

SCHOOL LEADERSHIP RESPONSE IN THE  
AFTERMATH OF ADOLESCENT SUICIDE

by

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to examine the decisions made by school leaders in the aftermath of a student suicide in the context of the four frames of organizational leadership as described by Bolman and Deal (1989). The four frames were: structural, human resource, political, and symbolic. The researcher obtained an understanding of the leadership behaviors through the use of two qualitative research methods: interview and document analysis. This study utilized a case study of one middle school located in southern Arizona and a second case study of one high school from the same school district. Both schools experienced a student suicide one to two years prior to the data collection for this study. The case studies examined the leadership decisions and strategies implemented by the principal and others in relationship to the suicidal death of the student.

Some of the implications for educators were staff training, crisis response handbook, printed guidelines discouraging student memorials, district crisis team, staff training, assessing the impact of the student death, unwillingness of suicide victims' parents to accept their son's death as a suicide, assisting the parents in planning the memorial service, and consistently implemented crisis response activities. The two schools provided very different looks at how school leaders responded and the myriad of decisions that were made in the aftermath of a student suicide. The four frames of organizational leadership provided a powerful lens from which to view those leadership decisions.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### *Introduction to the Study*

Suicide has stolen the lives of youth throughout the world and is now recognized as a tragic, but preventable public health problem (National Institute of Mental Health, 2001; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). The adolescent suicide rate in Arizona is among the highest in the nation and no downward trend is anticipated (Arizona Department of Health Services, 2000). This dismal statistic plus the fact that suicide is an uncomfortable topic that riddles survivors with guilt and pain, has doomed adolescent suicide prevention to a back seat in educational reform movements.

The purpose of public schools has been redefined to address the complexity and diversity of issues that affect students today. Public schools are a reflection of our American society and the variety of issues families confront every day has caused a ripple effect in schools. Schools are expected to teach ethics, health, work place skills, driver's education, and character skills. Most Americans would agree that the public school is an appropriate playing field in which to combat social problems (Beck, 1992). Adolescent suicide is a social problem and has the potential to interfere with the education of not only the suicidal youth, but friends and acquaintances as well as the school climate. Many school mission statements articulate something similar to 'helping students reach their full potential.' This mission demands that curriculum and school programs include the personal/social development of all students.

Beck (1992) in her research of ethics in educational leadership emphasizes that battling social problems is one of the three most important issues for responsive school leaders. The caring attitude required to effectively address personal/social issues simply cannot be ignored. Beck notes that in many schools, there is a courageous and empathetic regard for students, which has led to a genuine concern for the well being of all students and in particular the most vulnerable students in the school. These students may view the school as a safe haven and the school can therefore, become a significant ingredient in the prevention of adolescent suicide. Discouragements and perceived failures at home and school can have a negative effect on students and their well being (Herring, 1990). There are a multitude of decisions that face school leaders when implementing a comprehensive suicide prevention program that consists of three major components: prevention, intervention, and postvention (Kirk, 1993). It is essential that school leaders possess a variety of strategies that will assist in addressing adolescent suicide as well as other social issues that affect students' ability to succeed.

To better understand a complex situation, one can use the literature as a guide. However, the literature in educational leadership has yet to explore many issues in relationship to suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention or crisis management in general. Most studies of youth suicide involve recognizing the signs and symptoms of suicide and measuring the knowledge and comfort level of the school employee in utilizing the referral process.

Fullan (1991) underscores the significant role of the principal in influencing organizational change. It is imperative that principals and all educators deal effectively

with suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention. The emphasis on student achievement and school accountability at the national and state levels has increased the perception of the amount of stress that students and educators embrace. If educators and students are experiencing more stress, then the importance of preventing adolescent suicide is even more critical. The school principal is the gatekeeper of the school climate and culture and must be involved in crisis response activities after a student suicide.

The literature is void of studies involving leadership decisions after a student suicide. This dissertation will attempt to fill that void. It describes a research study of leadership decisions as perceived by administrators, teachers, counselors, and staff members in two schools that recently experienced a student suicide. The case study results are based on interviews with school staff, including administrators, counselors, teachers, and support staff who were employed at the school at the time of the suicide. Data were also collected through document analysis. Effective principal leadership behaviors were viewed through the four frameworks to explain the qualities that comprise organizations identified by Bolman and Deal (1989). The four frameworks used in this study were: structural, human resource, political, and symbolic.

Chapter 1 presents the statement of the problem, the importance of the problem, and the limitations of the study. It concludes with the definition of key terms and the organization and overview of the dissertation.

### *Problem Statement*

The purpose of this research was to examine the leadership behaviors exhibited by two principals after the suicide death of a student in terms of the four frames of organizational leadership as determined by Bolman and Deal (1989).

### *Research Question*

The following research question was examined in this study:

Is there a relationship between the decisions that educational leaders make after a student suicide and the four frames of organizational leadership? If there is a relationship, how is it manifested?

### *Significance of the Problem*

Pitcher and Poland (1992) emphasize that a culture of caring and a warm environment where students are involved and feel important is what distinguishes excellent schools. But even in the most positive school environment, students commit suicide.

Suicide is the third leading cause of death for young people ages 15 – 24 and is exceeded only by unintentional injury and homicide (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1999). This startling statistic cannot be ignored when school leaders and educators strive to improve student achievement nation-wide. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) emphasizes school and leadership accountability by placing conditions for federal aid on schools meeting specified academic standards and following federal regulations. Students are also held accountable for meeting state academic performance standards, which can add additional stress to their lives.

As stated earlier, there is a void in school leadership research and suicide prevention. It is hoped that this case study research of principal leadership behaviors will contribute to the body of knowledge in adolescent suicide research. Furthermore, it is desired that the leadership research in this study will assist in closing the gap in this field of study by providing leadership information about the relationship between the decisions made after a student suicide and the four frames of organizational leadership. Specifically, this study is significant for the following several reasons.

This research provides relevant data for principals and superintendents to learn more about the behaviors of principals and their impact in a school that has experienced the death of a student by suicide. Secondly, this research provides applicable information for principals and superintendents to learn more about principal decision making and implementation of strategies in relationship to the four frameworks of organizational leadership following a student suicide. Lastly, this research provides relevant data for leadership preparation programs to determine those leadership skills that assist principals to effectively deal with a crisis situation in a school.

#### *Overview of the Methodology*

This qualitative study analyzed the meaning of a principal's decisions and actions after the death of a student by suicide through the use of the four frames of organizational leadership (Bolman & Deal, 1989). An understanding of the leadership behaviors was obtained through the use of the qualitative research methods of interview and document analysis. The utilization of both sources of data allowed the researcher to measure the phenomenon from different angles and positions (Mason, 1996).

This research study utilized a case study of one middle school and a case study of one high school from the same school district in Southern Arizona. Both schools experienced a student suicide one to two years prior to the data collection for this study. Both case studies examined the leadership decisions and strategies implemented by the principal and other school leaders in relationship to the suicidal death of the student. The four frames of organizational leadership were matched to those decisions and strategies.

Research methods used by the researcher included: interviews and document analysis. Initially, organizational leaders were selected and then snowball sampling was utilized to identify the other research participants. Interviews were conducted of key staff in the school at the time of the student death. These staff members were identified as having a role in suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention at the school. Key staff included the following: principals, associate principal, counselors, teachers, nurse, secretaries, and hall monitor.

Analysis of documents included the review of the district and school policies and procedures regarding a student death, including: student memorials, student services on campus, referral services, notification of students, staff, and parents, crisis intervention strategies, and crisis response team organization and duties.

#### *Limitations of the Study*

The following were limitations of the research study:

1. This research study consisted of a case study of one middle school and a case study of one high school from the same school district in Southern Arizona which limits the generalized applicability.

2. Due to the time elapse of 9 to 22 months since the student suicide and fading memories, interviewee responses were limited by the information they were able to accurately recall.
3. Interviewee responses were also limited by the responses the interviewees were emotionally willing to disclose in the interview.

#### *Definition of Key Terms*

*Adolescence.* “The period of physical and psychological development from the onset of puberty to maturity” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service, 2001). Adolescence may also be defined as the teen years prior to adulthood at age 18.

*Case study research.* This research focuses on experiences and observations that seek to understand a current happening or occurrence. It is usually qualitative in nature and utilizes a limited number of subjects (Merriam, 2001).

*Effective leadership.* Bolman and Deal (1997, p. 297) describe effective leaders as those who “help establish a vision, set standards for performance, and create focus and direction for collective efforts.”

*Middle school.* For the purpose of this case study, a middle school educates students in grades seven and eight.

*High school.* For the purpose of this case study, a high school educates students in grades nine, ten, eleven, and twelve.

*Suicide.* “Death from injury, poisoning, or suffocation where there is evidence that a self-inflicted act led to the person’s death” (U.S. Department of Health and Human

Services, Public Health Service, 2001). Suicide is also the purposeful taking of one's own life. Methods may vary, but include firearm, hanging, overdose, asphyxiation, or vehicle/train accident.

*Structural frame.* "... focuses on designing a pattern of roles and relationships that will accomplish collective goals as well as accommodate individual differences" (Bolman & Deal, 1997). The formal structure of organizations also includes the culture of the organization, expectations, and routine activities.

*Human resource frame.* "...emphasizes changing people (through training, rotation, promotion, or dismissal)..." (Bolman & Deal, 1997). People are the most important resource of an organization and it is important that human needs are met and talents utilized.

*Political frame.* The political frame emphasizes a different organizational pattern of coalitions of individuals and special interest groups within and outside of the organization who exert power and influence, while competing for limited resources (Bolman & Deal, 1997).

*Symbolic frame.* This frame emphasizes the meaning and interpretation of an event, not the event itself. It is designed around the concepts of stories, myths, festivities, and beliefs that provide an avenue to interpret and understand human behavior and organizational occurrences (Bolman & Deal, 1997).

*Yellow ribbon campaign.* The Yellow Ribbon national campaign is designed to provide students, staff, and parents with an awareness of adolescent suicide and a means to report students who are experiencing difficulty.

### *Organization of the Study*

This first chapter provides the reader with an overview of the research study and a description of the following four chapters. Chapter 1 includes the background of the research study, the statement of the problem, and the importance and need for the study. Also provided is an overview of the methodology, delimitations of the study, and the definition of key terms. Chapter 2 provides a review of the current literature in adolescent suicide statistics, prevention, intervention, and postvention strategies, and implications for school leaders. Also included in chapter 2 is a review of the current literature in leadership theories and their relationship to adolescent suicide. The intent of Chapter 3 is to describe the educational, volunteer, and work experience of the researcher and how it relates to this case study research. Chapter 4 describes the design and methodology used in the research study and specifically includes the research perspective and research type, time and location, description of participants, data collection methods, and data analysis. Chapter 5 presents the results of the study and Chapter 6 provides interpretation of the results and a summary the study.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### *Historical Perspective*

Adolescent suicide is considered an increasing problem in the U.S. as thousands of youth purposely take their lives (Nelson & Crawford, 1990; Ackerman, 1993; Adams, 1998; American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 1998). Historically, researchers attempted to associate meaning to suicide and find ways to prevent it, but not until French social scientist, Emile Durkheim explored and identified the risk and protective factors of those who committed suicide and those who did not, has the field been able to determine strategies to prevent and intervene with suicidal behavior (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services). Suicide prevention efforts in the United States did not begin until the late 1950s and started with the opening of the Los Angeles Suicide Prevention Center (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services). The Federal Government became involved in suicide prevention efforts in 1966 when the Center for Studies of Suicide Prevention was created as a department within the National Institute of Mental Health (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services).

The American Association for Suicidology and the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention were started in the 1970s and 1980s and were instrumental in the efforts to research suicide in order to develop effective prevention programs (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). The sharp increase in youth suicide rates gained national attention with the establishment of a violence prevention unit in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in 1983. This in turn led to the creation of the

Secretary of Health and Human Services Task Force on Youth Suicide. The goal of this task force was to review the research and literature on suicide prevention and make intervention recommendations (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). These recommendations were published in 1989.

The United Nations/World Health Organization published an international research document titled *Prevention of Suicide: Guidelines for the Formulation and Implementation of National Strategies* (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). This guide was readily endorsed by the Suicide Prevention Advocacy Network (SPAN USA), a grassroots advocacy organization comprised of survivors of suicide (those who have had a relative or friend who committed suicide), suicide attempt survivors, and community activists. The support and advocacy of suicide as a nation wide issue by SPAN USA provided the momentum that led to the development of a national suicide prevention strategy (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). A National Suicide Prevention Conference held in Reno, Nevada in October 1998 was crucial to the creation of a national document. Conference participants discussed and analyzed research that summarized evidence based suicide prevention activities and developed a list of 81 recommendations for action (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1999). In response to the conference recommendations, U.S. Surgeon General, David Satcher in July 1999 issued a Call to Action to Prevent Suicide. This document is a template for state and local organizations and utilizes these elements: Awareness, Intervention, and Methodology (AIM) to initiate suicide prevention activities (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1999).

The cooperative efforts of researchers, suicide survivors, and community activists have been instrumental in the creation of the National Strategy for Suicide Prevention: Goals and Objectives for Action. The National Strategy of Suicide Prevention (2001) describes the document as:

... a comprehensive and integrated approach to reducing the loss and suffering from suicide and suicidal behaviors across the life course. It encompasses the promotion, coordination, and support of activities that will be implemented across the country as culturally appropriate, integrated programs for suicide prevention among Americans at national, regional, tribal, and community levels. (p. 21)

Implementation of the national strategies will require a nation-wide collaborative effort on the part of all stakeholders.

#### *U.S. and Arizona Suicide Statistics*

Although suicide is the third leading cause of death in young people ages 15 – 24 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1999; American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 1998; American Association of Suicidology, 1998), the suicide rates in general for the U.S. population have been fairly stable over the past 30 – 40 years with the exception of a few specific age groups that have increased at alarming rates (Ackerman, 1993; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; American Association of Suicidology). The rate of suicide among persons aged 15 – 19 years has increased by 14% from 1980 – 1996 and the rate of suicide among youth aged 10 – 14 years has increased by 100% during the same time period (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). The exact

number of adolescent suicide attempts is unknown, in part because families ask that the death be classified as accidental, police investigators are unsure of the cause of many car accidents, and coroners are hesitant to list suicide on death certificates (Jones, 2001).

The western states, with the exception of Washington and California, have the highest adolescent suicide rates in the U.S. (American Association of Suicidology, 1998; Centers for Disease Control, 2001; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2001). Arizona has ranked in the top eight states in the nation for the number of suicide deaths per capita for the past 10 years (Centers for Disease Control; Arizona Department of Health Services, 2001). In Arizona youth 19 years and younger, suicide is one of the top three causes of death (Arizona Department of Health Services). Male adolescents in Arizona commit suicide five times the rate of Arizona females (Arizona Department of Health Services). The Arizona adolescent suicide mortality rate is consistently higher than the US adolescent suicide rate (Arizona Department of Health Services). There are suspected reasons for these statistics, but evidence was not found in the current research.

There are a variety of methods used by adolescents to commit suicide, but firearms are the method of choice by all age and ethnicity groups in the nation and comprise 60% of all U.S. suicides (American Association of Suicidology, 1998; Arizona Department of Health Services, 2001). Since 1980, suicide by firearms accounted for 96% of the increase in the rate of suicide in youth ages 15 – 19 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1999). Other methods of suicide include drug overdose, hanging, car crashes, and self inflicted wounds with a sharp object. There is little, if any

research on the characteristics of the firearms used in suicides which could prove to be valuable information in planning adolescent prevention programs.

The Services for Teens at Risk report (1993) claims that there are approximately 110 attempts for each completed suicide. Suicide cuts across all age, economic, social, and ethnic boundaries (American Association of Suicidology, 2001). Adolescents today feel a lot of pressure to succeed and experience feelings of stress related to self-doubt, loss of a romantic relationship, family problems, trouble at school or with the law, and fear of growing up (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 1998; Arizona Department of Health Services, 2001). Gibson (1989) emphasizes that gay and lesbian youth are two or three times more likely to commit suicide than their heterosexual peers and that 30% of all completed adolescent suicides are related to sexual identity. Hershberger and D'Augelli (1995) found that lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents are at a much greater risk for suicide attempts and completions than the general youth population. Many youth who admit their homosexuality to family members have faced abuse or ostracism by relatives. Rejection by friends and family after learning of their sexual orientation may cause stress and isolation for gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth (Hershberger & D'Augelli). Of the homosexual adolescents surveyed who came out of the closet, 41% reported suicide attempts as opposed to 12% who did not expose their sexual identity (Hershberger & D'Augelli).

It can be argued that one of the main reasons that adolescents today are more at risk for suicide than a generation or two ago is the general decline in the traditional family unit. American families are more likely to be blended with step parents and step or

half siblings and the mobility rate for families is higher than it was 40 or 50 years ago (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 1998). A study by Coder, Nelson, and Aylward (1991) found that approximately half of the school counselors listed family problems (divorce, death, substance abuse) as the most common contributing factor to suicide completions and attempts. Nelson & Crawford (1990) found that 59% of the elementary counselors in their study attributed family problems to youth suicide. Family dysfunction, characterized by conflict, anger, substance abuse, violence, or a combination of these factors, is often present in the families of suicidal youth (Herring, 1990; National Resource Center for Youth Services, 1990).

Adolescence is an evolving period of rapid physical growth as well as emotional growth, social and sexual development, and development of personal identity (Arizona Department of Health Services, 2001). It is critical that parents, schools, and the community recognize the behavioral health needs of adolescents. Kalafat (1990) indicates that most adolescent suicides appear to be spontaneous reactions to a crisis. The crisis situation is seen in a narrow perspective by the adolescent. Options are not recognized, leading to hopelessness and the adolescent feels increasingly isolated (Kalafat, 1990).

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2001) conducted the National Household Survey on Drug Abuse with youths aged 12 to 17 in 2000 and discovered the following:

- Approximately 3 million youths were at risk for suicide during 1999.
- Youths who reported past year alcohol or illicit drug use were more likely than youth who did not use these substances to be at risk for suicide.

- Only 35 percent of youths at risk for suicide during the past year received mental health treatment or counseling. (p. 1)

Herring (1990) found that abuse of substances may lead adolescents to suicidal behaviors, but the abuse is not the cause of suicide.

Depression and suicide ideation are treatable mental disorders (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 1998; American Association of Suicidology, 2001). Interviews with family members of youth who have committed suicide reveal that almost 90% of them had an untreated mental illness, usually depression or substance abuse (Jones, 2001; Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic, 1993). Suicide survivors are at an increased risk of suffering emotional problems, depression, and committing suicide (American Association of Suicidology, 2001). A brochure produced by the Mental Health Association of Arizona (2000) emphasizes that adolescent depression is not a choice, rather a biological and chemical disease that is treatable. Treatment of depression can include combinations of short-term psychotherapy, medication, and changes in the home or school environment (National Institute of Mental Health, 2001).

Adolescent suicide behavior may be increased by media exposure to suicide stories, suicide of a classmate, or a cluster affect from multiple local adolescent suicides (Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic, 1993). Herring (1990) points out that 10% of youth suicides will be successful and most suicide attempts by youth are not overt in that they rarely tell adults what they are thinking and generally do not call crisis hot lines. Most suicidal adolescents desperately want to live, but are in a hopeless state and are

unable to recognize any other alternatives to ending their pain (American Association of Suicidology, 2001). Suicidal youth find no other options to relieve them of their pain (Herring). McEvoy and McEvoy (2000) state, "Hopelessness in the face of a perceived intolerable situation usually is the catalyst for self-destruction--it is not depression, anger, guilt, or estrangement per se that causes self-destruction." (p. 7)

Along with the family, the school is an important social system for youth and problems associated with major disappointments in academic success or social integration can affect a student emotionally (Herring, 1990; National Resource Center for Youth Services, 1990). Herring suggests that negative student behaviors such as talking back to adults, bullying, truancy, and setting fires are a sign of inner conflict and he further notes that the emotional and social development of youth today is not keeping pace with the accelerated rate of physical maturation in adolescents. Adolescent suicide is rarely related to just one negative event (Herring). Suicidal thoughts and behaviors are not enhanced by talking, teaching, or learning about suicide (American Association of Suicidology, 2001). This myth is one of the most difficult barriers for educators to overcome when implementing a comprehensive suicide prevention program.

#### *Warning Signs of Adolescent Suicide and Assistance Strategies*

Several researchers have identified common suicidal behaviors. According to the research, a youth may be suicidal if he/she exhibits the following behaviors:

- Talks about committing suicide
- Has trouble eating or sleeping
- Experiences drastic changes in behavior

- Withdraws from friends and/or social activities
- Loses interest in hobbies, work, school, etc.
- Prepares for death by making a will or final arrangements
- Gives away prized possessions
- Attempted suicide before
- Takes unnecessary risks
- Recent severe losses
- Preoccupied with death and dying
- Loses interest in personal appearance
- Increased use of alcohol or drugs

(American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 1998; American Association of Suicidology, 2001; Coder, Nelson, & Aylward, 1991; Peach & Reddick, 1991)

There are numerous ways for someone to help a suicidal person. Most of these strategies can be considered common sense, require no special training or education, and can easily be shared with all school staff members.

- Be direct. Talk openly and matter-of-factly about suicide.
- Be willing to listen. Allow expressions of feelings. Accept the feelings.
- Be non-judgmental. Don't debate whether suicide is right or wrong, or feelings are good or bad. Don't lecture on the value of life.
- Get involved. Become available. Show interest and support.
- Don't dare him/her to do it.
- Don't act shocked. This will put distance between you.

- Don't be sworn to secrecy. Seek support.
- Offer hope that alternatives are available. But do not offer glib reassurance.
- Take action. Remove means, such as guns or stockpiled pills.
- Get help from persons or agencies specializing in crisis intervention and suicide prevention. (The American Association of Suicidology, 2001, p. 1)

As with most disturbing and uncomfortable topics, many myths have surfaced around the topic of suicide. These myths underscore the need for accurate information about adolescent suicide. King (1999) identifies the following 15 prevalent myths of adolescent suicide:

1. Adolescent suicide is a decreasing problem in the United States.
2. Adolescent homicide is more common than adolescent suicide.
3. Most adolescent suicides occur unexpectedly without warning signs.
4. Adolescents who talk about suicide do not attempt or commit suicide.
5. Most adolescents who attempt suicide fully intend to die.
6. Educating teens about suicide leads to increased suicide attempts, since it provides them with ideas and methods about killing themselves.
7. Adolescents cannot relate to a person who has experienced suicidal thoughts.
8. No difference exists between male and female adolescents regarding suicidal behavior.
9. Because female adolescents complete suicide at a lower rate than male adolescents, their attempts should not be taken too seriously.

10. The most common method for adolescent suicide completion involve drug overdose.
11. All adolescents who engage in suicidal behavior are mentally ill.
12. If adolescents want to commit suicide, there is nothing anyone can do to prevent its occurrence.
13. Suicidal behavior is inherited.
14. Adolescent suicide occurs only among poor adolescents.
15. Only a counselor or a mental health professional can help a suicidal adolescent. (pp. 159-161)

#### *Implications for School Leaders*

The implications for school leaders discussed in this section include: legal and written policy issues, professional development, curriculum delivery, community awareness, crisis response plan, and program evaluation. Kalafat (1990) identifies these elements as necessary to achieving a successful comprehensive school suicide response program: policies and procedures, community partnerships, and educating all staff members, students, and parents. King (2001) refers to a primary suicide prevention program as having the following components: district-wide policy, educating and encouraging collaboration among all staff members, integrating suicide prevention into the core curriculum, developing a peer assistance program, engaging in activities designed to increase school connectedness, developing strong family, school, and community partnerships, and organizing a school crisis team.

*Legal and Written Policy Issues*

Kirk (1993) notes that school officials have a legal responsibility to identify suicidal behavior, act in the best interest of the student to prevent violence or harm, and to error on the side of safety in suicidal situations. Most school boards desire specific policies that outline what the district will do to prevent adolescent suicide, as well as intervention and postvention responsibilities (Jones, 2001). From a leadership perspective, Jones cautions districts against specific policies that may be overly ambitious and create a standard for suicide prevention that district staff cannot meet. This may leave the district open for litigation. Michael Wessley of the National School Boards Association's National Education Policy Network also recommends that the district's suicide prevention policy be general, allowing the administrators to determine implementation details (cited in Jones). Kalafat (1990), on the other hand, advocates for a specific, written plan that includes guidelines for staff responsibilities and available resources for intervention and postvention activities.

The culture of the school and district may assist the leader in determining how specific a suicide policy should be. Specific decisions that the leader may need to make in the prevention of suicide include curriculum content, curriculum delivery, parent permission, and staff training. Intervention policy decisions may include activities for specific students, use of school resources, referral to outside resources, and crisis team procedures. Postvention policy may include notifying and providing care for students and staff in the aftermath of a suicide, debriefing for school staff and crisis team members, and utilization of school and community resources.

Failure to notify parents of a student's suicidal tendencies is the common factor in lawsuits against school districts according to Deirdre Smith, a Portland, Maine lawyer (cited in Jones, 2001). Notifying parents may not be enough. The school district has the responsibility to follow-up and ensure that the student is receiving help. The court decision in the Eisel case has placed additional responsibility on school counselors and other school officials to notify parents with third party information, even when the student in question denies any potential harm from suicide (Pate, 1992). Remley and Sparkman (1993) note that only counselors who lack appropriate skills or fail to exercise appropriate judgment in reporting adolescent suicide ideation are at risk of being held responsible for a student's suicide attempt or death. The counselor in the Eisel case was found by the Maryland Court of Appeals to be at fault for not notifying parents of a student's suicide ideation (Pate).

Suicide researchers generally recommend a no-memorial policy for school districts (Jones, 2001). Most school officials do not want a constant reminder and possible glorification of a suicide on the school campus, even though there is no research to support that a campus memorial would encourage other students to consider suicide (Jones, 2001). Most local administrators do not agree to deceased student memorial services on school grounds and are more often declining requests for a visible student memorial on campus. A written policy to this effect eliminates the need for the principal to make an emotional decision at the time of the student's death. An enforced policy also ensures equal treatment for all students, not just the high profile, popular students.

