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SUPPORTING ADOLESCENT MENTAL HEALTH WITHIN SCHOOL  
CULTURE AND CURRICULA: INVITING ADOLESCENTS  
TO UTAH'S MENTAL HEALTH CONVERSATION

by

Diana West

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

In

Education

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Logan, Utah

2020

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## ABSTRACT

Supporting Adolescent Mental Health Within School Culture and Curricula: Inviting  
Adolescents to Utah's Mental Health Conversation

by

Diana West, Doctor of Education

Utah State University, 2020

Major Professor: Steven Camicia, Ph.D.  
Department: Teacher Education and Leadership

Utah is facing a mental health crisis. Between 2011 and 2017, teen suicides nearly tripled in Utah and had become the leading cause of death for children ages 10-17.

Educators and policymakers are working to provide students with mental health supports in schools, but an incomplete understanding of the challenges that students face make it difficult to meet their needs. Each year, the Utah State Legislature, Utah Department of Health and Human Services, Utah State Board of Education, and other state agencies ratchet up awareness, funding, and the determination to support mental health initiatives, and yet each year adolescent mental health in Utah becomes more precarious.

The purpose of this study is to change the conversation—to explore, through critical ethnography and the lens of critical pedagogy, how schools can support student mental health at a systemic level by addressing school climate, curricula, and sociocultural factors that we might not currently be considering. This study presupposes

that we cannot understand what is needed until we invite adolescents to the conversation.

This critical ethnography shares the stories and insights of 14 Utah adolescents. Their voices both illuminate and complexify our understanding of how school environments, relationships and curricula impact student well-being. Drawing from principles embedded in critical pedagogies, this study constructs a new *Critical Connections* model for the consideration of educators and policymakers—a representation of the most urgent concerns that participants in this study expressed. My co-researchers indicated needs for safety, respect, inclusion, connection, empowerment and transforming purpose. Their courage and insights have the power to help stem the crisis and benefit all of Utah’s students.

(478 pages)

## PUBLIC ABSTRACT

Supporting Adolescent Mental Health Within School Culture and Curricula: Inviting  
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Utah is facing a mental health crisis. Between 2011 and 2017, teen suicides nearly tripled in Utah and had become the leading cause of death for children ages 10-17. Educators and policymakers are scrambling to provide students with mental health supports in schools, but an incomplete understanding of the challenges that students face can make it difficult to meet their needs. Each year state agencies ratchet up awareness, funding, and the determination to support mental health initiatives, but each year adolescent mental health in Utah becomes more precarious. The purpose of this study is to change the conversation by inviting adolescents to join Utah's mental health conversation. The stories and insights these students share suggest the need for the development of a more comprehensive model of mental health support in schools—one that includes consideration of their needs for safety, respect, inclusion, connection, empowerment and transforming purpose.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to Dr. Steven Camicia for countless hours of support and advice. In an educational environment that feels increasingly restrictive and fearful, it gives me hope that exceptional educators and scholars such as Dr. Camicia still embrace critical ideologies and earnestly strive to change the world. I am grateful, as well, to Barbara Richardson and Tamara Burdic, my dearest and most inspiring friends, for their generosity in reading this work and making insightful suggestions and edits. To Dr. Katherine Mohr and my committee members—Dr. Ryan Knowles, Dr. Susan Turner, Dr. Rick Cruz, and Dr. Shireen Keyl—thank you for your wise counsel and encouragement and for your willingness to extend this process beyond reasonable limits. In my impossibly busy life, there have been more people and projects demanding my attention than I could gracefully manage; your kindnesses have been key to my survival.

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To my co-researchers: You are the real authors of this study. Your incredible generosity, both of time and spirit, and your willingness to share your stories openly and honestly, enriched this study beyond my expectations. I feel honored to have worked with you and with so many remarkable young people over the past few decades of my life.

To my children and their families, who mean everything to me: Thank you for your willingness to work alongside me for so many years, first as my slave labor during

long hours at a growing school, and now as my technical advisors and support. I will forever be calling you when I cannot figure it out. Loving you and watching each of you chart your course in life (both literally and figuratively) has been joyous. You remind me that what matters most in life, and in education, is our love for each other and our hope for a bright, meaningful future. It is my privilege to sojourn with you.

Bruce—I stand in awe of your intellectual energy, curiosity, and good humor. You inspire me daily and are the reason this project is finally complete. Without your longsuffering support, I would have abandoned it long ago. (I know—too many adjectives.)

Diana West



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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION, CONTEXT, PROBLEM, AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

#### Introduction

Things that kids go through are very real. Like, mental illness is super present and we're not making this stuff up. The world is really painful right now, and there are a lot of things that need to change about it. We're not just stupid little kids. We're independent and we need things to be different so that the world can progress in a good way.

—Sofia, Teen Voices Interview, 2019

Sofia and I sit across from each other in a sunny upstairs office at Emerson High School (pseudonym), a kid-sized table between us. A strain of musical instruments—an odd mix of flute, guitar and accordion—wafts in from a nearby classroom. Student laughter erupts in the central commons a few yards away. The distant rumble of traffic on a busy street below provides a steady hum to the cacophony of sound. Curled comfortably in an oversized office chair, her legs folded beneath her, Sofia seems completely at ease, despite her impassioned words. When I first met Sofia a few months ago, I was surprised by her unabashed candor and charmed by her exuberance. I liked her immediately.

Sophia is new to Emerson, a quirky, public charter school tucked into the center of a strongly conservative community in Utah that does not always approve of the school's progressive practices and relaxed attitudes regarding individual expression. Sofia transferred here from a large public high school a mile away. With her darkly-lined eyes, pierced nose and multi-colored hair, she might be mistaken for a “tough” outsider at

any of the other school in this affluent, religious community where high school students tend to dress fashionably and groom meticulously. In reality, she is the oldest child of a typical Latter-day Saint (Mormon) family. She watches her younger siblings after school and attends church on Sundays. At Emerson, she simply blends more easily.

Sofia is one of 14 high school students at Emerson who volunteered to participate as “co-researchers” in this *Teen Voices* study. She has a lifetime of mental health challenges to share and hopes to be able to help other teens. This study reports on the stories and insights these young people generously shared—stories of their battles with depression, anxiety, and suicidality. They reveal the origins of their difficulties—sometimes faulting genetics, but more often drawing a direct line to traumas, exclusion and rejections they have suffered. They reflect on the ways school life impacts their mental health, and the ways in which mental illness makes academic life difficult. This is also a study of Emerson’s culture and curricula. It examines ways in which Emerson aims to protect student social and emotional well-being—and how it sometimes succeeds and sometimes fails. Finally, it is an exploration of what all schools might do differently to protect the well-being of their students.

In this introductory chapter, I explain how this study was first conceived and why I chose Emerson as the site of study. I describe Utah’s current mental health landscape as it relates to adolescents and schools. I acknowledge the many ways in which Utah policymakers, educators, academics, and health professionals are working tirelessly to help Utah students who are, too frequently, despairing and sometimes ending their own lives. I provide the premise behind my choice to use critical ethnography and



acknowledge how my own positionality and involvement with Emerson have influenced this work. Finally, I give a brief overview of each of the seven chapters contained within this report and provide a final summary of this chapter at the end.

### **Origins of the Study**

In my 12 years as principal at Emerson, I was privileged to work with a phenomenal group of educators and administrators. Although our primary responsibility was to student academic growth, we also spent long hours negotiating student emotional and mental health issues. Discussions often revolved around the swirl of depression and anxiety many of our students were navigating. We struggled to safeguard the mental health of our students, but often felt unprepared to manage their overwhelming need. Our school charter included a promise to value student social, emotional, and intellectual growth equally. But as diligently as we worked to fulfill that mission, we recognized the need for a level of support we did not have the training or legal authority to provide. Like educators at schools across the country, we often felt divided—wanting to take more time to support students holistically but compelled to focus on core curriculum and state-mandated instruction and assessment. Yet it was clear something troubling was happening in our culture that was negatively impacting young lives. My colleagues and I had theories about what might be harming our students—long stretches of exposure to social media and its resulting isolation, academic stress, fragmented families, disconnection from nature—but we were not certain of anything. We implemented innovative school programs hoping to help—programs designed to strengthen

relationships, connect students to the out-of-doors and disconnect them from social media. Still, we recognized we were not doing nearly enough.

### **An Opportunity to Observe as an Outsider**

My determination to better understand and support student mental health deepened as I stepped away from my role as principal, while staying actively involved with the school in a supervisory role. I continued to consult with my colleagues, but I now observed student life from a greater distance. In this new role I took the opportunity to consider more critically the emotional and social environment at Emerson.

As I immersed myself in the literature of adolescent mental health generally, and Utah adolescents specifically, I quickly discovered that public health forums and the Utah media were already raging about the mental health crisis in our schools. Almost weekly, one or more state or local newspaper had featured a story about the alarming state of adolescent and young adult mental health in Utah—articles about Utah’s growing rate of teen suicide (Havens, 2017; Lockhart, 2017; Nutt, 2018; Price, 2016; Ramseth, 2017) the prevalence of depression and suicide among Utah’s LGBTQ youth (Ramseth, 2018) the shortage of accessible mental health professionals serving Utah’s universities and public K-12 schools (Price, 2016; Stuckey, 2016, Tanner, 2019b) and a profusion of additional headlines. Multiple state and national agencies were beginning to conduct research to understand the phenomenon (Annor, Wilkinson, & Zwald, 2018; Summers, Meppen, & Ball, 2019; Harrison et al., 2018; Utah Department of Health [UDOH], 2017, 2018).

I felt reassured to know that my colleagues and I were not alone in recognizing a desperate need for intervention. But something about the literature I was reading troubled

me. In all of the data—the survey reports, agency and legislative summaries and news articles—I sensed a flattening of the adolescent persona, a failure to actually see the subject of study. Those who work and live with adolescents know how complex they are—serene and insightful one minute, angry and illogical the next; capable of extraordinary accomplishment, but sometimes mired in mediocrity. Yet much of the available data seemed one-dimensional. Surveys that had been used in Utah schools to track student well-being and behaviors felt like vestiges of a different era. They often focused on substance abuse, despite the fact that drug and alcohol use among Utah teens had been declining for over a decade (Harrison et al., 2018). I wondered if, in our desperation to arrive at a prognosis and treatment, we were failing to recognize the complexity and deep humanity of the young people we are trying to support and protect. I wondered, too, why in all of the literature I encountered, I could not find the voices of the adolescents themselves.

### **Media and Public Official Responses to the Crisis**

In early 2018, when I first began reading about adolescent mental health in Utah, the UDOH had reported that the suicide rate for Utah children aged 10 to 17 had tripled in the decade between 2007 and 2017 (UDOH, 2017, 2018). Utah adolescents were committing suicide at rate nearly twice the national average (Havens, 2017; UDOH, 2017). In 2017, suicide was the leading cause of death in Utahns ages 10-17, outpacing accidental injury as the primary taker of children's lives (Annor, Wilkinson, & Zwald, 2018; UDOH, 2019). Between 2011 and 2015, Utah's rate of increase for teen suicide

was over five times the national average (Annor, Wilkinson, & Zwald, 2018).

### **Possible Contributing Factors**

Over the past few years, public health and epidemiology reports have suggested several possible causes for the high rate of suicides in Utah, including the state's altitude (Kious, 2018; Price, 2016), air pollution (Bakian et al., 2015), dearth of mental health counselors and drug treatment centers (Rogers, 2019; Stuckey, 2016), a high rate of gun ownership (Neumann, 2019), and the state's "rugged mentality of self-reliance" (Price as cited in Knoll, 2017, para. 2). Some mental health professionals raised questions about these explanations. Knoll suggested that Utah's Department of Health was "ignoring the elephant in the room," namely the anecdotal and statistical data that link Utah's teen suicide rate to "religious context" and exclusion of LGBTQ youth from full societal participation (para. 3). In a study published in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* (Barker et al., 2016)—the preeminent journal on Latter-day Saint culture, by Latter-day Saint (LDS or "Mormon") scholars—researchers suggest that sufficient data does not yet exist to support their hypothesis that high rates of LGBTQ suicide in Utah are tied to LDS policy and practices. However, the preponderance of anecdotal evidence makes obvious the need to broaden and strengthen support for LGBTQ youth in Utah's schools (Barker et al., pp. 10-13).

Utah's problem quickly earned national attention and the UDOH reached out to the Centers for Disease (CDC) for help in understanding the increasing rate of suicides in the state. By November 2017, Epidemic Intelligence Service (EIS) officers from the CDC arrived on the scene and began working collaboratively with UDOH to find answers.

After months of study and data compilation, the CDC's final report underscores the difficulty of identifying any one cause. Annor, Wilkinson, and Zwald (2018) cite multiple contributors, most of which were already known. In an online news post, the UDOH (2017b) summarized the committee's 140-page report: "Our investigation showed that suicide is complex and youth can experience multiple risk and protective factors. No single behavior or risk factor could explain all the reasons for the increase we've seen." (para. 3)

Nearly a year after my foray into the literature, the statistical data available about adolescent mental health in Utah had not changed appreciably. Researchers at Utah universities, schools, community and governmental organizations continued to study the problem and provide solutions, but the root causes of the crisis remained elusive.

### **Suicides at Herriman High School**

The media frenzy surrounding Utah's mental health crisis seemed to briefly flame out in early 2018. But media interest reignited when six students at Utah's affluent Herriman High School committed suicide in a single year. This event rocked the state and put schools and governmental agencies on high alert. In April 2019, the *Wall Street Journal*, journalist Ian Lovett (2019) reported on the story. In his exposé, Lovett conjectured that several conditions unique to Utah may have sparked this cluster of suicides (and other suicides that followed). Each of his observations reflect concerns that my colleagues and I had often discussed in worried conversations about our vulnerable students.

Lovett (2019) spoke of a "deeply entrenched aversion in this community to

discussing mental health problems or seeking help” (p. 3). A Herriman parent, Erin Preston, had shared her frustration with him. “It’s ubiquitous in Utah whether you’re a Mormon or not—we don’t want to talk about the hard stuff” (p. 6). Lovett wrote that the standards and expectations of Utah’s predominant LDS faith has bred a “religiosity” and “hazard of perfectionism” that can feel daunting to both teens and their families.

Lovett also noted the importance of “keeping up appearances” in this affluent community, where expensive homes are a “sense of pride” for families and high school students are meticulously groomed. He wrote:

Hair is kept tidy (and often blond). Beards are rare. The dress code at Herriman High bans “conspicuous, extreme, odd” hair colors as well as any clothing that is “mutilated, cut off or immodest,” unusual for a public school (p. 7).

Lovett (2019) observed that students who do not fit this mold or who are not active members of the LDS church “can feel like outcasts” (p. 9). Lovett’s observations resonate deeply. Many teens I have worked with (including my own children) have expressed feeling a keen sense of exclusion and inadequacy in their Utah communities because they did not fit in.

It was not until the sixth student at Herriman took his own life, nearly a year after the cluster began, that school officials broke their silence and began to talk about the problem openly. As it turns out, Herriman’s students, parents, and the media at large had largely been kept in the dark until this point. It was a group of students, furious at school officials for their silence, who ignited long overdue discussion. One of these students was a close friend to the first suicide victim. She had posted this biting critique on her Facebook page: “School officials were more concerned with admonishing girls for dress

code violations than checking on their emotional well-being” (p. 6).

### **What Does Data Reveal About Student Mental Health?**

Statistics on suicide present only one part of a complex and troubling mental health picture of Utah adolescents. Data also suggests an increase in other markers of mental illness. The *Prevention Needs Assessment*, a 135-question survey developed by research group Bach Harrison, in collaboration with the Utah State Board of Education (USBE), is administered bi-annually to Utah students in grades 6, 8, 10, and 12. The testing is a part of USBE’s Student Health and Risk Prevention initiative and measures a range of student behaviors and attitudes. Over the past 10 years, data shows significant increase in multiple markers of mental illness. In the 2017 survey (the most recently available data at the onset of this study), 67% of Utah teens showed moderate to severe depressive symptoms; 29.4% of 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade respondents reported feeling “sad or hopeless” to the point of being unable to participate in normal activities; 19.4% reported seriously considering attempting suicide; and 8.6% reported actually attempting suicide one or more times (Harrison et al., 2018).

Utah’s intervention efforts have often focused on drug and alcohol abuse prevention (Utah State Legislature, 2019a). Historically, drugs and alcohol have been seen as culprits of teen trouble. But Prevention Needs Assessment data actually shows a marked decrease in substance abuse among Utah teens over the past 10 years, excluding e-cigarette and opioid use (Harrison et al., 2018). It would appear, on the surface, that the growing mental health crisis is not causally linked to drug and alcohol use—and yet the

substance abuse metric remains a central concern of the Prevention Needs Assessment Survey administered regularly to Utah youth.

By the time I concluded this study in late 2019, new *Prevention Needs Assessment* data had just been made available. Although results indicated a potential leveling off of teen depression and suicidality, the statistics on adolescent mental health in Utah were as grim in this survey as they were in 2017 (State of Utah Department of Human Services Division of Substance Abuse and Mental Health [DSAMH], 2019b). PNA data is especially troubling given that adolescent depression, anxiety and suicidality statistics have not changed significantly despite a substantial increase in statewide efforts to resolve this mental health crisis.

### **Utah's Effort to Support and Intervene in the Crisis**

Over the past decade, Utah's governmental and mental health agencies have implemented a wide array of supports and interventions to battle teen depression and suicidality. The following is only a partial accounting of those efforts.

- During the 2019 legislative session, seven suicide prevention bills passed, although only two directly impacted schools: \$32 million in new grant funding was made available to increase the number of mental health providers in schools. A bill was passed to give schools the ability to bill insurance for in-school medical health (Dickson, 2019).
- The Utah State Board of Education (USBEd) increasingly offers trainings to inform and support educators as they work with students, including webinars with mental health professionals and online suicide prevention coaching.
- Eleven local mental health agencies (LMHAs) statewide, such as Valley Mental Health in Salt Lake City, Bear River Mental Health in Cache County, and Davis Behavioral Health in Layton, partner with schools to provide a continuum of mental health services, including assessment, group, and individual therapy, and crisis intervention. Most individualized services are



funded through personal health insurance or Medicaid, although some services are supported through grant funding (Hargrave, 2015; Utah Legislative Fiscal Analyst, 2019).

- Community and statewide coalitions, such as the *Utah State Suicide Prevention Coalition*, bring researchers, community members, educators, and mental health and epidemiology professionals together to advance solutions and support families impacted by suicide. Local and statewide suicide prevention conferences are increasingly common (Pierce, 2018; Ramseth, 2018).
- *Hope for Tomorrow*, *Hope4Utah*, and other peer-to-peer support organizations in Utah schools train students to recognize peers at risk for suicide, provide support and friendship, and seek help from adult mentors and leaders. Although research into the effectiveness of peer support programs has been inconsistent (Annor, Wilkinson, & Zwald, 2018), the Utah Department of Health and Human Services (UDHHS), the National Association of Mental Health (NAMI), and the Utah State Board of Education (USBE) actively promote these programs (Reyes, 2019; Utah Department of Human Services, Substance Abuse, and Mental Health, 2019).
- The Utah Division of Substance Abuse and Mental Health appointed a suicide prevention specialist and staffs a division dedicated to suicide prevention and postvention research and education (A. Hood, personal communication, March 3, 2017).
- LGBTQ youth centers, such as the Utah Pride Center and Encircle (community non-governmental organizations), have emerged in Utah's most populous cities to provide services such as subsidized therapy, LGBTQ youth activities, family and friend support groups, gender-oriented discussion groups, and Survivors of Suicide Attempts (SOSA) meetings (*Encircle*, n.d.; *Utah Pride Center*, n.d.).
- The University Neuropsychiatric Institute (UNI) at the University of Utah provides Utah adolescents with free access to the program Safe UT, which invites teens to text concerns about themselves or their peers. Licensed clinicians field incoming messages and respond to concerns regarding suicidality, bullying, violence, and other issues (*SafeUT Crisis Chat & Tip Line* | *University of Utah Health*, n.d.).
- Utah lawmakers have involved themselves in the conversation, convening mental health roundtables (Stuckey, 2016) and providing funding for suicide prevention and postvention research. As early as 2016, the Utah State Legislature published a "State-of-the-State" report on the robust efforts being made on behalf of student mental health statewide (Utah Legislative Report, 2016). Those efforts have increased dramatically since that time, as illustrated in Utah Legislative House Bill 393 (Dickson, 2019).

- Individual communities, universities, and K-12 schools have organized seminars and employee trainings and have contracted with partner organizations to receive site-based mental health services. Funding through the State of Utah DSAMH has provided 130 Utah K-12 schools with funding for early intervention services (DSAMH, 2019a).
- Educational professionals and policymakers who have been charged with suicide prevention and the social/emotional development of youth understand the need to address the social and emotional conditions of school life. Several divisions within the Utah State Board of Education (USBE) offer a range of seminars and trainings to address these needs. USBE is currently offering an online course in trauma-informed practice (Utah State Board of Education, 2019). The suicide prevention office at USBE has compiled a list of potential programs and supports for strengthening school climate and supporting student well-being.
- Some efforts have focused on Social Emotional Learning (SEL)—curricula designed to teach students how manage their emotions and behaviors. A *Best-Practices Report* (Hanover Research, 2019), distributed to schools by the Utah State Board of Education, advocates for the widespread implementation of “standardized” SEL programs across districts. The report recommends “direct instruction of SEL skills,” and evaluation of program effectiveness using “surveys, report cards, and performance tasks” (p. 4). Although SEL curricula are not necessarily protective of student mental health (an argument I make in Chapter 2), many see these programs as essential for student well-being (e.g., Darling-Hammond, 2015; Durlak et al., 2011). It was perhaps in response to alarm raised by the UDOH and the CDC, that the Utah State Legislature mandated that one specific SEL curricula, *Botvin’s Life Skills*, be implemented in every Utah middle and high school by the 2018-19 school year (L. Schiess, personal communication, April 4, 2018).

### **Limitations of Current Approaches**

Awareness of and support for adolescent mental illness is clearly a top priority for Utah educators, mental health professionals, and public policy influencers. And yet, for reasons we do not fully understand, their earnest efforts have not yet significantly curtailed the rate of teen suicide (Utah Department of Health Violence & Injury Prevention Program, 2019; DSAMH, 2019a). Schools continue to feel a need for more

adequate and effective mental health resources (Miron et al., 2019). The crisis continues. If we hope to change the mental health landscape for children and adolescents in Utah, it is crucial that we ask hard questions about why this is so.

Many of Utah's efforts to understand and intervene in the adolescent mental health crisis have been focused on suicide prevention—which is understandable in a state that has garnered national attention for consistently leading the nation in teen suicide deaths per capita (Nutt, 2018; Ramseth, 2018; Summers et al., 2019; Zwald et al., 2018). Utah's funding resources are largely directed at crisis intervention and providing more robust therapeutic support to schools—although USBE increasingly provides professional learning opportunities to help educators address student need. In the following pages, I consider why these interventions have not yet been enough to stem the tide of student depression and suicidality, and why we might need to look beyond familiar models of care to better serve our youth.

### **Inadequate School-Based Mental Health Resources**

Nationally, more than 20% of youth need mental health services (Merikangas et al., 2010), but fewer than one in four receive professional help (Avenevoli et al., 2015b; Mental Health America, 2019). Although data shows that 60% of youth in Utah with depressive symptoms receive some level of support overall, Utah struggles to meet the most basic therapeutic needs of students in schools (Mental Health America, 2019; Summers et al., 2019). A 2019 survey of Utah school districts reported that the ratio of psychologist to student in Utah school districts ranges from one psychologist to 1067

students in the best-served district, to one psychologist to 15,320 students in the most underserved district. (Summers et al., 2019). The data in Table 1.1 are taken from this survey.

**Table 1.1**

*School Mental Health Professional to Student Ratios*

Profession	Lowest reported	Highest reported
Psychologist	1:1067	1: 15,320
Social Worker	1:479	1:28,905
School Nurse	1:774	1:16,165

*Note.* Data do include districts reporting 0 FTEs for some professions.

In 2019, the Utah State Legislature appropriated \$32 million in new funding to help place more psychologists and licensed clinical social workers in schools (Summers et al., 2019). The funding is welcome but inadequate. For example, Emerson secured over \$26,000 from Utah's *Mental Health Qualified Grant* funding for the 2019-20 school year. The grant was to be used in partnership with our local community-based mental health organization. Through this partnership, the grant is only enough to pay for one part-time licensed clinical social worker (LCSW) to work approximately 15 hours-per-week. This clinician works with our entire population of K-12 students, splitting his limited time between two campuses. While this level of professional therapeutic support is far more robust than Emerson has been able to provide in the past, it is not nearly enough to meet the needs of so many students.

### **Ineffective School/Mental Health Agency Partnerships**

Many school districts in Utah have developed a partnership with one of Utah's 11 Community Mental Health Agencies (CMHAs). CMHAs rely on Medicaid, private insurance, and grants from state and federal programs to provide services to schools and individual students (Hargrave, 2015; Taylor, personal communication, April 6, 2017; Utah Legislative Fiscal Analyst, 2019). CMHA partners offer a broad range of services, including individual therapy, group therapy, assessment, behavior management, and psychosocial rehabilitation. However, in a comprehensive survey of Utah schools, Hargrave learned that the majority of Utah schools viewed their LMHA partnership as only moderately effective. Schools reported that services were not always consistent or comprehensive. Some of the CMHA providers' time was spent providing special education services that school personnel were not equipped to manage—primarily behavioral modification interventions. Some resources were allocated to providing crisis intervention when schools experienced a traumatic incident such as a school shooting or suicide.

While mental health partnerships can be crucial resources for overburdened schools, providers find it difficult to keep up with the backlog of needs. Many agency/school partnerships are limited in scope due to staffing and budget constraints. Most CMHAs face overwhelming caseloads. For example, Wasatch Behavioral Health's Provo Clinic is a critical partner to several school districts and, in early 2017, was responsible for providing mental health services to a region that included over 60 schools. (S. Taylor, personal communication, April 6, 2017). Understandably, providers must

focus their efforts primarily on Tier 3 interventions, which leaves them little time and few resources to offer the comprehensive mental health prevention and education supports that schools need, or to serve students beyond those who are most immediately and visibly in crisis. Students whose mental health struggles are concealed may feel isolated and helpless as they try to deal with depression, anxiety, or suicidality on their own. Mental health professionals recognize that schools need stronger systems of support built into campus life, beginning with mental health literacy and the strong involvement of teachers (Wei, Kutcher, Blackwood, et al., 2015; Kutcher, Wei, & Weist, 2015b; Swain-Bradway, Johnson, Eber, Barret, & Weist, 2015; Weist & Christodulu, 2000).

### **Unwillingness or Inability to Access Programs**

In some cases, a lack of mental health literacy or the stigma surrounding mental illness prevents young people from recognizing their own mental health needs or from asking for help (Clement et al., 2015; Lanfredi et al., 2019; O'Driscoll et al., 2012; Radez et al., 2019). Of those who are identified for professional intervention, some slip between the cracks because they do not qualify for Medicaid and cannot afford expensive private care. Other barriers to seeking help include limited mental health knowledge, lack of trust in provider confidentiality, and logistical hurdles such as transportation, time away from school, or unsupportive parents or guardians (Gulliver et al., 2010; Radez et al., 2019).

### **Overwhelming Burdens Placed on School Counselors**

School counselors are not trained for, nor are they authorized to manage serious mental health issues. Their primary responsibility is for tracking student academic

progress and ensuring that students are, as the ubiquitous catchphrase stresses, “college and career-ready.” It is neither a school counselor’s role nor responsibility to provide psychological counseling to students. Nevertheless, they are often tasked with serving the mental health needs of students. School counselor caseloads are generally heavy. The American School Counselor Association recommends caseloads no larger than 250 students per counselor (Gephardt & Poe, 2015). By statute, Utah requires a ratio no higher than 1:350 (Utah Office of Administrative Rules, 2018). But Utah schools often have trouble meeting even this modest benchmark. During the 2016 school year, the effective counselor-to-student ratio in Utah’s K-12 schools—at 1:725—was the third worst in the nation (Tsosie, as cited in Jacobsen, 2016). By 2019, these numbers had improved—but not by much (Utah Legislative Fiscal Analyst, 2019).

**Table 1.2**

*Counselor to Student Ratios in Utah Schools*

Range of support	Lowest	Highest
Counselor/student ratio	1:299	1:896

*Note.* FY 2018 data were reported by Utah school districts in Summers et al., 2019, p. 14).

School counseling programs are seriously underfunded in Utah. Emerson, for example, receives \$20,000 annually earmarked for counseling programs. This funding is not enough to hire even one part-time counselor for the school’s population of over 400 students. Even when counselor/student ratios are in line with state standards, the demands of the job are overwhelming and leave little time to support student mental health. Much of a counselor’s work focuses on helping students to plan class schedules and develop

College and Career plans (academic roadmaps to graduation). A counselor's primary role is to support academic achievement and help students understand and negotiate the ever-changing demands of 21<sup>st</sup> century vocational and higher education. In Emerson's experience, the pressure to meet the demands of this program can be overwhelming to individual counselors. CCGP standards suggest that certified counselors should spend 85% of their time on responsive services—meeting with students to help with academic, behavioral, or mental health concerns (*Utah College and Career Readiness School Counseling Program*, 2018). The reality is that, unless a student finds herself embroiled in a visible crisis, she will most likely meet with her counselor for less than an hour annually to schedule classes and plan for graduation.

### **Fear of Overstepping Bounds**

Where schools do find funding and time to devote more preventative and ameliorative mental health support to students, legal constraints and confusion about Utah law sometimes make educators and counselors wary of talking about important topics related to student well-being. For example, A 2019 GLSEN survey of school-based mental health professionals and counselors (Kull et al., 2019), shows that counselors do not feel confident that they can meet the needs of LGBTQ students, a particularly vulnerable population in schools. Only 14.1% feel confident about their ability to assist LGBTQ students in the coming out process; 20.1% feel confident talking to LGBTQ students about health and mental health risks (such as suicide). In Utah, where talk of LGBTQ issues was completely prohibited until 3 years ago, these statistics are likely even more troubling. Utah's so-called "no promo homo" law, which prohibited



“advocacy of homosexuality,” was repealed in 2016 (*SB 196 Health Education Amendments*, 2017; Thoreson, 2017), but confusion about what is and is not permitted to discuss still abounds.

Utah legislative rule also makes it difficult for school counselors and educators to talk candidly with students about sexuality and birth control—issues relevant to student mental and emotional health. The Utah State Legislature recently relaxed state law so that trained teachers can now “talk about ‘risks’ of birth control and condoms” (Stauffer, 2019, para. 3). But the law still prohibits frank talk about sexual activity and the promotion of contraceptive use (Tanner, 2019a; Utah State Legislature, 2019b). The bill’s language is confusing. This ambiguity is particularly concerning when nationally, 41% of teens in grades 9-12 report being sexually active (Resource Center for Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention, 2019), and only 54% of these teens report using contraception (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2019). In Salt Lake Tribune editorial, Robert Gehrke (2019) cites stunning statistics from a Salt Lake County Health Department report: In 2018, there were 5,279 new cases of chlamydia reported in Salt Lake County alone; gonorrhea cases had increased by more than 800% since 2011. 83% of the infectious diseases contracted by teens between the ages of 15-17 had been sexually transmitted (Harkins, 2019). School counselors and mental health professionals need to be able to talk openly and honestly with teens about sexuality. Most school professionals strive to develop trusting, caring relationships with students, but when students approach them with a serious and immediate need—a relationship trauma, issues of gender identity, allegations of sexual abuse, or even suicidal ideation—they can be

fearful of engaging too deeply and potentially breaking state law. It is a strange system that renders a student's first line of emotional support at school impotent, but does not provide adequate backup support.

### **Standardized Solutions Cannot Meet the Needs of All Schools**

Sometimes well-intentioned legislative efforts to support student well-being result in mandates that might not be a good fit for every school. For example, in its 2018 legislative session, the Utah Legislature adopted board rule 53G-10-406, which was originally designed to curb underage drinking.

Beginning in the 2018-19 school year, LEAs shall offer a school-based, evidence-based alcohol prevention program, that has been qualified by the advisory council, each year, to every student in grades 8 and 10. (Utah State Legislature, 2019b)

This mandate inadvertently became more restrictive when a USBE advisory committee requested that the rule be expanded to include a social-emotional learning requirement for all schools. In an email to Utah districts and charter schools, Scheiss (personal communication, April 4, 2018) explained that, of the 1127 vendors who responded to Utah's RFP for qualified programs, only *Botvin's Life Skills*—a nationally recognized Social Emotional Learning (SEL) program—met all of the search committee's established criteria. As a result, all Utah secondary schools are now required to teach this one specific curriculum. The Utah State Board of Education does not typically require schools to teach specific curricula, so I found this development concerning. I was frustrated by the loss of school and educator autonomy. I wondered if *Botvin's Life Skills* were equipped to meet Emerson's unique needs. This concern led me to a further study of

SEL curricula in general and has, partly, shaped the focus of this study. Ultimately, however, it is this study's participants—Emerson students—who brought the greatest clarity to issues of state-mandated curricula and standardized solutions to addressing student well-being. I share participant insights about Botvin's Life Skills in Chapters 6 and 7.

### **Survey Data Paints an Incomplete Picture of the Crisis**

Close readings of the 2017 and 2019 Prevention Needs Assessment (PNA) student surveys show that questions focus largely on participant demographics, anti-social and substance abuse behaviors, school discipline, and community and family protective factors. Summary reports (Harrison et al., 2018; DSAMH, 2019a) correlate substance abuse and antisocial behaviors with variety of risk and preventive factors such as church attendance, family structure, and school/community involvement. While this information is useful, relatively few questions are asked about a wide range of risks and protective factors unrelated to substance abuse or anti-social behaviors but vital to adolescent well-being—factors such as academic stress, school climate, dating relationships, sexual activity, body image, social media, and gender identity. Two questions regarding gender identity were added to the 2019 PNA survey and a handful of questions now address school climate and social media usage, but despite these additions, there is still a gap that needs to be bridged between PNA survey questions and the lived realities of teens.

### **A Call for Expanded Action**

As encouraging as it is to note the steps that Utah is taking to support student mental health, it is urgent that we evaluate the effectiveness of the programs being implemented and that we continue to explore new avenues of care. Although the Utah Legislature, Utah Board of Education, and other organizations continue to allocate resources for school mental health services, most adolescents who need mental health care still cannot easily access services at school or connect with a professional therapist at the moment when their need is greatest. Some choose not to use professional help even when it *is* available. We must create a stronger, more expansive safety net for our students—one that catches all students and provides robust protections for them on a daily basis. It seems only logical to weave that net using the curricular and human resource network already in place in our schools. Administrators and teachers see their students daily and care deeply about their safety and welfare. Although professional mental health services are a vital part of the solution, the purpose of this study is to explore how schools can create broader safety nets and systems of care within classrooms and school communities.

### **Inviting Adolescents to the Table**

In the sea of data and discussion about adolescent mental health in Utah, student voice is conspicuously missing—this despite studies that underscore the value of including student perspectives in educational research (D. L. Anderson & Graham, 2016; Coombes et al., 2013; Holdsworth & Blanchard, 2006; Shields, 2004).

Few agencies and coalitions working to support adolescent mental health in Utah have explored the adolescent experience ethnographically. Most studies, such as the Prevention Needs Assessment, rely instead on survey data. During the 2017 Utah legislative session, funding was allocated for an ambitious statewide postvention study of suicide, which includes interviews with family member of suicide completers (Utah State Legislation HB 346). But few efforts have been made, as of yet, to meet with and talk to teens about their mental health experiences.

Survey data, while useful for painting broad strokes of a mental health landscape, cannot possibly capture the complexity of the world Utah adolescents negotiate daily. It cannot address the full range of issues unique to the current generation, including the very real and present dangers of the six-plus hours a day that adolescents spend on electronic devices (Jensen, 2015). Screen time can, and often does, lead directly to isolation, anxiety, compromised mental and physical health, and minimal interaction with the natural world (Alter, 2017; Jensen, 2015; Twenge, 2017). Constant access to media exposes teens to global tragedies and personal dramas on a daily basis, yet the Prevention Needs Assessment asks few questions about such issues, and no questions at all about sexuality—an issue of importance to adolescents but prohibited for inclusion in student surveys by Utah law (A. Hood, personal communication, March 3, 2017). The Prevention Needs Assessment only superficially explores school climate and culture as potential risk/protective factors for depression/suicidal ideation, and few if any Utah-based studies exist that examine how school culture and curriculum might be contributing to adolescent mental health struggles. This study opens up that crucial dialogue.

## **Epistemology, Ontology, and Critical Framework**

Most educators, I believe, aspire to do work that is meaningful and makes an impact. I chose to engage in research at Emerson because I have the ability to influence policy and practice there. I also care deeply about the welfare of its students and educators. That being said, my hope is that the findings of this study will make a difference far beyond Emerson's walls.

My long history with Emerson presented both ethical and practical dilemmas—issues of privacy and power, for example. Yet using Emerson as a site of study provided a unique opportunity to examine the impact of one school's policies, culture and curricula on the mental health of its students—at a deeper level than might have been possible in another setting where I had no special understanding of context.

### **Why Critical Qualitative Study?**

For this study, I chose to engage in critical ethnography. In some ways, this was the only choice available to me. My 15 years serving and leading at Emerson, and my deep love and concern for its students and educators, compelled me to conduct a study that might serve the school in some way. But mine was also an ontological choice. Personally, I struggle with relativist tendencies. Ever since my teens, I have felt a near-constant sense of foreboding belief that life has little meaning beyond what we construct. This way of experiencing the world has consistently made individual stories and relationships rich and meaningful to me, but has rendered generalizability difficult. Critical qualitative approaches make better sense to me than quantitative study.

Kincheloe and McLaren (2002) see critical, qualitative research as an attempt to harness postmodern thought for just purposes—to accept its inherent fragmentation and subjective realities, but to fight its nihilistic tendencies. Postmodern traditions sometimes deconstruct experience to the point that neither universal truth nor meaning remain. Critical approaches present a more hopeful epistemology—insisting that we use study findings to act for the common good (Carspecken, 1996; Madison, 2005). Carspecken reminds us that we must, at some level, agree upon what is “good” and “just” if we hope to use research to benefit humanity (p. 220). In my experience, acting on behalf of others gives life meaning and purpose. For me, choosing a critical approach is a kind of shoring up against the void. It allows me to anchor my research to a meaning-making project and pushes me to articulate my deepest convictions.

*Critical ethnographic research* is a means for both exploring “non-quantifiable features of social life” (Carspecken, 1996, p. 3), and exposing the inequities we discover. Conditions of race, class, culture, ability, and gender often render students as “other” and push them to the margins of social experience (Cannella, Perez, & Pasquee, 2015; Giroux, 2012; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002). Individuals are sometimes compliant in their own subjugation—believing the narratives that constrain them (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002; Madison, 2005). In its most ideal sense, public schooling should serve as a great equalizer, upholding the ideals of social justice in order to nurture and empower all students. Yet public school is too often a mere reflection of an unjust society. Critical approaches to research interest me because many of the young people I have worked with at Emerson have experienced life at society’s margins, longing for inclusion in

communities and families that often do not understand or respect their cultural, ethnic, or gender identities. Their pain is bound up in experiences of exclusion and cruelty.

Fine (1995) writes that critical study has the power to “unearth, disrupt, and transform existing institutional arrangements” (p. 211). This is an immense aspiration, but one that I aim to approach with this study. I hope to transform our understanding of what schools can and should do to impact the well-being of students. I know, too well, how the systems that constrain us can cause us to neglect the values that led us to education in the first place—our desire to do good in the world and to enrich the lives of others. We can be swept up in a swirl of accountability and efficiency—exhausted by the system, but still determined to meet its demands. In our rush to ensure that our students are “college and career ready,” we may fail to see that their hearts are breaking. Our students require much more than academic skill and knowledge to build lives worth living.

### **Why Critical Ethnography?**

Ethnography provides a powerful tool for understanding individuals and groups because it requires that we listen to their stories, observe, and engage with them, over time, in meaningful ways. My 15 years of immersive experience at Emerson gives me both a deep understanding of its culture and an abiding respect for its students and educators. In this sense, I have been engaging in ethnographic study at Emerson for as many years as I have served here.

Adopting a critical approach to ethnography allows me to overlay values onto this study that are important to me and central to Emerson’s vision; my colleagues and I



founded the school for the express purpose of creating a space where young people can truly learn, unfettered by the structures and conventions of traditional schooling. We have offered uncommon freedoms and have aspired to treat students with respect and love. We continue to endeavor to be mindful of each child's unique contributions and potentialities. Like the values Emerson is built on, critical ethnography is also concerned with matters of human dignity, relationship, and agency. It acknowledges that individuals and groups have the right to define and interpret their own experience and, in doing so, to shape their own destinies (Carspecken, 1996; Madison, 2005).

Critical ethnography strives to give voice to those who have been silenced and excluded (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002), and to invite the subjects of research to, as Harding (2007) writes, "come to consciousness" for themselves, and "not just as the object of the gaze of others" (p. 46). Many of Emerson's students have experienced marginalization and exclusion in their neighborhood schools or communities. I have no desire to further misrecognize and disempower these youth by representing and distorting their realities using the typical quantitative tools of the academy (which seem to be missing the essence of who these teens are). I hold no illusions that I can adequately define my co-researchers, or comprehensively explain what they need, but in my quest to understand how better to serve them, critical ethnography allows me to rely on their voices and insights as I envision school practices and curricula that might help them to live happier, more fulfilled lives.

### **Blending Narrative and Thematic Analysis**

When I began this study, I intended to share what I learned from my co-

researchers through story. I quickly realized how difficult it would be to distill the experiences and insights of 14 teens within a narrative frame. Ultimately, I chose to analyze and present findings thematically instead. I share my reasoning for this more fully in Chapter 3. Nevertheless, I strive in these pages tell participant stories wherever possible—stories in fragments—in vignettes drawn from the lives of these teens told in their own words. Sometimes I include my own tales from my days spent at Emerson.

Story is a powerful means for understanding and communicating human experience (Ellis, 2004; D. Polkinghorne, 1988; D. E. Polkinghorne, 2010). Witherell and Noddings (1991) write that, “in the quest for life’s meaning and the meaning of individual lives,” storytelling helps both the storyteller and listener “penetrate cultural barriers, discover the power of the self and the integrity of the other, and deepen their understanding of their respective histories and possibilities (pp. 3-4). Ellis writes that narrative is the “sprawling middle ground” between science and art” (p. 28)—although it may occupy a place closer to art than to science. Narrative does not assume that experience can be neatly coded and categorized for analysis. It strives, rather, to explore the perplexing, inscrutable nature of human experience. Ellis observes that narrative ethnography can reveal complexity and nuance that statistical studies only hint at (p. 46).

Narrative is revelatory, but also creative and visionary. As stories unfold, we make connections and gain insights that help us better understand human experience. The tools of narrative ethnography have the power to open a window on adolescent experiences of emotional struggle. Applying a critical lens to narrative allows us to see beyond what is, to what can exist. Narrative, writes Bruner (1986) is a means of

imagining *possible worlds*.

Critical ethnography favors the stories and voices of its participants: it values authenticity and insists on counter-hegemonic relationships between researcher and collaborators. It is a reflexive methodology that requires co-authorship between researcher and participant (Madison, 2005). For these reasons, adolescents are the co-authors of this study. As I constructed the narrative in Chapters 4, 5, and 6, I choose words that reveal the lives and emotions of these teens in genuine ways. By sharing their stories and insights, I hope to inspire policymakers and educators to make wise and just decisions on their behalf. I rely on the power of storytelling to, as H. Bhabha (2003) writes, “create the web of history and change the direction of its flow” (p. 180).

Using the tools of critical ethnography—informed by the stories and insights of my co-researchers—I hope to widen the lens on adolescent depression, anxiety, and suicidality in Utah, and to explore, both critically and compassionately, what educators can do to better respond to this crisis.

### **Positionality**

Madison (2005) reminds us how essential self-awareness and self-disclosure are to critical ethnography. She writes that reflexive thought “forces us to acknowledge our own power, privilege, and biases, just as we are denouncing the power structures that surround our subjects” (Madison, 2005, p. 7). I cannot write credibly about the lives of my co-researchers without first making my own positionality transparent.

I view myself as both “insider” and “outsider” to the culture I am studying. I am

at least four decades older than my co-researchers, which makes me a decided outsider to their world. But I have been immersed in the community and culture in which they currently reside for many years. This “insider” status not only informs my understanding of the site of study, but also introduces significant biases. I have tried to acknowledge these biases when they emerge and remain mindful of them.

I spent my first 8 years of childhood as an insider in a community much like the one in which Emerson is situated. My mother and step-father held positions of prestige and authority in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (hereafter referred to as the LDS church). I felt a conviction, as much as any child can, that “*The Church is true*”—a mantra Latter-day Saint children embrace early and repeat often in “testimony” meetings. I once explained to a third-grade classmate that I belonged to the “only true church.” When she gleefully made the same claim, I called her out for the fraud that she was: “I don’t ever see you on Sunday,” I argued, “You can’t belong to my church!” In this way, I had learned early how to marginalize others.

Before my fifth-grade year, my stepfather took a position at a university in the Pacific Northwest where the counterculture was still flourishing. We moved from the protective bubble of our little community to an unfamiliar place where I had no friends. Despite my many protections of privilege—economic, racial, my father’s academic and ecclesiastical status—I became an outsider. It took me a while to understand that if I wanted to avoid being bullied, I could not carry my “triple combination” (an especially large collection of LDS scripture) to school. The confusion I felt about this transition led to turbulent middle and high school years as I alternated between being a model LDS

daughter and a rebel—trying to establish a comprehensible identity. My stepfather and I often locked horns over my choices and I began to define myself as “other” from him. In spite of my orthodox upbringing, I developed a strong left-leaning sensibility that placed a divide between me and my conservative religion and family.

Apart from my role as third-grade zealot, I was generally an empathetic young person. My sociopolitical leanings may have had more to do with innate tendencies than with my relationship to my stepfather. I have felt a strong sense of social justice for as long as I can remember.

After high school, I dutifully returned to Utah to attend the LDS Church-run Brigham Young University. I also immediately quit attending church. The reasons for my aversion to religious ceremony and ritual were not fully evident to me at the time—although in later life, I can begin to articulate these misgivings more clearly. But this new separation from community launched 4 decades of living as a person on the edges of society. This was not terribly traumatic for me. I still hold a deep respect and affection for the culture and faith that nurtured me. But my children grew up as outsiders within their community. As their mother, I observed the many overt and nuanced ways that their non-LDS status caused them to be excluded and misrecognized.

Both my etic and emic experiences gave me insight and informed my thinking about the responsibility that schools have to promote inclusiveness and connection. Years later, when I collaborated with colleagues to found a new school, I was determined to create an inclusive school, even within a community that sometimes felt less-than-welcoming to outsiders.

In later chapters, I examine additional ways that my positionality influenced this study. In an effort to make Emerson's culture comprehensible, I share stories about my own experiences there. Although it might, at first, seem self-absorbed to include myself in a study of others, as Ellis (2004) writes, "It is self-absorbed to pretend you are somehow outside your study...to mistakenly think that your actions and your relationships need no reflexive thought" (p. 34).

I acknowledge that my power and privilege as Emerson's former chief administrator influence this study significantly. Some of my co-researchers did not know who I was when this study began. Others did, and may have moderated their responses according to their relationships with me and their understanding of my role. Generally, I suspect, my former role led to greater openness and candor on the part of those co-researchers who knew me. At times, however, it evoked more guarded responses. I explore this concern in later chapters.

Throughout this study, I relied upon the power of discourse to crosscheck my own insights against those of my collaborators. I corrected flawed assumptions when I could, and opened myself to possibilities that I had not previously considered. Lincoln and Guba (1985) write: "Transformations occur when ignorance and misapprehensions give way to more informed insights by means of dialectical interactions" (p. 113). With the help of my co-researchers, I created the most honest narrative I could write— knowing that it would always be flawed.

## Research Questions

Madison (2005) suggests the value of identifying a single precise question upon which to focus a study. For this study, my overarching concern began as two related questions.

1. Which cultural and/or curricular practices in Utah high schools might be compromising the emotional and social well-being of students?
2. Which cultural and curricular practices in Utah high schools might have the power to strengthen adolescent mental health?

I was not entirely happy with these questions—they did not capture the complexity of what I hoped to learn and were too wide-ranging and inscrutable for student participants to grapple with on their own. I hoped that by engaging these young people in a series of conversations using a wide range of interview questions, I might help them to articulate *their* understanding of how school life has impacted their mental health. My purpose was to co-create a narrative with these teens, always striving to honor their meanings and capture the complexity of their lives. I could not be sure where their interests would lead, so these questions provided a starting point for the study.

Kincheloe and McLaren (2002) warn against “unexamined assumptions” and “taken for grantedness” (p. 101) inherent in research. Critical ethnographers, they argue, must be “suspicious of any model of interpretation that claims to know the final truth” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002, p. 102). Throughout this study, I tried to acknowledge the subjective nature of ethnographic research and accept that the “meaning of human experience can never be fully disclosed” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002, p.102). For the critical researcher, the act of interviewing requires not just a list of questions, but

curiosity, flexibility, openness and the ability to tailor questions to the needs of the moment, pivoting easily and posing questions out of genuine interest and empathy. At the onset of the study, I created a pool of possible questions from which to draw as our conversations flowed from one idea to another. Questions included:

- Do you feel respected by and cared for by your teachers?
- Have you experienced oppressions or injustices at school?
- Do your teachers know about your life—the challenges you face and the sorrows you experience?
- At school, do you feel isolated? Lonely? Unsafe?
- What can teachers do differently to help you feel safe? Protected? Acknowledged?
- Are there issues of culture, class, gender, disability, and/or power that you wish we could talk about—in class or in other school programs?
- Have you experienced discrimination at school?
- Do you feel like you have any say in what you learn or in how you are taught?
- Are you stressed by academic expectations?
- Do you leave school each day feeling happy? Fulfilled? Lonely? Hopeless?

A more comprehensive list of these initial questions can be found in Appendix A.

I created an entirely different set of questions to ask myself as I tried to reach a more complex, nuanced understanding of how school policies and practices, both at Emerson and state-wide, impact student mental health. Questions I posed included the following.

- In our laser focus on the pathology of suicide, are we failing to consider holistic protective factors that might have a broader impact on adolescent mental health—factors such as school climate, culture, and curriculum?



- As we implement programs such as peer-to-peer intervention and SEL curricula, are we forgetting to strengthen *authentic* relationships in schools—a factor that may be more meaningful and protective?
- In placing a spotlight on suicide prevention, are we missing the silent sufferers who do not manifest mental illness or express a need for help?
- Do we understand that the experiences we provide to our students and our expectations might actually be harming them in some ways?

Such a wide array of questions may feel unwieldy, but critical inquiry values “beginning at a place of uncertainty” and asking exploratory questions (Carspecken, 1996; Hesse-Biber, 2016).

Although I prepared a wide range of questions, as I began talking with my co-researchers, an interesting and unexpected thing happened. I began each initial interview by simply inviting participants to tell me their stories. Why were they in pain? What had they experienced that led them to this place? Without much prompting from me, most of these teens launched into compelling narratives that naturally touched on most of the questions and themes that interested me. I asked some questions along the way, but not always those I had prepared in advance. Most of my questions in these initial interviews emerged organically from my interest and empathy. I would not have learned nearly as much had I constrained interviews to a scripted set of questions.

## **Chapter Summaries**

This document largely follows traditional dissertation format and includes this introductory chapter, a literature review and methods, findings, and discussion chapters. It departs from standard format in two important ways.

1. Study findings are expanded into three chapters. The voices of my co-

researchers—whose stories and insights are central to the study’s purposes—are given as much time and space as can reasonably be provided within the scope of this project. Despite this, too many stories and insights had to be omitted.

2. Discussion typically reserved for the final chapter of a dissertation is offered across two chapters. Chapter 6 offers critique of our current system of schooling and its impact on mental health—both my own and that of my co-researchers. Chapter 7 suggests possible solutions.

Chapter 1 introduces the context and site of study, includes a statement of the problem, relevant statistics, and an overview of Utah’s unique struggle with teen depression, anxiety and suicidality. A fuller summary is available below.

Chapter 2 traces the history of mental health support in schools, beginning with school-based mental health (SBMH) paradigms and extending to more recent Social Emotional Learning (SEL) programs. I offer a critique of some SEL programs, which place emphasis on teaching students skills rather than developing authentic relationships and implementing connective practices to promote inclusion, connection, empowerment and transforming purpose in schools. I examine literature on the importance of school connectedness to student well-being. Finally, I briefly review the origins and foundational principals of several critical pedagogies, as these provide a framework for my analysis in Chapters 6 and 7.

Chapter 3 offers the social and cultural context of the study. It provides a brief demographic and narrative profile of study participants and an overview of the study’s data collection, coding, analysis, and reflection processes. It illustrates ways in which I sought to support students throughout the study. Finally, it addresses ethical concerns and potential threats to validity.

Chapter 4 draws from participant narratives to reveal not only what these fourteen

young people understand about the origins of their anxiety, depression, and suicidality, but also what they see as the primary drivers of their ongoing struggles. I synthesize the narratives that emerged from various versions of the question: “Will you share your story with me?” Rather than condensing and retelling each story in a cohesive way that would fully honor its complexity—far preferable if space and time allowed—I instead examine common threads that weave through many of the narratives and arrange them thematically.

Chapter 5 explores some of the challenges my co-researchers have faced as a result of mental illness—the various physiological and psychological demons they have encountered; the complicated therapeutic and personal relationships they have navigated; and the medical interventions that have sometimes saved their physical lives, but have not always healed their emotional existence. I weave together pieces of their narratives to illustrate just how difficult some of these experiences have been and how often they have wreaked havoc on participants’ academic lives.

Chapter 6 offers both findings and discussion. It communicates my co-researchers’ explicit suggestions about what educational policymakers and leaders can do to better safeguard student mental health. Some of the excerpts I share are direct responses to various forms of the question I posed: “What can schools do to be safer, more inclusive places that nurture and protect students’ social and emotional well-being?” Because these teens often found it difficult to engage in critique, some of the observations and conclusions I have drawn in this chapter are my own, extrapolated from their narratives as I searched for patterns.

Chapter 7 explores study implications for educational policy and practice and extends a call for action.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I provided an overview of this study's intent and purposes. I shared the context in which the research questions have emerged—and explored how my own positionality has both evoked these questions and shaped my method of study. I provided data to illustrate the severity of the adolescent mental health crisis in Utah and outline many of the ways in which Utah policymakers, educators, and mental health professionals are responding to this crisis. Finally, I provided an overview of the structure of this document, explaining why I chose to devote over half of its pages to stories and insights my co-researchers shared.

Using a critical approach to research, this narrative ethnographic study brings the voices of its research subjects to the foreground—considering their interests, needs, and aspirations. Its purpose is to better understand what Utah schools can do to support teens, drawing from the experiences and perspectives of fourteen Utah teenagers who attend one Utah high school. My hope is that this representation of adolescent lives will serve as one more tool for Utah educators and policymakers to use as they envision new ways to protect the well-being of students.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

#### Introduction

In Chapter 1, I described Utah’s current mental health landscape and examined how depression, anxiety, and suicidality are impacting the young people in our schools. I touched on the many supports that Utah legislators, educators, medical providers, public health professionals, and others are feverishly implementing in an effort to protect Utah’s children and adolescents. I suggested that, while each of these efforts is crucial and commendable, we might be overlooking important sociocultural conditions contributing to the stresses plaguing the lives of our children. We might also be failing to recognize some of the more nuanced, holistic ways that we could foster more nurturing and protective school environments for our students. I provided context for my interest in this study and shared my positionality as an educator who has worked with adolescents for two decades and recognizes their increasing mental health needs. I proposed that a critical, ethnographic study of Emerson’s unique population and culture—and conversations with students who are at the center of the storm—may provide important insights into Utah’s continuing crisis and suggest ways that schools can provide greater support for these young people.

Chapter 2 provides an historical and theoretical context for this study and examines, broadly, several bodies of literature that inform its purposes.

## **Structure of the Chapter**

As it is an unconventional choice to offer such a broad review of literature, I provide the following concise overview to organize the themes and purposes of this chapter and to make navigating its pages more manageable.

### **History of Mental Health Services in Schools**

First, I trace the history of mental health services in U.S. schools. Therapeutic models of care in schools often rely upon a presumption of deficiency—students are diagnosed then treated. Preventative care, often in the form of instructional intervention, is generally reserved for specialized classes such as health. I consider how sociocultural events and theories of the past have influenced current mental health practice in schools. This network of influences is too vast and complex to examine comprehensively in these pages, but it is important to have at least a casual understanding of how trends in education, public health, medicine, and the cognitive and behavioral sciences have influenced how we currently address child and adolescent mental health in schools.

### **Emergence of Social Emotional Learning**

Finally, I consider how both medical/therapeutic and behavioral/developmental models of care have influenced the development of Social Emotional Learning (SEL). I choose to focus on SEL because of its current influence on national educational policy and its increasingly strong presence in state, district, and school-level standards and curricula (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2019; Hanover Research, 2019; Weissberg et al., 2015). SEL curricula is now mandated for use

in Utah secondary schools and is sometimes marketed as a “fix” for child and adolescent anxiety, depression, and suicidality. Although most SEL programs are not designed to address serious mental health issues, the discipline’s foundational studies claim that student mental health is one of its most important outcomes. I examine this claim through a critical lens. I draw from a small body of literature that questions one of the field’s primary assumptions—that explicitly teaching the “skills” of social and emotional competence protects and enhances student mental and emotional well-being. Because states and school districts increasingly turn to commercial SEL curricula, believing these programs will improve student well-being, it is important to examine the validity of this belief and to determine if SEL-branded curricula offers the most productive use of a school’s limited resources and time.

### **Critical Pedagogical Approaches**

Finally, I briefly review the literature of critical theory and the pedagogy that has emerged from this tradition. Themes woven through critical pedagogy—safety, inclusion, recognition, respect, connection, empowerment, critical consciousness, and transforming purpose—provide powerful conceptual tools for envisioning more holistic, authentic ways for schools to protect vulnerable youth.

### **A Brief Disclaimer**

Critical studies, by their very nature, can seem dismissive of conventional wisdom and practices. That is not my intent with this study. Before proceeding, I would like to clearly acknowledge my belief that Utah schools need significantly more funding to place

medical and mental health professionals in our schools. The support of qualified individuals can be life-saving for students. I also recognize how critically important it is for educators to be informed by medical and cognitive sciences as we try to understand how best to serve students. I question, however, our over-reliance on crisis management and therapeutic intervention as the primary support systems for student mental health in schools. I suggest that we must cast a wider net of support—one that requires involvement from the entire school community and relies upon theory and research beyond what the medical and behavioral sciences have to offer.

### **Contextual and Theoretical Orientation**

Providing a framework for understanding the current milieu surrounding adolescent mental health in schools is a daunting task. My initial search of “adolescent mental health” and “schools” pulled up over 123,000 articles, spanning the disciplines of psychology, medicine, prevention science, human development, cultural studies, school climate, inclusion, youth development, and social emotional learning—although this is hardly an exhaustive accounting. Clearly, a comprehensive framing of adolescent mental health in schools would be too ambitious an undertaking for the scope of one study. As I searched for clarifying and unifying themes, three divergent streams of study emerged—endlessly branching, at times converging, yet distinct from each other

One stream traces the history of public health and therapeutic interventions in schools and centers on themes of diagnosis, treatment, and school-based mental health interventions (Apple, 2017; Cha et al., 2018; Cohen, 1983; Mathur et al., 2017;



Richardson, 1987; Stephan et al., 2010; Weist & Christodulu, 2000). A second stream follows a psychosocial trajectory, tracing theories of human development and cognitive and behavioral sciences (Daly et al., 2014; Durlak & Wells, 1997; Hankin et al., 2015).

Each of these disciplines feeds into the cultural milieu influencing current mental health practice in schools. Each has also influenced the development of SEL, a model that has become one of the most theorized and studied trends in education over the past few decades (Darling-Hammond, 2018; Durlak et al., 2011; Greenberg et al., 2003; Guerin, 2014; Weissberg et al., 2015).

Figure 2.1 provides a graphic representation of how fluidly and complexly these several disciplines intersect, branch, and converge.

### **Figure 2.1**

*Disciplines Influencing School Mental Health Practice.*



Imagine that the two largest streams eventually flow into a large body of water beneath the illustration. This is the sea of information and experience that informs our current conception of what mental health practice in schools should be. The analogy is

vastly oversimplified, but provides context for this broad literature review. The smaller rills—critical pedagogies—seem to have less influence on mental health practices in schools. This is the subject of later chapters of this document.

