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Those Who Get Left Behind

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Those Who Get Left Behind

Abstract

Overview: For most people, losing a friend or loved one is the most difficult thing that they will have to deal with in their life. When that person is an adolescent who may not have personally dealt with death before and especially a death from suicide, the process of grieving can become even more difficult and complicated. In 2009, 4,630 young adults ages 10-24 died by suicide (“Youth Suicidal Behavior”). For each of these deaths a conservative estimate is that “as many as 6 to 10 survivors (persons close to the suicide victim) remain to cope with the loss” (Mitchell et al. 12). Most people can see that this is a tragedy, an epidemic, but to many, it is also just a number. Personally, I will never be able to look at this statistic without thinking that it would have been one less had the decisions that my friend, Cherelle, made that year been altered. In April of my freshman year of high school I lost Cherelle to suicide, and I have lived the past four years of my life affected by her choice in more ways that I ever would have imagined. While we were never terribly close, her choice changed the way that I look at just about everything in life. While researching this topic, I came across a statement by Jane Wolfe, who spoke as both a professional who deals with adolescents and as a parent who lost her child to suicide. While addressing the effects the suicide of a student has on a school Wolfe writes, “For many of the students and teachers in the school, the concept of ‘normal’ has been changed forever” (5). I don’t think that Wolfe could have put it better because the suicide of a peer or a student is something that will affect the lives of numerous survivors, probably for the rest of their lives. Since the day that I found out about Cherelle’s death, I saw, and still see, changes in myself and in many of my friends who were also close to Cherelle. Personally, I would argue that the estimated 6-10 lives affected by each suicide is much too low, as I saw dozens of people grieving, devastated and forever affected by Cherelle’s death. Adolescent suicide is a tragedy in our country, and there is no question that something needs to be done to change that. However, what I want to focus on is those who survive the suicide of a friend or family member- the survivors that get left behind.

Keywords

Writing

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Those Who Get Left Behind

For most people, losing a friend or loved one is the most difficult thing that they will have to deal with in their life. When that person is an adolescent who may not have personally dealt with death before and especially a death from suicide, the process of grieving can become even more difficult and complicated.

In 2009, 4,630 young adults ages 10-24 died by suicide (“Youth Suicidal Behavior”). For each of these deaths a conservative estimate is that “as many as 6 to 10 survivors (persons close to the suicide victim) remain to cope with the loss” (Mitchell et al. 12). Most people can see that this is a tragedy, an epidemic, but to many, it is also just a number. Personally, I will never be able to look at this statistic without thinking that it would have been one less had the decisions that my friend, Cherelle, made that year been altered. In April of my freshman year of high school I lost Cherelle to suicide, and I have lived the past four years of my life affected by her choice in more ways that I ever would have imagined. While we were never terribly close, her choice changed the way that I look at just about everything in life.

While researching this topic, I came across a statement by Jane Wolfe, who spoke as both a professional who deals with adolescents and as a parent who lost her child to suicide. While addressing the effects the suicide of a student has on a school Wolfe writes, “For many of the students and teachers in the school, the concept of ‘normal’ has been changed forever” (5). I don’t think that Wolfe could have put it better because the suicide of a peer or a student is something that will affect the lives of numerous survivors, probably for the rest of their lives. Since the day that I found out about Cherelle’s death, I saw, and still see, changes in myself and in many of my friends who were also close to Cherelle. Personally, I would argue that the estimated 6-10 lives affected by each suicide is much too low, as I saw dozens of people grieving, devastated and forever affected by Cherelle’s death. Adolescent suicide is a tragedy in our country, and there is no question that something needs to be done to change that. However, what I want to focus on is those who survive the suicide of a friend or family member—the survivors that get left behind.

For those survivors, many of them adolescents themselves, the feelings of grief, loss, and guilt will never be completely eradicated. That is why something needs to change. Something needs to be done to help adolescents who have lost a friend or family member to suicide. In this paper, I

will investigate the effectiveness of bibliotherapy using Young Adult Literature related to suicide in aiding the grieving process of adolescents who have lost a friend or loved one to suicide.

While most people see that suicide is a problem, they can often overlook the magnitude and how many people are affected by suicide. According to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 34,000 people in our country die of suicide of each year; that's 95 Americans each day, or one death due to suicide every fifteen minutes (Facts about Suicide). Even more, these numbers don't account for suicide attempts; an additional 2,370 attempts are reported each and every day (Facts about Suicide). While suicide is the eleventh leading cause of death for all Americans, it ranks number three for adolescents and is the number two killer of college students.

