong

Figure 8 Love and care



The picture in figure 8 seems to present a boy dressed in Gho (traditional wear for boys and men) stepping away from the darker side and toward love and care. The group presenter during the group work explained this artwork and said that students without love and care can be lost to the dark side which involved drugs and sometimes suicide. He said love and care can steer a person out of the dark side.

Students indicated the need to share meaningful connections with parents, peers and teachers. The need to belong was expressed in all interviews and were articulated by comments such as “I feel very supported because my friends, teachers are always there for me” (Thuji), and “greatest thing is giving love....if we are loved we will be happy” (Binita).

Dorji said, “I feel that if they are able to share their problems with their family or to their teacher and friends they can at least come to a solution”. The absence of support was expressed “as feel like no one is there to care for them” (Namgay). Students were looking to be valued in a web of relationships that would shape the meanings of their life and aspirations for the future. Stable, nurturing and supportive relationships were seen as being to students’ sense of worth as they traversed the growing up phase, Wangchuk said: “parents should guide, help and love their children through the spectacles and the ugliness of the world”.

In addition students wanted spaces to talk and to be heard,

as we have seven periods (classes) per day so from that seven periods, one period should be given as free period where we can share our feelings and problems, where we can solve and read some books, where we can get time to speak to others. (Kado)

Kado implied that the school schedule was busy with classes where subjects are formally taught. He said he longed for free time and to connect with other students. I sensed that Kado was perhaps suggesting that schools can offer more than teach subjects. It seemed he was longing for a space to connect socially at school.

A series of initiatives or practices that are seen to be working, or indicated as preferred by students in their schools, are presented in the following sections. These stories recounted under an array of topics may contribute to preventive ideas.

Suicide is preventable

It was evident from the interviews that students who completed suicides showed signs and shared their intention to kill themselves to their friends.

There were signs

Student interviews referring to four suicides indicated that friends and peers were told of their (deceased) intention to kill themselves or to disappear. It was also clear that friends and peers were not aware and must not have known how to respond, as they did not take it seriously. Nono spoke of events leading to the suicide of a 16-year-old boy in her school and said

he told his friends that he would kill himself if his parents were called by the Principal. I heard during the lunch break he was with his friends and then they went to Lhagkhangs (temple) and sang. His friends said that he also was looking at the cliff next to our school gate saying 'if I fly down from here will I die'.

Nono continued stating that the friends had not imagined the seriousness of his intent. Instead, they made jokes of these comments but the boy hung himself that same night in his dormitory. According to Nono, the deceased left the night study right after the attendance (roll call), he went back to the hostel, locked his room and with the lights on he hanged himself.

Dolma told the story of a suicide by someone she had known in her school. According to Dolma

the girl told her friend that she is now going to commit suicide so she was actually taking out Kera (traditional belt) to commit suicide, then her friend neglected her, thought that she is not that much serious and they just hid her Kera from her and they hid it inside the cupboard and she kept talking about committing suicide saying 'today I will die, I will die' like that. So the friends didn't take her seriously and after 1 am or 12 midnight, she took a stool, her Kera and went to the stairs and hung herself.

Dolma emphasized that the friends of the deceased did not take the threat seriously. An intentional emphasis was also made on the use of Kera as the method for suicide. Kera is part of the traditional Bhutanese attire for both men and women. It is a hand woven belt which is used to hold the Gho (traditional wear for men is a one piece heavy garment with full sleeves. The garment is lifted and held by the Kera at the waist, and Gho is worn at knee-length like a Scottish Kilt) and Kira (traditional wear for women has three pieces. Kira which is a one piece ankle-length garment worn with Kera as the belt. Wonju and Tego are like jackets. Wonju is worn inside the Tego and worn over the Kira) in place. Kera maybe be around 2 -5 metres in length and ranging from 2 -4 cms in width.

Another student Shraddha felt remorse at not being able to save her best friend from committing suicide. She said she had noticed her friend looking "unusually disturbed, acting aggressive, and picking fights in her class, disengaged from friends, and talking about wanting to go somewhere far". Shraddha also casually made a remark about her friend's relationship with her stepmother and that she (her deceased friend) always had domestic troubles, and it was not a new thing for the friend "it always occurs". Shraddha said sometimes friends can overlook issues and not be aware of the seriousness of issues.

Reflecting on the stories told so far, I wondered if students were saying that although friends are physically present, they may not be able to attend or be available to support someone in that state of mind. My sense was students were

saying that they needed to be alert and know what to do when faced with suicidal friends. Perhaps there was an indication of friends needing to be more responsible and careful and not misinterpreting these messages as a joke or ignoring them. Students were saying that a prior awareness to recognize signs, and skills to support is crucial as a future preventive measure.

'Living beyond that moment'; stories from those who survived suicide attempts

Two students Tendral and Shraddha shared being grateful for still being alive, or as Tendral said, "living beyond that moment".

Tendral survived with a neck injury after jumping from his two-storeyed house. He said his classmates noticed when he did not turn up to school for three days. They reported his absence to the school guidance counsellor, who helped him through his difficult times including his drug use. When I asked if there was anything else that could have helped him before he attempted suicide, Tendral said

a good friend who would always be by my side and then giving me lots of advice and sharing his new ways like how to get relief from all kinds of drugs and then, of course, counselling session because in this session the counsellor really talks and gives lots of advice and never lets us down.

Tendral stressed the importance of having support from people around, especially peers. He said good friends and support from a counsellor was helpful in his case. He reiterated that it is important for someone to notice and to be concerned. I noted Tendral's expectation of the counsellor as being dependable and having answers to problems.

Shraddha also said she was saved by her friends. She reflected back on the incident and said she felt wanted and visible when she was being saved by her frantic and hysterical friends. She reiterated

suicide is committed by narrow-minded people, they think of just the problem in front of them but they never go beyond and think of when the problem is solved and how I am going to enjoy life... life is not always roses roses, there are thorns and we have to overcome thorns.

This comment by Shraddha provided an understanding of the sense of isolation students may feel while facing series of problems, and how they may be pushed to see their lives as problematic. Shraddha stressed the need to keep students or friends under observation if they showed signs of self-harm, appeared suicidal or expressed intentions to die. The person in distress might feel consumed by that particular problem and if left alone may resort to hurting themselves or killing themselves. Shraddha said it was important to keep the person away from weapons which may aid in the destruction of themselves in those irrational moments. She suggested that at-risk students must be connected to positive relationships for support and to engage them in activities.

Tendral and Shraddha's personal experiences provide an insight from the perspective of survivors, in addition to the views of other students; enriching the possibilities to consider in creating responses to suicide.

Figure 9

We all deserve to know it can get better

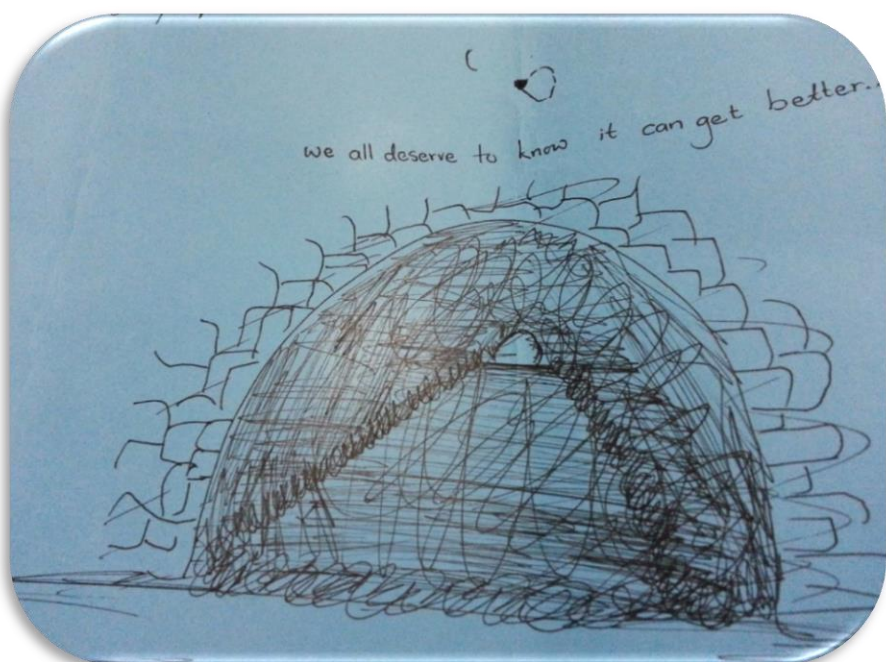


Figure 9, the artwork by Namgay portrays a sense of imprisonment. He said it portrays someone closed by layers of walls around, and the person is suffocating and feels trapped. To me, the statement we all deserve to know feels laden with expectations from the artist, an expectation to improve the environment and realities that person is imprisoned in.

What do you think the schools or the Ministry of Education should do to help these students?

I think schools would be able to provide an atmosphere where what is missing at home is here, for example, some people have domestic violence at home, but when they come to school they feel happy. Schools serve the purpose to make one better, and show that life can be better, that my family may have this problem, my uncle and aunty might have this problem, my neighbour might have this problem or my brother or my sister....but then when I come here I think there is some chance to something better, it is not just an institution but has a purpose to serve. (Namgay)

Namgay described the school as a place to be nurtured, and an institution that aims to enhance lives. He said schools can work to be a better place than home, especially to those that may be left out at home and in their communities. Namgay expected schools to show possibilities for hopeful futures for their students.

Kado said schools can “make everyone feel free to share their problems”. It felt to me he was referring to an atmosphere where students felt valued, cared for and supported. In the interviews and the group work, the students identified what they found helpful, and their ideas to improve the school.

Supportive teachers

Rinzie and Kado illustrated the interplay of a positive relationship between teachers and students where students feel valued. Kado was one of the quiet participants who came from a financially poor family. His parents were illiterate,

and he said he could not share his feelings and problems with them because he did not want to hurt them, but that he “loved coming to school”. He said, “I love all teachers and teachers also trust me”. Kado felt positively connected to his school, something that may have been missing at home. He felt nurtured and trusted within the school, and he valued how his teachers and friends saw him. Like most students, it was crucial for Kado to feel trusted by teachers. It seemed to validate his sense of belonging in the school and feeling valued.

Rinzie drew attention to the importance of a class teacher’s role and suggested that the support of one teacher could act as an anchor for many students.

We have a very good class teacher. Whenever we have problems, even with teachers sometimes we have a problem, the teacher scolds us, always gives pressure to us. So we tell our class teacher what happens. Like this, we also tell everything about our class to our class teacher. So she talks to other teachers, other teachers also talk to us and then it became easier for us too. I think the teacher should not be too strict because it can really give pressure to students. She is frank and she is also always there to support us and we feel that we should also support her.

Rinzie provided a description of a “good class teacher” as someone approachable, “not too strict”, and someone available to help. The “good teacher” enabled students to feel comfortable in communicating their needs and to reach out for support. She highlighted the impact they have on students comparing her “very good class teacher to the very strict” math teacher. The term “strict” seemed to refer to a teacher who did not make space for their concerns. She reported that “even a flipping of page wouldn’t be heard in his classes and he beats [use of corporal punishment] up all the time and we need to keep silent in his classes”. Despite all his “strictness”, the fear amongst students kept them away from his classes and from doing the tasks allocated by him. On the other hand, their class teacher did not demand the tasks but students did them out of respect. In this sense, Rinzie was making a distinction between

responses of students made out of respect to a good teacher and unresponsive frightened responses to the very strict math teacher. Rinzie said teachers when

too strict never remove our doubts. We can never approach him and say we didn't understand that because his face itself makes us frightened.

Rinzie provided clear evidence of the teacher's role and behaviours in student care and learning. Using the word "we", Rinzie seemed to say she was speaking on behalf of her classmates and that they valued mutual and nurturing relationships with their teachers, particularly their class teachers. She repeated that students did not like being beaten up but naturally responded to "love and care".

Namgay added to this thinking by saying "when students are not open to the teacher, we cannot solve the problems and if they are open, they can solve the problems". Rinzie also brought to fore that "beating" and the use of a "stick" (cane) prevailed in the Bhutanese schools, in this case, a middle secondary school.

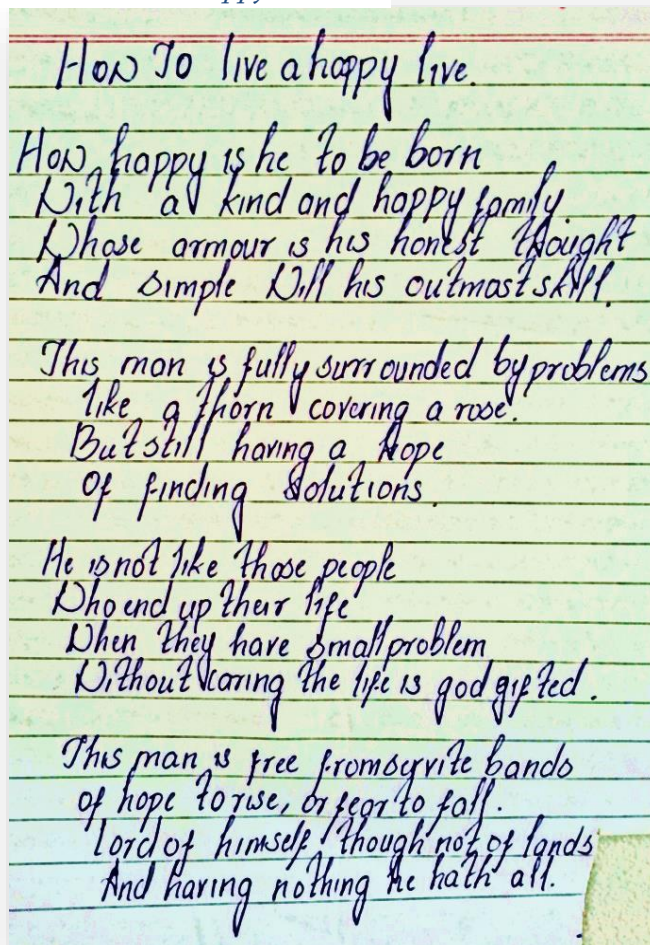
Students addressed the need for all teachers and school principals to be proactive in reaching out to students as it may be that this responsibility has been left to the SGCs in some schools. Shraddha said

as a child spends most of their time in school, the teachers and all other fellow mates and elders should guide the person who is most likely to commit suicide, the counsellor is not the only responsible person.

Students expressed an expectation and need for supportive teachers in their schools, someone they could relate to and go to for help. This meant that teachers were seen as primary carers for students, and they hold the power to influence students' wellbeing and aspirations.

Collaboration between with parents and school

Figure 10 How to live a happy life



This poem by Neelam was explained as a hopeful poem. She said it was a story of not giving up – suicide, but instead finding solutions knowing that life is precious. I also wondered if Neelam through this poem said suicide is taken as an option when other solutions are not availed or visible to those in the problem. The poem starts by situating herself in the family, perhaps stating the significance of family in her chain of thoughts expressed.

Students felt parents and family were foremost and family and friends must show responsibility. Tara said I think “not only school administration but through the friends and family also they should show some kind of responsibility. I think the family are one of the main pillars”.

Parents were seen as the main support and immediate witnesses to their child’s struggles and successes. Tara also said

I will never suicide because I love my life... my family, they are very good, support me in every field, so I don’t think I have to give much tension or any kind of problem from my side.

Tara's comments indicated the significance of feeling valued by parents. Similarly, Seday said, "my parents are very supportive, so I don't think, I have ever thought of committing suicide, I think I will never do such a thing, my family means a lot and I don't want to hurt them". Once again, Seday's comments reinforce the sense of feeling valued and supported by parents and reciprocating that sense as the child. Mutual love, support, and respect between the students and their families were present in these two stories. This leads on to recognizing love and positive relationships with parents and family as a possible buffer against suicide. It also left me wondering what Tara and Seday would have said if their parents were not supportive.

By presenting the significance of parents' role in suicide prevention, students were expressing the need for schools to collaborate with parents. Students required parents to understand the potential of their role and they relied on their schools to pass on this awareness. Students said schools could tell parents

not to be too strict and demanding (Kado)

that committing suicide is bad (Nono)

to give enough love and care (Tika)

to spend time with their children (Wangchuk)

A couple of them suggested that parents should talk to their child if the child looked uneasy or stressed or talk to the school for support. Students said schools must tell parents to be supportive in cases where a student may be identified at risk. Seday said schools must collaborate with the parents of the adolescent: "tell their parents to understand their problems". From these interviews I understood that parents and families were held responsible for the care of their children and schools were placed in a position of power to be able to facilitate or tell parents what to do.

Support from peers

Students said they turned to friends and peers for help and they were the immediate and most significant support next to their parents.

Sonam When you feel very sad, who do you talk to first?

Kado I talk to my friends. I like school, in school, I have many friends.
We can share problems or anything but at home, I cannot share with anyone because I am afraid of my parents and my brothers.

Kado was expressing the significance of his relationship with his friends, and how his school had enabled that experience. As stated by Namgay at the beginning of this section, the school provided what was not possible at home for Kado, a place to talk about problems.

Good friends and peers were identified as important support. Students said friends influenced their habits and lifestyle, and friendship also helped in developing care for one another, and valuing relationships. Rinzie said “friends can really influence because friends really help when we are in need. So strong friends can stop suicide”.

Similarly, Tara asserted

friends play a big role in one’s life, I think friends should know their friends problems and try to solve it before it is too late or they are following the path of suicide.

I sensed that these statements seemed to impose greater responsibilities in friendships, perhaps, also requiring students to be attentive and aware of their friend’s state of being.

Evidence of peers’ attentiveness and concern was evident in Tendral’s case. They had noticed his absence from the school and were alerted by his unusual behaviours. Tendral himself and other Peer Helpers shared accounts of working as

a bridge between the students at risk and the SGCs. However, this meant that students had to be aware and able to identify those friends requiring help. Because in the case of three suicides reported by students, it was evident that the friends “they did not bother” (Dema) or didn’t know what was occurring and how to respond. To address this gap and need of awareness amongst students, a mass awareness and education campaign for schools targeting the whole school was recommended by the students. Students wanted schools to prepare them to recognize signs of distress and suicidal intent and to know how to respond and locate help. This also meant that on the other hand, where suicides had occurred, friends and peers certainly felt the guilt of not having lived up to these expectations. They may have felt they failed to remain alerted or provide support and save their friend. Another form of support identified as helpful was the student Peer Helpers in the schools.

Presence of student Peer Helpers

Student Peer Helpers were seen to work at two levels. Being engaged in helping others enhanced their sense of worth, and they felt they were contributing to something better. For instance, Tendral who survived multiple suicide attempts talked about his involvement in helping another friend who struggled with similar issues that he had been through. In the same vein, Phuntsho who once struggled with drug use spoke about his involvement in helping other boys and his uncle get out of addiction. Phuntsho was aware of the services such as the drop-in centre for recovering addicts and referred his uncle and some friends to the centre. He felt responsible in his role and when he spoke of suicide by his friend’s suicide, he said: “I couldn’t help her even though I was a peer helper, and feel guilty somewhat like that”. These stories from Phuntsho and Tendral made me reflect that they both took responsibility to help someone else and in turn felt strengthened as a person through these practices. Perhaps, being responsible and able to contribute to others in helpful ways enhanced a positive sense of self.

Rinzie was not a peer helper but aspired to become one. She said, “Peer Helpers are really helping”. She presented criteria for good Peer Helpers, and they were

Not serious looking

Friendly and good natured

Jolly and laugh all the time

Approachable

Participants who were student Peer Helpers expressed their keenness to help and believed they could make a difference. They saw themselves as responsible and capable and took pride being Peer Helpers.

Only in one case, a student participant Singye said “I do not feel that Peer Helpers are really helpful to students. Only a few exceptional cases only, and if some are well experienced and well trained by the school guidance counsellor”. This statement also indicated expectations of Peer Helpers to be well trained and equipped with helping skills. I wondered if they were also expected to be counsellors.

Create awareness on recognizing signs of suicide

A need to raise awareness in the whole school, the parents and the society echoed through all individual and group interviews. Students stated that they either were not fully aware of signs of distress leading to suicide, or they ignored them or deemed them as attention seeking, or thought of them as nothing unusual. For some, although they recognized the signs, they said they did not know how to respond or offer support. In only two cases did the peers intervene: one in the case of Tendral and the other, in the case of a girl who had committed suicide at home. Even though friends had tried to help and got her in touch with counselling services, the girl committed suicide during the semester break at home.

Creating awareness and education referred to letting people know how to recognize signs of distress and suicidal intentions and how to provide help and support. Mostly students articulated the need to create awareness about “importance of life and then talk about life, to show positive messages that get to our hearts” (Phuntsho). Once again the cultural view that human life is precious was posited, and finding ways to strengthen this belief was seen as a helpful and positive measure. Students during the group work co-created imaginary possibilities for suicide awareness, and the use of media was most prominent and discussed below.

Suicide prevention ideas through media

Media is the new machine...the cell phones, laptops, iPad, television, radio are shaping our life currently....and it can have two-sided effects (Namgay).

Namgay stated that just as the current generation of youth had access to vast information, they possibly had more exposure to media representations of suicide through television, movies, Facebook and print media. “Movies show practices of real life like burning oneself with kerosene or using the rope to hang” (Namgay) and these depictions gave ideas to young students and informed them on methods to commit suicide.