In summarizing three extensive bodies of literature, I necessarily strip each of richness and complexity. In exchange, I offer some insight into how we arrived at this moment in time and find ourselves in a cultural milieu where professionals across multiple disciplines—medicine, psychology, sociology, public health, education—are intent on solving Utah’s mental health puzzle and protecting the children in our care. Yet no one is entirely certain how best to achieve that goal.

### **Medical and Public Health Influences in Public Schooling**

The following section provides a brief overview of the history of mental health care practices in U.S. schools. Historical context is essential for understanding the social and cultural forces that have shaped both our current attitudes about both the role schools should play in nurturing student well-being and the methods we choose to provide that care. Cultural reproduction plays an irrefutable role in influencing Utah’s current emphasis on crisis intervention, therapeutic care, and social-emotional learning.

### **Contributions of Psychology**

The complex relationship between public schooling and mental health care in our nation can be traced, in part, to the contributions of psychologist and educator, Stanley Hall. Hall authored the seminal work, *The Contents of Children’s Minds on Entering School* (Hall, 1891), and established the first experimental psychology lab at Johns

Hopkins to research and advocate for the study of children. Hall's educational reform efforts had widespread influence and long-term consequences. Many of his students, including Stanford professor, Lewis Terman, became leaders in educational psychology. By the early 1900s, the scientific study of the school's role in child development was legitimized.

French psychologist, Alfred Binet, who had been heavily influenced by Hall, developed a standardized test for measuring levels of intelligence and diagnosing mental deficiencies.<sup>1</sup> The *Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale* was soon being used alongside other standardized measures to track, classify, and ultimately prescribe treatment for an increasingly diverse population of public-school children. Our nation's obsession with normalization and the practices of testing, diagnosing and treating students in schools had begun (Becker, 2003).

### **Emergence of Psychosocial Practices**

At this same moment in time, the emerging sciences of psychophysics and psychobiology arose, stressing "mind-body" relationships and the importance of social stimuli in the process of habit formation (T. Richardson, 1987). The influence of these fields, and the contributions of Jung, Freud, and Adler to psychotherapy, set personality at the center of the study of mental disorders for the first time (Cohen, 1983). This new

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<sup>1</sup> A careful scientist, Binet acknowledged the complex and malleable nature of human intelligence and insisted the results of his test were not generalizable; he cautioned against the test's decontextualized use and advised that it be used as a single measure among more qualitative approaches to understanding individual intelligence (Becker, 2003; Siegler, 1992, pp. 179-190). Terman, however, adapted Binet's test, which had been carried to the U.S. and translated by eugenics proponent H. H. Godard.

emphasis on mind-body connection—compatible both with Dewey’s views on the importance of school environments and the behavioral theories of Watson and Skinner—led to a proliferation of experimental schools that sought to address both the intellectual and social/emotional development of children (Reese, 1996).

Progressive experiments in education led to innovative pedagogical reforms, such as those implemented in Dewey’s lab schools. But administrative and policy reforms in education were also brewing and eventually cemented more rigid structures of schooling. Most of the familiar conventions of schooling—standardized curriculum and testing, student tracking, central control of schools, and requirements for the professional diagnosis and treatment of disorders (primarily through special education programs)—were developed during this era of social efficiency. They have endured to the present day (Cohen, 1983; Labaree, 2005; T. Richardson, 1987).

### **Contributions of the Mental Hygiene Movement**

With the dawn of the progressive movement in education, reformers struggled with challenges of urbanization, immigration, and an enormous influx of students to public schooling. The National Committee for Mental Hygiene (NCMH)—established in 1909 by progressive physicians, social workers, psychiatrists, and academics—sought to manage these challenges (Levine & Levine, 1992, as cited in Flaherty & Osher, 2003). The NCMH posited that mental illness could be prevented by intervening in the development of children (Cohen, 1983; Flaherty & Osher, 2003). They stressed the malleability of personality and charged schools with identifying and treating “deficiencies,” thereby preventing mental illness and mitigating social ills (Cohen, 1983;

T. Richardson, 1987). In her cogent analysis of the mental hygiene movement and its reverberations, T. Richardson outlines its primary tenets:

Personality maladjustments are the cause of individual mental disorder and social problems of all sorts; childhood is the critical period in the development of personality; children are extremely vulnerable to personality disorders; the school is the strategic agency to prevent, or detect and “adjust” problems in children’s personality development; and finally, the personality development of children must take priority over any other educational objective. (p. 124)

Richardson posits that, in a nation enamored with its newfound faith in science and its emerging interest in sociology and psychology, the new science of mental hygiene was used to identify the pathologies of “mental deficiency, mental diseases and deviant conduct” (p. 279), and thus prevent and eventually eliminate social disorders.<sup>2</sup>

This new emphasis on early detection and prevention of problematic behaviors and intellectual “deficiencies” led to the proliferation of screenings at schools (such as the Stanford-Binet scale) and introduction of visiting experts to facilitate the treatment of maladapted children within schools. This was the institutional genesis of today’s special education programs (J. G. Richardson & Parker, 1993; T. Richardson, 1987).

T. Richardson (1987) charges the mental hygiene movement and its “medicalization of human differences” (p. 5) with shaping a system of education in the U.S. that remains largely resistant to reform—despite over a century of dramatic social

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<sup>2</sup> Cohen (1983) asserts that the appeal of the mental hygiene movement lay partly in its premise that society would not have to bear the burden of social reform if individuals could be adapted to thrive in society as it presently existed. He writes that members of the NCMH saw the public school system as a “fertile and untouched field” for their work (p. 127). They believed that with careful attention and application of particular instructional strategies and policies—such as “attention to the child’s personality development as opposed to intellectual development—a child’s personality could be fundamentally altered and societal improvement would come from within.” (pp. 130-131) Cohen recounts the words of a prominent hygienist of the time: “We need not accept even human personality as we find it. Personality may be consciously improved and better adapted to social needs.... This is social progress.” (Cohen, 1983, p. 141).

change. She also asserts that the categorization of children based on their psychological and biological differences is still being used to justify our failure to provide marginalized students equal access and political power in our schools.

The mental hygiene movement continues to influence and constrain our conceptions of what mental health care should look like in schools. When educators and policymakers develop mental health support programs for schools, they generally think in the medicalized terminology of diagnosis, treatment, and prevention. Interventions are generally delivered by mental health professionals or taught using specialized curricula. Programs are designed to address cognitive, behavioral, or social-emotional “deficiencies” students bring with them to the school doors.

### **Introduction of School-Based Mental Health Clinics**

This therapeutic conception of mental health treatment in schools grew stronger with the introduction of medical clinics to schools. A small number of psychiatrists served schools in advisory capacities in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but initially the mental health needs of students were largely addressed by academic professionals and nurses (R. D. Apple, 2017). In 1902, the first school nurse, Lina Rogers, began serving New York City schools. By 1914, over 400 nurses worked in the city, providing hearing and dental screenings, on-site treatment and home visits, and often working in conjunction with various charitable organizations to provide food and clothing to families living in poverty and squalor. This experiment was deemed so successful that school districts nationwide sought to replicate Roger’s program. By the 1920s, school-based clinics, staffed with

nurses, dentists, and advising physicians, were common. Student mental health was considered the purview of these clinics. But when the world went to war from 1941 to 1945, nurses engaged in the war effort, leaving health care aides to replace them in schools. Post war, many of the women who'd served in the war chose to stay at home and raise children, thus creating a nursing shortage. For several decades, the school nursing tradition waned.

But with a post-war interest in social programs and a federally-announced *War on Poverty*, the first school-based health clinic (SBHC) was established in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1967, commissioned by a local pediatrician and run by a nurse practitioner (Brodeur, 2000). In 1978, the New York legislature began to fund school-based mental health clinics statewide (Brodeur, 2000). Subsequently, clinic numbers in the US grew through the late 1980s and into the 1990s before they began to level off (Weist & Christodulu, 2000).

### **Role and Efficacy of Health Clinics on School Campuses**

Despite increasing support for school-based mental health clinics and community/school alliances in the 1980s, school-based mental health resources remained scarce (Flaherty & Osher, 2003; Weist, 2005, 2015; Weist & Christodulu, 2000). Alarmed by increasing rates of substance abuse and violence among the nation's youth, in 1992 Congress established The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) to support mental health research and make it more readily available to the public. SAMSHA evolved to take the lead in promoting a more comprehensive national

agenda, including the oversight of state mental health education and prevention efforts. By 2001, over 1400 school health centers served the needs of students on school campuses (Society for Adolescent Medicine, 2001). Most of these clinics were partially funded through state and federal dollars but were often subsidized by hospitals, medical centers and private foundations. They provided a wide range of services, including preventive care, exams, lab tests, acute care, mental health, and even reproductive care (Weist & Christodulu, 2000). Approximately sixty-nine percent of these clinics offered mental health screenings and follow-up care (Society for Adolescent Medicine, 2001).

Over the past two-and-a-half decades, SAMSHA has promoted a “system of care” model of mental-health based on the philosophy that mental health services need to be “family-driven, youth guided, community-based, coordinated, and culturally and linguistically competent” (Thomas, 2017). This integrated approach to student care, with its focus on community input and involvement, led to increased financial support for mental health in schools. The Children’s Health Initiative, a SAMSHA competitive grant launched in 2002, has awarded over 1.6 billion dollars to support states and communities in developing coordinated mental health services through the collaborative efforts of schools, community practitioners, and governmental agencies. This funding and the community/school partnerships it generated has dramatically shaped the structure of and expectations for student mental health care in schools.

Some of the community/school collaborations that emerged from these initiatives have generated innovative and effective mental health support for children and adolescents. But programs are just as often burdened with challenges. Community health



organizations that serve schools are often understaffed, overextended, and cannot offer comprehensive care. Many of the referrals they receive are for children and youth with “maladaptive” behaviors that schools are not equipped to handle, or for students served by Individual Education Plans (Hargrave, 2015; Hoagwood et al., 2007). Children and adolescents with mental health needs who are well-behaved and academically competent are less often referred for help (Hoagwood et al., 2007; Reinke et al., 2011). In Chapter 1, I addressed other limitations of these school/community mental health alliances.

### **Holistic Approaches to Student Mental Health Care**

By the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there was an almost universal advocacy for school-based mental health systems of care and an emerging research base for their efficacy (Weist et al., 2003). But many felt that these supports were inadequate for meeting the growing mental health needs of children and adolescents (Rowling & Weist, 2004). In 2003, the nation renewed its efforts to find a solution to the adolescent mental health crisis and funded the President’s New Freedom Commission Report on Mental Health—a collaborative effort of scholars, public health officials, physicians, psychologists, and mental health professionals (Carter Center, 2003). The study reported a lack of centralized responsibility for adolescent mental health care in the U.S. and called out the disjointed nature of mental health programs in schools—which were generally overseen by multiple agencies such as child welfare, juvenile justice, and special education. Because schools are one place where all adolescents are served, the study’s authors called for schools to take a larger role in mental health care education and support of students:

Every day more than 52 million students attend over 114,000 schools in the U.S. When combined with the six million adults working at those schools, almost one-fifth of the population passes through the Nation's schools on any given weekday (122). Clearly, strong school mental health programs can attend to the health and behavioral concerns of students, reduce unnecessary pain and suffering, and help ensure academic achievement. (Carter Center, 2003, p. 58)

A 2004 Annenberg public policy survey found that mental health professionals working in schools saw teen depression and substance abuse as their most pressing concerns. Sixty-six percent indicated that their school had no clear way of identifying students suffering with mental health issues (McCarthy et al., 2008). Medical and public health researchers studying school-based mental health cautioned that mental health professionals could not adequately meet needs of adolescents on their own and called for paraprofessionals and nonprofessional school staff to provide additional support, stating that these individuals have been shown to “have powerful outcomes over the short-term and long-term for participating youth” (Weist & Christodulu, 2000, p. 196).

Academics and mental health professionals continued to cite the failures of SBMH and called for new systems of coordinated care with the school as the primary coordinator (Swain-Bradway et al., 2015; Weist, Kutcher, & Wei, 2015). Weist and Christodulu (2000), suggest that properly trained teachers—who often spend more than 1,000 hours with students each year—have a more direct impact on student mental health than school mental health professionals, who may see students only a few hours a year.

### **20<sup>th</sup> Century Developmental of Sociocultural Models of Care**

The President's New Freedom Commission (Carter Center, 2003) and the Annenberg report left the impression that the call for schools to implement more holistic,

integrated models of care—with educators as the primary providers—was somehow radical and new. But in fact, schools had been involved in promoting student well-being holistically throughout much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. More than a century earlier, progressive educators, psychologists and public health professionals had recognized the inability of an increasingly institutional, standardized educational system to adequately meet the social and affective needs of students. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—in an era that prized scientific rationalism and eschewed emotion and sentimentality—both Dewey and Jung had explored the relationship of affect in human development, postulating that biological, psychological and cultural phenomenon work synchronously in human development (Dunlap, 2012). While Dewey and Jung largely resisted the Lockean bias of the day that privileged sensing and reason over emotion (Dunlap, 2012), Dunlap suggests that their ideas about the psychosocial nature of human development did not gain as much traction or become as fully developed as they might have been in a more liberalized environment. He writes:

Like all men and women of any age, both Dewey and Jung were influenced by current attitudes toward the identity of the social scientist including the contemporary attitude that the scientist needed to minimize the impact of their subjectivity on scientific inquiry. While both thinkers challenged much of the positivist paradigm, they could not anticipate the extent to which their cultural milieu crept in by means of their restricted understanding of the psychocultural function of human emotion. This restriction limited their ability to extend their intuition about the developmental continuity between biological and psychocultural experience. (p. 59)

Nevertheless, the zeitgeist that inspired progressive experiments in education in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century led to an increasing recognition of the role that affect plays in human development. Efforts to address both the intellectual and emotional life of

children began to emerge from multiple disciplines. For example, in 1907, philosopher and spiritualist Rudolph Steiner wrote the treatise *The Education of the Child in the Light of Anthroposophy*, calling for the education of “feelings” and of the “will” (Steiner, 1927/1981). His ideas ultimately led to the founding of a worldwide network of Waldorf schools that aim to cultivate each child’s innate gifts and sensibilities. In 1907, Italian physician Maria Montessori opened *Casa dei Bambini* (The Children’s House) in Rome, offering a child-centered approach to education and stressing the importance of rich learning environments and an adult-to-child relationship of profound respect (Montessori, 1917/2016). Emerging theories of psychosocial and cognitive development acknowledged the crucial role of emotions, environments, and social interactions in child development (see Erickson’s Psychosocial Development Theory, Piaget’s Cognitive Development Theory, Lewin’s Field Theory, and Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory). Successive generations of educational theorists and philosophers have grown increasingly aware of the emotional components of cognitive and social development, leading to contemporary social learning theories such as Bandura’s *self-efficacy theory* (Zimmerman et al., 1992) and Ryan and Deci’s (2000) *self-determination theory* and to the emergence of concepts such as *emotional intelligence*, a term popularized in Goleman’s 1996 book of that name (this concept was initially developed by Salovey & Meyer, who theorized emotional intelligence in behavioral terms as “the ability to monitor one’s own and others’ feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use this information to guide one’s thinking and actions” (as cited in Stearns, 2017, p. 17).

More recently, developments in neuroscience show how closely linked social and emotional development are to cognition (Benningfield et al., 2015) leading to new psychobiological theories of human development, which recognize that the complex neural networks of the brain are malleable and heavily influenced by the inputs of emotion and temperament (Blair & Raver, 2015; Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007; Immordino-Yang, Darling-Hammond, & Krone, 2019).

### **Positive Youth Development Models of Care**

During the tumultuous decades of the sixties and seventies, the nation's increasingly diverse, crowded and underfunded schools introduced new challenges (Kozol, 1989/2016; McLaren, 1994). School violence, HIV/AIDs, substance abuse, and teen pregnancy were on the rise and the influx of more ethnically and culturally diverse populations meant that schools faced increasingly complex needs and requirements—often with fewer resources. Public schools grew from small community schools with an average size of 40 in the 1900s (Greenberg et al., 2003) into behemoths with more than 2000 students in a single high school building. Educators, academicians, and policy-makers sought to meet the challenges presented in these institutions. Work on many fronts and across disciplines led to the implementation of a broad range of initiatives in the nation's schools, all designed to prevent substance abuse, curtail problem behaviors, and promote student social and emotional well-being. But efforts were haphazard and fragmented without a clear research base or an understanding of how to effectively integrate programs into the culture of schools (Elias et al., 2003; Greenberg et al., 2003).

During the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a new science of *adolescent*

*psychology* emerged, founded on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory—a study of human development within the context of a widening web of human relationships. This model prompted a perceptual shift in attitudes toward teens—a crucial shift away from a deficit model of youth development would lead to the creation of a new, more prosocial model emphasizing a continuum of human development and recognizing the strengths and resiliencies of youth (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Lerner, 2005). By the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, increasing evidence from the cognitive and neurobiological sciences showed that adolescent development was much more complex and context-dependent than earlier theories had shown (Gottlieb, 2007), which led to an explosion in studies of individual differences and the conditions of culture, history, environment, and relationship that impact the social and cognitive development of adolescents.

In a 2005 paper prepared for The National Research Council and the National Institute of Medicine, Dr. Richard Lerner of Tufts University traced the emergence of a Positive Youth Development conception of adolescent psychology. Citing the work of Freud and the writings of Hall (1916), Lerner (2005) notes that for nearly 85 years adolescence had been seen as a time of “storm and stress” (Hall’s characterization)—a time when “biologically reductionist models of genetic or maturational determination characterized adolescents as ‘broken,’ ‘dangerous or endangered’ and as ‘problems to be solved.’” (p. 3) Lerner attributes the origins of this deficit model of adolescent development to Hall, whose seminal two-volume work on adolescence—*Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relation to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion, and Education* (1916)—marked the adolescent epoch as a time when

individuals struggle to overcome “beast-like impulses.” Lerner notes that, for the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, much of the study on adolescent development—including the work of Anna Freud and Erik Erickson—had been subtly influenced by this bias, but that by the 1960s, research began to unveil a more complex, multi-dimensional adolescent nature as scientists explored more “molecular” theories of adolescent development. He cites work on egocentrism by Elkind (1967), formal operations by Piaget (1972), moral development by Kohlberg et al. (1983), and other seminal studies that acknowledged the crucial importance of relationship and historical context in adolescent development and led to the development of a more pro-social theoretical framework for the study of adolescent life. Lerner (2005) credits this shift, in part, to a newfound collaborative synergy between disciplines—a move away from a Cartesian notion of the split between nature and nurture (biology/psychology) and toward a study of human development that integrates multiple systems—biology, psychology, physiology, culture, sociology, education, history—into a complex, interrelated whole (pp. 14-16).

### **Entrenched Nature of Deficit Thinking**

Positive Youth Development gained traction as a theory and has been in widespread use over the past few decades, primarily as the research base for after-school and community programs. Still, the reverberations of an entrenched deficit model of adolescent development have remained strong. Over the past few decades, the behavioral and prevention sciences have continued to influence school policy and practice, leading to the proliferation of programs that promise to dissuade youth from engaging in substance abuse and other risky behaviors, or pledging to shore up attributes such as

“emotional intelligence,” “resiliency,” and “grit” (Higgins & O’Sullivan, 2015; Hodder et al., 2017; Love, 2019; Nabors et al., 2000).

Lerner (2011) noted:

Literally hundreds of millions of federal tax dollars continue to be spent each year to reduce or prevent the problems “caused” by the alleged deficits of adolescents. These problems include alcohol use and abuse; unsafe sex and teenage pregnancy; school failure and drop out; crime and delinquency; and depression and self-harming behaviors (p. 152).

Both medical and developmental approaches to adolescent mental health care continue to be subtly—or not so subtly—influenced by the perception that youth struggle under conditions of “storm and stress” and are prone to destructive behaviors and animalistic urges.

## **Emergence of Social Emotional Learning**

### **Origins of CASEL and SEL**

By the early 1990s, professionals in multiple professions—psychology, education, child development, and social work, among others—recognized a need for a more coordinated approach to developing and studying the efficacy of social and emotional support programs in schools (Brackett et al., 2015; Elias et al., 1997). In 1994, the Fetzer Institute hosted a group of researchers, child advocates and educators who were already immersed in the problem of how best to address the social and emotional needs of children and adolescents in schools. They met and engaged collaboratively. CASEL was organized with the mission to promote “healthy development and success of children so that they can grow to their fullest potential—socially, emotionally, academically, and



eventually, professionally” (Brackett et al., 2015, p. 21). The term *Social Emotional Learning* (SEL) as a unifying construct emerged at this organization’s first gathering (CASEL, 2019; Elias et al., 1997; Greenberg et al., 2003). CASEL sought to advance the national conversation about the importance of social and emotional learning and to act as a clearinghouse dedicated to the development and evaluation of SEL programs (Elias et al., 1997; Weissberg, et al., 2015).

### **Rapid Growth of Social Emotional Learning**

In the 25 years since the emergence of CASEL and the SEL model, schools, public health agencies and community organizations have seen a burgeoning in the development of SEL-branded programs. To date, SEL programs have been implemented in thousands of schools nationwide and in multiple countries (CASEL, 2019; Darling-Hammond, 2018; Greenberg et al., 2017; Hanover Research, 2019; SEL Worldwide, n.d.; Weissberg et al., 2015). State and national policy is heavily influenced by SEL advocacy. By 2015, all 50 states had developed stand-alone SEL standards for preschool programs and many had integrated components of SEL into their subject-level learning standards. At least one state, Illinois, had adopted a full K-12 framework of SEL programming (CASEL, 2019; Dusenbury et al., 2015). Well over 500 studies to date have been conducted to measure the efficacy of preschool through post-secondary SEL programs (Weissberg et al., 2015).

Over the past two decades, many of the studies that address the role of schools in fostering the social and emotional well-being of children and adolescents have defaulted to the use of SEL language and assumptions. Theoretical constructs originally developed

in the traditions of social learning, child development, psychobiology, prevention science, neuroscience, and positive youth development, increasingly reference the literature of SEL or find themselves subsumed under the umbrella of SEL. The language of SEL has become tightly woven into educational jargon and school practice. More germane to this study, commercial SEL curricula are beginning to be marketed as a response to the nation's mental health crisis (e.g., Bernstein, 2019; Greenberg et al., 2017; Mazza, Dexter-Mazza, Miller, Rathus, & Murphy, 2016).

Utah wholeheartedly jumped on the SEL bandwagon in 2019, when the Utah Board of Education's research arm—Utah Leading Through Effective, Actionable, and Dynamic (ULEAD) Education—recommended that all Utah school districts should implement at least one SEL curricula districtwide (Hanover Research, 2019). This same year, the Utah State Board of Education mandated that all Utah middle and high schools must teach *Botvin's Life Skills*—a commercial SEL curricula.

Because we are so swiftly and uncritically embracing language and assumptions of SEL, it is urgent that we examine SEL premises and programs critically to be certain that we are allocating our resources appropriately and providing our youth with the most effective emotional and mental health protections. The following pages provide a brief introduction to SEL (as conceptual model and commercial brand) and explore its origins in medical, behavioral, and psychosocial conceptions of student mental health care. I critique both the premises and research base of SEL theory and suggest that some commercial SEL curricula may not be addressing vital needs of students. I also examine ways in which some SEL programs might actually undermine student well-being.

## **Social Emotional Learning Conceptual Model**

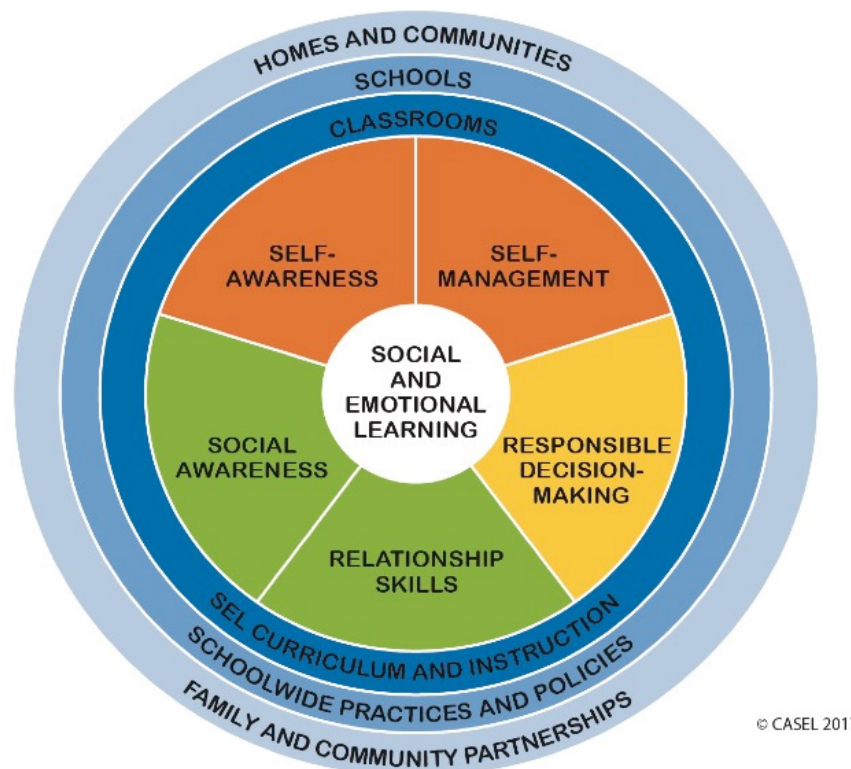
Ostensibly, CASEL embraces a broad range of approaches to social emotional learning. The organization has never insisted upon the use of any one foundational theory (Brackett et al., 2015; CASEL, 2019). Instead, CASEL serves as an advisory and research organization to assemble and assess the vast body of literature that addresses social and emotional aspects of human development (Weissberg et al., 2015). No one theory is “ascendant” in the SEL model (Brackett et al., 2015). Programs vary widely, drawing from the disciplines of prevention science, child development, psychology, social and cognitive science, neuroscience and public health, among others (Weissberg et al., 2015). Strategies and implementation vary dramatically from program to program (Brackett et al., 2015; CASEL, 2019; Weissberg et al., 2015). However, SEL’s conceptual model and research base heavily influence the nature of the programs that emerge from the field, resulting in curricula that are often premised on a deficit view of students and employ a behavioral approach to instruction.

CASEL developed the following conceptual model (Figure 2.2) to illustrate the components of social-emotional learning the organization deems most important.

The SEL conceptual model is built on the conviction that successful, well-adjusted individuals develop five social, emotional and cognitive competencies—self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Social and emotional programs of learning are situated at the center of these competencies and the entire system is bound by the protective shell of three

**Figure 2.2**

*CASEL Model for Social Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2019)*



concentric circles of support—SEL Curriculum, and Instruction; Schoolwide Practices and Policies; and Family and Community Partnerships (CASEL, 2019; Weissberg et al., 2015). CASEL acknowledges the interrelated, intersectional nature of the SEL model’s component parts (CASEL, 2019), but seems to place particular emphasis on that first concentric circle—SEL Curriculum and Instruction. The taken-for-granted assumption of CASEL seems to be that the adoption of qualified SEL curricula and the use of appropriate SEL measurement tools, are essential to student social-emotional skill development and to fostering protective learning environments (Brackett et al., 2015; Durlak et al., 2015; Jagers et al., 2015; Redding & Walberg, 2015).

## **Social Emotional Learning as Mental Health Protection**

The goals of SEL are wide-ranging—articulated by Brackett et al. (2015) as “the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions” (p. 20). Note that Brackett does not include verbiage to suggest that the end goal of SEL is promote the “mental health” or “emotional and social well-being” of students. And yet SEL programs are increasingly offered as a solution to the nation’s mental health crisis (e.g., Durlak et al., 2011; Greenberg et al., 2017; Mazza et al., 2016).

In 2015, CASEL gathered a collection of theoretical and research articles on the efficacy of SEL into the *Handbook of Social Emotional Learning: Research and Practice* (Durlak, Domitrovich, Weissberg, & Gullotta, 2015), a tome that includes 37 articles written by professionals in the fields of education, neuroscience, economics, medicine, psychology, psychiatry, and child development. Many of these articles reference, as foundational, a few key studies and meta-analyses that support the efficacy of SEL as a construct. This collection of essays is an interesting mix of scientific study and promotion of the SEL model. Most authors point to correlations between SEL programming and outcomes such as improved conduct, academic gains, positive attitudes toward tasks, and other social and emotional skills. But ultimately, few of these articles make clear which components of the SEL model show the greatest potential for supporting student well-being, or even suggest that these programs have any long-term impact on mental health. Where articles do suggest that SEL promotes and protects mental health, the link appears

to be largely theoretical.

Although SEL programs are built on a broad base of theoretical foundations and practices, they are heavily influenced by the language of the behavioral sciences. Themes of self-regulation and behavior management surface in many empirical SEL studies (see, for example, Bartholdsson et al., 2014; Corcoran et al., 2018; Hoffman, 2009). To understand why, it is useful to note that the movement's key figures—Elias, Durlak, Weissberg, and other SEL luminaries—are grounded in the disciplines of prevention science and psychology. My assumption is that they naturally use the vernacular of their professions, which in turn influences the language and perspectives of the SEL field. This is apparent in foundational studies of social emotional learning (conducted several years before the acronym SEL was in common use). Early in the history of CASEL, Joseph Durlak, professor emeritus of psychology at Loyola and editor of the *Handbook of Social and Emotional Learning* (Blair & Raver, 2015), together with his colleague Anne Wells, conducted a meta-analysis they titled *Primary Prevention Mental Health Programs for Children and Adolescents: A Meta-Analytic Review* (Durlak & Wells, 1997).” Curiously, although *mental health* is featured in the title, no mention is made of mental health outcomes in the ensuing abstract. Instead the authors note that most of the 177 “primary prevention” and “intervention” programs under review reduce childhood “problems” and improve “competencies” (Durlak & Wells, 1997, p. 115). Their language of deficiency echoes that of the mental hygiene movement. The majority of the studies under review measured externalizing behaviors such as “acting out” and “oppositonality.” Only 40 of the studies under review measured internalizing symptoms such as anxiety and

depression (Durlak & Wells, 1997, p.135). In their meta-analysis of data compiled across programs, social emotional learning programs showed far less effect on student affect (.32) than on behavior (.69) (Durlak & Wells, 1997, p. 134). Durlak and Wells reported that classroom-management and social training programs reduced “aggressive behavior in boys and self-destructive behavior in girls” and significantly influenced high school students’ “grades, disciplinary referrals, absenteeism and drop-out rates” (p.128). They praised two ambitious schoolwide programs—Comer’s School Development Project and the Houston Project—a school reform initiative and a community-based preschool program—for reducing “serious behavior problems” and for showing “long-term effects on behavioral adjustment” (Durlak & Wells, 1997, p. 128).

While it may be true that some of the studies under review resulted in improved mental health, Durlak and Well’s meta-analysis did not theorize such a connection. They concluded that the programs under review significantly reduced “problems” and increased “competencies,” but they did not explain how, or even if, the construct of “mental health” was related to these outcomes. The study is peppered with the language of deficit—“maladjustment,” “dysfunction,” “disorder,” “intervention,” “acting out,” “oppositonality,” and so forth (Durlak & Wells, 1997, pp. 115-142). The term “mental health,” when used, is generally coupled with the word “promotion” and seems to be referencing the preventative strategies used in various SEL programs (Durlak & Wells, 1997, pp. 116-119). Mental health, as a condition, seems to be a binary state—it either is or is not possessed—and its existence is evidenced by normalized (positive) behavior. Ultimately, Durlak and Wells (1997) conclude that SEL programming achieves its stated

goals, but the authors never make clear which variables provides evidence of student well-being.

Fifteen years later, Durlak et al. (2011) conducted a similar meta-analysis of 213 school-based SEL programs and drew similar conclusions. In this study, the words “mental health” are again coupled with “promotion”—suggesting that “mental health promotion” is an express purpose of SEL. Examining only studies with pre/post measures and control groups, Durlak and his colleagues measured the impact of school-based SEL curricula and programming on “student behavior and academic performance” (p. 406), concluding that competencies acquired through SEL led to “more positive social behaviors, fewer conduct problems, less emotional distress, and improved test scores and grades” (Durlak et al., 2011 p. 406). While the variable “emotional distress” was now included in this new study (pp. 407, 413) only 49 of the studies under review actually measured any variable related to emotional distress. Those that had, reported only a small effect size (.14 to .35). Not surprisingly, the strongest effect size detected was for the variable “SEL Skills” (.48 to .67), which measured student performance of skills that were explicitly taught and practiced during SEL instruction—skills such as stress management and decision-making (Durlak et al., 2011).

In this most recent meta-analysis conducted by Durlak et al. (2011), there is, again, a cloudy relationship between SEL objectives and child and adolescent mental health outcomes. The authors seem to make the uncritical assumption that positive, normalized behaviors provide evidence of student well-being and mental health, but they provide little to no evidence of this claim. Instead, they end their discussion by



concluding that SEL must continue to be implemented in schools because mental health is important for student learning. They cite the following US Public Health Service statement in support of this conclusion:

Mental health is a critical component of children’s learning and general health. Fostering social and emotional health in children as a part of healthy child development must therefore be a national priority. (U.S. Public Health Service Statement as cited in Durlak et al., 2011, p. 420)

This circular logic echoes through many of the SEL studies I reviewed.

Since its publication in 2011, hundreds of journal articles, often authored by academics and curriculum promoters within the field of SEL, have cited the positive effects of SEL based on Durlak’s and his colleagues’ meta-analyses (e. g. Darling-Hammond, 2018; Weissberg et al., 2015; Williamson et al., 2015). In many of these articles, the taken-for-granted assumption seems to be that student social and emotional health is secured through social-emotional learning—more specifically, through programs branded as SEL. This echo chamber of ideas and practices needs and deserves a fresh critical perspective.

### **A Closer Examination of Social Emotional Learning**

My first awareness of SEL as a conceptual model came at a statewide suicide prevention conference, where several commercial SEL curricula for schools were being marketed under the guise of breakout sessions. These “workshops” were interesting but mildly off-putting. A promotion of commercial products felt out-of-place in this context, given the gravity of the topics being discussed. I found myself silently challenging the presenters of one workshop, who were showing charts and graphs demonstrating the

efficacy of one SEL curriculum grounded in Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT)—a cognitive-behavioral therapy developed by Marsha Linehan in the late 1980s to treat borderline personality disorder. The program’s lessons were engaging enough, and I learned that CBT has an excellent track record as a therapeutic tool for those with personality and eating disorders (Federici & Wisniewski, 2013; Navarro-Haro et al., 2018). But, still, I wondered if scripted skill-building lessons could hold any real power against the very real darkness that adolescents sometimes experience.

In perusing the *DBT Skills in Schools* (Mazza et al., 2016) curriculum that I pulled up online during this presentation, I considered how implementing these lessons might weigh against fostering authentic, caring relationships in a school. I intuitively felt that strong adult-student relationships, supportive peer-to-peer connections, and professional mental health counseling would hold infinitely more power to safeguard the well-being of teens, but I could not claim any theoretical basis or evidence for this conviction. I was curious to know if the academy had critically examined the claims of this and other SEL programs claiming to protect adolescents from depression, anxiety and suicidality. I began to examine the literature to find answers.

### **Critique of Social Emotional Learning Studies and Curricula**

Initially, I found few criticisms of SEL in the literature—other than a general concern that the field fails to use clear, consistent constructs for measuring outcomes (Aldridge & McChesney, 2018) and that it lacks scientific rigor—too often relying on anecdotal evidence and self-report data published in non-peer reviewed journals

(Hoffman, 2009). More recent critiques (Blad, 2015; Love, 2019; Stearns, 2017) express the fear that widespread implementation of SEL in schools might lead to the practice of measuring child and adolescent social and emotional traits in schools—one more aspect of child life to be measured and weighed. But in general, critique of SEL is scant while support is robust. Widespread support is evidenced in the abundance of SEL-promoting articles published in popular education trade magazines such as *Education Week* and *Education Today*, and by the large number of school districts and state education agencies that have adopted SEL standards and programs (Durlak et al., 2015).

As I studied the literature, I grew increasingly concerned about a largely uncritical acceptance of SEL's claim to support student well-being. My initial aversion to SEL had been evoked by the commercial nature of the field—a concern expressed by Stearns (2017), one of the few authors I found who shared my apprehensions. She wrote: “SEL operates with the assumptions that emotion can be taught and learned, that there are right and wrong ways to feel, and that all of this can be codified, documented in language, bought and sold” (Stearns, 2017, p.7).

My unease with SEL was also bound up in skepticism. I doubted that direct instruction of social and emotional skills would hold much power to change the emotional landscape of adolescent experience and might potentially feel demeaning to students—especially if the curriculum or instructor did not fully respect adolescent intellect and agency. Some of the SEL lessons I reviewed had a reductive quality—positioning teacher as the moral authority over students and failing to recognize their innate morality and complex emotional lives.

Unquestionably, the advent of SEL as a conceptual framework has brought energy and awareness to the study of child and adolescent mental health in schools. CASEL and SEL have drawn much-needed attention to the importance of social-emotional learning in academic settings. The field is beginning to develop a common language around which to build and assess stronger supports for student social and emotional development. But the question remains: Do most commercial SEL curricula and programs actually foster long term student-well-being? Scripted approaches to social and emotional learning may offer some value, but the medium can sometimes feel inauthentic. I personally am drawn to more holistic, organic means of helping students to develop the sensibilities and skills they need to be healthy and whole. I acknowledge a need for greater support from mental health professionals in schools and for a stronger focus on providing social, emotional, and mental health supports in classrooms and school communities, but too many commercial SEL programs—as currently conceived—feel overly simplistic and reductive.

### **Summary of Concerns About Social Emotional Learning Programs and Curricula**

As SEL becomes increasingly favored, working its way into educational vernacular and finding a firm foothold in state standards and curricular mandates, it seems important to engage the field critically to ensure that we are not blindly implementing programs that may not accomplish what we imagine. If SEL programming is to be marketed as a “fix” for child and adolescent mental health, it is essential that we

examine programs closely to find evidence for this claim. It is outside the scope of this study to conduct a thorough examination of the efficacy of SEL-branded programs, but in the following pages I offer a brief summary of several specific concerns I have felt. Although criticism of SEL is scarce in the literature, I eventually found a small body of literature that echoes my apprehensions.

### **Social Emotional Learning Studies Have Not Adequately Theorized Mental Health**

When an SEL program claims to effectively promote student emotional well-being and mental health, then we ought to be able to draw a direct line from treatment to outcome. Therefore, “mental health” would need to be theorized in a clear and consistent way in the literature of SEL. Instead, there seems to be some confusion about what is meant by “mental health.” Much of the SEL literature I read seems to be equating mental health with social competency or good behavior (making good choices). The meta-studies that form the foundation of the field (see Durlak et al., 2011; Payton et al., 2008) uncritically assume that the development of positive, normalized behaviors (the extent to which students adhere to social norms) signify well-being (Hoffman, 2009; Stearns, 2017). This jump in logic goes largely unchallenged in the literature.

Although many SEL studies make the claim that SEL instruction supports emotional well-being and mental health, few if any examine whether or not explicitly-taught SEL competencies and skills such as “self-management” and “good conduct” actually predict long-term mental health. Acquiring SEL “skills” is said to lead to the development of internalized competencies such as “care and concern for others,” and

“taking responsibility for one’s choices and behaviors” (CASEL, 2019). Although these characteristics are certainly desirable, no real evidence exists to suggest that the SEL lessons that purport to teach such “skills” have any lasting impact on student behavior or alter deeply-held moral sensibilities. Certainly, no evidence exists to confirm any enduring mental health benefits. Because SEL studies often gather data on the efficacy of programs using self-report surveys and teacher observational instruments, and because follow-up studies are rare (Durlak & Wells, 1997), it is difficult to demonstrate that students actually experience significant, lasting change to their emotional well-being or cognitive structures as a result of SEL instruction.

Brackett et al. (2015) argue that theory and research linking social competence to psychological well-being does, indeed, exist (they cite, for example, Eisenberg et al., 2000). They recognize, however, that this relationship is complex, mediated by many conditions, and that SEL skills are unlikely to be learned in classrooms where authentic, caring relationships do not exist. They noted that in a study of one “evidence-based” SEL program developed at the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence—RULER (recognizing, understanding, labeling, expressing and regulating emotion)—researchers determined that the extent to which children learned and internalized RULER skills was largely predicted by teacher personality and classroom environment. They observed:

Teachers who created healthy emotional climates for students—those who demonstrated warmth and respect toward their students, who were sensitive to their students’ needs, who demonstrated a genuine interest in their students’ ideas...led very different conversations about emotions than teachers who were just going through the motions of doing a lesson. (p. 22)

Referencing the theories of Deci and Ryan (1985/2000), Brackett et al. (2015) argue that,

for students to be psychologically healthy at school, they must first have their fundamental needs met—needs for caring, supportive relationships, competence, autonomy, and relatedness.

### **Some Social Emotional Learning Programs Employ a “Deficit” Model of Instruction**

With roots in prevention and behavioral science, many SEL programs default to a deficit model of instruction—targeting problems to be fixed, deficiencies to be corrected, and gaps to be stopped, rather than identifying and supporting the strengths, gifts, resiliencies, and innate competencies that students bring to the classroom (Ames & Leadbeater, 2018; S. Anderson et al., 2007; Cho et al., 2019; Melnyk et al., 2015). In a study of one program for refugee students, researchers observed that the teacher’s deficit approach to SEL learning was actually inhibiting growth by making students and their families feel marginalized (Cho et al., 2019). They suggest that instead of focusing on students’ lack of skills, teachers should identify their strengths (e.g., experiences, knowledge, resilience) and integrate these into their teaching practices, thereby inviting pluralism and cultural richness into the classroom and creating a space for celebrating student competencies.

As noted earlier, SEL often assumes a therapeutic vernacular, where students are “at risk” and educators apply “interventions” to remedy “dysfunction” and “deficiencies.” Curriculum is administered in “dosages” and progress is measured quantitatively (see, for example, Durlak et al., 2011; Payton et al., 2008). Discipline of body and mind is often the remedy of choice. It is easy to imagine that a deficit model of instruction might carry

the potential to shame and demean rather than to empower and dignify—especially for adolescents.

### **Social Emotional Learning Uses Terminology and Measurement Tools Inconsistently**

Few of the constructs commonly measured in studies of social-emotional learning—especially those related to social and emotional well-being—are theorized consistently within or across disciplines (Aldridge & McChesney, 2018; Thapa et al., 2013; Williamson et al., 2015). SEL advocates recognize that more study is needed to understand which dimensions of SEL make some programs more effective than others at producing emotionally and socially supportive school environments and improving student well-being (Brackett et al., 2015; Weissberg et al., 2015). Additionally, it is unclear what constitutes sound evidence when multiple instruments measure a broad array of outcomes, including academic progress, social skills, attitudes, conduct problems, positive social behavior and many other variables (Aldridge & McChesney, 2018; Durlak et al., 2011; Joyce & Early, 2014; Payton et al., 2008; Taylor et al., 2017).

Examination of CASEL’s nine exemplary middle and high school programs makes clear the difficulty of identifying and measuring the discrete elements of SEL that lead to program success. In fact, they beg the question of what “success” actually means. In many cases, programs themselves define the terms under which they should be evaluated and rely on self-commissioned, self-funded studies for data (Hoffman, 2009). In the CASEL (2015) guide to *Effective Social and Emotional Learning Programs*, nine secondary SEL programs were chosen by CASEL as *exemplary*, yet few of these had the



strong family/community partnerships recommended by CASEL and the SEL model. Some programs used scripted SEL lessons taught as stand-alone curricula (mostly at the middle school level), while other programs were more holistic. High school programs branded as SEL (although most were developed in other contexts and for other purposes before evaluation by CASEL) tended to rely more heavily on practices that fostered schoolwide community building.

Until the SEL field theorizes a clear, overarching understanding of what it means to be socially and emotionally healthy and which program elements lead to that outcome, it will continue to be difficult to measure how effectively SEL programs nurture and protect child and adolescent well-being. Aldridge and McChesney (2018) write that qualitative methodologies and longitudinal data must play larger roles in that study.

### **Social Emotional Learning Does Not Adequately Address School Environment**

A impressive body of evidence suggests that a positive school climate and school connectedness—originally conceptualized by Goodenow (1993) as “the extent to which students feel accepted, valued, respected and included in their school” (p. 80)—are strong predictors of adolescent well-being (Aldridge & McChesney, 2018; Goodenow, 1993; Kassis et al., 2017; Loukas et al., 2009; Ruvalcaba et al., 2017; Thapa et al., 2013).

Across multiple studies, a positive school climate has been associated with lower levels of depression and suicidality (Aldridge et al., 2016; Bond et al., 2007; Joyce & Early, 2014; Kidger, Aray, Donovan, & Gunnell, 2012; Millings et al., 2012; Riekie et al., 2017; Shochet et al., 2006), lower incidents of violence and substance abuse (Bond et al., 2007;

Daily et al., 2020; Dorio, Clark, Demaray, & Doll, 2019; Hurford et al., 2010; Ryabov, 2015) and improved academic outcomes (Bond et al., 2007; Daily et al., 2019; Maxwell et al., 2017).

The CASEL community clearly recognizes the importance of promoting strong, healthy relationships and positive environments in schools (Brackett et al., 2015; Darling-Hammond, 2018; Weissberg et al., 2015; Williford & Wolcott, 2015). In the introduction to the *Handbook of Social and Emotional Learning* (Durlak et al., 2015), Shriver and Buffet (2015) write:

The real core of education is the relationship between the teacher and the student, and the extent to which that relationship nurtures the longing of the child to matter in the world, and the longing of the teacher to nurture and fulfill that desire. In so many ways, the whole science of child development and the best philosophy of education agree completely on the fundamental truth that learning is a relationship and that the success of education depends almost completely on the strength of the social and emotional dimensions of that relationship. (p. xv)

However elegantly expressed here, the themes of school climate, connectedness, and relationship are surprisingly sparse in both SEL literature and curricula. Research on school environments, teacher-student connectedness, self-concept, peer attachment, and other important theoretical constructs are not always sufficiently incorporated into SEL curricula and programs. Many SEL programs address school relationships and connectedness only superficially—using skills-building games and role-playing to teach concepts as chimeric as “acceptance” and “caring.” The term “relationship,” where it does appear in the literature of SEL, is nearly always coupled with the word “skills” (e.g., Blair & Raver, 2015). My review of the SEL literature suggests that the behavioral, therapeutic foundations of SEL result in curricula that sometimes shift away from the

deeper, more transformational contexts of relationship-building in favor of skills-based, behavioral models in which teachers instruct students on how to manage themselves effectively in classroom exchanges.

SEL programs designed to transform school relationships and environments certainly exist (see, for example, *History and Ourselves*, a history and language arts curriculum that teaches tolerance, social skills, and civic responsibility and *MindUP*, a 10-lesson mindfulness curriculum), but if the Handbook of Social Emotional Learning is representative, programs such as these are less common. Many of the SEL curricula under review in the Handbook (Durlak, Domitrovich, et. al, 2015) are composed of teacher-directed lessons designed to modify behavior, rather than to promote community-building or foster authentic relationships. Some are focused on curbing teen substance abuse, violence, bullying, and risky sexual behaviors (e.g., Jagers et al., 2015; Williamson et al., 2015). The variables “connectedness” and “school climate” are too infrequently measured or discussed in these review articles.

SEL programs that fail to acknowledge the complexity of creating positive school climates and building authentic relationships impoverish the theoretical foundations of SEL. If CASEL’s aim is to safeguard and enrich the emotional and social lives of children and adolescents, it must avail itself more fully of the wealth of studies that reveal the nuances involved in creating protective school environments and nurturing genuinely supportive adult-child and peer-to-peer connections.

### **Critical Perspectives are Largely Absent in Social Emotional Learning Theory**

Although the SEL field of study is maturing and will almost certainly evolve, currently its studies and curricula undertheorize the diverse nature of student experience, ignoring factors of race, ethnicity, class, (dis)ability culture, gender, sexual identity and other attributes that complicate and enrich learning environments (Cho et al., 2019; Hoffman, 2009; Stearns, 2017). Note how infrequently these variables are mentioned in meta-studies of SEL effectiveness (Durlak, et al., 2011) or in the Handbook of Social and Emotional Learning (Durlak, et al., 2015). Marginalized groups—such as LGBTQ youth who are at high risk for bullying, depression, and suicide (Haas et al., 2019; Kosciw et al., 2018; Kull et al., 2019; Williams, 2017)—seem to be largely ignored in SEL literature.<sup>3</sup>

Research consistently shows that students on the margins of society—those who experience frequent micro-aggressions or are from stigmatized groups, are at greater risk for compromised mental health (Bostwick et al., 2014; Gattis & Larson, 2017; Kim et al., 2018; Mays & Cochran, 2001; McGee & Stovall, 2015; Ramirez et al., 2017). Incidents

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<sup>3</sup> The 2017 GLSEN National School Climate Survey (Kosciw et al., 2018) found that “LGBTQ youth face alarmingly high levels of harassment, assault, biased language, and discrimination at school that have a negative impact on their educational experiences and psychological well-being.” While the GLSEN survey indicates that we have made progress in many measures of school safety, it also shows a leveling off and even some backsliding in markers of discrimination. For example, incidences of negative remarks about transgender students increased significantly between 2013 and 2015 (Kosciw, p. xxiv-xxv). A 2018 national survey of counselors, social workers and psychologists (Kull et al., 2019) indicates that most school-based mental health professionals feel a sense of responsibility for protecting and supporting students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer, but they don’t know how to provide adequate supports and protections. Even with increasing adult solidarity and advocacy, LGBTQ students continue to be marginalized and mistreated in schools. In this survey, fully a third (32.6%) of school-based psychologists, counselors and social workers indicated that lesbian, gay and bisexual students would not feel safe in their school; 43.7% believed that transgender students would not feel safe; and 78.1% felt that bullying, based on appearance, sexual orientation, or gender expression is a serious problem (Kull et al., 2019, p. xvii).

of racial prejudice and violence are on the rise in the U.S., fueled by a climate of divisiveness and fear in a nation of increasingly partisan politics and polarized ideologies (BBC News, 2018; Faupel et al., 2019). School mental health professionals and student survey data continue to report heightened incidents of harassment and bias at school (Harrison et al., 2018; Kosciw et al., 2018; Marriott, 2019). SEL theory rarely engages in these critical issues. Stearns (2017) writes that SEL “contributes to a cultural disavowal of race, class, sex and the body in the childhood classroom.” (p. viii). Hoffman (2009) points out the limitations of Eurocentric SEL scripts in addressing the diversity of cultures in classrooms, where a child’s ethnic identity and culture might dictate a very different way of processing and communicating about emotions than the typical westernized SEL curriculum allows for (p. 541).

As SEL becomes more widely implemented in schools and incorporated into state and national learning standards (Dusenbury, et al., 2015; Weissberg, 2015), it is imperative that the field promote a greater awareness of and advocacy for marginalized populations. Although some SEL advocates are beginning to address issues of race, class, gender and individual differences (e.g., Hecht & Shin, 2015), there is little evidence that critical perspectives are systematically used to inform the development of SEL curricula and school-wide programs (Hoffman, 2009; Stearns, 2017). This is an area in need of further study.

### **Suppression of Naturally Occurring Thoughts and Emotions**

Two important premises of SEL theory are that students must learn to harness

their emotions and conduct themselves in socially acceptable ways (CASEL, 2019; Weissberg et al., 2015). Teachers deliver curriculum designed to help students learn and practice skills of self-management and control. On the CASEL theoretical wheel, it is made clear that students are expected to learn self and social awareness. Together, these skills are meant to lead to greater resilience and emotional intelligence. It is a “pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps,” and “control-your-anger-before-it-controls-you” mindset. The trending work of Carol Dweck (*Mindset*), Angela Duckworth (*Grit*), and Daniel Goleman (*Emotional Intelligence*) fits neatly into SEL theory and is increasingly integrated into SEL programs (Hoffman, 2009; Love, 2019; Stearns, 2017). In a nation of boot-strappers and self-made individualists, it is difficult to locate much criticism of these self-improvement constructs.

As elusive as the logic behind my initial resistance to SEL was to me, my unease only intensified as I began to suspect that the practices of SEL can subvert the natural processes of relationship-building and communicating in classrooms—choosing instead to prescribe remedial instruction and position the teacher as the moral and ethical authority of a child’s social/emotional life. My life experiences as a mother, teacher, administrator, colleague, and friend, leads me to believe that social and emotional states of being are tied largely to relationship—and are enhanced when we are well-treated, respected, loved, and cared for. Decades of research and theoretical study support that intuition (e.g., Fernandes, 2003; Noddings, 1992; Palmer, 1983; Sadowski, 2016). The moments of recognition, resolve, and transformation that have led adolescents in my care or under my purview to “pick-themselves-up-dust-themselves-off” have come as the

result of deep connection between students and adults—with earnest, open-minded attention and generous displays of faith and trust. Conditions of control or mistrust—restrictive rules, directives, dogmatic instruction—almost always lead to resistance or withdrawal.

Eventually I found two studies of SEL that effectively articulated what I have intuitively felt. The first was a study of an SEL curriculum—*Social and Emotional Training: Important for Life* (SET)—widely implemented in Swedish pre-K through secondary schools. Using discourse analysis, Bartholdsson et al. (2014) noted the curriculum’s emphasis on self-regulation and its use of a therapeutic ethos. The researchers reported that students were explicitly taught breathing techniques and bodily positions to manage their emotions—a model that brings to mind Foucault’s *governmentality*, where individuals are “monitored and managed so as to best the goals of democratic humanism” (Lupton, as cited in Bartholdsson, 2014, p. 3). SET is based on two SEL programs developed and widely used in the U.S.—*Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies* (PATHS) and *Botvin’s Life Skills Training* (an elementary school version of the SEL curriculum recently adopted by the Utah Board of Education for use in Utah secondary schools). Both programs use tools of cognitive and neurobehavioral science to teach students how to mitigate risk by managing their emotions and altering their beliefs about risky emotions and behaviors (Bartholdsson et al., 2014). Bartholdsson et al. observed that SET sometimes uses the threat of mortal danger (“look what might happen to you if you ignore this safety warning”) and social stigma (“if you act this way, other students won’t like you”) as deterrents to anti-social behaviors (p. 204). Teachers

take students through a range of exercises to practice both social and anti-social behaviors, asking them to reflect on how their bodies look and feel during these exercises. The curriculum presupposes that all children struggle with “hit the roof” anger at some point, and it teaches them physical strategies for regaining control. Lessons also include games that mimic exclusionary practices, such as closing a child outside of a circle of friends and asking them how it feels to be physically excluded from the group.

Bartholdsson et al., write:

The risk of social exclusion, as well as the prospect of social rewards for successfully managing the body, is a recurrent theme in the teacher’s manuals from the preschool class up to ninth grade. Teachers are encouraged to inform the children that not being in control of how to express emotions will eventually result in...not being liked, but also not being listened to and/or not being taken seriously.

In order to avoid these social risks, the children are instructed not only in how to control bodily expressions of anger, but also in how they should position their bodies in socially accepted ways. (pp. 206-207)

Bartholdsson et al. (2014) astutely question how the production of docile bodies is supposed to prepare students for democratic life, writing:

It seems to be rather counterproductive, from a democratic perspective, if schools’ preparation for the future citizenry comes if students are being taught “socially acceptable codes for behaving” rather than self-expression and political thought. (p. 210)

While rigid and prescriptive methods of teaching self-control are not universal in SEL programs, they are common. Little is found in the literature to challenge the notion that teaching skills to help students regulate and manage their own bodies promotes social and emotional well-being, or to question whether learning to reproduce the appearance of control or to adhere to the rules of “good conduct” leads students to internalize values



and beliefs that elicit genuine respect and care for self and others.

In a second critique of SEL, Stearns (2017) observed two elementary classrooms where teachers were implementing a popular SEL program. Through a process of observation, discourse analysis, and phenomenologically-informed interviews with teachers, Stearns concluded that SEL curriculum engages teachers in a practice of “hegemonic positivity”—where student emotions are suppressed or set aside in favor of more “positive” normalized, SEL-approved emotions and behaviors. She questions the “scripted assumptions” of these programs—the premise that student affect can be fundamentally altered by learning the skills of self-regulation and emotional control (Stearns, 2017, p. 4). Citing the literature of affect theory, she points out that “positivity” is a uniquely American phenomenon, born of the deeply-rooted cultural tradition of “glossing over” ugly, angry, and negative emotions (Stearns, 2017, p. 19). SEL, she argues, is the outgrowth of a neoliberal political environment in which control and compliance are valued (pp. 18-19). In short, it is a natural fit for an educational system that is already entrenched in practices that deny children and adolescents the right to feel and express their individuality and flawed humanity.

Ultimately, Stearns (2017) rejects SEL as a model altogether, arguing that it is better to discard a system so deeply entrenched in positivist ways of thinking. Rather than recommend a replacement, Stearns argues for a “transformation in how schools think about children’s affective and interpersonal worlds” (p. 6) and suggests several guidelines for practice, drawn from her own convictions and supported by Kleinian psychoanalysis and affect theory, namely that:

- One individual should not dictate to another what the other is feeling.
- Emotions are always permissible.
- Teachers and curricula should strive for consciousness and honesty when it comes to what they want from children.
- Social and emotional existence should be dissociated from instruction in compliance. (Stearns, 2017, p. 8)

Stearns's ideas resonate deeply with me. I, too, question the value of direct instruction to "teach" social and emotional competency and foster student emotional well-being and mental health. I am wary of instructional strategies that rely upon deficit language and assumptions, insist upon compliance and control, and sometimes evoke shame. We should approach social-emotional learning more authentically, focusing on genuine relationship-building and providing, to our students, caring and empathetic attention and support.

### **Final Thoughts on Social Emotional Learning**

The construct of SEL is useful in that it constantly evolves. It insists upon providing students with a wide array of collaborative school, home, and community supports, and it welcomes theory and research from multiple disciplines. SEL programs range from scripted curricula that teach discrete social and behavioral skills, to more holistic approaches that recognize the strengths and gifts that youth bring to the table. It is difficult to provide a cohesive evaluation of SEL as a tool for protecting adolescent mental health when the field is broad and programs diverse. But as SEL is more widely implemented in school curricula and state standards, there is a danger is that we will begin to equate such programs with mental health support and see them as a solution to our current mental health crisis. In some senses, this is already happening—as evidenced

by the marketing of SEL curricula in a recent Utah suicide-prevention conference and in CASEL's claim to promote the "well-being of self and others" (para. 6) and to decrease "mental health problems" (para. 10) as stated on its promotional website (CASEL, 2019). It is crucial that educators and educational policy makers be aware of this trend and critically examine the actual benefits and purposes of SEL programming in schools.

I am hopeful that over time we will implement more well-conceived, theoretically sound SEL programs that are truly designed to support student well-being. However, there is a troubling trend toward the adoption of commercial SEL programs without a clear understanding of how these programs actually impact student emotional and mental health. A reliance on SEL programming to address student anxiety, depression and suicidality is irresponsible at best and potentially damaging if programming is used to supplant more effective, comprehensive approaches to protecting the emotional and mental health of our youth. Until CASEL provides greater evidence that SEL programming supports student emotional well-being and mental health, it is important that districts and schools not conflate SEL curricula with mental health support and potentially ignore more authentic, holistic means of support that may have greater power to influence adolescent health and healing.

Unlike Stearns (2017), I am not convinced that it serves us to discard the SEL conceptual model or discipline altogether; SEL programs and standards are deeply engrained in the national psyche and embedded in state and national learning standards. The language and perspectives of the field are influencing educational practice on a wide scale. For this reason, it feels urgent to challenge the field's entrenched deficit thinking

and hegemonic ethos, and to enrich the discipline by considering more compassionate, student-centered theoretical foundations for SEL.

In the following pages, I suggest that critical thought and pedagogy offer a wealth of theoretical and conceptional tools that have not been adequately considered by CASEL or the SEL discipline. I explore the possibility that using a critical framework to enhance our understanding of social-emotional learning might potentially help us to build stronger school communities, foster more supportive relationships, and create more protective, transformational curricular practices than we are currently employing.