With each of these suicides, more and more survivors are created. In fact, a recent study reported, "twenty percent of adolescents reported knowing a friend who had attempted suicide in the past year, and sixty percent reported knowing a teenager who had ever attempted suicide" (Bearman, Moody 89). This statistic shows that more often than not American adolescents know another teenager who has attempted suicide. Thankfully, the majority of these attempts are not successful; however, this still speaks to the severity of this epidemic.

As anyone who took health class in school knows, there often are warning signs that lead up to suicide. These signs can include: withdrawal from friends and activities, violence, use of drugs or alcohol, neglect of appearance, personality changes, loss of interest, and giving verbal clues (Teen Suicide). So if we teach these signs in school, why is it that signals are so often are overlooked by teachers, parents, friends, and peers? For people who have lost a loved one to suicide, realizing after the death has occurred that they had overlooked these signs can lead to an overwhelming feeling of guilt and the seemingly endless list of "What if?" questions that constantly circle their minds. After the death, it is very common for survivors to think that had they changed something that they had done, they would have been able to save the deceased. Unfortunately, these overwhelming feelings, along with several other factors, lead to a significantly increased likelihood of a survivor of suicide contemplating, attempting or committing suicide themselves. While a specific rate of increase has not been determined, a recent study of American adolescents concluded "the effect of a friend's suicide attempt on the respondent's suicidal ideation was extremely strong for both boys and girls" (Bearman, Moody 93).

Now that it is clear what exactly the problem is, it is important to find things that can be of help to these survivors.

Thankfully, this once altogether taboo topic is being more discussed both at home as well as in classrooms. While at one time it was thought that discussions of suicide would only lead to romanticism of suicide and making it seem like an acceptable solution, more professionals are now endorsing the idea that discussing suicide will do far more good than it does harm. It is now thought that discussions about suicide and the effect that a suicide has on a community before a death occurs could help to prevent the tragedy in the first place. In addition to this, it has been shown that discussing suicide with survivors after a death occurs can help the victims with their grieving process.

One method to opening such conversations that is becoming more acceptable is the use of Young Adult Literature (YAL) in the classroom. In fact, in her article on the subject Paula Berger writes, "By approaching this disturbing topic within the safe confines of a novel, the adolescent reader, even if he or she identifies closely with any of the characters, can maintain a discrete distance while absorbing potentially valuable information" (14). She then goes on to list: suicidal motivations; characteristics of people who may be considering suicide; the roles that family, friends, and relatives may play in the suicide and whether that role works to trigger or prevent the suicide; the affect that suicide has on loved ones as well as society; and the importance of getting psychiatric help as things that adolescents may be able to learn from YAL that deals with suicide (14).

Of course, making any sort of changes to a long standing part of the curriculum, in this case using YAL in place of classic works, is bound to face some back pressure. This can come from many different sources including parents, teachers, and administrators. Parents might question teachers using YAL that involves suicide in their child's classroom because it discusses such a sensitive topic, and they might question the way that their child's teacher might handle the conversation. Often times older teachers who are more set in their ways put up the most determined fight against using YAL in their classroom in favor of the classics that they have taught for so long. Finally, school administrators may be against using YAL in the classroom because it is so controversial, and they may be worried that if they offend the wrong people it could have a negative effect on their school, their job, or their reelection.

A prime example of this criticism is the challenges that Lois Lowry's *The Giver* faced in the 1990's (Suicide Books Challenged). In her novel, Lowry paints a picture of a utopian society, free of suffering, hunger, war, gender, color, music, and love. In this strange world everything is controlled by the elders as citizens are told what job they will be assigned right down to who they will marry. The book sparks controversy mainly because members of this society can be

“released” if they are too ill, too old, or if they break this society’s strange rules. When twelve year old protagonist, Jonas, is assigned his profession, The Receiver of Memory, and learns that this release is nothing more than lethal injection, he feels the need to make a change to his society. After its 1993 publication, Lowry’s novel ranked #11 on the list of “100 most frequently challenged books: 1990–1999” and the novel has been challenged in at least five states since 1999 (Suicide Books Challenged). Supporters of the book claim it “spurs students to think about important social issues and form their own opinions” while “opponents criticize the book’s failure to clearly explain that suicide is not a solution to life’s problems” (Suicide Books Challenged).