Wangchuk felt suicide imitation may be strong if a close relation committed suicide because they would think “oh my parent suicide then I will also suicide”. Leki said, “suicide of one member of the family can instigate others because there is psychological impact on them too”. Another student responded saying this thinking and impact may be challenged by educating people and creating awareness. But Namgay feared that media with its fast impact “can create a sickly environment and if someone is already distressed it raises the possibility of them committing suicide.”

Students said negative messages must be opposed by positive messages such as valuing life through the power of media. Students asserted that movies and dramas

made for the prevention of suicide must have positive messages. One group discussed an example of a movie script that emphasized a troubled teenager getting support and guidance from her parents instead of resorting to suicide. They said

If movies are made, it should be more positive. Why should it be so much of negativity? Let us say the same character, she is about to suicide and let us assume that her parents guide her and then she gets counselling support and recovers. I think it will be more positive, rather than showing she suicides leaving her family suffering from consequences.

Students stressed the need to hear more positive and powerful messages rather than be reminded of death and distress, which they said they were aware of it anyhow and live it. The school curriculum was identified as another mode of delivering awareness and education on suicide.

Curriculum

Students established links between their beliefs on the preciousness of human life and their school curriculum. They referred to moral stories and teachings taught in their Dzongkha curriculum. Specific references were made to *Gyelsey Laglen* taught in classes IX – XII and *Chhu Dang Shingi Tenchoe* texts taught in classes XI - XII (REC, 2016). Students found these lessons valuable and expressed a need for the curriculum to include “religious values” (Nima). Religious values in this sense meant appreciating life, and emphasizing the impermanent nature of problems. Other subjects within the school curriculum had opportunities to teach about appreciation just as the Dzongkha texts do. They said the anger and impulse to kill oneself can be countered by appreciation, gratitude, and empathy, which also involved trying to understand others such as their parents. Wangchuk said he stopped hurting himself when he started seeing things differently, “I started appreciating people”. Appreciation was identified as a response to anger and self-harm.

Identify those students at risk of suicide

Students stated the need for schools to identify students who may be at risk or vulnerable. This measure was seen as important to establish early support: “we will know then to observe them, understand them, and support them” (Dorji). Dorji and a few other students are peer helpers, capable of providing support to students who may be identified as requiring help.

Students stressed the need for the schools to identify students who may be at risk because they may not have parents or could be living with relatives. There was a belief amongst the participants that school students are at risk when they do not have parental support. They may be vulnerable to abuse and harassment from other relatives they have to depend on. I understood this belief perhaps represented several cases in the capital city where students had to live with their relatives in order to study because their parents lived in some other regions of the country. Students migrated to the capital city for their higher secondary school as most private schools are located there. This happens especially if students did not secure a government scholarship to study in the government higher secondary schools. These students are forced by circumstance to study in the private high schools. Students and parents prefer government higher secondary school because they only pay minimal fees, while the school fees are expensive in the private schools.

Teaching problem-solving skills to students

Since suicide occurred in the presence of problems, students identified a need for problem-solving skills as a way to intervene. Students expressed a need to learn problem-solving skills. Pema said the life skills education program was useful. It taught him that a problem may be temporary. Students reported that suicide is seen as a “way out of problem” (Namgay), as an “option” (Wangchuk). They felt students could be helped to understand their problems and be provided with problem-solving skills.

Also, students maintained a need for “talk time and space” (Dorji) with friends so that they could share their problems and find solutions. However, this problem-solving was addressed by students expressing a desire to connect to supportive relationships and services.

Further, two students from the same school made a brief reference to mindfulness as a suitable means to manage stress. Dema said

we practice mind training which is really helpful in coping up with our emotions, stress and also I feel that it is very effective because in every starting of the first period or every period we do about 1 to 2 minutes mindfulness and that really help us to concentrate also releases our stress.

In this sense, problem-solving practices were described as training students through programs such as life skills education, creating spaces amongst children to talk about their issues, and providing mind training classes.

Another component suggested as a helpful suicide prevention measure was the presence of SGCs.

‘Counselling can help’

I think that we should not end our life whatever the situation maybe, if we are going through some bad times, nowadays we have counsellors and all, we can go to them and the problems discussed in a confidential way so they won't be telling anyone so we can talk to them and ..ask help from them to solve our problem, I think that is what we can do . (Seday)

The sentence “nowadays we have counsellors” from Seday’s quote referred to the recent development of counselling services in the schools. She reported on the usefulness of the service, including the importance of “mutual trust” between the

student and the counsellor. There was also an expectation that the counsellor would solve the problem or have ultimate answers.

All students said SGCs were the key to suicide prevention and intervention measures. Interviews indicated that students relied on their counsellors for help. They showed a sense of comfort in knowing they could go to someone. For instance, all the students from a school with a recent suicide repeatedly said: “now that we have a counsellor” (Dorji). Before the suicide incident, the school did not have an SGC. The presence of an SGC seemed to make a difference to students in terms of making them feel supported.

Students sought counselling as the first professional help within their schools. Dorji said “counselling is a big help to us” but we need full-time counsellors not “part-time counsellors” (referring to the teacher counsellors). According to the students, SGCs advocated for the students and collaborated with other members within the school and with parents.

Students also formulated a standard for the counsellors and their services in the school. They said SGCs must be trustworthy so that students feel safe; approachable and the counsellor must be a good person. Furthermore, students emphasized that the welfare of students was not just SGCs responsibility but that the whole school must work together. For instance, Tara said

one school guidance counsellor may not be able to reach out to all the students, especially the ones needing help because those with the problem usually don't participate in anything or remain invisible, these students are left out.

Tara's comment also showed that students requiring help usually may not be forthcoming in seeking services. The SGCs were expected to help in identifying those left out students facing problems.

When asked, students casually expressed that it would be ideal to have an SGC placed in each school. The majority of girls said they would feel comfortable talking to a female counsellor, and some boys said they would be comfortable with male counsellors but would be alright as long as there is someone good in place.

Barriers to counselling

Students also provided views on some barriers to counselling in the school. One such barrier to counselling identified by students was a stigma that seeking counselling services means you have done something bad. Yangki said

When I ask my friend, what do you feel when a person goes to counselling? They say that only the spoilt people, having a problem, can go to counselling and they are not able to go for counselling.

Yoedzer highlighted that other teachers' attitudes toward counselling can influence how students view counsellors and counselling services,

I think most people don't really seek counselling unless the teachers send them. They don't go to counselling when it comes to stuff that they feel inside, sometimes, most of the time it's because of the teachers, the teachers feel that, 'You're a naughty student, go to counselling.'

On the other hand, this also meant teachers could collaborate and connect students to professional services in the school. Yoedzer was stating her support for counselling or the SGC who coordinated our meeting and the research interviews at the school for this project.

Then there was the fear of being judged especially if students had not felt understood by the SGCs. Kiba said she could not share her problems with her mother or her SGC about her multiple suicide attempts as neither would understand. Her not feeling understood was based on her previous experience

when she told her SGC about her conflicts with her mother and she was told “but she is your mother”. Kiba was implying that the particular SGC may have taken the mother’s side and refused to listen to her side of the story.

I understood that these comments from students drew attention to the delicate nature of counselling. Students seemed to be asking for a mutual dialogue in the student–counsellor relationships. The barriers articulated by students about counselling perhaps show that counselling is in the development phase in Bhutan. Students seemed unsure what to expect, unsure if they could trust the counsellors. In this sense, I understood counselling services and SGCs may have a continual task of advocating for their work and enabling its accessibility to the students.

Recreational activities to positively engage students

Students identified recreational activities as alternative practices which enabled them to stay connected to friends. Tshetan said “isolation should not be the answer. Suicidal people are very isolated”. He expressed a need for more recreational and social activities for the students. Dorji said, “in school, we have games and culture program, but many of them are not working, because no one is letting them do”. He meant that students were not provided adequate time to engage in recreational activities. Even if they did, the opportunity was limited to restricted numbers. I wondered if these comments meant that the focus on studies and academic performance overshadowed other aspects that students felt were important to them. Dorji said they were “wanting to talk and share; wanting to play and dance, and wanting to meet new people”, but these opportunities were minimal.

Need for school transition programs?

Tika spoke of the difficulties in adjusting to a new school, a new environment. She said “I was sad and lonely” because she had no friends when she arrived at her current school. The stories told around the suicide of a 16-year-old boy from class

7 also had aspects of the boy not being happy in the boarding school. Some students said that was also his first boarding experience. Finally, students made some points about gender differences.

Is there a need for gendered responses?

Seday said self-harm in the form of “nerve cutting” (cutting wrists) was common amongst girls, while boys resorted to smoking, drug use and alcohol. According to the participants, self-harm among girls by cutting their hands had almost become a “fashion” in the schools.

Two girls, Seday and Dema, stressed that teenage pregnancy may be a possible reason causing distress and influencing acts of suicide among teenage school girls. Seday and Dema indicated the presence of stigma toward teenage pregnancy because Bhutan is a “conservative society”. The conservative society was discriminating against girls and calling girls as vulnerable. Seday felt that girls

must be empowered to stand up for themselves and not think it is their fault. Girls are not aware of what they are up against. You must make your stand.

Seday said girls should stand up for themselves. She was upset that society was unfair to girls and did not appreciate behaviours of the boys towards girls in schools.

Summary & conclusion

The students believed that suicide is preventable if responses and collective efforts are timely and systemic. Students provided evidence that signs of suicide ideation and self-harm were present before they were acted upon. Identifying these signs was seen as integral to a preventive strategy for the schools. Students were saying those vulnerable and with problems needed help.

Students who survived prior attempts have transformed into helpers. They have drawn on their past experiences to save others who may make ‘mistakes’ like they did. Helping others and becoming responsible student Peer Helpers or school captains contributed to a positive sense of selves for students.

Students said schools should provide a nurturing environment and conditions to generate meaningful experiences for their students. They identified positive relationships between the school and parents, mutual respect and support between teachers and students, loving and supporting relationships amongst students, values infused school curriculum, recreational activities, and supportive SGCs as features of a nurturing school. There was a desperate call for schools to improve and get better than they are at now. Suicide prevention initiatives also needed to consider gender issues in the schools to counter influences of the conservative Bhutanese culture.

To move forward views of the young and adults that has been presented until here in this thesis, and to bring them to talk to each other and imagine possibilities as a result of their collaboration, I stage a community dialogue as a play in the next chapter.

Chapter 8: A dialogue on the ways of working

Introduction

“The future of the nation lies in the hands of our younger generations. It is, therefore, crucial that they live up to our high expectations and ensure the continued wellbeing and security of our nation. To this end, it is our education system that has the vital role of moulding our younger generations into loyal and dedicated citizens. It is very important that our students not only receive the best possible education and training but also learn to understand and appreciate the values of our Bhutanese system. They must become fully aware of our national goals and aspirations and take keen interest in the policies and programmes of the royal government”

– His Majesty the Fourth King of Bhutan Jigme Singye Wangchuck (Office, 1989)

This statement, proclaimed by the fourth King of Bhutan, is the foundation of policies of youth within the education sector. Here the Bhutanese younger generation is seen as future leaders and resources of the country. Current leaders, the government and society place high expectations on the youth of Bhutan, who in turn must be educated and trained to deliver these aspirations. Within the Bhutanese society, the education sector has tremendous responsibilities to shape the younger generation within the unique Bhutanese values. The task is to educate the Bhutanese youth with training and skills enabling them to lead a sovereign Bhutan into hopeful futures.

Consequently, suicide in this sense can be seen as the death of possible futures for Bhutan, the loss of resources and aspirations. Institutions entrusted with the care of youth feel responsible and they are blamed for their failures. How is it possible that even with such firm political motivation and concern some youth of Bhutan are lost to suicide? Schools, the education system, and primarily parents are seen as the fundamental institutions of care for the students. They are held responsible by

the people outside the education sector, who say “somewhere something is not right” (Principal). However, as stated by one participant “education is everybody’s business” (Policymaker), and this project recognises all the participants, students, policy makers, parents, principals, school guidance counsellors, and significant community representatives as members of the wider education community. The participants are affected by suicide, they have lost a friend, a family member, a neighbour, a schoolmate or a classmate. Everyone is trying to understand and reason out these acts of suicide. Interviews addressed fragments of what was seen as happening in the society, in the schools, in the families and the communities. Members of the education community called upon each other for actions and responses for hopeful futures. In this sense, this research design initiates dialogues on making sense and responding to suicide at two levels.

Firstly the participants engaged in a dialogue with the researcher and other participants during the interviews and group discussions. The dialogue took place at schools, conference halls, and offices of the participants. This study has invited members of the education community to participate in a dialogue on a once silenced and troubling topic of suicide by students with the hope that previously unimagined possibilities for actions become available (Frank, 2010; M. White, 2001). Interviews provided opportunities for participants to reflect and be reflexive of their ideas and plans in responding to suicide. For instance, one adult instantly reflected on the need to incorporate suicide education and screening protocols for his Centre. He said

Yeah, now I'm realizing...So, now I'm realizing because it's very much related to our field (of work). I don't have anything at the moment about suicide, so I especially need to incorporate it in my program here.

Interviews also created a platform to share and further the researcher’s and participants’ knowledge. Another participant said

These are very good points for me, I'd actually write it down. No, I'd write it down so that I actually add this in the plan. (Policymaker opened a notebook and started writing).

It may be that a simple message we provoke and leave behind as researchers influence the momentum of a dialogue that has already begun in the society. In an interview with one principal

Sonam How has this interview left you feeling sir?

Principal You have listened to me what I felt about the children's life, what I felt about the suicide cases and you are leaving a message to me to think about growing suicide cases. We need to do a lot of work, ways to take care of children and tackle these issues in the society. That is the message that you gave me.

During stage II fieldwork, students provided feedback and reported that as a result of the interviews and their involvement in this research they had become more involved in helping their friends. Some of them shared feeling more aware of their emotions as a result of the interviews. Participants seemed to feel that they were empowered in their thoughts and actions.

Also, interview sites can be a version of an imagined life. They offered an opportunity to create, strengthen and give texture to the preferred meanings for the participants. Students found an opportunity to reflect on their values, beliefs and what they may have preferred for themselves alongside sharing their discomfort over suicide by others. Most students said something like "I will never commit suicide or I think I will never commit suicide". It may be that these statements were made by those not confronted by situations of distress, but it could also be argued that this sense of thinking they would never commit suicide may have been strengthened at the interviews. Interviews were reflective, reflexive and empowering dialogues that open avenues for further dialogue and actions.

Interviews initiated a community dialogue which “aspired to create change through learning and the participation of people who had a stake in a particular issue and had something to contribute to the public space” (Shemer, 2014, p. 145). All participants shared their concerns about suicide and wanted to do something about the issue.

This chapter differs from the structure of earlier chapters because of the nature of its “re-presentation” (Ely, 2007). To extend the analysis, this chapter brings together the voices of the participants to create a dialogue between composite characters. Unlike previous chapters that ended with a summary and conclusion, this play will end in a soliloquy. The narrator’s soliloquy sums up and reflects on the dialogue amongst members of the Bhutanese education community. It then paves a way to expand the dialogue to the wider community in Bhutan.

The making of the play

I now open a door to the dialogue by proposing that the voices of the students and the voices of the adults lend themselves to a play. Denzin states that writing a story is a narrative; context, experiences and emotions shape the writing (2002, p. 5). The earlier thematic re-presentation drew out important points, but it was a reflection back to the participants who had shared the information. It lacked dialogic movement, which is generated when multiple voices and views interact in dialogue. Stories and dialogues can be told and retold in varied ways to reflect their complexities, the researcher becomes the storyteller.

My continued interest in Shakespeare’s plays which cover a range of social issues with melodramatic characters, and in a language that powerfully transcends the ordinary, but speaks with the most expressive and elegant tone, led me to write a play which could hold the confounding ambiguity facing Bhutan today.

Re-presenting stories in the form of a play broaden understanding “of themes, meta themes, context, social/political/cultural/economic surrounds, the players, the complex researcher, and the pulse of the story” (Ely, 2007, p. 592). This short play intends to highlight the themes presented in the previous chapters by staging them in different scenes. It demonstrates concerns and raises tensions in the form of a dialogue between the various characters. The differences and similarities between these characters are highlighted by bringing them to speak through the overarching themes. In this sense, the purpose of the play is also to imagine the dialogue between different players in the Bhutanese education system. As mentioned in Chapter 3, the process of creating this play is also influenced by Frank’s (2005, 2010, 2012) dialogic narrative analysis. I explain aspects of dialogic narrative analysis employed in the creation of the characters and plots.

“The story does not write itself” (Denzin, 2002, p. 257) until you find that image, that music, the first lines that move you along; I found the dialogic story when I imagined the school courtyard with adults in conversation. This image of the school courtyard with three adults in serious conversation evoked a warm, responsible, restricted and concerned sense; and the first act and the first scene were born textually. This idea to stage the dialogue as a play was sparked by Denzin’s work *Sacagawea’s nickname, or the Sacagawea problem (2007)*, *Indians in the park (2005)*, *Cowboys and Indians (2002)*; and *Disrupting Dichotomies: a social worker’s exploration into language interpreting practices in Australia* by Fernandes (2012) . These “dialogical performance texts” revealed (to me) the possibility of re-presenting academic research with literary expression; creating a space for “different voices, world views, beliefs in a conversation that has no end” (Fernandes, 2012, p. 167)

The three act play is an interplay of participants’ voices speaking as members of the education community in different roles. The play enacts and brings these voices into a dialogue with one another on what may be seen to be happening concerning

suicide by school students in Bhutan. The play makes it possible to “dip back and forth between” past and present; the call for future action is also inherent in the nature of plays or dramas (Ely, 2007, p. 592).

The play titled ‘Opening Doors’ is set at an imaginary school in Bhutan. The characters are members of the Bhutanese education community at an education conference. Opening doors is a dialogue to discuss current issues that may be seen as influencing suicides among school students; seeking opportunities and ideas to address these concerns. The title ‘Opening Doors’ is metaphorical as in a sense Doors may symbolise

- transitions, opportunities, gateways to changing social realities, to unseen futures
- a threshold between past and future
- a barrier if shut or a protective object that may be opened when required.

Voices of the characters

Different voices are brought together to speak for each character. For example, the interviews with student boys are brought together to create the voice of a student boy, and similarly for girls. This process takes away the specific contexts of the participants, but the idea here is to construct a collective voice of the students, and similarly for the adults within their roles. This process “assembles people into groups” (Frank, 2010, p. 130) of identities, to enact different roles for the purpose of this research.

The voices of the characters in this dialogue are made up of direct quotes from the participants. Some quotes are directly taken from one participant, and some are composite quotes from two to three participants. This process draws on the “shape-

shifting” (Frank, 2010, p. 39) function of stories, allowing multiple voices to speak for one character.

Voices of the participants speak through characters with minimal interpretation by the researcher to disrupt their views. A few additional words I have included, to provide clarity to the meaning of a sentence are represented in square brackets []. Also a few grammatical errors may still be seen because quotes are directly selected from the interview transcripts. Once again, the intention is to present participants’ voices as they were articulated to me, and with me.

Quotes from participants for a character are connected by using ellipses and sentence connectors which are presented in square brackets such as [and]. Quotes are selected to highlight the overarching themes from Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7. I have made attempts to avoid repetition of the same quotes from the previous chapters by revisiting individual transcripts for new significant quotes. At the same time, repetitions from the previous chapters are visible because some quotes are significant, and brought into this dialogue. The characters are placed in conversation with each other to speak on the themes identified and presented in the previous four chapters. In this way, themes are expanded in multiple settings, and stories once again echo from the past into the present. With the aim to construct a dialogue to shape responses to suicide, the play presents an idealist scenario where the dialogue flows, which may not be the case in real life. This process also locates stories into imagined future possibilities.

An intentional sequencing of speakers in most scenes has been staged to illustrate performances in real life dialogues. For instance, students normally find comfort in speaking after or to the view of another student; they hesitate to speak before or to a person in authority, unless the student is extremely comfortable and verbose. Other facets that add to the performative aspects are

- Who starts the dialogue in a scene?
- Who speaks minimally on which theme?
- Who speaks after whom?

Setting

The play intentionally begins in a school. Characters move within their spaces and then move toward a public space to speak to one another. For instance, students talk amongst themselves in their classroom, counsellors discuss amongst themselves in the counselling room, while Outlanders (views of members outside the education system) speak in the school courtyard. The scene and surroundings are meant to depict spaces and structures, intangible and tangible. These structures and spaces may constrain and provoke stories participants tell and imagine.

Synopsis of the play

The play recruits “narrative equipment” or capacities that equip stories to have the effects they can have (Frank, 2010, pp. 27-42). These capacities are namely for the story to state trouble; the need for the story to have characters and roles; a story to have points of view; the element of suspense; interpretative openness; letting the stories loose; performative aspect; and truth telling.

I now explain how these capacities are held by the play. Trouble is stated when the play opens with characters locating the problem of suicide and staging the trouble of the story. Characters are wondering how the problem may have come about and what may be seen as causing the trouble of suicide by students in the country. Characters and their roles are cast into the play, and they are described in the following sections. Points of view of different characters are presented and contested to show how their roles provoke, constrain or evoke compelling stories they tell each other. Interpretative openness and the element of suspense is attempted by presenting multiple points of view and understandings of the

characters. These stories are constantly seeking and do not have final responses or answers. In this sense, the stories are let loose for further discussions and imagination among the readers. Stories are at work and performing through the storytellers- in this case the characters and myself as the researcher. Stories are performing to become true as they are told. For instance, stories of a lonely student being suicidal are enacted through storytelling and become a significant claim.

