

Professional Development Needs of SBAE Teachers Regarding Suicide and Suicide Interventions

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Introduction

According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC, 2020), a death by suicide occurred every 11 minutes in 2020. Rural America has been plagued by an increase in suicides for many years; the rate of death by suicide for those located in rural communities across America is consistently higher than in metropolitan areas (Ivey-Stephenson, et al, 2017), and 1.5 times higher than the national average (CDC, 2022). Due to this problem, there is a distinct need for suicide prevention programs to support rural communities. Before effective suicide prevention programs can be developed however, there is a need for clear and distinct understanding of what suicide prevention programs have been utilized in the past, and what type of prevention programs are needed. This study, as part of a larger investigation, sought to determine the professional development needs of agricultural educators in regard to suicide and suicide prevention in the Southern United States and two United States Territories.

Theoretical Framework

This study was informed by the Interpersonal Theory of Suicidal Behavior (Van Orden et al., 2010). The theory explains that suicide risk consists of three main factors: (a) thwarted belongingness; (b) perceived burdensomeness; and (c) capability for suicide. When all three are present, an increase in lethal suicide attempts can occur as compared to the desire for suicide. Desire for suicide is present when the simultaneous presence of the two factors—thwarted belonging and perceived burdensomeness, is present.

Methodology

Instruments were developed to better understand the professional development needs of agricultural teachers in relation to suicide. Content validity was achieved using a panel of experts in agricultural education ($N = 14$). Further, cognitive interviews were conducted with five SBAE teachers to achieve face validity and improve instrument design as well as content validity and reliability (Knafl et al., 2007). This study identified the professional development needs of teachers through three open-ended questions included within the larger instrument. Participants were asked to describe concerns they have when identifying individuals who may be suicidal, their concerns related to working directly with individuals who may be suicidal, and the most essential areas of training for working with individuals who may be suicidal. The survey was distributed to 13 southern states (Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia) as well as the U.S. Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico. Participants were contacted through state agriculture teacher association email lists; three follow-up reminder messages sent at one-week intervals. Data were analyzed through multiple cycle coding methods to identify commonalities.

Results

Using the National Association of Agricultural Educators' (n.d.) 2021 state-level agricultural education supply and demand profiles, the researchers estimate the total population of SBAE teachers from states and territories involved in this study to be 6,961. Of the total number of attempted respondents ($N = 1,155$), 21% ($n = 247$) were not included in the study due to suicidal ideation. Additionally, 95 did not consent to participation. Of the 813 submitted responses, 20

were removed from analysis due to incompleteness. Therefore, the usable response rate was 11% ($n = 793$).

Of the participants, two identified as gender non-confirming, one identified as a transgender woman, 355 identified as male, and 438 identified as female. The majority of participants ($n = 699$) identified as white. The average age reported was 39 with one to five years of teaching experience. Of the teachers in this study who had not previously participated in suicide-related professional development ($N = 384$), 76% ($n = 293$) were willing to attend. Face to face training only was the most preferred single delivery format ($n = 94$; 32%), followed by virtual only ($n = 77$; 26%) and hybrid only ($n = 25$; 9%); many were open to any delivery format ($n = 54$; 18%), with the rest amenable to more than one, but not all delivery formats ($n = 43$; 15%).

When asked to describe concerns when identifying individuals who may be suicidal ($N = 220$), 49 (22%) were concerned about not seeing the warning signs or warning signs being hidden from them, whereas 36 (16%) expressed concern that they might not recognize the signs if they saw them. Teachers were least concerned about anger or hostility from confrontation ($n = 4$; 2%) or that there might be significant differences between identifying students and adults who might be suicidal ($n = 3$; 1%). When asked about concerns related to working directly with individuals who may be suicidal ($N = 248$), the majority of teachers ($n = 72$; 29%) expressed concerns related to not knowing what steps to take or how to get individuals help. Teachers were least concerned about concerns related to the difficulty of the conversation ($n = 4$; 2%), dealing with the impact to other students ($n = 2$; <1%), and personal care or safety ($n = 2$; <1%). When asked to identify the most essential areas of training ($N = 242$), teachers were most concerned about learning the warning signs and identification of individuals who might be suicidal ($n = 78$; 32%) and how to start conversations without triggering students ($n = 50$; 20%).

Conclusions

Teachers in this study desire professional development training related to understanding the warning signs of suicide and how to help students who might be suicidal. While most prefer in-person training, there was willingness to participate in a variety of training formats. While teachers expressed an interest in a variety of training topics related to suicide, they were most concerned about identifying students who might be at risk for suicide and how to start the conversation with students about suicide. Like many others in society, teachers in this study were concerned that starting a conversation about suicide might trigger a student to consider suicide. It is important that trainings be conducted to help teachers understand that having these conversations will not harm students or cause them to consider suicide (Knafl, et. al, 2007).

Implications

Professional development training is desired by teachers in the southern states. In particular, trainings should be conducted that help teachers identify warning signs for students in their classrooms that might be suicidal and how to begin that conversation with individuals about which they might have concerns. It is also important to stress during trainings that bringing up conversations about suicide will not increase the chances of suicidal behaviors which may help teachers be more willing to begin conversations with students about their mental health. It is recommended that states explore how training could be conducted in their area, including through partnerships with others in regional training formats.

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