The school counselor should be the catalyst within the school for suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention programs and these should involve parents and staff training in the following areas: myths, warning signs, and what teachers can do. Recognizing the many demands placed on schools, Kalafat (1990) recommends that the school's responsibility for a comprehensive suicide response program include only the following: identification of suicidal students, support and response for students, and education for students and staff.

School leaders must collaboratively make decisions about a comprehensive suicide program that contains prevention, intervention, and postvention activities. After reviewing a number of suicide prevention programs, McEvoy and McEvoy (2000) offer a list of suggestions for school administrators. These suggestions will guide school leaders in developing policy and procedures for individual schools and ideally at the district level.

1. Avoid scare tactics that seldom deter students from making unhealthy choices, especially as students enter adolescence.
2. School efforts independent of linkages to community organizations, seldom are effective.
3. Community agencies without a close working relationship with educators, cannot effectively impact most young people. At best, they usually are limited to working with those already identified as being at high risk.
4. "One shot" instructional approaches fail to prevent problems (King & Smith, 2000).

5. Prevention education that begins only in the later years seldom works to inhibit undesirable conduct.
6. Increase awareness levels about a problem, without fostering skill development to cope with that problem, does little as a form of prevention (King & Smith, 2000).
7. Attempting to address the problem without regard to family or peer networks of students will be ineffective.
8. Programs to prevent one problem usually are ineffective if they are not linked to other related problems.
9. School programs that expose only a limited number of students to prevention messages tend to be ineffective.
10. School programs that do not identify and help students at highest risk will do little to prevent their problematic behaviors.
11. Prevention programs that are the responsibility of a single staff person, rather than a shared responsibility within the school, nearly always fail (King & Smith, 2000).
12. Ignoring the problem, or insisting that a particular school is immune to it, will never prevent that problem.
13. Schools must allocate adequate resources to insure program sustainability. (McAvoy & McAvoy, 2000, p. 177)

### *Professional Development*

Today's schools face enormous challenges. In response to an increasingly complex society and a rapidly changing, technology-based economy, schools are being asked to educate the most diverse student body in our history to higher academic standards than ever before. (Darling-Hammond, 1998, p. 1)

In order to meet these challenges, it is critical that educators participate in ongoing professional development activities. Many of these activities must occur in a laboratory or an experiential setting rather than in the traditional classroom. Professional development is not an activity, but a way of operating where learning is integrated throughout teachers' careers (Bosworth, 2000). In effective schools, professional development opportunities are institutionalized and staff participation is expected. It is viewed as an exciting component of the organizational environment and culture.

Life long learning is a well documented ingredient to the success and growth of educators and it should include all facets of educating youth. The affective domain, as well as the intellectual domain, must be addressed in a comprehensive professional development program for teachers and all individuals involved in the educational system.

Professional development is ideally considered an integral component of a teaching career and takes many forms including formal university course work, district offerings, local, state and national conferences, mentoring, and learning on the job (Bosworth, 2000). Darling-Hammond (1998) identifies the following effective professional development strategies:

- experiential

- grounded in participants' questions
- collaborative
- relevant
- sustained and intensive
- interconnected (cited in Bosworth, 2000)

These strategies are important to include in professional development opportunities for educators, along with a wide array of delivery alternatives. School staff members learn in a variety of ways, making options a critical component of any successful professional development program. A seamless professional development program begins with preservice education, continues with induction opportunities and new teacher education, and then offers ongoing education for experienced teachers (Darling-Hammond, 1998). Suicide prevention has become an area of concern for many school staff members. Accurate knowledge about suicide and prevention, intervention, and postvention strategies for new and veteran personnel will most likely lead to competent and confident staff members willing to implement a suicide prevention program.

According to Bosworth (2000), a menu of choices consisting of: knowledge base of information, instructional skills, and organizational change skills must be included in a comprehensive professional development program. Providing staff with knowledge without the strategies to teach the skills, manage the classroom, and facilitate the change will not be successful. Many leaders assume that new teachers hired from the university arrive with a wide information base and never consider providing ongoing professional

development. McEvoy and McEvoy (2000) point out that the majority of university teacher preparation programs make only a brief reference to adolescent suicide and many school staff are uninformed about what to look for and what to do in the case of a suicidal youth. Many times educators are subjected to professional development 'one shot fixes' that are never integrated into the school vision, culture, academic program, or leadership agenda. This has led to experienced teacher apathy, isolation, and cynicism.

Kalafat (1990) recommends that all school staff members receive an in-service training that includes information about suicide, the school's crisis response plan, their responsibilities, and school and community resources. McEvoy and McEvoy (1994) emphasize the need for on-going suicide prevention in-services for staff prior to a crisis situation. Fairchild's study recognized the following important activities for effective staff development: early identification of students displaying the signs of suicide, life skills to promote resiliency, and the process for referring youth for assistance (as cited in Ward, 1995). Prior to any suicide prevention in-service training, it is recommended that school leaders identify staff members who may have negative feelings about suicide or a personal experience with suicide (Wastell & Shaw, 1999). Some staff members may associate suicide with anti moral beliefs or anti religious values (Wastell & Shaw, 1999). It is not unusual for some individuals to experience past death experiences when an unrelated death occurs. Suicide training activities may also cause personal grief issues to surface and the administrator must quickly identify those adults who may not be capable of receiving the training at that time. Staff members who have had experience with

suicide either as a survivor or personally, should be screened prior to participating in training opportunities.

Robertson (1997) contends that a serious prevention or youth development program in a school cannot occur unless the school provides a strong staff development program. It is also apparent that a strong prevention program for youth must contain the same components that Bosworth (2000) identified: a body of knowledge along with the skills to institute change. This 'walking the talk' form of modeling for students is an important factor in the success of staff and student development (Robertson). Another strength of a youth prevention program is the fact that it focuses on individual and organizational strengths and is provided to all students, not just students with problems. That is the essence of the resiliency philosophy, which is moving away from a deficit model that focuses on risk factors to a strength based model that emphasizes protective factors (Benard, 1991). Robertson also points out that professional development is by nature a long-term process and therefore both staff and student development must have a long-term commitment from policy makers and this vision must include on-going funding.

In their study, King et al. (1999) found that only 9% of high school health teachers reported that they could identify a suicidal at-risk student, even though they reported that this was one of the most critical aspects of their job and that it would reduce the number of adolescent suicides. In another study, King et al. found that even though school counselors can recognize the adolescent suicide risk factors and identify this as one of their job responsibilities, only one third stated that they could identify a student at

risk for suicide. In a subsequent study, King (2000) found that after an intensive suicide prevention training program, 56% of the school counselors expressed confidence in identifying suicidal youth. Experts report that school staff members often do not report suicidal signs and symptoms in a timely fashion (Jones, 2001). Another important factor in a suicide prevention program is that teachers and all school staff must be reminded that they cannot guarantee confidentiality to students (Jones, 2001). The stakes are much too high. Talk of suicide or a written suicide plan is one of the most serious and obvious signs of a potential suicide that youth will exhibit (Jones, 2001). This demands immediate attention and parent notification.

### *Curriculum*

According to the research, the most effective means of preventing youth suicide is early identification and treatment (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2001). Peach and Reddick (1991) suggest that other than the home, school is the next most important place for the majority of youth. Because youth spend a significant amount of time in school, it is an ideal setting to recognize the signs and symptoms of suicide (Kirk, 1993). Education programs that include prevention and intervention components may be the most influential activity in preventing adolescent suicide (Reddick & Peach, 1991).

Kalafat (1990) recommends that a suicide prevention curriculum be instructionally focused with age appropriate lessons provided by the classroom teacher or counselor. Bosworth (2000) advocates for “the integration of prevention concepts into academic content” (p. 21). McEvoy and McEvoy (2000) suggest that suicide prevention

should be part of the established health curriculum and should include these key concepts for elementary students: “basic skills, respect for self and others, problem solving, resistance skills, and empowerment” (p. 197). Curriculum activities should include the warning signs of suicide, how and when to report information to a school official, and available resources for youth (Ward, 1995). Jones (2001) reports that the most successful suicide prevention curriculum activities start in the early grades and focus on mental health issues and communication and problem solving.

Nelson and Crawford (1990) insist that education is the best avenue for the prevention of adolescent suicide and suicide prevention lessons should be presented to students in fifth and sixth grades. Prevention programs delivered to all students in the classroom are ideally integrated into the core curriculum and are intended to increase students’ social-cognitive problem solving abilities (Miller, Brehm, & Whitehouse, 1998). Bosworth (2000) notes that a change in students’ behavior is positively related to the delivery of the prevention curriculum in the core subject areas. Savin-Williams (2001) warns that targeting suicide prevention programs to specific groups such as sexual-minority youth may cause more harm than good. Students usually do not want to be singled out for special curriculum delivery. This deficit approach might be viewed by students as a punishment.

“A K-12 program developed in Miami-Dade County that emphasizes curriculum and staff training is credited with reducing the district’s student suicide rate from 7.7 per 100,000 students in 1987 to 1.7 students per 100,000 in 1999” (Jones, 2001, p. 18). The elementary version of this curriculum emphasizes communication and problem solving.

The middle and high school or 'gate keeper' training focuses on learning the warning signs and intervening. Some research studies have shown that districts using a suicide prevention curriculum that "normalizes suicide" and ignores the clear relationship to an untreated mental health issue have experienced an increase in adolescent suicides (Jones). One common concern among educators is that the prevention curriculum will take away valuable time from core curriculum activities and ultimately affect student achievement and test scores. Bosworth (2000) notes that school communities that emphasize a wide variety of learning activities and promote high expectations produce a strong protective school environment for all students. Protective schools emphasize a strong academic curriculum that focuses on the core subject areas while integrating prevention ideas (Bosworth).

Ward (1995) emphasizes that student training is a critical aspect to a comprehensive suicide prevention program because most adolescents are inclined to approach a peer about suicidal thoughts or actions rather than an adult. Jones (2001) notes that encouraging students to report suicidal tendencies is the most important factor in a suicide prevention program. It is estimated that over 80 percent of suicidal adolescents tell someone in advance of their plans (Jones). It is optimal if the curriculum is taught early in the school day to allow students to seek assistance from counselors and other staff (McEvoy & McEvoy, 2000). Counselors are often alerted to the fact that suicide prevention lessons are being taught by staff members and are then able to prepare for any personal student crisis that may arise.

McEvoy and McEvoy (2000) emphasize that staff members should be carefully selected to teach the suicide prevention curriculum and should receive more than adequate training. McEvoy and McEvoy (2000) do not recommend that schools require signed parent permission. If a parent permission form is required, it is believed that many parents would deny their student access to important and life saving information. The final decision on parent permission should be made by the school principal and may vary according to student grade level. Decisions of this nature tend to be more conservative at the lower grade levels. Parents should be notified in advance of the content of the suicide prevention curriculum and ideally a parent information workshop should be provided prior to the curriculum delivery (McEvoy & McEvoy, 2000). Parents, of course, can always request an alternative assignment and exclusion from the classroom lessons.

McEvoy and McEvoy (2000) outline three broad objectives for a suicide prevention curriculum: students will be able to recognize suicidal warning signs, students will be able to access resources for assistance, and students will demonstrate the knowledge and skills to make healthy personal choices. There are several suicide prevention curriculums and programs available for school leaders to consider. They include: Positive Paths (grades 6-8), Straight Talk About Risks or STAR (grades K-12), SOS High School Suicide Prevention Program (grades 9-12), and Offering Parents and Teens Information On Needless Suicide or O.P.T.I.O.N.S. (grades 9-12).

The Positive Paths curriculum is free and consists of 11 lessons at approximately one hour each. The lessons begin with self-knowledge, thoughts and feelings and progress to recognizing and responding to suicide risk and identifying support systems. A

Spanish version of the student and trainer notebook is available. This curriculum is available through EMPACT in Phoenix and Information and Referral in Tucson and evaluation data is currently being collected. The STAR program is primarily a gun violence prevention curriculum with a parent component. It includes a Spanish version and supplementary materials such as videos, posters, and hand-outs. The SOS prevention program is comprised of an educational video and depression screening procedures. There is a \$150 charge per school and schools receive a kit of educational materials that include a video, screening forms, parent information, posters, brochures, procedure manual, and a public service campaign kit. A limited amount of evaluation data on the program is available, but a description titled Best Practices from 2000 is listed in their brochure. Several national professional educator organizations sponsor this program. The O.P.T.I.O.N.S. curriculum seeks to educate and inform students about depression and its relationship to suicide. Free depression screenings/evaluations are provided, as well as handouts and hot line information. O.P.T.I.O.N.S. is available through the efforts of the Mental Health Association of Arizona.

#### *Parent and Community Education*

Involved parents and community members tend to “model, support, and expect healthy behaviors”, which in turn strengthens the school’s prevention efforts (Bosworth, 2000). Schools can design workshops for parents to enhance their parenting and communication skills (Kalafat, 1990, Ward, 1995). McEvoy and McEvoy (2000) warn that even though many students are fearful of their parents’ knowledge of their suicidal thoughts, school officials must notify parents. This is ideally done in person and should

be based on a strength-based approach with identified resources distributed. If parents have been educated about the content of the prevention curriculum, notifying parents of their child's suicide ideation will most likely not be tense and awkward.

The Arizona Chapter National Safety Council, Inc. has a Teen Suicide: Battle Plan For Parents Volunteer Guide available free of charge. The workshop addresses suicide statistics, myths, risk factors, depression, warning signs, and what parents can do if they believe their child may be suicidal. It is interesting to note that the following statement is found on the first page of the volunteer guide.

This program should **not** be used as a school-based suicide prevention program.

While many school-based suicide prevention programs exist, there is absolutely no evidence that they work. In fact, many experts believe that school-based suicide prevention programs do more harm than good primarily because they plant the idea of suicide where it may not have existed before. Young people with undeveloped coping skills may seize on the idea of suicide as an acceptable option to solve a very temporary problem. (Arizona Chapter National Safety Council, Inc., 2002, p. 2)

This statement is in direct conflict with suicide myths found in the research.

#### *Crisis Response Plan*

The purpose of a district and school crisis team is to direct and supervise a crisis event that affects students, staff, and the community (Kirk, 1993). King (1999) identifies the following postvention activities: have a written plan that can be activated within 24 hours of the suicide, recognize privacy issues, announce to all school employees,

announce to all students, provide counseling services for students, staff, and community members, avoid giving the death any special distinction, notify parents, school board members, and the community, assign one official media contact person, and monitor and evaluate the postvention activities. In a further study, King (2000) offers the following suicide intervention steps: ensure student safety, assess the student's suicidal risk, determine the mental health services needed, ensure the student receives appropriate care, and debrief school staff (pp. 134 – 135). A similar suicide intervention procedure is proposed by McKee, Jones, and Barbe (1993) with the addition of informing school staff, parents, and friends and providing student follow-up.

The student, staff, and community response to a student suicide will be different every time (Leenaars & Wenckstern, 1998). School counselors have training in crisis management and group facilitation and are therefore, in the best position of all school staff to provide the leadership necessary to implement a suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention program (Kirk, 1993; Smaby, Peterson, Bergmann, Zentner Bacig, & Swearingen, 1990). The crisis response will be viewed more logically by stakeholders if a suicide prevention curriculum is already in place.

#### *Data Collection and Program Evaluation*

Weiss (1998, p. 4) defines evaluation as "...the systematic assessment of the operation and/or the outcomes of a program or policy, compared to a set of explicit or implicit standards, as a means of contributing to the improvement of the program or policy." The National Institute of Mental Health (2001) states that all prevention programs must be evaluated for effectiveness and that programs designed to offer suicide

prevention as part of a broader curriculum focused on life skill development are the most likely to be successful. Schools today are expected to provide accountability to policy makers and stake holders. A well-defined evaluation system will provide a portion of the data needed to determine if the comprehensive suicide prevention program is effective in preventing or at least reducing adolescent suicide.

Weiss (1998) notes that most people believe that evaluation is for the purpose of making decisions about the future of the program. Other purposes of program evaluation include: historical program perspective, information to program staff, emphasize program goals, accountability, and change in client behavior (Weiss). Bosworth (2000) identifies the following three components of data collection to guide decision making: needs assessment, monitoring, and evaluation.

McEvoy and McEvoy (2000) note that current evaluation of suicide prevention curricula for students is not adequate and that outcome data is missing. Adolescent suicide is such an immediate concern that schools cannot afford to wait for evaluation data and as program effectiveness data becomes available, current programs can be modified (McEvoy & McEvoy). This suggests that schools offer non-evidenced based suicide prevention programs until additional research is completed. One research study showed that students at high risk for suicide showed no positive change in their attitudes, but low risk students demonstrated a positive movement in their attitudes toward suicide (McEvoy & McEvoy). The media in this case inferred that the suicide prevention curriculum was harmful to students (McEvoy & McEvoy). This misinterpretation by a

reporter demonstrates the need for school leaders to be knowledgeable about program evaluation and capable of interpreting the data for the media and other stakeholders.

### *Leadership Theories*

This section examines multiple leadership theories and perspectives through four domains of leadership: personal/interpersonal, contextual, curriculum and instruction, and organizational. The identified theories provide school leaders with an extensive set of strategies and concepts that will assist in the implementation of a comprehensive suicide prevention program.

#### *Personal/Interpersonal Leadership*

Leadership styles are not a one size fits all and must be individualized. One way for a leader to customize his/her style is to consider the three components of leadership: heart, head, and hand (Sergiovanni, 1999). Leading from the heart is defined as what the leader believes in and values and is often referred to as personal vision (Sergiovanni). This core set of values guides the leader to do what is right. According to Sergiovanni, head leadership is the theoretical framework utilized by the leader and includes the past leadership experiences that shape decisions. When heart and head are joined together they direct the hand or what the leader actually does. Hand leadership, according to Sergiovanni, includes strategies that enable leaders to develop policies and procedures.

Bennis (1994) agrees that leaders are all different, but he has identified a different set of qualities that effective leaders must possess: (a) vision, (b) passion, (c) integrity, (d) trust, (e) curiosity, and (f) daring. A vision is what guides leaders to where they want to go. In the Fifth Discipline, Senge writes, "Building shared vision must be seen as a

central element of the daily work of leaders. It is ongoing and never-ending” (as cited in DuFour & Eaker, 1992). It is critical that followers share in this vision and it must be constantly communicated to all stakeholders. A passionate leader will inspire others to follow and share in this vision (Bennis, 1994). Passion conveys the leader’s commitment to the shared vision. Without passion, the vision will likely be only rhetoric.

Integrity has three primary components: self-knowledge, candor, and maturity (Bennis, 1994). Leaders must know themselves and honestly self reflect on strengths and growth areas. Bennis also warns that leaders must obey their conscious and experience and grow as a leader. Trust is the product of integrity. Bennis has identified four qualities that a leader must exhibit in order to earn trust: constancy, congruity, reliability, and integrity. First the leader must remain consistent regardless of what else occurs professionally or personally. The leader must also demonstrate a match between his/her talk and walk. Followers must believe that the leader can be depended upon in all situations and most importantly, the leader’s personal integrity will shape the moral purpose of the organization. Curiosity and daring are the cornerstone for successful leaders who seek the unknown and are not afraid of failure (Bennis). Failure is viewed as a vital component of the leadership learning curve and new ideas are expected in this environment. Trust and integrity are compelling leadership qualities in all situations and particularly when addressing adolescent suicide matters.

The leadership qualities identified by Sergiovanni and Bennis are important in the prevention of adolescent suicide because they emphasize respect for and empowerment of others. Suicidal youth and youth in general, want to know that they are worthwhile and

that school leaders will listen to them. Through effective leadership, youth will be empowered to offer solutions for suicide, as well as other social issues affecting student achievement.

Snowden and Gorton (1998) explored several leadership styles and found that transactional leadership requires the integration of the needs of the organization with the needs of the individuals in the organization. Transformational leadership leads to empowerment of the staff through shared decision making and risk taking to effect change (Snowden & Gorton). It focuses on the strengths and talents of the members in the organization (Leithwood et al., 2000). This concept is congruent with a strength-based resiliency approach. Suicidal youth need to believe that there is hope and their situation can change. Leithwood et al. contends that transactional and transformational leadership are opposite approaches to leading others. In their review of the research, Leithwood et al. found that transformational leadership is an influential force on school improvement.

Another style reported by Snowden and Gorton (1998) is situational leadership, which maintains that the style used by the leader is determined by the situation and different situations will demand varied leadership approaches. Situational leadership eliminates the temptation of the leader to bounce back and forth between autocratic and democratic leadership styles (Blanchard, Carew, & Parisi-Carew, 1990). Instead it provides leaders with four situational leadership styles from which to choose. The four styles are placed in a matrix that ranges from low to high support and low to high direction for staff. The leader examines the situation and determines the appropriate style

to utilize with the particular employee. This leadership style has also been referred to as contingent leadership (Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 1999) and provides the leader with the opportunity to customize his/her approach to a comprehensive suicide prevention program.

### *Contextual Leadership*

Bolman and Deal (1989) have identified four frameworks to explain the structure of organizations. They suggest that organizations and leaders will experience more success when multiple view points are utilized. The four frames also allow the leader to recognize, comprehend, and effectively manage the multitude of complicated situations that occur daily in any organization.

Roles, responsibilities, relationships, and policies are underscored in the structural frame. Organizations assign responsibilities and create a hierarchical structure to make meaning of communication and chain of command activities (Bolman & Deal, 1989). The organizational culture determines whether the structure is formal or informal. Revising policy to include suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention activities is an example of a structural change.

While the structural frame places an emphasis on roles and relationships, the human resource frame focuses on the activity between the organization and its people. The school setting fits ideally into Bolman and Deal's assumptions: organizations exist to serve human needs, organizations and people need each other, when the organization and its individuals fit well, both benefit, and when they do not, both suffer (Bolman & Deal, 1989). Human resources are the greatest asset to an organization (DuFour & Eaker, 1992)

and should be valued for their contributions to school improvement, not diminished for being in the way. Leadership that respects and empowers others will enhance adolescent suicide efforts. Staff development is a critical component of a comprehensive suicide prevention program and requires the human resource frame to make it a reality.

The political frame focuses on the variety of individuals and special interest groups that are within the organization and also recognizes the influence of groups outside of the organization. It is apparent in viewing an organization from the political frame that solutions and decisions are rarely just right or wrong. Bargaining, negotiating, and vying for limited resources among individuals and groups are key aspects of the political frame and a top down approach from leadership is usually not effective. The leader must overcome inadequate funding at all government levels and the myriad of demands on financial and human resources in order to realize a comprehensive adolescent suicide program. It is important in the political frame that the leader allow groups to provide input into the decision making process, but keep those decisions in alignment with the organization's vision and ethical standards. There may be forces within and outside the organization that will work to prevent the implementation of a suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention program for youth and the leader must ensure that political influence is not allowed to shift the organization from its visionary course.

Organizations may be more influenced by the symbolic frame than the other three frames, where the focus is more on the meaning of events rather than on what actually happened. Human interpretation signifies what has occurred and stories, celebrations, and

rituals help to emphasize the significance of events. A multitude of myths surround adolescent suicide and it is important that the leader recognize that this topic must be demystified and repainted in people's minds.

Dworkin, Toenjes, Purser, and Sheikh-Hussin (2000) warn that schools that do not recognize and meet the changing needs of students and the school community run the risk of lower student achievement and reduced public support. Failure of the school to adjust to changing demographic needs may also result in high dropout rates, lower attendance, and increased student violence (Dworkin et al., 2000).

Transformational leadership is very adaptable to the challenges of restructuring and the high level of commitment needed to make organizational changes (Jantzi & Leithwood, 1996; Leithwood & Leonard, 1998). Bolman and Deal (1999) note that the four frames of leadership relate to change in the following ways (a) human resources – anxiety, uncertainty, (b) structural – loss of stability, confusion, (c) political – disempowerment, conflict, (d) symbolic – loss of meaning and purpose, clinging to the past. (p. 5) Problems or conflict are a necessary component of the change process (Fullan, 1993). Conflict allows for creativity and the generation of new ideas. Pascale further supports the positive aspects of conflict by noting that ideas that are easily accepted are also easily rejected at a later time (cited in Fullan).

Leaders must enter the unknown and take risks for change to occur (Fullan, 1993). An equal education for all students must be the mission of all school leaders. Fullan (2002) states, "School leaders with moral purpose seek to make a difference in the lives of students" (p. 2). Fullan (1996) emphasizes that school leader and teacher

understanding and knowledge of the change process is critical. The achievement of a comprehensive suicide prevention program will require organizational and individual change. Senge (1999) contends that in a learning organization, continuous improvement is intrinsic and the focus is not on what is wrong, but on strengths. The leader must model positive and healthy behaviors and empower others in the organization to demonstrate their leadership and decision making skills (Bosworth, 2000).

#### *Curriculum and Instructional Leadership*

The school leader promotes teaching and learning by providing encouragement, resources, and a sense of purpose (Bosworth, 2000). Oakes (1986) points out that those critical of the efforts to provide equality in education believe that the only mission of education is academic achievement. Others believe that “promoting excellence and providing equality” must be offered hand-in-hand to all students (Oakes, 1986, p. 13). Oakes, Gamoran, and Page report that the delivered prevention curriculum may be provided for the stated reason of meeting the needs of all students, but may actually create an unequal opportunity situation for students (cited in Guiton & Oakes, 1995). Teachers may vary the curriculum in an honorable attempt to meet specific student needs, but actually create an unequal opportunity for students in terms of access to information. Nation-wide standards and assessments may actually widen the achievement gap if equal opportunity to learn is not guaranteed for all students (Darling-Hammond, 1994). If students arrive at school with personal issues that are not being addressed, it will be very difficult for them to achieve academically to their full potential.

Elmore (2000) explains loose coupling as the autonomy that teachers and schools have enjoyed over the years that has immunized them against outside evaluation and state or national standards. Elmore (2000) advocates for a structured process of school improvement that can be weighed against specific criteria for success. Full staff support is essential. Darling-Hammond (1994) defines accountability as treating all students respectfully and fair, offering them the same educational opportunities, following ethical standards, and applying current research to practical teaching strategies --or “a duty of care” (p. 192).