### **Turning to Critical Approaches**

Both SEL and critical pedagogy are concerned with school practices and curricula that place the social and emotional welfare of students at the center of practice. But the two approaches emerge from fundamentally different premises. The SEL conceptual model prescribes programs of learning to teach students how to modify and control their attitudes and behavior within a protective shell of caring communities. Critical pedagogies assume that individuals have the innate intelligence and power to liberate themselves from untenable situations when they are armed with knowledge and granted both the agency and authority to improve their own lives (Shor & Freire, 1987). Rather than insisting upon discipline of body and mind, critical stances embrace liberation of body and mind. Through a process of “unlearning, learning and relearning” individuals develop a critical consciousness and are empowered to lift themselves out of cruel or adverse circumstances (Shor et al., 2017) and, ultimately, to overcome despair. Critical pedagogy recognizes that cultural reproduction and traditional relationships of power can

contribute to the oppressions of students—that schools may unwittingly compromise the social and emotional well-being of the young people they are meant to protect. It is this theoretical perspective I have chosen to embrace as I consider how schools might more effectively address the needs of our precious students at a time when anxiety and despair seem to be casting a long, dark shadow over too many of their lives.

### **Theories of Critical Pedagogy**

In these final pages of Chapter 2, I provide a brief overview of several pedagogical theories that have emerged from critical thought and identify principles central to the literature of critical pedagogy—themes of safety, recognition, inclusion, connection, empowerment, critical consciousness, and transformation. I briefly review the origins and foundational theory of critical pedagogy to illustrate why it becomes integral to this study. For those familiar with critical thought and pedagogy, this is an unnecessary primer. For those who have only a glancing knowledge of critical traditions in education, the following pages might be useful for understanding the theory that has informed this study.

The graphic analogy used previously in this chapter (Figure 2.3) illustrates how tangential critical pedagogies currently are to the disciplines that inform our thinking about student mental health in schools. I offer the illustration again here.

The small rills labeled “critical pedagogies” at the right side of the graphic flow far less robustly than other disciplines into the cultural milieu that informs school mental health practice. As I explored the literature that addresses adolescent mental health in

**Figure 2.3**

*Disciplines that Inform School Mental Health Practice.*



schools, I wondered about this apparent lapse. Every strand of critical pedagogical theory I have studied—e.g., feminist pedagogy, queer pedagogy, critical disability pedagogy, and others—has provided me with inspiration and a powerful set of theoretical tools for use in my work with adolescents. These theories have helped me to imagine *possible worlds* (Bruner, 1986) and have transformed my understanding of what a school can and should be. Throughout this study, I relied on these theories to inform my understanding of what we as educators might be missing in our bid to secure the emotional well-being and mental health of the young people in our care. In Chapters 6 and 7, I weave the literature of critical pedagogy into my analysis and discussion.

### **A Brief Primer of Critical Thought**

Grounded in the writings of Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, and the work of the

Frankfurt School, Critical Theory recognizes the human proclivity for creating and reproducing societal systems that retain power for an elite few by suppressing the individual freedoms of many. The project of critical theory is to expose the underlying hegemonies that shape language, institutions, and societies and which oppress groups and individuals. Horkheimer (1982) writes that a theory is critical if it seeks to “liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them” (p. 244). Multiple authors have written eloquently on its project of emancipation, empowerment, and healing (e.g., M. W. Apple, 1979; Freire, 1995; Giroux, 2011; McLaren, 1994). Critical thought enriches the literature of many disciplines, including that of education.<sup>4</sup>

Brazilian educator and philosopher, Paulo Freire, wrote eloquently about the power of *critical pedagogy*—a fusion of critical theory and the art of teaching—to free

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<sup>4</sup> Critical theory requires skepticism regarding absolute and authoritative claims. In Horkheimer and Adorno’s (1944/2007) seminal work of critical thought, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, they argue that even science—an institution of the enlightenment that freed society from the dogmas, superstitions and prejudices of theology—is subject to the forces of hegemony and cultural reproduction. Science, with its certainty that everything can be known and verified through mathematical measurement and scientific study, is largely responsible, they claim, for breeding a twentieth-century positivism that rejected theism, metaphysics and emotion as legitimate ways of knowing. Societal systems built on this new, *certain* knowledge, were deemed irrefutable and immutable (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/2007). Critical research requires us to examine the taken-for-granted practices and premises of institutions and disciplines and delve deeper to discover what we might be misunderstanding or missing.

Cordones (2017) argues that every public entity—whether, prison, political body, or school—is driven by the certainty that there are known, legitimate means to obtaining an end (we call this “research-based practice” in the education field)—and that leaders have the authority to dictate these means and manage the “unschooled masses” (Cordone, 2017). The masses, in turn, comply with their own oppression, believing in the expertise and protections of those in power.

The influences of the Frankfurt School echo throughout the work of critical theorists in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Michel Foucault, philosopher, psychologist, and activist, examined the role of power in shaping societal institutions (Foucault, 1975/1995). He fought for penal reform and to expose human rights abuses. Foucault faulted education and other societal institutions for seeking to control populations through practices of ranking, sorting, and dividing populations into “unequal stations” that erode solidarity and dehumanize individuals” (Shor et al., 2017, p. S5). In *Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Franz Fanon exposed the role of colonization in the continuing oppressions of racial and cultural minorities worldwide.

individuals from oppression and restore dignity to their lives. He dedicated his life to helping others understand the social, political, and economic conditions shaping their lives, and empowering them to engage in their own enlightenment and liberation (Freire, 1970). Freire inspired countless others to expand on this thinking. Many of Freire's disciples have theorized the ways in which critical pedagogical approaches to education can protect and empower marginalized individuals such as women (Harding, 2007; hooks, 2000), ethnic and cultural minorities (McGee & Stovall, 2015; McLaren, 1994; Riach, 2017), LGBTQ+ individuals (Butler, 2005; Camicia, 2016; Pinar, 2012), and children and youth (Cannella & Viruru, 2004).

### **Foundational Principles of Critical Pedagogy**

Each strand of pedagogical theory that has emerged from critical thought—feminist pedagogy, queer pedagogy, critical disability pedagogy, and so forth—provides a new way of understanding how we marginalize others and render them invisible. The literature of critical pedagogy explores the ways in which we misrecognize and misrepresent others. It unveils systems of power that harm individuals. Although each strand of critical pedagogy has a unique focus, all embrace similar foundational principles. Common themes weave through the literature of critical pedagogies—themes of safety, inclusion, connection, recognition, empowerment, and transformation.

### **Overview of Five Critical Pedagogies**

Reducing each critical pedagogical theory to a few words is a fraught experiment, but I have chosen to briefly touch on several germane to this study—critical race



pedagogy, postcolonial pedagogy, feminist pedagogy, queer pedagogy, critical disability pedagogy and ecopedagogy. There is richness and complexity in each pedagogical strand and multiple interlocking relationships between them.

### ***Critical Race Pedagogy***

Critical Race Pedagogy seeks to circumvent the constant and pervasive microaggressions in schools—unconscious or intentional—that wear down the dignity and spirit of individuals and communities (Gillborn, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1998; McGee & Stovall, 2015). It insists upon a praxis that humanizes students and makes room in the classroom for student’s cultural histories and personal stories. It urges educators and students to reflect on society’s injustices, then act to right wrongs.

### ***Critical Postcolonial Pedagogy***

Critical Postcolonial Pedagogy intersects with other critical approaches to explore ways in which we misrecognize and misrepresent others (Bhabha, 2003, 2004; Camicia, 2012). It is sensitive to systems of power that lead to intended or unintended oppression in schools. Cannella and Viruru (2004) recognize the ways in which uncritical, hegemonic thinking leads us to adopt policies, practices, and curricula that colonize and subjugate children and adolescents—failing to see them as equal beings with unique strengths and expansive possibilities. Students suffer the daily indignities of being subject to the authority of others. Many of our practices assume that young people are not capable of rational thought or mature, morally-grounded action. Postcolonial pedagogy asks us to consider the oppressions we inflict on young people that might slowly erode their sense

of self-worth and well-being.

### ***Queer Pedagogy***

Queer Pedagogy seeks to return voice and power to LGBTQ individuals (Tierney & Dilley, 1998) whose “experiences and identities resist categories” (Camicia, 2016, p. 14). It explores how power and patriarchy silence LGBTQ individuals in schools (Tierney & Dilley, 1998) and erase them from the curriculum. It seeks to disrupt normalizing discourses and oppressions by rejecting binary thinking and challenging the notion of normalcy. It invites the *queering* of traditional ways of being and knowing. Camicia (2012) explores how queer theories can intersect with other critical lenses to help teachers create safe, *third spaces* of “extraordinary openness” and “critical exchange” where all marginalized students are recognized and respected (p. 28). The concepts of safety and recognition are central to this study of adolescent well-being.

### ***Critical Disability Pedagogy***

Critical Disability Pedagogy rejects the “regulatory and controlling undertones” of discourses used by human services institutions, such as special education and medicine (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009, p. 51). It seeks to reframe and complexity our understandings of the lives of (dis)abled individuals and to suppress the normalizing discourses that view physical and intellectual otherness as deficiency. Critical Disability Pedagogy envisions inclusive schools and classrooms where students accustomed to living on the margins participate as full members of their community (Erevelles, 2000; Gabel, 2005).

### ***Feminist Pedagogy***

Feminist Pedagogy addresses the needs and oppressions of all individuals, regardless of their particular intersectionalities of race, class, gender, culture, ability, or sexuality (Fernandes, 2003). It takes an interest in exploring difference as an educative opportunity (hooks, 2000); in ensuring safe, nurturing learning environments (Noddings, 1992/2005; Wood, 2009) and in accepting “personal, communal, and subjective ways of knowing, as valid for inquiry and knowledge production” (Crabtree et al., 2009). Like all critical pedagogies, it is concerned with de-centering power and giving voice to marginalized others.

### ***Ecopedagogy***

Ecopedagogy addresses the escalating ecological and social crisis wrought by excessive consumerism, corporate exploitation, and a worldview of domination (Kahn, 2010). It is an emancipatory project for our Earth and its creatures. It is also an exploration of the vital connections between human and nonhuman life, and of the many ways that schools can connect students to their communities and the natural world (Sobel, 2014).

These pedagogies aim to promote individual—and ultimately societal—well-being and transformation. The liberatory praxis that is at the core of each unique strand of critical pedagogy has the potential to restore humanity and health to school communities by ensuring that students are deeply recognized, respected, and empowered.

## Summary

In this chapter, I provided an historical context for this study and explored the social and cultural forces that have shaped our understanding of adolescents and their mental health needs. I traced the origins and foundational philosophy of SEL—a conceptual model and curricula widely used in schools to help students build social-emotional skill and resiliency and to shore up their mental and emotional well-being. I suggest that an uncritical reliance on SEL instruction as a solution to the nation’s adolescent mental health crisis is problematic. I provide a critique of SEL programming and suggest that a study of critical theory and pedagogy has the potential to enrich this field of study. Finally, I provide a brief overview of several critical pedagogies and identify unifying principles found therein—themes of safety, inclusion, connection, recognition, empowerment, critical consciousness, and transformation. I suggest that revisiting critical pedagogical theory may transform our understanding of how best to provide the mental health support and protections our youth most urgently need at this moment in time.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### Introduction

This study examines how adolescents who have struggled with depression, anxiety, and suicidality have responded to the sociocultural environment of a small public high school in suburban Utah. It provides a unique opportunity for ethnographic study within a school culture that places strong emphasis on relationship-building and fostering the social and emotional welfare of students. In the fall of 2018, I distributed a recruitment flyer on Emerson’s campus (Appendix D) and invited high school students to join me as “co-researchers” in a *Teen Voices* study—to share with me their mental health stories and provide insights about their experiences with depression, anxiety and suicidality. The purpose of the study was threefold: (1) to provide a glimpse into some of the circumstances and conditions that have contributed to my co-researcher’s mental and emotional difficulties; (2) to examine ways in which they have learned to cope with their conditions within the school community; and (3) to invite these students to consider what Utah teachers, educational leaders and policymakers can do to better support their mental health needs.

Utah’s conservative sociocultural environment—and Emerson’s unique positioning within this community as a school that embraces cultural diversity—provides an opportunity for exploring opposing themes of marginalization vs. belonging, control vs. agency, and other concerns central to critical pedagogy. It is my hope that this

exploration may add to our understanding of how Utah schools can better support the well-being of Utah teens.

### **Social and Cultural Context of the Study**

While urban areas in Utah are increasingly diverse, most communities outside of the greater Salt Lake City metro area remain culturally homogenous. Emerson is located within one of Utah's most homogeneous communities. The population is 92.9% white and 90.6% of families enjoy relative economic stability (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). 82.18% of families report being members of the LDS Church, or "Mormons" (Canham, 2018). Five large public high schools are located within six miles of Emerson's modest facility.

Although schools do not collect data about cultural ideologies or religious and political affiliations, Emerson appears to have a unique social and cultural demographic that does not align with that of its surrounding community. The school has become, over time, a magnet for students who have felt marginalized in their neighborhoods or school communities. Many students who attend Emerson have opted themselves out of their neighborhood school for sociocultural reasons. Some have felt marginalized or excluded when their ideological or religious beliefs differed from those of many of their peers. Others have struggled to succeed in their neighborhood schools because of ongoing mental health challenges. Anecdotally, of the seven students admitted to Emerson's high school in January 2018 (new students were accepted at the semester break), five reported ongoing struggles with depression, anxiety or a more severe mental illness. Most had

chosen Emerson because of its reputation for being emotionally and academically supportive. This study explores, among other themes, facets of Emerson's culture and curriculum that serve to draw this population.

It is hard to know if Emerson's population is truly unique or simply a reflection of growing diversity in the outlying community, but there is a clear perception that Emerson students are different from the community's cultural norm. Recently, a parent angrily withdrew her daughter from Emerson, calling it a "school of freaks." I suspect she was referring to Emerson's increasing population of LGBTQ youth, yet she may have been disturbed by the school's larger-than-average population of non-LDS students or its handful of students who express themselves with hairstyles or clothing that defy community norms. Many students come to Emerson seeking refuge from schools or neighborhoods where they have had to suppress their identities, so it is not surprising that they represent their differences openly when they find a safe space in which to do so. Emerson strives to be a safe haven for students—a place where everyone feels included and identity, agency, and voice are respected.

In the following chapters, I attempt to bring some measure of clarity to the challenges and sorrows that these high school students have experienced, and tell their stories with fidelity and respect.

### **Study Participants**

Between October and March of the 2018-19 school year, I conducted interviews with 14 Emerson High School students who agreed to join me as participants in this

study, which I titled *Teen Voices*. I chose to address participants as *co-researchers* during the recruitment and data collection phases of the study, because I wanted each student to understand the immense value of their contributions as equal partners in this research. I use the terms *participant* and *co-researcher* interchangeably throughout the study.

My co-researchers represent just under 10% of Emerson's small high school population. Each participant had experienced depression, anxiety, and/or suicidality at some point during their middle and high school experience. To varying degrees, they have all continued to struggle with this burden. Sixteen students initially volunteered for the study and provided written consent (Appendices F and G), but two students had to be excluded when their *Columbia Suicide Severity Rating Scale* (C-SSRS) scores indicated suicidal risk. Another student expressed interest in the study, but because of a recent history of suicidality, Emerson's counselor wisely discouraged him from contacting me. I am saddened that these critically important voices could not be included in this study.

### **Participant Demographics**

Table 3.1 provides an overview of participant demographics. It is important to note that gender designations were not taken from school records but are an accounting of information that my co-researchers communicated to me. I explicitly asked only one participant about his gender preference (in order to clarify my own confusion about his narrative). He was dating a male transgender student when the study commenced, so I initially assumed that he might identify as bisexual. Instead, he identified as a cisgender male. All other LGBTQ participants revealed their gender preferences organically during



the interview process. Gender identity was often central to their experiences of emotional and social struggle. In a Utah community where gender identity is clearly (and statistically) a significant factor in depression and suicidality for LGBTQ youth (Annor, Clayton, Gilbert, et al., 2018; Barker et al., 2016), it is important to include these designations.

**Table 3.1**

*Participant Demographics*

Pseudonyms	Gender	Race	Socioeconomic status	Grade
Gabriel	Transgender female to male	white		12
Elizabeth	Female	white	Economically disadvantaged	12
Rainey	Female	Mixed race Hisp/White		11
Sofia	Female	Mixed race Hisp/White	Economically disadvantaged	11
Liam	Androgynous prefers “he” pronoun	White		10
Ximena	Female	Mixed Race Hisp/White	Economically disadvantaged	10
Zoey	Female LGBTQ	White		10
Isaac	Transgender female to male	White		12
Piper	Female	White	Economically disadvantaged	10
Antonia	Female	Hispanic		9
Jazmin	Female LGBTQ	Mixed race (Black/White)	Economically disadvantaged	9
Matthew	Male cisgender	White		12
Abigail	Female	White		10
Kate	Female LGBTQ	White		10

In some respects, the demographics of this group reflects Emerson’s general

population: 42% of Emerson's high school students qualify for free or reduced lunch through the federal Child Nutrition Program; 36% of this study's participants were qualified for this program (this statistic is indicated as "economically disadvantaged" in Table 3.1). Eight percent of Emerson's high school students are served under 504 plans (which provide support for medical or mental health needs); and 9% of these teens have qualified 504 plans. However, in other demographic categories, this group is less representative: 23% of Emerson's high school students are served by special education individualized education plans (IEPs), yet only two special education students (14%) chose to participate in this study; Only 19% of Emerson's high school students registered for school indicating a racial affiliation other than White, but 36% of this study's participants are Latinx or mixed race. Emerson's population is evenly divided between male and female, but nearly all of this study's participants were assigned female at birth—although two now identify as transgender male and one as "androgynous." In total, six (43%) of the study's participants currently identify as transgender, gender fluid, or queer. Emerson likely has a higher percentage of LGBTQ students than other schools in the community, but the large number of LGBTQ participants in this study might also be attributed to the fact that I extended an invitation to participate to a small group of students in Emerson's after school gay-straight alliance club. That being said, the figure might also be indicative of the high percentage of LGBTQ youth, in general, who experience depression, anxiety and suicidality (Annor, Clayton, Gilbert, et al., 2018; Cha et al., 2018; Knoll, 2017; Lytle et al., 2018).

## **Data Collection: Conversations with My Co-Researchers**

### **Gathering Monologic Data**

I initially intended to immerse myself more fully in the life of the school to collect what Carspecken (1996) calls *monologic* data—observing silently in classrooms, listening to conversations in hallways, watching student interactions at lunchtime and after school, and taking extensive field notes to assemble a primary record. While this process would have enriched my study, it ultimately proved unmanageable within the timeframe available. Because of the sensitive nature of the study, obtaining approvals from Utah State University’s Institutional Review Board took much longer than anticipated. I received final approval to proceed with the study on Emerson’s last official day of classes in May, 2018. Because of this, the study had to be delayed until the following school year.

With the advice and consent of my major professor and committee, I chose to assemble a primary record based on my long experience as Emerson’s chief administrator. In this sense, the study weaves autoethnography into its pages. Part literary form, autoethnography makes room for “emotion, embodiment, self-consciousness, and introspection” within the narrative (Ellis, 2004, p. xix). Ellis writes that autoethnography is “research, writing, story and methodology that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political” (p. xix). During my time at Emerson, I not only worked with students as an administrator, but also as a classroom teacher, an expedition chaperone, an advisor, and the parent of three Emerson students. For several months, I also served as Emerson’s interim academic counselor. I have spent thousands

of hours interacting with students and have written extensively about my experiences. I used these accounts and drew from memory to provide the thick description ethnography requires.

### **Gathering Dialogic Data**

My primary means of gathering data for this study was what Carspecken (1996) calls *dialogic* study—talking with participants, listening to their stories, asking them questions, reflecting on their insights, and continually seeking clarification. This phase of study took place over a period of seven-and-a half months from September 27th to May 14th of the 2018-19 school year. During this time, I conducted 32 interviews—each lasting up to an hour.

I chose to begin interviews in late September after students had settled into the rhythm of the new school year. The first round of interviews was largely completed before the end of November, although several participants joined the study later in the school year. Most second and third interviews took place in winter or early spring of 2019. I allowed time to pass between initial and subsequent interviews so that participants would have time to immerse themselves in school and classroom life, and so that I could track changes in their perceptions and sense of well-being over time. Two of my co-researchers were freshmen. I wanted them to actually *have* a high school experience before asking them to reflect on that experience. One participant was new to Emerson, having transferred from a school that she had loved and had not wanted to leave. I expected that, with time, she would feel greater acceptance and belonging at Emerson than she initially reported. That proved not to be true. My preconceived ideas

about Emerson were often challenged during conversations with my co-researchers.

### **Interview Strategies**

During initial interviews, I invited participants to share their experiences of depression, anxiety and suicidality. The stories they shared are the subject of Chapter 4. These initial conversations were loosely structured. At the beginning of each interview, I tried to help these young people feel at ease. I thanked them for their participation and assured them they need only answer questions they felt comfortable with. I encouraged them to become true co-researchers in the study and stressed that the study's ultimate aim was to empower and serve them.

Madison (2005) writes that interviews must be dialogic and open-ended; that ethnographers must have “genuine curiosity, sincere interest, and the courage to be vulnerable” (p. 36). I tried to conduct sensitive interviews by listening intently and empathetically, clarifying and summarizing at times, asking responsive questions, and using verbal and kinesthetic cues to signal compassion. I honored the importance of silences (Bengston & Fynbo, 2017).

I tried to serve as facilitator and confidante, rather than as authority (Carspecken, 1996; Madison, 2005). I engaged in reciprocal conversations, giving participants enough time and space to tell their stories without imposing my biases or acting as though I had any special knowledge of the topics we were discussing (Madison, 2005). I encouraged my co-researchers to lead conversations in unanticipated directions or to add additional insights at any time. I sometimes redirected participants who began to wander unproductively, but in each initial interview, I encouraged these teens to tell their stories

without imposing my own agenda. I posed follow-up questions from a place of interest and empathy.

Polkinghorne (2010) reminds us that in the process of telling stories, we simultaneously reconstruct and co-construct new stories with the interviewer. As I spoke with participants, I tried to recognize the underlying forces that shape narratives and understand the ways in which, in the telling of their stories, participants might be creating new identities and seeking acceptance (Daiute, 2014). I tried to be aware, in my interactions, of how I might unintentionally influence their choices about what to reveal or conceal. I attended to the nuances of what was said, what was expected, and what was left out.

### **Unexpected Candor**

When I initially planned an interviewing strategy, I was concerned that it would be difficult for adolescents to share private and painful stories about their lives with someone they did not know well (or at all, in some cases). I crafted questions that I hoped would gently guide conversations and encourage reticent participants to talk without making them feel compelled to divulge more than felt comfortable (see Appendix A for more information about study questions).

I quickly learned how unnecessary my concern had been. Most participants were anxious to share their experiences and were generous with the details of their lives. I found that if I listened intently, these teens would often address the study's questions without much prompting from me. Most expressed a desire to contribute to this research so that they could affect change and make school experiences better for other adolescents.

Sofia was one participant who articulated this desire. After our interview—which had been especially compelling and emotional—I discovered that my recorder had failed to capture our conversation (a tragedy I still lament). I apologized profusely for losing her precious words, but did not dare suggest that we try to reconstruct the interview. It was Sofia who contacted me via email later that evening to suggest that we meet again:

“I really enjoy talking about this sort of thing, so don’t worry about it... If you want to do another interview, I’m okay with that. Thank you for the opportunity to be a part of your research. “

First interviews sometimes went on for nearly an hour with few interjections from me—other than a few brief questions and words of encouragement. Most of these teens were unusually candid and open about their lives and mental health journeys. Each of their stories was revelatory, intensely private, and often tender. It felt wrong to interrupt such important narratives. When I did talk more extensively, often to share an observation or to offer supportive words, participants would sometimes retreat, handing the responsibility of driving the conversation back to me. I learned that the less I said, the more participants seemed willing to share.

As I talked with these young people, some of their stories felt familiar—like the refrain of a sad song that has been looping at the edge of my consciousness for as long I have worked with and worried about adolescents. But many of their revelations were surprising—giving me new insight into the causes of the profound sadness and anxiety so many of them face, and to the ways in which school experiences have sometimes contributed to their pain.

## Gathering Artifacts

Kincheloe et al. (2011) write of the impossibility of accurately or fully describing others. Each person is “culturally inscribed and historically situated” and is “a part of many contexts and processes.” They stress that critical researchers must adopt a “critical ontology” and approach qualitative study from many directions, using multiple tools, Kincheloe, et al. write that, “objects of inquiry are far too mercurial to be viewed by a single way of seeing or as a snapshot of a particular phenomenon at a specific moment in time” (p. 170). They evoke imagery to illustrate this ontological conundrum:

Process-sensitive scholars watch the world flow by like a river in which the exact contents of the water are never the same. Because all observers view an object of inquiry from their own vantage points in the web of reality, no portrait of a social phenomenon is ever exactly the same as another. Because all physical, social, cultural, psychological, and educational dynamics are connected in a larger fabric, researchers will produce different descriptions of an object of inquiry depending on what part of the fabric they have focused on—what part of the river they have seen. (Kincheloe et al., 2011, p. 170)

Throughout the study, I was keenly aware of the complexity of these young lives and of the fraught nature of representation. I was wary of painting their lives with too-broad brush strokes, based only on a few short conversations. To that end, I asked participants if they would be willing to share any written or artistic work related to their experiences of depression, anxiety and suicidality. I hoped to draw from their artistic expressions to better understand their interior lives. The tools of the critical ethnographer—poetry, written narratives, artwork, photography, music—can help paint a richer, more complex picture of the individuals we seek to understand (Carspecken, 1996; Creswell, 1998; Ellis, 2004; Kincheloe et al., 2011; Madison, 2005). Many participants indicated they use some form of creative expression to process difficult emotions. Most



were willing to share examples of this work. Ultimately, eight participants shared digital or photocopied sketches, journal entries, or other artifacts. Sofia handed me original sketches torn from a notebook and entrusted me with her only copy of an illustrated storybook she had created for a class—a fairy tale about love and identity. Some of my co-researchers' most powerful articulations of pain, despair, and hope were contained in these artifacts.

Table 3.2 lists the author and title of each of the 61 artifacts I gathered. I also list the thematic codes I attached to each piece. Excerpts from participants' creative contributions are strewn throughout the pages of this study. Additional samples can be found in Appendix E.

### **Choosing the Tools of Analysis**

For me, this study created a constant tension between my desire to enrich and complexify my understanding of human experience and my need to generate data and analyze patterns to make my co-researcher's experiences more comprehensible. Although I ultimately chose to use the tools of thematic analysis and critical ethnography to achieve my aims, I was also drawn to more narrative methods of analysis.

### **Considering Narrative Analysis**

As I reread and reflected on the stories my co-researchers had shared, I was fascinated by the narrative structures they had used to tell their stories. Some crafted lengthy tales, rich with vivid detail. Others spoke in short, perfunctory sentences—offering little beyond the scant detail needed to convey their meaning. Gabriel wove

**Table 3.2***List of Participant Artifacts*

Contributor	Artifacts	Themes
Sofia	Sketch: Angry Face	anger, pain
	Sketch: Wounded Face	self-harm, pain
	Sketch: Daggers and Restraints	self-harm, religiosity, anxiety, self-hatred, shame, diagnosed disorder
	Sketch: Potato Head	self-hatred, body image, shame
	Sketch: So Many Bonds	religiosity, anxiety, self-hatred, shame, isolation
	Storybook: Moon Girl	self-hatred, friendship, connection, empowerment, belonging, recognition, cultural disavowal, hope for future
Zoey	Journal Entry: If People Cared	isolation, connection, loneliness, longing
	Sketch: I'm Fine	isolation, self-harm, shame, self-hatred, masking pain, silencing
	Sketch: I'm Used to It	self-harm
	Sketch: IDFC	pretending
	Sketch: When You Reach Me	suicide, hopelessness
	Sketch: Poor Little Dead Girls	recognition, isolation, connection
	Sketch: I Don't Deserve This	self-hatred, anger
	Sketch: Injured Heart	pain, isolation, loneliness, self-harm
	Sketch: Hole in My Heart	loneliness, recognition, pain
	Sketch: Would Anyone Care?	invisible, self-harm
Sketch: Stitched Up Heart	self-harm, need for support, pain, loneliness	
Matthew	4 Photos: Escalante Trip	solace in nature, finding purpose, empowerment, connection
	3 Photos & Short Video: Hydroponics Project	finding purpose, autonomy, empowerment, nature
Liam	Song: Honest Self-Introspection	self-hatred, body image, recognition, gender identity
	Essay: My Father	gender identity, body image, connection, family trauma, recognition
Elizabeth	7 Photos: String Art Project	finding purpose, autonomy, connection, community, art
	9 Photos: Community-Based Self Portrait	connection, need for support, stigma, community, isolation, self-harm, hope, finding purpose, empowerment,
	Journal Entry	hope, finding purpose, empowerment, resilience, positive attitude

*(table continues)*

Contributor	Artifacts	Themes
Gabriel	Speech	suicide, connection, community, recognition, survival, safety, gender identity, finding purpose, hope, body image, hope for future
Piper	Journal Entries: 16 Affirmations	religiosity, positive attitude, body image, recognition, hope, finding purpose, academic stress, safety, resilience, survival
Unnamed Participant	Poem: i'm sad in the back of the girl's bathroom stall	anger, isolation, suicide, self-harm, safety, medication, hospital, recognition, hope, connection

*Note.* Eight participants provided 61 creative expressions, including 15 sketches, 18 journal entries, 23 photographs, one speech, one essay, one storybook, one song, and one poem.

multiple small stories together to convey his struggle with gender identity. Elizabeth jumped from theme to theme within a single narrative—touching on her eroded self-image, her desire to self-harm, her past abuse, and the tenderness she felt for others. Sofia interspersed stories with dialog—recounting hurtful or transformative conversations with parents, teachers, and friends. Rainey sometimes slipped into a kind of reverie, sharing internal discourse as though she were talking only to herself. Analyzing the structural elements of these narratives would have made an absorbing study. If space allowed, I would have liked to share these narratives more fully, but in the interest of space and cohesiveness, I share only brief vignettes.

I was also intrigued by the uncertain nature of my co-researcher's stories.

Riessman (1993) writes that we use storytelling to reinterpret our lives, to “create plots from disordered experience” (p. 4). Storytelling is a means of ordering and making sense of experience (Bruner, 1986). Like any story drawn from memory, these narratives were not always consistent or fully formed. Details occasionally changed in the retelling; important story elements were added in second and third interviews that had previously

been omitted; declarations were made that contradicted or confused earlier statements. Until our last interview, Elizabeth failed to tell me that anorexia continues to torment her. Abigail chose not to share details about the trauma most affecting her life. In one breath, Zoey insisted that she is always happy and carefree; in the next, she spoke about the pain of lingering trauma. One participant came out as queer months after these interviews had concluded—something she had chosen not to share when we talked.

As I thought about how best to organize and analyze these stories, I recognized that any number of methods of narrative analysis—structural analysis, discourse analysis, narrative hermeneutics, perhaps—would add depth and interest to the study. If time and space had allowed, I would have devoted a chapter to each of my co-researchers and provided a coherent, chronological narrative for each. I would have honored the complexity and importance of their experiences and insights by analyzing nuances, possible meanings, inconsistencies, vulnerabilities, rhetorical choices, narrative structures, and the political and the social implications of their stories. Had I interviewed only a handful of students, this format might have been possible. But for this study it proved unwieldy.

Ultimately, I realized that this study could only be a beginning. I could give a nod to narrative analysis by allowing new, unexpected themes to emerge, by preserving as many long, uninterrupted segments of narrative as possible, and by infusing narrative insights into the findings chapters where feasible. I could honor the intent of narrative analysis, but I needed a more practical way to manage the large quantity of data this study generated.

### **A Turn Toward Thematic Analysis and Critical Ethnography**

In the end, I risked fragmentation of my co-researchers' stories to focus on the commonalities between narratives and explore recurrent themes and patterns in the data. Clarke et al. (2015) write that thematic analysis is theoretically "flexible." It invites the researcher to organically and creatively select the tools of data collection and analysis that best fit the needs of the study. It is method, independent of theory, that offers an "organic approach to coding and theme development"—one that is "fluid" and is informed by the unique positionality of the researcher (Clarke, et al., 2015. pp. 223-224).

Coding and data analysis, by their nature, tempt us to categorize, generalize and potentially limit our understanding of individual contexts and meanings. Thematic analysis guards against this tendency. It never claims to know the absolute cause of human behavior, but instead examines the complex nature of human experience and seeks to better understand the conditions and interactions that influence action (Riessman, 2008). Thematic analysis is an interpretive exercise in which meaning is always tied to specific context (Clarke et al., 2015).

In the following pages, I share the ways in which I used thematic analysis to shape this study, guided by the critical ethnographic principles outlined in Carspecken's (1996) *Ethnography in Educational Research*. In the tradition of thematic analysis, I garnered tools from many sources but relied heavily on Carspecken's framework to guide and shape the process of data collection, coding and analysis.

### **Preliminary Coding and Reconstructive Analysis**

I spent much of December and early January immersed in the work of transcribing recordings, uploading transcripts and artifacts into NVIVO, coding, and reflecting on the content of my co-researchers' narratives. I then stepped back to search for patterns in the data and reconsider the focus and scope of the study. Carspecken (1996) describes this initial phase of meaning construction as *reconstructive analysis*—a largely mental exercise and hermeneutic process that begins with the researcher reflecting on the holistic meaning of data, then moving toward “more explicit and delineated modes of understanding, which, in turn modifies one’s holistic grasp of the meaning” (Carspecken, 1996 p. 95).

My initial coding strategy was to mark excerpts intuitively and organically without imposing my own preconceived ideas about the study’s themes. I primarily used low-level codes—codes intended to reference data objectively, with as little abstraction as possible. Many of the codes I used were descriptive or categorical in nature and served as simple labels to identify various kinds of experiences, behaviors and insights.

#### **Examples of Initial Low-Level Codes**

- academic stress
- negative body Image
- bullying
- exclusion
- romantic relationships
- truancy
- fatigue
- isolating behaviors
- physical environment
- nature

- music

### **Adding Low-Level and High-Level Inferences**

As I coded, I attached notes with questions I had or inferences I was making. I generally chose not to notate any code when the meaning was obvious. But when I made inferences beyond what was explicitly spoken (or written/ drawn, in the case of artifacts), I added a brief reminder of these thoughts.

The following are a few examples of codes and added notations.

- *hallucination* (Gabriel’s self-perception seems to be embodied in these “monsters.”)
- *sexual abuse* (Elizabeth minimizes sexual abuse and foregrounds grade school bullying. An avoidance? Embarrassment? Trauma?)
- *music* (Liam seems to rely on music to self-soothe.)
- *attempted suicide* (How could his suicide attempt be a cry for help if Matthew did not tell anyone? How did the school find out?)
- *truancy* (Piper blames depression for poor attendance, but might it also be the result of her distance from school and estrangement from those who provide transportation?)

I also used codes that emerged from a higher level of inference. Carspecken (1996) writes that high-level codes emerge as the researcher begins to generalize the body of gathered data based on recurring patterns and themes. These higher-level codes suggest a direction for analysis. The following are some of examples of higher-level codes I identified.

- It is crucial for adults at school to know about students’ lives.
- Teens self-isolate when depression is at its worst.
- Teacher/admin/counselor support can be a powerful intervention.
- Peer relationships are crucial to well-being.

- Recognition of their intellect and abilities is important to teens.
- Every student has unique mental health needs.

### **Emerging Organizational Structure**

Initially, I made no attempt to limit the number of codes I used. I began to note distinctions within codes and occasionally returned to the parent code to create new subcategories. A hierarchy began to emerge but did not fully form during this first phase of analysis. By the end of December, I had created roughly 120 discrete codes. (I failed to record the exact number at this point in the process, but later consolidated codes and reduced the number to 106.)

In this early stage, I purposefully did not impose the overarching themes of critical pedagogy onto the data as I began to create a hierarchy. I wanted to wait until all interviews had been completed and coded so that I could first analyze data holistically. Instead, I reflected on the data by re-reading and listening to excerpts of the narratives, studying artifacts, and by using data analysis tools found in NVIVO. I began to identify predominant themes. I noted repeating patterns in the types of stressors and circumstances that had harmed my co-researchers, or that were overwhelming them at present. I began to see ways that I could organize the data and structure my analysis. My thinking, however, did not fully crystalize until after I had completed and coded second and third interviews, after which a fuller picture emerged.

### **Rethinking Initial Questions**

Carspecken (1996) emphasizes the importance of honoring the circular movement between tacit, intuitive understanding, and more “explicit and delineated” ways of



understanding (p. 42). During this period of analysis and reflection, I questioned my initial assumptions, recognized some of my biases, continued coding, and started to create a hierarchical organization. I began to see clear patterns in the data, but I also noticed gaps in information and blind spots in my own understanding.

I had assumed that the topic of schoolwork would surface when I talked with students, but I had not imagined that academic stress weighs so heavily on these young people. I was especially appalled to learn that two participants saw academic stress as a catalyst leading directly to their suicide attempts. Multiple codes revealed these phenomena. This thread emerged as a primary theme of the study.

In initial interviews, students had talked less about their relationships with teachers, counselors and administrators at Emerson than I had anticipated. Again, I could not be sure if this was an artifact of my position of power at the school or had some other cause. Perhaps these teens were reticent to talk about any adults in my circle of influence—but perhaps this lapse simply reflected the relative unimportance of these relationships to students. To better understand, I prepared to ask participants more direct questions about their lives at Emerson. How had their relationships with teachers and administrators impacted their well-being? Could they recall classroom experiences that had felt especially supportive? Had any of their coursework been meaningful or life-affirming? A few participants had addressed these questions in initial interviews without prompting. But I wanted a better understanding of the impact that classroom work and school environments have on student mental health.

I also noted that students had said little about social media or substance abuse—

two variables frequently linked to teen depression and suicidality in research and the popular media. I needed to address these issues more explicitly. I prepared follow-up questions to ask my co-researchers. And so, the research deepened.

### **Gathering More Explicit Data: Second and Third Interviews**

I conducted most second and third interviews from February through April—although a handful of interviews occurred in early May. During these interviews, I approached conversations with a more explicit agenda, guided by the broad themes that had emerged during the first phase of study and prepared with questions I hoped might illuminate some of the murkier patches in the data. It is important to reiterate that initial interviews had been largely student-driven. Because most students had been willing to talk openly and extensively about their experiences without a great deal of prompting from me, I had often set aside prepared questions and followed their lead. Now, I chose to guide conversations more closely to clarify, fill gaps, and explore issues these teens had not fully addressed.

#### **Examples of Second and Third Interview Questions**

I began most follow-up interviews by inquiring about each coresearcher's welfare and revisiting some of the stories and insights they had already shared. I then turned to topics the participant may not have broached in early conversations. For example, after assuring each teen of their privacy rights and of my discretion, I asked some form of the question:

Has substance abuse ever been a part of your mental health struggle? Do you see a link between substance abuse and your own depression, anxiety, or suicidality?

I also asked participants to reflect on their use of social media and the impact it may have had on their well-being. I framed the question something like this:

Social media use is sometimes linked to teen depression and suicidality in research and in the media. Do you believe that your own use of social media—Facebook, Instagram, or whichever platforms you use—has contributed to your depression?

I assumed, after initial interviews, that the stories my co-researchers had chosen to share were those most relevant to their experiences of depression, anxiety, and suicidality. I wanted to test this assumption so I now asked each participant to summarize, in a sentence or two, to name the primary cause of their depression. Most responded quickly and definitively. Their answers did not always confirm my initial assumptions.

I asked other questions, hoping for more clarity about the relevance of adult-student bonds at school. I asked how relationships, classwork and extracurricular activities had impacted their well-being; I dug deeper to understand why so many of my co-researchers held negative perceptions of their physical bodies, intellect or abilities.

Finally, I invited my co-researchers to offer a critique of their school experiences—at Emerson and elsewhere. One of the final questions I posed was generally something like:

Imagine you have an opportunity to talk with some of Utah's most important educational policymakers and leaders. What advice would you give them? What should schools do differently to better protect adolescent mental health?

While answers to these questions did shed new light and clarify issues of interest

to me, I now question the wisdom of my approach in these final interviews. In general, this more rigid line of questioning led to conversations that were less revelatory—more constrained. My co-researchers seemed less emotive or engaged when I was the one steering the direction of our conversations. In future research, I would choose to work with fewer students and allow much more time for ideas and insights to emerge organically.

### **Iterative Coding, Analysis, and Reflection**

Data collection, reflection and analysis continued to be an iterative process. February through May, I reviewed narrative transcripts and notes, analyzed, revised coding, formulated new questions, clarified assumptions with my collaborators, revised and began again. At the end of the school year, once all interviews were completed, I moved to a more formal period of analysis and reflection, spending several weeks considering the relationships between codes, reorganizing, and identifying which experiences and insights had been most relevant to participants.

### **Identifying Themes**

Coding interviews and artifacts had been a complex and somewhat ambiguous process. Single paragraphs generally revealed multiple themes. The demarcation between themes was often blurry. Most themes intersected with multiple others. For example, memories of family economic struggle often coincided with revelations of familial relationship stress. Uncertainty about gender identity was frequently tied to experiences of marginalization and bullying.

To organize codes into comprehensible patterns, I began to group them together to develop a hierarchy. I merged redundant codes, added others, and when all was said and done, 106 discrete codes remained. I then grouped and regrouped these codes into a natural hierarchy. Three distinct “code clumps” organically emerged and began to suggest a possible “organizational framework” for the study (Glesne as cited in Madison, 2005, p. 36). Codes fell neatly into the following broad categories—*Causes of Depression/Anxiety/Suicidality*, *Behaviors Attributed to Mental Illness* (primarily at school), and *Implications for Schools*. Table 3.3 shows how codes were distributed between these three overarching themes.

**Table 3.3**

*Discrete Codes Organized into Code Clumps*

Code Clumps	# of discrete codes in each clump
Causes of depression/anxiety/suicidality	44
Behaviors attributed to mental illness	27
Implications for Schools	41

I initially questioned the wisdom, in a critical ethnographic study, of including a table to present frequency counts of coded references. Carspecken (1996) cautions against the quantitative use of data generated in qualitative study—of reducing data to code counts and statistical analysis. He writes:

The holistic quality of action contexts simply cannot be captured through a model of interacting yet discrete factors. The factors are simply not discrete by nature, so making them discrete conceptually can greatly distort our understanding of what it taking place. (p. 25)

Daiute (2014) describes critical ethnography as a “cultural tool for interacting socially

(with and for others)” and for making a “difference in the world” (p. 227). Qualitative researchers, she asserts, should work to maintain the voices of individuals in their studies” (p. 227). Quantifying qualitative data felt like a betrayal of these goals. I worried that prioritizing some participant experiences over others might have the effect of silencing marginalized voices—of erasing the experiences of outliers (Kincheloe et al., 2011; Rosiek & Heffernan, 2014). Additionally, the small number of participants in the study make extrapolating generalities from its data irresponsible. This is neither the intent nor the nature of qualitative study (Carspecken, 1996; Dauite, 2014; Kincheloe et al., 2011).

Despite my reticence, I created the frequency table in Table 3.4. While I reluctantly organized 112 discrete codes and 1262 references on a spreadsheet, unexpected patterns emerged—trends I might not have fully recognized without this organization. During interviews, I had listened to an abundance of stories about academic stress, negative self-image, self-isolating/masking behaviors, and a strong need for acceptance and recognition, but I was genuinely stunned to realize just how prominent these themes had been.

### **Overlaying the Themes of Critical Pedagogy onto the Data**

Initially, I had approached coding inductively, staying close to the text and keeping inferences low, identifying themes in the text without imposing my own biases (as much as possible). But now I began to overlay important principles of critical pedagogy onto the data, adding a new level of hierarchy. I had no difficulty fitting the

**Table 3.4***Table of References*

Emerging themes	References
Causes of depression	
Academic stress	104
Negative self-image/shame/self-hatred	102
Bullying & exclusion	79
Cultural expectations	34
Family instability & trauma	77
Gender identity	46
Genetic predisposition	7
Social media	16
Peer influence	4
Substance abuse	11
Implications for schools	
Adult awareness & support	146
Connectedness/relationship/inclusion	77
Support in curricula	27
Early intervention	4
Recognition & respect	64
Extracurricular activity	24
Independence/autonomy/trust	21
Connections to nature	14
Positive attitude	16
School-day structure	4
Transforming purpose	45
Behaviors related to mental illness	
Disassociation	5
Hallucination	5
Listen to music	6
Create poetry/essays/music/art	34
Self-harm	29
Exhaustion/sleep	7
Self-isolate/avoid help/silence/pretend	124
Seek connection/community	62
Suicidality	16
Anger and pain	15
Express hope for future/find purpose	25
Find solace in nature	8
Total coded references	1262

broad themes of critical pedagogy—themes such as inclusion, recognition, and empowerment—to the data. Critical pedagogy seemed custom fit to this study (although I recognize that my own biases most likely skewed my coding scheme in this direction, despite my best intentions). For example, critical pedagogy argues that respect and deep recognition are crucial to an individual’s well-being. As I overlaid the themes of respect and recognition onto my existing code structure, multiple codes easily fell under this umbrella. The following provides a brief illustration of coded thoughts I organized under the themes *Recognition* and *Respect*.

- Transferred to Emerson because it accepts difference.
- Teacher recognition makes a difference to students.
- School/church strips identity from students.
- Students value autonomy.
- Students appreciate when teachers acknowledge their intellect.
- Students like being on a first-name basis with teachers.
- Students crave frank, critical discussion.
- Knowing that others have experiences similar feelings is freeing.
- I want school to feel comfortable and home-like.
- I don’t want my gender identity to be the only thing that others know about me.

Ultimately, the organizational structure that emerged during the first phase of coding and analysis—Causes of Depression, Behaviors Related to Mental Illness, and Implications for Schools—shaped the overall organization of findings presented in Chapters 4 and 5. But it was this secondary thematic structure—themes of Critical Pedagogy—that guided my discussion in Chapters 6 and 7.

### **Constructing the Narrative**

As I constructed the narrative, I tried to honor the lived experience of study



participants by foregrounding their voices. My aim was not to rewrite and make their story my own (hooks, 2000), nor to serve as *ventriloquist* Fine (2006), impassively describing actions and words as though I were at once invisible and omniscient. Critical ethnography demands a search for meaning, a weaving together of common threads to explore emergent themes, and an understanding that our constructions will always be partial and incomplete (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002). In this collaborative search for understanding, I tried to treat participants with dignity and hold myself accountable to their meanings. I avoided imposing meanings that were not intended (Ellis, 2004; Daiute, 2014), always weighing the consequences of my choices (Carspecken, 1996).

Kincheloe and McLaren (2002) warn against “unexamined assumptions” and the “taken-for-grantedness” common in research (p. 101). Critical ethnographers, they argue, must be “suspicious of any model of interpretation that claims to know the final truth” (p. 102). I was keenly aware of my biases and ways in which I shaped the narrative. I acknowledged the subjective nature of my observations and accepted that “the meaning of human experience can never be fully disclosed” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002, p.102). For this reason, when I felt myself getting lost in the woods of my own ideas, I would return to student transcripts, read them again, and try to glean additional insight from my co-researchers’ words.

My experience and understanding of Emerson set the stage for understanding the context and of this study, but it is my co-researchers’ stories and insights that are more relevant to the study’s conclusions. The narratives and artifacts are theirs. As I assembled this narrative, I tried not to impose my own biases on participant experiences. I’m not

sure that I was always successful.

Finally, I invited most participants to analyze the stories and artifacts we had collected—to read portions of the emerging narrative, question my interpretations, and contribute additional insights. By inviting students to examine conclusions with me, I tried to make this study a reflexive process (Daiute, 2014; Madison, 2005).

### **A Call to Action**

Carspecken (1996) adds a final step to the ethnographic process, suggesting that we must reflect on the narrative that has emerged in light of larger social themes and issues. If the purpose of critical ethnography is to reveal marginalized others and to change the course of their lives, then a study must be a call to action. In Chapters 6 and 7, I attempt to weave my narrative back into the social fabric from which it was extracted and make it accessible to Utah educators and policymakers in a meaningful way. My hope is that this study will make the adolescents who struggle with depression, anxiety, and suicidality more visible and recognizable to the adults charged with their care during the school day—and that their stories will lodge in the hearts and minds of those with the power to implement systemic change.

### **Protecting the Validity of the Study**

A study that relies heavily upon a single researcher's interpretation of data is vulnerable to claims against its validity. I sought to shore up the validity of the study by using *naturalistic* research techniques first popularized by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

Although the sensitive nature of this study precluded the use of *multiple recorders* or *observers* during interviews, I *triangulated* data by comparing student narratives against their artifacts and my own observations. When I shared excerpts from student narratives, I tried to use *low-inference language*. For example, rather than explicitly state that Jazmin was overwhelmed with emotion when she talked about how difficult it is for her to get up some mornings, I let descriptive language illustrate what she might be feeling. Although privacy concerns made it impossible to employ *peer-debriefing* of interview transcripts; I often consulted with colleagues to cross-check my own personal accounts included in this study. For example, in Chapter 6, my recollection of a rainy day at Emerson was enhanced when a colleague who had been present that day reminded me of the sound of rain on the building's tin roof. Finally, I made extensive use of *member checks*, sharing relevant excerpts of my findings chapters with participants and soliciting their feedback and comments. These exchanges often sparked further conversation and allowed others to provide new insights or to correct misconceptions I might have.

### **Supporting Students During the Study**

I made myself available throughout the study to answer participant and parent questions and to provide any additional support that I could legally and ethically provide. In several cases, I emailed students to ask clarifying questions. Most responded quickly with lengthy, heartfelt responses.

It was difficult, at times, to know what my relationship with these teens should be. Several students contacted me unexpectedly to share additional information or to ask if

we could meet again. I sensed that these young people simply needed a listening ear and a little extra support. I was careful to remind them that they could also talk with the school counselor and other caring adults at Emerson and that I had provided them with a Community Resources packet (Appendix H). But I enthusiastically agreed to meet with anyone who wanted to connect. Most participants expressed a genuine desire to contribute to the study. They felt an urgency to help educators and policymakers understand the challenges and needs that students sometimes face. I grew to respect and appreciate their willingness to be candid and spend so much time with the study. Many of them told me, both during interviews and in emailed communications, that they enjoyed our conversations. One of Piper's emailed comment was similar to those shared by other participants: "Thank you so much for the work you're doing. It means a lot to know there's someone out there fighting for me." Long after the study concluded, Piper shared additional information about her difficulties, although she remained somewhat cryptic. The following excerpt is from a much longer response that I sent to her. It is representative of the email communications I shared with participants who reached out:

Piper,

I am overcome with gratitude for your willingness to participate and to share your wisdom. I am also saddened by your struggle....

Time has given me some perspective, and I know how important it is to let go of anger and find a hopeful path forward. I also know how helpful it can be to process emotions with someone else. This upcoming year, Emerson has a new counselor who seems to be a genuinely kind and loving person. The school will also have a social worker.... Both of these professionals will be discrete should you simply want to talk. I know it gets tricky if there is any abuse involved, because then they are obligated to involve DCFS. I truly hope that is not your situation.

Just remember that your amazing life is just beginning. I am so impressed by the things you have taught yourself to do, and the ways in which you have learned to cope.

~With admiration and respect, Diana

One participant emailed several weeks after the school year ended. He was trying to make a difficult decision and asked for my support and advice. The tone of his email worried me—it seemed to hold an undercurrent of fear and hopelessness. Before responding, I sought advice from both my major professor and an Emerson administrator. Although the regular school year was over and he was technically now an adult, I wanted to be certain that I was supporting him in an ethical and meaningful way. Ultimately, I shared the most authentic advice I was able to provide and suggested that he reach out to friends and family and meet with his university’s counseling center. We communicated several times afterward, even meeting for dinner one evening when he reached out to me and my husband for support after a particularly traumatic incident. I eventually felt confident that he was going to be fine. I count this participant as a friend and anticipate that we will communicate again in the future.

Being able to make valid claims depends not only upon on having insight and understanding of human nature, but also having a degree of knowledge about the conditions of participants’ lives. Because I had already built a certain level of trust with some participants and knew various conditions of their lives, and because, to some degree, we shared a culture and an understanding of the local community, my relationship with them allowed me to imagine a more valid “field of meanings” (Carspecken, 1996). As I listened to and analyzed their words, I was more likely to understand subtext and to recognize the unspoken meanings of under-articulated

thoughts.

I suspect however, that relationships of power did impede communication with at least one participant—and likely more. Although I did not know this student well, I had personal ties a close family member. She was one of two participants who chose not to share the more intimate details of their mental health journeys. Although this participant shared that she had recently been in deep pain because of a failed relationship, she was reticent to reveal too much. She was also careful to avoid identifying the actors of her stories—something I had asked all of my co-researchers to be careful of, but that few had consistently remembered to do. Talking with her made me more aware of the ways in which relationship complicates qualitative study (Ellis, 2004; Madison, 2005).

My co-researchers' varying degrees of candor may have had less to do with their relationship to me and more to do with individual personalities and inclinations. Of the four participants I had not previously met, two were somewhat guarded and two were unexpectedly open and unreserved. Whatever motivations guided each participant, I am grateful for their bravery and willingness to share their stories with this study.

### **Reflecting on Relationships of Power**

During second and third interviews when I was guiding topics of conversation more closely—asking students to answer my questions rather than letting them guide the narrative—I had to be more attuned to issues of hegemony and power. I wanted my co-researches to continue to feel empowered—to shape conversations and express concerns and insights important to them. I wondered if this more defined set of questions might be

off-putting and limiting. I assumed that some participants would be reticent to say anything critical about Emerson or its teachers. I had been largely absent as a day-to-day presence at the school for nearly 2 years before this study began—in this sense, my position of authority had been disrupted. But a few participants knew that I had been instrumental in founding and guiding the school. Others had a vague sense that I was still involved with Emerson at some level. I worried that a perceived power imbalance might make some of my co-researchers cautious about answering questions openly and honestly regarding curriculum and school relationships and experiences.

I wish I had asked participants explicitly how their relationship to me, or their understanding of my position, might have influenced their responses. I believe they would have been candid. As it is, I can only conjecture about these relationships. My sense is that the friendship and trust I had previously established with several participants actually led to a more honest and open exchange than we might otherwise have had. Critical methodologies rely heavily on the structures of everyday communication and human interactions (Ellis, 2004; Madison, 2005). Carspecken (1996) recognizes that no researcher can be certain about what is intended by a participant's remarks, but he stresses the importance of considering a "field of possible meanings" (Carspecken, 1996, p. 59). He argues that this field will be more expansive and credible—that observations will have more validity—when the researcher has developed a trusting relationship with participants.

## Protecting Student Privacy

Setting the study in a school I am closely involved with presented both practical and ethical hurdles. I worked closely with Utah State University's Institutional Review Board and others to ensure that both participant and school privacy were protected; that neither would be harmed by this study. I was continually aware of the ways in which I could potentially expose the identity of students or the school. Initially, as I crafted the narrative, I failed to adequately mask the conditions of participants' family lives. Although I had used pseudonyms throughout and offered only a general description of the school's locale, it was still conceivable that "Emerson" and, by extension, individual participants might be identified. I do not have the right to expose families to public scrutiny, so I quickly course-corrected and rewrote sections of the narrative (especially within Chapter 4) and ultimately chose to omit stories about family life.

The following are some of the additional precautions and privacy protections I implemented.

- Before beginning the study, I consulted with one of Utah's foremost authorities on student privacy law to ensure full compliance with Utah law. I reviewed applicable Utah State policies and board rule pertaining to human subjects research. I ensured that the study met all provisions required by FERPA, PPRA, and Utah Board Rule
- I consulted with a mental health professional to ensure that I was using protocols and procedures found to be nurturing and supportive of adolescents.
- I sought the appropriate approvals and permissions from USU's Institutional Review Board and from Emerson's board of trustees and executive director (Appendix C).
- I prepared a clear, concise lay summary for potential participants and their parents/guardians, which included an overview of the study's format and timeline, an expression of what I hope to accomplish, and a thorough



explanation of privacy protections, potential dangers of the study and anticipated benefits. All of these materials were made available on a study website (Appendix B).

- I made research materials available to students, parents, and school officials prior to securing consent and assent documents (Appendices F and G). Stakeholders were encouraged to review interview questions, procedures, and other materials before making decisions about participation.
- I provided students and parents with a packet of information and contact numbers/web addresses for local, state, and national mental health resources, including suicide prevention organizations, Safe UT, other apps and hotlines, county and city mental health organizations, and a variety of online resources and support organizations (Appendix H).
- I prefaced most interviews with assurances of student privacy and made sure that participants and their parents were aware that the school's social worker and counselor were willing to meet with any participant upon request.
- I used pseudonyms and changed many identifying facts and circumstances that might make it possible to identify Emerson and its students. When participants spoke about difficult family relationships or experiences of abuse and neglect, I communicated these experiences in general terms without attaching identifying facts or even pseudonyms.

To my knowledge, no participant reported feeling “triggered” or distraught because of the study, although one student declined an opportunity to “member check” his narrative, writing in an email:

“I don’t know if I want to be revisiting some of those emotional statements while I am expected to be running in such a high gear. I have no doubt that through your incredulous (sic) methodology and attention to detail that you represented me exactly how I would want to be.” (email from a participant)

I do not know if any of my co-researchers met with outside mental health support because of the study. Several participants indicated that our conversations helped them process difficult emotions and felt supportive rather than threatening

### **Study Concerns and Limitations**

Despite my best efforts, this study had the potential to expose participants to privacy violations and to certain physical and emotional discomforts during the interview process. My co-researchers were especially vulnerable. These young people already struggle to manage varying levels of depression, anxiety, and suicidality, so I was continually aware that our conversations might further compromise their well-being. The study's greatest ethical challenges and threats to validity are discussed below.

#### **Difficulty Articulating Trauma**

Perhaps the greatest threat to the validity of this study was the possibility that some of my co-researchers were unable to articulate the depth of their sorrows or the nature of their trauma. Herman (1992/2015) writes, "The ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness. Certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to utter aloud: this is the meaning of the word unspeakable" (p. 1). While most of my co-researchers seemed to be sharing the most intimate details of their lives, I cannot possibly know what sorrows they might have chosen to exclude.

Reticence to speak the unspeakable almost certainly limited the number of students who joined this study. Although I was honored to speak to fourteen Emerson students who had firsthand experience with anxiety, depression, and sometimes suicidality, many other students at the school have important and compelling stories that were not told. Three such students had wanted to participate in the study, but could not because their mental health was so tenuous. Others may have chosen *not* to participate,

fearing the risk of exposure or the pain of revisiting trauma. One participant mentioned that she, personally, had several friends who had considered joining the study, but who were afraid to share the intimate details of their lives with an adult they did not know well.

Months after the study concluded, I was, again, reminded of the gravity of Utah's teen mental health problem, and of how ineffective we are at recognizing and helping students in pain. In late spring, one of Emerson's newest students—a young woman I had not yet met—nearly succeeded at taking her own life.

### **Reticence to Offer Critique**

Although many participants excitedly shared their ideas about how Emerson or other schools could better support student well-being, some were unwilling to offer any real criticism of the people or institutions in their lives. When I asked participants to imagine how they might change policies and practices in schools to better support adolescent mental health, some articulately and passionately critiqued previous schools and particular classes or curricula at Emerson. A few addressed the broader, societal structures of schooling. Others were less inclined to criticize anything at all—other than themselves. Some seemed uncertain as to how to address questions of critique. For example, when I asked one participant how she might change classwork or the structure of the school day to be more supportive of her needs, she had a difficult time imagining any structure other than that to which she is accustomed. Other participants, however, offered a storehouse of ideas.

Following are a few possible reasons that participants may have struggled with

critique.

- Some tended to critique themselves, rather than any other individual or institution. They saw themselves as flawed individuals within a system they accept as immutable. They were, as Kincheloe & McLaren (2002) suggest, compliant in their own subjugation, believing the narratives that constrain them.
- Some may have been reticent to criticize Emerson teachers or staff because of my connection to the school. Power imbalances constrain free exchange of ideas.
- Many expressed genuine affection for Emerson's teachers and administrators. They either had no criticisms to share or chose not to speak ill of the adults they care about.
- Some had never been to a school other than Emerson, or had attended Emerson from the time they were in elementary or middle school. These students sometimes had a difficult time imagining alternate structures of schooling.

### **Imperfect Interview Spaces**

I had intended to ensure that the interview setting was consistent, comfortable, welcoming, and intensely private. However, unpredictable facility demands at Emerson often made this difficult. The high school administrator and special education director were extremely gracious and provided me with the use of their offices when they were scheduled to be elsewhere. But on several occasions, my co-researcher and I had to change planned locales at the last minute or search for a quieter space when school activity created too much noise. Several times, individuals who had more right to use these spaces than I did, knocked loudly or asked to retrieve things from offices where we were meeting. I was the interloper and did not want to inconvenience anyone, so interviews were sometimes halted for these interruptions. The few interviews that took place after school hours were much easier to manage.