Play consists of 3 Acts, each with 4 scenes. Each scene explores a theme in a progressive manner from ACT I to ACT III.

Themes addressed by the characters under each scene are briefly described below.

ACT I

Characters and problems are introduced. Participants are seen in discussions in their small groups waiting for the conference to commence.

SCENE 1 'It wasn't like this when I was younger'

[In the school courtyard]

Themes introduced in this scene are changing social realities causing generational gap and competitions in the society.

SCENE 2 Suicide-the end of the road

[Students classroom]

Themes introduced in this scene are family disintegration, the pressure in the society.

SCENE 3 The gap between parents, schools, and children

[Counsellors meeting room]

Themes introduced in this scene are gaps between parents and schools, impact of academic pressure, unhelpful traditional practices and unhelpful school policies.

SCENE 4 Caught between tradition and modernization

Themes reinforced are changing social realities and modernisation, changing parenting practices, growing competition, and children as being vulnerable.

ACT II

The bulk of the problem is stated.

SCENE 1 'Education system is pushing children to the edge'

[The grand conference hall]

Themes addressed in this scene are pressures of the education system, and its policies.

SCENE 2 Are children lost between their home and school?

[The grand conference hall]

Themes addressed in this scene are changing parenting practices, parent-school conflicts and unhelpful school policies and programs.

SCENE 3 Loss of relationships and grief [The grand conference hall]

Themes addressed are the need to address grief and loss.

SCENE 4 Media saying 'not good enough' [The grand conference hall]

Themes addressed are media influences on the sense of self and culture.

ACT III

Looking for resolution to the problems

SCENE 1 'Answers are in the family, in the schools, in all of us'

[The grand conference hall]

Topics addressed are the need for awareness and collaboration between parents and the school.

SCENE 2 ‘Unless you solve all other problems, teaching and learning cannot happen’
[The grand conference hall]

Suggestions for suicide prevention are need to change school curriculum, policies, and to improve the quality of care in the schools

SCENE 3 Counsellors as saviours [The grand conference Hall]

Topics discussed are roles of the school guidance counsellors in suicide prevention; need to address unhelpful school policies; strengthen peer helpers program; and supervision and support for the SGCs.

SCENE 4 The sermon [The school auditorium]

Topics addressed are moral views on suicide and cultural beliefs about human life. The play and the chapter conclude with a soliloquy.

Characters and their assigned roles

Introducing the characters in the order of their appearance in the play.

Narrator The narrator guides the readers between scenes; signposting performances by raising questions and drawing attention to contradictions or absence of responses; and the narrator as the researcher interprets and reflects at the end.

The narrator is present as the voice over until the final scene where she takes the stage to end the play.

Principal Voices of the principals

Parent Voice of the parent participant

Outlander	Voices of participants outside the education community. This character is created to represent critical reflections of the participants not directly involved as service providers. They include voices of the psychiatrist, the Rinpoche, the representative from youth drug and alcohol aftercare services, and the media regulation representative.
Student boy	Voices of male students
Peer helper	Student voices of Peer Helpers. The Peer Helper also portrays someone with a history of self-harm in the past.
Student girl	Voices of female students. Her character is portrayed as a survivor of suicide attempts and enacts the assumption stated by several participants about self-harm being common among girls; 'especially girls they are soft in the heart, so they attempt suicide'. Also, represents voices of two female participants with prior suicide attempts.
Counsellor	Voices of the school guidance counsellors and a teacher counsellor
The Ministry	Voices of the policy makers
Atsara	Extracts from print newspapers, magazines and online news as used by Denzin (2007, p. 128). This character is inspired by the Shakespearean fool ("Shakespearean fool," 2016), and the character of Atsara, the clown and entertainer (Zhideybhutan, 2016) from traditional Bhutanese festivals. Atsara like the fool cleverly tries to outwit the populist views of the community, and disrupts, entertains and is ever present at all performances. Atsara highlights concerns and contradictions for the audience.

Atsara is an omnipresent character in the play, like the Atsara during the traditional festivals it does not perform as a part of the group of other dancers/characters but stands aside as an observer, as a helper when needed, mocks at the dancers and talks aside to the audience.

Rinpoche

Although the views of the Rinpoche who participated in this research could be represented under the character of Outlander, this character is not just the Rinpoche's voice, this voice is a separate character being allocated a significant place in this play. This character is not just the voice of the Rinpoche who participated in this research but is a composite of participants' views and concerns about religious views and cultural values. A Rinpoche is traditionally revered in the Bhutanese culture. They are seen as an authority on religious and cultural views. This character in the play symbolises the 'unique' cultural values and their strengths that the participants refer to and are perhaps holding on to while changing for a future/futures unknown.

Title of the play - 'Opening Doors'

Narrator Scene setting

The year 2013. An increasing number of suicides by students in the country has alarmed the school authorities and the Ministry of Education in Bhutan. The Ministry has called for a conference to address the matter. Parents, significant community partners of the education sector, students, school guidance counsellors, and principals were invited but many could not participate. Those present are waiting to meet at the grand conference hall.

ACT I

SCENE 1 'It wasn't like this when I was younger'

[Enter Outlander, Principal and Parent. The school courtyard]

Principal When I went to school many years back, I was a day student and I had to take the horses with me to go to school, keep them somewhere and go to classes. Then I came back to look for the horses and take them back home. I was responsible for the horses and had to make sure they got home.

When I was in school, we did not have depressions or emotional problems because we were never free at all. You go to school, there is school work to be done, when you go home you were never free, you are looking for firewood, helping your parents to cook, taking care of babies and looking after cows.

Parent That could be the factor where we become narrow-minded towards the feelings of our children. We cannot understand our children's lives these days.

Outlander Now Bhutan has become a very competitive place, especially for the youth. When I went to college I think we were about 40 or 50 odd guys in the whole of Bhutan and they were easily absorbed in any job but the reality has changed now.

[Principal exits to the counsellors' meeting room]

Let me tell you something about my school days, I did not in those days hear of a single suicide case.

Parent Yes during my time we were not having this one. When you look back, ten years back or so I didn't see many problems but now the suicide cases are more and more.

Outlander A French sociologist called Durkheim actually mentioned that when a society runs and transits so fast, a lot of safety nets in the society are broken and then the children or young people fall through the crevices. That's exactly what is happening in our society. Our society is running very fast, the strong traditional bonds and extended families or communities are fast breaking down. There is a lot of rural-urban migration, and development of our country is one of the fastest in the world. ...The materialistic demands are endless. While parents are working to meet the demands or make ends meet, children are left alone, on their own.

[All walk to the grand conference hall]

SCENE 2 'Suicide-the end of the road'

[In the students' classroom. Student boy, Peer helper and student girl discussing]

Student boy Youth and friends suicide mainly because of pressure on them from the society, emotional torture so I must say. Children especially are too innocent to understand why they are going through such problems and deliberate the action of suicide because they think suiciding is the only way to get freed from that kind of trouble. ... The world is becoming a competitive world to live in, and youths are under pressure to perform. ...Then there is emotional torture because their parents divorce and they lack attention. They are not able to solve problems, they are not able to share problems.

Peer helper People commit suicide because some are given pressure by their parents, then getting pressure in their studies. ...From my point of view committing suicide is getting relief from all pains, running away from all the problems and troubles that I had.

Student boy Ending life could be like trying to find something new, like some think this life is not worth it anymore maybe the next life could be better, like looking for other options.

Student girl Mostly people commit suicide when they lack love, if people feel loved and happy then they won't do such things.

Student boy Suicide is not a sudden momentary impulse, I think it gets built on and on by some factors and it keeps piling on in your mind and then it reaches that limit. They feel their life is useless, and worthless and that's the end of the road.

Student girl When we take a decision to do all these things it doesn't come at once, we keep hurting bit by bit and it grows bigger and bigger. Finally all you think of is let's finish it up, if I die then maybe somebody will feel that oh she died because of all these things, somebody may feel guilty for me. I would at least go peacefully. So that way I was hurting inside but I was not really interested in showing it out. I used to smile, I used to act as though everything was fine, and one day it was too much for me so I felt like I am not needed anymore, I will be rid of my life. I am suffering too much and maybe this is going to continue and I won't smile again. That old me who had fun, like last year, who used to shout, irritate others, is not going to be anymore. And I am not needed anymore, nobody wants me, I could hardly hear somebody calling me, or asking for me. It felt really bad and I felt low and the more I thought about it, the more I felt that I was dropping down and the floor under me was opening up, I felt as though I was invisible.

Student boy I found a boy hanging from the ceiling and I panicked, I was shocked and I wanted to cut the belt [Kera] and save him but it was too late. When I talk about this I feel sad and scared sometimes. ...Suicide is bad for anybody, it gives pressure to family first, then to the society, then to the country. It is a concern to the country and it is a big question to the government itself.

[All walk to the grand conference hall]

SCENE 3 The gap between parents, school and children

[The counsellors meeting room- Principal, the Ministry and counsellor seated]

Principal We had four or five student suicides in the last six years and the reasons are yet to be established. All suicides occurred in their homes. Certainly, relationship with teachers or the system of the school contribute to suicide, but the depth of the problems remain with their parents, the non-cooperation of the parents. ...There are family disputes, a lot of family pressure. ...I feel emotional problems of children are not listened carefully by the adults or by the parents or by their caretakers. We tell them 'this is not your age to talk about this'. So I feel there is a gap in communication.

Counsellor I am a father of two kids and looking at the recent suicide case in our school, I feel parents can play a big role in the life of a child. Maybe being a child they may not be in the position to make a better decision and they think the ultimate way out of that tension is suicide. Even the smallest matter of their life is taken with seriousness by them.

Principal Children as young as 8 years of age commit suicide. Even my eldest son who is ten years old says Nga she dewong may [I will kill myself], it seems like a trend. It is not that my child has a problem, things are well at the home front, but now I don't know why they like to say all these things. If I scold them a little bit they say things like this. So I am wondering if these words are influenced by other students. It made me think that these things are going on in the schools even at that age, like talking about dying. In a way, times have changed, how a young child thought during my time as a kid, and now is drastically different. Children of this generation are more exposed, including exposed to deaths and suicides.

Counsellor One thing about culture, myself having been brought up in a village, whenever people quarrelled they said Nga dhe sheru tubay [I wish I am dead], Nga de meru tubay [I wish I did not exist], this is the

comment they always pass. And when children don't get along with their parents they say things like 'why did you give birth to me?'

Principal Some parents don't know what to do especially when they are illiterate, so they often give up when their children are in trouble. And that way children fall again. ...Children are home from 4 pm until 4 am or so. In that time parents have not assigned children to do any work, and on top, parents have no time to listen to their children.

The Ministry There is nobody that this child can look to for support. Some of the students who committed suicide are very talented, their taking their own life is sending a message to all the others.

Counsellor Suicide is real, we have dealt with so many students showing signs and symptoms of suicide. Students face complex problems, too much on them. Once students feel rejected, they resort to substance abuse which then leads to suicide. Bullying can directly lead to suicide, similarly illicit boy-girl relationships. There are things which we have no control over, like broken families, divorces which are increasing in Bhutan.

Atsara [Oh] the Discipline committee of a lower secondary school recently terminated two students for having an illicit relationship. The girl studying in class VI and the class VIII boy went missing on October 10. On October 13, the school discipline committee called the students' parents to school and handed them their children's termination order. The principal said the school management had caught the students having an illicit relationship before and made them write statements [statements not to repeat the act of dating in this case]. However, they were again found continuing their relationship. The students were suspended for two weeks in August (Rai, 2014). [Sigh!]

Counsellor During our time there was no competition, no employment problem but now these are the problems causing suicide, these are the problems of the hour. Giving pressure to the students to perform well in their academic field whereby some of the students are restricted. The reality is all human beings have different kinds of talent, but this acceptance is quite hard to accept in the Bhutanese system because everybody thinks about the marks, the moment you look for job everybody talks about marks.

Principal I think there is a gap between the school, the parents and the child, maybe because of this, the children are not able to express their problems. ...So we raise this during the meeting with the parents and discuss what can be the solution now.

[Gets up and leaves for the grand conference hall]

SCENE 4 Caught between tradition and modernisation

Narrator Atsara speaks to the readers/audience while the other characters proceed to the grand conference hall.

Atsara Eight deaths in eight months or one every month is far too many for a small society like ours. Our children and youngsters have become psychologically fragile and lack the psychological resilience that was there in the older generation. Children particularly don't seem to understand the permanent nature of death and seem to act impulsively (Pelden, 2013). Suicide is the very symptom of modern society and driven by materialism, that very concept that is against the country's guiding philosophy. Development brings more opportunities, opportunities beget competition, competition triggers pressure to perform and do more, in some that cause depression, and depression makes people highly suicidal ("A Slap in the Face of Society," 2013). [Pause] It has to do with parenting. Unlike in the past, in most cases today, both parents work, in the name of providing for their children in a society, where a lone person's earning leaves a family to survive on a shoestring budget. [Louder]

Or are some young mid-aged parents still unable to douse their thrill for social activities and night life ("A Slap in the Face of Society," 2013)?

ACT II

[All participants seated inside the grand conference hall]

SCENE 1 Education is pushing children to the edge

Outlander Our education system to me is one of the biggest problems causing a lot of stress to our young people, you know pushing them to the edge. Instead of lumping everyone together and wasting a lot of resources, education can look into identifying those skills in the children very early in their lives so that they can be guided and children also find that fulfilling.

Parent Our education system has made tremendous achievements we should praise it. But it is so exam-oriented, though we say our education system is child focused, I don't think it is hundred percent child focused.

Counsellor The pressure on academic performance is something that we need to be concerned about. The school dropout rate for class ten is very high because students can't make the cutoff points.

Student boy When I was in primary school there was a guy, a friend of my brother, it was during the annual result declaration, I think he was living with his stepfather and mother. And I think his stepfather usually beat him. He failed in that standard and then he didn't call his stepfather and mother to come and see the result instead he committed suicide. He jumped from the bridge into the river. He must have been 12 or 13 years old.

Student girl When I was in class 8, one of my classmates committed suicide. That was because he was much older than us and he failed. He wanted to

be in the next grade and when he failed he felt ashamed and he ended his life. It was quite painful to see.

Principal Most schools want the best of students, those that are academically strong. Some schools actually accept students who have scores above 70% only. ...Some students have learning difficulties, they just can't perform like others, [and] they often fail. The sense of failure drives students to suicide. Students are thrown out, rejected for various reason from the schools. Schools give up on children and parents not knowing what to do give up ...in between children are lost and rejected.

Counsellor Nobody is concerned about these things, they consider these people Go Machoep [good for nothing], he failed and then put blame on the child which makes the child depressed.

SCENE 2 Are children lost between their home and school?

Principal Parents and schools both assert their right to tell and expect from the children [but] not attend or listen to them, this is how I feel. If we can understand children such problems will not exist.

Outlander Parents actually don't know what they want from their children. Maybe they think their children will be happy if they can be made into doctors or engineers ...You know how parents are, parents don't want them to do the things which they like children to do and they have lots of expectations. If these expectations are not fulfilled you are humiliated and you are scolded, and sometimes beaten. ...Parents compare you to someone else.

Student girl Yes, I don't feel understood by my mother, even when I work my mum says I am good for nothing. My parents don't love me so I don't care. She compares me to others and said Ro ghe awa zha [eat their shit, you are no good]. There were big rocks on the side and I didn't care I thought as long as I am dead, my parents will be happy, they

may cry once but they will forget me, that's what I thought and jumped.

Student boy I have a friend whose parents divorced. He told me that he smokes and does all naughty things to prove to his parents that they are wrong and it's their fault. I also used to think that maybe I could make my parents feel guilty or make them regret arguing and all. ...I think most students who committed suicide, their parents are divorced. I think the school should give more attention to them.

Outlander In my time [when I was young] I have not come across one single case of suicide. That was because my parents were there and they loved you. Wherever you go, you know that you can depend on them, so that is one factor.

Peer helper Personally I have been in this situation because my father and mother got divorced. At first, I tried to cut my hands with a knife, then the second time I jumped from my room.

Outlander Children lose hope. ...When children can't fight back they wish they were dead.

Counsellor We tell students to come forward and reach out for help but they remain in the gloom. Maybe in the past, they may not have expressed to the right person and that person may have looked down upon them.

The Ministry The need to respect life I think it's really important for all of us. I think we need to inculcate that in our children.

Peer Helper It's not like that, we really prefer that our parents support us as well as intervene in our life, but most parents don't think that they just put a lot of pressure on us. ... Like asking us to do things we are not good at.

- Counsellor At the moment parents are not involved in the policy and decisions of the school. For example last year, some parents made so much hype about the sudden hike in the fees of some private schools, this showed parents were not at all involved in the decision making.
- The Ministry The school system doesn't actually support intimate, more caring relationships. I think it is just maintaining discipline not getting into the depth of the person.
- Principal Could it also be that some discipline policies and rules are not helpful for our students, that they don't allow our students to rectify themselves or acknowledge and support students when they want to improve themselves. For example, students must have [strayed] using drugs and alcohol but want to amend their ways which are not easy for them, some take a long time. But because school rules often allow them three chances which may not be enough, they are then turned away from schools. And when they go home they get scolded by their parents, so they are turned away without support from the school and home. And then they don't have anywhere to turn to and so they resort to suicide.
- Student boy As a school boy, we like to keep our hair long and make the style of it but our school teachers do not allow us. Thus, some boys bunk from school and get into trouble like taking drugs, forming gangs and fighting with other boys.

SCENE 3 Loss of relationships and grief

- Atsara Two students from a high school have committed suicide. It seems that they were caught having an illicit relationship, and as per the school policy their parents were informed. The parents were supposed to report to the school in the morning. But in the wee hours of the morning (at around 4 am), the dead bodies of both the students were discovered. Both were studying in 10th standard. This is the latest in the suicide cases amongst youngsters (especially

students) that have disturbed the otherwise peaceful country (Wangdi, 2014).

Student girl When I was in class 8, a girl committed suicide in the hostel because of a love relationship. She kept talking about committing suicide but her friends didn't take her seriously. One midnight she took a stool, her Kera and went downstairs and hung herself. ...Girls do that when they are in relationships when they are deeply in love they become like that, [and] boys act intensely initially and then later they break off so girls get hurt and out of sadness they do these things.

Student boy My girl [friend] once said she wanted to commit suicide. She said I didn't love her. It was not like that, I loved her deeply but I was busy with my studies.

Student girl I think teenage pregnancy is one of the reasons behind committing suicides by youth. Girls end up in unhealthy relationships and the society blames her.

Principal I think especially girls have a lot of issues to grapple with which is why we need a female counsellor. I see a lot of girls visiting counsellors so that in itself is an indication.

Student girl My best friend killed herself over love, and this is a poem I wrote for her.

Your sweet smile haunts me still
I chose to forget you but I couldn't and never will
You brought the smile and glitter on my face
But you walked away with a greater pace
Oh! How could you dare to leave me
You could never do it,
Hand in hand we used to walk
On the streets and we were crazy
Do you remember? We were seven
We use to enjoy like we were in heaven

But you were selfish enough to get there alone
It still hurts so bad even though a year has flown
I remember the belt around your neck
I know it was real and not fake.

Narrator The intensity of the student's feelings of loss and grief has grown and yet except for the Principal's view on girls needing special care, none of the other adults addressed the grief and loss felt by students over the death of their friend or grief of other students over the loss of their friends or schoolmates to suicide. And why does everyone, including students sneer at experiences of romantic relationships?

SCENE 4 Media saying 'not good enough'

Outlander In my opinion it is because nowadays everything in the media tells you are not good enough, television says that you are not beautiful enough, you must buy these clothes, buy this cream. Nowadays many Bhutanese boys and girls want to look like Koreans but why? I agree Koreans are beautiful but Bhutanese are also beautiful, in their own ways but there is not a single advertisement that says that. So when we can't appreciate ourselves, when we are not happy in our country because media somehow says that it is not good enough, that dissatisfaction arises because we can't appreciate ourselves. So that's why in the society there is discontentment and then that dissatisfaction leads to jealousy and competition.

Student girl Yes discrimination, if someone is wearing a trend, the newest fashion, and if someone is wearing dirty clothes or old clothes, he or she is a little bit poor.

Student boy Media is considered the new machine. There is a drastic impact on youth, and they have two-sided effects.

Student girl While watching television and advertisements, they show diseases like HIV and all, but I have never seen an advertisement based on suicides.

- Peer helper or talk about the consequences of suicide.
- Counsellor Media need to be more responsible. If you call students ‘psycho’ they act like one.
- The Ministry When we talk about suicide, I think we need to inform our children that suicide is not an option but the way this message is conveyed is different. There are ways of saying it, not glorifying it. It is like Za dha [eat this] and Gum dha [hog], it means the same thing but in two different ways.
- Principal Then after the suicides, media provoked aggressive responses, there is a kind of loggerhead [conflicts] aftermath of suicide.
- Counsellor And that’s why our programs should be structured accordingly. ...Students should cope with the realities of life, present realities you know, not that they give up easily.
- Narrator Discussions continue into ACT III. Responses and resolutions are gaining momentum in the dialogue.