Cornbleth (1990) contends that the implicit curricula supports the social structure and culture of the school and reveals what is included in the curriculum and the delivery method. Another point that Cornbleth (2000) makes regarding national standards is: whose standards are being taught? Apple (1993) also questions whose curriculum and standards are being taught and contends that textbook companies exert a lot of power over local and state leaders by the type of material they include in textbooks. Darling-Hammond and Falk (1997) emphasize that standards may have an adverse affect on the students who are already neglected by the current educational system. This might be in the form of higher failure rates and dropout rates. Darling-Hammond and Falk report that student retention does not contribute to academic success and has been linked to lower self esteem and negative social adjustment. These negative factors may influence adolescent suicide ideation.

Effective teacher training, restructuring schools and student services to support student learning, and assessments that allow for flexibility must be in place in order to

ensure that all students have equal access to learning opportunities (Darling-Hammond & Falk, 1997). Darling-Hammond (1994) argues that changes in the way students are assessed will not create a more equal system unless the way the results are utilized is changed also. McDonnell (1995) reports that the concept of opportunity to learn moved from strictly a research topic to a policy device when research demonstrated a direct relationship between what students were taught and what they achieved. Reeves (1998) argues that subjects and classes should not be taught if there is not a direct link to the approved standards. Leaders must support the standards based movement through both words and action (Reeves, 1998). According to Noll (2001) the first half of the last century encouraged an expanded curriculum based on the whole child, life skills, and social adjustment. Parents and community members continue to hold high expectations for schools that would essentially rid our society of all its social ills (Nelson, Palonsky, & Carlson, 2000). There is still much debate today between proponents of teaching only the core curriculum and those in favor of an enriched array of courses for students.

Suicide is not a topic most educators are knowledgeable about or comfortable with. Yet, if a comprehensive suicide prevention program in a school is to be successful and make a difference, it absolutely must contain a professional development component. Staff must be presented with a knowledge base of suicide prevention information which would include: identifying the signs of a suicidal youth, skills to teach the information to other staff and students, and strategies to implement changes in school procedures for obtaining resources for suicidal youth. A comprehensive suicide prevention program will also require teamwork and collaboration (Ward, 1995). A school suicide prevention

program cannot be comprehensive and successful if it addresses only student development. Counselors, nurses, and social workers can function as trainers, mentors, and presenters in a school-based suicide prevention program.

Bosworth (2000) recommends that prevention strategies be reinforced by weaving them into the core curriculum delivery. Bosworth (2000) has identified three levels of services that can be implemented to meet the varying needs of all students:

- Universal -- key prevention concepts that are taught to all students
- Selected -- specific activities designed to offer students additional assistance in a specified area
- Indicated -- interventions intended to provide special assistance to students who have exhibited specific, undesirable behavior

Ward takes a similar approach and suggests four levels of activities for a suicide prevention program:

- prevention activities for all youth
- intervention for identified suicidal youth
- postvention for survivors of a student suicide
- program evaluation

### *Organizational Leadership*

It is important that school leaders have the ability to address the issues surrounding suicide prevention within the framework of the organization. Carlson (1996), in describing an organization's capacity to implement change, provides school leaders with four viewpoints or metaphors of organizational theory. These four major

perspectives are: cultural, political, theatrical, and brain. The four perspectives allow the leader the opportunity to reframe a situation and clarifies the contradictions and ambiguities that occur in an organization.

The first metaphor, organizational culture, assists leaders in understanding the depth of an organization and its inherent nuances. It leads to a greater understanding of the emotional attachments staff members have for their school and the appreciation of diverse ideas and opinions (Carlson, 1996). The leader must examine and seek to understand the underlying functioning of the organization in order to fully understand its culture.

Schein (1997) defines the culture of an organization as “A pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems” (p.12). The way people live and the continuing process by which meaning is made and shared is how Apple (1993) defines culture. Deal and Peterson (2000) claim that people create culture and then that established culture affects the people within the organization.

Three levels of culture have been identified by Schein (1997) as follows: artifacts, espoused values, and basic underlying assumptions. Gruenert and Quinn (2002) further explain these levels as follows:

Artifacts are the things we see or hear as we enter the room, such as:

- Awards

- Student work on display
- Rules

Espoused values are the things we claim are important, such as:

- State testing
- Attendance
- Safety

Assumptions are the driving forces that cause people to behave as they do, such as:

- I care about my students
- The school staff trusts me

Organizational culture has been defined in many ways, but the basic premise for school culture is that it describes what is currently happening and what ought to be happening in the school. The school culture provides a common language and allows individuals to focus collectively on what is really important. Discourse and adolescent suicide prevention activities may be considered important and may require organizational change in order to be accepted as part of the school culture. Schein (1997) warns leaders that if they do not become aware of the embedded culture, then the culture will manage them.

The second view point or perspective suggested by Carlson (1996) is politics. Bolman and Deal (1989) state that it really is not a question of whether an organization will have politics, but what kind of politics. Politics is an inescapable feature of all organizations. An effective leader will utilize politics as a vehicle to effect change in the

organization. A leader's political skill facilitates the organization's ability to positively work through unavoidable conflict (Carlson). Adolescent suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention strategies will inevitably lead to conflict within the organization due to the varying viewpoints stakeholders express. Moral, religious, and other personal beliefs of students, staff, parents, and community members may clash with the goals of the organization. The leader will need to direct the political forces and scarce resources to provide an effective and essential comprehensive suicide prevention program.

Theater, as a metaphor, defines the various roles within the organization, as well as in life (Carlson, 1996). Understanding the various roles represented in the organization allows the participants to create meaning from the dynamics of an event. The script, stage, drama, actors, role players, and audience are all critical aspects of theater. Carlson emphasizes that where there is culture and politics there is also theater. A warning is issued by Carlson to leaders that there are ethical implications that must be considered. There is no room for hidden agendas and motivations that hurt others. A comprehensive suicide prevention program must be in the best interest of students, as well as other stakeholders. This serious issue must not be minimized by ulterior and deceptive motives.

The last metaphor, the brain perspective of organizations, determines the behaviors associated with the first three metaphors (Carlson, 1996). One of the primary functions of the brain is learning and this also applies to organizations. It is assumed that brains have unlimited capacity to learn and Carlson suggests that this is also true for organizations. Viewing the organization as a system allows the leader to view the

organization as a whole unit with interdependent parts. Learning from errors and accepting feedback regarding performance will determine an organization's capacity for change (Carlson). Negative behaviors in an organization may be characterized by poor or no communication, faulty thinking, inferior management techniques, and a controlling structure. The success of suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention is in direct relationship to the quality of the communication and a positive school climate that exudes trust.

#### *Leadership Theories That May Not Work*

Not all leadership theories promote a caring and protective school culture that is necessary for the successful implementation of prevention programs. Several leadership theories are examined in this section that are not advisable for leaders of schools desiring to provide a comprehensive suicide prevention program.

Reeves (1998) notes that the leader may not be able to tend to other management issues in order to focus fully on standards implementation. Student concerns in the affective area may be placed on the back burner during times of dramatic school reform. This may negatively affect the school's ability to promote prevention programs such as adolescent suicide. The effective schools movement resulted in the birth of leadership theories that were narrowly focused and emphasized a top down approach (Leithwood & Leonard, 1998). This leadership approach does not lend itself to participation by all stakeholder groups, which is essential in a successful comprehensive suicide prevention program.

Sergiovanni (1995) discusses traditional management theory and the fact that it is most successful when situations are stable, predictable and highly structured. In school situations, such as the potential or actual suicide of an adolescent, traditional management theory does not meet the need for “extraordinary commitment and performance”. (p. 41) Leaders must be able to act swiftly with confidence and expertise in a potential crisis situation, which will undoubtedly be loosely structured and unpredictable. Many of the rules change in a crisis environment. There will be numerous and competing goals, multiple solutions (Sergiovanni, 1995), and the leader must ensure the safety and welfare of all students.

Traditional educational theory and the dominant leadership culture are examined by Gosetti and Rusch (1995). They suggest that the assumptions, values, and judgment of what teaching and learning are can become so buried in the dominant leadership culture that leaders are not able to see them and therefore take them for granted and without challenge (Gosetti & Rusch). This is often represented by the statement, “This is the way we’ve always done things.” When implementing a comprehensive suicide prevention program it is imperative that the leader be able to step outside the box and look at all angles of the issue in order to provide an effective student-centered approach.

Transactional leadership is based on exchanges between the leader and followers. Snowden and Gorton (1998) describe transactional leadership as aligning the personal needs of the organization’s members with the expectations of the organization. Rewards, promises, threats, and bargaining are the norm and delaying decisions or actions until something has gone wrong characterizes the transactional leader. Bass (1990) describes

transactional leadership as an exchange between the manager and the employees.

Managers explain what is expected from the employees and the rewards they will receive in exchange for their work. This exchange describes effective leadership (Bass, 1990). It can also be a recipe for mediocrity if the leader is usually passive and tends to only exercise leadership when he/she has to, contends Bass (1990). Using threats or coercion to force followers to perform in a certain manner is likely to be very unproductive. A passive leader who waits for the crisis before taking action is unlikely to promote prevention activities for students, staff, and the community members. Waiting until a student commits suicide is obviously too late for that student and is likely to be too late for others with suicidal thoughts or intentions.

#### *Chapter Summary*

Adolescent suicide is a solvable problem (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). and a multi-faceted issue that demands trust and integrity on the part of the leader, as well as the opportunity to select from multiple leadership strategies and styles. The leader must create a school culture of compassion, commitment, and caring for all students and believe that all students have the right to an equal opportunity to learn. A holistic approach that allows the leader to balance the demands of standards based educational reform efforts with the personal/social needs of students is recommended and offers the most favorable circumstances for success. Providing a protective school environment that includes all students will offer a beneficial and diverse learning environment (Bosworth, 2000).

Benard (1991) emphasizes that school strategies that focus on the positives and strengths within the individual and the organization will build protection into the lives of children and families. It is important that these efforts are not dismissed in the challenge to raise test scores. Positive links between schools and families and schools and the community will assist in developing a protective environment and personal resiliency (Benard). Research is now demonstrating that children can be taught that they have a choice in how they handle difficult situations (Katz, 1997). Katz reports that most successful adults who struggled in their early school years can identify one influential individual that made a difference in their life. These are considered two of the core protective factors that enable individuals to be resilient (Katz).

Leaders must make many decisions when implementing a comprehensive suicide prevention program. The literature provides specific approaches to the required components of a program: prevention, intervention, and postvention. Hopefulness in the face of adversity is the most important message educators can communicate to students. There are choices, options. The community and school staff must believe this message and provide healthy role models. A healthy community will have high expectations for healthy students.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCHER'S BACKGROUND

#### *Introduction*

The intent of this chapter was to describe the educational, volunteer, and work experience of the researcher and how it related to this case study research. Due to the delicate nature of the topic of suicide, it was necessary to articulate the researcher's credentials that enhanced her ability to handle the topic of suicide with sensitivity, empathy, and professionalism.

#### *Education*

The researcher earned a bachelor's degree in business education and two master's degrees of education in guidance and counseling and in school leadership. She was a doctoral student in an educational leadership program during the research study. Her background in suicide includes the following: suicide assessment and intervention, suicide prevention, suicide postvention, suicide and adolescence, signs and symptoms of suicide, critical incident stress management, crisis management, crisis intervention strategies, living with grief and loss, post traumatic stress disorder, listening skills, solution-focused brief therapy, adolescent brain development, adolescent mental illness signs and symptoms, resiliency, domestic violence, and sexual orientation.

A few of the skills and knowledge learned from these professional development opportunities are:

1. Strategies for coping with grief and how to prevent the increased risk of suicide for survivors.
2. How to help people deal with suicide and reduce negative consequences such as guilt, shame, and the stigma that accompanies suicide.
3. How to assess and understand the process of grief and loss and effectively utilize coping tools.
4. How to identify adolescents with suicide risk factors and implement suicide prevention and intervention strategies.
5. Strategies to effectively respond to people in suicidal or crisis situations.
6. How to deal with a suicide after it has occurred and reduce the negative consequences that affect physical and emotional health.
7. How and where to seek help for a suicidal person.
8. How to understand the basic structure and function of the developing adolescent brain.

The researcher recently participated in a support group referred to as Survivors of Suicide. This counseling group was comprised of relatives and friends of a person who committed suicide. The researcher assumed the role of a participant in the group, rather than a co-facilitator, but group members were made aware that she was a doctoral student studying adolescent suicide.

Through funding from a suicide prevention grant, the researcher was responsible for planning and implementing a one-day Adolescent Suicide Prevention Conference for local educators. Responsibilities included planning the conference content and focus,

locating and contracting with appropriate speakers, evaluation of the various aspects of the conference, and budget management. A two-hour Suicide Prevention Training of Trainers was also planned by the researcher from the same grant. This well attended event provided school counselors with a tool box of adolescent suicide prevention and intervention strategies.

### *Work Experience*

The researcher's work experience included seven years as a high school teacher, eight years as a high school and middle school counselor, seven years as an alternative school principal and 5 years as a director of student services. As a teacher and particularly a school counselor, the researcher worked with many students and families in crisis. This included adolescent suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention activities. While serving as the alternative school principal, she worked with students who were unsuccessful in the traditional school setting. One student attending the school committed suicide at home and as the principal, she worked closely with friends and family members of the student to understand and effectively deal with their grief.

As the director of student services, the researcher was responsible for supervising the following programs: counseling, health, resource and wellness, childcare, and teen parent. She organized several workshops on the topic of adolescent suicide and spearheaded the Yellow Ribbon campaign at the district's two middle schools and two high schools. The Yellow Ribbon campaign is designed to provide students, staff, and parents with an awareness of adolescent suicide and a means to report students who are experiencing difficulty. The researcher was also responsible for organizing a large

district-wide task force to explore the issue of adolescent suicide after several students committed suicide in a fairly brief time period. This task force met numerous times under the leadership of the researcher and made significant recommendations to the school district governing board. The recommendations were categorized into the areas of curriculum, staff training, and parent and community awareness. Most of the recommendations were subsequently implemented by the researcher and other school district staff members.

During the time that the researcher worked for the school district, she developed a collegial relationship with other administrators including the two school principals in the study. This experience enabled the researcher to easily obtain district approval for the case study research and dialog freely with the principals about their participation in the study. The researcher's familiarity with the school district, the staff, and the community was a distinct advantage when names, places, and prior events were referred to by the interviewees. Many additional questions would have been needed to be asked by a researcher unfamiliar with the school district in order to pursue and comprehend the interviewee's dialogue.

#### *Researcher Bias*

The researcher no longer works for the district and does not hold any position of authority in relation to any of the interviewees. This allowed the researcher to examine leadership strategies and decisions in a less threatening manner, but within an arena of trust that was previously established. Interviewees appeared comfortable with the

interview process and seemed to understand the importance of the data that was being collected.

“The researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis” (Merriam, 2001, p. 42). Data is filtered through the researcher’s eyes and theoretical position, including biases. The intimate knowledge of the two school settings by the researcher was an asset, but could also have been viewed as a liability because the researcher may have had previously established values, biases, and understandings prior to conducting the interviews. The researcher was aware of this possibility and made every attempt to objectively query the participants and transcribe the interview information accurately.

Merriam (2001) emphasizes that in qualitative research, “reality is not an objective reality, rather, there are multiple interpretations of reality” (p. 22). The researcher brought her interpretation of reality to the research, which was mingled with the participants’ view of the reality of the event. An attempt to control researcher bias was implemented by asking all of the participants the same standard interview questions. The responses varied, as was expected, but were not influenced by the researcher who attempted to listen and allow significant time for interviewees to respond. At times, there was social interaction between the researcher and the interviewee and follow-up questions were asked, but these were not viewed in a negative way, but rather as part of the interview process (Mason, 2000) and the researcher continued to focus on the complexities of the responses and the event.

*Chapter Summary*

In summary, this chapter describes the experience and knowledge that the researcher possessed that enabled her to be trusted by school staff to conduct a study on the sensitive topic of adolescent suicide and leadership strategies and decisions.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

#### *Introduction*

The purpose of this study was to examine the leadership behaviors exhibited by two principals after the suicide death of one of their students in terms of the four frames of organizational leadership as espoused by Bolman and Deal (1989). The principal leadership behaviors were described and analyzed in relationship to the following four frames of organizational leadership: structural, human resource, political, and symbolic.

This chapter outlines the process and procedures for the multiple case studies. The first sections provide an overview of the research design and perspective. Subsequent sections describe the research participants, instrumentation, data collection, and the data analysis methodology.

#### *General Perspective/Overview*

This interpretive case study methodology was selected to provide understanding and to explain the meaning of the events following a student suicide. Merriam (2001) describes a case study design as evolving, flexible, and able to provide a richly descriptive story. The qualitative case studies described in this paper sought to interpret leadership behavior in relationship to adolescent suicide and to produce a broad understanding of these behaviors in a school context. The results provided a rich and abundant description that was used to identify the conceptual categories that demonstrate the effectiveness of the leadership strategies (Merriam, 2001).

Creswell (1998) describes qualitative research as an inquiry process in a natural setting where the researcher collects data in the form of words and pictures, analyzes them in terms of what they mean to the interviewees, and describes the process.

Qualitative researchers seek to uncover the whole picture. Unlike quantitative research, qualitative studies utilize few units of study with numerous variables and seek to answer how or what (Creswell, 1998). Another reason to employ a qualitative study is that school leadership and adolescent suicide needs to be explored. There is a void of research on this topic and it is hoped that this study will contribute to the scholarly literature in the field. This study provides a detailed view of leadership and adolescent suicide in a school setting and the researcher's role is one of an active learner who tells the story from the interviewee point of view.

Creswell (1998) describes the following five methods of qualitative research: biographical study, phenomenology, grounded theory study, ethnography, and case study. These methods were developed from vastly different disciplinary perspectives. It is imperative that the researcher choose the research methodology carefully in order to design an intellectually complex study (Creswell).

Case study research was determined to be the most desired methodology to utilize because it allowed the researcher to employ the widest array of data collection in an effort to build an in-depth picture of the case (Yin, 1989). The following six forms of data collection are identified by Yin (1989) document analysis, archival record analysis, interviews, direct observation, participant observation, and physical artifacts. The researcher was able to immerse herself into the events surrounding the suicide at each

school and obtain a broad perspective and rich context through interviews and document analysis.

A case study is described by Creswell (1998) as an in-depth study confined by a time frame and location and utilizing several sources of information. Case studies can involve multiple sites or a single site. More than one study is usually referred to as a collective case study. Case studies have a long, prominent history across many fields of study and are a familiar methodology to most researchers. It is important that the researcher select the type of case study research prior to collecting data. This study utilized a collective, multi-site case study approach. The two schools were chosen for their accessibility and their uniqueness. The details surrounding the two student suicides are extremely different and provide different perspectives on the leadership decisions and strategies that were implemented. The researcher recognizes that the choice of more than one case can dilute the overall analysis due to the lack of intensity in utilizing one case (Creswell, 1998), but the richness of information gained from two case studies has outweighed the lack of depth in inquiry.

The two schools are from the same school district and were chosen to provide the researcher the opportunity to analyze across cases. It was considered desirable to look at leadership decisions from two schools that operate within the same district culture and policies. The leadership decisions made by both principals after a student suicide had the same district influences and restrictions and were therefore examined in the context of each school setting. Creswell (1998) notes that the idea of generalizability has little

meaning to qualitative research and case study research in particular, which usually involves four or less cases.

These two case studies also attempted to reconstruct the authentic voices and meaning surrounding the student suicide and the leader's decisions within the social environment of the school. The abundance of detail provided by the case studies will provide insight and have resonance in other schools settings. It is hoped that the reported findings will assist readers in understanding the complexity of the role of school leadership and be a strong voice to effect changes to social practices and public school policies surrounding adolescent suicide.

#### *Research Context*

The schools studied are located in southern Arizona. The selection criterion for the schools was a documented suicide of an enrolled student in the past two years. The researcher initially identified a middle school in another school district, but the principal relocated to Florida, limiting access for the researcher. The final selection of the two schools provided a purposive sample. The researcher is a former administrator in the district and had previously established a collegial relationship with both principals, which assisted with the initial contact about and subsequent approval of the study. This connection also provided the principals an element of confidence in the researcher, which was extremely beneficial because of the sensitive nature of the study. The researcher initiated the interview process with the principals or gatekeepers and then continued the interview process with the other identified individuals. The results of this study will

ideally be advantageous to the principals and assist them in identifying positive and useful decision making strategies after a student suicide.

### *Middle School Description*

The Middle School is located in a small rural town approximately 20 miles from a large city in Southern Arizona. It serves students in grades 7 and 8 with a total student population of approximately 1,000. Most of the students live in the rural areas surrounding the school, but an increasingly large number of students live in housing subdivisions recently built in this rapidly growing area. The suicide victim from the Middle School lived with his mother, stepfather, brother, and stepbrother in a modular home in one of the rural neighborhoods located almost 10 miles from the school.

The staff composition of the Middle School includes 3 administrators, 7 other professional staff members, 56 teachers, and 27 support staff members. The student attendance rate is 94% and the student retention rate is 13.1%. The State of Arizona achievement profile for the Middle School is “highly performing” and adequate yearly progress has been made (Arizona Department of Education, 2003). These designations mean that the school has demonstrated that a high number of students have met the state academic achievement standards and student scores have improved approximately one grade level from last year. There are 31% of the Middle School students on the free lunch program and 11% on the reduced lunch program. Ethnicity breakdown is as follows: 73% white, 23% Hispanic, 2% black, 1% Asian, and 1% Native American.

Reports submitted by the school to the Arizona Department of Education list an on-campus alternative program and other instructional programs such as gifted and

enrichment classes, on-site special education, comprehensive performing arts program, and comprehensive after school tutoring. The Middle School administration also report the following as school/community resources: counseling services, health services, after school programs, Department of Economic Services, lunch and breakfast programs, and parent groups. This school building is over 40 years old, but has recently been remodeled.

### *High School Description*

The High School serves students in grades 9-12 living in a suburban area approximately 12 miles from a large city in Southern Arizona. Over 2,000 students attend the High School. The students generally reside in average to above average priced homes in closely knit neighborhoods. There are a few students whose homes are located on several acres of land further from the organized neighborhoods. The railroad tracks run through the school district and are approximately 2 miles from the school and the suicide victim's home. The High School suicide victim lived with his mother, father, two older siblings, and one younger sibling.

The staff composition includes 4 administrators, 11 other professional staff, 97.5 teachers, and 48 support staff members. The student attendance rate is 95% and the student retention at grade level rate is 1.6%. The State of Arizona achievement profile for the High School is 'highly performing' and adequate yearly progress has been met, (Arizona Department of Education, 2003). These are the same descriptions the State of Arizona provided the Middle School and basically identify schools whose student achievement scores have exceeded the state criteria. There are 8.8% of the High School students on the free lunch program and 4.4% on the reduced lunch program. Ethnicity

breakdown is as follows: 73.7% white, 19.7% Hispanic, 3.3% black, 2.6% Asian, and .09% Native American.

The school report lists many instructional programs that include advanced placement courses, honors classes, special education inclusive model, career and technical education, school-to-work, integrated curriculum, and an off-campus alternative education program. The following school and community resources are provided to students: counseling services, health services, student prevention team programs, support group counseling, crisis intervention, peer mediation, job placement services, and lunch and breakfast programs. The High School is over 15 years old and has also been remodeled.

#### *District Crisis Response*

The district crisis response program was initiated 13 years prior to the student suicides and is organized into two teams of five employees who serve every other month. The teams are most typically comprised of school counselors and nurses, are reorganized on an annual basis, and supervised by the director of student services. Several district documents provide principals with crisis response information. These documents are the crisis response plan k-12, the crisis response manual, the emergency procedures manual, and the guidelines for student memorials.

In the 5 years prior to this student suicide, the school district experienced a moderately high number of student suicides and school staff attended suicide prevention workshops. The director of student services gathered information and materials for school staff members, district administration, and governing board members. After one of the

previous high school student suicides, the students printed t-shirts with the student's likeness and wore them as a remembrance and tribute to the student. This had a disruptive impact on the educational process of the school. One of the workshops attended by the director of student services approximately 5 years prior to the High School student suicide in this study suggested that the following guidelines be established prior to a crisis event:

Memorials that contain or would cause any of the following to occur may be rejected by the board of education.

1. Memorials that contain the name and/or picture of the deceased.
2. Memorials that may alter the routine of a regular school instructional day.
3. Memorials that require the retirement or discontinued use of school property.
4. Memorials that require the altering of school property or school publications.
5. Memorials that require the altering of school activities or the school's activities schedule.
6. Memorials that infringe on the separation of church and state.
7. Memorials that require the use of public funds to purchase, develop, or maintain (Dudley, 1995).

The director of student services discussed the above guidelines with the superintendent and with his approval sent this information with a memorandum to district principals, superintendent, and assistant superintendent. The memorandum encouraged the principals to review the information and suggested that it would be helpful to have these guidelines in place prior to a school crisis occurrence. The director of student

services also included the following information about acceptable memorial options: scholarships in the name of the student, furniture, equipment, books, or other instructional materials without a donor plaque or one that did not mention the deceased student, and contributions to a local charity (Dudley, 1995). The distribution of these guidelines to principals was intended to ensure that student deaths are not glorified and that all student deaths are treated in a consistent and fair manner.

It was recommended by the superintendent that principals place these guidelines in the school student and/or staff handbooks as they deemed appropriate. Both principals referred to the guidelines in their interviews and several other participants mentioned one or more of the statements in their responses. The researcher examined many district documents including the Crisis Response Plan K-12, Emergency Procedures Manual, Crisis Response Manual, student and staff handbooks, and governing board minutes, but could not find any written evidence of the above philosophical statements. Neither of the principal participants in this study or the director of student services could locate the memorandum or written guidelines, but another district principal provided them to the researcher. It seems likely that the guidelines have been institutionalized by both principals and school staff members because the participants in this research study are aware of them, follow them, expect others to follow them, and referred to the guidelines as the district's philosophy about student death and suicide specifically. The Middle School principal stated, "I remember it as one of those philosophical foundations upon which the decision to remove the memorials in the garden was made. The question was disruption of the educational process."