Participants appeared to be unruffled by last-minute changes and interruptions, but I felt uncomfortable subjecting students to these inconveniences. In future research, I will ensure that I have a dedicated space in which to talk with participants so that they will not feel any sense of intrusion on their privacy.

### **Further Concerns and Limitations**

I approached this study with trepidation, knowing that ethnography has the potential to colonize, even erase, its subjects (Madison, 2005). A qualitative researcher has the power to make herself invisible in her own narrative while exposing others in reductive, essentializing ways (Fine, 2006). Trying to represent individuals nearly four decades younger than myself makes me feel like something of an imposter. These teens live in a world that I barely understand—a world of ambiguous realities built around strings of text and ephemeral images on electronic screens. Their lives are shaped in public forums and on private devices, minds saturated with information, aware of a world filled with chaos and conflict, intimately connected and yet profoundly isolated from even their closest friends (Alter, 2017; Jensen, 2015; Jordan & Romer, 2014; Twenge, 2017). I have not lived in that strange world, but I have hovered around its edges. I understand that my limited understanding of their world is problematic. In future study, I would spend more time immersing myself in adolescent culture and trying to better understand how their relationship with social media impacts their perceptions and relationships.

Ultimately, my representations of these young lives are—and will always be—incomplete. The strength of critical approaches to research, and to education, is that they

recognize the impossibility of complete understanding and remind us to continually question our assumptions and revise our conclusions. We must always begin at the point of epoché and approach research with humility, uncertainty, and respect—aware that our understanding will always only be partial. As we hover at the *hyphen* between *self-other* (Fine, 1994), we must be intensely honest and reflective and avoid othering those we intend to serve. Most importantly, we must invite those for whom we are fighting to represent themselves and join as full partners in their struggle.

**CHAPTER 4**  
**THEMES OF ATTRIBUTION: WHAT I LEARNED FROM MY**  
**CO-RESEARCHERS**

**Introduction**

In Chapter 3, I provided an overview of the processes I followed to gather and analyze data for this *Teen Voices* study—from creating a project plan, to recruiting participants, listening to their stories, gathering their creative work, and finally, coding and analyzing a wealth of data. I shared some of the challenges I experienced and insights I gained during this process, then articulated ways in which the study may be flawed. I hope that I expressed, sufficiently, the gratitude I feel for my co-researchers and their generous and wholehearted participation in this study. Each participant was delightful to talk with—some of them confident and articulate, others shy and cautious, but all remarkably candid. It was humbling to learn from the collective wisdom of teens.

**Organization of Study Findings**

In the following pages, I articulate what I learned from these young people. In an effort to bring clarity and a sense of story to the study (and at the risk of creating artificial demarcations between important themes that have emerged), I have chosen to present study findings in three separate chapters.

- Chapter 4, titled *Themes of Attribution*, draws from participant narratives to reveal what these 14 teens understand about the origins of their anxiety, depression and suicidality and what experiences and conditions they identify as the primary drivers of their ongoing struggles.

- Chapter 5, titled *Themes of Coping and Care*, explores how my co-researchers have wrestled with their particular mental health demons at school and have managed to care for themselves and others throughout their ordeals.
- Finally, in Chapter 6, titled *Themes of Critique*, I continue to share the insights of these young people, but I interweave their thoughts and stories with my own. Together we explore how educational leaders and policymakers might better nurture and protect the mental health of the young people for whom they care. I organize Chapter 6 around important elements of *critical pedagogy*—themes of safety, inclusion, recognition, connection, empowerment, and transforming purpose. This chapter serves as both the beginning of study discussion and as springboard for a more explicit analysis and a call to action in Chapter 7.

Each of these three chapters offers a small window into the troubling and sometimes traumatic life experiences endured by these young people. The triad of chapters chronicle the stressors teens negotiate daily at school. I recognize that there are countless ways to organize and represent the lives of others (Ellis, 2004; Madison, 2005). In these retellings I attempt to honor the meanings my co-researchers intended while remaining transparent about my choices. The experiences of 14 young people at a small, idiosyncratic charter school in a staunchly conservative community in Utah are unlikely to be representative of the experiences of all adolescents who experience mental health challenges. I avoid suggesting that the broad themes I have chosen to write about are the most crucial concerns for educators in all schools—only that they are significant in the lives of these study participants at this time.

### **Perceived Causes of Anxiety, Depression, and Suicidality**

In the following pages, I synthesize the 14 narratives that emerged from various versions of the open-ended question: “Will you share your story with me?” Rather than condensing and retelling each story as a cohesive whole to fully honor its complexity (far



preferable if space and time allowed) I instead examine common threads that weave through these narratives. Table 4.1 offers a highly condensed accounting of the many codes I assigned and themes I identified related to the origins of anxiety, depression, and suicidality. This is not meant to be a quantitative representation of participant experiences, nor to suggest that some causes of depression are, in general, more common than others. Statistical measurement is not the work of critical qualitative study

**Table 4.1**

*Perceived Causes of Anxiety, Depression, and Suicidality*

Theme	# of references
Academic stress, perfectionism	104 references
Self-doubt, self-hatred, low self-esteem, negative body image and shame.	102 references
Overwhelming or aversive religious or cultural expectations, including concerns related to gender identity/sexual orientation	84 references
Bullying, exclusion, peer rejection during elementary, middle or high school (attributed to gender identity, physical appearance, or religious, cultural difference from school, community, or family norms). This category includes references to failed romantic relationships and overlaps heavily with the previous category.	79 references
Difficult family circumstances and relationships, including poverty, instability, mobility, neglect and sexual, physical, or emotional abuse.	77 references
Social media and screen time	16 references
Substance abuse	11 references
Genetic predisposition to mental illness	7 references
Negative peer influence	4 references

*Note.* My co-researchers often mentioned a particular stressor or experience multiple times in a single interview. Because this table reflects each discrete reference, it is primarily useful as an illustration of the kinds of traumas and stressors that my co-researchers believe have compromised their happiness and mental health. It is not intended to represent the number of discrete incidents mentioned.

The groupings of themes and key words in Table 4.1 is somewhat arbitrary. Most of the stories my co-researchers shared involved a complex set of circumstances, emotions, and insights intersecting across multiple themes. In Nvivo, I marked interview

transcripts liberally with a rainbow of colored codes. I find this table useful, however, for understanding which experiences and concerns weighed most heavily on the minds of these teens.

The first five themes listed in Table 4.1—*academic stress, self-doubt and shame, bullying and exclusion, religious, cultural, and/or gender expectations, and difficult family circumstances*—were clearly dominant. Academic stress, by reference count, was the most frequently articulated stressor. This may have been, in part, because some interviews took place near the end of a semester when academic pressures were mounting. But the intensity of feeling my co-researchers expressed around the stress of academic work and assessment made it a major concern of this study. Many of my co-researchers suggested that self-doubt about their academic abilities or intellect was playing a powerful role in their ongoing struggles—a disclosure I had not expected from these bright, capable young people, many of whom excel academically.

I was stunned by how many of my co-researchers reported incidents of bullying, exclusion, or misrecognition at school. Nearly all of these incidents had happened in previous years and at other schools, although it may be that some participants were unwilling to tell me about incidents that had occurred at Emerson. My intuitive sense is that these teens disclosed the experiences that had harmed them most deeply, but I cannot know for certain if that is true. Nearly two thirds of these teens had suffered significant family trauma or stress at some point—although most were quick to assure me that they are currently safe and have supportive relationships at home.

At least half of my co-researchers easily identified a single catalyst that marked

the beginning of their troubles—generally related to family upheaval or bullying/exclusion at school. Others reported that multiple experiences and stressors had contributed to their depression, anxiety, or suicidality. The gravity of my co-researchers' experiences and their collective pain was sobering.

The themes listed near the bottom of Table 4.1—*social media, genetic predisposition, substance abuse, and negative peer influence*—were mentioned far less frequently in participant narratives. I was curious as to why these themes were less prevalent than expected. For example, social media is frequently linked to teen depression in scholarly work and the media (Alter, 2017; Twenge, 2017). Yet only after I asked explicit questions about social media in later interviews did these teens articulate the ways in which Instagram and other platforms have contributed to their low self-esteem. I return to this question at the end of this chapter.

Before turning to the narratives, I offer one more illustrative table. This is not an inclusive accounting of every experience, condition or stressor that contributed to each participant's mental distress. Instead, Table 4.2 illustrates the multiplicity of factors that contributed to each participant's depression, anxiety, and/or suicidality. No teen reported fewer than four contributing factors to their mental distress.

It feels disingenuous to reduce each participant to a set of thematic codes. But analyzing their stories in this way has helped me better understand the many conditions and experiences that have contributed to each student's mental and emotional distress. This research has led me to more carefully consider the wide range of curricular and programmatic supports we may need to implement if we truly want to safeguard our

**Table 4.2***Multiplicity of Contributing Factors*

Student	Shame, self-criticism & negative body image	Family trauma, instability, or stress	Academic stress	Bullying, exclusion, Rejection	Cultural religious expectation	Gender identity	Rejection or abuse in sexual or romantic relationships	Genetic factors
1	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
2	X	X	X	X			X	
3	X		X	X			X	X
4	X		X	X	X	X	X	X
5	X	X	X	X		X	X	X
6	X	X	X	X	X		X	
7	X	X		X	X	X	X	
8	X	X		X		X		
9	X	X	X	X				
10	X	X	X		X			X
11	X	X	X	X	X	X		
12	X	X	X	X	X			
13	X	X	X	X			X	X
14	X		X		X	X		X

*Note.* In an effort to protect student identity as fully as possible, I omitted pseudonyms in this table. I also added gender identity as a discrete factor to illustrate how many LGBTQ participants have been harmed by exclusion and discrimination.

students emotional well-being and mental health. If we are committed to helping our students—beyond simply staffing our schools with mental health professionals who primarily deal with the fallout of trauma already inflicted—then we must have a deep understanding of the range of traumas our students have lived through and of the ongoing stressors in their lives. The importance of understanding the circumstances of individual's lives has always been a central concern of critical pedagogy. But at a time when teens are increasingly socially isolated yet constantly exposed on social media; at a time when mass shootings, geopolitical crisis, natural disasters, and a host of additional stressors continually bombard the teen consciousness, a need for understanding is more crucial than ever.

### **Early Onset of Depression and Anxiety**

Almost invariably, when participants shared stories about the origins of their depression, anxiety or suicidality, they began with childhood experiences—specific traumatic events that occurred or anxieties that developed when they were as young as 4 years old. This is a reality that educators and policymakers are beginning to recognize and address through trainings such as *trauma-informed practice* (Griffin, 2019; Utah State Board of Education, 2019). Study after study shows that mental illness increases dramatically with the onset of puberty and adolescence (Avenevoli et al., 2015; Costello et al., 2011). However, depression and anxiety—even suicidality—often emerge well before adolescence (Burstein et al., 2019; Sheftall et al., 2016). By some estimates, as many as 9% of young children suffer from depression (Buda, 2008). Although our

understanding of suicidality in younger children is limited and statistical data remains problematic (Anderson et al., 2016), 43.1% of emergency room visits for suicidal children and youth between 2007 and 2015 were for children between the ages of 5 and 12 (Burstein et al., 2019).

Most of my co-researchers had struggled with mental health trauma for the better part of their young lives. The following table illustrates the age of onset and condition or incident that each participant recalled having been the catalyst for their struggle with depression and/or anxiety. I have removed pseudonyms to protect participant privacy.

This study focuses on adolescent mental health, but its findings have important implications for educators of young students as well. Clearly schools need to be aware, as they plan protective programs and curricula, that significant depression and anxiety can emerge early in the lives of children. Middle and high school educators need to recognize that the young people who arrive on their doorsteps may come with long histories of trauma and mental illness. Had I been better informed during my time as a teacher and as Emerson's principal—had I known more about students' lives—I might have approached curriculum planning and program development in vastly different ways. It is essential that we, as educators, awake to the reality of the significant wounds some students bear when they enter our classrooms. Our minds and hearts must be attuned to those traumas as we plan curricula and orchestrate classroom activities.

In the following pages, I share a few of my co-researcher's stories so that their experiences and insights can provide a window into adolescent life.

**Table 4.3**

*Age of Onset for Depression and/or Anxiety*

Pre K	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Depression/anxiety began as early as kindergarten—related to religiosity, shame and possible sexual abuse													
Unsure of origin, but remembers being anxious as soon as school attendance began.													
Felt anxiety related to body image/existential crisis. Depression began in middle school													
Felt anxiety and depression from bullying, genetics, & academic stress													
Depression began with family trauma and bullying/exclusion at school													
Depression began with “violent” divorce													
Depression—family trauma, academic stress, body image													
Depression began with family trauma, bullying & gender confusion													
Depression due to exclusion & later gender & body issues													
Depression/anxiety related to body image & academic stress													
Depression began with severe bullying and later sexual abuse													
Depression from broken relationship													
Depression began from exclusion due to gender identity													
Depression/anxiety genetic													

*Note.* This table records the age that each participant reported remembering feeling anxious or depressed. The left edge of each shaded bar marks the grade of onset (one student could not remember a time when she was free from anxiety). The right edge marks each participant’s current grade in school.

### Shame and Self-Deprecation

The majority of participants I interviewed had at least some relationship with shame and self-loathing. As I coded instances of negative self-talk, I realized that these self-hate narratives were embedded in nearly every thematic strand I had identified. My co-researchers had experienced shame because they could not save their parents' marriages; because they could not meet the cultural expectations of church or family; because they were not smart enough, talented enough, slender enough, tall enough, or for other inadequacies—real or imagined.

The self-criticism and shame infusing most of these stories took many forms. One student spoke about feeling shame about potential future misdeeds.

I'm always scared I'm going to be a bad person, just because I've seen a lot of men in my life be really bad people. Being a bad person is my biggest fear. Any time I slip up or make a mistake or do something wrong or whatever, I'm always telling myself it's because I'm a bad person.

Another participant worried that somewhere, embedded deep in her genetic code, is the potential to mess things up: "I was neglected and my primary caretaker was a narcissist who had psychosis and addiction. Runs in my family."

Rainey's feelings of inadequacy often surfaced in our conversations. Physically slight, Rainey tended to slip apparition-like through the hallways at school and seemed always to be withdrawing physically, almost apologetically, during our interviews. But I have also witnessed Rainey's powerful physical presence when she is competing as a gymnast. Rainey excels both academically and athletically, and yet she was endlessly self-deprecating during our conversations. Despite spending long hours at a daily practice and



earning multiple awards for her gymnastics skills, she claimed she has not worked hard enough at her sport. Despite a near-perfect grade point average, she spoke with emotion about not being as capable as other students. “That little voice in your head,” she explained, “It’s like, ‘You’re worthless. You’re not enough. You’re not smart enough. Oh, whoops, you made a mistake! How could you do that?’”

Sofia reported that her shame is firmly entrenched in her religious upbringing.

When she was younger, she could not shake the feeling that God and her parents must be severely disappointed in her.

It’s a thinking process I learned when I was a little kid—feeling overwhelming guilt and shame for thinking something that’s not good or doing something that I think my parents wouldn’t like. And it’s not like big things that I *should* actually feel guilty about. It’s just, like, little things.

Sofia shared an experience to illustrate her perpetual feeling of shame:

I got a small tattoo, and I had a tantrum, screaming, crying—so anxious I called my parents, made them take me home. And then I was clinging to my dad and bawling because I felt so guilty. I felt like I was going to fall off of the earth if I didn’t hold on to my dad as tightly as I could and tell him that I was so sorry and that I would change everything about my life, and that I could be punished or whatever.

### **Physical Self-Loathing**

Most commonly stories of shame surfaced when participants spoke about their physical appearance. All but two of my co-researchers expressed some degree of dissatisfaction with their bodies. Most of these students recognized that negative body-image contributes to their ongoing mental health issues.

One particularly vulnerable study participant (pseudonym omitted to ensure privacy) seems to want desperately to fit the typical western standards of beauty. She

reported that body shame is a mainstay of her existence. I met with her several times and body-image came up consistently. This young person expressed great love and admiration for her older sister, but was grieving that she could not meet her sister's standard of physical beauty. In fact, at one point she expressed that she would rather die than continue to bear the burden her sister's embarrassment about her physique. She reached out to me after a particularly rough week and asked to talk. Through tears, she explained that her sister is hurting her deeply:

At night I just lay in bed and I will cry because I feel like she gives me this vibe like she doesn't like me. Like she likes *me*, but not my body and the way I look. And she has this image in her head where she's like, "I want you to look like this." And so, then that sticks in my head. I go to the gym and I see all these thin girls that have beautiful bodies. And I'm just like, "I want to be like that." And I try to go to the gym—all the time. But I have school, homework. I get tired. I can't always go to the gym.

This teen was distraught about her sister's constant reminders to exercise. This obsession with her weight was something she agonized over in every conversation:

She's always like, "Oh, you need to lose weight! You need to go to the gym!." And she knows that I don't like my body, and she knows what low self-esteem I have. And her constantly and every day telling me, "We need to work out to make your stomach flatter, your sides, your this and that." I hate hearing it because, okay, I *get* it! I don't have the perfect body.

Most of my co-researcher's felt that their shame had been self-imposed—the product of a society that expects too much of them. Abigail, a petite, slender freshman with large soulful eyes, remembered feeling anxiety about being overweight in first grade. She was one of five study participants who reported that social media has contributed to their conviction that they do not measure up to other people, physically or intellectually:

I've always had issues with appearance and then I also have issues with not *smart* enough or *talented* enough, or—I don't know—*cool* enough, or whatever.

I kind of feel like it's something that I've imposed on myself. But I also kind of feel like it's the influence of social media and magazines and all that, and just my culture and just this society. I feel like it's mostly, like, just seeing examples of what's perfect.

Abigail recalled that her frustration about her appearance took a back seat to more existential anxieties during her late elementary school years. But the self-loathing returned full force in middle school:

When I got into middle school, I started to have, like, different kinds of body image issues—just worrying, like, all the time...like social anxiety. And then also having, like, those existential thoughts. But I kind of just tuned those out and started being more, like, insecure about my looks and stuff.

When I asked Abigail who she had talked to about her struggles, she responded in a way that I was to hear again and again in these conversations. She had talked to “no one.”

I don't think I really ever told anyone about my body image.... I think I was, like, embarrassed, kind of, and I didn't want anyone to know.... In elementary I was kind of trying to lose weight and stuff, and kind of in middle school, too. And I just didn't want anyone to know. I don't think anyone knew that was the case.

In these conversations, self-imposed critique so often went hand-in-hand with a shame that isolates—a double impact for any vulnerable psyche.

Jazmin, an articulate young lady with a generous smile and warm presence, also remembers feeling shame about her body at an early age. With a cascade of auburn hair and bright green eyes, Jazmin is striking. But she worries about her weight: “Yeah. I think a lot of my depression and anxiety comes from me thinking I'm taking up too much room, she said. “Like, I'm taking up space—I shouldn't be there.” After years of

struggling with the depression and anxiety she felt around her academic performance despite a stellar academic history, Jazmin feels some measure of confidence in her intellectual abilities. But her anxiety over her physical appearance resurfaces regularly: “It’s like, a really big factor,” she sighed.

Energetic, fast-talking, and endlessly charming, Ximena seemed to be holding on to so much pain and frustration that it nearly burst from her when we first talked. More than any other participant, Ximena’s stories of depression centered on her physical appearance:

I kind of feel like Regina George. You know how she’s, like, super ugly and in the end, like, all the sudden joins her friends and she makes all her friends look like really hot people? That’s kind of how I feel with my friends. I feel like they’re all, like, perfect or beautiful, and I’m the one just there—ugly, and making them look like they’re amazing.... I just don’t necessarily feel like I fit with them....

There are these days where I think, “Why are they even friends with me?” Like I’m not pretty like them. I don’t have the perfect body like them. I don’t know why they’re even friends with me or bother to talk to me.

Ximena is sometimes hurt by comments about her appearance that others make carelessly. “If someone says, ‘Oh, you’re so tall; why are your feet so small?’...little things like that really tend to get me because those are things I’m insecure about.” Like Elizabeth and Abigail, Ximena recognizes that being constantly exposed to images of perfect bodies in the media erodes her perception of self:

All these other people are so skinny. And if you’re not skinny, you’re not pretty. That really affects me in my daily life because I feel like if I ever want to date a guy or be who I want to be...[I’m] not able to love my body for the reason that I’m not beautiful, because I’m not skinny.

Ximena says she obsesses about her appearance “a lot of the time” I asked her to

estimate the percentage of time that her depressive episodes have been triggered by body image concerns. “Ninety percent,” she answered.

Even when I’m alone or something, I just will stare at myself in the mirror and pick out all the little things I don’t like and wish I had a little knife to cut it all off or make it go away.

Piper will serve as my final example of a study participant uncomfortable in her skin—although I could share several more. When we first talked, Piper struck me as unusually self-possessed for a freshman. Her stories revealed, however, how deeply insecure she felt about her physical appearance. An acting veteran at a young age, Piper had recently played a role in a local film production. She had been excited by the rare opportunity, but was troubled by the film’s storyline, which required her to transform from being a withered, ugly hag with gnarled hands and harsh, twisted facial features (all accomplished with make-up and a latex masque), to become, magically, a fair young maiden. Piper dreaded the audience’s reaction—believing that they would struggle to imagine her as beautiful. “I was really, really scared, she said, “I was like, ‘Wow, people are going to laugh at me.’”

Unbeknownst to Piper, I had seen the premier screening and had been awed by this moment in the film—primarily, I think, because I could sense her vulnerability. The audience seemed to feel this as well. Despite her fears, Piper’s transformation had been poignant. She was stunning. As she recounted the story in our time together, she seemed unaware that her inner beauty had transcended any physical limitations she may have imagined.

During each of these poignant interviews, I was jolted by how deeply injured

students are by their feelings of inadequacy. I realized just how feeble our efforts have been to address this debilitating part of student life in the curriculum. I wondered how an educator could best intercede to break or soften this cycle of self-criticism and isolating shame.

### **Anorexia and Bulimia**

Often in these narratives, self-loathing manifested as eating disorders. In initial interviews, most of these teens had failed to mention their various battles with anorexia, bulimia, or self-harm. Perhaps these topics felt too tender or private. Only in later interviews did participants trust me enough to reveal these particular battles.

When Piper shared her experience with her role in the film, she also revealed her long battle with eating disorders.

I used to struggle, a little bit, with anorexia and bulimia. When I was like 14, I weighed 70 pounds.... I was really, really little. I was just, like, flesh and bones basically. That made me really, really unhappy for a long time.

In several conversations, Piper talked about what an important role the arts have played in her life. In fact, she credits dancing with saving her from her eating disorder:

I weighed like 70 pounds, and then...we had three or four hours of rehearsal every night, and it was normally, like, very intense dancing. And for the first couple weeks of rehearsal, I would pass out at rehearsal, just because I wasn't eating but I was doing so much physical exertion. And so, I started forcing myself to get better because I cared about [the performance] so much.

Elizabeth had struggled with eating disorders more than most. A tall, willowy young woman with a soft voice and gentle demeanor, she revealed, apologetically, during our third and final interview that she is still skirting the edge of anorexia. Her most recent battle had begun only a few months prior:

I was super anxious all the time, and I felt super out of control. And that kind of reflected actually on my eating habits a little bit—just like restricting.... What happened was: As it got kind of bad, my boyfriend noticed. So, we kind of talked about it a lot and kind of stopped it before—

She interrupted herself, struggling to express what could potentially happen. She sighed deeply, resignedly, then went on to explain: “If you get, like, really, really into it—it’s really bad.”

She spoke from experience, knowing the difficulties a full-blown eating disorder can deliver. In seventh grade, at 5’ 9,” she dropped to under 100 pounds. At the time, no one seemed to recognize that she was in trouble. “People always kind of made jokes,” she explained. “You know when people make jokes...just like, ‘You should eat something, you look anorexic.’” When I asked Elizabeth why no one had noticed that she was losing too much weight—even though her teachers knew that she had recently been suicidal—she quickly excused the oversight: “It’s really hard with that kind of stuff. It’s really difficult because it’s not easy to tell, honestly.”

Elizabeth’s forgiving attitude toward those who had been so oblivious to her crisis was typical in these narratives. Most participants were quick to place the blame for their troubles on themselves and were protective of the friends and adults in their lives. I sensed that this compassion was deeply genuine.

Body image is still at the core of Elizabeth’s mental health struggles. The complexity and ambiguity of her emotions surrounding her appearance clearly confuse her. In one interview, her voice broke with the frustration she was feeling:

I want to dress up and look nice...but then at the same time, it’s like—”People will look at me, and I don’t *want* people to look at me.” But I want to look good because I feel insecure about myself, and it’s just kind of like—a constant back

and forth.

Elizabeth has read extensively about body image distortion and recognizes that her own issues may be tied up in past sexual abuse. “You don’t feel safe in your body, and you don’t recognize your body almost,” she explained. “And you kind of want to get rid of the body that you once had.”

### **Exclusion, Misrecognition, Gender Identity, and Shame**

As I began to write about the LGBTQ participants in this study who have struggled with self-loathing and shame, I realized how impossible it would be to convey their experiences without first writing about the bullying, exclusion, and misrecognition they often experienced before coming to Emerson. Threads that run between themes are impossible to untangle in each of these 14 narratives, but this is especially true in stories shared by Emerson’s queer, transgender and androgynous teens.

It is important to this narrative to understand Emerson’s relationship to the local LGBTQ community. When Emerson opened its doors, so long ago, issues of gender identity were far from our minds—although we tried to create a welcoming, inclusive school for all students. Almost immediately we drew a culturally diverse population. Families in the community who had felt marginalized, often because they did not belong to the LDS faith, found refuge at a school where administrators and teachers welcomed diversity. Almost every teenager at a nearby Evangelical congregation enrolled at Emerson. A smaller group of families who attended a Hindu temple some distance away joined our ranks. Our students were also diverse in ways we did not always recognize. As



accepting and protective as we tried to be, in those early years we were clueless about the LGBTQ students attending our school. At our first high school reunion, nearly 8 years later, a number of our especially gentle and reserved alumni from Emerson's earliest years had "come out" as queer or transgender after graduating. Reflecting back, I realized that these students had been closeted during their time at Emerson and that we had failed to recognize their vulnerabilities and needs.

A decade ago, our demographics began to shift dramatically as Emerson became widely known as a refuge for LGBTQ students who had been bullied, misrecognized, or closeted elsewhere. In our first interview, Zoey told me that at her previous high school, Emerson was disparaged as "the Gay School." A local LGBT support organization regularly refers their young clients to Emerson. Although Emerson does not keep an official accounting, the school's GSA advisor believes that as many as 30% of Emerson's high school students currently identify as LGBTQ.

Over the years, Emerson's administrators and teachers have educated themselves to better meet the needs of our LGBTQ students. My co-researchers certainly felt safe enough to express themselves authentically. Gabriel, who is transgender, lovingly asserted in our second interview, "Emerson is a school of freaks!" He added:

I also think that because we're sort of the outcasts from other schools and we come here because there's no place for us in other schools, we're all sort of on the same page—"I didn't fit in here, so maybe I'll fit in with these other people who didn't fit in." So, we don't really get to pick and choose our friends based on identity, but it's also like, we pick and choose our friends based on experiences, and we all relate to each other.

When I protested Gabriel's use of the words "freak" and "outcasts," he laughed. "Okay," he conceded, "misfits!"

Matthew, the only cis-gender male I interviewed, claims never to have “felt down” because of his physical appearance. “As a white middle-class male,” he explained, “it was less likely to be a problem for me.” In contrast, the study participants who have transitioned (or are currently transitioning) from female to male, one who identifies as androgynous, and another as a “demi-girl,” report that negative self-image has impacted their mental health in profound ways. The stories of Isaac, Gabriel, Liam, and Zoey illustrate the added burdens that LGBTQ students often face.

### **Isaac**

Isaac, a transgender student with big dreams and a desire to break free of Utah, believed that his suicidality was largely related to “self-hatred and self-image issues” that began as early as sixth grade:

I first realized I was depressed in, like, sixth grade, and that just kind of was like, “Oh, yikes!” And I dealt with that on my own. I didn’t really talk to anybody about it. My mom might have recognized it, but she never said anything. When I was 13 and I realized I was trans—that came with a whole new onslaught of, like, depression and not being comfortable with myself—and gender dysphoria.

Isaac began to have panic attacks about this time and eventually turned to his mother for help. But despite medication and his mother’s loving support, in eighth grade he considered taking his own life for the first time:

It was the day after Christmas, and I went to take a handful of pills, and then I realized what I was doing, and I spit them all back out, and I told my mother. And I just cried and cried a lot. And so, at that point, we went to the ER and I was hospitalized for two weeks.

Isaac talked about his experiences several years later at the first high school he attended, where teachers and administration had found it difficult to accept his male

identity. Although the school counselor emailed each of his teachers to share Isaac's preferred name and pronouns, none of them seemed to understand or care about these requests and continued to use his female birth name:

It sucked because I was trying so hard to only be me, and only be the person that I wanted to be identified as. And every substitute, every rude teacher—it was always my birth name, and I just wanted to...I was like trying my hardest to keep that covered and closed off—that being called that was really, really hard—because I'd have to explain it to people and I just didn't want to have to do that.

One teacher was defiant, holding an authoritarian line:

During roll call, he'd call me by my birth name, and I either wouldn't answer or I'd tell him my real name. And he'd be like, "But that's not on your birth certificate." And he would just make up all kinds of excuses and things to not gender me correctly...or call me by the right name. And when I talked to the administrators, they didn't do anything. They just told me I could switch out of the class. He got no reprimands, no warnings, no anything.

Isaac sought support from school administrators on several occasions when he felt excluded or misrecognized, but was disappointed by their lack of responsiveness. "I would talk to them, and I didn't get anything," he explained. "I still had to use segregated bathrooms. I still had to use the girls' locker room." As his frustration and isolation at the school intensified, Isaac tried to assert his identity:

I would write on my neck in, like, eyeliner, and it said, "I'm a boy." And it didn't really help—but it *kind of* helped. It just made people ask questions, which was kind of good. But one time this girl was like, "So you really think you're a boy?" And I was like...(he sighed heavily) "It's not that I *think* I'm a boy, it's that I *am* a boy.

Isaac contrasted this with his experience at Emerson, where he doesn't feel he has to fight for acceptance:

The first day, I got here, they're like, "This is Isaac," and "He is going to be in your class today." And it was so wonderful that on the roll it was changed to the name I use, and people really respected my gender enough to ask: "Oh, when we

go on this college trip, do you want to be bunked with the girls or the guys?” And the fact that they cared enough to ask and they cared enough to place me where I was most comfortable was so wonderful. And, like, the fact that here I never have to explain myself or be like, uh, “Hey, this is who I am or this is the type of recognition I need,” or that type of thing—that’s really wonderful.

Isaac still struggles with body image issues to some extent:

I don’t really feel it at school, just because it’s Emerson and it’s a lot more accepting. I felt it at public school for sure, just because I was so different. I was one of two trans people at my [previous] school, and so I definitely felt it there. But here I don’t feel it. Outside in the real world, I feel it a little bit, just because I still am in this weird androgyny phase where I don’t necessarily pass 100 percent. And so, I feel that a little bit. But it’s mostly a self-image issue.

Isaac also recognizes a connection between his use of social media and his negative self-perception He is consciously trying to moderate its use:

I’ve noticed that I have this point where I’m like, if I’m not on social media too much, I’m doing a lot better, and I’m like, Wow, I really appreciate who I am and I appreciate where I’m going and how much I’ve accomplished. And then the more I’m on social media, the more I’m like, “Ugh, I wish I was different!” Lately I’ve been working on it because I do like social media for the connection, so I’ve been working on trying to manage my self-image issues with still being able to be on social media

## **Gabriel**

Gabriel, who is transgender, is an affable, determined young man who exerts himself tirelessly at school and is looking forward to finding his place in the world.

Gabriel reports that he has felt more peace about his physical appearance over the past year. But it has been a long struggle. He has long been frustrated with societal expectations for his body.

I’m still struggling with depression and a lot of self-esteem issues because through my entire life I’ve been told—especially in the church—a lot of very bizarre ideas of what was considered beautiful.

Gabriel expressed how confusing it was to be told, on the one hand, that he must be modest, but also that he must be beautiful—the “perfect woman.”

So that was super confusing. Even though I’m out as trans, I still struggle with a lot of that because I still have the same body that I did.

Gabriel acknowledged that going through puberty is “tough for everyone—everyone’s insecure about that.”

As an 18- year old who has been admitted to his first-choice college and recently earned statewide recognition for his academic and extracurricular accomplishments, Gabriel has gained a lot of self-confidence. He claims that he worries less now about his appearance and more about his health. He wants to ride rodeo on a college team and is determined to be prepared:

I grew up being trained to be a barrel racer, but that’s a women’s sport, so I’m taking my granddad’s ideas of myself and turning it on its head, and I’m going to be a bronc rider—because he would hate it so much!

Gabriel plans to take a year and have top surgery (to remove breast tissue) before he begins college, “Because it’s going to be really hard otherwise,” he explains.

I have to pretty much do it next year. So, that’s what I’m planning on, and then from there I will just be a man. And if people have questions, I’m more than willing to talk about it as long as they’re being respectful, because I think it’s important to share experiences about that sort of thing, just in case someone else is wondering, like, “Is this something I can do? Is this something that is normal?” And I want to be able to say, “Yeah, it’s fine.”

## **Liam**

Liam, an extraordinarily talented musician and artist, has delicate facial features and a sensitive demeanor. He chooses to be identified as “androgynous.”

Liam reported that his negative self-image began with troubling elementary-

school relationships. In fourth grade, his best friend was already struggling with an eating disorder and suicidality:

Being exposed to all of that made my stress levels go up more. So that kind of like started...I got familiar with it through that—suicide and stuff—because she would tell me, “Yeah, I drank bleach the other day.” So that was scary.

The stress of dealing with his friend’s mental health challenges at such a young age led Liam to experiment with self-harm for the first time. “I would get body image issues, kind of just like thinking about *her* body image issues.”

In sixth grade, Liam began to question his gender identity. He remembers that school did not feel safe. Sexual harassment at his school was prevalent and he did not feel as though he could turn to anyone there to ask for help for himself or for a close friend who was also self-harming. He does not remember if a counselor was available or not. He never thought to ask.

About this time, Liam’s parents divorced. He remembers responding to the stress he was feeling by dissociating—mentally disconnecting from familiar experiences and relationships. He told me about his first frightening experience:

I was laying in my brother’s bed. I would sometimes sleep in his room.... And I think it was in the middle of the day, I was laying there in, like, a depression and just not doing anything, staring at the wall. And I remember just thinking like, I’m in a coma. Everything is fake. Like, my mom is just a figment of my imagination. I was crying.... and my mom was on a business trip. I called her and I was like, “Mom, you’re not real.”

By the time Liam was in eighth grade, he knew, definitively, that he did not want to be a girl. Although he spoke respectfully and positively about the school he was attending at the time, he felt isolated and lonely there. He started self-harming in earnest. Liam was not yet open about his gender identity and the stress of incongruity became

increasingly intense. He remembers the breaking point—a day when his older sister drove him to school. “I just remember seeing the school and sobbing, crying. Just, like—I hated it.”

Liam began to look for ways to alter his feminine appearance. “I started learning how to bind my chest, and that was really nice,” he told me. “I just felt comfortable.” The next year he transferred schools again. For the first time, he told a friend (and a sometimes romantic partner) about his desire to have a male name:

I wanted to change my birth name, “Sarah.” It’s a fine name or whatever, you know. But it just—for some reason, being called “she” and being called “Sarah” just didn’t feel right. And I didn’t like how it felt.

Liam learned about Emerson when the school sponsored a “Queer High School Prom” for the community (at the request of a local LGBTQ support organization). He transferred to Emerson his freshmen year. Today he is still somewhat ambivalent about his gender. He reports feeling most comfortable being androgynous, but he accepts either the “he” pronoun, “because it’s, like, the easiest for most people,” he explains, or “they” if people are willing to use that pronoun. Liam says others try to be respectful of his pronouns and name change. He is understanding when they sometimes forget.

### **Zoey**

Vivacious and perpetually upbeat, with a nervous energy that seems to explode when she is talking about difficult experiences, Zoey identifies as a *demi-girl* (she feels that she is only partially female) and says that her depression is strongly linked to her unhappiness with her body:

I don’t like my breasts, and then the fact that I have super thick thighs...I really

don't like that. And they can be really useful sometimes, but I just feel like it's just lots of flabby fat.

Although Zoey did not initially report having an eating disorder, she told me that she has not eaten during the day at school since middle school:

It was like the middle of the year, seventh grade, I started—no, actually, it was like the beginning of the year, I started not to eat lunch because it kind of just felt weird to eat maybe like sandwiches in front of other people. And I don't really know why or how, but, yeah, I just kind of stopped eating the lunch.

At a certain point, Zoey stopped eating breakfast as well. Most days she does not eat at all until she is home again. “Don't you get hungry?” I asked her.

“I do,” she answered, “but I suffer through it because pain's normal.”

I think I must have looked startled because she immediately tried to reassure me:

“I promise, I eat during the summer!”

Only in our last interview did Zoey tell me the truth about her choice not to eat at school:

Do you want me to tell you another reason [I don't eat] that might make you kind of sad? It's because I don't like my body and my pudgy stomach. Part of the reason I wouldn't eat lunch or breakfast, mainly lunch, though, during middle school, was because I was trying to go anorexic. I don't like my body.

As I listened to the stories these LGBTQ+ participants shared, I felt grateful that these teens had found a welcoming home at Emerson. But I was furious at the people and institutions that had rejected them or made them feel worthless and unloved at times. I was angry that they had felt a need to leave their neighborhood schools where they should have been valued and protected. Their stories renewed my resolve to somehow help educators understand these silent exclusions—or intentional wounds—that happen in classrooms, lunchrooms, and quiet corners in every school. I felt an urgency to



somehow influence school policies and practices so that more attention will be given to ensuring that all teens feel valued and respected in their school communities.

### **Feeling Unsafe and Unhappy at School: Bullying and Exclusion**

The need for connection, inclusion and friendship were critical themes for all of my co-researchers. Who among us does not want to belong? Ten of these teens talked about incidents of physical or emotional abuse that had happened before coming to Emerson. Most had experienced more subtle forms of exclusion or marginalization. No one mentioned being mistreated by their peers at Emerson, although two participants expressed frustration at the level of gossip or drama that is sometimes generated in such a small community.

In the previous section, I shared stories of marginalization and misrecognition related to gender expression. But both cisgender and queer participants had experienced other forms of cruelty and exclusion as well. Several had been left emotionally bereft and depressed when a romantic relationship ended. A few talked about the cultural exclusions they had suffered living among people who could not understand them or who judged them harshly. Most of these experiences of persecution or exclusion had happened at school—most commonly during elementary or middle school. Several participants had transferred to Emerson to escape the isolation or misrecognition they were experiencing at their neighborhood schools. All of these young people articulated how profoundly these experiences had affected their mental health. I share a few of these stories here.

## Piper

Piper remembered vividly the darkness and suicidal thoughts that engulfed her during fourth grade. Her family situation was decidedly difficult, but her school life was unbearable due to cruel exclusions:

It was especially bad then. And I had no friends in school. I was getting bullied a lot.... I remember just dreading school. Honestly—*dread*—that’s probably the best word to describe it. Like, I just hated it—hated my life at that point.

I asked Piper if she was in danger of actually committing suicide at such a young age. She answered, “I don’t know if I could have really ever brought myself to do it, but I remember thinking about it a lot and thinking about specific ways of doing it.”

## Ximena

Ximena’s depression began in seventh grade when a brief romantic relationship ended abruptly. She was hurt and confused by the rejection: “I was like, ‘What did I do wrong? Did I do something to upset him?’”

But Ximena’s real trouble began when with a female classmate and romantic rival began to confront and threaten Ximena in classrooms and hallways:

The other girl hated me. Like the whole entire school year she was the rudest to me. I remember this one time I was going to my locker and she came face to face with me and was like, ‘Why are you talking to my boyfriend?’ She was face to face to me, and I was scared because I thought she was going to hit me, and I never hit anyone in my life, and so I was panicking. I was like oh, my gosh, is she going to hit me? Like this fear in me came out and then she was telling me, ‘You better watch out!’

Ximena spent much of our first conversation together revisiting this trauma. “I don’t understand,” she lamented, “I was always nice to her. I would always be like ‘Hey, how are you?’ and stuff like that.”

Things reached a crisis point on Ximena's twelfth birthday. The day began pleasantly enough. Ximena reports receiving cards, gifts and birthday greetings from many of her friends. But once again, her nemesis confronted her menacingly in public, pressing Ximena against a locker and yelling accusations.

She ruined my whole entire day.... I cried the whole entire day and I just felt like crap. And so I was like, "I don't even want to celebrate my birthday anymore." I went home. I laid in my bed. I cried. I didn't tell my mom about it, because I didn't want her to feel like people can get to me.

We all know the intensity of such feelings, having been teens ourselves. But Ximena's deep pain about this time in her life remains blistering. She started cutting her wrists that year—something she attributes to the bullying and to another pivotal experience shared later in this chapter.

Every night I would lay in bed or put myself down a lot. I still do to this day. I would just tell myself how pathetic I was, how worthless, useless. I would just like lay there crying, crying. When I did it [cutting], it kind of helped because it relieved my pain and everything.

I later learned that this self-harming behavior, begun in the midst of middle school bullying and unhappiness, continues to be a problem for Ximena.

### **Elizabeth**

Despite years of sexual abuse, Elizabeth did not hesitate to cite a different experience as the origin of her depression. In fourth grade, Elizabeth attended a new school where she felt isolated and lonely. "I didn't even have any friends," she explained, "That's not even like an exaggeration. I just didn't have any friends." Some of the girls in Elizabeth's class sensed her vulnerability and targeted her relentlessly:

There was this group of girls that would take me to the bathroom, and would put

my face in the toilet.... They would have me do their homework and stuff like that, and if I didn't do it—they would do that.

Elizabeth eventually told her parents, who immediately confronted school administrators.

But to her knowledge, Elizabeth's tormentors faced no consequences for their behavior.

She does recall not being allowed to be alone in the halls after that:

I think they tried to be mediating. Rather than like, "These girls are doing something wrong to you," instead, it was just like, "We're not going to stop what *they're* doing—we're just going to stop what's happening with *you*," if that makes sense. They never really had the girls apologize or anything like that.

Elizabeth was relieved when her family moved to Utah the following year. But despite finding good friends and feeling more comfortable at school, Elizabeth's anxiety and depression lingered through middle school. During high school, this depression deepened and a romantic rejection spurred a cycle of self-harm:

I really liked this guy.... We were hanging out one day, and were kissing and stuff. And I was like, "Oh, we're going to make out before we start dating," and I was like, "This is awesome!" And then, the next day, he was kind of like, "I don't really want to be with you."

That was hard for me because [she paused, then chose her words carefully]. I hadn't really had a consensual...that was my first consensual thing with someone, and it was like...he didn't even...it wasn't a positive...yeah.

Elizabeth talked about how effortlessly she had slipped into self-harming behaviors after that.

Now in her junior year of school, Elizabeth is well-liked. But she rarely hangs out with peers between classes or at lunch. She avoids extracurricular events. Her boyfriend, a college student she met at a downtown art show, is also a suicide survivor. She is grateful for the understanding and support that they provide for each other. When I asked Elizabeth why she does not spend time with other students at the school, she explains:

A lot of times...I'm not in a good mood. I just want to be in a room by myself and away from everyone. So sometimes I tend to avoid people, and then some people are like, "Oh, are you mad at me?" I'm just like, "No, I just don't want to be around people. I don't want to talk to anybody"—just be in that bubble kind of thing.

Elizabeth feels some ambiguity about this self-imposed seclusion. "I want friends, she insists, "but then it's like, 'Oh, but I don't want to *make* friends.'" She struggled to articulate what she was feeling. "I don't mind being alone, but physically I *am* alone...For some reason I feel lonely, but not alone. I don't know if that makes any sense."

### **Zoey**

Zoey recalled that her depression began "low-key" in fourth grade when she had difficulty making friends:

I was too afraid to ask people to hang out with me during recess. And so, because I wanted them to ask me, I was like, "Oh, they don't like me." So because of that, I spent most of fourth grade during recess like walking around the track by myself.

She eventually made friends and reports enjoying the rest of her elementary school years.

But depression returned full force during middle school:

I think it was because it was a public school, so it was bigger and just a lot going on—not really in my life, but just figuring myself out—stuff like that.... It was a lot more hectic, kind of, because there's a lot of people trying to get to their places and a lot of people in class. I realized I kind of have social anxiety.

Zoey did not say that she was bullied during middle school, but her relationships were problematic and she often avoided social settings. Zoey was not afraid to share with me how angry and frustrated she had been during those years, to the point that she sometimes felt "murderous intent" toward her peers. "Especially people from elementary school because I kind of grew to hate them," she said. When I tried to understand the origin of

such intense feelings, Zoey launched into a long, complicated narrative that covered a range of emotions and experiences, but her sensitivity to a chaotic, crowded environment seemed to be key:

I guess because of the environment, I...kind of grew to hate the people I was around because they were super talkative, and I just wanted to be by myself and quiet. They were super loud on the bus, super loud in classes, and I was just like, “Shut up, shut up, shut up!”

Zoey initially rejected the idea that her emerging queer identity had anything to do with her depression and anxiety during middle school—she was not yet out as gay or as a *demi-girl*. But as she began to talk about her various romantic crushes during that time—both male and female—something seemed to dawn on her: “I’m kind of now realizing that I think most of my depression was mostly on romantic aspects,” she reflected. “That kind of meant more heartbreak because of [being gay].”

Zoey tended not to dwell on specific traumas she had experienced during her turbulent middle school years, but she occasionally revealed just how difficult her world had been at the time. Her choice to stop eating at school was one of these indicators—her negative self-perception another. She also downplayed any depression or anxiety that she might currently be feeling, but she occasionally revealed herself. During a recollection of her middle school experiences, she reported: “I kind of got back to [feeling] like no one cares about me—and just hating myself,” she said. When I asked her why she had felt that way, she inadvertently flipped into present tense: “I don’t really know why I do. I just do.”

## Gabriel

When I asked Gabriel to reflect on the primary cause of his depression, he answered: “Loneliness—just feeling alone. I think that was the biggest thing.”

Gabriel lived in a small, rural community through second grade and recalls feeling safe and accepted at the sunny, newly-built public elementary school he attended there. He does not remember any cliques or unkindness at all. Just before third grade his family moved in with his grandparents to another city. His frustration with the move was compounded by his unhappiness at his new school:

It was just like super stressful. The kids there were very not nice.... That was a horrible experience. The kids were just very, I don't know, I blocked a lot of that out. But I remember it not being incredibly fun, and just feeling very alienated and pushed away. I certainly didn't feel welcome there at all.

Gabriel's parents recognized his difficulty and eventually transferred him to another school. He reports that by now he was beginning to recognize that he was somehow different from other girls his age, but the concepts “gay” and “transgender” weren't remotely familiar to him. He was still very much a little girl:

So yeah, we moved to this new place and started school. I would say that these kids were even worse but on a more personal level. They would sort of find pieces about me—not just generalizations. Like I used to really, really love the color pink and I used to love horses and the traditional girly stuff. The first couple months of being there, it was totally gone. Like all of that passion was just kind of stripped away because I felt super alienated and degraded for liking that sort of stuff.... I never felt like I had a very good place there. I wasn't very well-liked. There were a lot of cliques and it was very like...(he trailed off).

Growing up at a school that didn't really have any cliques and was very open and all that, I was super confused by the whole thing.

Before fifth grade, Gabriel convinced his parents to let him leave school altogether and take online classes. He did not return to formal schooling until he came to

Emerson 3 years ago. He remembers these years away from school as being intensely lonely. He wanted to rejoin society, but returning to school felt risky and frightening after so many years of isolation. Gabriel shared a speech he had recently written. In it he expressed how hopeless he had felt by the time he reached high school:

Three years ago, I never would have been able to imagine that I would be here, standing in front of you, because three years ago, I thought I would be dead.

Three years ago, getting up every morning was a battle against myself that I felt destined to lose. And three years ago, I was scared, suicidal. I thought I was worthless, unwanted.

I've struggled against chronic depression since I was young. Bullying, rejection and an overwhelming loneliness wore me down—put apathy where my hope had been; dread in place of passion. Throughout my early education I was unwelcome and removed from the communities that surrounded me.

I'm a gay, transgender kid who grew up with the dangerous mentality that the pain I experienced was my fault, that I deserve something less than happiness. I thought that unless I could do something amazing as a child, I would never accomplish anything great as an adult. Three years ago, I was hopelessly sick of myself and everything I was.

Gabriel delivered this speech to an audience of Utah state legislators and educators. His honesty seemed to make a few people shift uncomfortably in their seats. But most felt the bravery and beauty of his story of transformation.

### **Liam**

Liam could not recall being bullied or excluded in elementary school in an urban area of Michigan, but he does remember being traumatized by the fighting he witnessed at school: “Like at the bus stop there would be fights, like physical fights—so it was very stressful.” But by his sixth-grade year, his parents had divorced and he was living in a new state. This was the first of several years that he felt he did not quite fit in: “I didn’t



really have friends that I felt connected to,” he explained.

When Liam first moved to Utah in seventh grade, he attended what he describes as a “traditional” charter school which, he reports, “was okay for a year.” The students seemed nice enough and the small community eased some of his anxiety. But Liam grew increasingly uncomfortable with the school’s culture:

I only got a week in and then...I stopped going there because there was a lot of homophobia and just a lot of chaos. It’s very similar to a public school—even though it’s a charter school. It’s very over-crowded and, yeah... a lot of slurs used.

Although the small home-schooling group Liam joined next felt like a better fit, a falling out with a boyfriend in the group left him, once again, feeling isolated:

I didn’t really have any friends on my own. And so once me and my boyfriend broke up, I didn’t have friends. And my mom was working from home and had been working from home for a couple of years, I think. So it was nice sometimes, I got to see her when I would do work at home. But most of the day, she would have to work in her office. So I would sit downstairs. I would do my work—which is fine—it was just very isolating... I was really lonely.

Stories of isolation and loneliness were much more common than I had expected from these teens. The stories caused me to reflect on my many years at Emerson, which brought forward the faces of some of the students I hadn’t known well. I dredged up a memory I had tried to suppress—of a student who attended Emerson for a few short months, kept to herself, and then suddenly left—just a few months before she took her own life. It had been easy at the time to avoid feeling culpable. Emerson was, after all, a school where everyone worked hard to reach out, to be inclusive and supportive. But I was haunted by images of her quiet, hunched figure, alone in the hallways, writing poetry and making herself invisible. I wondered if anyone had made an effort to learn her story. I had not.

## **Religiosity and Cultural Exclusion**

I did not ask participants about their religious beliefs, but it was a theme that came up often as these young people talked about their experiences of marginalization. A majority discussed ties to the LDS faith—something that surprised me. Emerson has attracted so many students from other faiths that I expected a more representative mix of study participants. Several of these teens talked about struggling to understand their place in a culture and faith that they do not always agree with or understand. A few expressed feeling out of place in their religious congregations. Some felt rejected by a culture that does not seem to recognize or respect their individual beliefs or their gender identity:

Zoey talked about this on several occasions:

If I'm at church, then I'm really quiet about it [gender identity] because I don't want to get into arguments. Although, when they are being kind of like homophobic, I'm like, 'I want to scream!' [But] I'm quiet because I just don't want to have to deal with that.

In the following pages, I share a few of the narratives that illustrate this intersection of marginalization and religiosity.

### **Matthew**

Matthew grew up in a small rural community in Utah—one of only a few non-Mormons at his school. He reports that he has always been an outsider: “When you live in [his hometown],” he explained, “it’s unorthodox to be not Mormon.”

In fifth grade, Matthew experienced both physical and social abuse at his school:

Yeah, I was kind of the freak at middle school.... I actually had to leave. That's why I went to Emerson, because I had no friends. And I was also not Mormon and people don't like that. And, you know, I used to get beaten a lot physically.

## **Gabriel**

When Gabriel talked about his experiences of exclusion, he expressed anger at a religion that does not respect or understand his transgender identity. “I was trained to not see myself as not good enough by anyone’s standards,” he said. “My parents never really seemed to mind—it was people at the church.” He elaborated:

I think a lot of the gender roles that were pushed onto me had a big impact on that [his self-image]. I think that started about the time that I started presenting more masculine, and I got a lot of flak for that. Because it was always like, “No, you’re a girl—you have to wear your hair long; you have to wear dresses; you have to like just people at the church.”

## **Sofia**

When I asked Sofia if she could summarize the cause of her depression in a few sentences, she used just two words: “Religion and family (referring to genetics).” “Mostly religion,” she added. “If I was born without religion, I’d probably still have depression, but it would not be as bad.”

Much of Sofia’s story centered about the shame she had felt for believing that she was a constant disappointment to her family and her church:

I just felt like I was a bad person because of how I was kind of like raised in the church and stuff. And then, like anxiety would be really bad. I couldn’t be at home without shaking... being really, really scared that I was just a terrible person.

Sofia was remarkably candid when talking about how her emerging sexuality intensified these feelings of shame. She wanted me to know that her parents are always supportive and that she does not blame them for her distress. Sofia knows that her parents love and support her and are worried about her ongoing battle with depression and anxiety. “I

mean,” she says, “Mom cries every other day.”

Sofia believes that her feelings of shame are largely self-imposed, but that they developed because of the LDS culture in which she is immersed. She feels paralyzed by her guilt at times:

In middle school it spiked up again when I started to be more interested in guys and stuff, and had trouble with my parents, which would make me feel really guilty and make me really, really depressed. I would go to school and I would feel like a different person, and go home and feel terrible about it. If I would kiss a guy at school, or something like that, then I would go home and feel really bad because I’d feel like...I don’t know. I just felt like I was a bad person because of how I was kind of like raised in the church and stuff. I just hated myself. I think I just hated myself for having emotions and for not like being exactly what my parents would want me to be.

As Sofia matured and dabbled in some of the things that teenagers tend to try, her sense of shame intensified. She felt guilty about having sexual thoughts, about vaping and taboo behaviors. She shared something especially traumatic that had happened at her previous high school:

I kissed a guy in public. Well, I didn’t kiss him on purpose. He started making out with me in front of a couple of cameras, and he got so popular. And I got called a slut, like, every day. I didn’t realize there was any problem with it either. It just seemed like, you know, guys just joking. Like they wouldn’t try to hide it.... I would wear chokers to school just because I liked them. They’d be like, ‘Oh, it’s your black belt for sucking his dick.’”

As embarrassed as Sofia was at the time, she did not feel indignation at the double-standard and the exposure—only resignation. “I didn’t even realize that being treated this way was wrong,” she said. “I didn’t think there was anything wrong with that until this year when I realized that you don’t treat people like that.”

**Ximena**

Ximena's experiences with bullying in seventh grade were exacerbated when she was caught doing something that her parents and the school judged as morally reprehensible, although the specific behavior is common among young teens. Her school, a large public junior high, reacted dramatically, calling the police and ultimately expelling Ximena and, in effect, excluding her from her established social world. She was forced to find another school to attend for her eighth-grade year. "I ended up losing all my friends," Ximena reported. Her feelings of shame over the incident were largely centered on the disappointment that her mother expressed:

I felt awful about myself. I never wanted intentionally to break her heart. I never wanted to do that and so I remember that day. I cried. I cried because I felt sick, I felt like an awful daughter. I let my mom down and I didn't want to do that.

**Liam**

Liam talked about how difficult it was to get appropriate therapy in a community so entrenched in the cultural norms of the LDS church. His first experience with therapy dissolved when it became clear that he could not talk frankly with his counselor about his inner turmoil over religion:

It became a gap between us because religion is a part of my identity, and I struggle a lot with it, and I just want to talk about that.... I would talk about being frustrated with the LDS religion and stuff, and he would kind of say like, "Yeah, we can be really frustrated when the apostles aren't perfect,"—the kind of stuff that I've heard before that people say. He was kind of brushing it aside, and I asked him, I said, "Can I talk about religion? Because I know you're a Mormon." I mean, you know, I'm 16, and if this was, like, a professional therapy position. I shouldn't have to ask and it shouldn't have to be an issue. But, yeah, so that just didn't work out.

Raised in the LDS church and living in an orthodox LDS home, Liam struggled to

understand how religion fit into his own life:

I'm so interested in it from, like, even a scholarly standpoint. Like, what makes people believe in religion? Where did it come from, you know?

My dad—my biological dad—is atheist, and my mom is LDS and she married an LDS man. And so, it's just trying to figure out who I am and what I want because I come from a background of [both] LDS and atheist views. And I actually dislike my biological dad. I don't talk to him. So, that's kind of part of the struggle because I don't believe in God, but saying that reminds me of my biological dad. So, it's like....

Liam struggled, for a moment, to articulate his feelings, then blurted out “Identity is hard!”

### **Kate**

Kate is the one LGBTQ participant who did not report feeling marginalized because of her faith or her queer identity. She feels that she was protected to a large degree, growing up in a progressive, “extremely liberal” city in the East with a family that has been exceptionally accepting and supportive of her gender identity. She and her family attend events and workshops together at a local LGBT support organization and Kate takes a leadership role at Emerson, supporting other LGBTQ youth.

Still, Kate waited to come out until her ninth-grade year, when she began school at Emerson and felt that she was in a protective environment. “I mean, definitely at Emerson, everyone's been really accepting,” she reported. Kate has not, however, shared her gender identity at church, although she feels as though the members of her congregation are “good about things.” Her anxiety made it difficult enough for her to begin attending her church's youth group last year. “My mom wanted me to go to young women's, and the very thought of talking to anyone made me so nervous that I couldn't

move,” she said. Kate worries that some of her friends who are members of the LDS faith have not been as lucky as she has been. “It’s just, the Mormon church isn’t all bad, I guess. There’s just some stuff that makes LGBTQ-plus people feel not wanted or not seen or anything.”

### **Academic Stress**

Over the past decade I have noticed that academic stress increasingly plays a role in the anxiety and depression plaguing so many students. Objectively I understand that academic rigor provides some students with a sense of accomplishment and self-worth. But an intensifying state and national emphasis on standards and testing and an almost obsessive focus on college readiness feels destructive and counterproductive much of the time.

This concern came into sharp focus for me in my last year as Emerson’s administrator. I vividly recall a colleague holding up a trash can for one shy young man as he lost the contents of his breakfast just before end-of-year testing was to begin. That same day, another student sequestered herself in a bathroom refusing to go to class for the next testing session. We had tried to minimize the stress of testing by creating a festive environment—starting each testing day with a pancake breakfast and reassuring students that academic testing was not a measure of their worth. We had made clear to parents that they could opt their student out of testing (and many did). But still the tension was palpable.

Six of my co-researchers identified academic stress as a root cause of their

anxiety and/or depression. All but one suggested ways in which it has compromised their well-being. For some, real or perceived academic pressure has intensified an already-existing fragile emotional state. Others are tormented by the perception that they are not as capable or smart as their peers. Nearly every participant expressed a desire to do well in school, but some felt that their mental health makes this impossible. Several lamented the downward spiral of academic failure that is inevitable once depression sets in. Every participant had compelling stories to tell. I chose eight brief excerpts from participant narratives as representative—keenly aware that this topic deserves a study of its own.

### **Abigail**

Abigail has always struggled with the sense that she is not “smart enough.” But she reports that it is her heavy homework load that stresses her most: “I just get lost,” she complained. “I have so much stuff to do.”

Abigail is a gifted writer and deep thinker, and yet she struggles with math and science. She has IEP accommodations that allow her extra time and support with her work, but that does not do much to alleviate the anxiety she feels around academics. She is saddened that some teachers do not seem to recognize her needs. “It’s definitely something I have to fight for,” she explained. “Some teachers will be really good about it and know what to do and then some teachers will be like, ‘Okay.’ But then they just won’t *do* anything.”

### **Kate**

Kate is an excellent student, but she overthinks everything and worries incessantly



about her academic performance. Participating in classroom discussion is difficult for her, but she does her best to engage despite her fears. She wishes that school could be “more about learning and less about grades:”

I know a lot of people feel like if you don't have a B or higher, then you're just sort of doomed. I mean, I get good grades, but I don't know...I'm always super nervous about them because if I want to go to a good college and get a scholarship so I'm not in debt for the rest of my life, then I need good grades to do that. But then if I feel like I'm not doing so well on an assignment or anything, I get really nervous about that.