ACT III

[All participants seated inside the grand conference hall]

SCENE 1 Answers are in the family, in the schools, in all of us

- Atsara Parents, teachers, and adults all have a role to play in ensuring that children are not stressed or neglected and then resort to such harmful measures (Pelvar, 2013)
- Counsellor The problem is when society thinks suicide is the sole responsibility of education. There has to be a common goal amongst different agencies not just work on the sides [on their own] and leave it all to education.

- Principal The girl who committed suicide, her mother could have cooperated with us, but despite a number of letters, a number of our requests, they failed to turn up. On the other hand, we could have personally visited the girl's house and confronted the family but we would be crossing our own limits. We reported the matter to RENEW [agency for domestic violence] and if they had mobilized our case to another stronger agency, through their concerted efforts, we could have helped the girl avoid committing suicide.
- Student girl Parents have to give lots of love, care and affection to their own child and understand them, encourage those undergoing stress and over depressed. ...Parents play an important role in saving their children's lives.
- Student boy I feel if they are able to share their problems with their family, or with their teachers and friends they can at least come to a solution. They feel safe when they have some guidance and support.
- Principal What we need is a good interaction between the teachers and the parents, very honest. There are many parents who are not very open, we need to talk to these parents closely. If there is a close relationship between the teachers and parents then all issues will be taken care of. ...We see that the full- time counsellors are doing this and doing a good job at it.
- Counsellor A key intervention factor is the direct involvement of a parent in the education of their child. This is actually not that strong at the moment, so we are actually trying to bridge that gap through parenting programs. ...Involving parents in the decision making of the school is also important, they are ignored here at the moment. ...Responsibility to educate a child is mutual between parents and schools. ... [Recognizing] this importance, during the positive parenting month we are planning a talk to parents about ways to support their children.

- Principal School is a community where the learning takes place not only for the students but also the parents.
- Student boy Make everyone aware of suicide and its consequences in the school then the students can share with their illiterate parents and the society.
- Counsellor In planning our strategies we could include the youth themselves.
- Student boy To prevent and stop suicide I feel it is very important to give counselling. Counselling really supports us, they find a solution to help us.
- Student girl I think people who are trying to commit suicide, they are very narrow-minded. They think of just the problem in front of them but they never go beyond that. They think of when the problem is solved and how I am going to enjoy life, how my life used to be back then when I did not have this problem. And how I am going to enjoy when I overcome this problem. We don't realize and look at the problem in front of us and we think it is too big to overcome and we never look beyond. ...Everybody attempts suicide when they are in problem, and if we give some awareness program about problem-solving these things will stop.
- Principal Certain things are beyond our control, children might have a serious problem at home
- Student boy I think schools would be able to provide an atmosphere where anything that is missing at home is here. Like for example, for some, there is a fight and domestic violence at home, but when they come to school they should feel that they have a place where they want to come again and again. School should serve a purpose to not just be an institution to teach a b c, but make them feel that life can be better even if it is not good right now.

SCENE 2 'Unless you solve all other problems, teaching and learning cannot happen'

Atsara Schools should teach our children more than just methods of passing tests and exams. Schools should not be coaching camps where syllabus takes the back seat as pupils are urged to focus only on solving past board papers to prepare them for the final examination. It is reassuring that we continue to achieve commendable pass percentage every year. But let not need to gain school fame defeat the real purpose of education in our schools. It will be a sad commentary on our educational success otherwise ("Looking Beyond Pass Percentage," 2016).

The Ministry We need to balance the academic and values we want children to imbibe. If we have smaller classes and the system of good class teacher might help because the class teacher is with the students the whole year. So I think this can lead to an understanding of the students because the key here is knowing the students well. Quite often in the cases of suicide, the teachers actually did not know these students.

Student boy We have a very good class teacher. Whenever we have a problem, even with teachers, the teachers scold us, always give pressure to us. So we tell to our class teacher what happened. She then talks to the teacher, that teacher also talks to us and then it becomes easier for us. She doesn't beat us much. She never uses the stick in the class. She is frank and she is also always there to support us, and we feel that we should also support her because when she supports us why not we. If somebody asks us who our favourite teacher is, we always say our class teacher because she has been with us from [class] 7 to 9. It's a long duration and she says she would leave [here] with us.

Outlander When a teacher looks at a student they don't see a job but their own child and remembers that child is equally precious to his or her parent as would be your own.

- Principal We need to deal with our children from the heart, listen to their emotional problems. ...If you see some children having a problem in their life, forget about academic marks, forget about math, science, and first take care of their life.
- The Ministry I think that care needs to get into our teacher training institutions that care, knowing your students more, so this is all about being a good teacher. Unless you solve other problems, teaching and learning cannot happen.
- Principal Schools must ensure care of every student so that even their transfers to other schools must be done diligently and with care between the parents and the new school
- The Ministry Personal files of the students help in keeping track of the students throughout their time in a school and the new school too
- Principal An inclusive education system will reduce the children on the street. We have to revisit the Ministry policies and certain things must be done. We must look at the child as a whole, not just their academic results, to look at the overall development of the students. Policies must be implemented with uniformity by all schools.
- Counsellor But firstly we need to review our own policies, the school documents, everything idle should be replaced, ...schools should be a caring place for children and that is first and foremost for any school in Bhutan.
- Principal This is my dream, if the liberty of delivering the syllabus and programs are kept to the schools, not prescribed syllabus that we get, not the prescribed curriculum we get, but give us a benchmark. For example of a benchmark would be, what would you see a student being able to do after class 10? ...Then ensure the quality and readiness of teachers to deliver this curriculum too.

Counsellor Coming to what we can do about preventing suicide, we can do a lot. First orient and provide awareness programs on suicide, tell teachers about referral procedures. Then every new student who comes to school, every new entry level class must be oriented on counselling, and secondly talks on suicide must be provided. Then we can form peer helpers group, which works wonders. Train a group of students. And these groups of students go and observe and give basic counselling because they come in close contact with other students. Then they give us the status of problems of other students. These mechanisms are already in place.

Student girl We have to give awareness to our society, educate people saying life is very precious. We have to do something meaningful and successful instead of hating [and] killing yourself.

The Ministry Give hope

Student boy I think that hope, that possibility or that hope for a better future or better tomorrow is what will help us preserve ourselves.

SCENE 3 Counsellors as saviours

Parent I feel it would have been good if we had counselling support like 10 -15 years ago, it would have reduced a lot of problems, they are like Messiah, a Saviour.

Principal We have full-time counsellors who are helping a lot. People don't know how many lives our full-time counsellors have saved. A number of cases were prevented because of some rapport with parents. Parents are generally unaware of what their children are up to. ...We must motivate our parents so that they come forward, we respect their decisions. Our counsellor is doing a wonderful job and should continue. ...They have to be systematic and well trained otherwise the program may flop.

The Ministry The counsellors actually liaise between the school and the parents to bring them together.

Counsellor I feel there is lack of awareness on mental health, mental disorders, even among adults, if we could step up the awareness program on mental health issues, I think people would then be better able to understand their own, and then when they identify themselves with certain distress and disorder, they could actually seek support, because services and support at the stakeholders' level, relevant agencies are already in place. Mental health issues are complex and can be invisible so the prevention program should include this aspect. Awareness needs to be tailored to the needs of the students. We can ask students what they think would be helpful.

Student boy I believe that festivals and games, sports and other recreational activities, arts and crafts and music will really drive a person. Isolation should not lead to suicide. People who are very isolated are depressed and nobody cares for him/her, nobody notices about him/her, and that really drives these individuals mad into taking their lives.

Counsellor There should be a policy document mandating all the schools to have awareness programs. At the moment it is difficult for the counsellors because they are limited by other contradicting policies like discipline policy and all. In a few schools, the decisions and priorities of the school head are influential in the school policies, and there are other schools that are not receptive of such policies on awareness and guidance programs.

Principal I don't think it has to do with corporal punishment because in our times we use to get beaten up all the time, corporal punishment was rampant but no one killed themselves.

- Atsara Judging by the cases that have been reported, the scenario of corporal punishment [is] severe. Teaching through punishment and humiliation is nothing new (Pelvar, 2013)
- The Ministry In some schools, counsellor services are taken as a punishment type of thing. For example 'you didn't do your homework I will send you to the counsellor', these are certain things happening in our schools.
- School girl Our school counsellors are doing the best but I think we need some more teachers for that kind of guidance, and also students to stop suicides.
- Parent Dealing especially with children 14 years and above, they are more focused on their friends, they think their friends are models for them.
- Peer helper The friends play a big role, more than parents, they can make out how we are feeling by our expression, so these friends can report to the counsellor or the parents.
- Student boy I think every school should have peer helpers. Peer helpers are really helping. Our peer helpers are so friendly and good natured and they laugh all the time. When we have problems they are ready to listen to us even if they were doing something. We say we have some problem, they would come to sit near us and console us and then help us to get out of this trouble.
- Counsellor The peer helpers are very effective, they can identify students and refer to us for help. We have had more referrals from the peer helpers.
- Parent Counsellors need to be well trained and skilled.

Outlander I am concerned about our new and young counsellors, they have a long way to go. It is a difficult job and overwhelming, we need to nurture the counsellors and provide supervision and guidance.

The Ministry We are choosy about the counsellors. ...Counselling services will be one big way of actually preventing any suicide and I am very positive that with proactive good counsellors, and support for them it will help. I am not saying that we will be able to prevent all of the suicide but it will help.

Counsellor Capacity building for counsellors is important so that they know how to deal with cases professionally. Our current suicide prevention plan on identifying suicidal people, talking about signs and symptoms, are effective not only for students but the staff also. Even for the communities, some parents came and said they were not aware of this information before and it was important. The suicide prevention programs need to be coordinated for the communities and if possible, the monk body too, because they are influential. Bringing in religious leaders who can connect with youth and conduct Choeshed Legdrims because they really work for the students.

Students Teach about precious human life, and the importance of taking care of body, mind and spirit.

[All participants get up and walk toward the school auditorium]

SCENE 4 The sermon – Choeshed Legdrim

[All participants seated facing the spiritual teacher inside the school auditorium]

Narrator The grand conference ends with a religious sermon. All participants assemble at the school auditorium for Choeshed Legdrim led by the Rinpoche. Unlike traditional teachings which are one sided where only the religious Lama speaks, this Choeshed Legdrim format

includes question and answer sessions and panel discussions. The question and answer session is in progress.

Rinpoche Suicide is not the end of the problem if you understand Buddhist teaching, it actually is a starting of another problem because you wake in the afterlife- Bhardo.

Student Suicide is selfish, irresponsible and a dishonouring act. ...Some of them don't care about families, they have families, they have their loved ones who care for them, but due to a small reason they commit, and now it's like a trend for the youth. They always, like even for the small thing, even if the teacher scolds them they cannot take it so, due to small reasons.

Rinpoche In terms of suicide, I will say love is there, maybe it is because they love their parents that they cannot bear to see the disappointment, or they aspire to something that they cannot get, but wisdom is not there, the wisdom to see consequences of your action. Compassion must be accompanied by wisdom. If you fail your exams your parents may suffer for 2 months or one year, you may too. But if you kill yourself your parents suffer their entire life. As children you must try and understand why parents put pressure on you, right?

Atsara I came to realize that while most of the children have now learnt their rights from the Western perspectives, the parents have not evolved according to the needs of the time (Nirola, 2016).

Counsellors We must teach youth to be responsible and do productive work instead of just giving to them, and youth expecting from us. They must be taught to be responsible for making their lives, responsible to their parents and society, this is forgotten by them because we give a lot of things, in fact too much. Youth must be taught to be custodians of the culture, the country. This will take time, it does not happen overnight.

Rinpoche In our culture, equality comes when the younger generation has respect for the elder generation, those that are older than you. At the same time, elders don't abuse but look after the young with love and compassion.

Student boy My parents and teachers say that if you commit suicide once in a lifetime then we commit suicide for next 500 lives.

Rinpoche We are all creatures of habit, and suicide is a mental habit of easily giving up when a difficult issue arises. Whether this life or the next, consciousness is the same. Consciousness continues, and when suicide leaves a strong imprint on your mind, the tendency to act in the same way may appear. On the other hand, we actually say killing ourselves is equivalent to killing a Buddha because there is a Buddha self in each one of us.

Buddhism teaches us that we can always change our life. Life is made of cause and conditions, it is not a destiny, so this means any future you choose, in a way you have control over it, so when you make a choice, a decision, let that be influenced by compassion and wisdom.

[Scene fades into a distance showing a continuing sermon while the narrator takes the stage]

Narrator a soliloquy

Students are hinting at a need to belong, to connect but also want their independence. Schools are asking for independence, but they seek support and autonomy from the Ministry. Perhaps these tensions are a longing to be a part of something without remaining constrained by the rules of that connection. Students are seeking love and care and safe and secure futures. Adult participants are attempting to negotiate their way so that they may better understand the younger generation. School and education participants seem aware of what needs to be done but feel constrained by the current unhelpful education policies, they know the

focus on academic marks is not helpful and needs to change. Principals are calling upon each other to be fair and work together for students' welfare.

The education sector is under pressure from the members of the Bhutanese society to step up; doing is endless and complex. Participants state the need for modern education and traditional values go hand in hand. Also, students being able to reach out to someone for help is seen as an important strategy to save lives. The presence, knowledge and accessibility of these support mechanisms must be made available to students. Amidst this chaos, panic, questioning and asking, the new members of the education community, the school guidance counsellors feel responsible and optimistic in improving the quality of care in the schools. They maintain optimism amidst anxious colleagues who see them as 'saviours' and their services are identified a key suicide prevention strategy.

These voices together imply a need for vigilance in the society. Can this vigilance be created through the checks and balances amongst the members of the society? Are these dialogues and holding each other responsible a part of this check and balance? How may these dialogues be made constructive and engaging? For now, the voices of the parents outside the education community are missing.

A way forward to enhance this dialogue would be to include parents, especially those who may be closely linked to the schools, and those seeking to collaborate. Perhaps they have responses and reflections on collaborating with schools; their views of the education system (school, teachers and principals); and where they see themselves positioned in this system of care for their children.

The doors will be endless and so must the dialogues be. The battle is not lost for there is optimism and it is a hopeful country where elders feel and take responsibility, the Bhutanese are holding on to their values and unique cultural practices while changing for future.

As we take courage to look yonder into realms of Hope
Shall we look beyond here and now, to the borders beyond ours
Nudge ourselves to tell tales and listen to the 'modernised spheres'.

-END-

Chapter 9: Bringing the stories together

Overview of the chapter

The Bhutanese education community members were invited to speak about suicides by school students in the country. Suicide was described as a relational loss for the community, a collective failure of the Bhutanese society. Stories of disconnection from the family, alienation at school, fear of failure, fear of rejection and feeling lost were shared by the participants. The issues of the Bhutanese education system, family practices, and changing community structures were at the forefront of these stories.

In this chapter, I bring together key themes identified in Chapters 4,5,6,7 and 8 in the light of wider discourses drawn from relevant studies around the world. The chapter is structured in four sections. Section one is on seeking meanings of suicide, depicting how participants are trying to speak of suicide by young people, and ways they represent and position themselves. Section two discusses the problem story and factors seen as contributing to suicide, while section three outlines suggestions for suicide prevention, and the benefits of the dialogue. The chapter ends with my reflections as the final section.

Seeking meanings of suicide

Suicide was seen as an “escape” from the tensions of the society, a desperate measure when the young people saw no other options (Tighe et al., 2015, p. 4). This view bears similarity to the definition of suicides by Aboriginal youth in Australia: “kids who don’t necessarily want to be dead but they don’t want to be in life” (Tatz, 2005, p. 77). Shneidman said “suicide is never born out of exaltation or joy” (1998,

p. 245), and similarly a student, Binita, said if people “are happy then they will not do such things”.

At the outset, participants made attempts to rationalize acts of suicide and suicidal people. These discursive processes of sense-making illustrated views and positioning while describing suicide. Participants, both adults and students, constructed suicide as a selfish act, or an act by the immature. They were sympathetic and felt pity for the suiciders, yet they were scared. Participants feared someone else may repeat the act and they were scared of the dead spirits. Similarly, hurt and anger were expressed. Suicide was constructed as an individual choice, an option to cease problems, but on the other hand, life was described as being bound to relationships and responsibilities.

Similar to studies in the West (Roen et al., 2008), suicide was constructed as an irrational act, and suicidal students were othered as those who had no respect for life. Participants, especially the students, could relate to the pressures, tensions, and problems, but most of them did not see themselves as considering suicide. In this sense stigma attached to suicide was visible from the ways participants distanced themselves from the possibility of suicide (Fullager et al., 2007; Roen et al., 2008). There was a general disdain towards acts of suicide, almost a moral judgement. Suicide was defined as killing oneself, and ungraciously ending a precious human life. The act is against the Buddhist “community’s religious beliefs” (Roen et al., 2008, p. 2091), and not a normal death.

In addition to the ways suicide was explained by the Bhutanese community, the factors contributing to suicide in school students are discussed in the next section in the light of the existing research.

Suicide a troubling paradox

The troubling paradox of suicides by school students in Bhutan needed unpacking in terms of its context, time and place. This was done by locating the emerging stories of the cultural evolution of Bhutan in terms of transitions. Transitions here refer to the Bhutanese society being in transition to modernisation; and adolescence as a formative life stage transitioning from childhood to adulthood. In addition, the influence of Buddhist thinking, beliefs and practices on suicide is also discussed. While Durkheim's theories about suicide have been critiqued for their attempt at causality, his metaphorical categories of egoistic, altruistic and anomic suicides still resonate. When a society is disturbed by a major crisis, such as rapid social change, a period of disequilibrium is likely to follow, and adolescents are a particularly vulnerable group at this time.

Transitions contributing to distress felt by the children of Bhutan

Suicide by school students was constructed as a recent phenomenon by the participants, caused by the "pressures of modern society" (R. Evans & Hurrell, 2016, p. 9). Suicide among students was described as a problem that began in the late twentieth century in Bhutan. Bhutan's turn towards modernisation has led to social changes in the country; the society is in transition- negotiating between old ways, and forging new. The elders and planners of the country are constantly in the process of planning for a present and sustainable future. They are cautious, for "uncontrolled social change can bring serious trouble" (Rucker, 1955, p. 305), but the past and the familiar is threatened by a flux of changes. While the elders are figuring out, the younger generations are faced with a sea of changes. They are in transition too, they are figuring out the world, and a place for themselves. In a race to keep abreast with changes which are inevitable, there are tensions, tussles, and losses. Suicide is a social malaise caused by "the cracks and the fissures" (parent participant) of these transitions. These transitions impact the identities of young Bhutanese and show numerous connections to suicide. Rather than seeking to

identify causal relations to suicide, this research has focused on causes of stress for young people in Bhutan today, including societal, community, family, interpersonal and intrapersonal stresses, which have been associated with suicide in the literature and in this research.

Impact of dramatic social and cultural changes

In any changing society, “traditional customs and rules are breaking down, increasing competition, increasing expectation and so on lead to a growth in the suicidogenic impulse” (Hood-Williams, 1996, p. 172). It seems the changes and influences caused by modernisation are causing much public distress in Bhutan. In this “transvaluation of values” (Mills, 1959, p. 14), there are losses, and the country is dealing with a crisis of losing young people to suicide. Mills states that the mechanics of change in the underdeveloped world break up ancient ways of life. Vague expectations become urgent demands. Loss of the old ways of the culture can shift societies into states of panic, tensions, and upheaval (1959). His ideas remain central to this day and relevant to the context of this study. They provide an understanding of a changing society and its intersection with personal troubles. Bhutanese participants suggested Bhutan has joined the great modernist wave of change. Bhutan, the tiny medieval survivor, is the midst of all sorts of push, pull, shove and ruptures of old ways. Bhutan’s remarkable leap into modernity within a span of less than 60 years has resulted in a feeling of panic among the adults, who have leadership, planning and guidance responsibilities. Modernisation brought rural-to-urban migration, changes to materialistic values over spiritualism, and the expansion of the educational system.

The surge of new technological change, institutional change, changes in social practices, lifestyle and relationships are seen as changing the face of the Bhutanese society. Giddens (1971, p. 111) said “modern societies have caused individuals to be disconnected from others”, similarly nuclear families in Bhutan are replacing

the once large and extended family structures. Relational values are shifting as the family elders are not physically around to take care of younger children, and working adults are often unable to support their ageing parents. In most families, both parents are working to make ends meet. The double-edged sword is at work. Issues vary in rural sites with poverty and illiteracy of parents identified as possible contributors to the neglect of a child in those areas.

The adult participants were disconcerted that the Bhutanese younger generation wants to be Westernised. Adults feared that the cultural identity of being Bhutanese may be lost in the changes of the modern world where “heartless media and soulless advertising suck the soul out of our unsuspecting children” (Powdyel, 2013, p. 48); yet they want their children to do well at school so they can compete for good jobs. The younger generation is flung into a flurried world, and their experiences are mediated by the media. Bruner (1996, p. 15) said media depictions add to young people’s “interpretations of the world which are multivocal and ambiguous”. In the same vein, the Bhutanese youth are exposed to the ways of foreign modernized cultures.