### *Research Activities*

The research activities covered a 4-month period of time, from July 1, 2003 to October 31, 2003. For purposes of confidentiality, the schools will be referred to as the Middle School and the High School. The suicide deaths in both schools contained special circumstances with multiple perspectives.

### *Middle School Suicide*

The Middle School suicide occurred on a Friday afternoon after school at the student's home. The student who committed suicide was a 14-year-old white male living with his mother and stepfather. He was the oldest of three boys, including one step brother and lived in a rural community approximately 10 miles from the Middle School. This eighth grade student hung himself from a recreational vehicle when the parents were not home and was found by his younger brother. He did not leave a note.

### *High School Suicide*

The High School suicide occurred on a Wednesday evening at the railroad tracks near the student's home. The 16 year old student lived with his mother and father in a suburban area of the school district and attended 10<sup>th</sup> grade. He left a note in his pocket for his best friend. The note referred to a girlfriend who had just ended a relationship with the suicide victim. The student was originally reported as a runaway and was not identified as the victim of the late November train accident for approximately 3 weeks. His death was ruled a suicide after the winter break began. The following table outlines the series of events.

Table 4.1

*Sequence of Events for High School Student Suicide*

Time Frame	Series of Events
Late November	Student disappeared.
A Few Days Later	It was reported that an individual was killed on the railroad tracks.
Two and a Half Weeks Later	The individual killed on the railroad tracks was identified as the High School student.
One Week Later	The student death was ruled a suicide. The two-week winter break for students and staff had just begun.
Two Weeks Later	School resumed and crisis response activities began for the students and staff.

According to a teacher who had the student and several of his close friends in class, she noticed uncharacteristic behavior several days before his disappearance. She noticed that he came into class, put his head down, and did not say anything. The teacher thought he was not feeling well and the next week, when he was not in class, his friends told the teacher they thought the student ran away. The student's friends went to the counseling office to report their friend as a runaway. They thought he had left with a group of students bound for California, but no one had heard from him. The group of students requested that a notice be placed in the school announcements asking for anyone who knew of the student's location to notify the counseling department. Before he was identified, the teacher remembered that the school announced daily that anyone who knew his location should contact the student's mother. The student had been in the nurse's office a few times that school year and the nurse had a positive relationship with

two or three of his friends. She recalled that the student was believed to be with a group of male students who had run away to California.

The teacher reported that the train accident most likely occurred the first night the student was gone, but he was not identified for more than two weeks. A note to his best friend that mentioned a girlfriend was recovered from his body. The principal received notification that the train track fatality was the High School student approximately two and a half weeks after the death and just prior to the district's two-week winter break. The High School official notification of students and staff of the cause of death as a suicide occurred after the two-week winter break. Many students had already received this information, so there was a lot of time for students to talk and rumors to circulate. The teacher reported that students started to collect money for the family, and therefore, a bookstore account was opened to facilitate the donations. Parents also called the school to offer their help. It was not clear whether the parents actually assisted. The student's memorial service was held outside of the school day and counselor #1 believed this was a direct result of the principal tactfully communicating to the family that it is much easier for students to attend if the service is not held during school hours. In the past, the High School has had some brokenhearted students because they could not attend a fellow student's memorial or funeral because the parents would not sign a release from school form or the student did not have transportation. Parents were concerned for their student's safety and many could not take off work to attend the memorial with their son or daughter, which counselor #1 highly recommends.

### *Similarities Between the Two Suicides*

Very different circumstances surrounded the two suicide deaths, but there was some parallelism, such as both victims were white males, neither student participated in school activities or community activities outside of school, both had reportedly argued with one or more parents prior to the completed suicide, and both suicides occurred in November. The Middle School suicide is noteworthy due to the method the student chose to commit suicide and his young age. The High School suicide is also atypical because of the method used and the student victim was not identified by officials for several weeks, delaying the grief process.

### *Research Participants*

Snowball sampling was used to select the participants so that the researcher could learn, explore, determine, and comprehend the maximum amount of information about the event (Merriam, 2001). The participants for the case studies were initially identified as having been directly involved in the events following the suicide. Snowball sampling is defined as asking each initial participant to identify other potential participants (Seidman, 1998). The researcher utilized the snowball sampling technique to generate the appropriate sample (Mason, 2000) after initiating the interview process with each of the principals. At the conclusion of the interview, the principal was asked who else should be interviewed for the study. This process was continued as subsequent participants were interviewed. The number in the sample was realized when the information was maximized and no new information was gleaned from the interviews.

### *Middle School Participants*

The Middle School principal identified six other individuals who were knowledgeable of the student suicide. Interestingly, two of the interviewees who were selected by the principal also recommended the same individuals as the principal to be participants in the research study. This factor modified the snowball approach, but still provided a useful sample. Case study participants for the Middle School included 2 administrators, 1 counselor, 1 teacher, and 2 secretaries who were employed at the school when the suicide occurred. Table 4.2 describes the snowball sampling for this case study.

Table 4.2

### *Snowball Sampling for the Middle School*

Research Participant	Selection Criteria
Principal	Planned Interview.
Associate Principal	Recommended by principal. Disciplined student for drug paraphernalia shortly before student suicide.
Counselor	Recommended by principal. Member of school crisis team.
Teacher	Recommended by principal, associate principal, and counselor. Had student in class.
Principal's Secretary	Recommended by principal. Worked closely with the principal.
Associate Principal's Secretary	Recommended by principal and associate principal. Lived in the student's neighborhood.
Other Counselor	Recommended by the principal. Refused to be interviewed for the study.

### *High School Participants*

The High School principal referred the researcher to the head school counselor who identified the other participants for the study. He expressed confidence that she would identify other appropriate participants and that is exactly what occurred. The head counselor identified another counselor, the school nurse, a teacher, and one of the school's hall monitors who were all knowledgeable of the events that occurred at the school after the student suicide. The principal subsequently approved her recommendations. The four individuals identified by the head counselor were asked to recommend other potential participants. The nurse mentioned the head counselor and the second counselor. The second counselor recommended the nurse and the teacher. The teacher recommended both counselors and the nurse. The hall monitor did not offer any suggestions for other research participants. This phenomenon resulted in a modified snowball approach and also provided a purposeful sample. Participants of the case study research for the High School included one administrator, two counselors, one teacher, one school nurse, and one campus monitor, who were all employed at the school when the suicide occurred. Table 4.3 demonstrates the snowball sampling for the High School.

The researcher discussed with the principals and counselors the appropriateness of interviewing parents. The principal and counselors at each school were not able to identify any parents of students who were directly affected by the death of the student who committed suicide. They believed that the parents were not aware of the decisions that the principal or other school leaders made after the student suicide. The researcher did not interview any parents from either school.

Table 4.3

*Snowball Sampling for the High School*


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Research Participant	Selection Criteria
Principal	Planned Interview.
Counselor #1	Recommended by principal, nurse, and teacher. Lead the school crisis team.
Counselor #2	Recommended by counselor #1, nurse, and teacher. Served on the school crisis team.
Nurse	Recommended by counselor #1, counselor #2, and teacher. Served on the school crisis team.
Teacher	Recommended by counselor #1 and counselor #2. Had the student in class.
Hall Monitor	Recommended by counselor #1. Gauged the school climate during crises for the principal.

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*Instrumentation*

The research design of this case study is qualitative in nature. The interview and document analysis research methods described by Mason (1996) were used to identify leadership behaviors and decisions.

*Interview Structure*

The interviewer must realize that some of the meaning derived by the participant is a function of the interaction between the participant and the interviewer (Seidman, 1998). According to Seidman, the interviewer must recognize and accept the importance of the interview techniques in order to use his/her skills to minimize bias or distortion that the role of the interviewer can cause during the interview.

Three types of interviews are described as follows by Merriam (2001): highly structured/standardized, semi structured, and unstructured/informal. Highly structured or standardized interviews employ questions that can be described as predetermined in terms of the wording and the sequence and may appear to be an oral form of a written survey. Unstructured or informal interviews utilize questions that are open-ended, flexible, exploratory, and may appear to be conversational. Semi structured interviews ask questions that are a mix of highly structured and unstructured formats. The case study research reported in this paper utilized a semi structured interview approach that included structured questions that all participants were asked and flexibly worded questions to gain additional insight and meaning. Probes as described by Merriam (2001) were used as follow-up questions to clarify an answer or obtain more detailed information. The researcher conducted several pilot interviews with colleagues to obtain interview practice and determine if any of the questions were confusing or did not yield appropriate details or the quantity of information expected.

Three sets of questions were developed by the researcher, one for principals, one for school staff members, and one for parents. The questions were written to determine relationships and roles. These questions also helped to determine the participant's past experiences and place them in context (Seidman, 1998). Additional questions were developed using the four frames for organizational leadership. At least one question was asked that would provide meaning for three of the four frames: structural, human resource, and political. These questions concentrated on the concrete details of the participants' experience related to the student suicide (Seidman, 1998). Several of the

interview questions required the participants to reflect on the meaning their experiences had for them (Seidman, 1998). The reflection on past experiences coincides with the fourth frame, symbolic, as presented by Bolman and Deal (1989).

### *Pilot Interviews*

Seidman (1998) recommends that researchers conduct a pilot of their proposed study. The pilot for this study was conducted with a principal, counselor, teacher, and a parent, who were identified as having similar educational experience and background as the research participants. The principal formerly worked at the High School and was very familiar with the district protocol for researchers. It was advantageous to include him in the pilot so he would be familiar with the questions that the participants would be asked and to ensure the appropriateness of the questions for school staff. At the end of the pilot interview, he expressed that he did not have any concerns about the study and hoped that it would assist the district in helping students.

The counselor for the pilot worked at the middle school that feeds into the High School. She had difficulty answering some of the interview questions because she has not dealt with a student suicide as a teacher or school counselor. The pilot interviews confirmed for the researcher that the interview questions were clearly stated and helped the researcher determine when necessary follow-up questions and explanations should be provided.

The pilot teacher worked in a neighboring district middle school and had a family member who committed suicide. She was able to assist the researcher with the appropriate amount of sensitivity and empathy. The pilot parent worked for the school

district, but had a daughter attending a neighboring district. Her daughter had an 8<sup>th</sup> grade friend who committed suicide. She reported that the pilot interview was cathartic for her. She assisted the researcher in understanding the concerns of a parent after a student suicide. The researcher had anticipated interviewing a parent from each school, but the principal and other staff members could not identify an appropriate parent for the research study.

The pilot interviews allowed the researcher to try out the interview questions and interview structure with a small number of participants. The researcher also learned some of the practical aspects of accessing participants, scheduling the interview, conducting the interview, and whether the questions helped meet the purpose of the study (Seidman, 1998). As a result of the pilot interviews, the following changes in interview protocol were made:

1. Participants were referred to by name and the school was named during the interviews. This seemed to enhance participants' comfort level during the interview. It was awkward during the pilot interviews to not use any names.
2. Several questions were identified as possibly needing further explanation. When these questions were asked, the researcher was ready to respond if a research participant seemed confused or unsure of what was being asked.
3. After reviewing the pilot interviews, the researcher was able to hone her listening skills and understand the importance of wait time after a question and withholding additional comments and opinions.

### *Document Analysis*

Merriam (2001) describes documents as a wide range of visual, written, and physical material relevant to the study. For this study, the process of analyzing school documents began with identifying the appropriate public records, personal papers, and artifacts that might relate to one or more of the four frames of organizational leadership. It was important that the documents were congruent with the conceptual framework of this research (Merriam, 2001). The analyzed documents included: student services director memorandum and guidelines, student handbooks, staff handbooks, school crisis plan, district crisis response plan K-12, district crisis response manual, district emergency procedures manual, specific information about student suicides, district suicide profile form, school report card, linkages to outside resources, and school and district resources.

In determining the value of these documents, the researcher examined whether they contained information or insights relevant to the research questions and specifically which frame or frames of organizational leadership they illustrate. The documents were further analyzed to verify their authenticity and accuracy. The use of documents for this case study research provided stability because unlike interviewing, the presence of the researcher does not alter the document (Merriam, 2001). There are also ethical issues to consider when documents are very private or confidential. Most documents examined for this research study are considered public record. An exception is the informational chart detailing district student suicides for the past 5 years. This was kept by the former director of student services and was used to inform the superintendent and governing

board of suicide trends and possible links between suicides. It is important that the researcher ensure the confidentiality of this document.

### *Summary*

The use of interview and document analysis methods to corroborate each other is a form of methodological triangulation (Mason, 2000). The unit of analysis for the interviews was the participants and the documents themselves for the document analysis methodology. The data gathered from the interviews and analyzed documents were integrated in a meaningful way around the themes created by the four frames of organizational leadership. The two schools in this study were different and provided variety, which is likely to render more compelling results (Merriam, 2001). The results of this study were shared with an external consultant who assessed the findings, interpretations, and conclusions to ensure that they are supported by the data (Creswell, 1998).

### *Procedures Used*

The researcher arranged a meeting with the principal of each school, who held the same leadership position in the school when the suicide occurred. Permission to meet with the current and former staff of each school was secured from the district administration and the current principal. Key staff members who were directly involved in the events following the suicide were identified by the principal and the counseling staff members. All prospective participants were given a letter explaining the purpose of the research and the role of the participant, after Human Subjects approval was granted.

Individual interviews were arranged and the researcher implemented a semi structured interview approach, utilizing one of the three sets of questions. All interviews were audio taped for future transcription. The researcher scripted non-verbal body language. A professional counselor on staff with the district's employee assistance program was identified in advance to provide any follow-up counseling or other services as needed. This was determined to be important because suicide is a sensitive topic that can elicit past grief issues and emotions. This resource was explained to all participants at the beginning of the interview, but none of the participants had emotional difficulties that warranted referral to the employee assistance program.

The interviews ranged from 40 minutes to 2 hours and 20 minutes. Interviewees selected the location of the interview. Six participants were interviewed in their offices, two in a conference room at the school, one teacher in her classroom, and three participants were interviewed in their homes. Both principals gave staff members permission to be interviewed during work hours. Several interviews were rescheduled at the request of the participant and one of the Middle School counselors initially declined to be interviewed. She then called back and agreed to a time for the interview, but then called the day of the interview and requested that the interview be rescheduled. At that point, the researcher made the decision to not include this potential participant in the research study due to her hesitancy and lack of commitment, even though the principal recommended that she be interviewed.

All interviews were audio taped and transcribed after the interview. This provided the following benefits: it preserved the original data, the researcher could review the tape

for accuracy of the transcript, and the researcher studied the employed interview techniques and made improvements as the interviews proceeded. The researcher offered to share the completed transcript with each respective participant. This would allow for member checking (Seidman, 1998). All of the research participants declined the opportunity to review or check the transcript of their interview.

Permission was received to review a variety of school and district documents including, school mission statement, student handbook, staff handbook, school crisis plan, district crisis response plan K-12, district crisis response manual, district emergency procedures manual, specific information about student suicides, suicide profile form, school report card, linkages to outside resources, and school resources. Copies of the documents were secured as permitted.

#### *Data Analysis*

The researcher utilized several strategies to analyze the data. In order to organize the data, the researcher transcribed and reviewed the interviews. Participant responses from each school were categorized and coded using the four frames of organizational leadership: structural, human resource, political, and symbolic. The analyzed documents were dissected and coded accordingly. All of the data for each frame was then collected and combined into one narrative report. The researcher continued with the other three frames. This process allowed the researcher to move from a theoretical construct to a practical interpretation. The researcher also identified the appropriate balance between descriptive and analysis to convey an accurate meaning of the events following the

suicide. Finally, the interpretation and meaning of the data was explained and the implications for generalization of this study were described.

The researcher located a professional educator, with a doctorate in educational leadership, who agreed to review the data and comment on the findings. The professional educator had 15 years of teaching experience and 15 years of administration experience in two school districts in Southern Arizona. In her role as a school administrator, the reviewer served on the school crisis team and responded to several student deaths. Specifically, the reviewer looked for similarities and differences in the manner in which each school dealt with the student suicide, identified common themes for each school, and described the implications for educational leaders. The reviewer's comments closely matched those of the researcher. One area of disagreement was that the reviewer recognized an additional implication for educators. This additional implication was the creation of smaller learning communities, which was discussed by the high school principal. The researcher discussed this difference with the reviewer and they agreed that since the other high school research participants did not mention the topic of smaller learning communities, it would not be included.

#### *Chapter Summary*

This chapter has explained the research methodology used in determining the meaning behind the decisions made by the school leader in the aftermath of a student suicide. The next chapter explains the results obtained from this qualitative case study.

## CHAPTER 5

### RESULTS

#### *Introduction*

The purpose of this study was to determine how the decisions made by school leaders in the aftermath of a student suicide related to the four frames of organizational leadership as espoused by Bolman and Deal (1989). The four frameworks of organizational leadership used in this study were: structural, human resource, political, and symbolic.

This study was based primarily on the results of interviews conducted with identified key staff members from one middle school and one high school from the same school district in Southern Arizona. Data were also collected from school and district documents related to student suicide and crisis management.

#### *Description of the Middle School Student*

The principal described his association with the student as “principal to student relationship.” He continued,

Whenever a student enters their third year (retained) of their stay at this school, that’s a big decision to make. So I was in touch with the family and I was in touch with the student. As usually happens with kids who are unsuccessful, not usually, but often they have behavioral issues, so I would get involved in that.

The principal had met with the student and his parents the previous spring to discuss the retention. The associate principal had developed a collegial friendship with the student’s uncle, who worked for the school district, prior to the suicide. The uncle asked the

associate principal to assist the student with problems he was experiencing at school. The associate principal responded to the uncle's request by meeting with the student at least three times and discussing drug use. The school resource officer also met with the student during this time period.

The student was described as a good kid by the associate principal, but the student had confided in her some negative events that were occurring at home. Approximately 4 or 5 days after their last conversation, the student was caught on campus with drug paraphernalia and the associate principal facilitated the disciplinary action against the student. The associate principal was in contact with the student's mother during this time and met with her. The student was suspended for 45 days, which was reduced to 11 days because the parents agreed to enroll the student in counseling for a minimum of three sessions. The student returned to school after the 11-day suspension on a Thursday. The suicide occurred the next day after school at the student's home. The 14-year-old victim was found hanging from the family's recreational vehicle by his younger brother. His mother and stepfather were not home. He did not leave a note.

The student's main teacher had known the student for 2 and one-half years and currently had the student in class. The student was enrolled in an alternative school within the larger middle school. Students in this special program had three core teachers for most of the day. The teachers were selected for their nurturing personality and ability to work with underachieving students. The teacher characterized the student as a "terrible student" who got in trouble for doing silly, stupid things. She believed that they got along very well, and they liked each other. He had only been in her class a few days before he

was suspended. The associate principal's secretary knew the student through her position in the school and the 4-H program in which he was enrolled. This school employee also knew the student's mother, aunt, and stepfather because they went to school with her daughter and lived in the same neighborhood. They had all previously graduated from the Middle School and attended the district high school.

#### *Description of the Middle School Participants*

The principal of the Middle School has served in a number of positions in the school district during the past 15 years, all of them at one of the district's two middle schools. His employment with the district includes teacher, in-house suspension supervisor, associate principal, and principal. At the beginning of the interview, the principal did not think that he would remember the events surrounding the student suicide, but remarked during the interview that he was surprised at how much information he had retained. He also stated that the interview had a cathartic effect on him and he appreciated the opportunity to debrief and evaluate his decisions and the occurrences after the suicide. The Middle School principal is knowledgeable about the four frames of organizational leadership and offered his insight of how decisions and events fit into the different frames to the researcher. The principal was friendly, talkative, and helpful and he participated in the longest interview of the research study.

At the time of the suicide, the associate principal for the Middle School was serving in her third year at the school and in the district. She had been employed prior to that as a teacher in a neighboring school district. The role of associate principal in this district is burdened with significant student discipline responsibilities and it was in that

arena that the student and associate principal met and developed a student to administrator relationship. This individual expressed emotion and guilt over the student's death and reported that she had received suicide prevention and postvention training.

The Middle School counselor has experienced a long and successful career in school and mental health counseling and retired from the district at the end of the school year in which the suicide occurred. She was hired from a neighboring district as a school counselor for the Middle School and served in that position for 7 years. She has had extensive training in suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention and served on the district crisis team for 6 years. As a member and leader of one of the district's two crisis teams, the counselor responded to several other student suicides in the district, as well as the death of a teacher.

The teacher interviewed for this study also retired at the end of the school year in which the suicide occurred, after teaching in the district for 24 years. She taught 8 years in one of the district's elementary schools before transferring to the Middle School. She had previously worked in a neighboring school district for several years. The year of the student suicide she volunteered to teach in the school's new alternative program for students not achieving academic goals. The suicide victim was a student in her class. This teacher was very active in the school and the district and was particularly insightful and candid about the events surrounding the student suicide.

The principal's secretary was identified as a participant of this research study by the principal, but not by the associate principal or the counselor. The student death occurred in her first semester as the principal's secretary. This individual presents a very

calm and caring demeanor and was obviously fond of the students and devoted to the principal. She had no formal training in suicide prevention, intervention, or postvention, but it was evident that her high level of common sense and empathy allowed her to be an asset during school crises.

The associate principal's secretary was identified as a potential research participant by the principal, associate principal, and the counselor. This individual had worked at the school and the district longer than any of the other participants. She lived in the same neighborhood as the student and her daughter went to school in the district and is still friends with the student's mother. She was notified of the student suicide by a family member early in the evening of his death and she then informed the principal. This school employee refers to herself as "...more of a community buffer because I'm out there and I pretty well know what's going on then directly with the other kids' emotions afterwards [*sic*]". She is very knowledgeable about what occurs in the rural areas of the district. She initiated the interview by stating that she wanted to make sure that the researcher knew that the student's death was an accident. She termed it an "accidental suicide" and that the student's family had made this determination.

The following chart outlines the educational experience and suicide related training background of the Middle School participants:

#### *Research Question*

Is there a relationship between the decisions that educational leaders make after a student suicide and the four frames of organizational leadership? If there is a relationship, how is it manifested?

Table 5.1

*Middle School Participants' Educational Experience and Suicide-Related**Training Background*

Research Participant	Educational Experience			Training Background		
	Years in Position	Years in School	Years in District	Prevention	Intervention	Postvention
Principal	4	5	15	Yes	Yes	No
Associate Principal	3	3	4	Yes	No	Yes
Counselor*	7	7	7	Yes	Yes	Yes
Teacher*	1	16	24	No	No	Yes
Principal's Secretary	2	4	4	No	No	No
Associate Principal's Secretary	20	30	30	No	No	No

\*Have retired from the school district.

*Middle School Structural Frame*

Bolman and Deal (1997) describe the structural frame as the prototype of the roles and relationships that will reach collective goals and also meet individual needs. The structural frame, according to Bolman and Deal, is likely to either enhance or restrict what organizations can accomplish. Three interview questions were asked to obtain information about how the principal employed the structural frame when making

decisions after the student suicide. These questions asked about staff roles and duties that were assigned by the principal after a student suicide death.

The roles that were assigned formally or informally to the staff by the Middle School principal are an example of the structural frame in place at the school. The principal stated that his primary role was communication. He described his communication duties as informing the staff, the students, and the parents, calling the district student services director for resources, answering parent phone calls, responding to media requests for information, sending letters home with the students, and meeting with the family. The associate principal concurred with the principal's role and duties when she explained that she was part of the team that worked with the principal and the crisis team members were assigned very specific roles. She described the members of the school crisis team as the three school administrators, the two counselors, the principal's secretary, the counselors' secretary, and in this case, the associate principal's secretary. The principal designated the members of the Middle School crisis team based on the structure provided by the district crisis response plan.

The associate principal also explained that, "the principal's job was to be in contact with the family, be in contact with the crisis team, setting up all those crisis procedures." The principal also took responsibility for notifying the director of student services that the district crisis team was needed at the Middle School. The associate principal's role centered on notifying the staff through a memorandum and keeping information flowing to staff members. In past crises, the staff expressed strong desire for information about the student death and the associate principal anticipated this to

continue to be a need of the Middle School staff and she tried to meet this need. She described her role as “roaming the halls of the school, talking to people, retrieving kids, and getting them to the crisis counselors”. In contrast, the principal was dealing with the external factors--the student’s family, the parents, the district administration, and the media.

The counselor described her role on the team rather sequentially and in terms of a school crisis in general and not the student suicide specifically. First, the team met with the principal and received accurate information about the student death. Then the counselors attended the staff meeting when the principal notified the staff of the student death. At this time, the counselors attempted to determine the needs of individual staff members and discussed with the teachers the services and resources that would be available for students and staff members. If the principal did not facilitate a meeting to notify the staff, then the counselors visited each classroom and notified the teachers with a statement written by the principal. The counselors also set up a central location, usually the library, where students and staff came for crisis counseling. When asked if the team she was describing was the school crisis team, she responded, “No, we did not have a crisis team on our campus. In fact, when any of these incidents occurred, other district counselors came and supported us.”

The principal’s secretary performed duties that are often in conjunction with the duties of the principal. She was part of the team that initially met with the principal. She also emphasized the importance of distributing accurate information. She did not seem to know if the school had a crisis team. This particular student suicide occurred on a Friday

afternoon, so the principal's secretary was notified by the principal during the weekend. The principal's secretary called the other members of the school support staff (secretaries, custodians, maintenance, teacher aides) and notified them of the suicide. The principal's secretary typed all of the letters and memorandums that were distributed to parents and staff and kept the school phone tree accurate for the principal. She screened the phone calls coming in to the school, notified the district office, and communicated with the external forces such as the parents, media, and district administration. The principal depended heavily on his secretary for advice on how much information should be expressed to the staff and students and what assistance the students and staff might need during the crisis period. With a great amount of insight, the principal's secretary underscored the importance of preventing a chain reaction that a suicide death can produce and noted the broader effect it has on the school community. She mentioned that the suicide can often affect the way other people feel and stated, "There is a measure of control and we need to recognize that and help others to recognize that this doesn't have to be the final chapter. There are alternatives."