She reports that her anxiety has been more manageable at Emerson, where classes are smaller and she knows her classmates better. “I'm a lot less nervous about talking to teachers now,” she said.

### **Antonia**

Academic stress has always been the primary driver of Antonia's anxiety.

Identified as “gifted” in elementary school, she sometimes collapses under the weight of her anxiety and the pressure of feeling like she has to excel. She talked about the first parent/teacher conference of her fifth-grade year. She had not yet learned how to check grades online and had been crying off and on all morning because she was so nervous. Before conferences, her teacher asked the class to decorate the “student work” folders they were going to share with parents:

And I remember like doodling a little version of me, like, straight up just panicking, being like, “Oh my god, I've failed everything, haven't I!” But then when we actually, like, went to the thing—the actual parent-teacher conference—I was at the top of my class. I was doing well in my grades. The teacher loves me.

Antonia's anxiety intensified in middle school as classes became more challenging.

Depression hit hard and her grades dropped for the first time in her life: “I honestly can't

explain it,” she said. “I was getting more tired out of nowhere. I was losing motivation to do even things that I enjoyed. I was getting more panicked over really small things.” She described the cycle of stress/anxiety/depression that reemerges each fall as the school year begins. This year it had been especially bad. Her voice wavered as she described it, her emotions raw:

During the summer, I was going outside more. I was doing more things. I wanted to fix my life.... But then the beginning of this year, it all just kind of...like it was like a rising scale, then it was just straight down. All of my nervous habits that I’ve always had as a child—I thought I had managed to get rid of them. But this year they just came back.

Antonia recognizes, objectively, that she is bright and capable, but she cannot seem to still the voices in her head that tell her she is not good enough. “I think about it a lot, and I always try to be better,” she said. But the anxiety persists:

I don’t think I’m good enough because I have anxiety. I’m not feeling motivated because of depression, and so those are adding onto each other, and it’s just a big thing that’s happening while I’m huddled in a corner, trying not to burst into tears.

### **Jazmin**

Jazmin’s academic anxiety first appeared in eighth grade when she began to worry about what high school would be like. She feared that she would not understand everything and would not be able to keep up in classes. She began to have panic attacks. I was curious as to why Jazmin, who is an excellent student and consistently tests at the top of her class, is so unsure of her abilities. She acknowledged her identity as a top student and expressed recognition of how irrational her fears might seem.

It’s weird though, because I love school, right? I love the teachers and I love learning. I love my friends.... I love my home and I live in a safe space. Like, I do love being home, but I would prefer to be at school, maybe just because I have my

friends there and I get to see more people. But then, it also stresses me out the most.

Later in the conversation, Jazmin grew agitated and tearful trying to articulate how her anxiety and depression feed into each other, and how academic worries fuel the fire of both:

Yeah. So my anxiety and depression will go in like the cycle where I'll stress about something so harshly and so intensely that I'll eventually just be exhausted from all of that, that I'll like go into the depression, and I won't really care about anything for a while. And it's just like, "Whatever. If I fail this, I fail, and if I don't do this, it's fine." Recently, I've just kind of been really depressed. I really have been like, just exhausted. And there's, like, so many mornings when my alarm goes off, and I hear it, and I'm just like, "I'm just not going in today."

Jazmin's eyes filled with tears and she paused, trying to compose herself before continuing.

"It seems like every day, recently, it's been a battle to get up and actually go to school," she explained. She paused for a several seconds, her eyes cast down, her breathing labored. She seemed to be weighing whether or not to share more. Then she hurriedly confessed, "Not that long ago, I was just, like, 'What if I just ...I just take the bus.' She laughed nervously, as though what she were about to say was an absurd idea.

"And this is kind of dark—I don't think I ever really would—but I sometimes I just want to like...if I just jumped in front of it."

After a brief silence while she took a deep breath and wiped away tears, Jazmin laughed apologetically and said, "Yeah. I'm not going to cry again."

## **Matthew**

During his time at Emerson, Matthew had gone out of his way to tackle

challenging independent projects and engage in extracurricular academics. He was the driving force behind several of Emerson's STEM clubs. In the past year he had arranged two internships for himself—one at a university physics lab and another with a retired chemistry professor who agreed to meet with him weekly after school. He also held down a part-time job and enrolled in Emerson's most rigorous classes.

Matthew had enrolled in a full schedule of early college classes in both his 11<sup>th</sup>- and 12<sup>th</sup>-grade years. When I asked him why, without hesitation he explained that his family ca not afford to pay for college—that this was an opportunity to earn college credits without going into debt. Later in the conversation, when Matthew seemed to be measuring his words more carefully and vulnerably, he revisited this initial answer:

“Yeah. I don't actually know why I went into [college-level classes],” he admitted. “I think now that...” he paused, choosing his words carefully, “it was part of my self-destructive tendencies, because there's only so far you can hurt yourself physically and so mentally harming yourself is much more effective.” After a moment of silence, he continued: “I would argue that a little bit of it was to see how far I could push myself, and then push myself a little farther.”

Matthew described how pressure had been building over the past eighteen months and had led to self-harm. When he first began working a minimum-wage job his junior year, his shifts began immediately after school and often ended close to 1:00 a.m. By year's end, he had begun to unravel. “That's when the stresses started to really build up,” he reported. “And then the ‘Oh, my god’ moment: ‘I'm going to be an adult and I don't know what I'm doing!’ That's definitely when I started cutting myself.

The summer before his senior year, Matthew briefly thought about dropping AP classes altogether, but with his mom's input decided against it. "We can't afford to pay for college," he reiterated. "These classes kind of gave, like, a brief glimmer of hope."

At the beginning of his senior year, depression descended heavily and Matthew soon crashed. He was now working a more professional job with higher wages, but he continued to work long hours. He was frustrated that his grade point average was suffering: "I had a 3.8," he explains, "but then AP took it down a couple notches." The stress became too much to manage: "Stress kind of like opened the doors—kind of triggered the floodgates," he explained, "and then AP just kind of tipped it over the edge." Matthew was referring to his second suicide attempt that had occurred only a few months earlier.

On the day before my birthday, I attempted to overdose on opioids because I didn't want to make it past 18. But that really failed. Like I just got really sick.... No one actually found out because I did it at night, and it was over the weekend. And I threw up, cleaned up my bed sheets, and I just went about my day.

Matthew had joined the study late. When we met for the first time it was January and he was still working through the aftermath of this recent trauma. Eventually, his mother and the school had learned about his suicide attempt and Matthew had been admitted to the hospital. He reported that he is currently doing well emotionally, but that he is failing several classes because of his time in therapy and because he is adjusting to new medications. He seems hopeful about his chance of recovering his grades but is still enormously frustrated by his overwhelming academic burdens.

Matthew believes that he is not Emerson's only student taking early college classes who has suffered because of academic stress: "I've noticed a lot of the students

who have dropped out [of AP classes],” he said. “Decreased self-worth,” he asserted emphatically, then repeated, almost like a mantra, “Decreased self-worth, I promise—and definitely downtrodding [sic] on themselves, you know?”

### **Piper**

Piper is a prolific artist and musician who plays the piano, cello, sitar, and half-a-dozen more musical instruments. She has also been academically precocious at times. She told me about reading the *Communist Manifesto* “for fun” in seventh grade, and about winning a medal for her math skills in fourth grade—although she now struggles in this subject. She works a part-time job at an art studio and spends hours creating art, but her academic classes have caused anxiety and depression for years now. In all three of our conversations, Piper focused on her frustration with traditional schooling:

I was in the public school system, and I think that kind of messed me up a little bit. I just feel like the public system doesn’t work for me. I’m a very creative, artistically-brained person, and I feel like in public school, it’s kind of—if a kid isn’t good at art or theater, that’s OK because not everybody has an affinity for those things. But if I’m bad at math, I’m not applying myself. That ideology was just beat into me so hard, so I always felt stupid.

Near the end of the school year, Piper contacted me, depressed and overwhelmed by school. By the time we met, her most immediate crisis was largely over, but she was angry about the demands of school. “I wanted to talk to you about school because it’s a stressful time for everyone, you know—time of the year.” Piper talked about having over “50 pages of homework” to complete in just two weeks’ time. “I got to a point where I was really, really, really overwhelmed, and it just kind of sent me really spiraling.”

Several of my co-researchers had complained about Emerson’s new late work

policy and how damaging it has been to their academic success. Piper was particularly bitter:

I know I'm going to fail at biology, and it's too late for me to fix that, which sucks because the same thing happened with physics last semester, and then I switched into biology. So I failed a full year of science. I feel like the late work policy definitely contributed to it—you miss one thing and it just kind of spirals and spirals and spirals. And it just gets to a point where I was so overwhelmed that I just felt like there was nothing I could do anymore, you know? And then that made me feel really depressed and really worthless. And so, even in my free time, all I had the energy to do was sleep. I was in a really, really bad place for the past couple weeks, just feeling so overwhelmed and so worthless.

Like so many of the young people I spoke with, Piper is exceedingly hard on herself. At the time we talked, she was maintaining an A average in most of her classes but had one “C” and one failing grade. She attributed her self-perceived failure, in part, to the time she spends working at a much-loved job in the afternoons, and to her occasional work with a film production company in the evenings. She reported that her extensive extra-curricular activity has made it nearly impossible to keep up with academic demands, and yet this work is her healing salve. Piper is conflicted, however, because she feels that, in the eyes of others, her worth is measured by how well she performs in school—specifically by her academic grades. “I’m not valued for other things,” she lamented. She admitted that she is also guilty of gauging her own self-worth based on letter grades. “I still tend to slip into that mentality, every now and again,” she explained, “of like, ‘Oh, I have an F, so clearly I’m worthless and I’m no good.’”

Like Matthew, Piper expressed concern that academic stress was taking its toll on Emerson students. She explained that a couple of her friends had not been showing up at school at all because they were so stressed academically. “Most of them have just really

intense anxiety surrounding school,” she said, “which I totally get.” She talked about her own tendency to miss school when things get rough.

### **Elizabeth**

Elizabeth is bright and does well academically when she comes to school consistently and when her depression is temporarily at bay. But when depression overwhelms her—which is frequently—she finds it nearly impossible to engage.

Frustrated, she tried to explain why the previous school year had been so difficult for her:

I didn't really experience...things. I was just, like, not caring. It was a little bit of, “I'm not going to make it to the end of high school, so why put in the work for classes and why try to pass?” Even getting out of bed was a big deal.

Elizabeth expressed a longing for more support and for affirmation of her capabilities and achievements, rather than constant reminders of her failures. She had recently learned about “narrative grades” at a college recruitment seminar and loved the idea of holistic evaluation, rather than letter grades:

I think it's really cool. They tell you all this awesome stuff that they loved that you did and things that they liked—that kind of stuff. And then, it's like, “Oh, here are some things I think that you could improve on.” I thought...“I can work with that,” you know what I mean? Usually, when I get grades back, it's like, “You messed up here,” and then I am kind of like, “What did I do good here, though?”

Until this year, Elizabeth did not know about the possibility of credit recovery or Section 504 accommodations. She had not asked for or received much academic support during her worst depression and subsequent hospitalization—she simply accepted the failing grades she received. She told me that she is hopeful she can catch up so that she can graduate, but she's frustrated by an endless cycle of compounding depression and



failure:

I think it's hard because people with mental health struggles, they still have to go through school and everything, and it's difficult because failing classes, and that sort of stuff, fuels it—if that make sense. But, at the same time, you're not able to pass classes.

When I told Elizabeth how sorry I was that her challenges have not always been recognized and supported, she dismissed her troubles as being nobody's responsibility but her own.

### **Isaac**

Isaac first tried to commit suicide his freshman year and had been hospitalized three times since. Like Elizabeth, he talked about how hard it was to worry about schoolwork amidst the trauma of suicidality and hospital visits:

[The hospital] really didn't communicate with the school very well, so the schoolwork was piling up. And so, I had really bad grades for my freshman year. And then a couple months after my first hospitalization, I was hospitalized again.... My grades that year were not very good. My sophomore year, I was doing better, then I had one real bad depressive slump and my grades got all jacked up.

One of the hardest things Isaac experienced at Emerson was being excluded from an international trip he had signed up to join last spring—one that he had saved for and looked forward to all year. Because he had been hospitalized and was adjusting to medications, the school did not want to risk taking him:

I wanted to go so bad. I was like so looking forward to everything that I would be experiencing there, and then not being able to go also kind of put me in a bad place because I had never really—before then—looked towards the future for plans, because I always just thought that I would be dead and not alive by the time I graduated high school.

I kind of screwed myself over because I didn't care enough, so I didn't...I didn't

think I was going to last very long, so I didn't care enough to put too much effort into things.... Going on that international trip was like something that I was finally like, "I can look forward to this, and I actually have something to look towards in the future." That trip was a really big motivator for me to get my shit together. And then I couldn't go. I definitely cried a lot.

Isaac reported being in a much better place this year and is thrilled to be going on

Emerson's upcoming international trip:

I'm going to stay healthy, stay on my meds, go into therapy, stay working so I can 100 percent go because I finally have a big thing to look forward to and a goal.... I'm going to be graduating this year, which is a goal that I've been hoping to accomplish and scared I wasn't going to. And so, the fact that I made it to my senior year and I'm on track to graduate is something that I'm really, really proud of and really happy about.

I initially hesitated to include so many stories of academic overwhelm in this narrative. Just re-reading these accounts exhausts me. But so many of my co-researchers expressed anger, frustration, and despair about their academic lives that it felt important to include each of these voices.

Academic stress is not an issue that I often see addressed in Utah's conversations about teen depression, anxiety, and suicidality. The Utah State Board of Education's many training and meetings are more often focused on the urgency of providing academic rigor. I recognize that public schools have an obligation to prepare students to succeed in higher education and in their careers, but we seem to be forgetting about our equal obligation to prepare these young people to live joyous, meaningful lives. This concern has consumed me for many years.

After listening to my co-researchers' stories, my determination to make academic stress a central theme of the study intensified. In Chapters 6 and 7, I return to this concern again. Applying principles embedded in Critical Pedagogy, I offer several insights—my

co-researchers and my own—about what schools can do to create a healthier balance in their efforts to nurture both the intellectual development and the emotional well-being of students.

### **Less-Frequently Mentioned Themes**

When my co-researchers first considered the origins of their depression, anxiety, or suicidality, they rarely mentioned the influence of social media or of substance abuse. Several referenced having a genetic predisposition to mental illness, but they tended to mention this only in passing. I did not press these issues at first, as our initial conversations were long and sometimes emotional. I did not want to demand too much of my co-researchers' time. In subsequent interviews, however, I asked them to consider these influences.

#### **Social Media Influence in General**

When participants failed to mention social media as causal in our initial conversations, I made the following assumption: Social media is woven into the fabric of their lives, they might not recognize negative impact it is having on their mental health—the stress of needing always to present a perfect image of themselves online; the isolation of living life remotely, rather than in the company of friends. I was surprised to learn, in subsequent interviews, however, that most of my co-researchers have thought deeply about the potential hazards of social media. Most try to actively moderate its use. Some feel that it plays a positive role in their lives. However, as seen earlier in this chapter, a few of these teens recognize the damage both social media and media messaging can do

to a fragile self-image.

Matthew reports that he has “abstained from almost all social media.” He prefers to cultivate his existing relationships, rather than try to develop connections with strangers in “Salt Lake or across the world,” as he put it. “It’s just never clicked with me,” he explained. “It’s just not something that satisfies me.”

Piper expressed frustration about ways in which Instagram has facilitated the spread of gossip at Emerson, but she claims not to spend much time on social media and does not see it as a contributor to her depression.

Rainey reported not spending much time online either “I’m kind of lazy when it comes to social media,” she said. She did acknowledge that Instagram posts have, from time to time, made her feel “sad and more depressed.” She shared one recent example: Her friends had posted online after an impromptu gathering one evening when she was at home helping her mother. Rainey saw the post and realized that she had missed out. When she asked her friends why she had been excluded, they responded that the get-together was spontaneous and her exclusion unintentional. Still, she felt deeply sad. “That was not the best feeling,” she said. “I know that I’m very introverted, but I do like to at least be invited. I mostly just feel sad when I’m not included or just left behind.”

Most of my co-researchers were savvy about the pitfalls of social media. They acknowledged that spending long hours online is not a healthy behavior. Nearly half of them reported only moderate use of social media platforms. None recalled being cyber-bullied. Two, however, mentioned the negative effects of a near-constant barrage of negative and traumatic news reports. Kate attributed her anxiety, in part, to “just

everything that's going on in the world." She added. "It seems like everything is kind of going really downhill." Rainey also mentioned that the use of the news media in her Current Events class at school is sometimes overwhelming. "There was one week that really got to me," she explained. Her class had been discussing media and events surrounding the topic of racism. "I don't know if I've mentioned this," she said gravely, "but I'm not white." Discussions of racism had caused Rainey to sink into a deep depression, although she could not articulate why. This was the only conversation, in this study, that included any mention of race. I had meant to explore my co-researchers' insights and experiences around the intersections of racial identity and mental health. But because none of their narratives broached this issue and because of time constraints I chose, ultimately, to save this important question for future study.

Sofia claimed that social media has had little impact on her mental health. She admits, however, that the excessive amount of time she spends online does. Her frequent online browsing and gaming makes her feel "bored and drained:"

It's not very healthy or good.... I don't have any social media that I go on frequently, I just play games sometimes. You just want to keep scrolling through or keep playing a game or whatever, and then you just do that for a really long time, but you don't enjoy it.

### **Social Media as a Positive Force for Well-Being**

A few participants suggested that social media had played a positive, supportive role in their lives—helping them connect with others, obtain information, and learn about themselves. Kate mentioned how impactful it has been for her to watch streaming "self-care" shows such as "*Queer Eye* and *Marie Kondo*." She asserted, "They've got really

good messages. It's not about making yourself look better for other people. It's about making yourself *feel* good."

Access to social media has been particularly important for Gabriel, who felt isolated during his online school days:

I had a lot of time on the Internet. I got the chance to experience other people in a much broader way than I had in the past. I learned what it meant to be trans and what it meant to be gay and a whole bunch of different religions and religious experiences and all this sort of stuff. I think that's the point where I started to fully come into myself—just realizing that who I am isn't bad.

He is grateful that social media allowed him to meet his current boyfriend, who is immensely important to his life. But he reports that its influence has been "pretty neutral overall."

Zoey believes that social media access is essential to her well-being. She described the lengths she goes to when she uses her "secret" Instagram account—despite parental prohibition: "I'm not supposed to have social media until I'm 18 because of Mormonism," she said. "My parents—they're kind of strict with what the Church says." It was Zoey's Instagram account that alerted one of her youth group leaders to her mental health crisis:

One of the girls' moms, she was checking who she [her daughter] was following and she saw my [Instagram post], and she was like, "Oh, worry!" So during Mutual, she was talking to me about it, and then after that, she drove me home and she talked to my parents about it.

"Mutual," a common nickname for a weekly youth group held for LDS teenagers, is something that several participants mentioned during interviews—always confident I would understand their reference. I am intimately familiar with LDS youth groups, however I found this assumption surprising because most of my co-researchers know

nothing of my cultural or religious background. I recognized this as one of many innocent assumptions students in our community make that potentially cause students who are not members of the cultural “in-group” to feel marginalized. I also recognized, with amusement, that Zoey was assuming her parents’ social-media ban was doctrinal. My own parents had used “The Church” as their strongman many times during my youth. In any case, as Zoey shared this story, she seemed genuinely surprised that her parents had been more concerned, during this meeting, about her depression than they had about her illicit Instagram account (or her occasional use of off-colored language on the site). But in the end, she reported, nothing much changed. “They said they were going to take me to a therapist because of it, but then they never did.” Zoey’s parents, did, however, insist that she transfer schools. “My depression’s not as bad now because I’m here and I love this school,” she exclaimed, “but at the time it was like—I didn’t want to go.”

Zoey is still hacking her way around her parents’ social media ban, but she feels strongly that her relationship to Instagram and other sites is healthy:

I like being social when I *want* to be social. With middle school, I didn’t really feel like I belonged or anything. I didn’t have that many people to talk to. And I’m thinking if I had had it, I could have made more friends. I’d be happier.

I have secret accounts from my parents because I want to be able to express myself. I want to be creative and I love writing and stuff like that.... I actually have two online friends and I can be really open with them and I can talk with them. I actually help my one friend, whenever he’s dealing with family issues and stuff like that.... It makes me happy being able to do that.

### **Social Media and Self-Loathing**

Five of my co-researchers—Elizabeth, Ximena, Abigail, Isaac, and Antonia—recognized that some media platforms, particularly Instagram, have contributed

significantly to their anxiety and depression. Social media has—in addition to making them feel inadequate, unattractive and anxious—pressed more glamorous lives into their minds. Elizabeth talked about her tendency to compare her life with what she sees online:

You're looking at everyone's highlights in their lives, and all the great things they are doing, and, you know you're just in your room scrolling through social media. And you're like, "Wow, everyone's out having so much fun." But then, in reality, it's like—everyone's doing that.

She was surprised, recently, when a peer she follows online and idealizes for her perfect Instagram presence, told Elizabeth that she follows *her* online and envies *her* life: "This girl was saying, 'Your life is cool and you seem so put together!' When I saw that, I was like, 'Oh, my gosh, like, that's crazy!'"

Like many of her peers, Elizabeth checks Instagram frequently throughout the day: "I scroll through it whenever I'm on my phone—any time I pick up my phone... just checking really." She recognizes that the greatest harm social media has inflicted on her is the eating disorder she battles.

Abigail reported that she does not access social media at all anymore—a decision she came to with her parents' help. Until recently she was on Instagram an average of eight hours a day and often late into the night. She said that her constant need to check on everyone and to compare herself to others was making her anxious:

I got social media when I was 13. I feel like that definitely had a huge impact on my self-esteem and stuff, like, sometimes for worse, sometimes for better. I got a flip phone because I just think it was stressing me out really bad. I think it was worsening my depression.

How ingenious, choosing and using a flip phone to save herself from hours of self-loathing.



Isaac appreciates social media for the connection it offers, but he recognized how much stress it has added to his life. He is trying to self-regulate. “I’ve been working on trying to manage my self-image issues with still being able to be on social media,” he reported.

Jazmin said that social media makes her obsessive. She described the stress she felt around a series of Instagram birthday messages she had received the previous day:

Everyone had wished me a happy birthday and everything, but then for some reason I was bothered with no one posting it on their story. And I was like, “Well, wait, why do I care about this?” And I was like, “But, wait, why didn’t they say anything?” I got, like, really sad for a second, and then I was like, “OK, well, I guess I must not matter then.” And it was like, “OK, well, you’re being dramatic. Calm down.”

She also reported that social media makes her feel “really isolated” at times. “We have a quick connection to everyone and we get so caught up in that that we forget that it’s not really—it’s not *real*.” She continued:

It’s so hard to decipher who is a genuine person who cares, and who doesn’t. And so, it’s kind of isolating. Like, “Does anyone really care about me?” And then in the other sense, it’s like, “Does anyone care about me if I’m not important on social media?”

Antonia reported that she does not use social media much, other than Tumblr and Twitter, but that she is online via her phone almost constantly. “Probably eight to nine hours a day,” she admits. “I am pretty attached to my phone; I feel weird when I don’t have it.” She does not see her screen time as a problem, *per se*, but she does talk candidly about how “dark influences” online have contributed to her depression:

I try to keep away from things I know will make me upset and stuff...but once again, it’s my escapist thing. When I’m feeling like I don’t want to deal with this—I need a break from my own brain—I will spend five minutes just scrolling through my phone.

Antonia says that online content sometimes make her feel “gross” or “uncomfortable:”

It feels almost like an allergic reaction, kind of. Like, when I am looking at something that’s making me feel uncomfortable, that’s making me feel not good, I usually get a genuine pit—a stone-in-my-stomach type feeling. My mouth gets really dry. I start feeling actually nauseous.

When that happens, she usually disconnects.

I found it illuminating, listening to teen perspectives on social media and mental health. It helps, it soothes, and it also harms. I admired the recognition and awareness my co-researchers brought to this relatively new (in the scheme of human history) and ubiquitous challenge to belonging and connection.

### **Genetic Links to Depression and Anxiety**

Kate, Piper, Rainey, Liam, and Antonia all assert that genetics is the primary driver of their condition. Each of them talked about this matter-of-factly, almost dismissively. “It runs in the family,” said Abigail. “It’s just my brain.”

For one of these participants, knowing that members of her extended family have struggled with alcoholism, depression and suicidality—including a cousin who “is broken and probably will be broken for the rest of his life”—makes her determined to take control of her own situation. “I feel like it makes me feel more driven to stop this,” she said. She is hopeful about her future. “When it comes down to it,” she said, “mental illness is another condition—like eyesight or like maybe you’ve broken your arm and it’s healing. It doesn’t even have to be a permanent condition.”

Most participants who acknowledged a genetic link also reported many complicating life circumstances. Genetics seemed to be a peripheral concern. After

sharing his story of childhood neglect, trauma, and gender dysphoria, one participant implicated genetics almost as an afterthought. “Runs in my family, he explained. “I’m biologically wired to have depression.”

When I first asked Piper why she had been so depressed as a child, she took time to think before replying:

I don’t really know why. I don’t really think there was a reason. I think it was just my brain just not working the way it was supposed to, which made me feel not great because it felt like, “Oh, there’s something wrong with me.” It’s not the situation around me anymore. It’s me.

She then proceeded to share her long history of bullying, exclusion, family hardship and academic stress. In ensuing conversations, she never mentioned genetics again.

### **Substance Abuse**

In initial interviews, not one of my co-researchers suggested that drugs or alcohol had contributed to their struggle with depression, anxiety and/or suicidality—although two talked about difficulty regulating prescribed medications. This seemed revelatory to me, because so much effort and time in school health programs gets devoted to the topic of substance abuse. In follow-up interviews, I assured participants of their privacy and asked if they would be candid about the ways in which drugs or alcohol have affected their mental health. Half of them claimed to never to have experimented with illegal substances at all. Zoey’s response was typical: “We don’t really have prescription drugs in the house or anything. We don’t even use medicine for headaches, really, so that’s not a problem.” By way of explanation, she added, “I haven’t had any experience with substance abuse, like medications or anything, because I’ve been raised in the Mormon

faith. We don't drink or anything."

Rainey talked about not wanting to use even legal medications because of her fear of addiction. Her mother had to insist that she give prescription medication a chance. She spoke, instead, about her recent attempts to regulate caffeine use—her family is prone to "caffeine addiction," she explained. More harmful substances did not feel like an option to her.

I made a promise to my dad. He made me actually swear, like, not to do anything regarding drugs and alcohol because we have that genetic disorder in our family.... It's not even a sense of being like, "Oh, you could." It's like, "Most definitely, if this happens, you can and probably will get addicted to it. So don't do it!"

Rainey was close to someone who had died from complications due to alcoholism. She is determined to not share that fate:

I don't want to have a stroke or a heart attack when I'm older and have kids and all of a sudden die, like that, and leave behind my kids and family. If I can prevent that from happening, then that's what I'll do.

She earnestly expressed a desire to share her extended family's experience with addiction so that this study's readers might steer away from substance abuse. "I need people to understand that it will kill you," she exclaimed, "that it will break you."

Two participants mentioned knowing other students who have used substances—generally marijuana—to cope with mental illness. Abigail said, "I don't have any personal experience, but I know a lot of kids who use drugs to escape mental health problems."

Four of my co-researchers talked openly about having experimented with illegal substances at some point, but they generally did not see a causal connection between

those experiences and their mental health. In each case, their depression had predated their substance use by years. One student explained it aptly:

You know how when people say that a square is a rectangle, but a rectangle isn't a square? It's kind of like: Depression and suicidal tendencies can lead to substance abuse, but once you're already depressed and suicidal, you might take on substance abuse to cope with it. But depression and anxiety are *not* direct results of substance abuse. I would say that when people begin substance abuse, it's usually because of something going on. So I don't know how it would be like vice versa, you know?

Participants who reported using illegal substances from time to time seemed remarkably cautious and well-informed about the dangers of substance abuse—and inclined to moderate their use. “A lot of drugs clash with my medication,” one participant explained. “I’ve researched it and stuff.” She worries about potential interactions. “I’d have to take a day off of that and make sure that it was out of my system before putting something else back in. And that would be a risk in itself.”

In these conversations, I learned that peer pressure has not factored heavily in these young people’s choices to use or not use illegal substances. One said, “I don’t think people actually care that much whether or not you do drugs.” She elaborated:

I know how to tell someone I don’t want drugs.... People act like it’s some big, scary thing, and maybe it is for some people. They’re like, “You’ve got to do these drugs or you’re not going to be cool, dude.” But for me, it’s just been like, “Hey, want some?” and if I was like, “No,” they would be like, “Cool, more for me.”

Most participants talked about knowing the potential consequences of substance abuse, or about having watched a relative or family member struggle with addiction. One student expressed a desire to be healthy and claimed that he had used only on occasion to cope with depression or anxiety. Another had used in “one or two circumstances”—to

alleviate anxiety and insomnia:

My family has a history of substance abuse, and I have borderline personality disorder, so I'm already incredibly drawn to that sort of self-destructive tendency. But I've managed to avoid it, which has been good.

Two participants had less-successfully navigated the waters of substance abuse.

One reported occasionally drinking or smoking weed when he was “younger”—which I understood to mean earlier this year. “I was sad, and that’s why I was drinking,” he explained. “I used it to kind of help depression, and I used it to numb myself. I was reckless.” He said that he prefers marijuana over alcohol, but reports that he has never purchased it from anyone (a fact he may have included to protect his peers):

I never had bad experiences with it. [I was] always with people. A good amount of the time I was with adults—which is a good thing, but not a really healthy relationship.

He acknowledged that his choices have not always been wise and told me about his recent decision to stop sabotaging his future:

There was a point in my life—about the beginning of this year—where I was like, “Okay, I’m going to stop doing these destructive things, stop having relationships with people that are bad for me and stuff. And it was easy to stop talking to my ex, who would only want sex from me and stuff. But it was difficult to not want marijuana. And so, I talked to my mom about that, and she said, “Well, if you had marijuana on you, or you were high and there was evidence, then you would have legal consequences.” And so, now I’m not doing it because I don’t want that.

Like so many of my co-researchers, this student longs for improved mental health and a happier life:

I really, really want to have a bright future. If I get arrested for underage alcohol, and it goes on my record, that would suck.... I don’t want to mess with my body. I’m not doing that anymore because that can stunt brain growth when you’re a teen.

Only one participant suggested that substance abuse may have contributed to a

deepening depression. He started using occasionally last year—after school and in the evenings. “Most of the time, it was marijuana,” he reported, “to help me calm down and help me relax.... But it started at some point to make my depression a little bit worse.” By the beginning of this year, his impairment was beginning to compromise school life. He said, “I felt really bad about being the type of person that was getting high during the day.” He chose to stop using.

This teen recognized that marijuana use had exacerbated his depression, but he emphasized, more than once, that it had not *caused* his depression. “I personally think the link goes the other way,” he said. “Instead of the substances causing the depression, I think it’s the depression that causes the substance abuse.”

I was impressed with how deeply most of my co-researchers had thought about the topic of substance abuse. They clearly understood its dangers and had weighed the consequences of their choices. Most of them were much better educated than I about the long-term effects of drug use. Education and frank discussion about the topic, both at home and school, had clearly influenced their choices. I do wonder, however, how tenuous some of their seemingly strong convictions about substance avoidance might be if the pain of deepening anxiety and depression in the coming years became overwhelming.

### **A Note on Childhood Trauma**

During my time as Emerson’s administrator, I had assumed that my colleagues and I were at least generally aware of the circumstances and challenges our students

faced. But these conversations with my co-researchers made me realize how naïve I had been. More than half of my co-researchers shared stories of childhoods marred by instability, poverty, illness, abuse, neglect, or loss. Some of these early traumas had been the primary catalyst for subsequent mental health struggles. A few circumstances were ongoing and continued to fuel emotional distress. I had not expected to hear about so much trauma in this relatively protected Utah community.

My initial reaction was to write extensively and passionately about the difficult experiences and gut-wrenching indignities some of these young people had experienced. I wanted to convey to others my sense of anger and alarm, hoping to remind myself and others to be more attuned to the challenges our students may be facing outside of school. But ultimately, I had to be cautious about what I chose to reveal. I had no right to compromise the privacy of the families who had entrusted me with their children during this study. I also recognized, having raised five children of my own, how troubled the waters of even relatively happy childhoods can be. I have endless compassion for families who have faced difficult life circumstances.

I was impressed by how judiciously my co-researchers processed their past traumas. Although flashes of anger sparked from time to time as these young people shared difficult stories, I found that their viewpoints were largely generous and measured. They expressed gratitude for family members who have supported them over the years of trauma and pain—who have been their closest allies and friends. In deference to these important relationships, and in an effort to ensure participant privacy, I have left conversations about family life out of this account.



Throughout the interview process I felt humbled by the maturity and selflessness these young people exhibited. Despite their own mental health challenges and in the face of some truly difficult times, nearly all of them found a way to express gratitude for the good things they have in life—for the people they love and the support they receive. They exhibited a deep level of insight and humanity—something that I have noticed often in my work with teenagers. I was left wondering how so many of them could find room in their battered hearts for so much love.

### **Artifacts: A Reflection of Experience**

Many of the teens in this study had engaged in some kind of creative expression as a way to manage mental health challenges or to find refuge from the pain. Eight of these young people contributed 61 artifacts to this study—including 15 sketches, 18 journal entries, 23 photographs, one speech, one essay, one storybook, one song, and one poem. A full accounting of these pieces can be found in Table 3.2.

I had hoped to collect at least one artifact from each participant. Several had promised to share their work but never did. I could not be sure if these young people were reticent to share their very private expressions or were simply forgetful. I chose not to press any of them about something that felt so private.

I gathered most artifacts long after initial stories had been told. Most of my co-researchers had needed months of reminders and cajoling before they finally shared these very personal expressions. Before I even began to reflect on and add codes to these artifacts in Nvivo, an organizational structure for the study had already begun to emerge.

As I held up my co-researchers' creative expressions against this structure, I was not surprised to see how closely these pieces mirrored the pain and struggle expressed in the narratives. Liam's song and Gabriel's speech referenced a longing for inclusion and acceptance of their identities. (Excerpts from each of these pieces are included earlier in this chapter and can be found in Appendix E.) An anonymous poem—*i'm sad in the back of the girl's bathroom stall*—recounts the ugly realities of self-harming behaviors and the relentless, exhausting pain of mental illness. (A fragment of this poem begins Chapter 5 and is included in its entirety in Appendix F.) A few pieces suggested a deeper pain than these teens had revealed in interviews. Zoey's sketches of battered hearts—hearts filled with holes, patched with bandages, and covered in scars, seemed to express a difficult past and a longing for love and acceptance. Sofia's self-portraits—at least that is what I had assumed they were—suggested a kind of turmoil and bondage. I share examples from both participants in Figures 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3 (discussed and shown separately below).

I lament that I am also in possession of two beautiful pieces of music I cannot include in this document. They were contributed by a student who ultimately had to be excluded from the study. She wanted me to keep her work anyway.

### **Revealing Shame and Self-Loathing—Sofia**

By any measure, Sofia is lovely, with dark, deep-set eyes and a ready smile. She never mentioned disliking her physical appearance during our conversations, nor did it occur to me to ask about *physical* self-loathing (she had expressed existential self-loathing in so many ways). But Sofia's sketch, *Potato Head* (Figure 4.1), suggested that she might also be harboring shame about her appearance. I emailed to ask Sofia for help

**Figure 4.1**

*Sofia's "Potato Head" Subtitled "Hates Herself; Can Hardly Look in the Mirror."*



in interpreting her sketch. I had learned, over the course of this study, that giving my co-researchers an opportunity to respond in writing encouraged them to articulate their thoughts more fully than they might otherwise. Sofia answered back in an email.

Her response is shown here in its entirety. The emphases are mine:

It's not really a self-portrait, it's kind of just a person that exists somewhere in my mind that isn't necessarily attached to me. [She] is a sad human being who experiences many of my same fears and insecurities, but on a much more intense

level. The idea of her causes me grief, which is why I drew her.

She has permanently warped her face with scars to make herself pay for being ugly, but then only covers it up with obsessive amounts of makeup because she's so ashamed of her face—*wow, this is starting to sound like me. I didn't realize I created her so similar.*

SO many people experience this same self-loathing and shame for simply *being*. It hurts. Potato Head is the name of a song by Melanie Martinez that was part of the inspiration.

Several more of Sofia's sketches suggested self-loathing to me, although I was not at all certain of their meanings. I asked Sofia to tell me about two of her drawings in which young women are restrained—*Daggers and Restraints* and *So Many Bonds*. (Figure 4.2). In response to my request, Sofia sent another lengthy email. As it turns out, both drawings were meant to express Sofia's complex and overwhelming emotions around her inability to meet the expectations of her LDS faith. Sofia had expressed this frustration often in our conversations. The sketches also illustrated an ongoing battle with a more severe mental illness than Sofia had previously revealed.

Of these sketches, Sofia wrote (in part):

I feel trapped in my mind. I can never escape the religious views I was raised to believe and to respect more than [I respect] myself. I feel like I can't escape the shame that follows every decision I make, and every thought that enters my head. Each restraint represents a different side of the existential war that I have been fighting my whole life. This moral conflict, represented by chains, can also be seen as the cycle of my bipolar condition, the anxiety that meets me halfway through every action, and the depression that simply won't let go of me.

The "watch" is actually a clock in a noose. It's symbolic of anxiety—constantly ticking and measuring everything faster than you can keep up with. Time causes anxiety for me.... I have to choose who I am and where I want to go with my life right now. It feels like another restraint, something I always need to be aware of in the back of my mind. I have a never-ending commitment to time and it stresses me out.

**Figure 4.2**

*Sofia's "Daggers and Restraints" and "So Many Bonds."*



Sofia and I met three times. Although we spoke at length on each occasion, this was the first time that she had mentioned her bipolar disorder. I was again reminded of how essential it is that we provide ample opportunity for our students to tell us who they are and what challenges they face.

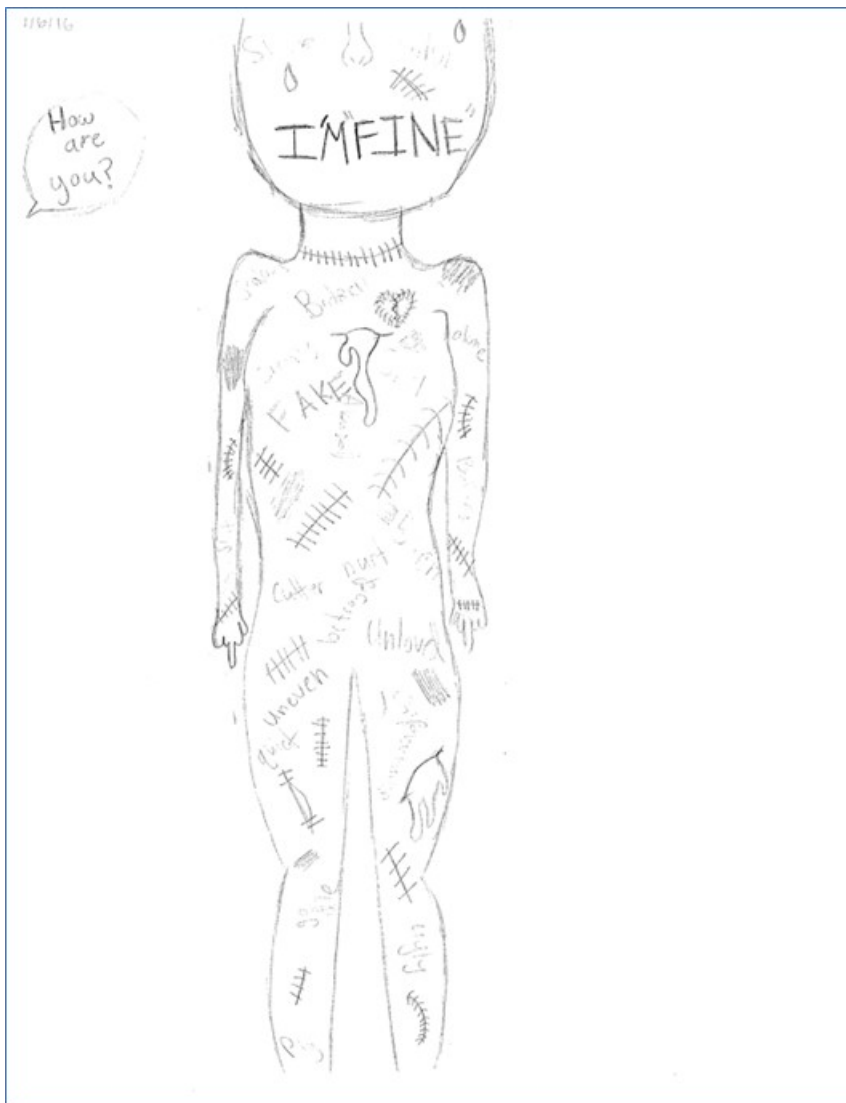
### **Revealing Hidden Pain—Zoey**

Zoey often minimized her experiences of emotional distress during our

conversations. But her sketches suggested a deeper sadness than she had admitted. I pressed her to tell me more about one particular piece—*I'm Fine* (Figure 4.3). This sketch seemed to belie the ways in which Zoey presents herself to others—as a cheerful, self-possessed young woman with few cares in the world. I wondered if her façade was masking hidden pain.

### Figure 4.3

Zoey's "I'm Fine."



Note that in the image that the words “I’m Fine” replace the figure’s mouth to suggest masking and silence. The figure’s body is covered with wounds and with words such as “unloved,” “cutter,” ugly,” “fake,” “damaged,” and “bruised.” This suggested to me that Zoey might be struggling with self-loathing and fighting an ongoing battle with self-harm. I emailed Zoey to gather more information. This is an excerpt from her lengthy response:

I created this in middle school [last year], when I really *wasn’t* in a good place (by this, I mean *all* of middle school)....

Ever since I stopped going to public school [Zoey doesn’t seem to understand that Emerson *is* a public school], my mental health has healed a lot, and I don’t really get depressed or [have] the need to self-harm. Depending on who I’m around and why I’m feeling upset, I might have to hide my feelings. But I do have some people I can talk to about anything.

I never thought of the person I drew as myself, although I did have some of the things I thought about myself written on [this sketch].

Zoey insisted that this sketch was simply a representation of someone else—a teen who deals with a level of emotional distress that she recognizes as pervasive among her peers. She tried to assure me that I had nothing to worry about—*I’m fine*, she implied.

It would have been easier to take Zoey at her word had she not shared eight additional sketches that expressed themes of self-harm, shame, self-hatred, hopelessness, loneliness, and pain (see Appendix E). The person depicted in *I’m Fine* has no eyes: perhaps seeing the self-damage done straight-on would be too difficult.

### **Manifestations of Strength and Resilience**

The works referenced above—the sketches, song lyrics and poem—represent only a portion of the creative expressions I gathered. Many of the artifacts included in this

study suggest a more hopeful story. Piper's affirmations, Gabriel's speech, Elizabeth's journal, and Sofia's Storybook, all express hope and resilience. The 23 photos I collected that chronicled Mathew's Escalante trip, Gabriel's independent research, and Elizabeth's *Community Self-Portrait* are all remarkable acts of faith that represent the healing power of community and transformational work. There is a strength in these artifacts that had not always surfaced in our conversations. Here these remarkable individuals showed the ability to lift themselves up, to find meaning and the will to push through pain—one step at a time—in hopes that a better future awaits them on the other side.

You will find examples of both the darker expressions of pain and despair and of these more hopeful pieces woven into the pages of the next chapter, *Themes of Coping and Care*. I use these artifacts as epigraphs and as illustrations of this study's themes.

### Summary

In this chapter, I shared some of the life experiences that my co-researchers believe have compromised their mental health. My intent is to remind us that the lives our students lead are complicated and deeply felt, that the herds of noisy teenagers who sail in and out of our classrooms have often experienced deeper traumas and more weighty burdens than we might imagine. Darker waters than we ourselves have tread. I recognize that these clipped representations of their experiences are partial and flawed, but that attests only to the limits of this one study, not to the worth of the voices I have heard.



## CHAPTER 5

### THEMES OF COPING AND CARE

*mental illness isn't a fucking painting.  
 it's a pill every damn morning and every damn night.  
 it's paying a stranger with a degree to listen to me twice a week.  
 it's not giving a fuck because i'm sure i'll be dead by tomorrow.  
 it's being stuck in a hospital for a week, trapped by doctors unable to escape because I  
 am told I am not safe in my own body.  
 it's being tired of being tired of waking up.  
 it's the craving for physical pain so the hurricane in my mind can shut up for once.  
 but it never shuts up.  
 it never shuts up.  
 it never shuts up.*

—excerpt from participant poem, “i am sad at the back of the girl’s bathroom stall”

### Introduction

In Chapter 4, I explored participant narratives to better understand why these teens have been burdened with depression and anxiety. What circumstances of their lives had filled them with so much self-doubt and self-loathing? Why, for some of them, was the struggle so overwhelming that suicide felt like a reasonable solution? The answers to these questions will never be completely clear. But these stories of exclusion, neglect, loneliness, and fear reveal lives that have been battered from many sides and in many ways. These 14 narratives must represent only a fraction of the challenging emotions and circumstances that adolescents find themselves negotiating day-to-day. As educators, it seems crucial that we understand the dizzying array of experiences and societal forces shaping the lives of these young people and develop robust, integrated systems of love

and support that have the power to help them transform their lives. We need so much more than can be offered in a single class or during a few hours of therapy.

In this chapter, I explore some of the challenges my co-researchers have faced as a result of mental illness—the various physiological and psychological demons they have encountered; the complicated therapeutic and personal relationships they have navigated; and the medical interventions that have sometimes saved their physical lives but have not always healed their spirits. In the following pages, I weave together pieces of my co-researchers' stories to illustrate just how difficult school life has been for them at times. I examine some of the coping strategies they have developed—seeking or avoiding support, caring for or harming themselves, expressing themselves creatively. All this, while doggedly trying to avoid burdening anyone else with their problems.

### **Therapy, Medication, and Hospitalization**

In their stories of hospitalization, professional therapy, and the rounds of medication that inevitably followed, participants suggested that medical interventions have had a dramatic impact on their lives—sometimes bringing peace for the first time in years and sometimes inflicting additional pain. Most of these participants seem to have been in therapy at some point during their mental health journey, a fact that is at odds with data indicating that fewer than 20% of adolescents who need therapy receive professional help (Merikangas et al., 2010). Many of these teens had been suicidal at some point, so perhaps therapy had been initiated as an intervention. I did not ask about this explicitly. Some participants expressed gratitude for the help they received, but

others reported feelings of frustration or anger about the disruption and uncertainty that medical treatment introduced into their lives.

Gabriel was first hospitalized for suicidality when he was only 12 and had scathing things to say about his hospital experience. “I *hate* hospitals,” he said. “They’re *very* not okay. I don’t like being trapped and I don’t like the very white, blank walls, and I don’t like the smell. It’s claustrophobic in a really weird way.” He talked about feeling both “terrified” and “trapped” when he was first admitted. He did not sleep at all that first night and recalls how frightened he was in the morning when he was escorted into a psychiatrist’s office:

He brings me into his office to interview me and get to know me and all that.... I’m scared of him, so I’m being quiet. And he’s like trying to force things out of me very, very quickly—like more quickly than I’m comfortable. He’s a male doctor and I’ve never been very... I have had bad experiences with male doctors. So he’s trying to force this out of me and near the end of the session, I’m answering with one or two words because I don’t want to talk to him anymore.... He basically says to me, like, “You’re in here because you’re an idiot. Like you don’t know your own problems so you can’t fix them on your own.” Like he’s being very degrading towards me. And he’s talking to me like I’m an idiot. Which is not very cool.

Gabriel refused to go back to the hospital the second time he attempted suicide. Instead, he went to his mom’s workplace for a day so that she could be sure he stayed safe. He recalled how sick and stressed he had been that day. After remaining bedridden for a week following this second attempt, he returned to school without any fanfare.

Other participants who had been hospitalized had mixed feelings about the experience. Elizabeth expressed gratitude for the perceptive therapist who realized she was in serious trouble and took her to the emergency room. Although she did not like the hospital environment, she was profoundly grateful for the companionship of fellow

suicide survivors there. “No one wanted to even be there, or even be...alive, you know what I mean?” she asked. “I think we found a lot of comfort in each other.”

For years Elizabeth had felt like no one really understood her, despite everyone’s good intentions and attempts at listening to and supporting her. But at the hospital she encountered peers, for the first time, who had experienced similar traumas.

Someone who’s dealing with the same thing—you feel so much more connected to them and, like, this person actually *does* understand. I don’t know...it was kind of bad in a way, just how openly we all talked about it.

Elizabeth remembers how difficult it was to return to school. Most days she did not want help or companionship, but some days, she felt “super alone” and longed for someone to listen to her. Instead of feeling supported, she felt overwhelmed by her ongoing depression and by the school work she found impossible to manage:

I know that teachers are supposed to teach, you know what I mean? It’s not like they’re therapists or whatever. But it was kind of hard when it felt like...I don’t know. When I was severely depressed and suicidal, it wasn’t like I was being lazy with schoolwork, it was like...teachers would be upset or mad that you didn’t do classwork, and it was kind of like...you kind of express, like, “I couldn’t do it,” or “I wasn’t feeling well,” or...I don’t know. It was a little hurtful to hear people calling you lazy, or [saying] “You don’t try hard enough in this class.” Because even showing up to school sometimes was a lot for me.

The transition from hospital to school had been rough for other participants as well. Some reported that their families did not always communicate clearly with the school about what was happening. Their teachers seemed largely unaware of what they were going through. When we first talked, Isaac was beginning to apply to college and was discouraged. Like Elizabeth, he was grateful the hospital, where he had been able to “reset” and develop close relationships with fellow suicide survivors, but he was also frustrated by the disruption several stays had caused to his academic life. He had high

aspirations but felt hopeless about getting into the top-tier college he hoped to attend. His ACT score was high, but his GPA did not reflect his capabilities. The medications he was prescribed during hospital stays further complicated matters for Isaac. “I’ve taken a lot of different medication in my life because of being in the hospital,” he said.

The first time I was there, they put me on so much medication. I was taking, like, ten pills a day. And one time...I had hallucinations, and the other time I was shaking so bad, and another time it made me so sick.

Many participants recalled how difficult it had been to function at school when their medications were being adjusted or were otherwise “off.” Matthew had started a new antidepressant just a few weeks prior to our first interview. He said it had affected his memory and caused him to “lucidly dream.” Just a few months previous, he had imagined completing important schoolwork he had not actually done. When we talked, it was mid-semester and Matthew was failing three of his AP classes. He ultimately managed to pass all of these classes, but he ended the year with a lower GPA than he had ever earned.

Several participants shared horror stories about their medications. Rainey described being “miserable” at school during a month when she was taking a medication that the pharmacy had given her in error. Her depression had spiraled during this time:

That was a crazy month. It was the month that a big project was due. It was the month that I was supposed to take a test that I ended up dropping out of at the last minute. I took a break from [gymnastics] for a week...It was not fun.

Sofia talked about a humiliating encounter with a teacher on a day when she was especially tired. “I have all these pills that I have to take, and they all make me super tired,” she said. The class had been rehearsing a dramatic presentation when Sofia missed

her cue. She recalled how embarrassed she had been to be called out in front of other students.

I was all the way across the room, and she, like, screamed at me in front of the whole class.... I hate when people talk to me in a condescending way...they think of me like I'm an idiot, like some stupid little kid who won't get to her spot. And I just hate it because I'm not a stupid little kid, and I hate it when people yell at me.

Yet other students talked about how medications have improved their school experience. Rainey matter-of-factly reported that, once she started medication, she was “instantly better—within a week” (although she later talked about an ongoing battle with anxiety). Isaac and Gabriel, both transgender participants, expressed gratitude for their testosterone treatments. Isaac had been bothered by his androgynous appearance and had started treatments earlier in the year to help with his transition. Between our first and second interview—several months apart—his voice had grown noticeably deeper and facial hair was beginning to form on his upper lip. Gabriel began testosterone treatments last year and reports that the drug dramatically softened his dysphoria and improved his mood. “If anything,” he explained, “it’s made it easier to attend school.”

One of Gabriel’s biggest challenges this year has been working and saving for breast tissue removal surgery, which is vitally important to him. The financial and emotional burden of the surgery will make it impossible for him to attend his chosen university in the fall—something he was looking forward to. He explained his decision to delay college for a year:

I want to go into the next part of my life as close as I can be to the person I want to be. Top surgery isn't cheap, and while it's partially covered by my insurance, I'll be needing to pay \$8,000-plus out of pocket for it—which just isn't possible while I'm attending school.... Recovering from the surgery would mean I couldn't be attending school for two months.

Participants reported mixed experiences with professional therapy as well. Liam had been frustrated by a therapist who could not seem to separate his personal religious beliefs from his professional practice. Isaac reported that he did not like his first therapist and therefore his sessions were not particularly useful: “I wasn’t very open,” he confessed. Antonia received professional counseling briefly during middle school but reports that her therapist “kinda sucked.” She does not talk with anyone now. Sofia had to convince her parents to take her to a therapist, but she was disappointed when her therapist “wasn’t that much help.” She remembers having “bad panic attacks” during sessions:

She would take my parents’ side on everything. And I told her that I was feeling like I was going to hurt myself—or that I have. And she was like, “Well, then I guess I just need to tell your parents that.” And that was her only solution—that she was going to tell my parents. And that felt like a betrayal.

Only a few participants reported that they had not ever seen a therapist. Despite years of family trauma, bullying, and debilitating depression, Piper had never talked with a professional therapist or a school counselor about her depression. Neither had Zoey. “I have my friends that I can speak to,” she explained, “and I write in my life notes.” I asked her if she would have accepted help when her depression was at its worst—had it been offered. “I probably wouldn’t have,” she answered. She explained her reasoning:

I didn’t want to talk to an adult. And also, one of the reasons I didn’t really want to talk to psychologists was, I didn’t want it to be like someone from the Mormon Church, because then I can’t be as open. And then I was also kind of afraid they would talk to my parents about it.

A few participants briefly mentioned positive experiences with a professional therapist—most notably Elizabeth, who credited a therapist with saving her life. But she

was eventually assigned another therapist who, she reports, “isn’t much help.” She had not yet talked to this therapist about her current battle with anorexia.

It seems like an impossibly difficult world these kids have to navigate, not just handling their own struggles with mental and emotional health, but also the barrage of disorganized responses from the those responsible to care for them. That they sometimes manage so much chaos and pain in silence is almost incomprehensible.

### **Trading Emotional Pain for Physical Injury**

*i'm sad in the back stall of the bathroom and I can't pinpoint why.  
you will not find roses on my wrists.  
there is no fresh soil not matter how deep I dig.  
beauty cannot bloom here.  
nothing appealing can grow here.  
so please don't romanticize my scars.  
there is nothing more disgusting than feeling absolutely nothing.*

*the proofs of my addiction are not additions to my personality—  
they are showers that sting  
and long sleeves in July  
and stains on my bedsheets that won't come out.*

—excerpt from poem, “i am sad at the back of the girl’s bathroom stall”

Although I did not ask participants directly about self-harm, more than half of them shared stories about cutting or otherwise inflicting injury on themselves as a way to assuage their pain. The expressions of self-hatred and shame that move through these narratives suggest that these self-inflicted injuries were and are a form of self-punishment. It took me by surprise, the counterintuitive reach I had to make to understand how pain could serve as relief. But they expressed themselves so eloquently



that I began to understand.

Sofia started self-harming in eighth grade using knives or broken shards of glass. She remembers not wanting to kill herself but needing to find an outlet for her anger and shame. “I think I just hated myself for having emotions,” she said, “and for not like being exactly what my parents would want me to be.” Although she does not believe it was a conscious thought at the time, she says she was trying to punish herself. “I just needed to get it out,” she said, “so I would stab myself and stuff.”

Abigail briefly felt suicidal after a painful break up with a long-term boyfriend, but she always intended to stay alive. She used self-harm as an alternative to suicide: “I kind of just wanted to feel like...I don’t know—just feel something, rather than die,” she explained.

Liam started self-harming in eighth grade and has been doing so ever since, although he claims to be slowly getting it under control. “Usually the summers are pretty good for me,” he explained, “and then school can become a stressor.” He told me about the many scars on his thighs and the dark thoughts that trigger these incidents:

First time was a box cutter, and then pencil sharpener, blades, and stuff... It was like, “If I die, I don’t really care.” It wasn’t determined. It wasn’t pre-planned. It was just in the moment. I was so numb.

Liam said that his mom took away his self-harm implements last April. “That was the right thing to do,” he reflected, “because I was in danger.” But he continued to find other ways to harm himself. “[It was] a power struggle. So I would try to make myself throw up or like hit my head or bruise myself. Because even though the blades weren’t there, I still wanted to self-harm.”

Elizabeth recalled the first time she cut herself—the day that a boy had unceremoniously rejected her:

I was taking a shower, and I was just super, super stressed, and sad. This was, like, a small, little thing, but it still hurt me a lot. “I remember I was just crying.... I knew about self-harm and I was just like, “Maybe this would help....” There’s a reason that people do it.” I think, also, I kind of had hatred toward myself a little bit, like, “There’s a reason why people do this to me.”

Elizabeth talked about how odd that first cut felt. She thought, at first, “This is weird. Why would someone do this?” But the pull was powerful and she cut herself again a few weeks later. It soon became a daily practice. She says she uses self-injury to soothe herself when she is stressed or sad. “It just kind of gets rid of everything for a little bit,” she explained. In the hospital last year, she was relieved to learn from other suicide survivors that her behavior is not unusual. “It was nice to hear people talking about it” she said, “because self-harm, I think, personally, it’s actually like a physical addiction—because you get dopamine from it and all that.”

Most participants who shared stories of self-harm talked about it in the past tense. A few told me explicitly that they have moved beyond this phase of their lives. Elizabeth was one of these. “It’s not worth that few minutes of relief,” she explained, “because I know that once I start again, I’ll just get back into it, and I don’t want to do that.” Ximena, who has been cutting herself off and on since seventh grade, says that she is doing “pretty good” right now. But she keeps a blade hidden in a little container under her make-up brushes—just in case.

There are days where I’m really having a rough time and I don’t feel happy at the moment. Or I feel like if doing it would make me feel a lot better.... Every time when I want to, I just say, “No, that’s going to leave a scar, and it’s not something I want on my body.” So then I just put it down. I just sit down and just breathe

and just think about it and just try to relax myself.

It struck me that on any given day, multiple students at Emerson might be nursing fresh self-inflicted injuries. I learned, in fact, that sometimes these injuries take place at school. After Elizabeth's parents had learned about her self-harm practice and had removed any knives or blades from the home, she turned to harming herself at school instead. An unsuspecting photography teacher had a drawer with X-Acto knives available for student use. "I took one of those and went into the gender-neutral bathroom," she said. "Sometimes, that'd be why I'd want to come to school." Elizabeth was quick to assure me that this teacher knew nothing about her behavior at the time and has since secured the knives. Elizabeth also assured me that she had spoken about this with the school counselor and has promised to seek his support in the future. I wondered if some of the participants were spinning their stories, just a little, to make me feel less anxious about their safety. As they themselves have reported, they are masters at hiding pain.

### **Fighting Invisible Demons**

Mental health demons do not stop at the school's front doors. They follow students in. Some participants talked about suffering psychological responses to their depression and anxiety while at school—responses that are beyond their control. Traumatic episodes, ones that most adults at the school know little or nothing about, move through these student's interior landscapes. Liam's occasional lapses into disassociation have left him shaken and embarrassed at school. He recounted an episode that occurred last year during math class. He found himself suddenly standing at the front

of the room just staring, feeling like everything in front of him was happening on TV. His teacher, not understanding what he was doing, initially laughed at his behavior—which confused Liam, because this teacher was generally “so nice.” Once the teacher realized that Liam was in trouble, she gently invited him to sit down and sketch until he felt better. Her kindness was meaningful to Liam. “It was really helpful,” he recalled. “It was awesome.”

Gabriel has also experienced disassociation and has terrifying hallucinations when he is under stress. “It comes in waves,” he reports. Usually these dream-states are disturbingly vivid, such as boa constrictors piled across his floor. But the recurring apparition that troubles him most is the “freakish” stranger who places his hands on Gabriel so that he feels “trapped” and then whispers Gabriel’s own worst self-doubts in his ear. “There will be a voice that just kind of like repeats the stuff that I think that is bad about myself over and over and over again,” he explained. “It’s super degrading and not very...it’s not nice.”