An increasing cultural gap between the adolescents and their parents affects their relationship and communication (Haim, 1974, p. 177). Adults in their roles as parents and teachers concurred that most of the time they couldn’t understand the younger generation. The rapid transitions caused by the country’s development had cast “a generational gap” between the old and the young (Walcott, 2011, p. 263). The Bhutanese parents and their children are living different social realities. It seems that the differences are making it difficult for these two generations to support and make sense of each other’s experiences. Parents and teachers teach moral tales to the younger generation by talking about the hardships they went through in their times. Walking barefoot for days to get to their school, juggling domestic chores and school work, were some stories from adults the younger generation in urban areas could not connect with. The younger generation finds

these stories dated; the troubles of their time are different. However, the development landscape of Bhutan is unequal, because youth in the rural regions of Bhutan continue to walk to school (Walcott, 2011, p. 262) and come home to tend cattle and other domestic chores, but less so than in earlier times. Now boarding schools accommodate most students and provide a second home.

The adults spoke of responsibility, claiming that the current younger generation had fewer responsibilities compared to the older generations. For instance, one school Principal narrated his domestic responsibilities of having to look after horses. He said he had no time to think of himself as he had responsibilities before school and after school. In this sense, adults wondered if the suicides by students were driven by their selfishness. Here once again an individualist view of oneself is seen as influencing suicide amongst young people.

The students also reflected this individualist view, that although suicide may be driven by pain, it is selfish because the victims did not think beyond themselves. Suicide in this sense was constructed as a selfish, individualistic act, similar to a Durkhemian view on egoistic suicide which is seen as a result of moral individualism in modern societies. Giddens (1971, p. xiii) said individual freedom and self-fulfillment are the primary values in modern societies, and this seems to be becoming more prominent in Bhutan. In addition, this also struck a chord with the Durkhemian (1952) thinking that more responsibility bound an individual into roles and to other individuals. This view is explained by Stack (2001, p. 22) stating when the individual thinks less about themselves and more about the well-being of the larger group, they become less preoccupied with themselves and their perceived problem. Participants seemed to refer to this idea by providing evidence of their responsibilities. A few students said they would not commit suicide as they had to look after their parents and family members.

Adolescence the troubled transitional development phase

Child-rearing practices influence the nature of children's relationships with the world around them (Kelleher & Chambers, 2003, p. 172), and these practices vary across cultures. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the psychological theories in the West describe adolescence as a distinct phase of life. Erikson (1950, pp. 227-228) calls adolescence a stage of identity versus role diffusion when adolescents go through physiological changes and are concerned about their roles and expectations in families and the society they live in. Theories of adolescence posit this stage makes them vulnerable as they figure out their identity. They may have not acquired the experiences of life to enable a knowing that an adult often possesses (Chandler & Marcia, 2003). This notion of adolescence in the West was similar to the ways participants spoke of the school children in Bhutan.

The National Youth Policy (DYS, 2011) and National Law (RGOB, 2004) defines young people as those between 13-24 years of age. Those below 12 years are categorized as children. Traditionally children are called *Alu tsu* and a child is called *Alu*, these terms are also most commonly used to refer to students or a student, while *Nazhoen* is used to refer to the younger generation. Adult participants commonly used the terms children (*Alu tsu*) and child (*Alu*), and rarely used the term student or young people (*Nazhoen*). On the other hand, students used the term "we the youth" or "we students". The use of these terms was imbued with roles and expectations that each conveyed. Young people and youth carried a sense of responsibility and autonomy, while children or child were cast as immature, innocent, gullible, vulnerable and needing to be taught. One school principal's comment was "you can't beat them anymore, they are not children anymore" implying children needed disciplining and were expected to be submissive. As Foucault said, for "school children, there is no copying, no noise, no chatter, no waste of time" (1995, p. 201), similarly school children in Bhutan were described by the adults as the generation needing supervision, and as objects to be taught.

On the other hand, the Bhutanese young people who are seeking autonomy may feel confused about their roles. Sometimes they are called school children, sometimes Nazhoen. This difference in language use may reflect an ambiguity, a confusion which is experienced by these young people.

Also, school children or adolescents learn to relate to themselves, to others and the world around them primarily through their families. So, in this sense, education begins at home, identity formation begins in the family context (Nelson, 2002). Parents are role models, sources of praise, nurturers and caretakers (Berman et al., 2006, p. 107), but their own experience may have been a quick transition from childhood to adulthood, with no adolescence phase in between. Bhutanese students were clear about the significance of their parents for their wellbeing. Stories of students who had attempted suicide and three completed suicides correlated with family conflicts and family disintegration.

Impact of family relationships

Adult participants highlighted the changes in child rearing practice, increasing family disintegration in Bhutan. An adult participant said, “when I came home my mother was home with hot food”. This parental attention, according to participants, was not available to all the current younger generation. School adolescents may be left on their own to manage and monitor their time and activities. Mostly, participants reported increasing family disintegration which referred to divorce and parental separation. From the thirty student participants, six students [one from each school] lived with a single parent. All student participants shared stories of their friend’s distress, which they attributed to parental conflict and separation. Students spoke of divorce and parental conflict with fear and sadness. For instance, one student said there is “emotional torture because of their parents’ divorce and they lack attention. They are not able to solve problems, and they are not able to share problems”. This supports Stack’s (1982, p. 53) view, that an increase in divorce and

strife within families where parent-child relationships are filled with anger and hostility leaves the children emotionally prone to self-destruction. According to the participants, three students who committed suicide came from families where parents had separated or divorced. Amongst the deceased, two lived with their step-parents and siblings. The changing lifestyles, urbanization, and freedom to choose self-fulfillment were seen as culprits that caused fragmentation in family bonds. For instance, the divorce rate was seen as high because couples gave in easily and chose to go their own ways. Two students spoke of their father leaving their family for another woman, they expressed a strong sense of rejection.

Literature around the world shows that social support and family connectedness are buffers against suicide with the lack of support and connectedness causes distress and a sense of isolation and tendencies to self-harm and suicide among the young of the population (Chandler & Proulx, 2006; Cheng et al., 2010; Chu et al., 2010). Findings from this study also confirm that when homes were in disarray, and adults were consumed with their conflicts, children felt alone and invisible.

The advent of modern education has also created a shift in parenting practices in families where parents are illiterate. School adolescents and young people are seen as the modern generation, and some illiterate parents may feel helpless not being able to support their children with school work and decisions around subject choices. In the face of increasing youth suicide in the country, adults feared children were too sensitive to criticisms and comments. An adult participant said, "I don't know what to say to this generation anymore, anything we say can be taken wrongly". In this way, the younger generation of children was seen by adults as being vulnerable compared to the previous generations. Maybe adults felt afraid, not knowing how to provide guidance to the younger generation. Could this reflect that adults have not been able to differentiate between childhood and adolescence? This would make it difficult to distinguish between the needs of children and adolescents.

Education in transition: the narrow alleys

Education is highly valued in Bhutanese society, and seen as a road to a successful life (Choden & Sarkar, 2013, p. 513). However, limited access to government scholarships for High School students puts tremendous pressure to perform well and score high marks. The school judges the student's performance, and the student responds by evaluating himself or herself in turn (Bruner, 1996, p. 37). Bhutanese students face significant consequences in terms of the aspirations for the future.

Times have changed for the Bhutanese society. Society functions within certain rules and rules are in turn shaped by the society. Looking at what rules govern the education system in Bhutan and what has led to these pressures experienced by the younger generation, I reflect on Dewey, who said: "education is [a] means to a better life" (1986, p. 242). It seems there are deeper issues to consider in terms of the Bhutanese education system. Students told of the intensity of pressures and tensions faced at home, and in between their schools and home.

Expectations and pressures linked to education

The self often thinks and speaks with the words of others (Aveling, Gilespeie, & Cornish, 2004, p. 2), each of us measures their worth through others. Identities are shaped by context and relationships we enter into throughout our life. This reasoning is relevant to the Bhutanese school adolescents. Children make sense of themselves and meanings of their life in relationship with others. Their sense of self is validated through their roles in relationships. Without positive validations, they may think they cease to exist: "I felt as though I was invisible" [Shraddha]. Unhelpful messages such as 'you are useless' may come from their homes and schools when they cannot live up to unrealistic expectations to be something else or someone else. Dominant societal or institutional narratives operate to control our lives in ways that can be taken for granted. Messages such as Go Machoep [good for nothing] "constrain abilities to story life experiences differently" (Boje & Rosile,

2010, p. 899). For those young people in distress, who already feel unwanted, “society has spoken” (Halbwachs, 1978, p. 303). These feelings intensify until they see no way out or ahead. Stories from participants showed that parental expectations to perform well in schools are immense. According to Deb et al. (2014), most parents in Asia measured their success in the society through their children’s performance in the schools. This is true in the case of Bhutanese parents.

Perhaps a vestige from the earlier imported Indian education system, the Bhutanese education system is known for its “extreme anxiety provoking role” (Deb et al., 2014). Similar to Japan, the exam-oriented education “functions as a sorting machine” (Yoneyama, 1999, p. 147), sorting students to go to higher classes, sorting for scholarships, sorting for government jobs, and it also seems it is adding to the stresses experienced by the students. The structured Bhutanese education system is traditional, and its practices are described as limiting the creativity of students; including students with different abilities. In this ways, Education system in Bhutan is seen as causing significant stress among its school students.

In addition, as Yoneyama (1999, p. 12) found in Japan, school assessments are not only in the form of written exams but also on-going assessments which mean students’ behaviours and conduct are constantly under observation. The pressure to perform in front of their teachers and principals is constant. Slee (2014, p. 448) found that the demands of schooling cause distress in students which they may express in ways unacceptable to the school. The same study stated that increasing substance use, truancy and forms of violence may be some forms of resistance to the uninteresting and unaccommodating demands of an education system. It makes sense to consider Fullager’s thinking that “suicide in these terms is a matter of becoming waste – the failed or shamed self, the life that did not live up to the expectations” of the society (2003, p. 292). Students feel pushed through standardized tests and exams, which set most students up for failure: “as students, we have tension all the time” (Kado).

Concerns around quality of care in the schools

Participants said there is more to schools, and the overall education system than just the academic prospects. The quality of care provided in the schools, student-teacher relationships, and parent involvement in the schools were described as integral aspects which need more attention. These aspects are further impacted by the structures and policies of the institution.

Schools in Bhutan are challenged by a “lack of infrastructure, overcrowded classes and low motivation amongst teachers” (Gordon, 2013, p. 290). A large number of students compared to teachers and caregivers in the school could cause some students to be neglected.

In addition, multiple programs called extra-curricular activities such as sports, scouting education, school health programs, school agriculture programs, school counselling programs are crammed into schools. Amidst the hectic school schedule students are asking for time to relax, and just connect to others in the school without the pressures; Wangchuk [student participant] said

we have seven periods [classes] per day, one period should be given as free period where we can share our feelings and problems, where we can solve and read books, where we can get time to speak to others .

School principals, too, are questioning the usefulness of these programs, and the curriculum. They are asking for autonomy in making decisions around curriculum and program planning. Currently, the Ministry of Education provides them with a prescribed standardized curriculum. Principals desire freedom and flexibility to develop needs-based curriculum and program planning for their schools. But the principals require the Ministry of Education to monitor and ensure that the current school policies are coherently implemented across schools. It seems schools expect a top-down policy framework to ensure uniformity amongst all schools, yet desire

decentralized power for each school to make decisions about their programs and curriculum. The complexity and dilemmas over what to hold onto and what to let go were visible amongst the school principals.

It was evident from the interviews that policy directives from the Ministry of Education were not practised consistently in all the schools. According to the participants, implementation of policies and rules were up to the school management and leadership. First, the policy of not allowing students to repeat in the same school if they failed twice was seen unhelpful and irrational by some Principals. Some schools retained and allowed students to repeat out of good will, while some schools failed the students. Often students who become a poor investment need to be managed or cut out of the school to lessen their negative impact on the school's reputation (Slee, 2014, p. 455). Secondly, the suspension and the expulsion of students were identified as counterproductive practices. Participants said schools, in the name of discipline and utilitarian impulses, pushed students out of their schools. Third, although corporal punishment was banned by the Ministry of Education, its practice was still evident. It is common knowledge that corporal punishment has served no constructive purpose but is an outcome and maybe a catalyst for violence. Students in the past have been injured by teachers in the name of corporal punishment. Cases are reported in the news ("Corporal Punishment in Schools," 2014). There is a current debate on the appropriateness of corporal punishment in the schools of Bhutan. Some say corporal punishment works and must be retained. Some say it must be practised in moderation for cases where nothing else works ("Corporal Punishment in Schools," 2014). Like in the Japanese school education, where punishment is at the heart of the discipline (Yoneyama, 1999), discipline often means corporal punishment in the Bhutanese schools. A proper examination of the use of corporal punishment in the Bhutanese schools and its impact is overdue. For Johnson, corporal punishment incorrectly models violence as an acceptable way of dealing with difficulties; it does not teach students alternative ways of behaving (1992, p. 81). In Australia, corporal

punishment is incompatible with a commitment to child protection and to the reduction of domestic and social violence. Concepts and practices of child protection through the Convention on the Rights of the Child ("Corporal Punishment in Schools," 2014) have already arrived in the Bhutanese education system, but yet again this is a Western approach in practice. Students from the urban schools spoke of being "beaten" by teachers.

Journal notes

Dated 7th November 2014

During my data collection, and on my way to interview a school principal, I walked past the school's general office and heard the school vice principal threatening to beat two high school students. There were a few teachers and the school administration staff present. I stood there at the scene, as I had to wait for the school Principal to finish his prior appointment. Both teenage boys had their heads low, they appeared tormented, but they were pleading sorry, while the vice principal lashed out words I felt were crude and disrespectful. My counsellor's mind couldn't help reflecting on the effects of such oppressive behaviours by leaders and teachers of our education system on the students. Or could it be my Western-influenced counsellor brain at work?

I wondered if children mirror and learn from society, did these two boys just learn that one can be spoken to and threatened thus to get a message across? It could be that students resist by retaliating verbally, physically, or with violence in such extreme cases of mistreatment. Could these behaviours of teachers be a reflection of the autocratic teacher-student relationships in Bhutanese schools which are embedded in the traditional hierarchal relationship between an adult and a child? This traditional pattern of communication was identified as a barrier to open discussions and connections between teachers and the students.

In the face of constant pressures and demands created by society, school students battle ambiguous policies and practices in the schools. The Bhutanese adolescents seemed tense and confused, they are worried about themselves, their family members, and their friends. Some of these students feel isolated, and perhaps they are the ones who are seen to fall through the cracks and lost to suicides.

Again, participants spoke of some school rules that are applied with rigidity. Non-negotiable rules such as rules on hairstyles, school attendance, school uniforms and more are applied without any explanations. Two recent suicide cases that occurred within the school premises led me to wonder if the act performed in that location and context bore messages from the deceased. One suicide in particular, which was also widely spoken of amongst the participants, hinted at a message that the deceased may have wanted the school authority to see his death. Participants described rumours of the deceased who was a day student leaving the Principal's office after a request was refused. He hanged himself in the dormitory. A few participants wondered if the deceased wanted to show his anguish to the Principal and hung himself right there, in the school.

Findings also showed that in the Bhutanese schools, students were not allowed to engage in boy-girl relationships. They were most popularly referred to as illicit relationships. Such relationships were deemed unhealthy causing teenage pregnancies and distraction. School rules were seen as restrictive and oppressive to growth, and heavily blamed for the suicide pact of two secondary students in 2014 (Rai, 2014a). Having a boyfriend or girlfriend in the school was seen as taboo in most schools. This was evident in the interviews as most students named the relationship as illicit.

Students entering a new environment like a new school faced excitement and stress. Tika, a student participant shared feeling lonely and sad when she arrived at her current school. In addition, the story of the suicide of a 16-year-old boy was connected to stress around the new school environment. According to the students, the deceased was new to the boarding school and, so he was unknown to many teachers. He got in trouble with the school for breaking rules because he would shirk school to go home.

Studies have documented and confirmed the prevalence of gender bias against Bhutanese women (Roder, 2011). Some girls participants said that the society and school communities solely blamed girls for teenage pregnancy, girls and their bodies are in this way constructed as objects. Girls were described as being more vulnerable and sensitive causing them to resort to self-harm. Findings from this study confirm with other studies that girls may have a higher tendency to self-harm (Adrian, Zeman, Erdley, Lisa, & Sim, 2010; Wilchek-Aviad & Malka, 2016).

Finally, school leadership and the quality of teachers were seen as integral factors in implementing the policies and practices within schools. Two suicides reported by participants were also strongly linked to conflict with their school principals. In addition, students complained about teachers who were unapproachable. As mentioned earlier in Chapter 4, the traditional age hierarchy may constrain open communication between the teacher and a student. Teachers with traditional views were seen as unhelpful in dealing with the modern younger generation. In addition, the teacher training colleges in the country function as a replica of the school systems, which means future teachers are trained to replicate and enforce old systems, suggesting there is an urgency to address these old unhelpful practices so that students may be able to connect and relate to their teachers better.

Gaps between schools and parents

Although Bhutan's education policy promotes equal responsibility and ownership of parents in a child's education (RGOB, 2015, p. 4), most schools found it difficult to get parents to come to meetings and collaborate. Findings confirmed poor collaboration practices between the school and the parents. In several cases, family circumstances were major factors impacting parental involvement in the school (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Conflicts in the family and a low level of belief in their ability to help their children are likely to be factors why parents avoid contact with schools. It may also be that getting involved with the school is not their current

priority or they “view that such involvement will not bring about positive outcomes for their children” (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). In addition, some school principals and teachers can be unapproachable which widens the gap between parents and the school. This distance creates a privileged position of modern knowledge versus illiterate parents, whose knowledge is not valued.

This study also suggests that an “increasing cultural gap between the adolescent and their parents and family can affect their relationship and communication” (Haim, 1974, p. 177). Bhutan has had a hierarchal social system where the young are expected to respect the elders. Traditionally elders designated responsibilities and were seen as the carriers of knowledge (Walcott, 2011, p. 262) and children as learners. On one hand, this practice served its purpose of maintaining a communal bond based on respect and order, but this hierarchal expectation also seemed to create barriers between the children and their parents. This runs in contrast to the modern education which encourages open communication for healthy relationships. Reports from participants confirmed a lack of collaboration between the school and parents in the cases of suicidal students.

Impact of religious beliefs

Similar to studies in the West (Golston, Molock, Whitebeck, & Murakami, 2008) and Asian regions (Jegannathan et al., 2016), this study shows that Bhutanese students are influenced by their religious beliefs around life and death. Firstly, because suicide is a silenced topic, students are struggling to make sense of the death of others, and their relationship with those deceased. Religious beliefs about the Bhardo and afterlife upset Bhutanese students. Participants indicated that students who lost a family member, friend, a relative or a classmate had not been able to talk about their loss. This may leave the younger children in a state of confusion or despair, as they grapple with grief over the loss of a loved one (Mitchell et al., 2006). Secondly, religious beliefs about rebirth are misunderstood

by students, children may not see suicide as the final death but that they would come back or somehow survive to see the atonement of others or the act of suicide may be seen as an escape from the current life with problems.

Having discussed the problem story of contributing factors to suicides by school students, I propose that people and societies are constantly responding to changes so that they may survive, adapt and grow. The next section documents “innovative ideas of how to move this country into the next century without sacrificing its culture and young people along the way” (Gordon, 2013, p. 289). Alternative stories and responses to the problem of suicides by school students in the country are discussed.

Evolving ideas and practices: developing alternative stories

There were lessons from positive experiences and expressions of the students and adults which added to the stories of success. Initiatives of the SGCs were linked to these alternative stories. This section works with hopeful stories of success, rather than simply highlighting problems. Dewey (1986, p. 247) said “the departure from the old solves no problems”, so these existing stories need to be seen and their voices amplified by adding knowledge and practices from the literature considered for this study. If listened to carefully, these stories from the participants inspire and influence innovations and initiatives. I start by discussing some recent changes in the Bhutanese education system to set the storyline of evolving practices, and then I bring in the initiatives, lessons and hopes as responses and resolutions.

Bhutan in seeking “a modern sense of self” (Walcott, 2011, p. 253) has witnessed significant changes in its education system over recent years. The Bhutanese government has high aspirations for the country by “intelligently planning and directing social change” (Rucker, 1955, p. 308), but navigating between the

valuable age-old practices and embracing modern ways are complex. Education is a constant “work in progress” (Bruner, 1996, p. 23), and the Bhutanese education system has had tremendous achievements since its establishment in the early 1990s (MoE, 2013). Amongst some of its new developments, the Nationwide Educating for Gross National Happiness [GNH] in 2011 envisioned a revolutionary concept for education, its vision stating “all is not lost” and aspiring for a GNH-school where everybody succeeds (Powdyel, 2013, pp. 49-53). Re-thinking the role of education for this precious segment of the society the younger generations, the GNH framework emphasizes a holistic, environmentally sensitive, culturally enlightened, economically responsible, and people-centred approach (Powdyel, 2013). This thinking seems in contrast to the current traditional approach which is based on a one-dimensional academic pursuit, standardized subjects and tests and restrictive opportunities to explore creativity. The GNH framework for schools although a novel concept is finding its way into practice. As part of the initiative, mindfulness practices have commenced in the schools to help students with self-reflection and managing stress. There is an emphasis on nurturing relationships between the parents and the school and on school-community collaborations geared toward community vitality (Zangmo, 2014, p. 22). These practices are intended to infuse collective and shared values amongst the younger generation. In addition, discussions and developments are required to practically integrate the “idealistically driven practices” (Gordon, 2013; Ura, 2013; Walcott, 2011; Zangmo, 2014). The planning and negotiations have started in the schools and the Ministry of Education in Bhutan.