The associate principal's secretary is not always included on the team when a student death transpires, but in this case, she played an integral role. She was notified by the family a few hours after the death, designating her the first school employee to learn of the student suicide. Her close and long time neighborhood relationship with the student's family placed her in the unique position of being able to identify first hand the needs of the family and then match those needs with the school resources. Even though she declined to take credit, other research participants mentioned that she organized the

food that was taken to the family. She also cleaned out the student's locker and facilitated the return of the belonging to his mother.

Beyond the identified roles and responsibilities, another aspect of structure for the Middle School was their phone tree. The principal's secretary regularly updated the staff home number phone list for the principal and he kept this in his planner which he carried with him at all times. After the principal called the associate principal, his secretary, the school counselors, and the director of student services, he called several key leaders in the school and they continued with phone calls to additional staff members to facilitate the phone tree structure.

Two examples of the structural frame were identified for the Middle School from the interviews: a team with roles and responsibilities and the phone tree. The participants, except for the associate principal, did not identify a school crisis team, but they all referred to the "team" that met with the principal shortly after the school crisis occurred. The district crisis response plan recommends that each school organize a school crisis team, but the training that accompanied this manual was provided before the Middle School principal was hired. Instead, the principal assembled key staff members who were his "team" in the event of a crisis. They were assigned roles and responsibilities that seemed clear and understandable to all participants. The phone tree was implemented because the principal needed to distribute information quickly to staff members and is organized in a written format.

*Middle School Human Resource Frame*

Bolman and Deal (1997) portray the human resource frame in the following ways: connection between the employees and the organization, interpersonal relationships, opportunities to make a difference, and trained and inspired staff. A positive match between the employees and the organization was illustrated by staff members who found meaningful and rewarding employment and schools who received talented and motivated employees. Five questions related to the human resource frame were asked of research participants. The questions were intended to reveal relationships, meeting the needs of students and staff, and the principal's use of human resources.

Meeting the needs of employees is an important aspect of establishing a connection between employees and the organization. The principal believed that his decision to call in the district crisis team members assisted in meeting the needs of the staff. "The district crisis team members were well trained," he stated, "and they understood the issues." The staff was supported and they experienced open communication from the principal, who met their needs in those ways, according to the associate principal. The principal's secretary and the counselor agreed that providing the staff with accurate information met their needs. The counseling resources on campus also met the needs of the staff by assisting students.

Interpersonal relationships were affected by the decisions the principal made after the student suicide. The principal expressed his respect for the Middle School staff, especially his secretary. The principal and his secretary both acknowledged the fact that their professional relationship was unusual. At times it seemed that the secretary knew

what the principal needed her to do before he expressed it and this was more evident during a crisis situation.

The principal described at length the changes in his relationship with students after the student suicide. He related how in the past he would walk around campus with a furrowed brow that rendered an angry demeanor. He explained, "So, rather than project that, I do that in my office and then when I go out, I present a much more positive, excited, involved image. And I think it has been contagious around the school." He treats students more respectfully, does not yell, and makes decisions from a student-centered view. He is also working with teachers to help them view his decisions and their own actions from the aspect of what is best for students. One example he provided involved a teacher wanting to present a fictitious student to run for office in order to prove that the students could be tricked into voting for someone who did not exist. The principal refused to allow the teacher to carry out this idea because he did not believe that it would be beneficial to students and could possibly cause harm.

The teacher emphasized that she has become more aware of the emotional needs of the students and she was very blunt when discussing the student's suicide with the other students. "We talked about it being a selfish act that you know he leaves you behind to grieve and we didn't have a chance to say goodbye and we did a lot of talking", noted the teacher. The decisions the principal made also changed the way she relates to the parents. She reported, "I had several pretty serious talks with parents that I don't think I would've had prior to this suicide." These are examples of the teacher's ability to make a difference.

The utilization of resources by the principal is described as routine for most crisis events, although these decisions continue to be made by the principal. The library was converted to a location for counseling with paper, writing utensils, tissues, and bottled water supplied. The school facility was not used for a memorial service. The district crisis team was called in to support the two school counselors working with grieving students and staff. The district student services department was mentioned by the principal as a resource and this included the director, the parent resource advocate, and the district crisis team. The associate principal walked the campus to identify students needing grief counseling.

Participants were asked about human resources and the principal was identified as the primary resource for the family of the deceased student and the parents of the other middle school students. The associate principal was the resource for teachers and other staff members and monitored the campus climate and the counselors and crisis team members were the resource for the students. The associate principal's secretary brought a list of the family's needs to the school and the staff responded by providing home cooked dishes which were delivered to the family.

In summary, there was apparently a positive match between the organizational needs of the Middle School and the staff after the student suicide. The needs of staff were primarily identified as accurate information about the student suicide and providing crisis counseling services to the students. Enhanced interpersonal relationships were reported by the principal and the teacher reported several opportunities to make a difference with students and parents by developing a closer relationship to them.

*Middle School Political Frame*

Bolman and Deal (1997) state that it is not a matter of whether organizations will have politics, but rather what kind of politics. School districts and schools are inevitably political entities, but that should not be viewed in a negative sense. Bolman and Deal suggest that conflict that arises from the exertion of power encourages and energizes new ideas and change. Participants were asked to describe both the internal and external influences on the decisions the principal made after the student suicide. Several other interview questions also touched on the political arena.

One participant who recalled any internal influences on the principal's decisions was the teacher and she stated, "The associate principal's secretary has a huge control over our school." She expressed her opinion that the grieving process was allowed to continue longer due to pressure on the principal from the associate principal's secretary. The teacher stated that if another student, not personally connected to the influential associate principal's secretary, had committed suicide, the grief counseling and the response to the crisis would have been ended sooner.

Another aspect of the influence of the associate principal's secretary was that she secured a list of items that the student's family needed and brought the list to school so that the staff could contribute. This was apparently very successful and the family received a large amount of home cooked food. The teacher also mentioned that this secretary was angry with her for not attending the student's funeral and she found it interesting that both the principal and associate principal both wanted to go to the funeral. The teacher recalled that in the past only one of the administrators would attend a

student's funeral. She surmised that this was due to pressure from the associate principal's secretary and perhaps some guilt. The teacher stated, "It was all very unusual, considering the kind of kid he was and what had not been done for him before. So I think a lot of that was guilt from all of those people." She also believed that the associate principal's secretary would influence the community in a negative way if the principal did not attend the funeral. From what the teacher has described, it seems that the associate principal's secretary is an informal leader within the school. The teacher was most likely not aware of what the administrators had done for the student before his death. Her statements are her perceptions of the events.

The guidelines for student memorials distributed to principals from the director of student services can be considered an internal influence and associated with the political frame, although there is a strong relationship to the structural frame and they have become part of the district's culture and a symbolic ritual. The Middle School principal reported that the guidelines have assisted him in making difficult decisions during the emotional time after a student death and particularly a suicide death.

Parental influence is considered an external pressure in the political frame. In the case of the Middle School, the student's parents did not ask for the service to be held at the school or for a physical memorial such as a tree, bench, or plaque. The mother did ask the principal for a memorial in the yearbook and after some deliberation with the associate principal about the effect it would have on the students, the principal fulfilled her request. Another external influence that the student's parents exerted was their request for the suicide to be described as an accidental death. The principal explained:

The parents wanted it to be an accident or portrayed as an accident, so they were very clear when I wrote my letter to change it so it didn't seem like it was a deliberate act. And I complied with their wishes.

In the interview the principal discussed at length the dilemma that this presented. He did not consult with district administrators and his final approach to the request can be summarized in that he recognized the parent's right to address their son's death in their own manner and he was responsible for presenting factual information to the school staff, students, and community of parents. These two concepts came together for him in the following statement: the young man was choked by a rope.

The principal made the following observation:

So all those issues surrounding power and perspective are, well public perception is a very powerful influence, whether you are seen as competent or incompetent. Whether people think you handled it well or didn't handle it well. Whether you were covering up, whether you were vague. All those things are political.

Realizing this, the principal believed he met the demands of the parents as well as his responsibility to convey accurate information about the event. He explained:

In my heart do I believe it was an accident became irrelevant [*sic*]. It really is irrelevant because this is what the parents' wishes were. In the end, when all is said and done, it is the parents who live the rest of their lives with the grief. So I have to respect their desires. It was a possible scenario, the principal added.

The teacher emphasized that the principal received a tremendous amount of pressure from the student's parents to portray their son's death as an accident. The

teacher recalled a parent conference two years prior where the mother stated that she was sick of dealing with her son and she was done. The way the mother treated the student before his death was not consistent with her demands of the principal and the school after he died, according to the teacher. According to the teacher, this cohesive, rural community expected the school to go to great lengths to recognize this student's death. She had heard that some community members wanted to hold a memorial service at the school for the student, but the principal had said no. A popular Middle School student had died over 10 years ago and the principal, who has since retired, allowed the memorial service to be held in the school gym and most of the students attended. The teacher thought the community wanted this to occur again, not due to the popularity of the student, but because of the guilt over what the adults did or did not do with and for this student. "Nobody cared about this kid until he was dead," according to the teacher.

Initially, the associate principal's secretary did not identify any internal or external pressure exerted on the principal. As an afterthought, she did note that on the day that she visited the student's family with the principal and associate principal, the mother wanted to make sure that the school officials knew he was a good kid. The associate principal's secretary recalled, "The student's mother asked us to not say anything bad of him because he was a good kid and she knew he had a few problems, but he was genuinely a good person." The principal agreed with the mother's request. The secretary was not sure that the mother influenced the principal with her plea, but she was sure that it had an emotional effect on his decisions. The mother and father were divorced and both had remarried. They were not on friendly terms, so the principal had to be sensitive to the

needs and requests made by both families. The mother and stepfather and father and stepmother were in a struggle for control over the decisions that needed to be made and were blaming each other for the student's death. The student had evidently had an altercation with his stepfather in the days preceding his death and according to the teacher, several of the students in her class stated that the student did not mean to kill himself; he was just trying to scare his parents.

The principal's secretary identified the district office as an external influence on the decisions that the principal had to make after the student suicide. She discretely mentioned how difficult it was for the principal to attend a required meeting with the superintendent when there was a crisis on campus. It is an enormous task to assess the crisis, take care of student and staff needs, and inform the district according to this research participant. She also was quick to note that the principal does follow all of the district guidelines.

The Middle School principal experienced both internal and external political pressures after the student suicide. Internal political influences included the associate principal's secretary and the guidelines for student memorials. Participants identified the student's parents as a significant external political influence on the principal's decisions and one participant named the district administration as an external pressure.

#### *Middle School Symbolic Frame*

The symbolic frame characterizes an organization's customs, public events, and historical legends that provide meaning to everyday events. These symbols depart from the more rational thought of the other three frames and characterize the culture of the

organization. Two interview questions specifically asked about rituals and customs and the climate of the school after the student suicide. The responses to several other interview questions more subtly identified the meaning and the participant's interpretation of the events that occurred after the student suicide.

The principal told the story of the memorial cactus garden that was located in the center of the school. The garden was symbolic of the deaths of students from the school and had been instituted at least 20 years prior to his employment at the school. There was a placard that contained the names of students who had died and names were added when students died. The memorial cactus garden was unique to this school in the district. The principal noted that because of its location, the middle school students walked past this symbol of death several times a day. He described it as a somber area that conflicted with the assurance of safety at school and the positive attitude toward learning and life message he wanted to send to students and parents. The students referred to the memorial garden as a cemetery or graveyard and some students thought that the deceased students were actually buried there. The principal received a few calls from parents each year asking about the cemetery at the school.

During the 3 years prior to the principal's arrival at this school, the district had experienced a disproportionate number of student suicides. The school and district administrators, the community, and the governing board members were extremely concerned about this phenomenon even though there were not any of the student suicides that could be linked. One governing board member requested that the memorial cactus garden be removed during the summer that the Middle School was scheduled for

renovations. The principal heartily agreed with her request and the cactus garden was removed. It was a well known fact in the district that the previous principal had memorialized and even glorified student deaths. There were also some obvious inconsistencies in how this occurred. Memorials at school did not fit the current culture of the district. The principal remembered the guidelines for student memorial that were given to the principals for the student handbooks and stated, "I remember it as one of those philosophical foundations upon which the decision to remove the memorial garden was made."

The staff fully supported the removal of the memorial garden and the students did not respond either way to the change. The cactus garden remained and only the student memorials were removed. The principal mentioned that he was not sure there was a direct cause and effect between the memorial garden and the student suicides. He stated, "It was possible that a middle school student might think that if I kill myself, I will get my name on a plaque in the garden." Community members, particularly parents still come back to the Middle School and ask where the plaques are. The principal dealt with this political issue in a positive way by saving all of the brass name plates and when a family member asked about the garden they were given the brass name plate.

Rituals or customs mentioned by the participants included calling the crisis team, utilizing the library as the crisis counseling center, sending at least one letter home to parents, contacting the family, providing the family with food and other items they need during the crisis, discussing the student's death with the students by the Home Base teacher, and encouraging students and excusing staff to attend the funeral or memorial

service. The counselor emphasized that students are encouraged to talk about the event and they are more liberally released to go to the counseling office during a crisis. The associate principal's secretary stated that the school has a moment of silence for the deceased student and many teachers write letters to or give the parents of the student a mosaic, mural, or other item of remembrance. In past student deaths, the students have signed a t-shirt to give to the family. In this case, the mother asked for a yearbook and the school facilitated the signing of it by many of the students. This was the first time this was done and several research participants mentioned that the mother really liked it. They thought it should become a custom. The associate principal's secretary distributed to the staff the list of items that the student's family needed and facilitated their delivery to the family. The principal and associate principal both believed that visiting the student's family was an important decision.

The Middle School has many symbols and rituals that occur after a student suicide, even though the memorial garden is gone. The district crisis team is called, grief counseling is offered, sending letters to the community of parents regarding the student suicide, visiting the student's family, and attending the student's memorial service are all important and recognized symbols of the decisions the principal has made after a student suicide.

### *Summary*

The Middle School did not have a defined school crisis team, and when the student suicide occurred, the principal assembled a "team" of staff members to help him with the crisis response activities. He assigned the team members their role as the crisis

unfolded and they worked together under his direct supervision. The principal sought help and guidance from the director of student services, but not from other district principals who had experienced a student suicide. Internal and external influences on the principal were viewed in a primarily negative manner and guilt was mentioned by several of the research participants. The rituals that the school implemented included providing a place for students to grieve, counseling for students and staff, food for the student's family, letters home to all of the students' parents, and attending the funeral services.

#### *Middle School Reframing*

Bolman and Deal (1984) discuss the concept of reframing which encourages leaders to look at the same situation through all four lenses or frames. This yields more flexible and liberated choices for organizational leaders and matches the strengths of the leader with four different approaches to the event. Bolman and Deal emphasize that the role of an organizational leader is chaotic and decisions emerge from a string of conversations, meetings, instincts, and determinations surrounding the event. Most leaders believe that their organizations are more stable than they really are and that they, as the leader, have more command over a series of occurrences than they actually do. It is therefore, critically important that school principals respond to events with active utilization of all four of the frames. It is essential that the four frames of organizational leadership are in alignment and support each other during a major crisis such as a student suicide.

The principal discussed some of the changes in his leadership and decision making that occurred after the student suicide. He told a story of the teacher who did not

read the message about the student suicide to his class and ignored the grieving of the students in his class. In the past he might have reprimanded the teacher for not following the directions that were given and the structure that was set up for a crisis situation. Now the principal will make an effort to discuss privately with the teacher in order to discover if anything personal is causing the teacher to not participate. The principal will remind the teacher that his leadership philosophy and the school culture he is trying to establish are based on teaching the whole child. His expectation is that the teacher will be responsive to warning signs that students may display. A team member was assigned to read the statement and assist the students in this teacher's classroom.

Another change that the principal cited is his expectation that teachers and school staff be more empathetic towards students and will measure their words before they speak. In other words, they will use judgment in how they word their comments to the students. He stated the following example, "That's stupid can be really hurtful. Telling students that I wouldn't have made that choice, is a whole different message." This principal has moved from the structural frame to the human resource frame in these examples. When asked what changes he might make in the decisions he made after the student suicide, the principal responded, "We have learned to respond differently--calmly and thoughtfully to crises. I have also learned that communication with the teachers is essential." He has interpreted the suicide or crisis through the structural and human resource frame.

The associate principal mentioned that now she recognizes how the principal is looked upon in a crisis and that the decisions he makes are crucial. She has viewed the

principal's decisions through the political lens. An area of recommendation in the structural frame that she proposed is to have the district crisis manual on hand and the letter templates ready to use. In the human resource frame, she mentioned that the principal needs a support system in place and a number two person that he can rely on to step in if he needs to take a respite from the crisis situation. In regards to the students, the associate principal stated that the staff was more on the alert for changes in student behavior or signs of depression. She expressed this change after the student suicide through the human resources window.

The counselor viewed the changes after the suicide from a more symbolic frame when she stated that the whole staff became more aware of the number of student suicides in the district and they have a desire for more information and knowledge of what to do the next time. From a human resource lens, she mentioned that when counseling students, "I do not hesitate to ask the students, do you feel like you want to hurt yourself?" From her perspective this is a change that has occurred since the student suicide and is endorsed by the principal.

The teacher described a similar phenomenon in that she became much more actively involved in the students' lives and did not worry if the parents did not like her new proactive commitment to working with the whole student. This fits the culture that the principal described and is an example of reframing the event through the political lens. She communicated her concerns to the parents when appropriate and she also mentioned that teachers need more training in recognizing the signs and symptoms of suicide and assisting students and parents, which is the human resource frame. The

associate principal's secretary related the student suicide to her own family and it became a symbol of her need to pull her grandchildren closer and watch over them.

#### *Description of the High School Student*

Unlike the Middle School student, the teacher was the only research participant who knew the High School suicide victim. The teacher described the student as "kind of with the skater bunch of kids." She noted that he was not involved in many campus activities. He was not well known by a large number of the high school students, but according to the teacher, "He was well loved in his group." The student had a positive influence on his friends and encouraged them to strive for higher grades. The teacher stated:

The kids said...in fact the first day that he was missing, they go [*sic*] he's probably home doing homework. He's addicted to homework, he loves doing homework. And he was such a good influence on that group of kids because they would work real hard to try to match his grade. And I noticed after he was gone, then their grades slipped a little bit, which I expected.

#### *Description of the High School Participants*

The High School principal was selected to assume the duties of the principalship approximately two years prior to the student suicide. He had 8 years of teaching and administrative experience in another district in southwestern Arizona. Even though he had not received any intervention training he stated that he and the three associate principals reviewed the Yellow Ribbon campaign's recommendations for intervention with a potentially suicidal youth. He stated, "We were self taught." The principal has had

experience with previous suicides at the school (there were two during the school year 2 years prior) and also from a personal perspective.

When this administrator was employed by the previous school district, a coaching colleague committed suicide. He discussed his friend's suicide death several times during the interview. This student suicide occurred at approximately the same time of year that the principal's friend committed suicide and the same questions surfaced for him again. Two of those questions were what could I have done differently to prevent this death and were there warning signs that I didn't detect?

This principal displayed a very calm and composed demeanor during the interview. He is well respected by the school staff. The principal is enrolled in a doctoral program at the local university and is familiar with the four frames of organizational leadership. (See Table 5.2 for High School participants' educational experience and suicide-related training background.)

Counselor #1 transferred to the High School one year after it opened. She is known throughout the district for her expertise in suicide intervention and postvention and is also well respected by the school staff and the district counselors. She has 27 total years of counseling experience that includes agencies, a private boarding school, and the school district. In her current position of counseling department chair, she supervises four other counselors and the department secretary as well as any agency counselors and interns that might work with students at the High School. Counselor #1 preferred to be interviewed at her home after work hours. Her interview was nearly two hours, the longest for the High School participants.

Counselor #2 is fairly new to the High School and is younger than most school counselors in the district. She has rapidly built a solid reputation for herself within the school as an energetic, dependable, and responsive school counselor. Counselor #1 and counselor #2 both expressed admiration and respect for each other and counselor #2 noted that they work well together and their personalities are similar. Even though she has not received any formal suicide intervention or postvention training, counselor #2 has informally learned from counselor #1 the district policies and procedures, as well as liability issues and is comfortable working with grieving students after a suicide death.

Table 5.2

*High School Participants' Educational Experience and Suicide-Related*

*Training Background*

Research Participant	Educational Experience			Training Background		
	Years in Position	Years in School	Years in District	Prevention	Intervention	Postvention
Principal	3.5	6	6	Yes	No	No
Counselor #1	14	14	15	Yes	Yes	Yes
Counselor #2	2	2	5	Yes	No	No
Nurse	3	3	11	Yes	Yes	No
Teacher	14	14	14	Yes	Yes	Yes
Hall Monitor	10	10	10	No	No	No

The High School nurse has been a nurse for 22 years, 11 of those years with the school district, and has recently been promoted to the position of district coordinator for health services. This soft-spoken research participant has attended several suicide prevention trainings and workshops. At the time of the student suicide, she was a member of the High School's crisis team and this was her first response to a student suicide.

The High School teacher interviewed for this research project is a mature veteran with 30 years of teaching experience and a master's degree in guidance and counseling. Her prevention and intervention training were prior to her employment at the High School 14 years ago. She had the student in class and was very familiar with his circle of friends. In the past 6 years, she has had two other male students in class who committed suicide and she vividly recalled the circumstances surrounding each of those students' deaths. She is an experienced crisis team member, but was not on the team for this case.

The hall monitor at the High School who was interviewed is one of four full-time hall monitors at the school. He is called on during crisis situations because he has 10 years of experience and knows most of the students. Considered the "eyes and ears" of the school, the hall monitor knew the student well enough to greet him in the hallway. The researcher interviewed the hall monitor in one of the High School conference rooms. He seemed nervous during the interview.

#### *Research Question*

Is there a relationship between the decisions that educational leaders make after a student suicide and the four frames of organizational leadership? If there is a relationship, how is it manifested?

### *High School Structural Frame*

The structural frame emphasizes the importance of stated roles and relationships (Bolman & Deal, 1997). The formal structure of an organization contains the patterns of activities and the expectations placed on staff in various positions (Bolman & Deal). The same three questions were asked of the High School participants to determine how the organizational structure framed the decisions the principal made after the student suicide.

The structural frame for the High School consisted of an organized school crisis team and defined roles and responsibilities. The principal organized the school crisis team following the guidelines found in the district Crisis Response Plan K-12, and then provided on-going support for their efforts. The school crisis team was lead by counselor #1 who is the chairperson of the counseling department. The principal described himself as an active participant of the school crisis team, but not a formal member. He stated that his role as the principal during a crisis is to be available and accessible for the crisis team leader to consult with, because she is the expert in responding to crises. Counselor #1 noted that the High School does not usually call on the district crisis team because the school has five school counselors, several instructors with master's degrees in guidance and counseling, and usually one or more school counseling graduate students working at the High School.

All of the High School participants were very clear about their role during a student suicide. The principal described his role as facilitation, support, coordination, and communication. Communicating with the family, school staff, superintendent, community relations coordinator, and governing board members was also an important

role for the principal. He stated that it was important for the students, staff, district staff, and community members to receive the facts about the student and the situation. He described his role after a student suicide:

It is a similar role, but it is different. Similar being that I am the one, the person who disseminates the information. But when a student commits suicide, typically there is a heightened level of awareness because it is something that is not natural. It is different in the sense that you know someone who dies of natural causes obviously there is a reason and sometimes we don't know why a student kills himself.

The principal met with the family in his office after the body was identified as the student. He also prepared for a TV interview for the media, but that did not transpire.

When asked what her role was after the student suicide, counselor #1 stated:

I would say that my role is to be the liaison of the counseling part of the suicide team in our school. And generally I'm in on the major decisions that are going to be made along with the principal and the nurse.

This three-person team met in advance of the school crisis team to plan and assign roles to the other crisis team members. Another role that counselor #1 played after the student suicide was assisting in the confirmation of the death by calling the family. She emphasized, "We always confirm with the family." After the verification is made, counselor #1 initiated the process of identifying the students who would be affected by the suicide. The student's friends had already identified themselves when they came to the counselors out of concern for their runaway friend. She also offered to make the

announcement to the students in his classes, if the teachers were emotionally unable to do so. Another duty was to organize all of the counseling activities for the students and staff. Debriefing among the crisis team members several times a day was discussed as another important function that counselor #1 originated.

Counselor #2 counseled students individually and in groups with counselor #1 after the student suicide, while the other school counselors performed the routine counseling duties for all five counselors in the department. She also met with a few parents of friends of the student to discuss the ripple effect of suicide, helped teachers as needed, and basically did what was needed to be done. The nurse described her role as one of helping the counselors with crisis counseling. She noted that the suicide death created a different reaction from students and the event was internalized and much later students may suffer from illnesses and health related complaints that stemmed from the suicide. She explained, "Also, just be aware of health complaints and who had a relationship to this person who committed suicide. Often times they're linked to the death." Another role the nurse played after the suicide was to assist the principal in obtaining correct information about the student death and she helped distribute the information. She also monitored the reactions of students and provided her office as a safe haven for students.

The teacher was not on the school crisis team when the student died, although she served on it many years prior. She therefore, did not have an assigned role after the student suicide, but because she had the student and his friends in class, she was involved in the events following the identification of the student. She touched base with the

student's friends on a regular basis, attempting to detect any problems that might be surfacing from the student suicide. The teacher made sure the students knew they could talk with her and she attended the student's service.

The hall monitor described his role as combing the campus for students in distress and directing them to the counseling office. He delivered the prepared message describing the student's death to teachers, cleaned out the student's locker, turned in the books and checked him out of school, and reported any changes in the school climate.

In summary, the High School had a well defined structure that included the school crisis response team and established roles and responsibilities. This structure allowed the principal to quickly determine a plan for the days following the notification of the suicide death and the capable High School staff implemented the plan under his consistent monitoring.

#### *High School Human Resource Frame*

Two of the human resource frame concepts that Bolman and Deal (1989) espouse are that organizations exist to serve human needs but humans do not exist to serve the needs of organizations, and when the fit between the employee and the organization is lacking, the individual may seek to take advantage of the organization or the organization may attempt to take advantage of the individual. People and organizations need each other. People offer creativity and vitality and the organization offers salary and benefits, as well as opportunities (Bolman & Deal, 1997).