This had happened most recently during AP exams when Gabriel was exhausted from lack of sleep and was not taking care of himself. The voice told Gabriel that he “*should* be lonely,” that he “*is* broken,” “not worth enough,” “not productive enough.” Gabriel recounted how frightening this had been. However, his worst experience happened soon after that, when the voice taunted him late one evening. It at first reassured Gabriel that it was only an apparition. “All that you have to do to make me go away,” the disembodied voice chided, is to “wake up.” But the only way to wake up, it informed Gabriel, is to “kill yourself.”

Gabriel assured me that he had been able to pull himself out of this hallucination safely. “Luckily, I was at my grandparents’ house, and I couldn’t do anything without them knowing immediately,” he explained, “so I was there with them until it settled down, which was really good.”

Isaac also spoke of the hallucinatory experiences that have plagued him during periods when his medicines were being adjusted—although he did not elaborate.

The first time we talked, Matthew was still feeling rattled by another kind of delusion—a paranoid incident that had left him feeling “crushed” only a few days earlier:

I’ve been having a rough past couple days. I was at my friend’s house, and I was doing pretty good. And then I got in my car and for some reason this wave of paranoia hit me, and I was like, “Oh, my god, something bad is going to happen!” The whole ride home, I was like, “Oh, my god, something’s going to happen!”

Matthew spent the next several days feeling fearful about the incident, relentlessly obsessing about what could go wrong in his life. The episode left him stressed, exhausted and unable to complete important work for his AP classes. He reached out to a friend, initially, then eventually to the teacher of one of the classes he feared failing. When we talked, Matthew had told no one at the school but this teacher. She was helping him to compose a letter he could share with all of his AP teachers so that they would understand why he was struggling to complete work. Matthew appreciated this support.

Most participants who suffered these types of episodes reported being reticent to talk about their traumas with adults at school. When Gabriel first shared his hallucinatory experiences with me, he disclosed that I was the first adult at school he had told about his apparition’s deprecating taunts. I found it hard to imagine how frightening it would be to have experiences such as these and how lonely it must feel to suffer in silence.

### Finding Relief in Sleep

Participants talked about other frustrating byproducts of depression that make school especially difficult. Exhaustion was a common companion to both depression and anxiety. Gabriel reported being exhausted during his bouts with hallucination. Liam recalled trying to cope with depression by sleeping for hours after school every day. Rainey remembered her chronic lack of sleep during her worst depressive episode last year, and unrelenting feelings of anger.

I was sad all the time. I was angry for reasons that I didn't know why. I wanted to yell at people even though, like, looking back on it I'm like—I didn't want to yell at anything, I was just very unhappy. I wanted to sleep a lot—a lot of sleeping. I wanted to not talk to anyone and basically just be in my room and like try not to be sad.

Rainey brushed off the exhaustion she still feels regularly. “You kind of get used to being tired,” she explained, “so it feels normal.”

Antonia also complained about exhaustion. She explained that she has “up and down weeks” and that she can always tell, on Monday, which kind of week it is going to be:

If my Monday was...like bad, my whole week can just spiral out of control. Like I remember a few weeks ago, I was feeling exhausted. I was not motivated to do anything. I was completely depressed. I barely wanted to get out of bed.

When Abigail's depression deepened during eighth grade, she reports that she was “super tired and not motivated at all.” By the beginning of her freshman year, she was regularly fighting both exhaustion and nausea. “I just didn't want to do anything,” she said. “I just started having really bad anxiety, where I couldn't eat, or I would, like, throw up and get sick and stuff.” The nausea had returned a few weeks earlier when she and her

long-term boyfriend ended their relationship. Even as we talked, Abigail seemed to be fighting to stay awake. She apologized for yawning as she curled up into her chair and pulled a blanket more tightly around her shoulders. Her eyes grew heavy. I wondered if she was trying to escape the memory of this relatively fresh wound she was so disinterestedly recounting—as though it had happened years ago.

Each of these teens spoke of how reliably sleep offers solace and escape, but also wreaks havoc on their academic lives.

### **Finding Solace in Music, Theater, and Art**

*I don't think I wanna die like all my friends do  
I just wanna pray and get an answer  
Well don't you?*

*And I've learned that self-love is honest self-introspection  
Noticing when you're playing the game of deception*

—excerpt from Liam's song, "Honest Self-Introspection"

Participants talked about physiological and psychological responses beyond their control, but they also shared ways in which they consciously strive to manage their mental health. I did not need to explicitly ask anyone to talk about how they cope with their depression—their strategies naturally emerged in their narratives. Four participants talked about how important music has been for their well-being. Antonia keeps headphones in “eight hours a day” listening to music much of that time. Liam has a beautiful singing voice and writes original songs. He recalled listening to music for hours on end during his worst depression. Sofia and Gabriel talked about specific songs that have been especially meaningful to them. Gabriel loves *Spaceman* by The Killers. It is

about a suicide attempt that turns out to only be a fantasy, he explained. Hearing this song for the first time was a turning point for Gabriel. It made him realize that he could take control over his depression. “If I don’t give this any power,” he realized, “it’s not going to affect me.” He said the song inspired him to start planning for the future and to “figure out exactly the sort of mentality that I needed to be in in order to keep myself safe.”

Piper finds refuge and joy in both music and art. She plays multiple instruments and immerses herself in creative work. She felt particularly safe and supported at a fine arts high school she had attended the previous year. Although she struggled with depression most of the year, her music classes and rehearsals gave her something meaningful to do and think about. Life felt more manageable. Things have been harder since she had to leave the school.

Jazmin said that anticipating new releases from her favorite musical artists or waiting for the next episode of a favorite television series or a new movie gives her incentive to carry on. “I feel like little things like that can really go a long way,” she explained:

I do this thing when I’m really, really depressed—if I can get myself to do it. I make a list of all the stupid things that I’m excited to do in the next month or week. Like, I was into K Pop, and they all have comebacks where they make new music and new music videos and new albums so often that I’m like, “Hey, BTS’s new album is coming out in just a month!” Like, that’s exciting to you. You want to see that.

Zoey talked about having retreated to music, reading, and drawing during times of loneliness and depression—especially during middle school when she was often alone at lunchtime. She reports that getting herself into an “aesthetic mood” is one of her primary strategies for coping with sadness. Anime art and the sad songs on her Spotify playlist



comfort her when she is distraught about a relationship she currently longs for.

Several participants mentioned how therapeutic creating art has been for their mental health. Liam recalled his first visit to Emerson when he was shopping schools. He immediately noted all of the student art on the walls: “That was a good sign,” he said. Both Annie and Sofia talked about drawing to get through their most difficult depressive episodes. They both shared portfolios of simple, poignant sketches they had created during some of their worst times. Figures 5.1 and 5.2 are representative samples of this work.

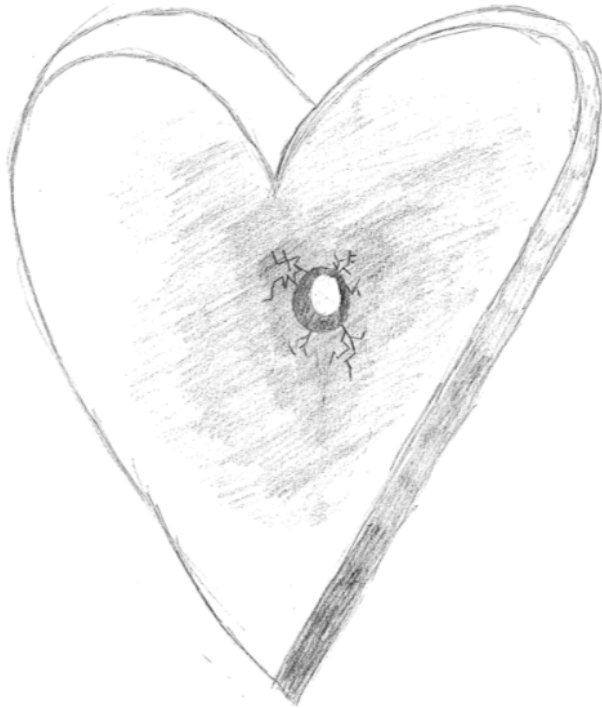
**Figure 5.1**

*Sofia’s Angry Face.*



**Figure 5.2**

*Zoey's "Hole in My Heart."*



### **Coping Through Written Expression**

Many of my co-researchers had used written expression as a way to process emotions and cope with their mental health challenges. Some relied on journaling, or in Zoey's case writing "life notes," to process their emotions. Others wrote poetry, essays or song lyrics as a means of processing difficult emotions. In the artifacts I collected, it was interesting to note that these expressions seemed to represent extremes of emotion—both the depths of despair and anger, and the intermittent hope these young people sometimes felt.

Both Gabriel and Piper talked about writing notes of encouragement to

themselves to help get through some of their toughest times. Gabriel called one of these pieces his *Unsuicide Note*. “I wrote it when I was really, really sad,” he said. “Like *really, really* sad.” The note was addressed to his future self—should he be alive to read it. He shared a few of the phrases he could remember from the note: “I’m proud of you if you’re better, even if your mental health isn’t stable yet.” Then, “I hope that you can feel confident in decision-making for your future.” And “Be nice to yourself.” Gabriel remembers how hard it had been to write the note, believing that he would not be alive much longer.

Piper shared a collection of affirmations she has written to herself at bedtime to remind herself of her worth and tell herself that tomorrow might be better. Following is a short excerpt:

Goodnight. Tonight, there are seven and a half billion people in the world. Which means there is absolutely no way you are the only one who doesn’t belong. No matter how many times you convince yourself you are.

Goodnight. Success is not an objective concept. You get to define success for yourself. Success can be getting straight A’s. Success can be getting out of bed. Success can be making it through today. All of that is enough. You are still here. And that is enough.

Goodnight. It’s hard to heal in this environment when it’s exactly what made you sick in the first place. But someday you can leave it behind. Someday you will be in the right place at the right time. Someday. Get some rest. Let’s see if it’s tomorrow.

Goodnight. No matter how defeated you feel, you have not lost yet. You are breathing, your heart is beating, you have people who love you. This is not how your story ends.

Ximena talked about how important written expression has been for her mental health. “I enjoy just being able to write it out,” she said, “to express...this is how I feel—

this is what's going on." Always mindful of her friends and family, she added that writing helps her to understand how others are feeling as well, that it can "help me to know what they are going through so that we can support each other."

Eight students shared pieces of their own work—some on the promise of anonymity. Selected excerpts from these poems, essays and songs can be found throughout these chapters. Several complete pieces are included in Appendix E.

It comes as no surprise that art and music soothe troubled hearts and minds. What amazed me is the intelligence these young people showed in finding ways—clear beneficial ways—to succeed, to help themselves, to survive.

### **Finding Renewal in Nature**

As a school, Emerson has been shaped by a place-based philosophy and by educators who love the world outdoors. Its founders believed that Utah's wild places can serve as inspiration and healing salve for young people. As both parents and educators, they noticed that the teenagers in their lives were spending excessive amounts of time in front of computer screens (teens owned mobile phones less frequently then) and were spending far fewer hours outdoors. They wanted Emerson to be a place where students could connect with the natural world as much as possible. The school's annual backpacking trek and various retreats were attempts to make that happen. Many of this study's participants talked about how these experiences, and their personal sojourns with nature, have provided solace for them and have helped at times to soften their anxiety or depression.

Gabriel did not need Emerson to realize that communing with nature is crucial to his well-being. He talked animatedly about his Mormon pioneer heritage, the mountain community where his mother was born, and his family's tradition of hunting, camping and hiking in a canyon named after his grandfather. "The one place that I've never felt lonely has been out in the deserts or up in the mountains," he exclaimed. He talked about how happy he is in nature and how much he values the outdoor experiences Emerson provides. He credits the school's fall retreat in the mountains with giving him the courage to begin talking with other students. "Staying at [Alpine Lodge] forces you to share with everyone," he laughed. He spoke excitedly about two upcoming school trips he is planning to attend:

We're going to [Zion] tomorrow, and I'm so excited because it was like, towering red rock and carved out by wind, and that's like—that's so important to me—that incredibly unique Utah landscape and the things that are only in Utah. And I'm going to [White Pine Lake] in a few weeks, and that's the polar opposite, where it's blues and greens and cold.

Jazmin reports that, despite her fear of bugs and worms, connecting with nature is foundational to her well-being and spirituality.

I find a lot of peace and serenity when I'm surrounded by nature.... I would just like, walk to the train station sometimes and I would just breathe for a second and I would just feel all the living [*sic*] that is surrounding—I don't know what word—such a *factorized* place.

When we first talked, Jazmin had not yet been on any of the high school's outdoor expeditions, but she had loved her time at the mountain retreat last year during eighth grade. She recalls one evening in particular:

It was raining really bad outside, and everyone was asleep, and it was our last night there, and I could just hear the rain outside, and it was so peaceful. I could just feel the love and the energy. And I don't think we could get that in a hotel

room in Salt Lake on a school trip.

Zoey also spoke of the time she had spent at Alpine Lodge. She had felt a close bond with the other students as everyone sheltered inside while the rain fell. Isaac spoke effusively about his experiences backpacking with the school and on a retreat. “I love those experiences so much,” he said. “Honestly, I feel like if I wouldn’t have gone to [Alpine] Lodge, I wouldn’t feel as close with all the students, and so I’d feel more isolated and more depressed.”

Isaac felt that spending time on these retreats encourages everyone to see him and his peers as “people and not just students.”

It puts into perspective that the people you’re at school with aren’t these enigmas of perfect people. They’re, like, actual people just like you. It helped lower my depression a lot because we were outside and we were just being kids in a way.

Isaac had not spent much time in nature prior to coming to Emerson, but he now wants to be outside “all the time.” He talked about a favorite English teacher who occasionally takes his class to a peaceful part of the campus grounds to talk and write. “I’m just more focused, and I’m more willing to learn when I’m outside, he explained. Being in nature just really grounds me. It makes me feel a lot safer.”

As I look back on my time at Emerson, my most vivid memories are of wild places—of standing at the base of a waterfall watching happy teenagers dare each other to take a plunge into freezing water. Of gathering in the red rocks of Capitol Reef in the glow of a setting sun while teens earnestly shared poetry crafted that day. As I reflect on the stories of communion with nature my co-researchers shared, it occurs to me that each vignette is really about human connection. About truly seeing and accepting each other in

the safety and beauty of wild places.

### **Finding Support in Community**

My co-researchers recognized how crucial supportive relationships are to their well-being. Most spoke passionately about family and friends who give their lives meaning and offer support in difficult times. I asked participants about the bonds they have forged at school. Many reported having peers and at least one adult at the school who have nurtured and supported them. Sofia had been at Emerson only two months when we first talked, but she spoke animatedly about how comfortable she has been here. “The teachers genuinely care about the students and talk to them on an equal level,” she said. “Which makes me want to respect them and be good to them, you know, and makes them want to be good to me back.” Sofia especially loves being able to call teachers by their first names.

I’ll talk about my teachers as my friends. If I’m going home and telling my mom what I did that day, I’ll be like, “Oh, yeah, and then [her math teacher] said this or whatever.” It’s just more like a...it’s like a little community, like a little neighborhood. Like those neighborhoods that you see in movies that you really like, and you’re like, “Oh, I wish my neighborhood was like that.”

As happens in any school, participants developed their most important relationships in unique ways. For both Zoey and Antonia, a love of anime and gaming connected them to a small group of peers, landing them in many of the same school workshops and after-school clubs together. Like several other participants, Gabriel’s initial foray into Emerson’s social life began at Alpine Lodge. But he developed deeper friendships in an after-school gaming club. Here in the safety of role-play and strategy games, he found

friends who have listened to him and supported him when he needed their help most. The group has remained close over the past 3 years and spends time together almost daily.

In Gabriel's junior year, he finally realized that the adults at Emerson can also serve as a support system. He is now close to a math teacher who banters with him and knows about his difficult circumstances. He has developed a "genuine bond" with Emerson's GSA advisor. He confides in her about his "sexual identity issues" and other stresses, although he has never actually been a member of the school's GSA. He explained why.

I don't like making myself a big part of the LGBT community because that's not the whole of my identity. I'd rather be known for something that I do than something that just kind of happens. So that's my take on it.

Gabriel talked about how comforting it has been to have this teacher's support.

She's the first person I go to when I'm like, hey, "My brain feels like it's going to implode right now," and I'm bordering on that, like, switch between normality and hallucinating so I need to be safe. She's the first person I go to. She's a really good listener, and she's really good at sympathizing and saying, "Yeah, that's really terrible, and I'm really sorry. Do you need a safe space? Stay here until you feel safe enough to go out and carry on with what you were doing." And that's really helpful.

Sometimes relationships develop because an adult reaches out to a student at a crucial moment. When Elizabeth returned to Emerson after her hospitalization last spring, she felt that her teachers were largely unaware of the ordeal she had been through. Her primary support, she said, came from her college boyfriend. Elizabeth reports that she was in a "bad place" when she joined her peers on the Emerson's annual Red Rock hiking and writing retreat just a few weeks later. She described her mindset at the time:

I definitely did *not* want to get better. I wanted to get worse so that I would be able to go through with...kind of the ultimatum. That was definitely like my goal



deep down, even...even if I didn't really, like, realize it. You know?

During her first evening at the lodge, Elizabeth sequestered herself in her room to avoid interacting with anyone. Later, while other students chatted and played games in the main lodge, she went out into the chill night air and sat by herself, sobbing. She did not initially notice when a teacher joined her. When he asked if she was okay, she said she felt "like a dam had broken."

I was crying a ton.... I don't even think he came out to talk to me. He just came outside, then he just saw me and he sat down next to me and he was like, "What's going on?" and for some reason I just spilled out a little bit, and we had a long conversation, and I really appreciated what he did.

During my time at Emerson, it has been interesting to watch how students tend to find a favorite teacher, administrator, or staff member to connect to. During times of crisis, they often reach out to this adult rather than seeking out help in more formalized ways. Title, rank, or official role have no bearing on whom they choose. My co-researchers were no different. Many of them expressed respect and affection for Emerson's high school counselor. Elizabeth said, "He's a really good person and teacher." Jazmin expressed her appreciation for this counselor as well, saying, "He understands and respects all students." Although many participants had talked with this counselor about academic concerns, he was not necessarily the adult they had reached out to when in crisis. Elizabeth had been meeting with a social work intern new to the school—a young woman not much older than her who makes Elizabeth feel safe and supported. Jazmin feels most comfortable with Emerson's receptionist: "[She] is such a great person to talk to, because she just listens," she said. Ximena talks to the school principal "a lot," she admitted. Sofia spoke of how meaningful it was, recently, when

both the high school counselor and principal reached out to her after another student's actions had been hurtful. "I'm doing fine," she had assured them. "It took me a second to like calm down about it, but I'm doing good now." They had chatted with Sofia for a while to be sure she was okay, then had reassured her that she was welcome to come back anytime, "if you ever need to talk about anything." "And it made me, like, so happy," Sofia said, beaming.

### **Hiding the Pain**

It would be tempting to feel self-congratulatory on the school's behalf about these stories of adult-student connection. Talking to these students, it seems clear that Emerson's commitment to inclusion and relationship-building serves to foster inclusion and to give students a lifeline at critical times. Some participants had come to Emerson seeking this kind of community. It is also clear that Emerson's current administrators, educators and staff are working tirelessly to provide a protective environment for students. But this is not the end of the story.

Not every participant I talked with had found community at Emerson. Like Sofia, Piper is new to the school this year. She feels lonely and isolated and desperately misses her previous school. She talked about the "close-knit" community at her previous school and expressed love for the adults and students there who had supported her through difficult times:

I really felt like everyone there was a good friend of mine—including the teachers, the adults. That was the first time in my life that I had a mentor...I found an adult who I felt like I could trust and felt like I could talk to no matter what.

I hoped Piper would find her place at Emerson, but our conversation injected some caution into my optimistic view of the school's protective environment. I began to realize that, despite the school's best efforts, some students had slipped through the cracks.

The most painful message embedded in these narratives is that too many of these teens, when in the depths of depression or suicidality, had chosen *not* to avail themselves of school or family support systems. A few reported that they had not established a strong relationship with any adult at Emerson. Even when they had established good relationships with school adults, most participants had chosen not to ask for help when they were at their most vulnerable; instead they isolated themselves when in crisis. With few exceptions, these narratives illustrate that depressed, anxious, suicidal adolescents often choose not to seek help from anyone.

Many of these conversations centered on the festering shame and self-doubt most participants had felt at some point—and on their reluctance to burden others with their problems. Decisions to self-isolate were often driven by a misguided sense of protectiveness toward those around them. Their stories reveal an enormous sense of generosity and self-sacrifice. These young people were keenly aware of challenges their friends, family, and teachers face. Despite their own significant needs, they choose to be silent to avoid adding stress to anyone else's life. For a few of these teens, a mix of fierce independence and a desire for privacy had kept them from asking for adult help at school. The following vignettes illustrate some of the ways in which these teens have carefully avoided troubling others with their mental health concerns.

### **Hiding Pain from the Adults at School**

Sofia reported that none of the adults at her previous school had noticed that she was suffering from severe depression and anxiety. At first, she excused them for this lapse: “It’s not their business,” she argued. When I expressed my surprise that no adult had seen how much pain she was in, she conceded, “I think it would’ve been nice if somebody had noticed, but no one really did.” She reported that her experience at Emerson has been quite different. When her math teacher observed Sofia leaving his class frequently, he talked with her about it. Sofia explained to him that she is sometimes overwhelmed and needs time to compose herself. Together they came up with a solution. He knew that Sofia likes chatting with Emerson’s high school principal, so he arranged for Sofia to visit there whenever she felt the need to leave class. She could go in to talk or to simply hang out—no questions asked. When I asked Sofia if she had ever taken advantage of this offer, she smiled sheepishly:

I’m still kind of like too embarrassed to do that...I’m kind of like, just like personality-wise, I kind of don’t like sharing my...I don’t know. I don’t like going to people when I need help. Like I don’t mind talking about it, but it’s hard for me to get up the courage and actually tell someone I need help because I think I can solve it on my own.

She added, “But it made me feel better to have that option.”

Rainey recalled “crying uncontrollably” some days at school during her worst depressive episodes. She explained how she kept her teachers from noticing.

Usually in class I’d just like stay silent and just, like, try and breathe. But if it got bad to the point that I like needed to *not* be around people, I’d just go to the bathroom and sit there for a minute or two and, like, recompose myself. I didn’t want to show my teachers and interrupt class.

Rainey had not considered talking to any adult at school during her worst depression. She

was a freshman, it was the beginning of the school year, and she did not want to “bother them with this weird problem.” She had not realized that talking with a school counselor or social worker was an option. Even if it had been, she informed me, she would not have availed herself of the opportunity.

I was still denying that I had issues at this point.” She explained: “I have no problem asking for help, like, or clarification [on schoolwork], but I’ve never asked for help on mental health—at least from teachers.... I tend to hide my struggles.

Liam admitted that he could have used a school counselor or therapist during sixth grade when he was trying to support his suicidal friend *and* manage his own emerging depression. But it never occurred to him to seek help. Ironically, he had been working as an aide for the school counselor at the time. He recalls assuming that the parade of tearful students going in and out of her office each day were getting some kind of support, but he never thought to ask for help himself. I asked Liam if he would have opened up and talked had the counselor recognized his distress and offered. He responded: “There were way too many kids at the school. I don’t think that would’ve happened.”

Jazmin had chosen not to meet with Emerson’s middle school counselor in eighth grade during a difficult bout with depression and anxiety. “I just felt like, at that age, if I made it known that I was struggling with stuff, I’d feel kind of alienated,” she explained. The counselor at the time was new to the school and unfamiliar to most students. When Jazmin explained why she had avoided her, the subtext seemed to be that this particular counselor was generally not trusted. “It wasn’t, like, a thing to just go talk to her,” she explained. Jazmin also suggested that the stigma surrounding mental illness had

influenced her decision to avoid seeking help. “Just kind of blowing it off and not taking people’s mental health seriously is something that kids—or at least teenagers—do a lot,” she explained.

I was surprised, initially, by Jazmin’s assertion. But I quickly learned that most of my co-researchers had, at least initially, avoided seeking help on their own. Piper had suffered through years of depression and suicidality but had only seen a counselor once—when a friend who was deeply concerned about her “reported” Piper to the school. Under coercion, Piper met with the school counselor just once. “It wasn’t really much of a conversation,” she said.

Piper was one of several study participants who had never spoken with any adult at Emerson about their depression. Ximena was another. When I asked her why, she responded, “I’m so used to just bottling it up inside me...and just being, “Oh, it’s something that everyone goes through.... I can deal with it myself.” Ximena says she does not want to talk to *anyone* when she is feeling depressed—especially not teachers, because “it’s not their problem.” Yet she spoke of the many nights she spends crying alone in her bedroom and of the days when she isolates herself from everyone. She feels a lot of responsibility for her family and friends and does not want to add to their stress.

I guess I just really want everyone to be happy. I enjoy seeing people smile and laugh and stuff like that, and seeing them sad just makes me sad, and I feel like I don’t know how to help them or make them feel better.... I’d rather just take myself out of the equation—not ruin everyone’s mood.

Antonia, who avoids asking for academic help so that she will not seem “dumb,” uses this same cautious approach where her mental health is concerned. The second time we talked, Antonia’s anxiety appeared to be escalating. She was clearly panicked about

her slipping grades but reported that she was just “trying to get through it.” She had not asked anyone at the school for help. “I personally don’t like going to teachers,” she explained. Antonia felt that her teachers would be supportive if she asked, but she did not feel brave enough to approach them.

I’m afraid to ask for help.... It’s just like, it’s one of those things it’s like, a really bad mindset of, like, “Oh, there’s somebody’s time that I’m taking that they could use instead of me,” and it’s sort of like a pride thing that’s like, I shouldn’t need to ask for help.”

I worried about Antonia during our conversation. She became increasingly agitated as we talked and a mild pattern of stuttering emerged and grew increasingly worse. She tried to express why things are so difficult for her. “I hate being aware that I have a mental illness,” she said. “I want this out of me. I want to actually be able to live healthy. But I know that right now I can’t, for whatever reason. It sucks.”

Matthew also reported that he is reluctant to reach out for help at school: “You know, I can slap on a fake smile, and I can make it through the day, he explained. “I was always good at pretending that I was happy.” He talked about using isolating behavior as a form of self-punishment. Even as a young child, he said, he had hidden in his room rather than play with friends. He remembers constantly chiding himself with self-deprecating thoughts like, “You’re so stupid.” Matthew does not know who reported his most recent suicide attempt to Emerson’s high school principal and counselor. He had not shared the incident with anyone but his closest friend. When they invited Matthew in to talk, he was reticent to share what had happened. He explained that he did not really want anyone at school to bother with him:

Everybody at the school was kind of dealing with their own stuff. I didn’t want to

burden the teachers with their already really busy schedules with it. And again, I'm only there for a very short amount of time so it didn't seem very necessary or important for me to stress them out over that when they have much bigger and more important things to be doing.

When I asked Matthew what could possibly be more important than him and his well-being, he answered, "The majority of students who are healthy."

These words jolted and pained me. I wondered how it was possible that he could feel so insignificant. I had believed that Matthew was an important part of Emerson's ecosystem—connected and respected. Once again, I found myself confronting my own ignorance and staring at the chasm between an educator's good intentions and the trials these students face.

### **Deliberately Pushing Others Away**

Fear of inconveniencing others was a theme that emerged again and again in these narratives. But beyond simply refusing to seek adult help, many of these teens had strategically avoided everyone—including family and friends—during their most difficult times. Isaac chose to manage on his own during sixth grade when his depression first emerged—then again in eighth grade when he was coming to terms with being transgender. He explained that the loneliness he feels at times makes him withdraw from family and friends. "Because I feel so lost and alone," he explained, "I don't want to reach out to anybody because I don't want to bother them. So then it just gets worse and worse."

Before he found friends at Emerson, Gabriel also remembers isolating himself. "I was very consciously secluding myself and hanging back," he said, "so I didn't have a



support system at school at that point. I was very sort of alone.” Even after Gabriel had a circle of friends he could have approached, he did not ask anyone to help him when he was suicidal and spiraling downward last summer. “It took a week’s stay in the hospital,” he reported, “and being basically emotionally beat up, until I told people what was going on.”

When Matthew tried to take his own life earlier in the year, he tried to hide the incident from both his parents and the school. He still does not like to talk about the attempt because the details are “gnarly.” He admits that there is a part of him that still believes “depression is bad” and that “to be mentally ill is a cop-out.” But although he tried to conceal his mental health struggles, he admits that this is not always an easy thing to do at Emerson. “I did isolate myself for a while there, and it kind of just never worked out with me because I was at Emerson, and everybody’s here to support.” In the same breath, Matthew made the following astute observation about so many of his peers at Emerson:

Isolation is a huge problem, and it only gets worse because you’ve got underlying—at least what I’ve observed is—people have an underlying problem with depression, and then they isolate themselves because they don’t think they’re good enough or they don’t think that they’re going to do the right thing, and they’re scared of failure, so they cut themselves off from everybody else. And that only exacerbates the problem.

Many participants shared observations such as Matthew’s. Their words felt important and prescient. But when Elizabeth shared the rationale behind her self-isolating behaviors, the suffering these teens had experienced suddenly felt much more potent. I was overcome with a sense of urgency and fear. Her story made me recognize just how ill equipped I had been, when serving as Emerson’s principal, to recognize let alone

attenuate any pain that the adolescents in my care might have been experiencing. It also made me realize how hard we will need to work as educators to understand what our students need from us, and to lay a viable plan that will actually make a difference.

Elizabeth's narrative captured the sense of hopelessness that so many of the participants reported feeling at some point on their journey. She was weary of the endless rounds of therapy and medication, only to wake up each day and "feel awful and just drudge through." She was worried about the economic and emotional strain her care was placing on her family. She desperately wanted everyone to give up on her so that she could quietly end her life:

I felt like a burden, just because I was spending my parents' money, and it just kind of felt like—this is the best option. And I didn't—honestly, at that point—I didn't see anything wrong with that. I was like, "This is just kind of escaping everything bad."

Any efforts that others made to reach out to her felt invasive and unwelcome. "I didn't want any help at all," she said. She felt immense guilt at the time—and pressure to stay alive for the people who seemed to care about her—although it was hard for her to believe that anyone really did. But she also felt frustration and anger. If anyone did love her, they should want to let her go so she "wouldn't have to suffer anymore." She explained that although "deep down" she may have wanted help, all that she recognized at the time was her desire to be left alone:

It really hurt. People kept telling me, "If you leave, you'll hurt people." That was hard to hear because it was like, "I'm in so much pain, and if people really cared about me, they'd *want* me to not have to deal with that anymore."

Once Elizabeth decided to end her life, she began pushing everyone away—including her closest friend. "I was really rude to her...I was trying to make her leave me alone, because

I wanted to be able to...I wanted her to hate me so that it was easier.” Elizabeth knew that, after a suicide, family and friends often ask themselves: “What could I have done? Why didn’t I do more?” She explained, “It’s not about that at all. It’s just about the person themselves...They [want to] be done with everything.”

I reflected on the many ways in which my colleagues and I have tried to forge relationships with students over the years—the backpacking treks, communal summer readings, mentor groups, nature retreats, and a thousand collaborative and individual attempts at drawing students in and offering support. These efforts seemed feeble in the crush of devastating emotions so many adolescents face. However, the stories my co-researchers shared reflect some hope that our efforts have been meaningful. I would like to believe that Emerson provides a more protective environment than some other schools might. But it is clear that there is still much work to be done. So many avenues for fostering connection and protection remain unexplored. Ideally, school should be able to ensure that students have access to the professional mental health support students need. But these narratives make clear that, while adding mental health personnel to our staff will be useful, it would not be enough. Adding a few weeks of social-emotional learning curricula to health classes certainly would not be enough. Suicide help lines and mobile crisis units—however vital—would not be enough. We must find meaningful ways of infusing emotional and mental health support for our students into all school programs, policies and curricula. In the final chapters of this document, my co-researchers and I consider how change might be possible.

## Summary

In this chapter, I tried to convey the depth and complexity of the challenges, sorrows, and fears study participants have struggled with much of their lives. I touch on both the psychological and physiological fall-out of mental illness to illustrate how school life is often more difficult for these individuals than we might imagine. I share some of the thoughtful, creative ways in which these teens have tried to hold their lives together in the face of debilitating depression and anxiety. I touch on their propensity to self-isolate and turn away from help when darkness is at its deepest.

In Chapter 6, I begin to explore, from the perspective of these youth, how schools and educators might better support students' mental health needs. Using Emerson as a backdrop and Critical Pedagogy as a theoretical lens, I envision a school where students find greater happiness and peace because they feel included, connected, and respected—and are empowered to do meaningful work and find transformation in the work they engage with as a community.

## CHAPTER 6

### THEMES OF CRITIQUE

#### Introduction

In the previous two chapters, I examine the origins of my co-researchers' mental health struggles and consider how their school lives have been complicated by depression, anxiety and suicidality. These stories are surprising and sobering. My hope is that by reading these experiences, Utah educators and policymakers might better understand the mental health challenges many young people in our schools face. I recognize how inadequate the process of description, analysis, and interpretation are when representing people's lives. It is difficult to fully communicate the complexity of each participant's experience. Choosing what to omit was been a painful process.

This chapter is the first of *two* chapters of critique and discussion. My approach is unconventional in the following ways: First, I include critique and analysis offered by my co-researchers in these pages. Their insights are essential to this study. Secondly, I begin this chapter by revisiting themes central to critical pedagogy first introduced in Chapter 2. The literature of critical pedagogy is then interwoven throughout both Chapters 6 and 7.

In this chapter, I communicate important insights my co-researcher's shared about how schools can better safeguard student mental health. Some of the following excerpts are direct responses to various forms of the question I posed: "What can schools do to be safer, more inclusive places that nurture and protect students' emotional well-being and mental health?" Many of these young people found it difficult to engage in conversations

of critique. They could not always see a clear relationship between the school environment—its curriculum, expectations, policies, and structure—and their own mental health stories. For this reason, some of the observations and conclusions I have drawn are my own, extrapolated from participant narratives as I searched for patterns.

I assumed, having raised five outspoken, critical-minded children of my own, that teenagers naturally enjoy blaming others and picking apart people and institutions. But that was not my experience with these teens. If anything, most were anxious to exonerate others—their families, teachers, and friends—from any wrongdoing, and thereby shield them from critique. These teens were focused on their own perceived shortcomings and culpability. Most of them were remarkably self-reflective, perhaps to a fault. What little critique I managed to extract from them was hard-won. Clear themes emerged, however, even when they were not couched in the language of critique. Critique is implicit in what we say we value. All of these participants expressed how critical love and acceptance are to them—especially from friends and family, but also from teachers and school peers. Critique is also implicit in what we say hurts us. When participants shared stories of academic overwhelm, exclusion, misrecognition, loneliness, and fear, I did my best to articulate their implicit criticisms for them. I hope that my representations fall close to the mark.

### **Themes of Critical Pedagogy**

In this chapter I offer a graphic organizer (not a model) to organize prevalent themes of critical pedagogy, recognizing that such a simplistic representation defies the

depth and complexity of the literature of critical pedagogy and the richness of its

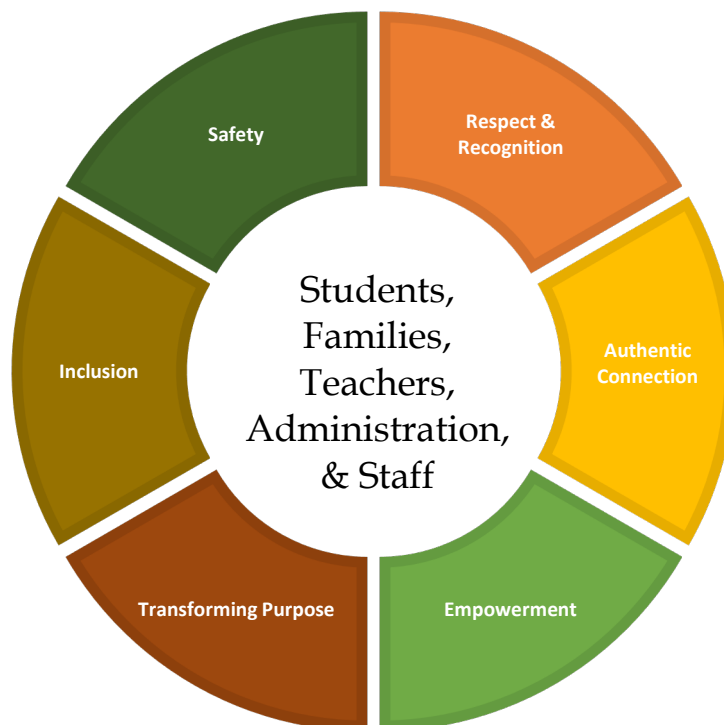
historical context. Darder et al. (2017) write:

It is important to emphasize that there does not exist a formula or homogeneous representation for the universal implication of any form of critical theory or critical pedagogy. In fact, it is precisely this distinguishing factor that supports its critical nature, and therefore its revolutionary potential and transformative possibility. (p. 9)

If I were an artist, I would create a much more apt representation—a tapestry, perhaps, with rich threads of theory woven into a labyrinth of repeating patterns. Or perhaps an intricate network of streams and rivers—intersecting, merging, flowing into and away from each other, small rivulets forming and building into strong, steady streams. But for now, this more basic representation in Figure 6.1 will have to suffice.

**Figure 6.1**

*Critical Connections Graphic.*



My daughter asked if she could take a stab at representing these themes more organically. Although the words in Figure 6.2 are difficult to read, her art more aptly represents the organic and intersectional nature of the various elements of critical pedagogy and of the individuals in schools who are supported by the structure it creates.

**Figure 6.2**

*Intersectional Nature of Critical Pedagogy Themes.*



My justification for creating a visual representation of critical pedagogical themes is this: Educational institutions prefer to be guided by models and graphic organizers; we like to use them regardless of their tendency to oversimplify experience. Already the SEL model has found a place of ascendancy in national conversations about mental health in schools. The SEL model includes components such as “self-management” and “responsible decision-making.” It emphasizes what students must learn and how they



should behave (although, to be fair, it also acknowledges the importance of caring communities). This “Critical Connections” graphic organizer offers an alternative that places greater emphasis on societal responsibility and on the importance of ensuring that students are recognized as intelligent, agentive beings who must be allowed to be co-creators of their educational experiences. This graphic asks us to consider how school policies, programs, and curricula can better serve both students and adults in schools by encouraging us to rethink societal systems of power and control that harm everyone. This graphic does not offer a strategy or a set of steps to follow; rather, it illustrates key elements of critical thought and reminds us to consider multiple dimensions of school and student life as we search for solutions to Utah’s mental health crisis. It is intended to be used at the local level, considering the unique needs and identities of students we serve.

Agencies that govern schools tend to reproduce familiar structures of instruction and intervention in response to any new situation or need that presents itself in schools. In response to Utah’s mental health crisis, Utah policy makers have focused largely on adding funding for mental health professionals and mandating the use of SEL curriculum in schools. Our dogged determination to standardize curricula and programs will not solve Utah’s mental health crisis. In fact, an over-reliance on behavioral interventions may be preventing schools from closely examining the ways in which school curriculum, policies and practices might be contributing to student distress. The Critical Connections graphic in Figure 6.1 serves as a reminder that students’ needs, desires, hopes, and capabilities must be central to our conversations about adolescent mental health in schools.

I first began to imagine a more comprehensive, holistic way of addressing student mental health based on recurrent themes in the writings of educational reformers such as Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, Antonia Darder, Joe Kincheloe, bell hooks, and other critical scholars who have fought passionately for radical social transformation in schools. Their fight for societal change is premised on the conviction that all individuals must be both recognized and respected, and should be granted the agency to shape their own destinies. The structures of schooling that silence and oppress students and deny them agency, also diminish their passion for learning and for life. Only when students feel safe, seen, included, understood, connected, respected and empowered can they find meaning in life and in their educational pursuits. Only then will they develop an individual and collective sense of purpose and political will. Darder (2017) writes about the foundational work of Paulo Freire in bringing a critical sensibility to education:

He was adamant about the political necessity to unveil authoritarian pedagogies in the classroom, which curtail the pleasure of life and the principle of love, generating in both teachers and students a sense of alienation and estrangement from self and the world. This, in turn, arouses deep anxieties and insecurities that interfere with cultivating and nurturing the political imaginations, epistemological curiosity, and the joy of learning necessary to our practice. (p. 97)

From the introduction of Freire's (1970/2000) seminal *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* to Giroux's more recent battle cries against a neoliberal culture that reduces education to "an obsession with accountability schemes, an audit culture, market values, and an unreflective immersion in the crude empiricism of a data-obsessed, market driven society" (Giroux, 2018, p. 84), critical pedagogy demands that we rethink the structures and purposes of education and recognize students as fully capable partners in their educational journeys. The many theoretical streams that have emerged from critical

pedagogy—queer and feminist pedagogies for example—often began as a critique of the movement but always built on and refined its aims. However disparate, each strand of critical pedagogy foregrounds the necessity of nurturing the social and emotional lives of individuals. Each examines the vital role that safety, inclusion, connection, recognition, agency, empowerment, and purpose play in fostering student and societal well-being. These are vital elements of student life that need stronger consideration in conversations about student mental health.

As I talked with my co-researchers and reviewed their narratives, I reimagined this Critical Connections graphic several times to more accurately reflect participant feedback—combining or omitting elements; choosing one descriptor over another. But ultimately, changes were minimal. Participant concerns and insights aligned closely with the dominant themes of critical pedagogy. Their narratives clearly illustrate how experiences of loneliness, exclusion, misrecognition and fear have compromised their mental health, and how inclusive, nurturing, empowering experiences have provided a healing salve. Their expressions of longing for respect, agency, and purpose suggest how central these needs are to their well-being. During our conversations, my co-researchers often articulated this understanding elegantly.

The following pages explore both explicit and implicit insights participants shared about how schools can better nurture the emotional well-being and mental health of adolescents. I organized their critiques thematically, using elements of the Critical Connections graphic. Addressing each of the graphic's themes discretely ignores their intersectionality—elements are intricately and inextricably linked. Untangling them for

clarity was largely an arbitrary process. The school life vignettes and students' insights I have selected to illustrate any given theme could have been used equally well to illustrate several others. Rather than attempt to justify my choices, I simply acknowledge the perplexing nature of trying to delineate human experience in categorical boxes.

In the following pages, I paint a more detailed picture of the school environment my co-researchers currently inhabit and share what I know of Emerson's past and current mission and vision. My intent is to contextualize participant experiences related to schooling and to explore further how Emerson's unique environment and programs have both helped and harmed their social and emotional well-being. I cannot claim objectivity. Although much of my work with Emerson is now related to mundane tasks such as grant writing, reporting, and administrative support—nurturing this school has been my professional focus for nearly 17 years. For twelve of those years, it consumed most of my time and all of my creative and physical energies. After my family, this school has been my life's passion (My children would argue that they have too often come second in that accounting). I am conscious of the bias that my long involvement with Emerson introduces, but also grateful for the unique insight this tenure allows me.

### **Creating Safe Spaces**

With rare exception, my co-researchers reported that they feel safe at Emerson. They clearly articulated how critical that safety is to their well-being. The bullying, exclusion, abuse and neglect that these teens had experienced had generally happened before they arrived at Emerson—or had taken place outside of the school's walls. It may

be that some of these young people were reticent to share traumatic experiences that had happened at Emerson, but my sense is that they were extraordinarily candid. They were not afraid to tell me about teachers they did not like or policies they resented, and yet most reported feeling safe and protected at school. At least six participants suggested that they or their parents had chosen Emerson specifically because of its reputation for being safe and inclusive.

From the start, Emerson has felt like a remarkably safe place to me. In my decade as principal, I remember only three minor physical altercations between high school students—all quickly resolved. With few exceptions, students and staff treat each other with respect and compassion and are responsive to each other's needs. I believe this is largely due to the student-centered values embedded in Emerson's mission and vision, coupled with a strong ethic of compassion and social justice shared by its educators. Emerson students and teachers are versed in "The Emerson Ethic," a catchphrase coined in Emerson's first year by a much-loved English teacher who was fond of expounding on the importance of individuality, inclusion, and community. This teacher had instigated *Café Creative*, a lunchtime cabaret where students shared original poetry, music, and art. *The Emerson Ethic* still encapsulates the values of the school. It implies that, at Emerson, we value difference and take care of each other.

It is been several years since I have interacted closely with students at Emerson, but these values still seem firmly entrenched in the community. When I asked participants if they have felt safe and included at Emerson, all but one answered affirmatively and enthusiastically. Some participants indicated that Emerson feels safer

than other schools they have attended, and in several cases, safer than home life. One student recalled settling into school life after his first semester at Emerson.

I felt comfortable, and I felt safe.... Coming here was an excuse to not be at home because I felt safe around the students and I felt safe around the teachers, and we had clubs, and we had just nice people to hang out with that I could use to escape.

Jazmin described an example of the mental health support she has experienced at Emerson. Several months earlier, while preparing for a concert with the school's ensemble choir, Jazmin felt panic creeping in. She had not expected to be terrified—she had performed many times before—but just before it was time to go onstage, a full-blown panic attack engulfed her. Her memories of the experience are hazy—a thing, she explains, that happens during these attacks. Her fellow choir members quickly ushered her into a quiet classroom and rallied around her: “They took me into a classroom where I could just kind of breathe for a second, she remembered. Her choir director soon joined Jazmin to offer additional support.

Feeling sick about disappointing everyone, Jazmin's panic intensified. She could not respond to anyone or express gratitude for their kindnesses. But no one gave up on her. The show was cancelled without fuss and classmates stayed with her until she regained her equanimity. No one made her feel bad about what happened. Jazmin's trust in her school community deepened: “I can't think of a single teacher I'd be kind of scared to talk to about mental health or personal stuff,” she told me.

A few participants were more circumspect, however. Rainey does not feel like bullying is “a thing” at Emerson but says that “sometimes people talk without thinking.... I've done it before as well,” she admitted. Rainey pointed out that feeling safe at school is

not entirely dependent on what the school does: “It’s impossible for me to stay completely safe from my depression,” she said matter-of-factly. “It’s going to be with me forever.” Piper was also guarded. When I initially asked her if she feels safe and included at Emerson, she responded with a non-committal nod of the head and a cautious, “Mm-hmm.” But Piper had been at Emerson only a month when we first talked and had not yet found her place. She admitted that she was feeling a bit like an outsider. “Everyone is nice enough,” she explained, “but the students are kind of cliquish.” In a subsequent conversation, Piper had found her voice and did not hesitate to share a darker view of her experience:

When I first came to Emerson I definitely felt out of place, especially because I had just come from such a loving and accepting school...Everyone has their friends and they aren’t interested in making new ones...if one person in a clique decides they don’t like you, then word spreads very, very quickly, and you’re shut out from their circle. The social hierarchy at Emerson is very troubling because there’s a strong “us and them” mentality—at least in my experience.

My conversation with Piper reminded me that young people who do not feel safe often stay in the shadows, choosing not to reveal that they feel excluded or fearful. I found myself considering the possibility that I had harbored an inflated sense of how safe and included Emerson students had actually felt during my tenure. While I had focused my energy and attention on the significant needs of students who felt secure enough to reach out for help, I almost certainly missed helping others who were not brave enough to reveal their needs.

Gabriel’s story reminded me of how long it can take to feel secure in a new environment. Now a senior who claims to feel profoundly safe at Emerson, he indicated that when he first came to the school it had taken months to feel comfortable around other

students, and several years to fully trust adults. It had taken a long time for Elizabeth to feel safe at Emerson as well. She came to Emerson during middle school, but earlier traumas in her life made her cautious about relationships. She reported that drama between friends during middle school often left her unsettled and depressed. Now in her final year of high school, Elizabeth felt more secure: “It kind of took me a while,” she reported, “but I feel like, now that it’s senior year...I’m really, really settled into the school. In our final conversation, Elizabeth was distressed about having only a short while left at Emerson: “Man, I have to leave this in a month and a half,” she lamented.” Then she addressed my question more directly:

I would say, I definitely feel safer here than I do at home even, not necessarily just because of my family, just because I feel like I’m kind of more in control here. Like, I kind of get to choose my life more here.

“It’s definitely a safe place,” Elizabeth reiterated, “especially in Nora’s class.” She paused, flustered by a sudden rush of tears and emotion— “now I’m, like, getting emotional... just because...it’s so...I love that class so much!”

Emerson’s GSA advisor, Nora, is a teacher several students mentioned when I asked about safety and inclusion. Nora sometimes invites students to journal about difficulties they are experiencing at the beginning of class or during GSA after school. Those who are brave enough allow their journaled thoughts to be read aloud— anonymously. Classmates are then invited to offer encouragement and supportive advice to each other. Nora has created a classroom environment where sharing written work feels safe, and discourse takes place in a respectful, protected space.

Liam also talked animatedly about feeling protected at Emerson: “It’s definitely



one of the safer places I've found within my city community," he reported.

I remember at my public school, administration was one of the least supportive parts of that school. And being here is so wonderful because I feel like I could talk to [the administration] about any kind of problems that I feel I have within this school. I could talk to them about problems with curriculum, or I could talk to them about personal problems, or I could talk to them about, honestly, anything. I feel like they're so supportive in that way.

It was at first difficult to reconcile the experiences some participants shared of communicating easily with Emerson adults with other more guarded comments they made suggesting a reticence to disclose personal problems. As I considered this further, I realized several things: (1) Those who had shared their most difficult struggles with school adults had generally done so only after an adult had noticed their suffering and had invited them to talk; (2) Teens opened up during their darkest times only if a relationship of trust had already been established; (3) Many participants who relied heavily on adult support had developed a relationship with a favorite teacher, counselor, or administrator outside of school hours—primarily during expeditions, retreats, or after school clubs—these programs had been vital to building a safe, nurturing community; and (4) Finally, it is worth repeating here, several of these young people, even though they felt safe at Emerson, had chosen not to disclose their struggles to any school adult at all.

### **Safety in Being Heard**

The experiences participants shared to illustrate feeling secure at Emerson often revolved around having a voice and feeling like their insights and contributions actually mattered. Their stories underscore the vital importance of creating safe classroom and

school environments where personal passions and stories are valued—an ideal that Feminist Pedagogy and theorists such as Nell Noddings (1992/2005) and bell hooks (2000) have long championed. Feminist pedagogy legitimizes personal experience as a valid springboard for curriculum (Crabtree et al., 2009) and limits threat and fear in the classroom by minimizing teacher-led instruction and favoring more collaborative, communal learning experiences. Lewis (1993) writes: “The potential power of a pedagogical practice, whether in the realm of the personal or that of the political, whether inside the academy or out, is its ability to bring people to a point where they care to listen” (p. 49).

Feminist pedagogy challenges the notion that effective schools require traditional class structure and authoritative teachers and administrators. It asks us to dismantle hierarchical structures in schools and to rebuild “egalitarian relationships centered around shared interests and mutual objectives” (Shrewsbury, 1987). It suggests that students feel safer and more inclined to learn when they have ownership of both curricula and environments and have the ability to help shape their own educative experiences. My co-researchers’ narratives suggest that Emerson has managed to embrace egalitarian values well in some cases, and that ownership of school spaces and learning experiences have helped them to feel safer and more at peace with themselves. In some circumstances, however, there is room for reflection and growth.

### **Safety in Feeling at Home**

My co-researchers expressed how vitally important Emerson’s comfortable environment has been to their well-being. The school’s founders consciously built student

ownership into the school's structure and curriculum, even down to the design of the building. Students move freely through classrooms and are invited to make changes to their student-centered physical environment. The high school building is intentionally homelike. A central common area, filled with bright daylight even in winter, is strewn with ragged overstuffed couches that the students regularly rearrange. The walls are covered with student-created murals and artwork. A large blackboard—where students share chalked art, poetry and personal expressions—covers one wall. Sofia compared this environment to that of her previous school.

Like, when I think about [my former school], it feels like a prison. Like, the windows are always closed and there's, like, dim lights in these hallways. It's just not very sunny.... Here it's very sunny, and I like that. It makes me feel better. And there are, like, couches. And there aren't, like, weird, dark hallways everywhere. The actual layout of the school, it feels like a house but nice, very organized—well, a *little* messy [she laughed].

Classrooms at Emerson are filled with couches and cafe tables instead of desks, and students are often on the move. Most teachers invite their students to leave class at will, when they need to go to the bathroom or take a minute away—as long as they do not abuse that privilege. Even during class time, students can be found in the school commons curled up on couches or huddled in small groups chatting with each other. Sofia is grateful for her ability to escape class from time to time to find a safe space when anxiety overwhelms her. She reports: “I can just go stand in the bathroom for like ten...not ten...” she corrects herself, “like *two* minutes, and I'll be fine.” Although these short respites do not entirely calm Sofia's panic, they give her “more room to work it out.” Sofia feels that since she has transferred to Emerson her anxiety has abated somewhat:

I don't feel like going to school is adding more on to it. I feel like it's almost a relief sometimes. It's like, "alright, I'm just going to be at school where there's like couches and there's light." I feel comfortable sitting alone at this school, which is something that I like because I'm kind of introverted sometimes.... I like to just sit alone and think about things. I'm not afraid to do that. I don't feel like I'm pressured to have someone around me. I don't feel awkward just sitting here by myself on one of the couches or something like that. I don't know why that makes me feel better, but it does. When I come to school, I can just feel like I have a nice, safe place to do my work, and talk to people if I feel like, and work on whatever it is that I need to work on—like emotionally or academically.

### **Academic Achievement vs. Emotional Safety**

In conversations about safety, participants rarely talked about their academic concerns. They expressed fear and anxiety about their schoolwork in other conversations, and yet they did not think about academic stressors when I asked them about feeling safe at Emerson. It is a curiosity I wish I would have explored, but I did not recognize the incongruity until long after interviews had concluded. I wish that I would have thought to ask more explicitly if academic burdens have caused them to feel unsafe. It is an area in need of further study

In Chapter 4, I shared participants stories about feeling overwhelmed by academic life. Here I share their more direct criticisms and suggestions about academic expectations and practices at school. It is important to note that the connection I now draw between compromised student well-being and academic overwhelm is largely my own construction. However, it is a concern that grew increasingly evident as I talked with these teens. In fact, frustration with academic life was the one critique that the majority of my co-researchers had little trouble articulating. Many of these teens suggested that academic stress has exacerbated their mental health struggles. Conversely, they blamed

depression, anxiety, and suicidality for derailing their academic futures. Perhaps this problem is more endemic to schools such as Emerson, where at-risk students are more likely to struggle with academic overwhelm. However, an increasing national emphasis on academic rigor and post-secondary preparation must be adversely impacting student mental health everywhere.

It is difficult to tease out cause from correlation, but these narratives suggest the existence of a toxic, cyclical interplay between stress, expectation, anxiety and depression. My co-researchers openly shared their frustrations with what they experience as stressful and sometime inflexible academic expectations, rigid academic policies, and punishing testing and grading practices. Some participants blamed state and national mandates for their woes rather than implicating Emerson. During final interviews, I invited each participant to share any advice they may have for Utah's education policymakers and leaders. What changes would they suggest to help schools better nurture and protect student mental health? They shared a variety of ideas, but overwhelmingly they asked for more academic support, a wider recognition of their mental health challenges, and a less intense focus on academic outcomes, testing, and college preparation.

To put their concerns in context, it is important to understand the academic climate these adolescents currently inhabit. Emerson has historically been seen as less academically rigorous than some schools in the community. This perception frustrates dedicated administrators and teachers who have helped students to prepare for successful experiences at a range of colleges and universities, including Ivy League and top-tier

state and private institutions. But because Emerson serves a large population of at-risk students—including an unusually large percentage of students with learning disabilities who are served by Individualized Education Plans, Emerson’s year-end test scores are sometimes lower than local averages. These statistics factor heavily in the many online school rating sites and in school performance data displayed publicly on USBE’s Data Gateway. As hard as Emerson’s administrators and educators work to ensure that students succeed, the school maintains a solid “B” rating on the Utah State Board of Education’s *School Report Card*.

Emerson has always placed a strong emphasis on college preparation, going so far as to require students to gain admittance to a post-secondary academic program in order to graduate (not a difficult requirement given the open enrollment policy of at least one university in Utah). But Emerson also provides an enormous amount of support to help students achieve their academic goals. Small class sizes and a reasonable class load allow teachers to give students more individual attention than they might otherwise have at a larger school. The school provides a wide selection of college preparation classes, takes students on statewide college visits annually, and provides robust after-school homework help and tutoring services. Teachers spend long hours helping seniors with college entrance exams, essays, and applications. Because so many students come to Emerson after traumatic experiences that have compromised their academic records, educators at Emerson work overtime to help these students graduate. In my years as principal, my colleagues and I spent countless summer hours coaching seniors through the last few classes needed to earn a diploma. Emerson’s graduation rate has consistently hovered

around 96%. From everything I observed this year, the level of teacher and administrator dedication to helping Emerson students succeed is stronger than ever.

During my time as principal, my colleagues and I began to feel increasing pressure to bolster Emerson's academic stature. Increasingly, students were enrolling at Emerson as an alternative to the alternative schools in their home districts. Hearing that our school was especially supportive and nurturing, students who felt marginalized or unsafe, or who had been ousted for poor performance from other schools, often asked to enroll at Emerson. I recall the pressure I sometimes felt as principal, believing that our test scores reflected a unique demographic rather than any serious deficiency on the school's part—but having no way to communicate this adequately to prospective families. A niggling desire for recognition and validation waged battle with my more noble impulses. I felt honored that Emerson had become a refuge for marginalized students—my colleagues and I shared a deep devotion to these teens. But I resented that Emerson's academic reputation was penalized because we chose to make ethical, inclusive, and socially just choices. I found myself silently berating local districts for sluffing off their lowest-performing students, thereby concentrating high-needs students in schools such as Emerson. I judged them for not finding a way to help students with learning challenges feel more included and successful. I was angry at them for not providing a safer space for LGBTQ students, or for those with mental health challenges. It felt like a breach of educational ethics that students were being excluded from their rightful public spheres—either expressly or through marginalization. I recognized, objectively, that most educators in these institutions embrace notions of equity as

ferently as my colleagues and I, but the high number of referrals we received—“You might try Emerson,” students were often told, “I think you would be more successful there”—made us realize that some students were not welcome in their neighborhood schools.

From what I know of Emerson’s current academic climate, these tensions continue to exist to some degree. But a change we initiated 5 years ago has altered Emerson’s landscape in dramatic ways. In 2014, I proposed the adoption of a more rigorous academic model to bolster student achievement and, admittedly, to improve Emerson’s image. My colleagues readily agreed to the change. Our motives seemed reasonable at the time—we threw around rhetoric about academic equity and a belief that all students are capable of rigorous study. I still believe this, in theory, but I now wonder if the changes we implemented have done as much damage as good.

Over time, we crafted a program that encourages students to prepare for and take a roster of AP courses during their junior and senior years. In an effort to make this program inclusive, all Emerson students are encouraged to participate in at least one of these classes during their high school career. Emerson’s class schedule—once a crazy jumble of innovative, teacher-created core classes and student-requested (and sometimes designed) electives—is now largely built around a more traditional and rigorous roster of the early college courses that Emerson has committed to offering. This past year, about 10% of Emerson’s juniors and seniors opted to take five or six of these classes simultaneously to earn a full year of college credit. This decision was sometimes driven by economic need and the prospect of free post-secondary credits.



Emerson is rightfully proud of its early-college offerings. Teachers have worked hard to create engaging, meaningful courses and students have responded positively overall. But even before I began this study, I often questioned the wisdom of this new model. And now, as I talked with my co-researchers, it began to feel as though the academic stress introduced by this program was playing against the sense of emotional safety we had tried to build into the school. Many of my co-researchers complained that “schools that worry too much about college preparation.” Although these teens did not implicate Emerson specifically in their complaints, for all but a few of them Emerson has been their only high school experience so their generalized language did not really conceal which school they were complaining about.

It is difficult for me to know how students have been affected by the shift in Emerson’s academic programs and policies, or how representative of Emerson’s general population my co-researchers are. They all presented as bright, articulate adolescents with important insights to share. More than half are academically inclined in traditional ways—earning exceptional grades. Others have academic records that have suffered marginally because of mental health challenges. The two participants who reported being served by Emerson’s special education program are gifted in some domains—or are *twice-exceptional* in special education parlance. If most of my co-researchers were reasonably capable students and were still feeling excessive stress over academics, I wondered how more academically challenged students must feel.

Kate, who has a 4.0 grade point average, reports that her anxiety is driven, in part, by academic stress. Her primary advice to schools is to take the focus off grades: “I know

a lot of people feel like if you don't get a B or higher, then you're just sort of doomed."