If idealistic GNH best practices succeed in Bhutan, they may hold answers to many of the concerns articulated by the Bhutanese education community. It seems a GNH infused curriculum will get rid of the standardized shallow examinations and curricula; competition will be replaced by a shared collective vision and collaboration amongst community members. It may also fulfil the following

elements, identified by the participants as components of an ideal secondary school suicide prevention program

- Education policy for different levels of school [primary, middle and secondary] prioritizing the welfare and care of students
- School programs and policies acknowledging and addressing generational gaps between adults and the younger generation
- Schools tailor their programs to the needs of their students instead of having to conduct standardized or random co-curricular activities. This also includes suicide awareness and education program tailored to the needs of the school.

Findings from this research contribute to the evolving school education system that the Bhutanese society is seeking, particularly in response to the phenomenon of suicides by students. Suicide prevention is a complex social process where uncertainty, resistance, and negotiated meanings are defining aspects (J. White et al., 2012, p. 353), and all participants believed that suicides are preventable.

Some ideas for school suicide prevention

Some participants felt there might not be a need for a separate suicide prevention program but an integrated care system for the students. An integrated care system is systemic in nature, and not separate from existing services in the schools. Participants suggested that an integrated care program be initiated at all levels of schools. Similar to Miller's (2011, p. 11) findings, participants suggested these programs would be more efficient if introduced with children in their elementary and middle schools and continued as they grow older. The following sections discuss various suggestions that may contribute to the envisioned integrated care program for schools.

School leadership and policies

Erbacher et al. (2015, p. 8) found that promising resources for suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention in the schools in the West continue to face challenges because leadership in the schools may largely remain uninformed about suicide. School principals in Bhutan have the authority to implement and interpret policies and guidelines in the schools. Good collaboration between the school principal and the SGCs has resulted in the proactive implementation of the guidance and counselling programs. Principals who were proactive and open to collaboration and consultation created vibrant school communities. The leadership of the school influenced the school environment. Students saw the importance of active participation of their school principals in the suicide responses and care of students. Leadership in the school also determined the collaborative practices of the school with parents and the communities. This supports Kladifko's (2013, p. 54) view that getting better public support, minimizing criticism, and collaborating for ideas and resources help educate students better. Such practices enable community empowerment and move the school's impact beyond its gates.

School counselling

Students and principals articulated the usefulness and benefits of having a school guidance counsellor in their school. School guidance counsellors were seen as modernized responses to modernized times. There was an expectation that they are and must be different to traditional teachers and caregivers. Although school counselling has evolved since the mid-nineties in Bhutan, it was still resisted as a Western notion by some members of the education community. A few members within and outside the education system remained critical of counselling, while some didn't see much choice but to hope it may help. Regardless of the resistances and barriers presented, participating students and principals found counselling services invaluable in the schools. Initiatives of the SGCs in the school communities were mainly impacted by support of their school principal, followed by support

from other members of the school. SGCs were identified as the focal point of contact between the parents and the school, and the community. According to the principals and the SGCs, school student problems reduced significantly after guidance and counselling programs were initiated in the schools. The roles of the SGCs are stated in the *Guidance and Counselling Framework for schools in Bhutan* (MoE, 2010). The SGCs services are not limited to the students or teachers. Even parents approach them for support. Some SGCs also provide consultation to other schools without counselling services. They conduct student needs assessments, initiate guidance curriculum, and provide direct counselling services amidst continued resistance from a few teachers. There was an indication that the success of the school counselling depended on the knowledge and expertise of the SGCs and support of the school leadership.

Collaborative practices with parents

Yoneyama's (1999, pp. 15-16) study of the Japanese High School found that the composite experience of the student, which is closely linked with life at home, impacts the overall sense of well-being of each individual student. Studies from Africa and North America have confirmed the benefits of including parents in the education of their child, suggesting that the overall focus of any student care program should address the totality of experiences (Colley, 2014; Epstein, 1995; S. H. King & Goodwin, 2002). Collaborative practices in suicide prevention in Bhutanese schools must have clear aims, with curriculum content developed in consultation with students and their parents. Currently, schools in Bhutan have the School Based Parenting Education Program (SPEA), as an initiative to provide awareness amongst parents on the emerging youth issues such as understanding adolescence and substance abuse. The way SPEA is taught varies across schools depending on the facilitator. Generally, SGCs facilitate. Some teach it like a school curriculum, while some facilitate discussions. Although the curriculum is intended to bridge the generational gap and improve communication between parents and

their children, the risk may be that parents are only taught how to be a parent in a modern world and this takes away the confidence of the parents in their own abilities. The question of who is the expert in raising and caring for the student remains at the centre of all these competing claims and appeals. I return to this question of who is the expert at the end of this chapter.

Student Peer programs

Studies show that peer leaders programs in schools as interventions have been effective (Wyman et al., 2010). Similarly, the student Peer Helpers program was identified as a helpful component in the Bhutanese school care system. The program worked in three dimensions, firstly it benefited the student Peer Helpers themselves; secondly, the SGCs had a reliable support network in the student population; and other students had an additional source of help amongst themselves. Schepp & Biocca's (1991, p. 61) study based in the US found that student Peer Helpers were able to identify students requiring help more quickly than the parents and school personnel. In the same vein, student participants confirmed that adolescents confided more amongst their peers than with the adults.

The student Peer Helpers program is increasingly gaining popularity amongst the students in Bhutan, but caution must be taken to avoid unrealistic expectations of student Peer Helpers to provide counselling. The risk is that student Peer Helpers cast themselves or are cast by others into expert roles. This divide amongst students of the problematic (students seeking help) and the experts (Peer Helpers) was already visible.

Media education

Print and social media have a significant impact on youth in schools and the literate society in Bhutan. Media reports influence everyday understandings of

community members and professionals (Fullager et al., 2007, p. 11). The media narratives on the past suicides by school students negatively impacted the dialogue between parents and the schools; conflicts increased between the school, the media and the parents. Education for media on reporting suicides is crucial in any society (A. Beautrais et al., 2008, p. 39), but absent in Bhutan. Alternatively, media was described as a powerful medium which can be utilized to promote positive reinforcements in society (A. Beautrais et al., 2008, p. 40). The media, having the potential to amplify alternative stories of aspirations, hope and creativity in the society, was evident in the discussions.

Curriculum and spiritual values

The school academic curriculum was seen as another potential dimension for furthering a suicide prevention initiative. The need for a separate curriculum similar to the gatekeepers training (Capp, Deane, & Lambert, 2001) run by the SGCs was stated. The Dzongkha (national language) school subject was viewed as a helpful instrument in combating suicide. The curriculum was seen to promote teachings on the preciousness of human life, and other Buddhist values which promoted appreciation and understanding of life from a Buddhist perspective.

There do not appear to be many research studies on Buddhism and suicide (Leong, Leach, Yeh, & Chou, 2007). There is potential to examine how Buddhist teachings and beliefs are interpreted for their pragmatic use by the young in Bhutan. Durkheim's (1952) view on religion acting as a buffer against suicide is supported and expanded by other studies on young people. Constructive and cherished spiritual values and religion amongst the young can provide strength and faith during their troubled times (Donahue & Benson, 1995; Golston et al., 2008; Stack, 2001; Warren, Lerner, & Phelps, 2011).

An interesting view was presented by one of the school guidance counsellors about seeing the impact of religious practices on the elderly in Bhutan. He said that

worldwide suicide in the elderly was known to be high but it is rare to hear of suicides by the elderly in Bhutan. There is no known evidence for this view, but if this is a fact, it could be that “the social support derived from religious faith and networks provide a buffer against life’s crises” (Stack, 2001, p. 25). It is common practice in Bhutan for the majority of the elderly to spend their time in spiritual pursuit. It is seen as a preparation for the afterlife and rebirth, death is not seen as annihilation and loss, but a doorway, and the most crucial moment of our lives (S. Rinpoche, 2012, p. 8). Bhutanese elders devote themselves to prayers, prostration and circumambulation of temples and monasteries. The contrast with the tasks and expectations of adolescence are stark.

Many Bhutanese youths, although living in a modern era continue to cherish Buddhist spiritual values, they value the teachings received through their Dzongkha teachers, their grandparents and a few through the Choeshed Legdrim conducted at the school. There is potential to explore ways of transmitting helpful cultural values and practices through the school curriculum and programs. While initiatives such as Choeshed Legdrim and Dzongkha texts were commended, students and adults said these are not enough. A review of the current initiatives and consultation with the students and teachers may be undertaken to ascertain their usefulness and way forward. Views and perspectives on the curriculum also suggested that students are looking for a match between what is taught in the school, and aspects of their everyday living. Perhaps, like a Yiddish Passover Seder (Myerhoff, 2008), schools can link their students and grandparents.

Improve teacher- student relationships

Students feeling connected to their schools has been identified as a significant factor for young people to experience fulfilling school and growing-up experiences (Yip et al., 2005). Students are closest to their class teachers in the Bhutanese school system. The class teacher has access and opportunity to work at the heart of the student care system, and to liaise with other key people such as the school guidance

counsellor and other subject teachers. Evidence of healthy and nurturing relationships between the class teachers and participants was evident in the findings. They indicate the potential role of the respective class teachers in the school care system.

Suicide awareness, education and preparedness

Dimensions of preparedness required in the schools can be represented as providing access to the right information and support and being prepared for post suicide responses. The death of a student by suicide is like throwing a rock into a pond with ripple effects in the school and community. The impact may be greater than ever before with the advent of social networks (Erbacher et al., 2015, p. 8) and media coverage. Students talked about suicide, especially of completed suicides of other young people. They sought information from the media and heard rumours from friends. This showed that students must have access to the right information. The absence of discussion merely serves to reinforce the stigma and taboo. This raises the vexed issue of how suicide might become part of public and professional discourse where emotional difficulties, existential dilemmas, fears about life and understanding of death can be safely explored in a way that is respectful of young people's desire for knowledge and understanding of these issues (Fullager et al., 2007, p. 10). The play in Chapter 8 illustrated how this could happen.

Schools must make space for creative and constructive dialogues on issues such as suicide. Such forums can be used to widen understandings of suicides and their impact amongst the students. In addition, dialogues, if guided sensibly, may offer therapeutic spaces for students. Responding to grief and loss issues and establishing effective communication on suicide and concepts of death are seen as crucial components of interventions with children (Mitchell et al., 2006; Wojtkowiak, Wild, & Egger, 2012).

Furthermore, adults including some SGCs seemed nervous and unsure of what to say and how to respond to students' expressions of suicidal tendencies. They felt they didn't know what to do because they were not professionally trained and prepared. Some adults feared that to openly talk about the topic of suicides with children could amplify any suicidal tendency in the child. Some of them said they were unsure if the children were just seeking attention or threatening suicide to get their way. Being able to identify and provide interventions and referrals for further support were seen as a key suicide prevention strategy. They were hinting at gatekeepers training (Capp et al., 2001) without naming it. The SGCs have commenced negotiating ways of providing suicide awareness and education programs in the schools.

The absence of post-suicide responses indicated that suicides by school students are a new and an emerging phenomenon. The Bhutanese schools did not have to combat suicides until recently. Suicides may have occurred but were not in the forefront as an issue in the traditional setting or perhaps it was silenced. It seemed in most cases of school suicides chaos, conflicts, and negligence of students occurred in the absence of coordinated responses. The *Guidance and Counselling Framework for schools in Bhutan* handbook (MoE, 2010) provide critical incident guidelines as post suicide responses, but the schools where suicides had occurred were not aware of these developments nor did they have a school guidance counsellor at the time the suicides occurred.

Talking about suicide; moving forward

Talking and sharing was identified as a problem-solving practice amongst students. Students are looking to connect and feel supported and make sense of the difficulties but some do not find that support in the schools, homes and in friendships. Like the anomie suicide described by Durkheim, suicides by Bhutanese students appear to have derived from emotions associated with disappointment

(Giddens, 1971, pp. 112-113). To address suicide among students, it is also important for young people in the schools to talk about suicidal possibilities in a way that helps them negotiate the tension between perceiving suicide as a viable option in the face of disappointments (Bettridge & Favreau, 1995, p. 2096). And as proposed by Fullager et al. (2007, p. 1) in Australia, there is value in considering how to create a dialogue between adults and young people who might benefit from engaging with the views of each other.

Hints for constructive conversations, and the need for “participatory spaces” were seen throughout the interviews, and their benefits provided in literature (Drewery, 2004; Hirano, Giannecchini, Magalhaes, Munhoz, & Croso, 2013). Student participants’ constant desire to connect and find creative spaces to talk; adults desiring to better relate to the younger generation; and adults talking about each other’s responsibility led to the creation of an imagined community dialogue presented in Chapter 8. The dialogue which is staged as a play showing an imagined education conference illustrates that reasons and factors influencing suicide are known by the participants, but that knowing is not enough. Talking is a beginning to resolving the problem. Talking about suicide is attached with taboo and stigma in many cultures and remains a barrier to help (Calear et al., 2016; Fullager et al., 2007; Sullivan, 2001), but in this play, personal stories of suicide attempts are heard by significant members of the education community. Girls are talking about gender bias, and students have help from Atsara to state their concerns about rules on boy-girlfriend relationships in schools. This process proposes that individual stories have the power to shape and revise dominant public narratives (Blix, Hamran, & Normann, 2013, p. 273). In addition, the play suggests that acts of identity constructions are constitutive and ongoing, of “being and becoming, belonging and longing to belong” (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 202). The imagined play in Chapter 8 shows the shift in participants, wherein the suicidal students have become peer helpers, their experience has become knowledge, and they consultants. Similarly, the counsellor and the principal are also speaking as parents in the dialogue. This

illustrates the constructionist view that people have multiple selves and self is the product of discursive contexts (Drewery, 2004, p. 339).

In the play, ambiguities are brought to the fore. For example, the principal thinks corporal punishment is not the problem creating suicide and Atsara responds with evidence saying corporal punishment is harmful. And the play shows how some topics remain ambiguous and that characters need to and can return to them at some point. Similarly, this imagined play portrays the benefit of talking to each other, instead of about each other. In this dialogue, they are clarifying, justifying together, and seeking resolutions as one group. The play as a dialogue also offers an opportunity to invite other characters whose participation will be useful to the ongoing dialogue.

The play also enhances traditional spiritual values and beliefs cherished by participants. In the final scene of Act 4 of the play, participants are invited to Choeshed Legdrim which is facilitated by a Rinpoche. Here they dialogue on beliefs around preciousness of human life and stigma surrounding suicide; the students get to clarify their doubts and myths. This scene intentionally ends with continuing dialogue set during a Choeshed Legdrim illustrating possibilities to engage in further conversations so that together the participants make sense of myths, unhelpful and helpful practices they want to move forward as future practices. This play, as proposed by Drewery (2004, p. 340), shows that talking about difficult topics “produces an account of possibilities” and moves forward selves and ideas in new ways, and this needs to occur in Bhutan.

My reflections

Finally, I offer words of caution as risks are inevitable when changes are hurried. And in these offerings, I speak as a Bhutanese counsellor with insider knowing, and as a researcher. The SGCs are expected to be the experts on youth issues in

Bhutanese schools. These views may exert pressure on the school counselling resources and the SGCs, and risk unrealistic expectations. The new generation of SGCs in Bhutan has a tremendous task to spearhead and facilitate the student care program which is currently the school guidance and counselling programs. SGCs said they have limited training, and added to their responsibilities is an expectation from the schools to be the experts on student issues. The general notion amongst the adult participants that counselling is a Western idea expressed that counselling may carry covert assumptions and beliefs embedded in the Western context. Perhaps the Bhutanese counsellors need to remain sensitive to this caution.

Secondly, to invest faith in one expert within the school may be a dangerous turn. To call upon an expert is often to undermine one's own ability. So-called expert views are not the ultimate truths or answers but alternate viewpoints to consider. If the school teachers, principals and students expect the SGCs to hold all the answers, then these same expectations may turn to disappointment that the counselling service is a failure. Leaning on an expert risks isolation, meaning the other teachers "may be keen to be relieved of the burden" (R. Evans & Hurrell, 2016, p. 7) of care of students to one SGC and may start assuming their job is only to teach the subjects.

Twenty-nine of the thirty students felt counselling services provided a support service for students in distress. The only student, perhaps right in his view, stated that counselling can only do so much and does not provide the ultimate answer. While a school counselling service has its usefulness, counselling alone is not the answer to suicide, nor to other school student problems.

Being problem focused

The final caution is stated by Mills saying "any great public issues as well as many private troubles are described in terms of 'the psychiatric' often, it seems, in a pathetic attempt to avoid the large issues and problems of modern society" (1959,

p. 19). Depression and mental disorders that took the world stage in the 1930s with the emergence of psychiatry and psychology in Western societies (Gergen, 1999, p. 39) are expanding in the East. Adolescents showing emotional distress are often seen as attention-seeking, exhibiting inappropriate behaviour or having mental-health disorders (Fullagar, 2003; RGOB, 2015). The vocabulary of mental disorder is used by psychiatrists, and loosely by reporters in Bhutan. In this sense, the concepts of mental disorders are seen in Bhutan, and an expansion of this may lead to “the dysfunctional disciplining of the population” (Gergen, 1999, p. 40). The Bhutanese government recently initiated a three-year national suicide prevention action plan (RGOB, 2015). The current framework establishes suicide as a mental health disorder in Bhutan. This way, suicide, in general, is constructed as an “escape from the depression of their lives” (S. Rinpoche, 2012, p. 10). The point must be made that suicides by adults and suicides by adolescents differ in terms of reasons and understandings, and so must our responses. The country does not have the resources such as the experts on mental health interventions, and a heavy reliance on one particular way of understanding suicidality may mean that few alternative understandings are available to young people (Roen et al., 2008, p. 2090) of that culture. The point is not to undermine the benefits of these practices but to forewarn its limits, and seek out “alternative understandings” (Gergen, 1999, p. 40).

Medical Discourse

Student participants rarely made reference to depression and mental illness when they spoke of suicide. One student wondered what it may mean to be depressed or if suicide was really caused by depression as was reported in the print news. Bhutanese students were more familiar with the language of calling problems tensions, and the troubled or problematic as trama-ship (Dzongkha word for naughty). Being naughty or bad were more familiar ways of making sense of unacceptable behaviours amongst students. This justifies the need to forge alternative understandings sought by the participants. At the end, a society is never

free from forms of disciplining, a range of language games, or disciplinary traditions. The question remains how might we explain this phenomenon of the 21st century, how might we ensure that more extensive calibrations of mental health disorders do not become a proxy for problems of education structures, processes and cultures?’ (Slee, 2014, pp. 457-460). An inquiry into the positive and negative consequences of these ideologies must be sought for promising futures (Gergen, 1999, p. 41). Explanations and practices that make sense to the communities must be forged.

Methods of suicide: Something worth thinking about?

Common methods of suicide employed generally reflect the availability of methods in the community (Sharma et al., 2006, p. 324) and preventing access to a method is a proven suicide prevention strategy (Sharma et al., 2006; Wu et al., 2012). Hanging and jumping into the river were the most common methods of completed suicides by students in Bhutan. This was confirmed by the stories of the participants and the Suicide Prevention Plan in Bhutan Three Year Action Plan (RGOB, 2015, p. 7). The Suicide Prevention plan details restriction of means to suicide such as access to pesticides, but it does not include methods of hanging. Ropes, belts and Kera (traditional belt) were used for a noose. Kera is part of the national dress for both Bhutanese men and women. Students then easily have access to Kera as it is a compulsory part of their school uniform. None of the participants spoke of the dangers of Kera as an accessible means to suicide. This left me wondering if this was one of the taken-for-granted-facts in culture. If students have completed suicides using Kera, then the use of Kera must be looked into in relation to suicides.

Summary & conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed the problem of suicide by school students and suggestions for suicide prevention in the schools from the findings in light of

theories from literature. This discussion chapter was presented in four sections, each section unfolded into the next leading toward resolutions.

The first section provided discussions around ways participants are seeking meanings of suicide by school adolescents. Section two discussed the problem story, the troubling paradox of suicide. Here I discussed factors seen as contributing to suicide among the school children in Bhutan, I also highlight ambiguities in practices within the culture and education system. Section three outlined evolving practices and drew on suggestions and recommendations for suicide prevention in the Bhutanese schools. I discussed the possibilities created by the imagined community dialogue staged as a play and argued for the need to talk by demonstrating the possibilities it has created. The final section contains my reflections, I have offered cautions to add to the recommendations and suggestions for suicide prevention.

In the next and final chapter, I draw this thesis to a conclusion by reviewing and reflecting on the aims and objectives of the research, the research process and research outcomes.

Chapter 10: Conclusion

.... the unfamiliar presence that has entered us; because everything we trust and are used to is for a moment taken away from us; because we stand in the midst of a transition where we cannot remain standing... the new presence inside us, the presence that has been added... We could easily be made to believe that nothing happened, and yet we have changed... many signs indicate that the future enters us in this way in order to be transformed in us, long before it happens. (Rilke, 1954)

The beginning

The origins of this research were a concern for school adolescents' suicide in Bhutan. My own story of suicidal thoughts during adolescence prompted this inquiry further. Making sense of acts of suicide can be varied across societies. The ever-changing landscape of concepts and practices of culture shape and reshape its discourses of suicide. To examine what cultural frames of meaning the Bhutanese are drawing from, beliefs, views and stories of school adolescents and adults from within the education community and concerned members of the society were sought. These differently positioned members of the education community provided their interpretations of suicide alongside their hopes and suggestions for suicide prevention in secondary schools in Bhutan.