The decisions the High School principal made following the student suicide helped enhance staff interpersonal relationships and serve their perceived needs. The

principal spoke highly of his staff and the other research participants in particular. He expressed specific gratitude to counselor #1, who directs the school's crisis team.

Counselor #1 emphasized the sincerity that the principal displayed when thanking and acknowledging the work of the counselors. She stated that the decisions the principal made encouraged the staff and parents to have open communication lines and he was willing to meet and discuss parent concerns at their request. The High School principal encouraged staff to attend the funeral and handled the media discretely and appropriately according to counselor #1.

Counselor #1 declared:

The principal made it possible for staff to seek assistance, for staff to make accommodations for the students. Acknowledging staff's right to grieve and supporting the staff in that. And then just the very kind words that he says to the counselors about appreciating what the counselors are doing, acknowledging the work we are doing, even just the quick, how are you doing, sincerely said. That's immeasurable when you feel like the work that you are doing is being seen and appreciated and supported, that's huge and I think that's something that he does especially well.

The principal's decisions enhanced counselor #1's relationship with students, staff, and parents because his decisions are based on what is best for students and that matches the philosophy that they all have. Counselor #1 portrayed her relationship with the principal in the following statement:

It was enhanced because I feel like I can go to him with anything. If I feel like I didn't do something right, if I have a question, if I feel stuck or need to brainstorm something I don't feel threatened by doing that. I don't think that he is going to think less of me.

The principal checked in with the nurse frequently during the days following this notification and offered his support. He requested that the school crisis team members update him if anything changed or new developments transpired. The nurse stated, "I look at my relationship with the staff to be closer because we worked closely together and in a very caring, different way than the every day experiences that we have. I think I gained more confidence in the end with my department and the rest of the school." She noted that the principal's easy to talk to style of communication and his supportive nature also helped meet the needs of the staff. He was respectful of the parent's request for privacy regarding their son's death and guaranteed that appropriate information was given to students and staff.

The staff was notified of the student suicide through a written, hand delivered memorandum that counselor #1 wrote for the principal's approval. This memorandum contained a scripted set of facts about the student suicide. Teachers were asked to read the set of facts about the student suicide to the students, so everyone heard the same information. The principal stated that this was the most effective way to provide all students with accurate information. He also mentioned that if a teacher was uncomfortable reading the facts to the students, one of the administrators was ready to take on that role. The memorandum contained more information than what the teachers

were asked to read to the students. The administrators, counselors, and hall monitors fanned the campus to deliver the memorandum and were ready to read the information to the students if a teacher desired. Counselor #1 remembered a few teachers asking for that assistance.

The High School had an organized crisis team that quickly mobilized when a crisis occurs. The career center was opened for crisis counseling and supplied with bottled water, tissues, and art supplies when notice of the student's death was received. Other resources such as clerical staff and copy machines were available as needed. The three associate principals circulated the campus to monitor the climate, the hall monitors kept an eye out for troubled students, and the nurse met with students suffering physical ailments, many of which were found to be related to the suicide.

Counselor #1 also did not know the student and stated that many of the students came to school already aware of the suicide. She noted that information is often received in stages. This year all teachers have email and the crisis team might consider email as an appropriate future means of updating the staff of details as they are received by the principal from the parents, according to counselor #1. She confirmed that teachers were asked to read the statement of facts that was in the memorandum.

When discussing parent notification of the student suicide, counselor #1 expressed her opinion that "it just didn't feel like that was appropriate" to send a letter to all parents. The principal concluded that since the student death had been on the news and identified as a High School student, parents had already received the information through the TV media and possibly verbally from their student. The principal believes that

sending a written notice home with high school students is not an efficient use of resources and does not usually reach parents. When parents called the school with questions or concerns, they were routed to the principal or the counselors. Students affected by the suicide were encouraged by their teachers and the hall monitors to go to the career center for crisis counseling services. The career center specialist created a banner for the students to sign and give to the family. The principal also supplied the career center with snack food. The principal supported the counselors when they advocated for a variance in the school and homework requirements for grieving students. The principal supported the students and the staff by approving of the teachers' accommodations to meet the needs of the affected students who were identified by the counselors. He recognized the staff members' need to grieve and he made it possible for them to seek grief counseling services.

Relationships and interpersonal dynamics are important in the human resource frame. The principal reported that his relationship to the students in the High School changed after the student suicide. He described it as a heightened awareness and more involvement in their emotional issues. The principal was an associate principal when the school experienced two previous suicides. He recalled: "Every time a student suicide takes place, you always pay closer attention to the kids who are crying out for help. And you are a little more conservative in how you deal with specific issues." His relationship with the staff was altered somewhat after the student suicide. He stated that he told the staff:

Never think that it is not a high priority when kids are hurting or maybe acting differently than the normal way they act. It is okay to communicate and take a minute out of your day or maybe even say, I want you to come with me so we can talk about this. So I think communication, the way I communicate with staff, because there have been repeated suicides in this school, you are always on guard with students and how they feel.

The principal's relationship to the parents was regularly filtered through the parent organization and the student suicide caused him to communicate more openly with the parents about suicide and what prevention activities the school was implementing. The parents asked questions after a student suicide and he needed to be prepared to respond to their concerns.

Counselor #2 reported that her relationship with students remained the same, but her relationship with staff and parents changed after the decisions the principal made regarding the student suicide. She described that in the following statement:

Before the suicide, I think that staff, we weren't really all on the same page, I guess. Since that suicide has happened staff...will send kids to us even if they are not really sure. They will do a care-and-concern report on a kid.

The principal's endorsement of helping students with emotional issues encouraged further communication between the teachers and the counselors. The teachers are now bringing concerns to the counselors and the counselors are obtaining parental permission to share private student information with teachers in order to prevent future suicides.

Counselor #2 also declared that she makes more calls to parents when students appear depressed or emotionally distraught and this is encouraged and supported by the principal. Her relationship with some parents has become much closer. The principal's decisions to foster open communication about suicide have resulted in a more trusting relationship between counselor #2 and the principal. She is comfortable discussing student issues with him and feels supported and validated.

The nurse did not believe that her relationship with students had changed, but did report that the principal's decisions to talk openly about suicide prevention and promote Yellow Ribbon campaign activities after the student suicide death resulted in a closer relationship with the staff and the staff worked more as a team. She considered that her relationship with the principal remained constant. She stated, "He is very approachable and I was very thankful for that because it could have made it much more difficult if he weren't."

The teacher did not view her relationship with students as any different after the suicide, but reported that the principal's decisions did encourage the staff to talk more openly about the student death and her to speak with the student's parents after the memorial service. She described her relationship with the principal as unchanged. The hall monitor did not believe that the principal's decisions after the student suicide altered his relationship with the students, staff, or the principal.

Counselor #1 also highlighted the importance of the hall monitors in assisting students and recognizing any changes in the school climate. The nurse and her staff met with students who could not go home, could not stay in class, and did not want to talk

anymore, and provided a place where they could cry and be alone. The teachers utilized the counselors as a resource for specific grief and loss strategies to help students through the crisis. The teacher in this research study, according to counselor #1, was pivotal in connecting with the student's circle of friends and spent a lot of time monitoring the students. The High School also communicated with the district's alternative school, where some of the student's friends attended half of the day.

Counselor #2 recalled that the written memorandum from the principal to the staff encouraged teachers to send students to the career center for counseling and not take student concerns lightly. The memorandum also provided the staff with accurate and current information about the student suicide. She stated that the principal constantly checked with the counselors to offer support and ensure that things were progressing smoothly. He ensured that the employee assistance program information was available to all staff. She believed that these decisions helped meet the needs of the students and the staff.

In summary, the High School principal utilized the human resource frame to enhance interpersonal relationships among staff members and him and between the staff and parents and students. The positive support that he provided the staff helped meet their needs and connect them with the organization.

#### *High School Political Frame*

Bolman and Deal (1989) assert that this vantage point interprets the allocation of scarce resources as a source of power and conflict. Individuals and special interest groups within and outside the organization compete for resources and power in the political

frame. Several interview questions were asked in an attempt to identify the political factors that influence the principal's decisions after a student suicide.

Internal influences that were identified by the High School participants include past student suicides, school culture, the Yellow Ribbon campaign, the student's peer group, counselor #1, the nurse, and the hall monitor. The principal recognized that previous student suicides had an impact on each subsequent suicide response and he stated, "I think one of the influences is past history and learning from your mistakes." The school culture continues to be one of open communication and this influenced his decisions on notifying the staff and students. The principal made the following observation: "The culture of the school is that if something is going wrong that affects or impacts the school, the staff needs to be notified in a reasonable amount of time, as quickly as you can possibly do it."

He also noted that the school participates annually in the Yellow Ribbon campaign to prevent adolescent suicide. After the student suicide, the members of the High School prevention team lamented the fact that they had been intending to implement the prevention activities more often.

Counselor #1 identified the student's peer group needs as the only internal influence on the principal's decisions. It is customary for the High School crisis team to locate the student's circle of friends in order to anticipate counseling and other needs. Counselor #2 described the following internal political influences on the principal's decisions after the student suicide: the High School counselors, the superintendent, governing board, and the director of student services. These groups influenced the

principal by conveying to him how things should be done in the aftermath of a student suicide. The district's written policies, as well as those institutionalized behaviors and procedures are expected to be implemented by the principals in this district. She also believed that the hall monitors, particularly the participant in this study, are influential in the decisions the principal makes. The hall monitors report campus climate changes to the principal.

The nurse named the members of the three-person team (principal, counselor #1, nurse) as the group who made the initial decisions about the response to the suicide and determined that the nurse and counselor #1 were internal political influences on the principal. She emphasized the fact that they discussed the events and brainstormed the best solutions. The principal did not tell them what to do, he listened to their ideas and they decided as a group what procedures should be implemented.

The teacher maintained that the Yellow Ribbon campaign was an internal political influence on the principal's decisions after the student suicide. The school followed the recommendations and provided the staff with warning signs to watch for. The teacher expressed the following statement:

What kind of bothered me was that you know you learn about the warning signals and it seemed like the ones that I knew personally, there weren't any signals there. And I even asked the student's friends. Did you guys have any idea, any indication? You know all the signs and that's the scary part because you think its getting harder to see those signs.

Standard procedures that are always implemented after a student death was the only internal political influence named by the hall monitor. He thought the High School had a good system that automatically kicks in when a crisis occurs. Everyone knows their role and they all work together to offer the best to the students.

As for outside influences, the student's family did not recognize their son's death as a suicide until after the police report determined that it was a suicide. The student's parents initially communicated to the principal that it was an accident. This fact limited the information that the principal could share with the students and staff. He reflected:

We kind of hesitated on sending out the communication because there were no formal decisions regarding if it was a student suicide or not. There was, I don't know if this was fact, but I felt in my communication to the parents there was a little denial in what had happened. So until the sheriff's department made the determination, we were kind of hesitant to communicate that.

The media was a minor outside influence and even though they did not contact the principal, the possibility was always there.

Counselor #1 recognized the media as an external political influence in previous student suicides, but it did not materialize in this case. Another external factor that she mentioned was the timing of the student's death and the identification. The identification of the body was made just before the school's two-week winter break. The death was ruled a suicide during the two-week winter break. When school resumed in January, many of the students had worked through the grief process and the impact on the school's climate was much less than it might have been.

A potential political influence noted by counselor #1 occurred when she called a local agency that the district's student services director had been working with. The agency works with survivors of suicide (those who with a relative or friend who committed suicide) and coincidentally provided a city-wide workshop at the High School after the student committed suicide, but before the body was identified as the student. Counselor #1 hoped that the agency would be willing to send several crisis counselors to High School to offer students a grief and loss counseling group.

Instead, the agency contact person questioned counselor #1 as to why the school was experiencing so many student suicides and lectured her about the school needing a crisis team and offering suicide prevention programs to students and other ideas, all of which the High School has implemented. Counselor #1 remembered:

I just thought that before you rush in and tell us what we are doing wrong, find out what we are actually doing. And this was somebody who started out with the supposition that we weren't doing anything. Then we got into well you are too far away, your school hours don't work for our hours, and finally I just gave up. I was really disgusted.

This conversation frustrated counselor #1 and therefore, the principal and counselor #1 made the decision to discontinue soliciting assistance from this agency.

Counselor #2 described the High School community as very conservative with several influential religious groups. "These groups and the media have to be taken into account by the principal every time there is a there is a crisis" she stated. Counselor #1 emphasized the following:

We have a lot of concern that religious belief community members, both Born Again Christian and Mormon and Catholic. [sic] All three of those are fairly highly representative in our population. Although a lot of our kids are connected to churches and very actively so. Not this kid. And two kids who committed suicide were from one Catholic family and one Mormon family where we thought sexual identity was an issue, but it was not an issue that would have been compatible with the family. Not an issue that the family brings up. And it was not even an issue that the family is even looking at. It is something that trickles in to us from peer comments after the fact. So there may be some of that where the kids in their identity search are out of sync with the morals of their families.

Even though there are some very conservative parents in the school community, counselor #2 considered most parents very open minded. She viewed the deceased student's parents as open and communicative and noted specifically that they asked the school to publish the funeral service hours.

The only external pressure on the principal's decisions after the student suicide that the nurse affirmed was the community of parents. She believed that he took into account what the parents might think and how they would react to the school's response to the student's death. It was presumed that the parents would want to know what the school was doing for the affected students and what prevention efforts were being implemented. She noted that the student's family was very concerned that accurate information about their son's death be distributed. The teacher did not know of any outside political influences on the principal and the decisions he made. The hall monitor

did not describe any specific outside political influences, but he was convinced that if the outside political influence was a good for students, the principal would consider it and accept it. The hall monitor emphasized, "If it would have a negative effect, the principal would not give it the time of day."

In summary, the High School participants identified numerous internal and external political influences and seemed to consider most of them as a positive aspect when dealing with a student suicide. Internal pressures included several staff members, the Yellow Ribbon campaign, the school culture, and the student's peer group. The external pressure mentioned by several participants was the media, but they were not a factor in this student suicide. The community and the student's parents were recognized as an external influence that the principal considered when making decisions. The outside agency was a potential influence that also did not take hold. The superintendent, director of student services, and the governing board were mentioned as providing recommendations and direction, but not in a negative sense.

#### *High School Symbolic Frame*

According to Bolman and Deal (1989), the meaning behind an event is determined by how people interpret what happened and this meaning is significant in the symbolic frame. People often create symbols and rituals in an attempt to understand an event, resolve conflict, and move forward. Participants were asked questions to determine what they believed to be the meaning behind the events following the student suicide.

The principal listed the communication to staff and students and offering the students a place at school to grieve as a customary activity. He said:

We don't decorate the student's locker, we don't have a memorial type area on campus, the way we have handled it is that we have a system in place where students can get together and grieve and talk about what they are feeling.

He believes this has become part of the school's culture. One time the parents of a student who died gave money to the school for a plaque honoring their student. Plaques commemorating student deaths were hung in the school halls by a previous principal. Other parents have given money for a scholarship in their student's name.

In regards to accommodating parent requests, the principal made the following statement:

I think it has to depend on the specific situation and how we can support the community and the families. Maybe providing some closure to their grieving process. And it does impact .... the school. I think there is a balance between those two.

He recalled that the overall climate of the school was not affected by the student suicide, but it did cause the school's prevention team to examine their efforts to prevent suicide and determine that they would like to present the Yellow Ribbon campaign more often. He viewed the Yellow Ribbon campaign as a symbol of hope for the future for all of the students.

Counselor #1 identified the following activities as school customs when a student commits suicide: notifying students and staff, providing counseling, identifying the affected student groups, sharing funeral information, providing factual information, debriefing the crisis team members, and providing the script for staff to read to students.

These are all implemented by the crisis team members. She emphasized that they do not want memorials at the student's locker or elsewhere on campus and they do not endorse in memory of clothing. These activities cause disruption when they occur and the principal tries to handle each situation with sensitivity and tact. "We try not to disrupt the whole campus. That is the goal. We do not want to disrupt the kids who are unaffected. And we encourage kids not to wear in memory of clothes", counselor #1 confirmed. When the locker was decorated, it was decided and communicated to the students that the items would be removed and taken to the memorial service. This deadline mediated the students' need to have a memorial for their deceased friend with what would be least disruptive to the unaffected students on campus. Counselor #1 noted that the campus returned to a normal status fairly quickly with the exception of a core group of students who were profoundly affected by the student suicide. Their routine was changed for at least the rest of the school year. These profoundly affected students were offered grief counseling and a grief and loss support group.

Counselor #2 discussed the fact that the school discourages the students from displaying their grief in a way that might disrupt the educational process of the other students. They do not offer assemblies and encourage students to take their memorials off campus. The school does have a number of rituals that occur when a student dies and those were identified as providing a place for students to grieve and receive counseling; the crisis team has specific roles that they play, notifying the staff and students with accurate information, and having a plan. She summarized the school's customs as the creation of an atmosphere that it is okay to get help and to show your grief. Counselor #2

noted that the climate was like “walking on egg shells” after the student was identified. Staff became overly sensitive to students and many asked for guidance in what to say to certain students. Students expressed anger, sadness, and denial. After the winter break, the tension lessened and the campus began to return to a normal state.

The nurse stated that the activities implemented at the High School after a student death can be considered a ritual. They include calling the crisis team, offering counseling to students and staff, providing assistance to the teachers in the classroom, and obtaining and distributing the funeral or memorial information. She believed that these activities are routinely put into place when a student dies. The school climate as a whole after the student suicide was described as “okay” by the nurse, but the group of students who were most affected had a multitude of issues that occurred throughout the spring semester. Some students changed schools, some left school, some had behavioral problems, some acted out, some self mutilated, and a few students were hospitalized for mental health reasons. She noted that the suicide may have brought out problems that were ongoing and had been suppressed prior to the student’s death. Some of the affected students were not in the student’s immediate circle of friends, but knew him. The nurse noted that the school had displayed plaques in the past for students, who died, but those have been removed and that custom has been eliminated.

The teacher deplored the fact that there is not a place on campus where the students can memorialize and say goodbye to a deceased classmate and she believes that this is needed. She did not identify any rituals or customs that are implemented when any student dies. She agreed that the climate of the school as a whole was not affected by the

suicide, but pockets of students were touched in a variety of ways. The school has nearly doubled in size during the years the teacher has been employed there and she believed the impact of a student suicide was much more dramatic when the High School was smaller. The teacher also discussed her 19-year-old daughter who has suicidal tendencies, and the procedures she has endeavored to follow when her daughter becomes distressed.

Decorating the student's locker or parking spot was a ritual identified by the hall monitor. The friends of the deceased student decorated his locker. The items were removed approximately 3 days later at the administration's request and prior to the student's memorial service. This seemed to be in conflict with the district's adopted guidelines for student memorials. Counselor #1 responded with the following explanation:

We do things different with each kid to a certain extent. Like we had one kid where they decorated his locker and then we had to figure out how long we were going to let that stay that way and how it was going to be taken down and we are going to do that so it didn't hurt people and you know, we would collect stuff and we would have a student collect it to take to the memorial service to give to the parents. So that everything that was done at the locker site would be over by the funeral, you know. So it just kind of depends.

The hall monitor described the school climate after the student suicide as solemn and somber and he remembered it lasting for about 3 days. He speculated that the more popular the student, the more widespread affect the student death had on the school climate.

In summary, the High School had a number of rituals that occur after a student suicide. Participants identified the following symbols that have helped them understand a student suicide: responding to the crisis with grief counseling, providing a place to grieve, providing information about the death and the memorial services, debriefing by staff, and providing assistance to teachers. On campus memorials and other activities that might disrupt the educational process for unaffected students were discouraged, but were allowed in some cases. This is a recognized inconsistency between student deaths and a deviation from the district guidelines for student memorials.

### *Summary*

The High School utilized an organized and well defined school crisis team to respond to the crisis. The principal identified two school leaders within the school crisis team who provided him with specific recommendations that lead to the implementation of the plan for the days following the identification of the student suicide victim. Several of the research participants noted the strong and appropriate support that the principal offered to the school crisis team members. Internal and external influences on the principal's decisions were identified. Customary activities included providing a place for students to grieve, counseling for students and staff, providing accurate information about the student's death and services to the staff and students, and attending the memorial service.

### *High School Reframing*

Utilizing structure, human resources, politics, and symbols together to interpret a single event provides the leader with a comprehensive approach to effective management

(Bolman & Deal, 1984). They propose that this approach will assist principals in understanding the occurrence and identifying the necessary and practical decisions that need to be made (Bolman & Deal). The reality for principals is that after a student suicide, decisions must be made quickly and principals most likely rely on past experiences involving similar situations and intuition.

The High School principal noted that the school had experienced several student suicides in recent years. This unfortunate fact enabled the school's crisis team to be rather skilled in responding to a crisis. Notifying the parents of all of the students in the school through a letter sent home is the one example he gave of what he would consider doing differently next time. He stated that

Possibly sending home a letter with the students and whether they get home or not is another question, but just saying that you need to be aware that a junior student has committed suicide and that we have done the following things to reach each of our students....Maybe send home the Yellow Ribbon card with the letter so that parents know that it may not be their kid, but they may have somebody else that they can help. It would have the signs to look for.

This decision illustrates the principal's movement from viewing the suicide in the structural frame to the human resource frame to meet the needs of parents and students and the political frame of sharing scarce resources. Along with a letter, he would like to send the parents Yellow Ribbon campaign information that includes the signs of suicidal ideation. In this way, he would be informing parents of the student death, but also encourage them to be aware of the signs of suicide and how to help that individual.

Symbolically, the principal stated that the school's prevention team was continuing the Yellow Ribbon campaign and increasing their efforts to halt not only student suicides, but drug abuse and relationship violence. Structurally, the principal has reorganized the school's freshman program to create smaller learning communities and ensure that all students are connected to the school and develop relationships with their teachers. The structural changes he described are meeting the needs of students through the lens of human resources. The principal again spoke of his friend who committed suicide and how he views each student suicide through a personal or human resource window.

Counselor #1 did not offer any suggestions for changes in the decisions the principal made after the student suicide. She reflected that each crisis is different and the decisions must be made based on the needs and climate at the time of the student death. This participant was not concerned with the structure of the response to the suicide, but described the importance of the political and human resource frame. She discussed at length the importance of her support system that includes the other school counselors and the nurse. The suicide became symbolic of her need to talk with her husband and obtain reassurance from her sons that they are not suicidal and that they understand what can happen when someone is depressed. This has become a consistent practice for her. Within the counseling department, she has viewed the suicide through the structural and human resource frame by assigning the counselors to stay in contact with the most affected students.

One recommendation that counselor #2 made was for more concern to be shown for the staff and how they may be affected by the student suicide. Her view of the event through the human resource frame was concerned with meeting the needs of the staff and ensuring that they were emotionally stable. Also in the human resource frame, she noted that teachers seem to be more caring and concerned about students. They have been more willing to refer students for counseling. She has met with suicidal students more often and communicated essential information to the teachers. The communication lines are much more open between teachers, counselors, and parents she reported. Structurally, counselor #2 observed that the school has implemented new procedures that require parents of identified emotionally distraught students to obtain a mental health evaluation before the student can return to school. This occurred after a student had been identified as unable to continue his or her education without therapeutic intervention. The new procedures have placed more responsibility on the parents for the well being of their child.

The nurse stated that she now views students from a different perspective and believes that she has a better understanding of the choices they make. Students often make important decisions based on the present situation and she hopes to assist them in looking at the future and accepting their mistakes. Utilizing the symbolic frame, the nurse has created meaning from the suicide in order to interpret and accept the complexity of what happened. She also emphasized that the principal himself is a symbol of strength and support. From a structural sense, she has been examining students' grades and noting

any dramatic changes. The identified students are provided assistance in grade improvement.

When asked for recommendations for the principal, the teacher's answers reflect the human resource view point. She suggested that the principal facilitate a meeting with the staff prior to school starting. This would provide the opportunity for staff members to grieve and process the suicide prior to reading the prepared statement and teaching students. She believed that this would better meet the needs of the staff. She also mentioned that she hoped the principal would consider allowing students to have a small ritual or memorial on campus to provide closure and bring them closer together. The hall monitor did not have any suggestions for the principal, but hoped that the students realized that the school has resources to help them during a crisis such as a student suicide. Meeting the needs of students is considered viewing the event through the human resource vantage point.

### *Chapter Summary*

There are similarities and differences between how the principals utilized the four frames of organizational leadership when making decisions after a student suicide. Structurally, the two principals differed in how they organized their staff and the roles that staff members were assigned. The Middle School principal organized his school team after the suicide occurred and assigned them roles as the crisis unfolded. He included the associate principal's secretary as part of the team responding to the student suicide. This individual lived in the student's neighborhood, but her inclusion on the team can be considered unusual. He kept close supervision over all of the activities and made

most, if not all of the decisions. The High School crisis team was organized at the beginning of the school year and the team members were assigned specific and consistent responsibilities that they performed each time the school experienced a student death. The High School principal viewed his role differently than the Middle School principal and utilized two talented staff members to lead the school's crisis team. He assumed a supportive, caring, and facilitative role.

Even though the two principals structured their crisis response activities differently, both school staffs were apparently satisfied with the principal's decisions and leadership resulting in a positive match between the schools and the employees. The Middle School research participants were pleased that the principal made most of the decisions after the student death and they were in agreement with his decisions for the most part. The High School research participants thrived on the opportunities they were provided to make decisions and play a large role in responding to the crisis.

Educators in both school experienced internal and external pressures following the student suicide. Interestingly, the High School interviews reflected a positive spin on the influences and it seemed that they were able to utilize the influence or potential influence to meet their goals. The Middle School principal had strong pressure internally and externally and attempted to balance those influences with what he believed was best for the students in the school. Guilt was mentioned by several of the Middle School interviewees and seemed to influence the principal's decisions. Symbolic rituals after the student suicide were very similar for both schools due to the district guidelines for student memorials. The one exception is the High School allowed the deceased student's

locker to be decorated. The crisis response activities varied, but both schools identified consistent activities that followed a student suicide.

## CHAPTER 6

### SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

#### *Introduction*

To assist the reader, this final chapter of the dissertation restates the research problem and reviews the major methods used in the study. The other major sections of this chapter are the summary of the results and the discussion of the results and implications.