Kate said she wants school to be "more about learning" and less about "completing some sort of standard." She expanded:

I mean, I get good grades, but I don't know, I'm always super nervous about them because if I want to go to a good college and get a scholarship so I'm not in debt for the rest of my life, then I need good grades to do that. But then if I feel like I'm not doing so well on an assignment or anything, I get really nervous about that.

Several other participants talked about how destructive a school's intense focus on college can be. Rainey says she always strives to be "as perfect as I can be." She is an "A" student, but the pressure she feels to excel and be ready for college stresses her on multiple levels. She feels like it is crushing some of her peers.

College is super expensive. And it's made a big deal. You have to get good grades.... I feel like getting grades so that you could have a future sort of puts pressure on people. Even *I* feel pressure, like—"I can't do this... not happening!" I do it anyway.

She theorized that anxiety about college contributes to student depression in general:

Like, if you're being told you have to do this or you don't have a future...and you just struggle with it for whatever reason, you might be like, "Well, I suck!" And you become depressed; you get anxious. That could even contribute to suicidal thoughts as well.

Some participants expressed a need for more responsive academic support when they are in the midst of depressive or suicidal episodes. But their conversations made it clear that written accommodations—spelled out in Individualized Education Plans or on Section 504 contracts—are not always adequate. Students are often afraid to ask for special considerations, even when they have written protections in place. As conscientious as Isaac is about schoolwork, he reports that his battle with suicidality over

the past few years has affected his academic achievement dramatically.

I have really bad memory issues. And so, sometimes I forget that assignments are due or I forget all the facts I'm supposed to know before a test. And so, I have a 504 for an extension, but I guess it's probably my fault but I haven't been talking to the teachers enough to get extensions. And so, my history class has been really, really hard because we just took a really big test that I got a C-minus on. I've never gotten anything lower than a B.

Matthew, whose most recent suicide attempt was largely triggered by the academic pressure he felt in his AP classes, was passionate about his advice to schools:

I think that we are to the point now where we're giving students so much schoolwork that there's no time for like, for instance, scholarships—now that school is getting more expensive. It's incredibly difficult for me to fit job, home life, school and scholarships to get to college in one 24-hour day.

Piper, who had clearly thought deeply about the detrimental role that academic stress played in her own life, shared a specific model of schooling that she would like to see implemented in US schools:

I was watching a documentary the other day about the Swedish school system. And their school system is amazing. They don't have the ACT or SAT, so they can have diverse subjects because they're not spending all of their time prepping for that.

Piper contrasted this with the US educational system, which she believes places too much focus on doing well on standardized tests. “The thing is, she complained, “you need to get good scores on those tests so that you can get into a good college, so that you can get a better-paying job, so that you can pay off your student loans.” She continued:

I just wish that it wasn't about money. Like, that's kind of how school's always felt to me. It's just, like, preparing me to make the most money because that's what's most successful—not making me into the most happy, most well-rounded person I can be, but making me into the most capitalistic person I can be.

These adolescents do not need Giroux or critical pedagogy to tell them that their

lives have been largely commodified in a market-driven society. They feel that pressure deeply. Their narratives make obvious the stress of “needing” to perform well and feeling like they cannot always do that. This pressure has taken a toll on the majority of these young people. During a time when adolescents should be exploring a world of possibilities and developing skills and sensibilities that give them confidence in their abilities, they are struggling, instead, just to stay on the performance treadmill—panicked about grades, money and college acceptance. Instead of enjoying learning and life, they are always looking ahead—pegging their self-worth to their future marketability. Although none of these adolescents identified academic pressure as a “safety” concern, it clearly presents a constant low-grade tension for most and a more serious threat for others. These narratives indicate that pressure to perform academically may be the most profound threat these young people face in school.

### **Inclusion, Recognition, and Respect**

*In the process of teaching and learning, it is impossible to express love and respect for students without our willingness to engage them in ways that allow us to know them authentically. This is a form of knowing that demands we transcend our self-absorption and authoritarian fixations in ways that open us horizontally to know and be known.*

(Darder, 2017, p. 97)

My co-researchers generally reported feeling safe and supported at Emerson—something they had not always experienced in other schools. But their anxieties make clear that their sense of safety is conditioned, at times, on feeling accepted and respected by members of their school community. Feeling safe requires, at minimum, an absence of fear. But a deeper sense of safety emerges when we sense that others respect our intellect

and abilities and trust our judgement and intentions. When our most fundamental weaknesses and vulnerabilities are transparent and we are valued nonetheless, we feel truly secure. In the absence of such profound respect, it is easy to lose faith in oneself and descend into self-doubt and despair. Adolescents are especially subject to being buoyed up or dragged down by the perceptions of others. Teens long to be seen, understood and valued for who they are and what they contribute to the world. I wondered if these adolescents were experiencing this level of trust and respect at Emerson.

Study participants clearly articulated a *desire* for respect and recognition from friends. Worries about body image, media presence, and peer relationships permeate these narratives. These teens also expressed a longing for parental acceptance and love. Many reported relying on at least one parent as their primary source of mental health support. Recognition and respect from their teachers and school leaders seemed, at first glance, less relevant to these adolescents—a fact that surprised me.

I came to these interviews with a clear bias, believing that Emerson administrators and teachers excel at showing respect for students. I know how committed these professionals are to equity and community-building. I expected that most of these teens would have a deep conviction that the adults at Emerson knew them well and held them in high regard. Respect for students is, after all, one of Emerson's central values. When I asked my co-researchers if they generally felt known, understood and respected by teachers and administrators at Emerson, a few answered affirmatively and enthusiastically, sharing stories about Emerson adults who have been especially supportive. Gabriel, who had been working closely with several teachers to hone a speech

for a competition and to explore career opportunities, answered:

I've got a huge support system now, especially with [Taylor, Haruko and Nora] and, like, all these teachers here that are super excited about my career and they want me to achieve. By helping me with my future, they also are helping me with the stuff that I'm struggling with now. I don't think I could have done anything like this if I was at any bigger school.... That has been so big and it's given me something to look forward to and to strive for, so it's very cool that I have those teachers.

In several conversations about his transgender identity, Isaac talked about how supportive both administrators and teachers have been.

They're so accepting. They're so, like, knowledgeable that I feel like I could really just talk to them about anything. They're so down-to-earth here that I feel like they are considered some friends of mine in a way.

But some participants seemed slightly confused by my question and struggled to respond.

When I asked Rainey if she feels that her teachers respect her, she paused for a moment, then haltingly said:

I hope that the teachers appreciate my mostly positive attitude.... I actively try to understand. I hope that they appreciate that I don't just give up. I'm guessing they do...I mean, they laugh at my jokes, they say hello...they are like friends.

But after gathering her thoughts, she answered more equivocally: "I don't know if that's a thing that I've felt. I do hope that they appreciate me in some ways, I guess. They're nice people." Ximena's response was a bit uncertain as well: "I do feel cared about," she said tepidly, then added: "I don't know about respect...I guess...maybe." Jazmin suggested that while the school's counselor is respectful in general of all students, she is less sure that any adult at Emerson respects her individually. "Not me specifically," she answered. Then, as though excusing this lapse, she added "Respect? I don't know. I feel like that's a very deep thing."

In conversations with a few students, I omitted the word *respect* and simply asked if they felt like anyone at Emerson knows them well and understands their hopes, dreams, and passions. Kate answered with an unequivocal “No.”

In hindsight, I wish that I had introduced participants to the concept of *recognition* as seen through the lens of queer pedagogy. We talked mostly of *respect*, a concept whose meaning, I now realize, was not always comprehensible to participants and did not get to the essence of what I wanted to know. In the nomenclature of queer pedagogy, *recognition* implies something greater than respect—something more than a simple acknowledgement of a student’s contributions and abilities. It implies having a deep understanding of the many cultural and social conditions and experiences that have shaped individuals and honoring their unique identities. It resists normalizing discourses and gives every student equal claim as a vital member of the community, deserving of every right and freedom.

Camicia (2012) discusses various usages of *recognizing* within a school context. Most commonly it is used to mean “praise for an accomplishment” (p. 26). Emerson has a fraught relationship with this kind of recognition. Concerned about the potential divisiveness and stratification that can happen when a school honors some students and not others, administrators and teachers have avoided ranking or rating students, holding student elections, or giving out “best-of” or “most-likely-to” awards. In student government, long before the practice was popularized at companies like Google and Apple, Emerson students were forming informal, flexible committees to accomplish their goals. When these students filled out college applications, we helped them to attach a

reasonable title to each role they had played so that they would not be penalized for a lack of leadership on their college admissions applications.

This aversion to ranking and rating extended to our grading practices. For the first few years of Emerson's existence—until state reporting systems made it impossible—teachers gave students narrative assessments rather than assigning letter grades. Choosing a valedictorian and salutatorian each year was always a major stressor for us—we generally chose multiples of both.

Most of these practices and cultural anomalies still exist at Emerson. Almost instinctively, administrators and teachers have avoided creating hierarchies among students. The handful of Emerson teachers who are versed in critical approaches to education might understand the theoretical basis of these choices, but most staff simply share a distaste for the hierarchical structures of power, authority, and patriarchy so prevalent in society and in the local community. They choose not to recreate these systems at school. Students are recognized in more organic ways. A variety of accomplishments—from small acts of service to science fair victories or literary publications—are acknowledged in private conversations, during classes, and in weekly assemblies. Students can always be counted on to applaud enthusiastically for their peers on such occasions, and to shout out any accomplishments that the adults may have missed. Isaac said of these assemblies:

Assemblies here are less speaking *at* the students and more speaking *with* the students. At public school you're in this big auditorium, and there's no really, like, raising your hand and talking to the person telling you all these things. Here, assemblies are speaking with the students because it's such a small student body. And I definitely feel like...I'm able to have a voice, and I feel like that's really important.



It is worth noting here that Emerson *is* a public school, but many Emerson students never fully grasp this fact.

Camicia (2012) notes that a second meaning of recognizing essential to critical pedagogy is to acknowledge “individuals or groups in the ways that they understand themselves and the world” (p. 26). Acknowledgement and respect are only stepping-stones to this deeper condition of recognition. It requires listening to students’ stories and inviting them to share their convictions, aspirations and sorrows. The few participants who talked about feeling this deeper form of acknowledgment at Emerson had invariably entrusted a counselor, teacher or administrator with some of their most intimate hopes and challenges. I explore this further in the next section.

A third meaning of *recognizing* in queer pedagogy, is the creation of safe “third spaces,” for students who have traditionally been misrecognized and marginalized, where they have a voice and feel empowered (Camicia, 2012, p. 26). School gay-straight alliances (GSAs) are typical examples. Emerson has always tried to make the entire school a third space for marginalized students in our community, although we had little theoretical understanding of what we were creating at the start.

If my co-researchers and I had shared an understanding of *recognizing* as defined by critical pedagogy, our conversations might have been more cohesive. However, on close examination of participant narratives, it is clear that Emerson’s efforts to recognize students have been more relevant to their mental health journeys than they always articulated. Participants often talked of favorite teachers who care about student opinions and experiences; about administrators who listen to them and implemented their ideas.

They expressed gratitude for the freedoms and level of trust they enjoy at school. They recognized that Emerson eschews rigid policies and rules in favor of more relational, compassionate ways of interacting.

In the local predominantly LDS community, Emerson is often perceived as too permissive—its students entitled. But this, too, reflects the school’s critical ideology. Emerson has purposefully focused on teaching students to develop a critical consciousness—an attribute Freire (1970/2000) believed to be essential if students are to understand and transform the conditions of their lives and, ultimately, to transform society. Emerson asks students to examine the societal forces and contexts that shape organizations and human interactions. It encourages students to advocate for both themselves and for others. Once at a regional science fair, two Emerson students, anxious to understand how they could have improved on their work, refused to cede their right to review judging scores. After a long discussion with the fair’s director—during which these students were extremely polite and articulate—the director literally threw up his hands and complained, “Oh brother, you two must be from Emerson!” As Emerson has practiced its unique brand of respect over the years, the school has slowly become more adept at incorporating queered notions of *recognizing* into its practice. The school has become, over time, a safe “third space” for students in the community who have been misrecognized and marginalized at their neighborhood schools. LGBT youth, students with learning disabilities, and those with religious or cultural beliefs who do not fit community norms, have found refuge at Emerson. More recently, the school’s Hispanic population has expanded substantially. As Emerson continues to practice inclusivity, its

student population becomes increasingly diverse in a community known for its homogeneity.

### **Respect for Outward Expressions of Identity**

Teachers and administrators at Emerson express respect for students in more routine ways as well. Oddly, Emerson's dress code may be one its more meaningful efforts. Allowing students a broad range of clothing and personal grooming choices may seem like a superficial manifestation of recognition, but in a community married to rigid conservative standards of dress and modesty, freedom to express identity through wardrobe holds a deeper significance. During my time at Emerson, students often came to school attired in ways not allowed at their neighborhood schools. They arrived sporting vibrant hair colors and styles, unusual clothing choices, and the occasional piercing or tattoo. Boys sometimes wore nail polish, makeup or skirts. Shoes were largely optional. Students expressed themselves whimsically as well, showing up in everything from pajamas to tutus. A student once wore a set of diving flippers and a snorkel much of the day. While my colleagues and I may have rolled our eyes from time to time, we usually found these expressions of individuality delightful or at least benign. By all appearances, not much has changed over the years since my tenure.

For Sofia, the idea that she can dress as she chooses at Emerson is a powerful manifestation of the regard teachers have for students and that students have for each other. In our conversations about respect, it is the first thing she mentioned:

I feel like I could come to school bald and wearing a suit and like weird shoes. I could wear whatever and people are like, "Nice outfit, Sofia." You know, they'd just be fine with it. I've seen people wear kilts to school, pajamas, or dress up as

whatever. And some people come to school in really short, shorts and barely a bra as a shirt. And nobody is like, 'Ew! That's gross.' I don't see slut shaming happen at all, which is really, really different. People are really careful about that, which is like one of my biggest problems at [my former school]—slut shaming. And that never happens here. No matter what you wear or the way you act.

Sofia's words startled me. The questionable outfit she described clearly is not allowed at Emerson, but her story illustrates an ongoing ethical dilemma that Emerson teachers and administrators have faced. During my time as principal, my colleagues and I were always reluctant to confront students over issues of "modesty"—a value important to the local community. I grew up in a post-60's era in a liberal corner of Northwest Washington, accustomed to wearing torn jeans, tank tops, and sandals to school. When I moved to Utah to attend BYU, ethical conundrums around clothing plagued me from the beginning. I remember the sting of judgment I felt when my accustomed (and extremely limited) wardrobe did not meet my new community's standards. I tangled with the University's honor code office more than once over open-toed sandals and jeans (apparel now allowed at BYU at the time). Years later, I felt a deep pang of sadness for my own teenage daughter when she was publicly shamed at her high school prom. Standing at the top of a grand staircase, waiting to descend while parents and friends snapped photos and applauded, she was confused and embarrassed when a school official hurriedly draped a shawl over her bare shoulders, deeming her long formal dress immodest.

While the male teachers at Emerson seemed largely ambiguous about issues of modesty, several of the Emerson's female staff had been raised in LDS communities and remembered similar shaming experiences. Dress code became something of a third rail for us—none of us wanted to touch it. We dutifully drafted dress standards and posted

them online, and then we largely ignored them. Now and then, a student (almost always a girl) would make it through the better part of the day wearing something that was “out of compliance.” Faculty meetings sometimes revolved around this apparent ambivalence over dress code. Confronting students about clothing felt intrusive, but occasionally a situation seemed to warrant intervention. The task usually defaulted to me. I remember how startled I was the first time I saw a young woman wearing a loose T-shirt with a slit down the side—her bra intermittently visible. I dutifully delivered the sweatshirt we kept on hand for such occasions and explained that she would need to wear it or find appropriate clothing. She seemed confused at first, then embarrassed. She explained that she wore this outfit all the time at home and did not realize it was not acceptable at school. I sensed her shame and suddenly felt like a hypocrite. I enforced the wardrobe change, nonetheless.

Emerson eventually hired a gender-fluid teacher who sometimes made unconventional fashion choices as well. Occasionally a parent would express concern about the way this teacher, or a student, was dressed, but most Emerson parents eventually resigned themselves to the school’s quirky ways. If a student wore a logo or slogan that championed illicit behavior or expressed a culturally offensive sentiment (which was rare), it was easy for us to draw a line; these issues were ethical and gender-neutral—not nearly as hard to confront. But the inherent respect we felt for students made it particularly difficult to concern ourselves about their fashion choices. I am aware that many educators or administrators might view Emerson’s ambivalence about student apparel as spineless. It never felt that way to us.

## **Respect for Gender Identity**

I suspect it was, in part, Emerson's tolerance for free expression of identity that eventually led to the school's increasing enrollment of LGBTQ students. As I reflect on the early days of the school, I realize that some expressions of individuality were probably rooted in sexual questioning or were, perhaps, the only way that LGBTQ students felt able to share their "othered" identities. It was a different era and few students came out publicly at Emerson or elsewhere. I cannot imagine that any of the students under my leadership chose Emerson because they believed the adults at the school were particularly savvy about LGBTQ issues and needs (although that has now changed dramatically). Most of us were, at the time, fairly oblivious to changing social mores and did not recognize that some students at our school were questioning their gender identities. In retrospect, we ignored the needs of our LGBTQ students for far too long. We certainly did not make any attempt to locate LGBTQ students in our curricula or policies. Our commitment to inclusion and respect, however, mandated that we allow *all* of our students unusual freedoms of expression in those early years. We tried diligently to develop curricula and programs to support, in equal measure, the social, emotional and intellectual need of all students. I'm not sure we always recognized how profound and diverse those needs were.

When our first openly-transitioning student enrolled at Emerson, we made strong efforts to be supportive: We invited a former student—now identifying as gender-fluid—to educate us about using appropriate pronouns. For the first time, we grappled with the gendered nature of our backpacking treks and rearranged plans so that boys' and girls'

campsites were situated adjacent to each other and both genders could trek together. We quickly designated faculty bathrooms as unisex for students who wanted to avoid gendered bathrooms. But in faculty trainings, which were meant to be supportive, I sometime sensed a vague undertone of resentment. Some teachers were frustrated by the amount of time and effort these new situations demanded. In the end, I'm certain that we failed to serve our first LGBTQ students well as we should have.

Despite our many missteps, marginalized students and the parents who sought to protect them continued to seek safety and inclusion at Emerson. When he transferred to Emerson, Isaac, one of this study's transgender participants, did not bother joining the school's GSA because he did not feel the need for support beyond what he received from the school community: "It was such a small student body that I was able to reach out to anybody that I wanted, he explained. "I didn't really feel the need to join a smaller club. I felt like our school was a club in a way." Camicia (2012) writes:

Recognising can occur in a third space and a third space can occur in recognizing because both are bound by a nurturing of possibilities, voices and perspectives that are usually drowned out by normalizing and dominant discourses." (p. 27)

Emerson gave LGBTQ students the latitude to fill the room and express themselves as a dominant group and a third space naturally emerged. In fact, normalizing discourses at Emerson now often fall on the other side of the cultural spectrum to the point that more politically and culturally conservative students sometime report feeling "othered."

Matthew, who identifies as a cisgender male, but who recently dated a transgender male, dislikes this undercurrent of judgment he sometimes feels: "It's a strange judgment too," he said, "because everybody is so open." He talked about how students are "called out for

occasionally misgendering someone.” He suggested that schools should help students to understand that “people are going to make mistakes.” Yet in his next breath, Matthew considered the issue from another perspective and empathized with his LGBTQ peers:

At Emerson, where [you] think it would be a safe place, someone misgenders you and it’s a big deal, because now you’re facing it on both sides. I can see where they’re coming from.

Matthew’s observations reflect an ongoing concern of faculty and administrators at Emerson. Student demographics continually shift; the cultural pendulum slowly swings. The challenge is to constantly find new ways to ensure that *all* Emerson students, not just a select few, treat each other with compassion and respect and that everyone feels safe, recognized, and included.

### **Respect in Classrooms and Curricula**

When students talked about other manifestations of respect at Emerson, their stories often centered on intellectual conversations with teachers in and out of class. Jazmin reports feeling like “an adult” when her teachers talk with her about important issues and events outside of class. She and her friends often hang out after their last class of the day. Their history teacher sometimes joins them:

[My teacher] will just stay with me and my friends and we’ll end up talking about whatever we talked about in class, but with more...like he wasn’t trying to force a lesson on us, we’ll just have a conversation—which is really nice.

Other students also mentioned how much they appreciate being seen as intellectual beings. Sofia recalled how pleased she felt when a teacher acknowledged her contributions to his class during a parent-teacher conference. When her father asked the teacher if he was having any problems with Sofia in class (something that had apparently happened at her previous school), the teacher’s response surprised Sofia: She reported the



following conversation:

And he was like, “Sofia is a fearless person—her comments are very brave. She says things that are really in-depth and really outgoing. She doesn’t know if they’re going to be right. And if they were wrong, that would be okay because she just throws them out there, and they’re really smart.” And he was like, “And usually they’re not wrong.”

Elizabeth also talked about feeling appreciated for her intellect:

I’m definitely respected as a mature person in class. I like that. Especially Nora. I love, *love* Nora’s classes so much. She’s so good about it because she totally just treats you like an equal. You know, like [she says], “What you’re telling me is just as important as what I have to say about it.” And even though she has a degree in that stuff, she’s kind of like, you know, “I love to hear what you say.” She always talks about something that she likes that you said, and she kind of expands on it, too.

But Elizabeth proceeded to share a concern that again invites cautious skepticism about

Emerson’s success as a respectful, inclusive place:

I feel like some students aren’t respected, though, for sure. I feel like there definitely is some bias that teachers have with certain students, but it’s kind of like – well, it’s kind of like the students that I have seen that don’t come to class as much, or they kind of talk in class. Teachers kind of—if they have something to say in class, they don’t really want to listen... I’ve definitely noticed that for sure. If they kind of see a student more as a troublemaker...they’re less inclined to...yeah.

Always diplomatic, Elizabeth added that even teachers are subject to “personal bias...

which is human nature,” she mused, “it’s hard for them to fix that. But maybe,” she

added sagely, “it’s human nature that teachers have to overcome.” Elizabeth shared an

experience with one teacher in particular who frequently makes her feel inadequate:

I know lots of students actually feel this way, you know. You’ll say something like, “I think this is the answer,” and she’s kind of like, “Why would you think it’s that?” ...Yeah, I don’t know...it’s kind of easy to feel dumb in that class...you kind of don’t want to speak up because then it’s like, oh, I don’t want to get it wrong.

## Respect for Student Intellect

When I asked participants about how well curriculum at Emerson supports them in their mental health struggles, our conversations often circled back to this desire to be recognized and respected intellectually. Several of them complained about *Botvin's Life Skills*—an SEL curriculum mandated by Utah State and taught at Emerson during health classes for the first time that year. The curriculum does not seem to recognize their specific needs or the gravity of their challenges. Most reported liking the teacher, but not always the curriculum: Sofia said, “I feel like our teacher is trying her best to really incorporate mental health and other things into it. She does, like, what she can with the material that she’s given to work with.” But students were critical of the curriculum’s approach to mental health and other issues relevant to their lives. Kate said that she did not really enjoy the class or learn anything new. She had learned much more during a health class at her Minnesota middle school. The mental health unit was “kind of repetitive,” she explained, and the sex education useless:

I mean, Utah, it’s law that you have to teach abstinence, which I think is kind of stupid, I guess. I feel like a lot of people, like teenagers, are going to have sex no matter what. But at least they can do it safely. And so, like, in Minnesota they taught about birth control, like the pill and stuff. But here they didn’t really.

Sofia lamented the *Life Skills* curriculum’s unwillingness to address issues vital to teens. “All of the actual interesting questions,” she complained, “they just don’t talk about. It’s, like, weird.” She believes that health is a critically important class, but that the scenarios used and cautions extended in the course—especially those related to substance abuse and sex—are not realistic or meaningful. She explained:

We didn’t learn anything about, like, how to have safe sex. We just learned about

how to not have sex and how to say no.... I feel like talking about the risks of it is helpful, but also that doesn't actually...telling a kid how to say no isn't helpful at all, I don't think. It's not going to stop them.

Jazmin also shared concerns about health class in general. She was particularly upset that her teacher did not feel free to discuss important ethical issues:

We just learned sex ed like a week ago, and a student asked a question on abortion.... And by law, the teacher wasn't allowed to tell us how that worked, which is such...that's just so frustrating! And, you know, she could tell us science and what's going on in your body, but she couldn't talk to us about...[she trailed off].

Yeah, and that's really frustrating because I know at this age, not for me personally, but sex is a very big factor in a lot of people's mental health. And the teacher who's meant to be teaching these things legally cannot, which is really frustrating.

Jazmin also critiqued *Life Skill's* heavy focus on substance abuse prevention: “Yes, that is so important for us to learn, but they're not teaching it in a very effective way.”

She's telling us, “Don't do drugs,” and then [she explains] what can happen. Sometimes that's enough to scare kids into not doing it. But sometimes they need actual guidance because they've already done it. I already know friends who are on the verge of addiction, and a health class at the moment can't teach us how to deal with that.

Jazmin also critiqued Botvin's *Life Skill's* approach to mental health education. She was grateful for her teacher's willingness to diverge from the planned curriculum on occasion to talk about substantive matters—“Like sometimes a discussion will just go so far off-topic that we're allowed to discuss everything,” she reported. But her assessment of the written curriculum was sobering:

I don't want to say we spent too much time on it, but we spent too much time learning the *wrong* thing. Like social skills aren't the reason I have panic attacks. It's so frustrating because we spent at least two weeks talking about how to empower yourself—like power poses—and how to have a conversation with someone. We know these! *We don't* know how to handle suicidal thoughts at

three in the morning. We don't know how to handle panic attacks in the bathroom while we have a test going on.

Jazmin feels that she gets better mental health information and support from the informal conversations she has at school with friends. "Like a lot of the times something trivial and...I don't know...funny, will lead into a really *deep* discussion on mental health and how students feel," she explained.

Both Liam and Piper talked about mental health instruction they had received at other Utah schools before transferring to Emerson. Liam said that his class had not been "super comprehensive." He was disappointed that "gender identity was not brought up at all." Piper had not taken a formal health course, but her previous school had focused on mental health during weekly study hall. "It was not a helpful program," she reported.

It was kind of like—"You create your own happiness," and I was like, "I'm trying!" It was very, like, "Just *choose* to be happy. Just make the choice to *make* yourself happy. Just have a better attitude and you'll be happy." It wasn't, like, talking about actual issues with mental health.

Students hunger for genuine help and factual knowledge about the challenges they face.

These adolescents understood, intuitively, a concept central to critical pedagogy—that standardized curricula reflect the biases and worldview of dominant groups (Camicia,

2016; Kincheloe, 2008), and are not always relevant to their intended audience.

Kincheloe writes:

Teachers working in a critical context rebel against the view of practitioners as information deliverers, as deskilled messengers who uncritically pass along a canned curriculum. Highly skilled scholarly teachers research their students and their communities and analyze the curricular topics they are expected to cover. In light of such inquiry, these teachers develop a course of study that understands subject matter and academic skills in relation to where their students come from and the needs they bring to school. (p. 118)

Scripted or commercial curricula are inadequate for addressing the unique needs of all students—especially of students who do not fit societal norms. In Utah, standards for health curricula reflect the dominance of the LDS faith, which forbids premarital sex and reserves conversations about the weightiest personal matters for families. The cautious mandates imposed on schools by a predominantly LDS state legislature limit frank discussion about sex and gender expression. And yet the teens in this study, many of whom are LDS, clearly expressed a need for guidance about how to navigate serious suicidal impulses, sexual coercion, self-harm, gender dysphoria, and the physical and emotional landmines waiting along a journey of sexual transition—topics many participants did not feel comfortable discussing at home. These young people realize that *Botvin's Life Skills*—the first scripted curriculum that Emerson has ever used—fails to recognize who they are and what they need. It underestimates the complexity and intensity of the challenges they face and trivializes their needs.

Universally, study participants expressed a need for educators to respect their intellect and abilities (although they report that most Emerson teachers do this) and to show a wider recognition of some of the challenges students face. Several participants suggested that a more authentic, comprehensive mental health curricula might give them much-needed support and help reduce the stigma that still surrounds their mental illness. Even though some of these young people reported being intensely private about their mental health challenges, others expressed a desire for school adults to know more about their struggle, their home life, and the debilitating mental illnesses that plague them. When I asked Sofia what she would like to communicate to Utah's educational

policymakers and leaders about adolescent mental health—she responded passionately with the words that began this study:

I would just say, like, that things that kids go through are very real. Like mental illness is super present and we're not making this stuff up. The world is really painful right now, and there are a lot of things that need to change about it. We're not just stupid little kids. We're independent and we need things to be different so that the world can progress in a good way.

[We need] people who actually care about the kids, and more trust and independence for the kids.... It seems like that's really hard to enforce, but I think really you just need to give the kids more freedom and people that care about them and change up the things that they have to know about life, like let them be interested in things on their own.

Sofia's insights reflect a desire for greater recognition, respect and care that threads through most of my co-researcher's narratives—even when they do not articulate these desires directly.

### **Creating Authentic Connection**

Pleas for authentic connection and caring relationships reverberate through most of the conversations I had with my co-researchers. I shared some of their insights and experiences around school connectedness in Chapter 5. Given the extensive corpus of literature that links school connectedness to adolescent mental health (Aldridge & McChesney, 2018; Bond et al., 2007; Joyce & Early, 2014; Ruvalcaba et al., 2017; Shochet et al., 2006), it seems obvious to suggest that forging strong adult/student and peer-to-peer bonds at school holds promise for protecting adolescent mental health. Most schools make a genuine effort to foster connectedness through mentoring, assemblies, sporting events, and other and extra-curricular programs. Many of my co-researchers

have taken advantage of extracurricular clubs and activities at Emerson and talked about how these programs have helped them to develop bonds with their peers and teachers. Just over half articulated clearly how these connections have been critically important to their mental health. A few participants, however, have chosen not to engage with school extracurricular activities, and three claimed that they have not received emotional support from the adults at Emerson, although their narratives sometimes tell another story. Conversations with these adolescents make clear the importance of Emerson's programs that infuse community-building and emotional support into school-day curricula and activities in which all students participate.

### **Connecting in Natural Places**

As participants talked about meaningful experiences of connection at Emerson, it became clear that authentic relationships are something that they care about passionately, and that Emerson's schoolwide expeditionary programs have played a critical role in helping students and teachers forge these close bonds. Participants recalled experiences of connection with teachers and peers as they trekked, camped, and travelled together. Emerson's annual mountain retreat was still fresh in their memories during our initial conversations. Isaac credited the expedition with pulling him out of the suicidal ideation he had experienced over the summer:

Yeah. It was so great. I loved it. I love the mountains up there. I was able to have something else to focus on, and also, I was able to have these people that I could be really close with because we had to spend so much time together. I was able to, like, really talk to these people and get to know them. And so, it definitely lowered my depression and my suicidality, just because I felt like I had a little community. And I felt like it was really helpful for me.

Having spent a dozen years hiking, camping, and travelling with teenagers at Emerson, I know how critically important these experiences are for creating a sense of belonging. The first week of school, each newly-formed family of adult educators and 15 to 20 teenagers, begin the year in the Utah mountains to test their physical capabilities, commune with nature, and create new friendships. It was easy for my colleagues and me to develop genuine respect and affection for our students as we joined them in tackling steep, craggy trails with our overstuffed backpacks. Every year we watched in awe as stronger, more experienced hikers doubled back to encourage struggling peers and to carry their heavy gear. One year, a student arrived early at a campsite with the strongest hikers, then returned to the trail four separate times over the next several hours to carry backpacks for students who were struggling. In those campsites, we dressed each other's sunburns and blisters. We shared ramen in tin cups and forged bonds as we shared life stories around campfires under starry skies. Emerson ended each trek with solo time for reflection and journaling, followed by a bead ceremony during which we acknowledged each other's strengths and shared what we had grown to love about each other in those few short days. More often than not, these sessions were punctuated by tears and spontaneous hugs. In the mountains, students were genuinely kind to each other and especially supportive of those who might have been excluded in other settings—students with quirky personalities, intellectual challenges, or social anxieties. These students might not have found friends so easily in other circumstances. I was always impressed by the level of maturity and kindness that these adolescents exhibited, both those who were naturals at outdoor living and those who were not.



Many of my co-researchers mentioned how Emerson's expeditions have helped them to develop an abiding respect for and connection to their teachers and peers. Matthew spoke fondly of a school trip to Capitol Reef that he helped to plan and execute 2 years ago. He recalled how his perception of his classmates changed during this experience:

I was blown away that my peers could do something that they'd never done before, because [Natural Bridge] was a 10-mile backcountry trail. It's incredibly difficult.... And nobody wanted to turn around. Everybody kept going. Everybody kind of sucked up the pain, even someone fell over and gashed open their knee and kept walking. And that blew my mind, and I just cannot believe that I get to graduate with these students. It's more than an honor.

And the teachers, too, how much time and dedication they put into a job where they're not getting paid enough for—that is incredibly difficult because they are doing things on their own time, on their own dime. And that is also—just the *passion* of the teachers!

Matthew believes that even the long car rides to various remote destinations are worthwhile: “You just gain an empathetic connection with being stuck in a car with a group of students for four hours, he explained, “forced to sit shoulder to shoulder and just talk.”

The bonds that students form in these initial school experiences carry through the school year. Most of my co-researchers recognized how critical these connections have been to their mental health. When I asked Elizabeth to reflect on how peer-to-peer and student/adult relationships affect student mental health, she articulated her insights beautifully:

I think it is really important, because those are the people that you're learning with, you know. And you see them probably more than your family...like eight hours a day for five days a week! You see them a lot. So I think it's important to have a connection to some of them. When you think about that timeframe, it

seems almost inhumane to have someone not have any connection whatsoever, you know. It's, like, kind of crazy to think about.

### **Connecting in Classrooms**

Participant narratives made clear that expeditionary experiences alone are not enough to sustain supportive relationships. Participants who reported having a strong connection with Emerson and with each other shared school-wide and classroom experiences that have supported those bonds. Elizabeth expressed admiration for an art teacher who nurtures authentic connection daily:

In class, sometimes we'll be working on art or something, and she'll come over, and she's like, "Elizabeth, what inspired this?" And that's nice because then she's like, she kind of asks a lot of questions, and it's kind of like, "Oh, I'm opening up to you—you're *letting* me open up to you—so I feel connected to you."

In this same class the teacher planned an initial learning experience designed to build community between class members. Presenting students with a pile of cardboard leftover from Emerson's summer purchases of furnishings and computers, she invited her students to create anything they could imagine together, as long as everyone contributed. "She told us to all work together," Elizabeth reported, "and she said everyone has to include something in it." Elizabeth described the experience:

At first everyone was like, "What? It's stacked cardboard!" But you know the little house in the commons? We *made* that! We had no idea what we were going to do, and then I feel like as people were giving ideas, we kind of merged them a little bit, you know. And I think it definitely was hard at first, though, because no one really wanted to, like, be the leader—to step up, and talk.

Elizabeth told me about what she perceived to be the project's most meaningful outcome, when a timid student who had been reticent to join became an important part of the group:

Do you know \_\_\_\_\_ ? She's really shy... she's a sweetheart, but she just like doesn't talk at all. She kind of was, like, avoiding the group a little bit just because, you know like, wanting to be by herself? But she was doing a little art. And then I think it was Isaac or Kate—no, it was Erin. Erin was kind of like, “Hey, you should put that in the house, or something, so we have art in the house”...And she was like, “Oh, okay.” It was kind of like, “Oh, now I'm being included,” you know? It's cute because there's, like, lots of art in there now.

Matthew also expressed how important classroom bonds have been during his difficult mental health journey:

The students that I'm in every single class with, I feel like I have a really strong connection with. But the teachers also just, I mean, especially—maybe it's just Emerson—but I feel like I have so much respect, and I feel the respect coming in from them.

When I asked Matthew how respect and connection have been fostered in his classes, he responded:

I can say that definitely, open discussion and dialogue—instead of monologue—is incredibly useful because it makes the student feel as though they are contributing to the lesson plan, as opposed to just benefitting purely from it.

Many participants shared how important it has been for them to be able to work with their peers in small groups or to simply talk informally with teachers and peers during class at times—unfettered by inflexible schedules that preclude authentic interaction. Many talked about connecting with teachers during less formal classroom experiences or in one-on-one conversations. Several spoke fondly about their relationships with a math teacher who plays guitar and sings during class at times, and who shows an interest in their personal lives. Liam is grateful for an English teacher with whom he and his classmates have shared deep, philosophical conversations about everything from religion to family. He recalled a conversation that happened during independent work time that made him feel particularly cared for:

We were just talking...and he was talking about how he was raised. And he said, “I know you’re really bright, and you’re going to be successful. And you have a lot of potential” and stuff. My birth dad used to say that to me and I almost started crying in class.

Liam says that his connection to Emerson teachers has “definitely” helped him to overcome his depression:

Pretty much most of them know me to the point where I know that they care about me. And it’s professional, you know, or it’s still, like, appropriate, you know—obviously. But, yeah, I feel that the staff really cares about me and that teachers are interested and want to help me.

Jazmin also talked about how important it is to her to feel as though she connects with her teachers: “I think if you don’t have a bond with your teacher,” she explained, “it’s hard to respect them, and it’s hard to listen to them and even just understand them.”

### **Connecting to Adults**

Sofia expressed gratitude for her connection to Emerson’s school counselor: “I just know a bunch of kids who are like, yeah, I don’t have therapy, but I talk to Ben sometimes.” She explained. “I don’t know what it is, but he’s just a very approachable person and he’s super neutral, like zero biased at all, which is really good for people.” Sofia also feels close to the high school administrator, who has actually reproached her several times for not being where she is supposed to be during classes. Sofia told me about her most recent encounter with “Lisa,” who she calls by her first name.

I was eating in the kitchen, and you’re not supposed to, and I took some cereal, and Lisa got us in trouble, but she was like, “I love you so much, but I’m just going to have you clean the kitchen.” And I was like, “What did you say, Lisa? You’re going to beat me up in the courtyard after school?” [she laughed] And she was like, “No, no, no, just help me clean up the kitchen!”

So, that was, like...I don’t know. It didn’t feel like she was condescending at all.

It's like, if I left an empty bowl of food somewhere in the living room, my mom would just be like, "Hey, why did you leave that in there? Go clean it up!" And then I'd be like, "Oh, okay, sorry." That's how things should work. But it just doesn't work like most of the time, but it does with Lisa, which is good.

Sofia feels that "just having good people," is the most important thing schools can do to support student mental health. "People who care about you."

Elizabeth shared how important her relationship to the high school counselor has been. On a particularly difficult day—even though she chose not to confide in him—his evident concern meant a great deal to her:

It was a few weeks ago when I wasn't doing as well, and he kind of came up to me after college prep, and he was like, "Hey, do you need to talk or anything?" And like I wasn't in the mood for that that day. I just wanted to go home because that's my last period. And he was like, "You can e-mail me. You can come in my office whenever you want." And then he was like, "Do you want to talk to Bethany [a new social work intern]?" Because she is the person I usually talk with here.

Elizabeth took the counselor up on this offer, grateful that someone had noticed her distress.

Isaac also talked about relying on a social work intern for support: "There's a school therapist here that I feel like I could really ask anything to," he told me. "I could talk to her about anything, and I feel really safe having that connection."

Both Elizabeth and Isaac referred to Emerson's new social work intern as a "school therapist." Emerson has actually never had the financial resources to hire a professional therapist during the school day, although the administration recently secured a grant to pay for limited community-based support in the upcoming year. We once hired a part-time professional therapist through Emerson's 21<sup>st</sup> Century grant funding to provide after-school counseling, but students did not know this therapist well and rarely

met with him, despite referrals and encouragement. Over the years, students who have sought help have generally turned to the adult at school whom they know best and trust most—that adult might be the counselor but is just as likely to be an administrator, secretary or teacher. Emerson’s teachers refer students who are in crisis to a school administrator, but most continue to provide friendship and support as well. Providing mental health support is a delicate balancing act that has worried Emerson administrators and teachers since the school’s inception. The high school administrator consults regularly with legal counsel to ensure that no one is overstepping boundaries. But student need is great and most Emerson educators choose compassion over self-preservation. In final interviews with my co-researchers, I noted that Elizabeth and Isaac continued to rely on the social work intern throughout the year for mental health support. But many participants had chosen to confide in a favorite teacher, counselor or administrator instead. Piper, however, who continued to feel isolated at Emerson, reported that she never developed enough of a relationship with any school adult to share her experiences and concerns.

Several participants reported feeling a greater connection to the adults at Emerson than to their peers. Elizabeth attributed this to the support that several of her teachers have built into their curriculum. She shared a recent writing experience from Nora’s

English class:

Actually, it was on Monday. She wanted us to write a reflection of our senior year.... And then she also wanted us to talk about something that made a big difference in us this year, whether it’s negative or positive. But she had us write down kind of like worries and fears and stuff like that on paper. And then the bottom half of the paper, she had us write things that we’re really excited or happy about. And then she read them anonymously to the class. And if you didn’t

want yours read, she said to just put a little check at the top or something. But she was reading through them, and everyone was like, “Oh, I would have thought that was me....” People cried a little bit, and it was really sweet. That in itself made me feel connected to Nora and also everyone in the class.

Elizabeth talked about how important it was that Nora opened up as well, sharing her worries and joys. The experience was cathartic:

It was kind of like everyone kind of had this weight off of them a little bit. And then she was like, “Okay, now we can start on our big essay.” I think she’s really good at, like: “You guys feel super overwhelmed right now, so let’s, like, help that first, and then we can, like, work on the overwhelming stuff.”

In Elizabeth’s advice to educational leaders and policy makers, she stressed how important it is to include similar connective experiences in the classroom. She reiterated the impact this experience had on her:

That stuck with me for the rest of the week—just kind of like everyone else is feeling the same things I am. If you did that, even just like once a month for like ten minutes at the beginning of class or something.

Elizabeth trailed off without completing the thought, but her meaning was clear.

Isaac’s earnest advice to educators—in addition to his impassioned plea for more LGBT awareness and curriculum—reflects many of the comments made by my co-researchers.

If there’s any way to make a school more of a community—that really helps students that are struggling.... And I feel like the nature aspect that is so important here—it’s something that should be brought to other schools as well. So, I feel like just to sum it all up: talk about LGBT issues, educate yourself on LGBT issues so that you can educate the students on LGBT issues, find a way to create a community in the school, and involve nature a little bit more.

### **Connecting to the Outside World**

I have a favorite memory from my time as Emerson’s high school administrator.

The school started its journey in a small, dilapidated office building downtown, flanked by a sea of blacktop and a narrow strip of grass. One day in early spring, a dark, ominous sky had been threatening a storm for hours—casting a kind of pall on the school community’s collective mood. When a thunderous rain finally broke, pounding the tin roof above us, I barely looked up from some spreadsheet or report in which I was immersed. Within moments, I heard a developing commotion outside and caught a flash of motion through my window. Looking up, I saw dozens of newly-drenched teenagers and teachers dancing riotously across the parking lot, beckoning me to join them. I quickly abandoned my work and stepped outside into the downpour. The school’s mood was magically transformed for days. I felt immense gratitude for teachers who were receptive and wise enough to allow for that spontaneous moment of joy in an otherwise gloomy day.

By design, most Emerson teachers incorporate outdoor experiences into their curriculum. Some allow for spontaneous experiences with nature—teaching class outdoors on a nice day or taking journaling walks. Emerson’s administrators and teachers try to connect both students and adults to nature and to unplug them from the world of technology. Smart phones and computers are not allowed on retreats or expeditions. The school’s class longer classes and flexible scheduling makes room for classes and workshops centered in the out-of-doors. Eric was one of Emerson’s early social studies teachers, a deep thinker, photographer, poet and aspiring mountain man. He offered classes in wilderness survival and photojournalism, alongside slightly more conventional history courses. Before Emerson opened its doors, he was the one who pushed for a more



extreme outdoor agenda than the school's founders had initially imagined. This teacher gave us the courage and provided, largely, the organizational support we needed to transport Emerson's entire secondary population to Zion National Park in that first week of the school's existence. Emerson high school students have started the school year in wild places ever since.

Our early decisions to commune with nature were not guided by critical pedagogical conviction. We knew a little of the foundational work of Freire and his disciples who sought to educate a *planetary citizenry* (Freire, 1970). But we were only marginally aware of a brewing maelstrom in the world of ecology education—of ideological battles being fought in conferences and forums on an international front; conversations centered on societal responsibility for educating a global citizenry—one that could understand the interconnected nature of human and planetary health and would care enough to transform our rapidly-declining planet. Instead, we acted out of a collective love for the natural world and a belief that an increasingly plugged-in generation of young people was missing a vital, restorative part of life. Had we better understood the theoretical foundations of the nascent ecopedagogy movement that was emerging as we were creating Emerson, we might have better planned for and articulated the value of the outdoor experiences we were incorporating.

In *Critical Pedagogy, Ecoliteracy and Planetary Crisis*, Kahn (2010) explores the origins and aims of the ecopedagogy movement. Rooted in the Freirean quest for a more humanizing, emancipatory pedagogy, ecopedagogy seeks to understand how societal systems impact the natural world and how the natural world impacts humanity. Kahn

writes that ecopedagogy as a movement was initially fomented in Latin America. Environmentally-minded intellectuals and activists from the South decried the corporate greed and consumerism of their Northern neighbors (Kahn, 2010). They saw “environmental degradation” as a direct result of “socio-cultural, political, and economic inequalities” in the world and felt that Northern consumption and greed were decimating South America’s natural resources (p. 19). Environmental activists in the Northern hemisphere, who were, according to Kahn, protective of Northern corporate and private interests, centered environmental ideology on habitat and species preservation rather than issues of equity and social justice (p. 31). Their discourse, writes Kahn:

incorporates more typically Northern ecological ideals such as the intrinsic value of all species, the need to care for and live in harmony with the planet, as well as the emancipatory potential contained in human aesthetic experiences of nature. (p. 19)

These more visceral, less globally aware “Northern,” concerns were the initial focus of Emerson’s expeditionary efforts. We wanted our students to form a less anthropocentric worldview and to develop a sense of kinship with nature—one that might inspire students to transform their world for the better. If students came to love the natural world, we reasoned, they would feel connected to something beyond themselves and find greater meaning and purpose in existence and in learning. Primarily, we hoped that our students would be nourished and replenished by these outdoor experiences and mutual experiences of challenge and transcendent beauty would foster community. To large extent, we felt we were succeeding. Many Emerson students have expressed gratitude for the love they developed for the natural world, for remote places and cultures, and for each other during expeditions close to home and in countries as far-flung

as India, Vietnam, China, Ecuador, and Guatemala. Over the years, both teachers and students have developed a greater awareness of place and time and have begun to connect outdoor experiences with scientific, political and historical curricula in meaningful ways. Some of our graduates have gone on to pursue careers in the natural resources, international development, photography, and even fly-fishing—undertakings that earn them little money but offer a connection to the natural world. Emerson tends to launch more artists and social scientists than business moguls, so the ethics of ecopedagogy, for better or for worse, must be having an influence.

But these sojourns in the out-of-doors have provided another important, unintended consequences. Communal experiences in nature tend to disconnect teachers and administrators from their positions of power, break down hierarchical structures, and allow more equitable, authentic relationships between teachers and students to develop. The power of this decentering became especially evident during 2 years, some time ago, when late summer storms kept us from embarking on our annual backpacking trek at the beginning of the school year. During these 2 years, we felt a marked difference in the way students interacted with each other and with the adults in the first months of school. We sensed a more traditional centering of power and greater *us-versus-them* resistance to adult “authority.” Both students and teachers slid into more traditional, hierarchical ways of interacting with each other. It was much more difficult to establish the kind of egalitarian relationships we had enjoyed in previous years. These 2 years cemented our conviction that communal experiences based in nature are vital to the social and emotional welfare of our students and teachers and to building authentic community.

### **Connecting to Authentic Selves**

Each unique theoretical stream of critical pedagogy suggests holistic and immersive ways for educators to forge meaningful bonds with students and help them build authentic relationships with each other. Each is concerned with the dissolution of hierarchical relationships, which then allows for the creation of more collaborative, dynamic learning communities bonded by mutual respect and acceptance. Each provides a different lens for examining school and classroom practices that marginalize and diminish students—intentionally or unwittingly—and thereby isolate individuals from each other. But perhaps most importantly, each offers inspirations for ways in which schools can connect students to authentic experience and to their own internal needs and desires—something I explore in more depth in this section.

Perhaps most important to their mental health is the need for adolescents to understand themselves and be able to express themselves authentically in all venues of their lives. In Chapter 5, I shared stories about how participants have suppressed vital parts of their identities at school and have hidden their mental health struggles. Critical pedagogy decries this silencing. It offers avenues for helping schools create classroom and school environments where individual identity can flourish.

Critical disability, queer, and critical race pedagogies remind us of the danger of essentializing discourses that cast some students as “other” and fail to recognize the unique insights and contributions each individual brings to a community. Critical pedagogies discourage educators from labeling students based on sex, gender identity, ethnicity, or ability in order to relegate them to special classes or programs. These

pedagogies encourage, instead, finding equitable ways to ensure that all students are given full membership in classroom and school communities. They ask educators to reconsider the formation of specialized pull-out programs that isolate some students from their peers.

Postcolonial pedagogy rejects the forces of oppression that assume individuals in positions of authority have the right—even the obligation—to dominate and control the lives of those less powerful. Schools unwittingly, and sometimes intentionally, communicate to students that their purpose is to submit to authority and hierarchical structures. Postcolonial pedagogy asks educators to build authentic, collaborative, caring relationships with students instead and to allow them enough agency and autonomy to develop as competent, empowered, fully realized adults.

Queer and other pedagogies reject the one-dimensional heroes and villains often found in textbooks and curricula. These flat, lifeless representations of humanity hold little interest for students. They advocate, instead, exploring the rich and complicated circumstances and relationships that motivate and shape individuals. If students cannot recognize themselves in the lives of the poets, scientists, mathematicians, artists, innovators, and artists they study, they are unlikely to believe they can achieve great things in life. Students must be allowed to establish authentic measures and expectations for themselves.

Isaac understands the critical importance of helping students recognize the diverse and complicated nature of human identity. When I asked Isaac what schools can do to better support adolescent mental health, he said:

I definitely feel like one of the most important things is to include LGBT curriculum and to educate all students on the fact that not everybody in history was cisgender and heterosexual. I feel like that's something that's really important to queer students that are struggling.

Both queer and feminist pedagogies theorize the importance of acknowledging sexuality and desire in educational discourses and learning (Fine & McClelland, 2006; Pinar, 2012; Watkins, 2008). This idea is anathema to most Utah policymakers and religious leaders who feel the need to protect Utah youth from what they see as unwholesome subject matter (Cortez, 2019; Tanner, 2019a). They fail to see that Utah adolescents are already steeped in, and sometimes intensely confused by, the erotic and sometimes exploitive images and messages about sexuality that surround them in the media and in life. Desire, both corporal and spiritual, is a natural and normal teenage emotion. To ignore its existence is to disconnect young people from one of the most essential components of identity. It is the absence of desire that participants described when they talked about their decisions to end their own lives. Several of my co-researcher reported that their darkest periods of depression and suicidality emerged from experiences related to sexuality and desire—rejection after a romantic tryst or relationship ended, sexual exploitation or abuse, or confusing encounters with pornographic or other prurient materials on the Internet. Educators need to be able to talk to students authentically about the role that sexuality and desire play in human history—in politics, war, discovery, invention and creative endeavors. Community standards notwithstanding, they should be able to have healthy discussion about sexuality and desire in health, literature, social studies, and other classes. Pushing aside healthy discussion about topics of such deep concern to adolescents only leaves a void likely to

be filled by information from other less reliable sources.

Queer pedagogy helps educators to open a space for adolescents to express their unique gender identities. Utah's recent relaxing of so-called "no-promo-homo" law now make it possible for educators to have genuine conversations with students about gender issues in their lives, in their communities, and in classroom curricula. These conversations are not only possible, they are essential for fighting the ignorance and essentialism that leads to exclusion and cruelty (Kosciw et al., 2018; Kull et al., 2019). Pinar (2012) served as editor for an anthology of essays addressing to role of queer theory in education. In his eloquent introduction he writes:

*Queer Theory in Education* seeks to heighten the visibility of the issues, complicate and intensify critique and theory, while challenging homophobic and heterosexist nonsense—for the children's sake; for all children's sake, including queer children, who must feel as if they come 'from another planet—Planet Queer' (Watney, 1996, p. 24). In memory of those who have been murdered and beaten in gay bashings, those exterminated in the Holocaust, those who struggle(d) to survive in families whose "values" justify sadism, for all those who have died of and are living with AIDS, you are with us here. We acknowledge all those who have come before us, especially those whose courage has now made possible a certain (if slight and problematical) clearing of the public space for us to speak. It is long past time for us to speak. Will our colleagues in education hear us? (p. 2)

Feminist pedagogies (e.g., Anzaldua, 2012; hooks, 2000; Noddings, 1992/2005) suggest ways that educators can provide students with opportunities for self-reflection. It invites activities into the classroom centered around "personal, communal, and subjective ways of knowing" into the classroom (Crabtree et al., 2009 p. 4). Feminist pedagogy is concerned with the blurring of hierarchical divides and the validity of student voice. It explores the ways in which empathy and an ethic of care can be infused into curricula (Fernandes, 2003; hooks, 2000; Noddings, 1992/2005). Noddings proposes that *caring*

provides a compelling framework for organizing learning experiences that are meaningful and transformative for both students and teachers. She writes:

If the curriculum were redesigned around centers and themes of care, matters of interest to women and minorities could be included in natural ways. For example, we might tackle the questions: How can we produce a new generation better than the present one? Such a theme promotes discussion of a host of sub-questions.... What causes racial tensions, and how do people feel when prejudice is directed at them? Why do all—or most—groups see themselves as genuine human beings and outsiders as *others*?...All of the existing disciplines have something to contribute to the study of such questions, but in the new curricula the disciplines would not themselves be central. They would serve larger purposes. (p. 115)

### **Empowerment and Transforming Purpose**

If situations cannot be created that enable the young to deal with feelings of being manipulated by outside forces, there will be far too little sense of agency among them. Without a sense of agency, young people are unlikely to pose significant questions, the existentially rooted questions in which learning begins.

Greene (1988)

In this final section of Chapter 6, I examine curricular practices at Emerson from my co-researchers' perspectives, and I seek to understand how their classroom experiences and academic work has impacted their mental health.

Giroux (2013) writes that critical pedagogy is a “political and moral project” (online interview, para 2) It is not an instructional technique; neither is it a set of strategies or rules. It is, instead, a lens for imagining how to educate for personal and societal transformation. It is a means, Giroux argues, “of highlighting the performative nature of agency as an act of participating in and shaping the world in which we live” (online interview, para 2). My purpose, in the final pages of this chapter, is to examine



how classroom curricula and other school projects have impacted the mental health of my co-researchers. Had any of their classes given them a greater control over their depression or anxiety, or at least, a stronger sense of meaning? The intersectional nature of experience necessarily blurs the boundaries between the themes of critical pedagogy that I have chosen to consider, so to some extent, agency, empowerment and transforming purpose at school have already been addressed in earlier sections of this chapter.

Participants who reported feeling safe, connected, and included at Emerson have also found greater meaning and purpose in their lives at school. But most of the experiences of empowerment I shared, were centered in the culture of the school and or in extra-curricular activities. I wanted to know if my co-researchers had found a sense of agency and purpose in their academic work as well. Some of them had. But many of these narratives reveal that feeling safe, recognized and included does not always lead to feeling empowered by or fully engaged with academic work. While some of my co-researchers easily identified classroom and school assignments that have been meaningful and purposeful, that have contributed to their emotional and social well-being, others found it difficult to see how schoolwork has made much of a difference in their lives.

It is important to understand the classroom and school environment in which these young people learn. From its inception, Emerson strives to empower students—to provide them with choice, agency, and the ability to pursue individual passions. Emerson educators try to help students understand that their contributions have the power to transform the world. These values are inscribed in Emerson's founding documents and policies and are still infused in its culture.

In Emerson's first year, administrators and teachers worked collaboratively to initiate a variety of student-centered curricular policies and programs that have stayed with the school over time. Of course, many changes, some nuanced and some radical, do happen every year.

Emerson asks seniors to complete a significant independent project before graduating. The format and substance of the project is left entirely to students, but they are asked to include a creative element, a research paper, and a service component—all centered on personal interests. This format has stayed largely the same, although the project is now more structured, guided by a formal rubric and greater mentoring support. Emerson celebrates these projects at a luncheon each year. Parents, teachers, administrators and eleventh-grade students—who are beginning to formulate their own project ideas—are all invited. Seniors display their creations in a variety of formats—on trifold boards, computer screens, in photographic displays—whatever form makes sense. They produce everything from original music, to photo essays and homemade computers; from zines to documentary films. Some students tackle extremely ambitious projects. One student transcribed his favorite film, held auditions, and then directed and acted alongside his classmates in a full-blown stage production. Another student built a handcrafted guitar pieced together from discarded instruments. Two seniors completed an entire novel for their project. Another student visited children with terminal cancer at Primary Children's Hospital over an entire year. She also designed and built homemade toys as gifts for these children, whom she grew to love and sometimes lost. Most students did much simpler work, but there was no real shame in that; senior projects were not

graded—there was little pressure to meet any particular standard, only encouragement to do something meaningful. Every year, a handful of students submitted fairly uninspired, hurried work simply to pass the requirement, but some of the most impressive work I have seen Emerson students produce was created for these fully independent projects.

I was not surprised when my co-researchers reported that some of the most meaningful work they have done at Emerson was either a sophomore or senior project. In our conversations, I tried not to prompt students to discuss any type of work in particular. I was careful not to ask directly about these projects. When I asked Elizabeth if any of her schoolwork has supported her mental health and given her a sense of purpose, she replied:

I would say that the senior project is really good for that, just because...people kind of want to do something meaningful with it, you know, and they kind of take it upon themselves to do that. And I think also the school kind of like provides people with the opportunity to do things that change the world.

One participant's project related directly to her own mental health struggles. She gathered narratives from student who were willing to share, anonymously, their stories of depression, anxiety and suicidality. She created a colorful interactive art display featuring excerpts from the tales she collected. Although the teen has no idea who submitted each story, she feels some measure of comfort and connection to learn that other members of her community experience some of the same mental health burdens she bears. She mentioned one story in particular:

This person said that they've had an eating disorder for three years. And it's... interesting...because sometimes at school I'm just like, "No one else is dealing with this." Like, it honestly felt like that. And it was so weird because they were kind of, like, explaining almost the same exact things that I feel like I've experienced.

Gabriel spoke about how meaningful schoolwork keeps him occupied and has helped to keep his depression at bay. For his senior project, he parlayed his interests in rock climbing and climate change into an impressive film and a substantive research paper: “I just spent, like, hours and hours and hours just researching,” he said. “I’m researching a lot about ecosystems and how humans interact with the ecosystem.... That’s something I’m super, super passionate about.”

In a speech Gabriel wrote for a competition, (a portion of which was shared in Chapter 5), he indicated that transformative work at school has given him a sense of belonging and a reason for living. He began this speech by recounting years of heartache and suicidality. He ended it by sharing the hope he now feels and his excitement for the future.

The support I’ve received from [Emerson] not only given me the confidence and motivation I need to show my school what I’m passionate about, they’ve also given me the experience and resources to share my work with the world.

Three years from now, I see myself in college, working towards a degree in Environmental Studies....

Three years from now, I’ll be preparing for...a career that gives me the privilege to serve the people, the wildlife, and the land of my beautiful state. I’ll teach people about what I love and why it’s worth fighting for what they love....

And three years from now, I’m not only alive, but happy, striving to learn new ways to improve myself and the world around me. (Appendix E)

Despite his ongoing battle with depression, Matthew has tackled several significant projects over the past 2 years. Most have centered around climate change—something he feels strongly about. “Whenever I can, I like to wiggle climate change into anything,” he told me. I asked Matthew if his teachers generally allow him that much

latitude in his assignments:

Oh, yeah! I think all of my research papers were on environmental issues, pretty much. Like, I managed to work it into every single idea. It was kind of a challenge, but... within the guidelines, you have a lot of wiggle room so you can really tailor it to your passions.