The aim of this research was to understand and identify appropriate responses to the issue of suicides among secondary school adolescents of Bhutan. Its sub-objectives were to articulate storied beliefs, values and views of young people and other members of the education community; describe the interpretations of differently positioned members in the education system with regard to suicides by school adolescents and to collaboratively develop ideas and recommendations for suicide prevention in the Bhutanese schools. To constitute what we know so far, Chapter 4 and 5 fulfilled the first sub-objective by presenting adult concerns with regard to suicides by school adolescents and setting out adolescent beliefs, values

and views of suicides. Chapters 6 and 7 responded to the second sub-objective, Chapter 6 provided adult responses and recommendations to prevent suicides and Chapter 7 discussed views of school adolescents on what can be done and what needs to improve in the schools to prevent suicides. In Chapter 8 I staged an imaginary dialogue within the education community, and Chapter 9 provided a discussion of the findings in light of the theories and literature consulted for this study. In this final Chapter, I highlight key findings, offer lessons drawn from this study, include reflections on my methodological choices, and end with final reflections.

What I sought: problems and ideas?

This research started with many assumptions which were outlined in Chapter 1. Suicide by school adolescents has stirred uneasiness in the society and it is seen as a new phenomenon propelled by ruptures in the society caused by modernisation. Common explanations about the causes of suicide provided by participants centered around school academic pressures, growing family disintegration, unhelpful school policies and practices along with unsupportive teachers. The unfavourable economic conditions and limited opportunities for employment in the country added to feelings of despair identified by the school adolescents. Perhaps because the research focused on participants in the education system, the high expectations and disappointments also are directed at the education system.

In addition, suicide is stigmatized and students with suicidal behaviours are othered by Bhutanese society. The way students with suicidal behaviour were othered raised a concern about how school students and young people could talk about suicide.

Distress about the rising incidence of youth suicides drew the participants together, but stories presented by adults and school students were different. In this research, I found that school students were trying to make sense through their personal

narratives and explain why young people, their friends, and sometimes they, themselves, resorted to self-harm and suicide. Adults made causal links between suicide and problems in the Bhutanese Education system, and by reflecting on the negative impact of rapid changes in cultural and communal practices. Students were more concerned about facing pressure and expectations from school and their parents, and they were concerned about stability in their homes and for their future. The stories, which students told of themselves in relationships with their friends and families, and the way they saw themselves through the past, present and future and afterlife, were stories looking for a stable self, of seeing a “sense of self as continuous over time” (Bruner, 2004, p. 29). When this imagined sense was disrupted and fractured by circumstances and failures, the school adolescents may render themselves invisible or remove themselves from this rupture.

There were the stories about those who had successfully suicided. The young Bhutanese were negotiating their identities in evolving circumstances, the ever-changing landscape of chaotic external circumstances and internal changes within themselves. As adolescents, they were learning about relationships, themselves and values in relationships by falling in love and these may be the beginnings to shape how they think they ought to be in relationships, intimately and socially. During this time they may be swayed by their emotions. If and when they felt rejected or betrayed, the possibility of thinking they were unwanted, worthless or treated unjustly became evident. The danger of these experiences stripping their sense of worth seemed to be heightened in an absence of other forms of positive relationships. Students did not refer to a lack of resources or the need for material things. They were looking for safety, a place to talk and connect with friends and feel loved and trusted. They were looking for stable and caring relationships at home, in their schools and with their peers.

Students spoke of romantic relationships in various ways; as inappropriate or against the school or social norms. Girls highlighted issues around gender, they challenged the societal views about girls being vulnerable and emotional, or girls

alone being responsible for pregnancy. Such societal views were seen as impediments to girls and perhaps contributing to the suicide of the young girls they knew about. In these ways, students named some of the unhelpful school practices and policies. The students perhaps did not name the impact of societal changes like the adult participants, but they were struggling to cope with the multiplicity of expectations they felt from their parents, teachers, and society. Students were negotiating their roles and identities between the changing rules of their schools, and confusing messages they may have received from their families. For instance, as children, they may be silenced as a way to show respect to elders and tradition, but on the other hand, they were asked to step up and take responsibilities. Adults expected the students to be responsible because they were not children anymore. There is a traditional Bhutanese saying Choe alu manbay dha (meaning you are not a child anymore), reflecting that traditionally, teenagers by 18 to 19 years of age would have become parents. In this sense, it appeared there was confusion in expectations from the adults in the society, and similarly expectations of the younger generation from the adults.

Bhutanese adults commented that suicidal behaviours indicated youth in distress or school children under pressure. Bhutan like any society is seeking a place in the world. The desire for materialistic gains, the changing structures of families and communities are changing some values that the Bhutanese cherished for generations. Such values were named as care for each other; respect and responsibility which may override individual wants; and being trusting because decisions were made for the good of all not oneself. Participants indicated that the idea of care and responsibility is changing with time and speed of lifestyles. They argued that individualist views and thoughts about individual rights are becoming prominent in an increasingly competitive Bhutanese society. These comments perhaps reflect Durkheim's thoughts that anomie was the result of a society which was disturbed by a crisis, causing disequilibrium as human aspirations were no longer regulated by social norms or rules.

Adults and the school students were struggling to understand views and experiences of one another. It appears that the generation gap is widening and causing a rift between the old and the young of the Bhutanese society. The societal shifts and flux are interrelated to the education system. Education was introduced as a doorway to connect Bhutan to the rest of the world, and while it has successfully achieved the purpose of modernizing the country, it has created new rifts which were not anticipated, and an ambivalence, for which the Bhutanese people and their education system were not prepared.

Perhaps, this is also a reflection of the emergence of adolescence in Bhutan- a life stage that is only possible when education inserts an additional stage between childhood and adulthood. This stage was described by people like Erikson (1950, 1968) for Western industrialised and modernist societies. The students in Bhutan may be saying it is time to explore what this means for them and for the education system, their families and the whole of society. They are saying they are not children anymore, perhaps not yet young adults; they are students and in their adolescence.

Rilke's poem in the epigraph portrays the sense of loss, newness and uncertainties experienced by the Bhutanese. Bhutanese adults have said they are unsure how to respond to the suicidal behaviours of children and the students. There appears to be a feeling of helplessness present amongst the adults. This could be called a cultural helplessness because they feel they are not trained in the Western psychological theories which are perhaps seen as answers to issues of suicide. As a response, they have relied on the SGCs for psychological interventions, and in dealing with student problems. The uncertainties are also present because adults never had to deal with suicides by students before. Perhaps, they are saying, traditionally the older generation would hold wisdom and guide the young, but they have no point of reference in this world which is changing so fast and is influenced by ideas that are foreign to them. This has led to despair and a fear amongst the adults and not knowing how to respond. Stories of their own youth

are largely irrelevant to the urban youth who have access to a wide range of cultural influences, and cannot relate to the experiences of their parents' or teachers' own childhood.

The Bhutanese education system is unwittingly a cause of social tension – creating an adolescence in a population that never had one, and has no word for it. The education system is also held responsible for creating a disruptive change in the balance of knowledge between parents and children. An education system which aspires to prepare its youth for its “ever-growing needs of a developing country” (MoE, 2013, p. XXIII), is creating an expectation of better employment outcomes which may not be there. Yet, the Bhutanese education system also identified as a place of intervention continues to create interventions as responses to the growing tensions in the society. Some of these interventions are initiatives such as Educating for GNH and introducing counselling services in the school. The Bhutanese education community is looking at the SGCs to lead suicide prevention programs, and such programs are being named suicide awareness and education programs. Students have taken comfort in the presence of the SGCs in the schools but they have said that SGCs and counselling are not enough. Students are calling for caring teachers and nurturing school policies, and environments which also involve the support of their families.

In addition, schools need to establish better collaboration with the parents and their communities, including media agencies. School adolescents are wanting to talk about and make sense of death, suicide, and issues that trouble them and the wider society. The silence and assumptions around suicide and negative stories of the Bhutanese adolescents need to be talked about.

The doing

Suicides by students demanded a response that involved the importance of observing, listening to, reflecting and re-presenting views of all the participants,

especially the school adolescents whose views may otherwise have been unheard. I approached the research using narrative methods of inquiry informed by constructivist and strengths-based perspectives. This thinking acknowledges that all people are experts of their own lives, and people live multi-storied lives. People tell stories to make sense of their experiences, and as they tell these stories they create and recreate multiple possibilities of self and realities. This approach disrupted long-established ways of relating and communication between the adults and children. No longer did children quietly listen to adults to learn how to live their lives. No longer did childhood transform directly into adulthood.

The challenge for the research reflects the challenge for Bhutanese society on how to disrupt unhelpful ways of relating to each other while holding on to cherished values, beliefs and traditions. This study illustrated that the Bhutanese people and society are constantly responding to problems, and continually changing. I acknowledge that my identity impacts my relationship with varied participants, in turn, influencing the co-construction of narratives.

This research utilized the “transformative aspect” of narrative inquiry (Hunter, 2009; Liamputtong, 2008; Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). The methodology pursued ways of creating spaces for school adolescents to express their thoughts, fears, needs and wishes. While adults were saying they had no point of reference to draw on for advice for young people, the adolescents were saying they were facing these issues and pressures for the first time, they needed guidance and support, not rigid rules and punishment. At its extreme, these pressures have contributed to students feeling suicidal.

Information was collected through individual and group interviews and analysed initially using thematic narrative analysis. Using these methods, I generated dialogues among individual persons and spread to the collective (Shemer, 2014, p. 145) at different levels. Interviews and meetings were forums to hear and interact with perspectives of others so that the participants created “a movement from a

divided them and us to a collective, a collaborative we” (Pharris & Pavlish, 2014, p. 223). My responsibility was to create helpful connections so that changes in the views and plans of participants could occur in a shared space while addressing a common concern around suicide. This process created ways for the adults and adolescents to hear each other, they asked and wondered what each said, but this was not enough. Through the play, I disrupted the traditional ways of relating between the adolescents and the adults, and among adults in different roles which had become stuck. I enhanced, extended and proposed this attentive space where they needed to hear, observe and to learn how to together make sense of, discuss and manage what is important to keep and cherish, and what needs to change.

The outcome

I composed the final “outcome of the research as the story” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 15) by using dialogic narrative analysis to re-present views and stories as a play, and to stage the community dialogue. The play has expressed complexities which I thought were important to highlight. The play created an imagined space to bring students and adult participants to talk to each other. Space was created through the dialogue for new conversations which could deal with potential knowledge and help “to amplify the solution and not the problem” (Romano-Dwyer & Carley, 2005, p. 247). The imagined conference in the play also disrupted the hierarchical forms of communication and institutional spaces. It posits that in the process of talking, talking in new ways about different topics, answers are found, healing can occur, and new questions are framed.

Finally, the research illustrates that stories are not mere telling but an act of becoming, and this is enacted through the play. The community dialogue is not mere conversations or simple stories sharing fears, desires, hopes, beliefs and views. The community dialogue as a play shows the potential for emerging identities of the characters, which contributes to the changes and shifts to the group identity

thereby creating new possibilities for collective action. The school adolescents are speaking and listening to adults, reversing the traditional order by learning about each other, trusting each other in order to take on roles of adult and adolescent and child in this disrupted and dangerous world. The study has also generated “public narratives” (Blix et al., 2013, p. 264) of suicide and consequently reduced narrative silences. The study shows the potential for narratively informed methodologies while working with non-Western cultures. I suggest that new innovations must move beyond current assumptions and unhelpful traditional practices, and for that to happen conversations and creative dialogues need occur.

Hope for future

This research is the first scholarly study on suicide by school students in Bhutan. It has opened up a whole new dialogue on cultural meanings, explanations and responses around the issue of suicides by adolescents in Bhutan. The study confirms that cultures vary in how they provide explanations and responses to suicide by students. It also shows “how cultural and generational changes affect child-rearing practices and investigates how particular communities convey” beliefs and views of suicide (Wexler et al., 2015, p. 895). Experiences may be similar for two people in different cultures but their interpretation of them vary. In this sense, this study contributes new knowledge to the sociocultural study of suicide by adolescents in a developing nation of South Asia, which has been influenced by the individualistic thinking from the West.

Implications for policy and practice for Ministry of Education in Bhutan

In summarising participants’ hopes for the future, there were expectations that the education system would lead, respond to and manage, in a thoughtful and caring way, all that was needed to respond to the rapid social changes being experienced in Bhutan. Education has the power to effect change, as it stands at the hub of

society, but Education is not just the responsibility of the schools. It does not stand alone, it exists in a culture, and a society's challenges cannot be solved through education alone (Bruner, 1996; Gordon, 2013). The care for adolescents requires the collective efforts of that society; "answers are in the family, in the schools, in all of us" (adult participant). However, as Bruner aptly said "education is a tool to adapt to the world in which [we] find [ourselves] and to help in the process of changing it as required" (1996, p. 20). The study suggests that it is imperative to examine the appropriateness of responses by considering pragmatic questions such as: what resources does the country already have? How might these services and responses be sustained and strengthened? How can decisions be made about trying certain new practices?

The findings of this research suggest that democratic and constructive dialogues between the parents, communities and school are powerful and important. Dialogues help minimise the "unchallenged" (Foucault, 1988, p. 155) practices and knowledge held by education and schools in the society. The benefit in including the narratives of the students, and their families as communities in planning and implementation of the plans is that the institutional "regime for truth" can be disrupted (Foucault, 2002, p. 131). In these ways, knowledge and practices must continue to evolve and they must be reworked within the changing context.

Implications for counselling

This study has highlighted the views of participants on school guidance and counselling programs and the roles of the new SGCs. The findings have in many ways shown benefits of counselling, expectations and cautions for future work. Limits and possible strengths of counselling and guidance programs are shown in the stories. Furthermore, specific roles of the SGCs in suicide prevention programs have been noted.

Further research

Further opportunities to stage and perform the play may further the dialogue in the schools. This research has identified the need for future research into understanding help-seeking behaviour amongst Bhutanese school adolescents and the relationship between religion and spirituality and suicide.

Reflections and gratitude

Every time I found it hard to go on, to make sense of what I was doing, I thought about those young lives that had been lost. The voice of the young singer who had hanged himself in the dormitory would echo through my heart. The pain of people who lost their loved ones, I can never surmise, but that is what kept me going, reminding me why I started this research in the first place.

I conclude in gratitude, remembering tears I have shed in listening to the stories, imagining what if they had lived. I acknowledge the fear I carried within myself of perhaps not seeing a student participant alive again. And I remain in gratitude to stories that have impacted and touched mine in the course of this study. This four-year journey has been long, painful, tedious and fulfilling. It was tough, the journey was long, daunting and straying. The complexity surrounding the phenomenon of suicides are grave and responses imperfect, but as Geertz says “complexities are possibilities without an end” (1973, p. II). I hope that this study has provoked thoughts and ideas so that imperfections are revealed and cast for scrutiny. Perhaps in them, we do find some answers to these complexities.

Final words

I have argued and illustrated that dialogues and conversations are a powerful way of resolving difficult and challenging issues. I extended an invitation to members of the education system and the wider Bhutanese community to imagine how we

might create spaces to talk about how the phenomenon of youth suicide was understood, to share feelings of fear and despair, and to imagine how things could be changed for school adolescents. These opportunities to express their feelings and understandings were transformational.

Changes are inevitable and cultures are constantly changing across the world. Changes are deep, disruptive and transformative and can be an opportunity to create beautiful fusions across cultures. One such fusion in Bhutan is the young Bhutanese singing and performing rap and hip hop Dzongkha songs which could not be imagined a few years ago. The Bhutanese youth take delight in creating and composing new genres in music, and in the process, they learn that the possibilities to compose are limitless. In a supportive and conducive environment creativity can thrive, young people's expressions of who they are, and who they can be, are shaped within these creative imaginations and spaces. Similarly, facilitating spaces for conversations, and creative dialogues on the topic of suicide, and issues that trouble the young and the old in Bhutan must occur. Feelings of fear and despair must be shared and expressed, hopes for futures must be composed of shared spaces among the young and the old. In this research, I started a community dialogue to disrupt the usual practices, which had become stuck, and I hope that this opens up endless possibilities for many more dialogues that the Bhutanese deserve.

I have told my story, I have heard stories and retold, and now finally the stories need to travel beyond this thesis, the play needs staging, the dialogue needs to extend into the Bhutanese schools, and so I am wondering where to go from here...

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Glossary of terms

CECD	Career Education & Counselling Division
DYS	Department of Youth & Sports
GNH	Gross National Happiness
LSE	Life Skills Education
MoE	Ministry of Education
PHP	Peer helpers programme
RENEW	Respect Educate Nurture & Empower Women
SGCs	School Guidance Counsellors
SPEA	School based parenting education and awareness program

Appendices

- Appendix 1 Information sheet for SGCs
- Appendix 2 Adverse events procedure
- Appendix 3 Invitation to the schools
- Appendix 4 Consent form for students
- Appendix 5 Information sheet for the students
- Appendix 6 Invitation to students
- Appendix 7 Student recruitment guidelines
- Appendix 8 Interview guide questions
- Appendix 9 Preliminary themes
- Appendix 10 Participant information sheet-General



Appendix 1

Information sheet for the School Guidance Counsellors

Faculty of Health Sciences

School of Occupational Therapy
and Social Work

Telephone +61 8 9266 3600

Facsimile +61 8 9266 3636

Email enquiries@curtin.edu.au

Web <http://ot.curtin.edu.au/>

I am Sonam Pelden studying for my PhD at Curtin University in Western Australia. My study (research) will try to understand why some school students in Bhutan harm themselves and commit suicide. The hope is that by understanding this better we will be able to develop ways our schools might help prevent students committing suicide.

Who will be involved in the study?

This study will involve participants who are connected to our education system. I will be sending invitations to:

- Six Secondary schools: I hope that five students from each school, the school principal and counsellor will participate.
- In total 30 students, six principals and six school guidance counsellors will be part of this study from the schools.
- Up to six parents
- Officials from Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, and Bhutan InfoComm and Media Authority (BICMA).
- Buddhist teacher

What will you do as participants?

I will conduct group meetings with the students and the school guidance counsellors from the selected six secondary schools.

I will be coming to Bhutan for the meetings and interviews. I will also be contacting you to confirm the date, place and time for our meetings. Our meetings can take place in the following months:

- Anytime from May 2014 – November 2014

The group meetings will be with the school guidance counsellors separately. As a group, we could have 2 to 3 three meetings. However, this can change, as we will be deciding as a group. During our meetings, we will discuss your views and understandings (what they mean to you?) about suicides by students in Bhutan. We will also talk about possible actions and plans that might prevent suicides in our schools.

Support available during the study:

Your safety and wellbeing are important to me throughout the study. We will be talking on a sensitive topic and you may feel sad, worried or hurt. To help you, counselling will be available to you at any time. A network (group) of school guidance counsellors will also be available to provide help and peer-support to the participating counsellors. On our first meeting, I will give you the contact details for additional counselling services so that you know where and from whom to seek help if you feel the need.

What will happen to the information you share?

Participation is voluntary and information you share will be confidential. Trust is of great importance for this study.

The information you provide will be kept separate from your personal details. Information will be protected and stored safely. Papers and documents will be stored under lock and key and on the researcher's personal computer, which is password protected. Only the researcher will have access to the information.

However, if the researcher believes that anyone is at risk (not safe), confidentiality will be broken to ensure safety. I will follow the Critical incident guidelines stated in the Guidance & Counselling Framework for schools in Bhutan, 2010.

With your permission, I will use an audio recorder to record our interviews. This will be to ensure I do not miss any information vital to this study.

You have the right to withdraw or leave this study at any point. You do not need to give a reason and there will be no consequences for leaving this study. You can also ask to review (look at) information you have shared with me.

More about me

Since 2002, I have worked as a counsellor with Career Education & Counselling Division, Department of Youth & Sports within the Ministry of Education in Bhutan. I started my studies at Curtin University in Australia in June 2012. Please do not hesitate to ask any questions with regard to this study. You can contact me at sonam.pelden@postgrad.curtin.edu.au or at 17892870 from 9 am – 5.30 pm. You can also put your queries to me through your school guidance counsellors or Principals. Alternatively, you may also contact my supervisor at Curtin University Dr Angela Fielding at +61892667637 or A.Fielding@curtin.edu.au

Who has approved this study?

This study has been approved by the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval HR84/ 2013). The Committee is comprised of members of the public, academics, lawyers, doctors and pastoral carers. If needed, verification of approval can be obtained either by writing to the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee, c/- Office of Research and Development, Curtin University, GPO Box U1987, Perth, 6845 or by telephoning 9266 2784 or by emailing hrec@curtin.edu.au.

In case, you have any concerns regarding my conduct of the study, and you do not feel comfortable to talk to me, you may contact Dr Dorji Thinley at dthinley@gmail.com from the Royal University of Bhutan. This person is the local contact for the Ethics committee of Curtin University and is not directly involved in this study.