But the fact is that the goal of an adolescent English literature class should be to foster a love of reading in students. However, when teachers relentlessly force feed students information about antiquated, dry, and incomprehensible works that the majority of their students frankly do not care about this goal will not be reached. This is not to say that teachers should never teach the works of Shakespeare or guide students through *The Scarlett Letter* but rather that more teachers should add new YAL into their curriculum. Studies have proven that when they are asked what type of books they would prefer to read, adolescents consistently choose to read YA novels (Bushman 3). In addition, to this it has been shown that “An adolescent can better relate to the characters and plot of YA novels” and also that “They offer hope to the young reader—hope that things can change, improve, succeed. They give hope to be able to cope with all that seems wrong with being a young adult” (Bushman 9). English professor Tom Romano studied the relationships that many of his students, mainly English majors, had with literature in school. His results are very disheartening as he concluded that more than 90% of students had their worst experience with literature in a classroom while only 50% of the students interviewed had their best experience with literature in the classroom (6). This leads to the question that if YAL were used instead of books that are more standard to today’s English curriculum, would more students have their best experiences with literature in school and would fewer students might have their worst experience with literature in the classroom? When dealing with the aftermath that the suicide of a peer creates, forming these connections to others dealing with similar situations, as well as allowing students to have positive encounters with literature so that they want to read more, is very important.

So, since it has been established that YAL should be used in the classroom, the next logical question to answer is how YAL should be used in the classroom. There is no question that along with simply reading the novels, some form of discussion and reflection needs to take place. If a

conversation were to not occur, students could be left with unanswered questions. They would not be able to consider the novel from the perspective of their peers, and teachers would not have the opportunity to learn what their students are thinking and possibly catch on to students who might have suicidal thoughts.

Teachers could consider asking the students to create a journal to write whatever they feel is important to discuss. Journals can create a route of communication between students and teachers, without the students being worried about their peers judgments on their personal thoughts. Journaling about the novel that they are reading can also be an excellent way for students to see how their feelings about the novel, plot, themes, and characters change as the book progresses. Having the opportunity to write about a book that deals with suicide could particularly help students who have survived the suicide of someone they were close to because it could allow students to see and compare the coping methods that the characters in the novel use throughout the book to those that they are using. Seeing what methods characters used successfully could then be applied to their own life and aid in their grieving process. In addition, the act of expressing their feelings through journaling can be a coping method in itself. Being able to see how their thoughts and emotions have changed since the death occurred could help students see in what ways they have moved on and changed, and in what ways they are still grieving.

If YA books were used in a class after a suicide occurred, the teacher could consider bringing in a social worker or school psychologist to discuss the book with students. This professional might be able to better evaluate the book looking for the warning signs that the suicide victim exhibited and could bring in a different perspective in a discussion of the use of coping methods used by the survivors in the novel. Similarly, YAL that deals with a suicide could be used in a psychology class whether it is at a high school, undergrad, or graduate level. Because suicide is becoming a rapidly increasing epidemic, any psychology or social work professional working in a school will have to deal with suicide. Whether they are dealing with someone who might be considering recognizing the signs, they are working with a person who unsuccessfully attempted suicide, or they are helping people who survived the suicide of a loved one, having previously analyzed a novel that deals with these topics could provide them with very valuable knowledge. Group work could also be an effective method for discussing a particular YA book in the classroom. Working in groups allows students to express their feelings honestly and openly without feeling as much pressure that shy students might feel when discussion occurs as an entire class; yet, teachers would still be privy to the thoughts of their students so that they are still able

to catch on to the ever-so-important warning signs that might come up in discussion. One way that a teacher could use group work in his or her classroom is by creating book circles where each group of students reads a different novel. This can be particularly effective because it can allow students to take in information about several different novels and still see the perspectives of several different students. This would also allow the class the opportunity to see the success and failure of coping methods employed by many different characters in many different situations and compare what worked and what didn't work.

In her graduate thesis, Jill Ellen Hathaway did just this when she looked at how YAL informs teens about violence and in turn how students react to violence in YAL. In her introduction, Hathaway states, "Books that address issues such as cutting, rape, suicide, and shootings tend to be of high interest to high school students because they are subjects that students are familiar with and are taboo enough that many people don't discuss them; the students read books to learn about these issues"(2). Among novels that deal with many other forms of violence, Hathaway evaluated Laurie Halse Anderson's *Twisted*, Jay Asher's *Thirteen Reasons Why*, and *Breaking Point* by Alex Flinn, to name a few that deal with suicide.