#### *Statement of the Problem*

The purpose of this research is to examine the decisions made by school leaders in the aftermath of a student suicide in the context of the four frames of organizational leadership as described by Bolman and Deal (1989).

#### *Review of the Methodology*

This qualitative study analyzed the meaning of the leaders' decisions and actions after the death of a student by suicide through the use of the four frames of organizational leadership (Bolman & Deal, 1989). The researcher obtained an understanding of the leadership behaviors through the use of two qualitative research methods: interview and document analysis. This study utilized a case study of one middle school located in southern Arizona and a second case study of one high school in southern Arizona. Both schools are from the same school district and experienced a student suicide one to two years prior to the data collection for this study. The case studies examined the leadership decisions and strategies implemented by the principal and others in relationship to the suicidal death of the student.

The four frames of organizational leadership: structural, human resource, political, and symbolic; were matched to those decisions and strategies. Key staff interviewed for this study include: principals, associate principal, counselors, teachers, nurse, principal's secretary, associate principal's secretary, and hall monitor.

#### *Research Question*

The following research question was examined in this study.

Is there a relationship between the decisions that educational leaders make after a student suicide and the four frames of organizational leadership. If there is a relationship, how is it manifested?

#### *Summary of the Results*

##### *Middle School Structural Frame*

It is evident from several of the interviews that the Middle School principal utilized a semiformal structure that included stated roles for the associate principal, counselors, and the principal's secretary. The principal assigned other members to the team as they fit the situation. These additional roles and patterns of activities were implemented during the days following the student suicide, but were not necessarily the same as those assigned after other school crises. The Middle School counselor stated that the school did not have an organized school crisis team. She simply referred to a team that was organized and assigned roles after the student suicide occurred.

Several research participants identified the team members and emphasized that they first met with the principal to obtain factual information about the student suicide death and develop a plan for assisting students and staff. The principal was expected to

facilitate the team and handle the external factors such as the student's parents, the other parents, the media, and the district administration. The associate principal, counselor, and principal's secretary all had specific duties that they performed as members of the team to meet the common goal of assisting students, staff, and parents with their grief.

The Middle School structure had some flexibility that enhanced the school's ability to effectively deal with a crisis situation such as a student suicide. An example of their fluid approach was found when the counselor noted that if the principal did not schedule a meeting to notify the staff of the student suicide, she and her counselor colleague would visit each classroom and notify the teachers with a statement written by the principal. Another example of structural flexibility was the fact that each student suicide was considered individually and key staff members who were particularly involved with the student or the circumstances surrounding the suicide were included in the team. In this case, the associate principal's secretary was included in many of the team decisions because she lived in the student's neighborhood and personally knew the family. Neither the district Crisis Response Plan K-12 or the Crisis Response Manual provide recommendations as to which staff members should be included on the school crisis team. It seems unusual to include the associate principal's secretary on the team responding to a student suicide.

The Middle School principal stated that he called the director of student services after he was notified of the student suicide. They discussed a plan for responding to the student suicide and the director called on the district crisis team members to assist the Middle School when school resumed on Monday. The district crisis team members met

with the Middle School principal on the Monday following the student suicide and before the scheduled staff meeting. The district crisis team members supported the Middle School staff and students for several days. The Middle School principal recalled that the student services director provided administrative support when the principal and associate principal attended the student's memorial service.

### *High School Structural Frame*

The High School implemented a formal structure when faced with a student suicide. The principal of the High School organized the school's crisis team according to the recommendations found in the district crisis response manual. He told the crisis team that he was not a formal member, but offered them his full support. The school crisis team responded when the student was identified as the victim of the train accident and again when his death was determined to be a suicide. In the structural frame, counselor #1 functioned as the head of the crisis team and the principal met with this counselor and the nurse in advance of meeting with the whole crisis team to determine the appropriate approach after a student suicide. The fact that the principal formed a mini crisis team was confirmed by counselor #1 and the nurse in their interviews. It was apparent that the crisis team members understood their roles and responsibilities and the same was true for the hall monitor, who was not a member of the school crisis team, but was assigned specific and consistent tasks in the aftermath of a student suicide.

This school had the unfortunate history of experiencing a number of student suicides. Possibly due to this fact, the High School crisis team's response to the student suicide was routine in nature and followed the expectations of all interview participants.

The High School counselor called a local community agency and asked them to provide long term assistance in the form of group counseling to affected students. The High School counselors have consistently sought assistance from community agencies after a school crisis. The organizational structure of the school crisis team and community agency assistance after the student suicide was intended to meet the uniform goal of stabilizing the school climate and assisting the students and staff with their grief issues.

#### *Middle School Human Resource Frame*

Participants reported that the Middle School staff relied on strong relationships and the school's long and rich history in the community to reach established goals. Each of the participants described at least one important relationship that related to this study. The associate principal's secretary was a long time friend of the student's family and lived in the same neighborhood. This individual had an active community network and knew what occurred in her area of the district. The principal and his secretary both described their collegial relationship as unique and special. They trusted each other and were mutually respectful. The associate principal had a professional relationship with the student's uncle, who provided technology assistance to school staff. It is interesting to note that the Middle School principal included and relied heavily on two support staff members, the principal's secretary and the associate principal's secretary, to assist with the response to the student suicide. The district policy is not specific as to who a principal should include on the school crisis team.

Another example of the human resource frame is the assistance the staff provided to the family. The teachers and other Middle School staff members demonstrated their

support for the student's family and their desire to make a difference by providing home cooked meals and other items the family needed. The principal strongly encouraged this activity and referred to it as adopting the family. The Middle School principal distributed accurate information to all who needed it and asked the district crisis team to respond to the school and help meet the needs of students and staff. The addition of the trained district crisis team members was a positive match because it provided the Middle School with qualified individuals who could assist the staff in the overwhelming task of grief counseling and it provided the district crisis team members with meaningful and rewarding professional duties.

#### *High School Human Resource Frame*

In the human resource frame, Bolman and Deal (1997) emphasize the importance of trained and inspired staff. This theme certainly emerged during the interviews with the High School participants. Counselor #1 was highly regarded within the school and the district for her crisis response knowledge and skills. She clearly led the school through the steps necessary to effectively respond to the student suicide. The High School teacher was extremely skilled with 29 years of teaching experience and a master's degree in school counseling and the nurse had participated in numerous trainings related to suicide and crisis response. Even though the principal and the hall monitor had very little training in this area, it was evident that they were highly motivated to participate and offer whatever was needed to assist the students and staff with their grief issues.

Relationships are also an aspect of the human resource frame (Bolman & Deal, 1997). Each of the interviewees was very passionate about their responsibilities after the

student suicide and their working relationship with the other members of the crisis team. They also spoke very highly of the support and caring that the principal conveyed to them during the most critical days of grief counseling. The full-time nurse offered students a quiet and private alternative to the counseling center and established positive relationships with many of the students in the High School.

The principal stated that his relationship with both students and staff after the student suicide evolved into a more empathetic awareness of the emotional issues students face. He conveyed to the staff that they should be sensitive to changes in student behavior and mannerisms. The fact that the members of the High School's crisis team communicated frequently and positively with each other during the crisis and expressed mutual admiration and respect for each other's abilities and strengths allowed them to maximize their talents and not duplicate efforts. Their efforts conveyed to the school staff and the community a knowledgeable and make it better attitude.

#### *Middle School Political Frame*

According to Bolman and Deal (1997), organizations are a web of people and groups with unique beliefs and perceptions of what is real. The quest for power by these individuals and groups usually involves scarce resources and often results in conflict (Bolman & Deal). In the case of the Middle School, the scarce resource was the "accurate" account of how the student died. The principal was pressured from within the school organization. The associate principal's secretary was very clear in her interview that the student death was an accidental suicide. The teacher stated emphatically that the associate principal's secretary had a strong influence on the decisions the principal made

after the student suicide. She believed that the grief process was longer than necessary and some school staff may have been influenced to attend the student's memorial service.

External political pressure over the principal's decisions was exerted by the student's mother and father and the respective step parents. They requested that the principal not include specific information about how the student died in the letters he sent home to parents. The mother also emotionally appealed to the principal that her son be portrayed as a "good kid" and requested that the principal personally agree that her son was a genuinely good person who had experienced some problems. According to the teacher, this caused some conflict among the staff members because they knew that the parents had pressured the principal to make decisions that met their need to absolve their guilt over their son's death. The principal remained true to his goal of providing accurate information by stating that the student was "choked by a rope." In this way, he was able to balance the needs of the staff and students with the political pressure exerted on him by the student's parents.

The principal's secretary recognized that the district administration was another external pressure that affected the decisions the principal made. In this case, the scarce resource was time and priorities with the principal wanting to stay at the school during the time of crisis.

#### *High School Political Frame*

The political pressures exerted on the High School principal were less obvious than the Middle School case study, but nevertheless impacted the principal's decisions. Identified internal pressures on the principal were not uniform among the research

participants. The principal stated that the school culture was one of open communication and was influential in his decisions to notify students and staff. The Yellow Ribbon campaign was a positive influence on the decisions the principal made, according to the principal and teacher. Counselor #1 identified the student's peer group as an internal influence and counselor #2 suggested that the High School counselors, the superintendent, the governing board, and the student services director conveyed to the principal their expectations as to what should occur after a student suicide and therefore influenced his decisions. The nurse and counselor #1 determined that they were the primary inside factors that dominated the principal's decision making.

The external influence on the High School principal is mainly one of public perception, seemingly due to the number of the student suicides in recent years. The media contact did not materialize in this case, but the principal was prepared to respond to any media attention that might have been directed at the school. The community agency representative attempted to exercise control over the principal and his decisions by forcing her own agenda, which was promptly rejected by the principal and counselor #1.

Several of the research participants noted that there was concern that the school community would perceive that they were not doing anything to prevent student suicides. This resulted in the High School prevention team planning additional suicide prevention activities for students. The student's parents initially requested that the principal relay their son's death as an accident, but after the police report they gave the principal permission to communicate that their son had committed suicide. At first this restricted

the information that the principal could share. The High School principal was proficient in utilizing these internal and external factors to his advantage in making positive decisions after the student suicide.

### *Middle School Symbolic Frame*

Bolman and Deal (1997) propose that people and organizations invent symbols and customs to explain uncertain and complex events. According to the research participants, a student suicide is difficult to understand and invokes feelings of guilt and self doubt. The interviews also seem to indicate that a student suicide imparts anxiety onto school officials who fear that the student suicide may encourage or influence other students to take similar action. These factors, coupled with the number of recent student suicides in the district, caused the district and schools to embrace the guidelines regarding student suicides that the director of student services introduced. The guidelines became a symbol that helped the principal make sense of the student suicides and bring equilibrium to the organization. They have become an expression of the district's culture and how the district aligns the decisions made by the principal with the district philosophy.

The principal agreed that the memorial garden, which was a previous symbol and ritual of the school, was not a match for these newly adopted measures. The principal made reference to the guidelines as a framework from which he made decisions and the associate principal referred to them as the way we do things. The counselor stated that the school had no rituals, implying that they followed the guidelines and had no memorials on campus and avoided activities that would disrupt the educational process.

The other example of symbolism discussed by the Middle School interviewees is the crisis response measures that the principal implemented after the student suicide. The district crisis response manual has provided structure for the organization in the aftermath of a student suicide, but it also seems that the prescribed activities such as calling the district crisis team, opening the library for grief counseling, corresponding with parents, and attending the student service have all become rituals that the Middle School implements.

#### *High School Symbolic Frame*

Bolman and Deal (1997) note that traditions and symbols are created by organizations to understand confusing and difficult occurrences, to move forward, and to resolve conflicts. The High School adopted the same two symbols or themes that the Middle School participants proposed: the district guidelines for student suicide deaths and the crisis response activities found in the district crisis response manual. The guidelines were referenced by all of the interviewees and they indicated that the guidelines are symbolic of who they are as an organization. The teacher discussed the fact that the students need a place on campus to memorialize deceased students, which is in conflict with the district guidelines. School climate was frequently mentioned by the High School interviewees and is considered an important factor and considered by the principal when making decisions. The seven district guidelines all have a strong relationship to school climate.

The activities recommended in the district crisis response manual have also become symbolic of how the High School responds to a student suicide. According to the

interviewees, the staff, students, and parents have developed expectations based on the High School's past responses to student suicide deaths. The following activities are consistently employed by the High School after a student suicide: obtaining and distributing accurate information about the student's death, offering grief counseling to students and staff, providing assistance to teachers in the classroom, identifying the affected student groups, sharing memorial service information, and debriefing the crisis team members. These activities have helped the High School create an atmosphere in which it is acceptable to grieve and seek assistance.

#### *Findings Outside of the Four Frames*

*Introduction.* Some of the information gathered in the two case studies did not fit into any of the four frames of educational leadership. This information will be discussed in this section of the findings and has been organized by school.

*Middle school.* The middle school counselor seemed very detached from the student suicide and the crisis response activities. She did not appear to take a leadership role. The Middle School counseling department consisted of two counselors, but neither was designated as the department head. The other Middle School counselor was also recommended for the study, but initially declined to be interviewed. She changed her mind and an interview was arranged, but she canceled. The researcher did not pursue this potential participant due to her reluctance and lack of interest in the study. This situation seems very unusual because generally school counselors are actively involved when a student suicide occurs.

Another phenomenon at the Middle School that did not fit into one of the frames is the fact that the associate principal's secretary was a very powerful force at the school. Here is an individual with no higher education, but an incredibly strong link to the rural community who exerted influence over the principal, associate principal, and teachers. This individual is an informal leader with power because of who she knows in the community.

*High school.* The High School teacher made the following recommendations for the principal: a staff meeting should be held to notify the staff of a student suicide and students need a place on campus to gather and memorialize the student. The first recommendation seems reasonable. The teacher recognizes the fact that it was difficult to be in class teaching and be notified of a student suicide by a delivered memorandum from the principal and then be expected to read a portion of this notice to the students. The second recommendation is in conflict with the district guidelines that state that memorials may not contain the name and/or picture of the deceased, memorials may not alter the routine of a regular school instructional day, and memorials may not alter school property. Even though the teacher knew that the guidelines have become a ritual at the school and the district, she disagreed with this school symbol. It may be time for the principal to discuss the district guidelines with the staff.

### *Discussion of the Results*

#### *Introduction*

This section discusses the interpretation of the findings in terms of the four frames of organizational leadership. Several themes for each school have been identified within

each frame. A chart compares the themes for the middle school and the high school. The relationship of this research study to previous research is considered as well as recommendations for educational leadership decisions after a student suicide. Lastly, suggestions for additional research in this area will be offered.

### *Interpretation of the Findings*

This section will describe the Middle School and High School themes found in each frame of organizational leadership. Table 6.1 explains the narrative.

*Middle school themes in the structural frame.* The two structural themes that emerged for the Middle School are the principal centered structure and the utilization of district resources.

The Middle School principal directed the response to the student suicide by working closely with several key staff members who knew their roles from previous crises. The associate principal was the liaison with the staff and ensured that student and staff emotional needs were being met. The counselors offered crisis counseling services and the principal's secretary typed the letters to parents and screened the calls to the principal. Other staff members were included in this team based on their relationship to the crisis and in this case that included the associate principal's secretary. The principal directly determined, managed, and supervised all of these activities. All of the Middle School participants in this study noted that the principal made all of the decisions.

Table 6.1

*Middle School and High School Themes in the Four Frames of Organizational Leadership*

Frame	Middle School	High School
Structural	Principal assigned roles and made all decisions	Principal collaborated with counselor #1 and nurse
	Utilized district resources	Utilized community resources
Human Resource	Relationships and staff satisfaction	Relationships and staff satisfaction
	Reached out to the family	Principal supported and cared for staff
	District crisis team	Trained and inspired staff
Political Internal	Associate principal's secretary	Counselor #1 and the nurse
	Guilt	Yellow Ribbon campaign
External	Student's parents	Student's parents
		Public Perception
Symbolic	Followed district memorial guidelines	Followed district memorial memorial guidelines
	Crisis response activities	Crisis response activities

The Middle School principal relied on district resources to assist the students and staff after the student suicide. He consulted the director of student services and requested that the district crisis team respond and provide assistance. The Middle School usually

requested assistance from the district crisis team after a student death. The district crisis team members provided grief counseling to students individually and in groups and attended the student's classes to offer assistance to students and teachers. They were on campus for 3 days.

*High school themes in the structural frame.* The two identified structural themes for the High School are collaborative decision making approach and the utilization of community resources.

The High School principal collaborated with counselor #1 and the nurse immediately after notification of the student suicide. They determined the plan for responding to the crisis. The principal then endorsed counselor #1 as the authority for the myriad of decisions that would need to be made in the following days. The school had a designated crisis team who were assigned roles as outlined in the district crisis response manual. This school crisis team was formed at the beginning of each school year. Counselor #1 and the nurse met with the school crisis team and agreed on a plan of action. They drew on their past experience responding to a student suicide when making decisions. The principal was not a member of the school crisis team but was available for support and guidance. He monitored the crisis team by checking in with them often. This was not perceived as a review of their activities, but rather as offering support and demonstrating care for them. The principal noted in his interview that counselor #1 was the expert in crisis management.

It is customary after a student death for the High School to seek assistance from community agencies, usually in the form of grief support groups for students. In this case,

counselor #1 contacted an agency who ironically, had just provided a city-wide suicide prevention workshop for school counselors at the High School approximately two weeks prior to notification of the student death. The response from the agency representative was less than desirable and focused more on why the school had experienced another suicide than on what assistance the agency might be willing and able to provide to the High School students. In frustration, counselor #1 and the principal decided not to pursue community agency assistance for this student suicide and continued with the grief counseling that was provided by school counselors.

*Comparison of middle school and high school structural themes.* The two principals structured the response to the student suicide differently with the Middle School principal retaining control over all decisions and the High School principal delegating decision making to counselor #1. Even though the Middle School principal had structural control over the decisions that were made after the student suicide, he did not control the process. This led to a disjointed effort and no long range plan for assisting affected students or staff. The High School principal was able to control the process because he had a plan for crisis response that had been discussed with the school crisis team. Their plan included postvention support activities.

There are several reasons other than principal leadership style why this may have occurred. The High School was fortunate to have a skilled and trained counselor who provided leadership in the area of crisis response. Her proven track record of leading the High School through the days following a crisis allowed the principal to authorize her to make crisis response decisions. The Middle School did not have an individual with this

combination of training, skill, and leadership, even though the training backgrounds of the participants indicated that the Middle School had three individuals with postvention training and the High School only had two. The difference is the counselor leadership component.

Another difference between the structure of the Middle School and the High School is the fact that the Middle School relied on district resources to enhance their ability to respond to the crisis and the High School relied on community resources. One reason for this may be the size difference between the two schools. The High School had more than twice the student population of the Middle School. The Middle School had two full time counselors and a part time nurse, who was not on campus for most of the time following the student death. The High School had six counselors (the equivalent of five full time positions) and a full time nurse. This allowed the High School to assign three counselors plus the nurse to assist students and staff with grief issues. The other three counselors handled the routine counseling responsibilities during the crisis response days. In general, they did not need the services of the district crisis team for a student death, unless the death affected the majority of the student population. The High School contacted the community agency for a grief support group, which was a long term activity and one that would allow the school counselors to return to their routine responsibilities without adding to their already loaded schedule. The Middle School participants did not mention long term support for students. This is consistent with their lack of planning and lack of leadership control.

*Middle school themes in the human resource frame.* Three themes are associated with the Middle School human resource frame. They are relationships, reaching out to the student's family, and the district crisis team.

The Middle School was an integral part of the deceased student's community, evidenced by the fact that there was a strong community network that included members of the school staff. Both secretaries lived in or near the student's neighborhood and the associate principal's secretary and the teacher knew the student's mother and father when they were students in the district. It is uncertain whether this strong community link would have occurred if the deceased student had lived in a different area of the community. These relationships positively influenced and generated many of the decisions that the principal made, such as taking food to the family, attending the student's memorial service, having students sign a yearbook for the student's family, and visiting the family in their home the day after the student's suicide.

The Middle School staff showed caring and support to the student's family by obtaining a list from the family of what they needed and providing these items, which included a large amount of home cooked food. This appears to be unique within the school district and is related to the relationships described above. It may also be related to the perceived financial, social, and emotional needs that this family had. The principal supported and encouraged these efforts to support the student's family.

The third theme in the human resource frame for the Middle School is the district crisis team, which was previously discussed as a structural theme. The reason it is also considered in the human resource frame is that the assistance provided by the district

crisis team members was a positive match in that it provided the Middle School staff with trained professionals who could provide grief counseling to students and staff in support of the two Middle School counselors. In the same manner, the opportunity to help provided the district crisis team members with a meaningful way to utilize their skills and training.

*High school themes in the human resource frame.* Three themes were also identified for the High School. They are relationships, supportive and caring principal, and trained and inspired staff.

Each of the High School participants described their relationship with the principal as positive and they portrayed him as caring, supportive, and a good listener. Several stated that they could tell him anything without being judged. The positive relationship the interviewees experienced with the principal seemed to permeate the school and enhanced their relationships with each other. The relationships between the High School research participants were characterized by open communication and mutual admiration and respect for each other.

Closely associated with relationships is the caring and support consistently demonstrated by the principal. Even under what might be considered one of the most stressful times for a school principal, this principal was able to convey a calm, caring, and supportive demeanor to the crisis team. He trusted and empowered them to use their talents and skills to assist the students and staff in grieving for a lost student. He made himself available and frequently checked on their emotional state during the days of the crisis response.

The High School crisis team was trained and inspired to proactively provide support and assistance after a student suicide. Not only were they trained and inspired, but they were encouraged and supported by the principal to use their talents and strengths to help others. According to Bolman and Deal (1997) this combination of factors provided the most optimum of conditions for the High School to effectively deal with a student suicide.

*Comparison of middle school and high school human resource themes.* Although both schools' participants described strong relationships, this theme manifested itself differently. The relationships described by the Middle School participants were intertwined with the community. The associate principal's secretary knew the student's family because they had lived in the same neighborhood for over 30 years and her daughter and the student's mother were best friends. The student's mother and father attended the Middle School. The associate principal knew the student's uncle. The only relationship described by Middle School participants that did not include the community was the principal and his secretary. They described their professional relationship as positive and mutually respectful, but this may have more to do with their need to work together on all school business, than the student suicide.

In contrast, the High School participants discussed relationships in terms of their respect and admiration for each other. This was true for counselor #2 describing her relationship with the principal as well as counselor #1 describing the important role that the hall monitor had when a student dies. Education and job status did not seem to matter

to the High School participants. They all had a role and responsibilities and they recognized that none of them was more important than the whole.

The Middle School staff made great efforts to reach out to the student's family. For example, the staff provided food for the family and the principal, associate principal, and the associate principal's secretary visited the mother and step father's home. The High School did not engage in any of these efforts, but students did collect money for the family. The High School principal met with the student's family, but the parents came to his office. One of the reasons may be that the High School suburban community is larger, more mobile, and not as well connected as the Middle School rural community. It is possible that if the high school student suicide had been from a lower socioeconomic background, the High School staff may have organized and provided assistance to the family.

The High School principal supported and cared for the crisis team through his actions and this encouraged them to communicate and debrief frequently. The principal created a positive and caring atmosphere during a time of great stress. This is apparently his leadership style, but he also mentioned the fact that one of his close coaching friends committed suicide and his death had enhanced his ability to empathize with those grieving a suicide death.

The Middle School requested the services of the district crisis team and the High School relied on their trained and inspired staff. As discussed in the structural frame, this is most likely due to the number of trained staff and the emergence of a leader within the staff. But, the fact that the High School crisis team members were trained and inspired is

significant and directly related to the decisions the principal made. He supported opportunities for training and empowered them to use their training and skills.

*Middle school themes in the political frame.* The political lens will be viewed through internal pressure and external pressure. The internal influences include the associate principal's secretary and guilt. The primary external force is the student's family.

The Middle School principal received pressure from the associate principal's secretary who knew the family, lived in the neighborhood, and had been a very influential force at the school. She began her interview with the statement that this was not a suicide, it was an accidental suicide. It was evident that she wanted the school to help the family because it was the right thing to do. The teacher stated that she felt pressured by the associate principal's secretary to attend the student's memorial service. The counselor and the principal's secretary recognized that she was very influential, but did not give an example. The teacher felt that the grief activities were extended longer than necessary, but this was not substantiated by any of the other participants. The teacher admitted that she was anxious to get back to teaching.

The student had recently returned to school from an 11 day suspension before his suicide. Several of the Middle School participants mentioned the guilt and pain they and others felt because enough had not been done for this student to prevent his suicide. The principal and teacher mentioned that the parents may have some guilt over their son's death. According to the associate principal's secretary, the student's mother

...asked us (the principal, the associate principal, and her) to not say anything bad of him because he was a good kid. And she knew he had a few problems, but he was genuinely a good person. She has another one here at the school and she wanted us to make sure that we knew that they were good kids.

The mother may have been referring to the student's recent suspension from school. The theme of guilt seemed to permeate some of the activities after the student's death such as visiting the home, providing food and other items to the family, and attending or not attending the memorial service. The teacher made the following observation

The thing that was weird...was nobody seemed to give a whatever [sic] about this kid until he was dead. And then there was this huge outpouring of concern. I just think that there were a lot of people feeling very guilty.

The external pressure from the parents on the principal restrained his ability to deliver accurate information to the staff and parents of the student population. The parents pressured him not to describe their son's death as a suicide, even though the police had ruled it a suicide. The principal had to weigh the importance of the community having the factual cause of death or the needs of the parents to have their son's death an accident. He decided in favor of the parents, realizing that to not meet their needs could jeopardize the community's perception of his ability to handle a crisis and may affect his staff internally as well. The associate principal's secretary was also very direct with the principal that this student's death was not a suicide. It seems that this staff person and the deceased student's parents were in denial.

*High school themes in the political frame.* The High School principal experienced internal and external influences after the student suicide. The themes identified internally are the counselor and the nurse and the Yellow Ribbon Campaign. External themes are the student's parents, the community agency, and public perception.