This study is conducted through Curtin University, approved and supported by the Ministry of Education in Bhutan. Participants are not obliged or compelled to take part in this study. This research will be carried out in accordance with the Australian National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research.

I look forward to your possible collaboration and participation in this study. Thank you for your time in going through this information.



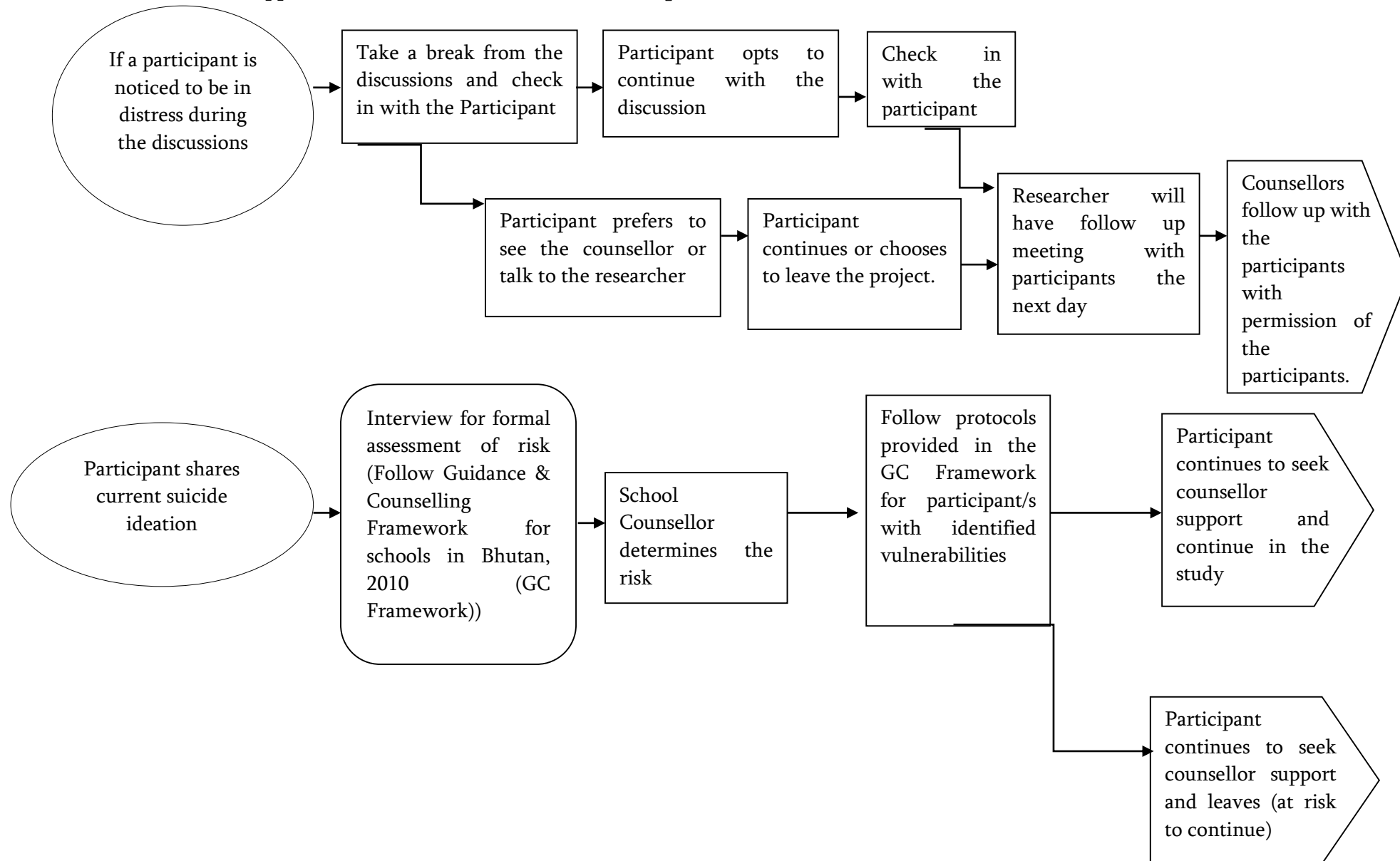
Sonam Pelden

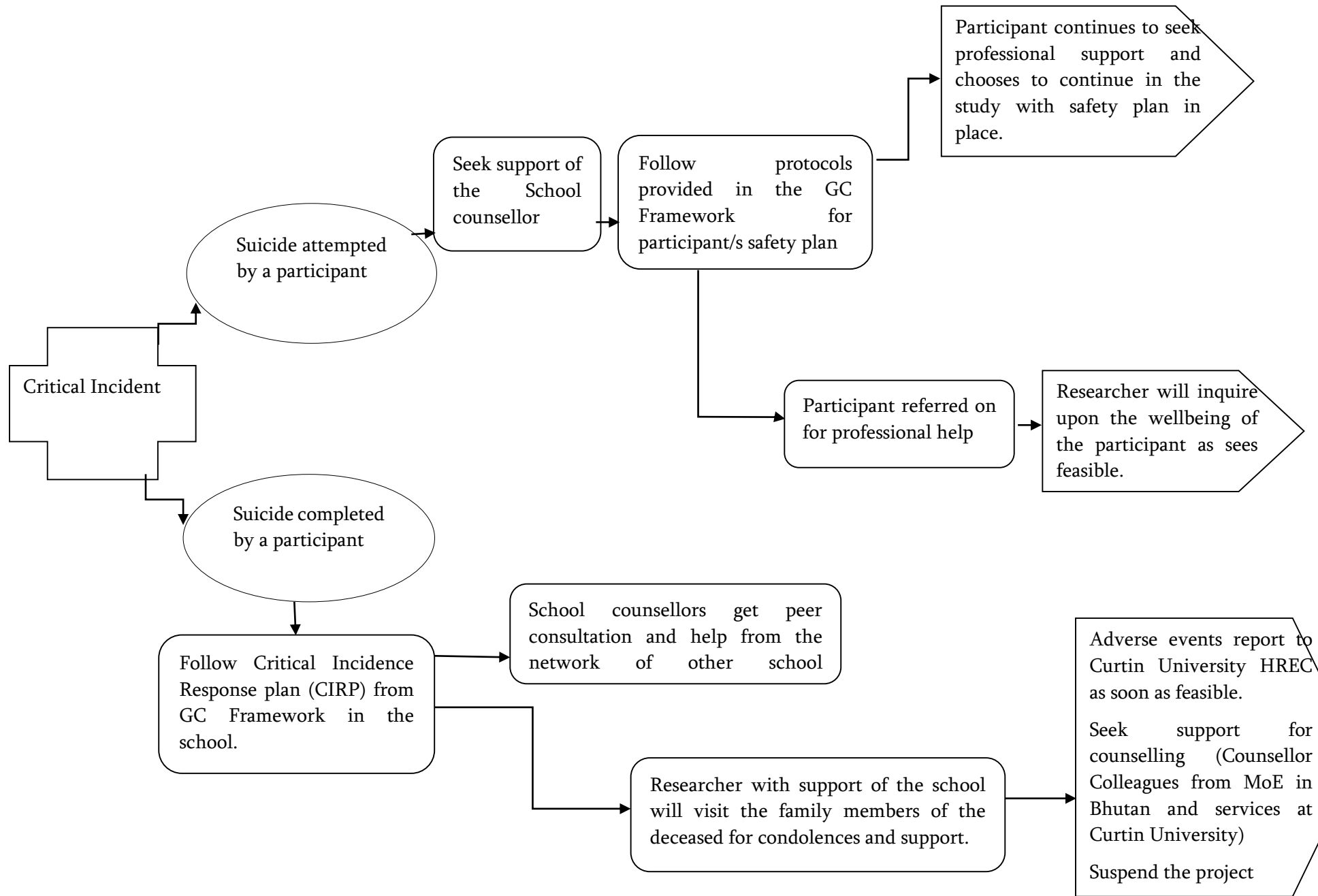
PhD candidate in Doctor of Philosophy- Social Work & Social Policy

Curtin University, Western Australia

Appendix 2

Adverse event procedure







Appendix 3 Invitation to schools

To the Principal

_____ School
_____ Dzongkhag/Thromde.

Subject: **Invitation to participate in the study ‘Making sense of suicides by school students in Bhutan: documenting a societal dialogue’.**

Dear _____,

I am a Doctoral student at Curtin University undertaking research on the topic ‘making sense of suicides by school students in Bhutan: documenting a societal dialogue.’ Prior to this, I was working as a counsellor with Career Education & Counselling Division (CECD), Department of Youth & Sports within MoE till May 2012.

The study I am undertaking will seek to:

Articulate storied beliefs, values and views of young people and other members of the education community and

To work collaboratively towards developing ideas and recommendations for suicide prevention in secondary schools in Bhutan.

Sir/Madam, you share similar concerns with regard to suicides by students in our schools. It has been a silenced topic and we still do not yet have any formally dedicated suicide prevention programmes.

This study will include participants from relevant agencies and mainly from the education sector (kindly refer participant information sheet attached for more details).

Your school is identified as a potential participant as it is a secondary school and with a proficient guidance counsellor. I would like to extend my invitation to participate to you as the Principal, the School Guidance Counsellor and five students from your school.

I understand that you already have a lot of activities and a busy school schedule. I thank you for your time in going through this invitation.

The following activities and schedule briefly underline what your participation would include:

Participants	Activities	Timeline (dates can be negotiated)
Principal	Individual interview for 1 hour	August-October 2013
5 Students	Individual interviews for 30 – 40 minutes each	August – October 2013
	Group interview	April – June 2014

School Guidance Counsellor	Group Interviews	August-October 2013 Break June – December 2014
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I look forward to confirming the dates, time and venue in consultation with you and the six other participating schools.

Sir/Madam, I also seek your guidance and permission to request your school guidance counsellor to take a lead in recruiting the student participants. They would best know your students.

This study has been approved by the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval Number HR84/ 2013). The Committee is comprised of members of the public, academics, lawyers, doctors and pastoral carers. If needed, verification of approval can be obtained either by writing to the

Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee, c/- Office of Research and Development, Curtin University, GPO Box U1987, Perth, 6845 or by telephoning 9266 2784 or by emailing hrec@curtin.edu.au.

Your queries and comments are most welcome. Please contact me at sonam.pelden@postgrad.curtin.edu.au.

Looking forward to your prompt and positive response.

Thanking you,

Sonam Pelden

PhD candidate in Doctor of Philosophy- Social Work & Social Policy

Curtin University, Western Australia

Email: sonam.pelden@postgrad.curtin.edu.au

Appendix 4

Consent Form for students

Title of the research project: *Making sense of suicides by school students in Bhutan*
: *documenting a societal dialogue*

Name of the Researcher : Sonam Pelden

I _____ (your name) have read and understood the participant Information Sheet. I know what the study is about and what I have to do as a participant.

I am volunteering to participate in the study on '*making sense of suicides by school students in Bhutan: documenting a societal dialogue*'. I also understand that I might feel some pain and sadness while talking about suicide. I also know I can talk to my school guidance counsellor and get help.

Participation is voluntary and I can stop and leave this study without any penalty if I do not want to participate. I do not have to explain or make excuses for leaving this study. I will be responsible and abide by the school rules and student code of conduct while taking part in this study.

I will show trust and respect. Our conversations and discussions (interview) will be recorded and written down by the researcher. I will get a copy if I want. I can read and erase any part of my interview before the final report (thesis) is completed.

Even though the researcher will make every effort to maintain privacy, there may be some risk of identification due to the small population in Bhutan and the small number of schools selected.

The results of this study will be compiled in a thesis (PhD report) and in articles.

I understand this study has been approved by the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval Number HR84/ 2013). I also understand that I can contact the research committee at Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee, c/- Office of Research and Development, Curtin University, GPO Box U1987, Perth, 6845 or by telephoning 9266 2784 or by emailing hrec@curtin.edu.au if I think something is not right about this research or the researcher. I may also contact Dr Angela Fielding, Supervisor for the researcher at Curtin University at +61892667637 or A.Fielding@curtin.edu.au.

Name: _____ Date of Birth: _____

Signature: _____ Age: _____

Date: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____ email: _____

Appendix 5

Information sheet for STUDENTS

I am Sonam Pelden studying for my PhD at Curtin University in Western Australia. My study (research) will try to understand why some school students in Bhutan harm themselves or commit suicide. The hope is that by understanding this better we will be able to develop ways our schools might help prevent students committing suicide.

Who will be involved in the study?

This study will involve participants who are part of our education system. I will be sending invitations to:

Six Secondary schools: I hope that five students from each school, the school Principal and counsellor will participate.

In total 30 students, six principals and six school guidance counsellors will be part of this study from the schools.

Up to six parents

Officials from Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, and Bhutan InfoComm and Media Authority (BICMA).

Buddhist teacher

What will you do as participants?

Each one of you will be having individual conversations (interview) with me. I will also conduct group meetings with a group of students. I will be coming to your school for our meetings and interviews.

During our meetings, we will discuss your views and understandings (what they mean to you?) about suicides and self-harm by students in Bhutan. We will also talk about possible actions and plans that might prevent suicides in our schools.

Support available to you during the study:

Your safety and wellbeing are important to me throughout the study. We will be talking on a sensitive topic and you may feel sad, worried or hurt. To help you, counselling will be available to you at any time. School guidance counsellors of your school will be available to provide support and counselling services to the participating students.

During our first meeting, I will give you the contact details for counselling services so that you know where and from whom to seek help if you feel the need.

What will happen to the information you share?

Participation is voluntary and information you share will be confidential (secret). Trust is of great importance for this study. The information you provide will be kept separate from your personal details. This means, only the researcher (myself) will know about who shared the information. None of the reports and articles will have your names. Information will be protected and stored safely. Papers and documents will be stored under lock and key and on the researcher's personal computer, which is password protected. No identifying information on students or any other participant will be shared with anyone. Only the researcher will have access to the information.

However, if the researcher believes that anyone is at risk (not safe), confidentiality will be broken to ensure safety. I will follow the Critical incident guidelines stated in the Guidance & Counselling Framework for schools in Bhutan, 2010.

With your permission, I will use an audio recorder to record our interviews. This will be to ensure I do not miss any information vital to this study. You have the right to withdraw or leave this study at any point. You do not need to give a reason and there will be no consequences (penalty or punishment) for leaving. You can also ask to review (look at) information you have shared with me.

More about me

Since 2002, I have worked as a counsellor with Career Education & Counselling Division, Department of Youth & Sports within the Ministry of Education in Bhutan. I started my studies at Curtin University in Australia in June 2012.

Please do not hesitate to ask any questions with regard to this study. You can contact me at sonam.pelden@postgrad.curtin.edu.au or at 17892870 from 9 am – 5.30 pm. You can also put your queries to me through your school guidance counsellors or Principals. Alternatively, you may also contact my supervisor at Curtin University Dr Angela Fielding at +61892667637 or A.Fielding@curtin.edu.au

Who has approved this study?

This study has been approved by the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval HR84/ 2013). The Committee is comprised of members of the public, academics, lawyers, doctors and pastoral carers. If needed, verification of approval can be obtained either by writing to the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee, c/- Office of Research and Development, Curtin University, GPO Box U1987, Perth, 6845 or by telephoning 9266 2784 or by emailing hrec@curtin.edu.au.

In case, you have any concerns regarding my conduct of the study, and you do not feel comfortable to talk to me, you may contact Dr Dorji Thinley at dthinley6789@gmail.com from the Royal University of Bhutan. This person is the local contact for the Ethics committee of Curtin University and is not directly involved in this study.

Participants are not obliged or compelled to take part in this study. This research will be carried out in accordance with the Australian National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research. This study is also approved and supported by the Ministry of Education in Bhutan. I look forward to your possible collaboration and participation in this study. Thank you for your time in going through this information.



Sonam Pelden

PhD candidate in Doctor of Philosophy- Social Work & Social Policy

Curtin University, Western Australia

INVITATION TO STUDENTS

Dear students,

I am doing a project (research) to understand why students commit suicides and what schools and we can do to help our young friends in the schools. I am looking for five student volunteers interested to join me on this project.

What will you do as participants?

You will be sharing your ideas, feelings and stories with me. You will not have to do anything extra. I will be coming to meet you in your schools. With permission from your school, we can set a meeting to talk. You will be participating in an individual talk (30 minutes each) with me and in a group work with four other students (2 hours).

What will you get for participating?

This is the first project to look at suicides by students and to talk about suicide prevention in schools. This means you will play a big part in developing this project.

You will be helping me and hopefully helping many other young students and people through your ideas and experiences. I also hope that you enjoy and find our talks helpful for yourself.

This research project is approved by the Curtin Human Research Ethics Committee. If you have, more questions please feel free to ask your school guidance counsellor.

A little about me

I have completed Masters in Human Services counselling and have been working as a counsellor with the Department of Youth & Sports for 12 years.

I INVITE YOU ONCE AGAIN. IF YOU ARE INTERESTED, PLEASE CONTACT YOUR SCHOOL GUIDANCE COUNSELLOR AS SOON AS YOU CAN AND REGISTER.

I look forward to meeting you.



Sonam Pelden

PhD candidate in Doctor of Philosophy- Social Work & Social Policy
Curtin University, Western Australia

Email: sonam.pelden@postgrad.curtin.edu.au, Phone: +975 17892870

Appendix 7

Students' recruitment guidelines and procedures for school guidance Counsellors/Teacher counsellors

Title of the research project: Making sense of suicides by school students in Bhutan

: documenting a societal dialogue

Name of the Researcher : Sonam Pelden

2013- Start announcements: School notice board and word of mouth by counsellors during their classes/programmes.

Commence recruitments:

Recruit 5 students on first come first basis. Please refer to the following criteria for screening, where necessary interview potential student volunteers to confirm they meet the criteria.

Criteria:

Rule out immediate risk factors: no risk to self and others (the student will be participating in a group interview)

Student must not have a history of suicide attempt/s in the span of last 12 months

Student is interested in participating

Student is mentally sound and able to participate in the interviews

Student is able to speak for themselves

Student has read and understood the participant information sheet

Students are from classes 7 and above.

Additional note:

Please ensure:

At least 1 – 2 student peer helpers are encouraged to participate from each school.

Participating students represent a good mix of gender

Participating students are from different class levels.

2013 Recruitment complete

Appendix 8

Interview guide questions

- How do you understand suicides by school students in Bhutan?
- Why do you think that is happening?
- Many students coming to counselling say 'I don't want to live anymore,' I don't care about my life anymore'- How does this make sense to you? What do you think these statements mean? How do you feel about these statements? Does this concern you?
- How do you think we can help these students?
- Who do you think can help these students?
- What do you think schools should do? How do you think schools can respond to this concern?
- How will you define suicide?
- What are your personal beliefs, values and thoughts on acts of suicide?
- What do you think about this project?

Appendix 9

Preliminary themes

<i>Groups</i>	Themes/codes	Alphabetic representations	Explanations
<i>Students</i>	Family and relationships	FR	Alludes to domestic, familial and parental issues; relationships with peers, teachers and romantic relationships
	Need to belong	NB	Refers to sub-themes isolation, need to feel understood, alone, invisible
	Stress and tensions	ST	Alludes to problems of expectations and pressures involving school performance, relational expectations, and thoughts about future.
	Feelings	F	Alludes to a range of feelings that include sadness, hopelessness, anger, fear of rejection and failures, and empathy.
	Beliefs & perceptions	BP	Refers to perceptions towards suicide, people who commit suicide, cultural and religious beliefs
	Prevention	P	Ideas for prevention
<i>Adults</i>	Despair	D	Refers to the overall tone of concerns and expressions shared in common by the adults
	Responsibility	R	Refers to issues of responsibilities
	Culture	C	References to cultural beliefs and practices

Participant information sheet

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Who will be involved in the study?

This study will involve participants who are connected to our education system. I will be sending invitations to:

Six Secondary schools: I hope that five students from each school, the school Principal and counsellor will participate.

In total 30 students, six principals and six school guidance counsellors will be part of this study from the schools.

Up to six parents

Officials from Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, and Bhutan InfoComm and Media Authority (BICMA).

Buddhist teacher

What will you do as participants?

Each one of you will be having individual conversations (interview) with me. I will also conduct group meetings with the students and the school guidance counsellors.

I will be coming to Bhutan for the meetings and interviews. I will also be contacting you to seek your permission, guidance and to confirm the date, place and time for our meetings. Our meetings can take place anytime from October 2013 until November 2013. We will be talking for 30 minutes up to an hour.

During our meetings, we will discuss your views and understandings (what they mean to you?) about suicides by students in Bhutan. We will also talk about possible actions and plans that might prevent suicides in our schools.

Support available during the study:

Your safety and wellbeing are important to me throughout the study. We will be talking on a sensitive topic and you may feel sad, worried or hurt. To help you, counselling will be available to you at any time during the course of this research. School guidance counsellors from the respective schools will be available to provide support and counselling services. In addition, another network of help will be mobilized. I will be providing you with the contact details for counselling services during our first meeting.

What will happen to the information you share?

Participation is voluntary and information you share will be confidential. Trust is of great importance for this study. The information you provide will be kept separate from your personal details. Information will be protected and stored safely. Papers and documents will be stored under lock and key and on the researcher's personal computer, which is password protected. No identifying information on students or any other participant will be shared with anyone. Only the researcher will have access to the information.

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Thank you for your time in going through this information.



Sonam Pelden

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