To get to her conclusions, Hathaway had the 10th grade honors English class she was working with read novels in literature circles. While Hathaway did not use a student population who was grieving the loss of a friend or loved one, her conclusions here can still be of use. After Hathaway collected data that included interviews with students, journal entries, essays, and group presentations she concluded that "students could identify causes, warning signs, and effects of teen violence in their books, and they said they now recognize the hazards of bullying"(iv).

One of the books Hathaway used in this study that deals with suicide, and more specifically the chaos created after a suicide, is Jay Asher's *Thirteen Reasons Why*. This novel is different than many others, as much of the book is narrated from the perspective of a teen, Hannah Baker, who before ending her own life recorded thirteen tapes illustrating thirteen reasons why she decided to kill herself. Each of these tapes was directed to one person and the tapes were left with directions for circulation from one person targeted to the next. The novel focuses on Clay Jensen, a classmate of Hannah's who is very surprised to see the tapes show up on his porch and is perplexed as to why he is one of these reasons why. The format of Asher's novel is rather ingenious- it allows the reader to see Hannah's reasoning, but also allows us to see Clay's reaction, and what an impact Hannah's decision made on her community.

The reaction that Hathaway's students had to Asher's novel is particularly interesting. Hathaway

discloses the reasoning behind why one of her students chose to study the book, writing "...she told me that she selected the book because one of her brother's friends had committed suicide two years ago. She wanted to learn more about why teens commit suicide" (67). While at the beginning of the novel this student told Hathaway she did not understand why Hannah would commit suicide, towards the end of the novel she "described the buildup to Hannah's suicide as the 'snowball effect'. She claimed that many of Hannah's problems (for instance, the rumors that she was sexually promiscuous and the failure of several friendships) built up to the point where she couldn't handle it anymore" (68). Helping grieving adolescents to see these connections and reasons why can help to answer some of their questions about their friend's death and can help them begin to become more at peace with what happened.

In addition to being used in the classroom, YAL that deals with suicide can aid the grieving process of students when used in a bibliotherapy setting. Bibliotherapy is "the usage of literature to assist individuals in understanding and treating their problems, generally through the aid of a social worker or therapist" (Tussing, Valentine 457). In their discussion of the effectiveness of the use of bibliotherapy in dealing with adolescents who have a parent with a mental illness Heidi Tussing and Deborah Valentine write, "They experience and gain insight on the problem solving and coping skills of the characters, subsequently applying this learning to their own lives. Bibliotherapy can serve as an unobtrusive, non-threatening medium to help adolescents relieve their stress and increase their coping skills" (457). The authors continue by stating that as they gain this new information, they may be able to become more comfortable and better able to discuss the issues that they are facing.

Through the study that they conducted, Tussing and Valentine were able to evaluate individual books based on specific criteria and determine whether or not they might be effectively used as bibliotherapy tools. Several of the books that they evaluated and deemed appropriate for bibliotherapeutic use featured an adolescent protagonist whose parent had committed or attempted suicide. The first of these novels is *You Bet Your Life*, where through high school senior Bess, author Julie Reece Deavor explores the new reality that Bess faces. Tussing and Valentine approved this novel because "Bess models appropriate coping skills through the use of humor, journal writing to her mother, and through peer and adult relationships" (465). They go on to explain that the book also is helpful because Bess displays a healthy, open, and supportive relationship with her father where she is able to discuss what she is feeling, particularly in relation to the loss of her mother.

Another novel that Tussing and Valentine discuss that deals with an adolescent coping with a

suicide is A. E. Cannon's *Amazing Gracie*. This novel differs from Deavor's as protagonist Gracie is shown coping with the unsuccessful suicide attempt of her mother. Due to this, Cannon's novel might be a particularly helpful bibliotherapy tool for adolescents who have a friend or loved one who was unsuccessful in their suicide attempt, as the novel shows the ways that Gracie interacts with her mother after her attempt to end her own life. However, Tussing and Valentine do note that one of the novel's downfalls is that it does not provide as much information about depression as might benefit grieving readers.