The internal influences on the High School principal were both positive in nature. Counselor #1 and the nurse formulated the crisis response time line of activities with the principal and influenced the decisions he made. The counselor authored the information distributed to the staff and determined what information should be read to the students by the teachers. The principal was willing to listen and follow the advice of counselor #1 and the nurse because they were trained, had experienced the event before, and had made positive decisions in the past. As in previous student suicides, they were his trusted consultants and he followed their recommendations.

The Yellow Ribbon campaign was an internal influence, even though it was a national initiative to prevent adolescent suicide. The High School prevention team recommended that the Yellow Ribbon campaign strategies for suicide prevention be offered to students, staff, and parents throughout the school year. The High School had been offering Yellow Ribbon campaign for several years and it had been internalized by the High School prevention team. Several research participants recognized the Yellow Ribbon campaign as a positive influence on the principal and the crisis team. The High School prevention team took responsibility for implementing the prevention strategies recommended by the Yellow Ribbon campaign.

Externally, the High School principal was pressured by the student's parents to not consider their son's death a suicide. After the police report listed his death as a suicide, the parents withdrew their request. What initially began as a serious political pressure disappeared and was no longer a valid concern for the principal.

The community agency representative attempted to force her own agenda on the High School, but a self confident school counselor quickly recognized this, discussed it with the principal, and they refused to be influenced. It was evident that the agency wanted to offer help to the High School, but only if it fit the agency's own agenda. For example, the agency wanted to help the High School develop a prevention team and when counselor #1 explained that the High School already had a prevention team, the agency was not interested in meeting with that group.

Most of the High School participants referred to public perception and how it influenced the principal's decisions. The fact that the High School has had several previous student suicides has made the principal very aware of the power of public perception. He was ready for the media, but they did not come. Religious beliefs have been an influence in past student suicides, but did not relate to this case. The principal, on advice from counselor #1, chose not to send a letter home to parents because of possible negative public perception. This school has experienced several student suicides and counselor #1 seemed to think that a letter to the parents might evoke questions about what the principal was doing to prevent future student suicides. Another reason is that the student death had been reported in the local newspaper. Even though public perception

was not obviously negative in this student suicide, the potential was there. The High School principal knew that and was prepared for it.

*Comparison of middle school and high school political themes.* Both principals experienced internal and external political pressure after a student suicide death. The internal pressure from the associate principal's secretary and guilt over the student's death was negative for the Middle School principal. This may have caused the principal or others to make decisions because of guilt or coercion by the associate principal's secretary. The Middle School principal faced a much more complicated situation than the High School principal because of these internal influences on his decisions and his lack of preparation for a student suicide.

In contrast, the High School principal experienced internal political influences that were positive in nature and assisted him in making effective decisions. Counselor #1 and the nurse provided the principal with a skilled team of professionals who made recommendations to him and helped make the decisions necessary after a student suicide. He valued and trusted their recommendations and decisions. The High School principal followed many of the prevention recommendations from the Yellow Ribbon campaign. These activities were intended to inform staff and students of the suicide signs to take notice of. It was clearly evident that the High School principal did not shy away from distributing suicide prevention information to students, staff, and parents. He was very proactive in this area.

Both principals experienced external pressure from the student's family in their desire to not recognize their son's death as a suicide. Fortunately for the High School

principal, the parents dropped their demand when the police report confirmed the death as a suicide. On the other hand, the Middle School parents did not believe the police report and continued to request that the Middle School principal not refer to their son's death as a suicide. This made it very challenging for the principal to word the information provided to the staff and the parents of the Middle School student population. The principal did some manipulating of words and stated that the student was "choked by a rope." This denial on the part of the parents, made it difficult and awkward for the Middle School principal to implement any immediate suicide prevention or intervention activities for students. The Middle School principal was very cautious in making decisions after the student death and it seemed that he was afraid of making a mistake.

The High School principal experienced additional external pressures that the Middle School principal did not encounter. The community agency can be considered a potential external influence that did not materialize due to the wisdom of counselor #1. She was able to recognize the agency's own agenda and unwillingness to help the High School with their request for a grief and loss support group. Public perception was also identified by the High School participants as an outside political influence. The principal and previous High School principals have been pressured by special interest religious groups and the media. The High School principal was prepared for a response from either group, but that did not occur. It is uncertain whether the decisions that the principal made immediately after the student suicide prevented negative public perception, but it is possible that his decisions were proactive in nature and led to positive public perception

and response to the student's suicide. The High School parents who called the school wanted to offer help to the family or the students.

*Middle school themes in the symbolic frame.* Two symbolic themes were identified from the Middle School interviews. They are the district guidelines for memorials and the crisis response activities.

The principal and the counselor directly discussed the district guidelines for memorials and the other participants referred to them indirectly as the way we do things here. The guidelines were the impetus for the removal of the memorial garden several years before the student suicide and they provided the principal with a framework to determine what was acceptable after the student suicide. The signed yearbook given to the parents met the intent of the guidelines because it did not remain on campus. The principal knew the guidelines from memory, but could not produce a written copy of them. The guidelines have become part of the school culture and symbolic of what is appropriate to do after a student death.

Crisis response activities prescribed in the district crisis response manual have also become a symbolic ritual for the Middle School. The principal implemented the following activities without referencing the manual or giving it much thought: notifying key people in the school, activating the school phone tree, requesting assistance from the district crisis team, opening the library for grief counseling, sending letters to parents, and attending the memorial service. These rituals were expected after a student death by the Middle School students, staff, and parents.

*High school themes in the symbolic frame.* The two symbolic themes for the High School are the same as for the Middle School. They are district guidelines for memorials and the crisis response activities.

The district guidelines for memorials have impacted the decisions of the High School principal. Student memorial plaques were no longer acceptable and decorating student lockers and parking places was discouraged, but sometimes still occurs. Students were encouraged to organize memorials off campus. The guidelines were referred to by all of the High School participants in a cultural sense. They talked about the school culture and who they are. School climate was also mentioned by the principal and several participants as an important consideration. One purpose of the guidelines is to reduce the disruption of the educational process or school climate. It was interesting that the High School principal took the guidelines a step further and recommended to the student's parents that their son's memorial service be held in the evening or on a weekend so students would be more able to attend and would not miss school. The parents accepted his advice and scheduled an evening service.

The crisis response activities from the district crisis response manual have become routine for the High School. Students, staff, and parents expect that the following will occur after a student death: distribution of accurate information about the student's death and memorial service, grief counseling for students, and support for teachers. Identifying affected groups of students and debriefing by crisis team members also occurs consistently during a school crisis. These activities are implemented without reference to the crisis response manual.

*Comparison of middle school and high school symbolic themes.* The same two themes were identified for both schools, but there are some slight variations in how the crisis response activities are implemented. The district guidelines for student memorials have become a pattern of beliefs and practices that defines who the schools are and how they respond to a student death. It is interesting to note that every participant from both schools referenced the guidelines directly or indirectly, but the guidelines were not printed in either school student or staff handbook. In fact, neither principal could find a written copy of the guidelines. But everyone knew the philosophy that they represented. The researcher finally located a copy of the guidelines from another district principal. The guidelines for student memorials have truly become a symbol of what the schools and district stand for in respect to student memorials. The high school teacher was not in full agreement with the district guidelines for student memorials. The High School principal may want to review the guidelines and their purpose with the staff.

The crisis response activities have become symbolic rituals for both schools although the schools have chosen slightly different activities to implement. Both schools offered grief counseling to students and provided information to students and staff. The Middle School requested assistance from the district crisis team and the High School activated their school crisis team. The Middle School sent letters home to parents, while the High School focused more on identifying the affected students and assisting them. The premise is the same; both schools have specified activities that always occur after a student suicide. These activities provide meaning to a confusing and unexplainable event.

*Emphasis on activities in the political frame.* Both principals spent more time on activities related to the political frame than the other three frames. They dealt with internal and external influences that were unpredictable and difficult to manage. The High School principal planned ahead for external political pressure from the media and the community. The activities that related to the other three frames were more predictable and customary. The principals did not need to invest as much time in them as they did in the political frame activities. It also should be noted that if something went wrong in the political arena, it would potentially affect the principal's future career.

#### *Relationship to Previous Research*

The researcher was unable to locate any previous studies of leadership decisions after a student suicide. There is an abundance of research on suicide prevention activities and crisis response in general. This is especially true for recognizing the signs of suicide. Many researchers have studied postvention activities, but not from a leadership perspective.

#### *Recommendations for Educators*

The recommendations for educators have been organized by the four frames of organizational leadership. A fifth category contains recommendations that did not fit into one of the four frames.

#### *Structural frame recommendations.*

1. Both principals in this study utilized a written and approved district crisis response handbook when making decisions after the student suicide. Districts and schools need a printed crisis response plan that defines the formal roles

and responsibilities of staff and outlines recommended crisis response activities. This should be easily located and available to all crisis team members.

2. The district in this study had printed guidelines for student memorials. The guidelines had become a symbol for how student suicide deaths were handled by district staff. Districts need printed guidelines for student memorials that provide structure for the difficult decisions that principals may need to make after a student suicide. The guidelines should be shared with all staff members.
3. The crisis response structure should allow for the flexibility necessary to effectively respond to each unique student suicide.
4. The high school had an identified crisis team that mobilized when the student suicide was determined. The high school crisis team members had defined roles and worked well together. Districts and schools should have organized crisis response teams that are able to respond quickly when a student dies.
5. The middle school principal did not maintain control over the crisis response process and his decisions were influenced by internal and external forces. Principals should maintain structural control over the decisions that are made after a student suicide. This should include control over the process.

*Human resource frame recommendations.*

1. The high school crisis team members were trained in suicide postvention and empowered to utilize their skills and training to help others. Professional development and empowerment of trained school leaders are recommended.
2. The middle school principal did inform his staff prior to the students. The high school principal sent a written memorandum to the staff with a statement to read to the students. The high school teacher in this study stated that this was difficult emotionally for her. Principals should first inform the staff of the student suicide rather than informing staff and students together.
3. The high school principal encouraged a positive relationship among the school crisis team members. This enhanced their ability to work as a team to perform crisis response activities. It is recommended that principals foster a positive, professional relationship among the school crisis team members.
4. The high school staff frequently requested assistance with student support groups from community agencies. This provided long term assistance to those students desiring the additional support and allowed the school counselors to continue offering their customary school counseling services. School staff should develop positive relationships with community resources in the area of suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention.
5. The high school identified the students most profoundly affected by the student suicide and offered them specific grief counseling activities. Crisis team members should identify the students most affected by the student

suicide and provide grief counseling services as needed. The students most vulnerable to developing social or emotional difficulties are those closest to the victim.

6. The middle school principal sought the advice of the director of student services as he began planning for the crisis response activities. Principals and crisis team members should seek advice from suicide experts and other school professionals who have recently experienced a student suicide.

*Political frame recommendations.*

1. Both principals in this study were knowledgeable of the school community and public perception. The high school principal prepared for possible questions from members of the community. Principals should be aware of their school community and the potential political influences.
2. The high school counselor contacted a community agency for student support group assistance and realized that the agency staff member had her own agenda that did not match the needs of the high school students. Principals should be aware that community agencies may have their own agenda for assisting after a student suicide and their agenda may not be in alignment with the needs of the school.
3. The parents of both suicide victims in this study did not initially accept the fact that their son had committed suicide. Principals should be aware that the parents of a student who has committed suicide may not be willing to accept the death as a suicide. The parents may attempt to influence the information

the principal plans to distribute students, staff, and parents about the student death.

4. The high school principal met with the suicide victim parents and recommended that the memorial service be in the evening when students and parents were more available to attend. Principals should encourage the parents of the deceased student to plan the memorial service outside of school hours.
5. The high school principal and crisis team assessed the impact of the student suicide and determined the level of crisis response. It is recommended that principals determine the appropriate level of crisis response to a student suicide. Parents and the community expect the school to be a pillar of strength during stressful events. They also expect that teachers will continue to teach.
6. The district had guidelines for student memorials that both schools followed, but the high school allowed exceptions. Districts and school should have clear and concise procedures forbidding student memorials on campus to provide consistency and fairness to all students.

*Symbolic frame recommendations.*

1. Both of the principals in this study followed the district guidelines and the approved district crisis response documents. Many of the crisis response activities have become rituals that consistently occur. Principals should consistently align their decisions with district guidelines, procedures, or policies regarding student suicide deaths. This will then become expected behavior and the way that things are done.

2. Both schools consistently provided crisis response activities for staff and students after a student death. Crisis response activities that are implemented routinely after a student death ensure that all students who die are treated fairly. The activities may last longer and be more extensive for students who were known by more students in the school, but all deceased students were recognized.

*Reframing recommendations.*

1. Principals may find it worthwhile to look at decision making after a student suicide through the lenses of the four frames for organizational leadership. Bolman and Deal (1997) describe reframing as viewing a situation in a holistic manner using all four of the frames.

*Recommendations for Additional Research*

*Community.* The High School and the district in this study have experienced a high number of student suicides. It would be worthwhile to research the adult suicide statistics for the area to determine if there are any related trends.

*Parents.* Both principals experienced political influence from the student's parents to not recognize the death as a suicide. It would be interesting to study how parents respond to their child's suicide. This particular research may be able to enlighten educators on what to expect from parents of a suicide student death.

Another recommendation is to research parent response to a student suicide in their child's school. This potential study might provide educators with the key to providing information and assistance to parents after a student suicide.

*Postvention suicide training.* Several participants from both schools had postvention suicide training. It would be useful to know if schools with trained staff reacted differently to a student suicide than schools without staff trained in suicide postvention. This might provide educators with information about the effectiveness of postvention training for school staff.

*School culture.* Deal and Kennedy (1982, p. 4) define organizational culture as “the way we do things around here.” This school district experienced nine student suicides in 5 years. The High School experienced multiple unrelated student suicides. It would be beneficial to study school culture and what influence it may have on student suicide. This might provide educators with insight into possible cultural influences on students to commit suicide.

*School climate.* This study was not able to determine if the school climate was affected long term by the student suicide. It would be useful to know if a student suicide affected the school climate for an extended period of time. This might assist educators in making suicide postvention decisions.

*School size.* The schools in this study were of much different size. It would be useful to know if the response to a student suicide varied due to the size of the school. This might provide educators with positive postvention activities.

*Suicide experience.* The High School in this study had experienced several recent student suicides. It would be beneficial to research the difference in school leadership response between those who had experienced prior student suicides and those who had not. This potential research study might provide postvention training information.

It also would be worthwhile to research the extent to which experience and beliefs in suicide impact the willingness of school leaders to participate in prevention activities and handle postvention activities. This might assist in the development of prevention and postvention training for school leaders.

#### *Limitations of the Study*

Limitations of this case study research will be discussed in terms of boundaries and ability to generalize. As discussed before, the researcher is a former administrator in the district. This fact provided the researcher many advantages which include knowledge of the school district, knowledge of district policy and procedures, information regarding past situations and decisions. The researcher understood many of the explanations and details that the participants shared and did not have to ask probing questions for the most part. The participants seemed to be very relaxed and comfortable when interviewed by a former associate. This is a situation unique to this researcher.

The disadvantage to knowing the research participants is that the researcher has past experiences that may color her interpretation of the interview data. There were also a few questions that another researcher might have asked that this researcher did not ask due to the sensitive nature of the anticipated response. These were hot spots known to this particular researcher.

The time elapse of 9 to 22 months from the time of the student suicide to the research interview resulted in fading memories and difficulty in recalling accurate information. This was particularly true for dates and timelines. The time frame for the

High School student suicide was particularly complicated and participants struggled to recreate the series of events.

This research study consisted of a case study of one middle school and a case study of one high school from the same school district in Southern Arizona which limits the generalized applicability. Twelve interviews were conducted. This limited number may also be considered a limitation.

### *Chapter Summary*

These case studies provided the opportunity to investigate school leader response to the complex events surrounding a student suicide. The two schools in the study provided very different looks at how school leaders respond and the myriad of decisions that are made in the aftermath of a student suicide. The four frames of organizational leadership provided a powerful lens with which to view those leadership decisions. Many implications for practice and further research have resulted from this study.

## APPENDIX A

## PRINCIPAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What position did you have in School \_\_\_ during the \_\_\_ school year?
2. How many years have you served in that position?
3. How many years have you worked in the school? In the district?
4. Did you receive any suicide prevention training prior to the student suicide? If yes, tell me about it.
5. Did you receive any suicide intervention training prior to the student suicide? If yes, tell me about it.
6. Did you receive any suicide postvention training prior to the student suicide? If yes, tell me about it.
7. Have you ever experienced a case of suicide prior to this student suicide? Tell me more about that.
8. Fortunately suicide doesn't happen often, but when it does occur, is there a specific role that you play in the school? Is this different or the same role that you might play when a student dies of other causes?
9. What specific duties did you perform after the suicide death of the student?
10. What was your role on the school crisis team? The district crisis team?
11. Did you have a relationship with the student who committed suicide? If yes, tell me about it.
12. How did you notify the staff of the student suicide? The students? The parents?

13. Describe how you utilized school resources, including personnel, during the days following the suicide?
14. What duties specific to the suicide were delegated to staff members? Please identify who was assigned these duties.
15. Describe the influences within the school that had an effect on the decisions that you made regarding the student suicide?
16. What influences outside of the school affected your decisions regarding the student suicide?
17. How do you think the decisions you made following the student suicide met the needs of students? The needs of staff? The needs of parents?
18. Did the suicide change the way you relate to students? To staff? To parents?
19. What school rituals or customs are implemented when a student dies?
20. How would you describe the climate of the school following the suicide?
21. If you were to do it all again, would you make any changes in your decisions after the student suicide? What would those changes be?
22. How did the suicide affect you?
23. In the following semester or year, how have things at the school changed because of the student suicide?

## APPENDIX B

## STAFF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What position did you have in School \_\_\_ during the \_\_\_ school year?
2. How many years have you served in that position?
3. How many years have you worked in the school? In the district?
4. Did you receive any suicide prevention training prior to the student suicide? If yes, tell me about it.
5. Did you receive any suicide intervention training prior to the student suicide? If yes, tell me about it.
6. Did you receive any suicide postvention training prior to the student suicide? If yes, tell me about it.
7. Have you ever experienced a case of suicide prior to this student suicide? Tell me more about that.
8. Fortunately suicide doesn't happen often, but when it does occur, is there a specific role that you play in the school? Is this different or the same role that you might play when a student dies of other causes?
9. What specific duties did you perform after the suicide death of the student?
10. What was your role on the school crisis team? The district crisis team?
11. Did you have a relationship with the student who committed suicide? If yes, tell me about it.
12. Describe the decisions the principal made regarding notification of the student suicide to staff? To students? To parents?

13. Describe how the principal utilized school resources, including personnel, during the days following the suicide?
14. What duties specific to the suicide were delegated to staff members? Please identify who was assigned these duties.
15. Describe the influences within the school that had an effect on the decisions that the principal made regarding the student suicide?
16. What influences outside of the school affected the principal's decisions regarding the student suicide?
17. How did the decisions the principal made following the student suicide meet the needs of students? The needs of staff? The needs of parents?
18. Did the decisions the principal made after the suicide change the way you relate to students? To staff? To parents? To the principal?
19. What school rituals or customs are implemented when a student dies?
20. How would you describe the climate of the school following the suicide?
21. As you reflect on the events that occurred after the suicide, are there any recommendations you would make to the principal? What would those be?
22. How did the suicide affect you?
23. In the following semester or year, how have things at the school changed because of the student suicide?

## APPENDIX C

## PARENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How would you describe your family?
2. What grades and schools did your child(ren) attend during the \_\_\_\_ school year?
3. Describe your child's relationship to the student who committed suicide.
4. Have you received any suicide training?
5. Have you ever experienced a case of suicide prior to this student suicide? Tell me more about that.
6. Describe the decisions the principal made regarding notification of the student suicide to students? To parents?
7. Describe how the principal utilized school resources, including personnel, during the days following the suicide?
8. Describe the influences within the school that had an effect on the decisions that the principal made regarding the student suicide?
9. What influences outside of the school affected the principal's decisions regarding the student suicide?
10. How do you think the decisions the principal made following the student suicide met the needs of students? The needs of staff? The needs of parents?
11. Did the suicide change the way you relate to your student? To the staff? To the principal?
12. Are you aware of any school rituals or customs that are implemented when a student dies?

13. How would you describe the climate of the school following the suicide?
14. As you reflect on the events that occurred after the suicide, are there any recommendations you would make to the principal? What would those be?
15. How did the suicide affect your student?
16. In the following semester or year, how have things at the school changed because of the student suicide?

## APPENDIX D

## INITIAL LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS

August 15, 2003

Dear Participant:

The \_\_\_\_\_ School District has given me permission to conduct a study examining the leadership behaviors exhibited by two principals after the suicide of an enrolled student in terms of the four frames of organizational leadership. You are being asked to participate because you have been identified as having been directly involved in the events following the suicide. This research is being conducted as part of my doctoral degree in Educational Leadership at the University of Arizona.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time. Please be assured that all information you provide during the interview will be held in the strictest confidence. Aliases will be used for purposes of publication of the dissertation. If you agree to participate in this study, I will compensate you for your time with a gift certificate.

The study will consist of one individual interview for ninety minutes. I will ask questions related to the student suicide and leadership decisions and strategies. The interview will be tape-recorded and handwritten notes will be taken. The interviews will be conducted at your school during a time that is convenient to you. Please contact me at the phone number listed below to set up a time and date for the interview, if you are interested in participating.

If you have any questions regarding your participation in the study or about your rights as a research subject, you can call the University of Arizona Human Subjects Committee office at 626-6721.

Sincerely,

Kimberlee A. Holaway, Principal Investigator  
1455 W. Liddell Drive  
Tucson, AZ 85704  
520-742-0795

For further information, you may contact:  
Kris Bosworth Ph.D., Faculty Advisor  
Educational Leadership Department  
The University of Arizona  
Tucson, AZ 85721  
520-626-4964

## APPENDIX E

## INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE LETTER

Title of Project: School Leadership Response to Adolescent Suicide

You are being invited to voluntarily participate in the above-titled research study. The purpose of the study is to examine leadership behaviors exhibited by two principals after the suicide death of one of their students in terms of the four frames of organizational leadership. You are eligible to participate because you have been identified as having been directly involved in the events following the suicide.

If you agree to participate, your participation will involve one interview about the leadership decisions made and strategies implemented after a student suicide. The interview will take place in a location convenient for you and will last approximately 90 minutes. You may choose not to answer some or all of the questions. During the interview written notes will be made in order to help the investigator review what is said. Your name will not appear on these notes.

Any questions you have will be answered and you may withdraw from the study at any time. There is the potential for some risk associated with your participation in this study. Suicide is an emotionally sensitive topic that may trigger flashbacks and prior grief issues. If you experience emotional stress during the interview process, the principal investigator will be prepared to initially respond and then refer you to an appropriate community referral source for further assistance if necessary. No direct benefit from your participation in this study is expected. There is no cost to you except for your time and you will receive a gift certificate for your participation.

Only the principal investigator Kimberlee A. Holaway, M.Ed will have access to your name and the information that you provide. In order to maintain confidentiality, your name will not be revealed in any reports that result from this project. Interview information will be locked in a cabinet in a secure place.

You can obtain further information from the principal investigator, Kimberlee A. Holaway, M.Ed. at (520) 742-0795. If you have questions concerning your rights as a research subject, you may call the University of Arizona Human Subjects Protection Program office at (520) 626-6721.

By participating in the interview, you are giving permission for the investigator to use your information for research purposes.

Thank you.

Kimberlee A. Holaway  
Principal Investigator

## APPENDIX F

## SCHOOL DISTRICT PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

May 16, 2003

Kim Holaway  
1455 W. Liddell Drive  
Tucson, AZ 85704

Ms. Holaway,

I have completed my review of your research proposal, School Leadership Response to Adolescent Suicide. I am happy to permit you to conduct your research at \_\_\_\_\_ High School and \_\_\_\_\_ Middle School in the \_\_\_\_\_ School District.

I have forwarded a copy of your proposal to \_\_\_\_\_ Principal of \_\_\_\_\_, and David Liss, Principal of \_\_\_\_\_ Middle School. They have agreed to allow the research to take place at their school.

I wish you the best of luck with your research and studies. Please let me know if I can be of further assistance.

Sincerely,



Ron Rickel  
Assistant Superintendent

APPENDIX G  
HUMAN SUBJECTS CONSENT

Human Subjects Protection Program  
<http://www.itb.arizona.edu>



1350 N. Vine Avenue  
P.O. Box 245137  
Tucson, AZ 85724-5137  
(520) 626-6721

8 July 2003

Kimberlee Holaway, M.Ed.  
Advisor: Kris Bosworth, Ph.D.  
Department of Educational Leadership  
PO Box 210069

RE: **BSC B03.125 SCHOOL LEADERSHIP RESPONSE TO ADOLESCENT SUICIDE**

Dear Ms. Holaway:

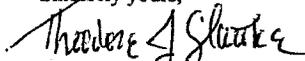
We received your research proposal as cited above. The procedures to be followed in this study pose no more than minimal risk to participating subjects. Regulations issued by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [45 CFR Part 46.110(b)] authorize approval of this type project through the expedited review procedures, with the condition(s) that subjects' anonymity be maintained. Although full Committee review is not required, a brief summary of the project procedures is submitted to the Committee for their endorsement and/or comment, if any, after administrative approval is granted. This project is approved effective **8 July 2003** for a period of one year.

The Human Subjects Committee (Institutional Review Board) of the University of Arizona has a current assurance of compliance, number FWA00004218, which is on file with the Department of Health and Human Services and covers this activity.

Approval is granted with the understanding that no further changes or additions will be made either to the procedures followed or to the consent form(s) used (copies of which we have on file) without the knowledge and approval of the Human Subjects Committee and your College or Departmental Review Committee. Any research related physical or psychological harm to any subject must also be reported to each committee.

A university policy requires that all signed subject consent forms be kept in a permanent file in an area designated for that purpose by the Department Head or comparable authority. This will assure their accessibility in the event that university officials require the information and the principal investigator is unavailable for some reason.

Sincerely yours,



Theodore J. Glatke, Ph.D.  
Chair  
Social and Behavioral Sciences Human Subjects Committee

TJG:tl  
cc: Departmental/College Review Committee

Enclosure(s)

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