To add to the definition of bibliotherapy, John Pardeck writes, "The goals of bibliotherapy are: (a) to provide information about problems, (b) to provide insight into problems, (c) to stimulate discussion about problems, (d) to communicate new values and attitudes, (e) to create an awareness that others have dealt with similar problems, and (f) to provide solutions to problems" (np). In his article "Using Literature to Help Adolescents Cope with Problems" he goes on to discuss the ways that bibliotherapy can be used (np). One of the main points that Pardeck makes is that bibliotherapy typically is not, and probably should not, be used alone. To continue his discussion, he writes that bibliotherapy is generally paired with another type of therapy or with one or more of the "follow-up strategies" that he discusses. The first of these methods that is often used with bibliotherapy is creative writing. One of the most interesting suggestions he gives here is that the therapist might ask the adolescent to write letters after reading the book. He states that these might include letters written from one character in the book to another character, or the adolescent might write a letter to one of the characters. Pardeck also writes that therapists might also consider facilitating art activities, discussion, or role playing as avenues to discuss the novel (np).

To further explore the use of bibliotherapy with grieving adolescents, consider Marty Slyter's article "Creative Counseling Interventions for Grieving Adolescents". In his discussion of the different intervention strategies that might be employed by therapists he looks into music, visual arts, bibliotherapy, drama, cinematherapy, and also suggests ways to combine various creative approaches. What makes Slyter's discussion of using bibliotherapy with grieving adolescents different from others is that he clearly defines its four sequential stages of identification, catharsis, insight, and universality. He writes that during the first stage, identification, adolescents are able to identify with the situations, characters, and settings that are present in their readings. Next, in the catharsis stage "adolescents become more emotionally involved in the story they are reading. They share the conflicts, motivations, and feelings with the character(s) with whom they have identified" (25). This stage naturally leads into the insight stage, where the

adolescent readers are able to relate and apply the outcomes of the story with their own life and what they might be dealing with. In the final stage, universality, adolescents can receive the greatest benefits from bibliotherapy, as they are able to see that their issues are shared with others and that they are not alone in how they are feeling.

Surprisingly enough, although the popularity of bibliotherapy is just beginning to really take off, the practice of using literature as a therapeutic method has been around for a very long time. In fact, "The prescribed use of books to heal the human condition appears to have started in institutional, medical and correctional facilities in the Middle Ages to help people cope with mental and physical ailments" (Jack, Ronan 164). While it can be assumed that in the beginning of the practice it probably was not used to aid adolescents who were dealing with the suicide of a friend or loved one, it seems natural that its use would eventually expand to cover this.

Despite all of this, there are bound to be people who disagree with the use of bibliotherapy. One argument that can be made is that not enough counselors are given sufficient training to help their clients get all that they could out of bibliotherapy (Kramer iii). Beyond this, there is very little literature showing the views of opponents of bibliotherapy. This being said, it can be assumed that people might be against the use of bibliotherapy for similar reasons to why they are weary of other newly popular therapies. They might oppose because bibliotherapy is new and somewhat unknown and because of this, it is hard to determine the effectiveness of the method in the long term. In addition, some critics might not trust the power of literature questioning how powerful of a therapeutic influence it can have on adolescents.

After examining what many others have to say on the topic, I strongly believe that Young Adult Literature being used in both bibliotherapeutic and in classroom settings benefits all students. This benefit is further amplified when looking at students who have gone through the loss of a friend or loved one through suicide.

Although I was never offered the use of a YA book dealing with suicide while grieving the loss of Cherelle, I believe that it might have provided comfort to my friends and me. The lessons that we might have been able to learn from such a book- that we are not alone, that it wasn't our fault- were lessons that we struggled to learn for a very long time, and with YAL we might have been able to realize these lessons quicker.

At this point in time, there are more teenagers grieving the loss of a friend or loved one through suicide than we could ever realize. These teens often go un-heard and un-helped and too often develop suicidal thoughts themselves, too many of them ending their own lives, adding to this vicious problem.

“I’m listening to someone give up. Someone I knew. Someone I liked. I’m listening but I’m still too late” (Asher 146). Asher speaks these words through Clay in *13 Reasons Why*, but they reflect the feelings of so many survivors. Clay, like so many other adolescents, struggles to figure out why the victim made the choices they did. When adolescents grieving the loss of a loved one through suicide read Asher’s novel and are able to see the process that Clay goes through, they may be able to take comfort in seeing that they are not alone, and may be able to compare the coping mechanisms that Clay uses to the ones that they are using. Something needs to be done to help these adolescents in a time when they feel so alone and as if nothing could possibly help them. I argue that this solution could be using YAL that deals with suicide in the classroom as the bibliotherapy to help those who get left behind.

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