Matthew's most ambitious projects have had nothing to do with class assignments. He simply wants to make Emerson a more environmentally friendly place and to pursue his own interests. He has lobbied for solar panels on the school roof—researching their cost and impact to the school. Although Matthew could not convince Emerson's administrators to act this year, he has entrusted his younger sister with continuing his battle next year. He did succeed in installing an electric wind generator at the school and in setting up a sophisticated automated watering system for the vegetables in our edible garden. For his senior project, Matthew planned the Capitol Reef expedition mentioned earlier.

Matthew talked about how much it has meant to him that the high school principal respects him enough to entrust him with significant (and sometimes expensive) undertakings. Many senior projects require funding. Emerson sets aside an annual project fund for senior and sophomore projects. Students are invited to write simple grant proposals, and everyone has equal ability to fund the projects they imagine. Most applicants ask for only a modest amount, but some students have received significant funding when their proposed project will benefit the school community.

Matthew also wrote an extensive research paper—an ungraded project, but one

with the potential to earn him college credit at his chosen university. The research was ambitious. He complained:

It was killer! It was twelve pages and 8,000 words, and it took me months to write. I mean, I ended up failing it. I chose something that was considerably more difficult than I should have ever chosen because it went into a lot of conceptual physics that I wasn't prepared for.

I tried to console Matthew by suggesting that he had not failed; he just had not quite reached the mark needed to earn college credit. I asked how his physics teacher had responded to the paper: “Oh, he loved it!” he reported. “He thought it was a great paper.” Matthew was proud that he had stretched himself. He said that it was “satisfying” simply to try something challenging and to “have control” over what he was learning. “Sharing what I love to do makes me feel more useful” he said. “[It creates] a sense of identity...by giving me more confidence in what I can do.” I found it encouraging that despite Matthew’s self-reported anxiety and stress over his heavy schedule, he ultimately felt peaceful about less-than-perfect outcomes—knowing he had done his best.

Emerson teachers are asked to incorporate authentic student-centered projects into classroom curricula. To some extent, they must be succeeding. Several participants mentioned how grateful they are that some class assignments provide them with the ability to pursue personal interests. Elizabeth says that her “favorite thing about Emerson is that “it’s very open-ended:”

Like, if you want to learn about this, you can learn about this, if you want to do a research paper about something like a hobby or whatever, you’re more than welcome to.

Emerson has also offers unique short-format classes that take place in the darkest days of winter. For two weeks, regular classes are suspended and students sign up for two

specialized workshops designed around both student and teacher interests. Each workshop meets for a three-hour block of time daily to allow for concentrated project and field work. Over the years, teachers and invited guest speakers have offered workshops in choreography, criminology, meditation, game strategy, environmental science, and dozens of additional topics. Students sometimes engage in a single workshop for the entire two weeks—such as a novel writing retreat that was taught by an Emerson English teacher and a published author. A few years ago, two science teachers took a group of twelve students on a “Deep Space” road trip through California to visit various observatories and a jet propulsion lab. In the first year these workshops were offered, students requested a “circus” class. We challenged them to find a teacher and circus performance equipment—believing, admittedly, that they would give up. The school was soon cluttered with unicycles, gym mats and juggling props. Years later, one of these budding circus performers took a summer away from her university studies to perform aerial fabrics with a professional circus troupe in Europe. Students have, on occasion, designed and even taught some of these classes—but State reporting and certification requirements make this practice more difficult every year; the school has to do some creative data entry in databases that track teacher qualifications and course codes.

Many of the more radical curricular experiments Emerson tried in its earliest days—such as flexible schedules that allowed for classes to combine for multi-disciplinary projects—have largely gone by the wayside (although there is talk of bringing some co-curricular classes back again). Emerson has felt the need to set aside some of its more innovative educational practices in favor of structures that make

working within traditional systems easier. In my final years as Emerson's chief administrator, it was a constant battle to stay true to our vision of student agency and innovation in a climate of increasing oversight and fear, one in which policy writing, standardized curricula, high test scores, and fiscal responsibility seemed to be the primary concerns of the educational agencies with oversight of schools. Even the structure of Utah's electronic reporting systems that track student progress—such as CACTUS and ASPIRE—no longer support non-standard classes or schedules. It felt like national and state educational policymakers were paying lip service to fostering student entrepreneurial spirit and creativity, when in reality, rigid core requirements, increasing oversight, and reporting burdens were consuming the instructional planning time and headspace that we had once used to brainstorm together and create unique programs tailored to the needs of our students. Innovation was, by no means, impossible, but it became more difficult to find the time or enthusiasm to navigate the workarounds needed to make innovation and student autonomy possible. We fought several structural battles and won—a tale for another day—but mostly we gave up and adopted more typical school structures.

As I talked with my co-researchers, some seem to lack any real spark of passion or excitement about their academic work. I wondered if my own waning enthusiasm for fighting standardized systems might have had repercussions that are now subjecting these students to a more rigid, less student-centered curricula than Emerson once had. I may be romanticizing those early years, and I know that Emerson's current administration and teachers continue to work tirelessly to implement supportive programs, but something



seemed off. As I poured over participant narratives to try to understand, I finally recognized that there is a clear divide between the kind of experiences that younger participants were reporting and those that older students shared. Most of the 9<sup>th</sup>- and 10<sup>th</sup>-grade student had not yet tackled independent projects. Their class schedules are largely dictated by state and local core requirements. These youngest students have little flexibility and a limited choice of electives. They make far fewer choices about the structure and content of their school day. It troubled me that these freshmen and sophomores—who have just as great a need for academic experiences that spark imagination and provide purposeful work—seem to have fewer opportunities for the agentive experiences that have helped their older peers gain confidence in their intellectual abilities and have, in some cases, helped them to exert greater control over their mental health.

These limitations seemed to be playing out in participants' feelings about their school work. When I asked Antonia if she has experienced meaningful, purposeful work in her classes, she had to think back to eighth grade, when an English teacher introduced an open-ended project centered on the hero's journey. Antonia could not immediately recall any meaningful work from her ninth-grade classes. She prefaced her eighth-grade memory by telling me that her depression and anxiety, at the time, had been "full-blown."

The teacher was talking about, "What is a hero for you?" And I was interested in [an anime series] at the time. I was obsessed with that show. And I was like, "This is perfect, this is something that I relate to." And I really liked this main character because his whole thing was like, "What does it mean to be a hero?" I'm, like, trying to strive to reach that sort of, I guess, mythic kind of thing of the ideal sort of hero. My ideal hero is somebody, like, who never gives up that's like a sort of phoenix rising from the ashes. Even if they do reach rock bottom, they still have the hope and drive to try again and keep going and to keep moving forward. And

so, it's like I take that really, really personally.

Antonia had created a watercolor of her hero, and had surrounded him with a textual and visual collage to illustrate his most heroic moments. This representation of Antonia's hopes and dreams is still hanging in her bedroom. "It's super nerdy," Antonia laughed, "but I'm really proud of it still; It means a lot to me." I asked Antonia if she feels like this type of assignment—one that offers choice and allows for personal passions to surface—is important for student well-being. She answered affirmatively:

I think, especially with a school like this, where its focus is sort of like individuality and trying to figure out who you are, having stuff like that that's like, even if it's not completely on topic, everybody can tell it was still meaningful to you, and you put a lot of work into it, I think is important.

Other 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade participants also had a hard time identifying recent school assignments that have felt especially worthwhile to them. When I asked Abigail if she does work that is purposeful and meaningful in her classes, she answered "Not a lot of the time." She likes her classes and feels like her teachers provide opportunities for students to talk about things that are important to them, but she has not engaged in these conversations herself: "I feel like at Emerson, there's a lot of opportunities to talk about that," she said, "But I don't usually speak up." She *was* excited about a project she plans to work on in her sociology class—an exploration of how media impacts adolescent self-image:

Well, in Media Arts, I'm going to do a project like that. We're supposed to do an art project that tells a story, so I'm cutting out pictures from magazines and doing a collage that kind of tells that story about the influence of beauty standards and stuff.

I prodded Abigail further to find out if *any* of her school work in core classes has

felt empowering or especially meaningful. “I honestly can’t think of anything,” she answered. “Not that there haven’t been projects that I really like. But, I don’t know. I just never felt really connected with schoolwork.” Abigail articulated, however, a desire for something more. “I wish it would be like that,” she said, “I just feel like I haven’t found something that really sparks my interest.” Abigail recently returned to Emerson after 2 years at her neighborhood school. I wanted to believe that her lack of enthusiasm was more reflective of practices at her previous school than Emerson, but too many of these young participants had similar responses. I could not dismiss her comments as an anomaly.

Ximena, a sophomore, also reported that while some of her classes are enjoyable, she cannot think of any particular project or assignment that has added meaning or purpose to her life. She says that spending time with friends fulfills that need. Ximena does not lack academic passion. When I asked her to think about what kind of schoolwork might spark her interest and give her life greater meaning, she answered:

Like, I want to kind of just try *everything* in a way—like take one course of this and then another course, kind of like really get the feel of it and see what I’m really intrigued with and passionate about.

Her current passion is body art, which she practices on herself, her parents, and friends. She has not found an outlet for that at school—yet.

I was saddened that even at Emerson, where administrators and educators are closely attuned to student emotional and mental health needs and actively try to connect coursework with student interests and needs, the result seems to be hit and miss. Clearly, some teachers and some classes are hitting the mark. Kate, a junior, talked about how

much she enjoys *Epistemology and Ontology*, a class that teaches critical thinking skills and explores issues and ideas that are relevant to students. “It’s a lot about your own personal opinions and informed by your own experiences,” she explained. Kate appreciates her art classes as well, which are preparing her for a hoped-for career as a graphic artist. But she could not think of any examples of classroom curricula this year that have provided her life with significant meaning, or have allowed her true autonomy. When I asked her if the work she does in school is meaningful and has relevance for her life, her response was a fairly tepid: “I think so,” but she could not provide examples outside of her 10<sup>th</sup> grade project the previous year.

When I first asked Rainey this same question, she asked quizzically “What do you mean?” After a more detailed explanation and a chance to reflect, she decided that only one of her classes meets these criteria—a current events class that asks students to grapple with important national and international issues:

[The teacher] has shown us documentaries and teaches us about the things of the world that maybe we don’t know about, or people ignore. This week we’re talking about how reporters are kind of in danger. Last week, it was Russia in general. Then before that, it might have been religion or something. Some of them aren’t issues, they’re just important things to know about. Then when we spent some time on the up-and-coming election— some racism and conflicting beliefs in general. Funny enough, most of my homework comes from that class. It’s a very good class. I’m glad I took it because that class, it’s like, “Hey, maybe we should fix this.”

Even though my co-researchers struggle with real and debilitating mental health challenges, their passions break through from time to time when they talk about things that matter to them—Gabriel’s wild places, Antonia’s anime, Piper’s art, Matthew’s environmental causes, Elizabeth’s desire to help others like herself. Despite their

challenges and occasional complaints, most have found moments of joy and fulfillment doing things at school that are meaningful to them—even if those experiences have taken place in schools other than Emerson, as they did for Piper. My conversations with study participants remind me of how important finding meaningful work is to any individual’s emotional wellbeing and mental health. It must be especially important for these young people who chase demons in their spare time. Isaac told me how critical it had been for his survival to find purpose in life—something he had finally managed to do in this final year at Emerson.

I definitely feel like, once I was able to find a meaning, I was able to see that there’s a reason to stay alive, and there’s a reason to fight harder to be happy. When there’s no meaning, it’s just like, “Well, why do I even have to try to get better?”

I asked Isaac how important it is for students and teachers to have conversations about what is important in life, and if these conversations ever happen at Emerson. He responded:

I feel like they happen *occasionally*, but I feel like it should happen more, just because there are some students, like myself, that are kind of like lost and still trying to figure out that type of thing. There are so many different people with different spiritualities and different meanings and different reasons for them to keep going—it’s good to bring that all together and be like, “So what is it for you? How can this [work] help students that are still struggling to finding their meaning?”

Most of my co-researchers expressed a desire for more agency and authentic purpose-driven work in classes, but even these adolescents could see how difficult this is becoming in the fast-paced rhythm of a typical school day. Liam suggested that institutional limitations would make what he truly desires from a school impossible. He could not imagine that a school could be structured in such a way to allow him to enjoy

the type of deliberate, slow-paced work that makes him happiest. And yet purposeful, passion-driven work should be a fact of life in the place where students spend the better part of each day.

The challenge, for any school, is to sort out how educators and administrators can infuse supportive, meaningful work into classroom curricula and school culture. There is not any one formula—only a wealth of powerful theory to draw from that advocates for building educational programs and curricula around students’ needs and interests—and asks us to provide students with a strong measure of control over their own educational and mental health journeys. Critical pedagogies remind us of what is most meaningful to adolescents—to all people really—friendship, acceptance, recognition, respect, independence, authenticity, meaningful work and transforming hopes and dreams. I do not know how we can possibly support adolescent mental health in a comprehensive way if we do not continually search for ways in which to meet all of these critical needs.

## CHAPTER 7

### IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATORS AND POLICYMAKERS

#### Introduction

When I began this study nearly 2 years ago, I sought information from researchers and public health officials engaged in the study of adolescent depression and suicidality in Utah, and from educators devoted to the important work of protecting youth who wage war with sorrow and despair. I shared my plan to interview high school students and asked several of these individuals if any such study had previously been conducted in Utah. At the time, Andrea Hood, the Zero Suicide Project Coordinator at the Utah Department of Health and Human Services, connected me with an impressive group of researchers and public health officials hoping to conduct just such a study. This was February, 2017. This group envisioned meeting with teen focus groups to better understand the context and climate of adolescent life in Utah. The study remained in limbo for some time, mired in the predictable complications of approvals, funding, and time constraints. Recently, one of its principal drivers reported that the initial plan might be abandoned altogether. Instead, they hoped to learn more about adolescent depression and suicidality by engaging in conversation with an existing coalition of Davis County youth (J. Bigler, personal communication, October 5, 2019). Outside of this study, I could not identify any recent or ongoing research that relied on conversations with the individuals most affected by Utah's adolescent mental health crisis—the teens themselves.

One individual at a public agency explained the reason for this gap in research. Although I did not record her exact words, she said something to this effect: *We generally don't conduct studies with adolescents. Teens lack self-awareness; they really don't know what they want or need.* I was jolted by this assumption. I had worked with youth in schools for 15 years and raised five children of my own. I felt certain that adolescents—as capricious as they can be—are insightful and self-aware. I am often astounded by the wisdom of teens. Part of what gives me hope for the future is that many of this generation are more socially conscious and empathic than I was as a teen.

Young people know better than anyone what they have experienced and how they feel. They may not always understand *why* they feel as they do. They do not always know that they deserve for “things to be different,” as Sofia so aptly phrased it. But they can tell you about experiences that have battered and crushed them. They know what makes life worth living. They are aware of the day-to-day exclusions, oppressions, and aggressions that extinguish their will to keep trying. *They are fully realized individuals with the ability, desire, and right to help shape their own lives.* This conviction lies at the heart of this study and is its most important finding. It is also the beating heart of critical theory and pedagogies.

The theory and literature of Critical Pedagogy provides a deep well of wisdom. Educators, researchers and policymakers can draw from this as they re-envision the role of schools in creating safe, nurturing spaces where teens can live meaningful, joyful lives. Champions of critical approaches to education (e.g., Apple & Beane, 2007; Camicia, 2012, 2016; Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Darder et al., 2017; Freire, 1970/2000, 1974;



Giroux, 2011; Kincheloe, 2008; Sadowski, 2016) remind us that students must be *recognized* and empowered in schools and encouraged to grapple with both practical and existential quandaries. They must participate in shaping their own educative experiences and be given meaningful work with which to engage. They should be freed from constant, corrosive judgement; instead empowered to transform their own lives so that they can, in turn, transform society. Currently, the transformation that teens most urgently need is the restoration of peace, purpose, and well-being to their daily lives.

### **Overview**

Beyond description and reconstructive analysis, the applied work of critical qualitative study is to inspire social change (Carspecken, 1996; Denzin, 2015; Kincheloe et al., 2011; Madison, 2005). We are responsible, as Bloom writes “to conduct ethical research that makes a difference to those whose life opportunities, health, safety and well-being are diminished” (as cited in Denzin, 2015, p. 31). Madison writes that critical ethnography must “name what is intuitively felt and inspire acts of justice” (p. 13). Nagasawa and Swadener (2015) describe critical study as an “ontological project,” one that “clarifies shared meaning in the service of larger social projects” (p. 177).

Critical ethnography is not complete until we examine the social implications of what we have learned (Carspecken, 1996, Madison, 2005). Metaphorically, our task is to weave the individual threads we have examined back into the social fabric from which they were pulled. The complex tapestry we then create should reflect the intellect, insight, hopes and desires of the community we have sought to understand. For critical

ethnography to be meaningful, this tapestry must at minimum suggest a pattern for social change.

Carspecken (1996) might argue that our analytical tapestry should be immensely complex, enriched by multiple studies of similar sociocultural groups and examined in light of existing sociological models and theories. He concedes that these tasks are often beyond the scope of a doctoral dissertation (Carspecken, 1996, p. 206). But without some form of systems analysis, he writes “only a part of a whole picture emerges” (p. 206).

In Chapter 6, I began the task of social critique and analysis by weaving the insights of my young co-researchers with my own observations. In this chapter, I more explicitly examine systems of schooling that teachers and educational leaders have the power to shape and suggest a pattern for social change. I first share thoughts about how educators and administrators can more holistically and robustly support student mental health in Utah schools. I then suggest several implications for educational leaders and policymakers. The final pages of this chapter offer an acknowledgement of this study’s limitations and suggests possibilities for future study.

Little of what I propose in this chapter is novel. Powerful, progressive ideas have enriched public education for over 140 years. Critical thought and pedagogy have sought to alleviate human suffering and transform educational practice for at least 50 of these. Many scholars have written eloquently at the intersections of critical pedagogy and student well-being (e.g., Camicia, 2016; Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Fine, 2006; Gabel, 2005; Sadowski, 2016). But the turbulent waters in which we now find ourselves are unfamiliar and, in many ways, incomprehensible. We have not seen the ubiquity of

childhood and youth anxiety, depression and suicidality we now face. Significantly more critical ethnographic study is needed to understand the unique socio-cultural conditions and needs of youth at individual schools and locales. This study is only a beginning.

Ideas offered here reflect the traumas, fears, hopes and desires of fourteen Utah adolescents who are in the midst of the struggle, and of one small school struggling to support them. They are meant as a springboard for discussion as Utah educators and administrators—in full partnerships with their students—consider how they can build programs and curricula to better nurture and protect these vulnerable, but courageous young people in our schools.

### **Suggestions for Schools**

Loss is a great and tireless leveler. As my co-researchers spoke about the origins of their mental health struggles, most told stories of loss—the loss of a parent through death or divorce; the loss of love and acceptance from friends or romantic partners; the loss of safety or innocence when abuse or cruelty injected itself into their world; the withdrawal of respect or recognition when they failed to meet the cultural or academic expectations of others. Most reported that their responses to mental illness—self-harm, emotional distancing, disassociation, suicidality—are a means for either regaining some sense of control over their losses or making unbearable pain go away. Most spoke of a need for greater meaning and purpose in their lives, although few expected such consequential matters to be of concern to schools. It may seem an impossibly heavy burden to place on schools—the healing of serious wounds and the instilling of meaning

into lives. But school is the place where most young people spend the greatest part of each day. Too many are estranged from family or are unmoored from religious congregations and communities that might potentially offer support. Such estrangement does not always stop at the school entry doors.

Hours spent in classrooms, hallways, and common areas are not only a preparation for life—for these students, they are life. School can, and I would argue, *must* be a joyous place where work is purposeful, relationships are fulfilling, and human emotions and needs find acknowledgment and nourishment. We have to look out for each other and make sure we are all stable, happy, and strong. If our primary concern is that students learn deeply and well, then we have no choice but to help free them of the fetters of mental illness so they can engage with academic work. One thing my co-researchers made abundantly clear is that they do not learn when they are not well.

The following suggestions are reminders of what we have all intuitively felt, but sometimes overlook in the crush of more immediate obligations. I have organized my thoughts—inspired by my co-researcher’s narratives and the themes of critical pedagogy—into six broad categories: *Create Safe Emotional Environments*; *Expand Our Conceptions of School-Based Mental-Health Care*; *Build Authentic, Supportive Relationships*; *Plan Work that is Both Socially and Personally Transformative*; *Relieve Academic Pressure*; and *Embrace an Ethic of Love and Care*.

Each suggestion begins with a list of themes foundational to critical pedagogy drawn from the *Critical Connections* graphic I proposed in Chapter 6. Because each thematic thread of critical pedagogy is inextricably woven with all others, this is merely

suggestive. I then revisit the themes of critique introduced in Chapter 6 and suggest practical ways that schools might bring about change. I end each section by sharing some of the literature that has shaped my own understanding of what a supportive, protective school environment can and should be.

### **Create Safe Emotional Environments**

*Safety • Inclusion • Recognition • Authentic Connection • Empowerment*

The young people in this study led me to understand that some of the sorrows they harbor and wounds they nurse were inflicted at school and might have been prevented in a different environment—one where students and adults recognize and care for each other while respecting each other’s differences. Participants stated clearly that schools must do everything in their power—especially when children are young—to prevent traumas that can lead to mental illness. While we cannot change past circumstances or genetic predispositions that make life hard for students, it is our absolute duty to understand the social conditions and circumstances of students’ lives, both at home and school, and to ensure that school is *not* one more place where exclusions, oppressions, and cruelty are inflicted on the young.

We must plan for the emotional safety of our students as urgently as we plan for their physical safety. In his compelling book, *Safe is Not Enough: Better Schools for LGBT Students*, Sadowski (2016) expressed how essential emotional safety is to the mental health of LGBTQ students, who are at disproportionately high risk for depression and suicide. LGBTQ youth rely on the protections of safe spaces, acceptance, adult advocacy, anti-bullying policies and gay-straight alliances for their basic survival

(Camicia, 2016; Kull et al., 2019; Sadowski, 2016). But these baseline supports are only a beginning. A truly safe environment must be more profoundly inclusive, protective, and empowering. All students must feel that they are valued members of the community and full participants in school life. Sadowski writes: “The classroom is in many respects the heart of school life, yet for the vast majority of students—even those attending ostensibly safe schools—it is also a place in which LGBTQ people and identities are never mentioned.” To counter this institutional silence, students must see their own realities and identities reflected in the literature they read, the people and histories they study, and the work that they do (Camicia, 2016; Sadowski, 2016).

Most of the young people in this study, whether or not they identified as LGBTQ, had at some point in school life felt invisible. Study participants were appreciative of efforts Emerson has made to address their needs and emotional pain, but those efforts have not been enough. Some felt that their mental health struggle and emotional suffering had often been overlooked or misunderstood.

Every aspect of adolescent well-being and fulfillment depends upon a foundation of safety. It follows that educators and administrators should set aside time to devise strategies, create programs, and plan curricula to address this most basic need. In the pages that follow, I briefly touch on several elements of school life at Emerson that participants believe have supported their well-being, and on other school structures that have not felt as supportive. Each insight generated in this study is framed as a suggestion. These are not meant to be prescriptive, only helpful. Every community of educators and students must embark on their own unique transformational journey.

### ***Create Welcoming Classroom and Community Spaces***

Study participants emphasized the critical value of spending school hours in an environment of beauty, comfort, and light. At Emerson, students paint murals on walls, write poetry on a communal blackboard, tend a garden and greenhouse, and share responsibility for keeping spaces nice. Teachers display student academic work and art liberally on school walls. During one week of this study, a large bank of windows stretching across the school commons was covered with a rainbow of colorful post-it notes with scribbled suggestions—evidence of a schoolwide brainstorming session. Participants expressed appreciation for a school environment that feels more like a welcoming home than a sterile institution.

### ***Talk Openly About Mental Health Needs***

All of the young people I spoke with had been, or continued to be, overwhelmed by mental health challenges. They expressed a longing for greater understanding and support from adults and for conversations about how to overcome their difficulties. Most of my co-researchers said they value the occasional mental health discussions that take place at Emerson—planned or impromptu—where they can talk openly about life’s challenges. They were generally aware of the absurdity of societal structures and expectations that harm them—in the media, in religious congregations, and at school. As Sofia noted, they long for “things to be different.” They want to be able to talk openly about what can be done.

### ***Focus on Institutional Change***

My conversations with these young people suggest we may be placing the burden of creating healthy, emotionally safe school environments too heavily on students' shoulders. We may also be confusing programs of SEL for mental health support. Note, for example, the prevalence of SEL programs reviewed in Kutcher, Wei, and Weist's (2015a) anthology of global school mental health literature.

Several participants questioned the ability of the skill-building exercises they were learning in *Botvin's Life Skills*—exercises designed to “enhance self-esteem” or “reduce anxiety”—to impact their well-being. Although most of these teens expressed gratitude for time at school spent learning to cope with life's challenges, they doubted the power of external behaviors to assuage their internal pain. Conversations with my co-researchers reminded me that we must be careful to avoid leaving students with the impression that they are responsible to moderate or “fix” their emotional distress based on a skillset they learn at school—or to suggest that, if they can only develop enough resilience or grit they will have the power to eradicate their own depression and anxiety, or suicidal feelings. What a cruel burden to impose on students already struggling with mental illness—the specter of one more failure. We should, instead, work collaboratively with students to examine the societal conditions and structures that are harming them and to fight together for substantive change.

### ***Model an Ideal Society***

Instead of insisting upon the adoption of programs that focus on building externalized skills and behaviors, we should create environments and relationships that allow social



competencies and ethical behaviors to evolve organically as students grow to understand and value themselves and each other. We should critically examine how we, as educators, can model the kind of society we are trying to create—one in which all individuals are recognized, respected, trusted, and cared for. Our focus must be on creating authentically supportive environments in which students are given a means of self-expression, are encouraged to do productive, meaningful work, and are supported as they forge healthy peer and adult bonds.

### *Address the Epidemic of Shame*

More alarming than any other finding of this study was that so many of these teens carry a burden of shame. Some are ashamed of their bodies or their minds, others of their character or failure to thrive. We are encouraged to adopt curricula to teach students to be good to others (an essential characteristic, but I would argue that empathetic relationships develop more authentically in school communities where all students are recognized and respected for who they are). But perhaps what is needed most desperately are programs that focus on helping teens be kinder to themselves. If these young people can come to understand and fight against societal forces and messages that make them believe they are “less-than,” they may find the strength to overcome painful self-loathing and shame.

Schools can design programs and coursework to help students see that they are valued and valuable members of society with abilities they have not yet tapped. Personal transformation is catalyzed by hope, self-love, and love of humanity. We must find ways to constantly affirm the value of each student’s life and identity.

### ***Reimagine the Structure of Schooling***

To accomplish any of these things, we have to wrest time from academic concerns. We have to slow down enough to build foundational relationships and create experiences that make school life worthwhile. We can rethink the structures of schooling that constrain our ability to provide robust support for the emotional welfare and mental health of students. We need to untether our schools from societal expectations and structures that limit what is possible and keep us mired in meaningless, sometimes damaging, rituals and routines.

Most study participants had difficulty imagining school as anything other than what they currently experience. But a few of them understood the possibilities. At the center of a maelstrom, these teens know that the situation is critical. They long for change. The following concrete, practical ideas suggest ways that we can begin, right now, to respond to a crisis that is already full-blown.

### **Expand Our Conceptions of School-Based Mental Health Care**

*Safety • Inclusion • Authentic Connection • Recognition*

In conversations with my co-researchers, most expressed a need for more robust mental health education and support at school. They longed to break the stigma of mental illness and to better understand their own conditions. One thing these teens did *not* ask for, however, was professional therapeutic support at school. Many reported mixed or negative experiences with professional providers and did not see therapy at school as a priority. When asked if they would access clinical help at school, should it become more

accessible, four of them simply said no.

### *Create Integrated Systems of Care*

Traditional school mental health care relies heavily on a standalone model of care, where students are referred to a provider who is largely isolated from school-day activities (Swain-Bradway et al., 2015). Studies show that this traditional model of school mental health is “marked by high levels of dissatisfaction with care by students, families, and school staff” (p. 283). Weist, Kutcher, and Wei, (2015) write that schools often have a monolithic understanding of school mental health care and “continue to engage in reactive, ineffective practices, resulting in no change and consequent failure to document positive outcomes and build policy support” (p. 3). In an anthology of literature on the global response to school mental health needs, Kutcher et al. call on schools to implement a broader range of integrated approaches than have traditionally been considered.

International efforts have focused on the importance of school connectedness (Coniglio et al., 2015), mental health literacy (Bagnell & Santor, 2015; Ojio et al., 2015), mental health assessments and monitoring (Wei et al., 2015), mindfulness practices (Weare, 2015), youth engagement and empowerment (Swain-Bradway et al., 2015), and other approaches. Kutcher et al. recognize that the construct of “mental health” is complex and encompasses multiple dimensions of human experience. References to “mental health” might be addressing mental illness or disorder; “emotional, cognitive, and behavioral difficulties”; or the more “common” and “ubiquitous” distress caused by “environmental challenges” (p. 303). They suggest, therefore, the need to consider multiple facets of school and student life if we are to build the capacity of schools to enhance student well-

being, prevent trauma, inoculate against distress, provide support for mental health challenges, and intervene appropriately when professional help is necessary. Swain-Bradway et al., (2015), direct attention to work currently being done to create effective models of integrated mental healthcare—for example, the Interconnected Systems Framework (ISF). Literature in this area can offer a blueprint for coordinating the efforts of administrators, educators and clinicians.

Most of my co-researchers expressed gratitude for Emerson’s extensive community and relationship-building efforts. At times, these efforts were life-saving. But their narratives revealed a dramatic need for more extensive support. About half said they had not talked directly with any school adult about their difficulties. Some kept the depth of their anxiety or depression hidden from family and friends. They felt isolated and alone in their troubling worlds. Their words make evident the need for broader supports at school.

Emerson administrators and teachers feel the immense weight of responsibility for these young people and are already engaged in ongoing discourse about how to create more effective networks of care. Our challenge is to become informed about the vast array of evidence-based supports that are possible, and also to ensure that student voice has a central place in our conversations. The following insights have emerged from the narratives of the young people in this study.

### ***Integrate Professional Caregivers into School Life***

Emerson was fortunate to have a social work intern at the school last year. She was

exceptionally personable and immersed herself in school life—going to school retreats and after-school events, attending assemblies, and attending classes from time to time. Several study participants reported developing relationships with her and valuing her support. They did not seem to know or care about her professional credentials; they simply liked and trusted her. *Participants made clear that they don't seek support from adults they don't know and trust.* For clinical support to be useful, caregivers must become an integral part of the school community and spend time building relationships. Therapists isolated in remote offices, disconnected from school-day activity, are less likely to be effective (Swain-Bradway, et al., 2015).

### ***Empower Students Through Discourse and Choice***

Several study participants could not identify a school adult they would talk to in a time of crisis. Some expressed the belief that it is not a school's responsibility to be concerned about student mental health care. Our first responsibility is to help students to see that their well-being *must be* a primary concern of schools. Students may feel passionately about societal injustices, but they often do not recognize how they, themselves, are being harmed by institutional or environmental conditions. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1976/2005), Freire offers a cogent analysis of the ways in which individuals remain marginalized because they devalue themselves and stay ignorant of the conditions that oppress them. As we talk with them about their challenges and examine with them institutional policies and practices that impact their lives, we can awaken in students a realization that they should expect and fight for institutional change

(Au., 2011; Freire, 1970/2000; Giroux, 2011; Kincheloe, 2008; Tristan, n.d.).

We can also make school and societal responsibility more evident by providing powerful networks of care—schoolwide mental health screenings and progress monitoring, a website to share community and online resources, school-day and after school mental health workshops and forums, and easy access to school support personnel. It is important to provide multiple avenues of care and to coordinate efforts between teachers, counselors, and administrators (Kutcher et al., 2015; Swain-Bradway et al., 2015). But the literature of critical pedagogy reminds us that students must play a central role in directing their own transformation. We can create openings in coursework and classroom discourse for students to share their experiences, fears, and needs, but we must also be sensitive and allow students to choose only those resources they find helpful. One study participant expressed a need to step away from group mental health discussions, which only make her anxious. But she is grateful for teacher awareness and flexibility that lets her step out of class when she is overwhelmed by anxiety, and that offers her the respect and recognition she longs for.

### ***Actively Fight the Stigma of Mental Illness***

We can help to remove the stigma of mental illness by addressing it more frequently and matter-of-factly, and by integrating holistic supports into the culture of the school. At Emerson, we have envisioned the creation of a student wellness center to provide a wide array of resources and services that appeal to students—both during and after school hours. The center could be directed by a forward-thinking educator or social worker who is willing to coordinate the efforts of both adults and students, and who will

think creatively about how to identify student needs, provide training and support to teachers, and integrate services schoolwide. This center might house academic counselors, professional clinicians, and (if funding allowed) a school nurse. It could also serve as a center for yoga, meditation, and tai chi. It could include a student break room, an indoor garden, and other spaces that appeal to students. It might offer workshops on nutrition, meditation, mindfulness, self-care, or a host of topics that support both physical and mental well-being. The most certain way to ensure that students will find value in such a place is to invite them to help create both the physical space and the programming. A student advisory board could coordinate efforts between students and adults to ensure greater student engagement and a sense of ownership.

### ***Provide Trainings and Forums for Discussion***

Students need networks of caring adults to turn to in times of crisis. Study participants who accessed adult help at school had not always consulted a professional clinician or counselor. They often sought advice or comfort from a favorite teacher, an administrator, a receptionist, a mentor and, in one case, the school facilities manager. School personnel who make themselves available to students in this way can feel an immense weight of responsibility and may find it difficult to know how to respond to student need. Clearly, all school adults need adequate training to know how best to support students in crisis. Like other Utah schools, Emerson has benefitted from online *trauma-informed practice*, *suicide prevention*, and other relevant workshops provided by USBE. We have also offered on-site trainings on techniques such as MANDT—a humane, student-centered de-escalation method—to help teachers with crisis and

behavioral management. It is difficult for already overburdened educators to carve out additional time for these workshops, so they appreciate trainings offered during regularly-scheduled faculty meetings and professional development days.

But the perspective of critical pedagogy underscores the need for educators to be trusted as the public intellectuals that they are (Giroux, 2011). It is essential that administrators create ample opportunity for teachers to discuss evidence-based practices, considering the perspectives and needs of the students they serve. They can then devise—through discourse and innovation—unique systems of care. While evidence-based programs and trainings can be useful as a starting point, they must be carefully critiqued and tailored to local needs.

### ***Include Personally Transformative Work in Curricula***

Study participants expressed a need for forums in which to talk openly and authentically about life's challenges. They are aware of the absurdity of societal expectations at times—both in the media and at school—and want to talk about what can be done. They may not feel confident or safe enough to impose themselves on the world, but they long to be seen and heard.

Noddings (1992/2005) observed that students are often the *object* of their own education—acted upon by the demands of the system. Instead, she argues, they should be the *subject* of their educational experiences, acting for themselves and others. She argues that impassioned concern for others is possible only when individuals are highly self-aware. Too often, she writes, “schools focus on teaching *inert* knowledge rather than



more powerful *self-knowledge*” She continues: “[Students] don’t get to ask the existential questions that might make a difference in their own lives and those of humankind in general” (p.118).

As I listened to my co-researchers demean and blame *themselves* for their troubles, I thought often of the need for students to engage in informed, critical analysis of the societal conditions that are contributing to their depression, anxiety, and suicidality. Elizabeth’s senior project centered on the mental health of her peers and was transformative for her. Using student interest and need as a springboard, educators and administrators can infuse academic classes and electives with content designed to help students live healthier, more meaningful lives.

We can work collaboratively with students to better understand their most pressing concerns and needs, and then incorporate mental health information and support into existing core curriculum. We can also create novel classes and workshops around mental health topics teens urgently want to explore. Emerson offered many such opportunities over the years.

- In social studies, literature, and science classes, teachers encouraged students to research mental health topics of interest. Some studied eating disorders or self-harm behaviors. Some explored links between social media and body image. A transgender student wrote an extensive research paper on the history of gender expression in the United States.
- A human biology class included a unit in which students explored the effects of too little sleep and too much stress on physical, mental and emotional well-being.
- A counselor offered a weekly *Cooking for Life* workshop with a focus on helping students cook and eat for better mental and physical health.
- Emerson offers an array of yoga and meditation classes. One participant said that she schedules the same morning yoga class each semester—it helps her

cope with the stresses of life.

- A social studies teacher offered a wildly popular *Gender Studies* class attuned to the needs of Emerson's growing LBGTQ population and of their peers' desire to support their friends.
- Teachers invited mental health professionals into classrooms and school forums to address pressing concerns.

If we commit to listening to students and recognizing their urgent needs, the possibilities are endless.

### ***Be Attuned to the Darker Consequences of Mental Illness***

In an age of school shootings, school districts beef up security systems, hold active shooter drills and, in some Utah schools, train teachers to handle a firearm should a shooter enter the school. We should be focusing just as urgently on ensuring the emotional safety of students. For every child lost to a school shooting, countless others suffer invisible injuries inflicted by cruelty, invisibility, exclusion, or marginalization. Some young people disengage from school life altogether and slink into incredibly dark places.

Although the field of research on school shootings is still developing, statistics from a 2004 U.S. Department of Education report show that the “most lethal violence in recent decades has been committed by current and former students,” that 75% of perpetrators were bullied or harassed at school, and that half of these perpetrators suffered from severe depression and suicidality (Chaterjee, 2019). In an interview with National Public Radio (NPR), psychologist John Van Dreal asserted that these perpetrators “felt excluded, socially left-out or rejected.”

Marginalized kids don't have anchors at school. They don't have any adult connection—no one watching out for them. Or no one knows who they are anymore.... People who do these kinds of targeted attacks don't feel very good about themselves, or where they're headed in their lives.... They may wish someone would kill them. Or they may wish they could kill themselves. (reported in Chaterjee, 2019, para 22-24)

A 2-year U.S. Justice Department study learned that the two greatest predictors of future violence for 12- to 14-year-olds are “a lack of social ties” and “involvement with antisocial peers” (Hawkins et al., 2000). In a *Threat Assessment Guide* (Fein et al., 2002) created by the U.S. Secret Service in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Education, researchers concluded that safe educational settings are spaces where adults and students “respect each other” and students have “a positive connection to at least one adult in authority.” In such environments, they write, adults and students will be able to openly share concerns and fears, “students develop the capacity to talk and openly share their concerns without fear of shame and reprisal. They try to help friends and fellow students who are in distress, bringing serious concerns to the attention of adults.” They continue:

Ideally when this climate of safety is created, students experience a sense of emotional “fit” and of respect. Problems are raised and addressed before they become serious. As a result, the potential for school violence diminishes. When a member of the school community shows personal pain that might lead them to harm themselves or others, someone is available. Young people can find an adult to trust with this information, so that it does not remain “secret” until it is too late (Fein et al., 2002, p. 6).

Dylan Klebold, one of two Columbine shooters, provides a tragic example of a child for whom things could have been different. Identified as “gifted” as a child, Dylan lost interest in school and became increasingly isolated and sullen. He latched onto the friendship of another angry young man, Eric Harris. Together the boys developed an

unhealthy relationship with macabre and violent websites. They learned to make pipe bombs and began to plot revenge on their school, a place that felt unfulfilling and unwelcoming to them. The boys provided plenty of warnings about their violent tendencies and what they were planning—malicious school essays, online posts, and warnings to peers. Yet nobody took the time to notice or intercede (Cullen, 2010; Margaritoff, 2019).

The *Threat Assessment Guide* (Fein, 2002) clarifies an important fact—individuals who are depressed and anxious are rarely violent or vengeful. Indeed, the young people in this study were exceptionally gentle and gracious. However, one participant talked openly about the vengeful and “murderous” impulses she struggled with when she was in the depths of her worst depression—feelings over which she felt she had little control. It is critical that we learn about the inner lives of our students—especially when they exhibit antisocial or self-isolating behaviors. Our wise, loving intervention may prevent a child from doing irrevocable harm to themselves or others.

It would be reprehensible to place blame on educators for what happened in tragic incidents such as those at Columbine, Parkland, and Sandy Hook, but it would be irresponsible for us to ignore what we have learned. We have to watch for warning signs, intervene with empathy and love, and do our best to help every hurting child find the help they need. We need to have endless faith in students, but we also need to have our finger on the pulse of school life in order to protect all of our students from harm.

The following literature informs school mental health practice and provides greater insight into the pressing mental health needs of this generation.

- Herman (1992/2015), *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*.
- Kull et al. (2019), *Supporting Safe and Healthy Schools for Gabe, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Students*.
- Kutcher et al. (2015b), *School Mental Health: Global Challenges and Opportunities*;
- Twenge (2017), *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood*.

### **Build Authentic Relationships and Strong Community**

*Inclusion • Recognition • Authentic Connection • Transformation*

Ten years ago, a student created a piece of art for me that I treasure and have on prominent display in my office. The watercolor's setting is tranquil—a calm ocean, setting sun, sandy beach in the distance, and rolling hills in the foreground. A VW bus bounces along a dusty road filled with Emerson students and teachers—with me at the wheel. A swirl of psychedelic colors flows up from an open window near the back of the bus and fills the sky with a kaleidoscope of green, blue, purple and rose. I especially love this painting because it captures the spirit of Emerson. We are like a community going somewhere together, driving a bit haphazardly, perhaps, but with passion and purpose.

I often ponder how we managed to create such a genuinely strong sense of community in those early days. I suspect that some of our connectedness developed naturally as students and teachers helped to build and shape an entirely new school. Students and their families tore up old carpet, laid tile, painted walls, assembled furniture, built a deck and a yurt. Families cleaned our musty, old building on a rotating schedule

and gathered for spaghetti fundraisers to support school expeditions. Students shaped the intellectual and social life of the school by helping to plan events and create student-centered workshops and learning activities. Our students' social, emotional, and academic lives seemed to thrive on the authentic, supportive relationships we forged at school. This assumption is well-supported by research showing that school connectedness enhances the academic, social, and emotional welfare of students (Aldridge & McChesney, 2018; Coniglio et al., 2015; Millings et al., 2012).

Emerson teachers and administrators remain fiercely dedicated to community-building, although the strategies they now use are decidedly more purposeful, measured and informed. But through nearly two decades, the voices of students (including those in this study) make clear which elements of Emerson's community-building programs are most vital to their well-being. The following suggestions are derived from their insights.

### ***Invite the Natural World into Programs and Curricula***

I recognize that many of the nature-based programs we adopted at Emerson—backpacking treks, mountain retreats, desert hiking, travel—may be difficult for other schools to implement. But these efforts were central to building the school's strong sense of community. Time spent together in awe-inspiring landscapes—supporting each other through difficult challenges—creates unbreakable bonds. Nearly all of my co-researchers mentioned how valuable an Emerson expedition or retreat had been to their mental health. Schools can at least try to imagine such possibilities and implement ideas on a scale that works for their situation.

When travel is not possible, teachers can take students out-of-doors for lessons or bring nature into the classroom. To the delight of her students, one Emerson biology teacher carries a sugar glider (a tiny squirrel-like marsupial) with her in a pouch during the day and keeps four personable geckos in her classroom. Emerson has a greenhouse, a chicken coop, an edible garden and a hydroponics system—all used for science classes and after school clubs. Every school can imagine unique ways to adopt nature-based education.

### ***Plan Full-School Community-Building Activities***

The Emerson community shares time together at annual events such as a fall picnic, a spring swim party, and a schoolwide Earth Day clean-up. Students look forward to annual traditions such as an ice cream social in the fall and a Sundance film screening and pizza party each winter. Schoolwide gatherings are often light-hearted, such as a *Campfire, Ghost Tales and S'mores* night, or the annual *Velcro-your-teacher-to-the-wall* event (when students gleefully attach several willing teachers to a wall in the commons using large bands of Velcro). But other activities are more reflective and purposeful. Emerson begins each academic year with a “launch week,” a time when the community gathers get to know one another, discuss shared summer reading, plan collaborative strategies for fulfilling Emerson’s mission and vision, and celebrate the promise of interesting and exciting days to come. This community-building process is invented anew each year, drawing from and reinterpreting experiences of the past. This year during launch week, students and teachers were invited to fill a suggestion box with ideas for

how they might show appreciation for each other that day—armed only with creative energy, post-it notes, art supplies, and the natural world outside. An art teacher jumbled the slips of paper, screened for inappropriate suggestions, then distributed the ideas randomly. By the end of the day everyone in the school community was the recipient of some kindness. Emerson’s principal went home with a personal note and a bunch of tiny paper flowers tied together with string. Students and teachers received cups of hot cocoa, poems, artwork, and other tokens of appreciation. Time spent working on the project was full of laughter and the generous, enthusiastic participation of everyone involved.

### *Engage in Schoolwide Service*

Critical pedagogy suggests that a strong sense of community and collective purpose emerges when we act for the welfare of others (Apple & Beane, 2007; Freire, 1995; Giroux, 2011; Noddings, 1992/2005). Apple and Beane write that a vital purpose of schooling is to reinforce the democratic ideals that define our nation—ideals such as “concern for the welfare of individuals and the common good” (p. 7). They underscore the essential need for students to have faith in their “individual and collective capacity” to envision change and solve problems” (p. 7). A desire for societal transformation is a powerful catalyst for projects that draw school communities together. Planning, executing, and celebrating service work with each other builds a common sense of purpose and meaning in young lives.

At Emerson, service is an essential element of the curriculum. Every student is asked to engage in an 18-month service project during their junior and senior years. One senior chose to visit the children’s cancer ward at Primary Children’s Hospital weekly, to



talk and play with hospital-bound children. She enlisted others to help her make toys and blankets for these children whom she grew to love and sometimes lost. Another student spent extended time with an undocumented family from Mexico whose father had been deported. She created a moving photo essay book about the family's challenging, loving, and hopeful day-to-day life. With this book, she inspired a schoolwide effort to supply the family with food and clothing they desperately needed. Many of these projects have had profound effects on students' lives.

Like many schools, Emerson engages in service throughout the year. Students and teachers work collaboratively to plan and carry out multiple worthwhile projects. Groups have gathered supplies for homeless and refugee centers, created care packages during natural disasters, and provided Christmas to hundreds of struggling families. One group of students spent extended time at an Alzheimer's unit at a local care center playing games, painting fingernails, and singing with delighted residents. Another group supported a local Catholic church in a low-income neighborhood—helping to clean and decorate its facility during the holidays. At times, projects are initiated by school adults, but most are driven by student interest and passion with teachers serving primarily as facilitators. Students are encouraged to engage with the projects that are most meaningful to them.

***Encourage Peer to Peer Support Initiatives  
(with caution)***

At Herriman High School, in the wake of seven devastating suicides, a group of students started an inclusivity organization—the *Golden Gate Club*. Students swept the hallways

at lunchtime and between classes to watch for peers who were alone—“reaching out to other kids that need—that feel alone,” explained one student (Lovett, 2019). At Emerson, students launched a similar campaign to recognize each other for their strengths and contributions to the community. They spent weeks writing anonymous notes of appreciation to every student and teacher in the school community—leaving them on desks, notebooks, and computers. I remember how delighted I was when I received one of these notes on a particularly difficult day.

But we cannot depend upon the efforts of a few students in after-school clubs to provide the fundamental change that is needed to ensure that all students feel recognized and supported. In fact, well-meaning adolescents can potentially misrecognize and embarrass peers if they approach relationship-building as a service project or position themselves as saviors. Students need the guidance of wise adults to understand the deeper societal forces and conditions that place their peers at risk. They must learn to support each other authentically, with sensitivity. We can model kindness and help awaken it, but both youth and adults must forge genuine bonds—especially with students who have experienced the pain of exclusion. This takes more time than an hour or two during lunch or after school. It needs attention that should be built into school policies, programs, and curricula.

The following resources offer theoretical foundations and practical ideas for developing powerful school community.

- Apple & Beane (2007). *Democratic School: Lessons in Powerful Education*.
- hooks (1994), *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of*

*Freedom.*

- Nyden, Figert, Shibley & Burrows (1997), *Building Community: Social Sciences in Action*.
- Noddings (2005), *The Challenge to Care in School: An Alternative Approach to Education*.
- Sobel (2013) *Place-Based Education: Connecting Classrooms and Communities*.

### **Plan Socially and Personally Transformative Coursework**

*Recognition • Empowerment • Transforming Purpose*

Some of the teens I spoke with seemed to experience school as something to “get through” so that they can finally begin life. They perceived that school was serving no real purpose other than as preparation for post-secondary education and careers. They felt adrift, searching for something to cling to that might carry them through the turbulent waters of adolescence and into what they saw as the calmer waters of adulthood. Some worried that they might not hang on that long. These young people were not always articulate in expressing a need for more meaningful work at school, but their narratives revealed a desire to dispense with mind-numbing, rote assignments that held little interest. They longed to do more valuable things with their time.

The rapidly changing circumstances and social environments of the 21<sup>st</sup> century deliver hollow media messages, social isolation, and an increasingly polarized world to our teens. It is logical that they often feel disoriented and anxious (Alter, 2017; Giroux, 2012; Twenge, 2017). Giroux writes of an era of “disposable youth,” wherein the economic and social realities of life give some teens little hope for a bright future. He

laments a culture of “punishment and neglect,” where youth are immersed in the “socially strangulating neoliberal values of hyper-individualism, self-interest, and consumerism” (pp. 92-93). For those who feel “expendable, redundant, and invisible,” he writes, “life becomes increasingly precarious” (p. 90).

Some adolescents may struggle with debilitating depression, anxiety, and suicidality because they have little sense of purpose or feel powerless to control their lives. Au (2012) argues the need for a *critical* curriculum in schools to help students, more fully understand and affect the world in which they live. “What we know about the world,” he writes, “has a profound impact on how we both view and act within the world (p. 11).” We can help students develop what Freire (1974) calls a *critical consciousness*—the sense that they can and must intervene in their own lives and in world events if they hope to create change. By implementing meaningful, intentional coursework and inviting discourse, educators can empower students to change their own circumstances and, perhaps, the course of history. The following are a few examples of critically aware, socially engaged coursework and opportunities that Emerson teachers have offered in recent years.

- During a study of economic disparity in a world civilizations class, a teacher challenged students live on the average daily income of the South American country they were currently studying. For a week, students limited themselves (and sometimes their families) to eating food and consuming products that cost no more than two dollars a day.
- In a sociology class, students were asked to disconnect from all electronic media—cell phone, television, computers—for an entire week. Within the context of a sociological experiment, most students rose to the challenge. They were excited to report what they learned about themselves and to discuss how they might live differently in the future as a result.
- Emerson administrators and educators often invite panels or guest speakers to

engage with students about current issues. Recently, a *Black Lives Matter* activist spoke to students—stirring controversy and passionate discussion for months afterward and creating a space for the school’s Black students to express painful emotions they had repressed for years.

- In a U.S. History class, a teacher assembled a panel of Vietnam War veterans to talk with students about their harrowing experiences. The students subsequently created a documentary film about these men.
- Some years ago, activist and founder of *Peaceful Uprising*, Tim DeChristopher, came to speak to Emerson students. DeChristopher was preparing to spend nearly 2 years in federal prison for bidding fraudulently at a land auction in Southern Utah in a desperate effort to protect the Southern Utah landscape he loved. He spoke of a troubling justice system that had not allowed him to present evidence showing he had raised funds and offered an initial payment for the land. He spoke of the costs of civil disobedience. Students sat rapt and asked passionate questions for nearly an hour afterward.
- Students often engage in field experiences and authentic research. A sociology class that had been discussing the socio-economic implications of our criminal justice system, visited prisoners at the Utah State Prison and spoke with inmates. This was not a “scared straight” experience, but a genuine conversation. This same class attended a forum at a local university to listen to a man who had been falsely accused of murder—largely because of racial profiling. After serving 20 years in prison, he had been released on DNA evidence.
- Students engage in work to benefit their school community. For a “Roots and Shoots” ecology and plant science workshop, students planted and nurtured flowers and vegetables which they later transplanted to a school garden. A biology class used some of these plants to experiment with grow lights and fertilizers in order to compare plant growth rates under various conditions.
- Emerson often makes time for students to engage with public intellectuals. Administrators learned, at the last moment, that a prominent NYU environmental scientist, Tyler Volk, author of *CO2 Rising* (2008), was speaking at a local university. They quickly arranged for interested students to leave class for the morning to attend his lecture. These teens gathered around Volk at the end of the lecture and asked compelling questions long after the college students were gone.
- In the aftermath of Greta Thunberg’s impassioned climate change address to the United Nations (Fink, 2019) and the subsequent international student walkouts, teachers processed these experiences with students. They explored the vastly different political and personal responses students had to the young activist and discussed how students were feeling about protecting the world they will inherit.

Experiences such as these happen at every school. We cannot underestimate the power of such transformative experiences to enhance student well-being. We must create opportunities for students to do meaningful work and live consequential lives right now. What students experience at school, Au (2012) reminds us, is not only the curricula of school, “but also the curriculum of their lives” (p. 11). If we hope to help the next generation of artists, tradesmen, inventors, teachers, scientists, and public intellectuals emerge from the veil of darkness drawn by mental illness, we must help them discover that the world is a flawed but promising place worth exploring and fighting to change. We should plan intentionally for activities that bring greater purpose and meaning to young lives and help students to know that their role in society is vital and their lives are worth living. The following literature provides a theoretical foundation for the critical importance of transformative work to the well-being of individuals.

- Au (2012), *Critical Curriculum Studies: Education, Consciousness, and the Politics of Knowing*.
- Apple & Beane (2007), *Democratic Schools: Lessons in Powerful Education*.
- Camicia (2016), *Critical Democratic Education and LGBTQ-Inclusive Curriculum: Opportunities and Constraints*.
- Freire (1974/2013), *Education for Critical Consciousness*.
- Giroux (2011), *On Critical Pedagogy*.

### **Rethink the Structure of Schooling**

*Safety • Inclusion • Empowerment • Transforming Purpose*

Critical thought and pedagogy demand that we rethink entrenched systems of schooling that were first structured to serve the needs of a newly-industrialized society.

These antiquated systems have evolved to support capitalist values that place the needs of institutions over individuals (Au, 2012; Bowles & Gintis, 1976/2011, 2016; Sacks, 1999). Bowles and Gintis (1976/2011) argue that educators are unwitting players in a system that actively perpetuates unequal structures of society. They write:

Schools foster legitimate inequality through the ostensibly meritocratic manner by which they reward and promote students, and allocate them to distinct positions in the occupational hierarchy. They create and reinforce patterns of social class, racial and sexual identifications among students which allow them to relate “properly” to their eventual standing in the hierarchy of authority and status in the production process. (p. 11)

This concern may at first seem to have little to do with student mental health, yet to my mind it is central. Some of my co-researchers spoke passionately about the challenges they have faced as those who are, in Gabriel’s words, society’s “rejects” and “misfits.” They had been marginalized or harmed because of their gender or cultural identities, or had suffered economic hardship. These challenges had directly impacted their ability to achieve academically. Their narratives make clear that they need a level of support at school that does not always exist. For some, college prospects and futures are limited because of their mental health struggles. They are being relegated to lesser roles because of their challenges and they feel this injustice keenly.

Many creative, passionate educators are tilting at the windmill of school reform. But too many conversations are focused on digital learning, early college, and other opportunities that may not be the best fit for some students. Too much focus is being trained on academic rigor and acceleration and too little on holistic well-being. School reform efforts should take into consideration the needs of all students—not only those of an elite few who have the luxury to focus solely on academic work. Some of the students

I talked with had faced life circumstances that made schoolwork a secondary concern—although all of them wanted desperately to succeed. Innovative programs being promoted by Utah policymakers *may* help us to create school structures that are more supportive of student well-being—but not necessarily. We have to think critically about how each new educational policy initiative might impact the well-being and future of *all* students—especially those who are most vulnerable.

Schools provide a critical societal need: they offer, ideally, a safe, caring environment where children learn while their parent(s) work. Large swaths of society—especially families who struggle with economic uncertainty—rely on schools to provide both the promise of a better future and a place where their children can thrive while they are away. Since the economic realities of society require children to be separated from their families for much of each day, we are responsible to ensure that our reform efforts focus on the whole child. We must adjust the structures and rituals of schooling in ways that benefit all students. My co-researchers touched on several of their most pressing needs in this regard.

### ***Reduce Academic Pressures***

Study participants expressed often and eloquently their longing to spend more time immersed in authentic learning without the constant, looming threat of deadlines and grades. An intense focus on high-stakes testing and college readiness has made some of them feel as though their worth at school is determined by their academic performance. Several mentioned how much worse their depression becomes when school is in session. This fact deserves our full attention.



These young people value the rare chance to take charge of their own learning and work at a more leisurely pace. They expressed a need to take breaks, socialize and decompress during the day. As educators, we can make school days more sustainable. We can leave more time for spontaneous and authentic moments of curiosity, discovery, and joy, and be willing to interrupt academic activity for a rainstorm or an owl at the top of a tree who needs retrieving (accounts in Chapter 6). Just as adults need to step away from the demands of work at times, grab a snack, chat with colleagues, stretch our legs, destress, and regain focus, we can build school days around a more humane movement of intellect and spirit.

### ***Provide Greater Academic Support***

My co-researchers overwhelmingly expressed a need for more robust academic support but were often reticent to ask for help. Some wished that they could work at a slower pace or be granted a reprieve from schoolwork when mental health difficulties overwhelmed them. Some reported that any level of academic stress provoked unbearable anxiety. These students need and deserve extra support and understanding as they learn how to manage their mental health challenges and balance self-care with academic achievement.

It is an impossible dilemma—one that Emerson administrators and teachers have puzzled over for years. How can we provide a protective environment if we are also introducing an unhealthy level of stress (for some students)? How can we ensure emotional safety and well-being if every program is laser-focused on academic performance and college readiness? How can we offer the healing salve of recognition

and respect when respect is primarily reserved for traditionally-achieving students and rarely meted out for the less-visible accomplishments and gifts each child offers? How can we know when students are suffering from academic anxiety in silence? These are questions we have to begin asking with urgency and open hearts. Who better to consult than the students themselves?

### ***Consider Alternative Assessments***

My co-researchers expressed gratitude for times when they were allowed to demonstrate knowledge or mastery in personal, creative ways. They enjoyed portfolio work, self-reflection journals and self-assessment. Although we cannot change entrenched systems of schooling overnight, we can begin to envision more holistic, meaningful ways for students to participate in their own assessment. We can invite students to track mastery of concepts and competencies on individual timetables (rather than insisting that all students work in lock-step). We can invite students to celebrate their work in student-led teacher and parent conferences and let *them* envision new ways to demonstrate progress.

At Emerson teachers aim to be flexible and creative at times about how they assess student learning. A math teacher invited students to demonstrate understanding of the quadratic equations in any fashion that made sense to them. Piper, who generally struggles with math, wrote a quadratic equation song that she claims has embedded this concept in her memory forever. Knowing that many of the students in his class possessed artistic skills, a physics teacher challenged students to produce a creative essay or poem, or to create artwork to illustrate their understanding of particle physics. This same teacher

assessed student understanding of the laws of motion by letting them build trebuchets and launch watermelons on the school playing field. In my experience, students value creative, self-directed opportunities to demonstrate learning. Those who prefer more traditional assessments can be given that choice.

Some study participants reported feeling stressed by academic expectations and disconnected from much of the work they are asked to do at school. And yet most were not averse to hard work. In fact, participants who expressed the greatest distress over school expectations—Piper, Matthew, Kate, Antonia, and Jazmin—all impose impossibly high standards on themselves and engage in a dizzying array of extracurricular activities—theater, dance, music, athletics, internships, activism, and part-time jobs. These students long to be recognized for their strengths and accomplishments outside of traditional schooling. They wish that their creative endeavors could be valued equally to the academic schoolwork they do.

Almost universally, my co-researchers were troubled by the grades and transcripts that reduce their achievements to a set of symbols or figures. Half of the students I interviewed are, by traditional measures, “high-achieving” students. Yet most worried obsessively about GPAs and transcripts—a source of ongoing anxiety and depression. We have to be willing to critically examine assessment practices used in our schools to be certain that our chosen methods are not meaningless or even damaging. Much has been written about the ways in which traditional assessment undermines intrinsic motivation to learn and perpetuates systems of sorting and ranking that harm students (Au, 2009; Kohn, 2018; Sacks, 1999). We have to consider that grades might primarily be measuring how

efficiently a student is able to fit into a system we have created within the parameters we have devised—a system intended to help us sort students into groups of those who will continue upward and those who will forever be left behind.

Some schools successfully dispense with grades. In Montessori schools, learning is not a “race against the clock or against others (Irinzi, 2008). Students attend multi-aged classrooms and are encouraged to progress independent of their peers. They are not asked to reach a predetermined set of benchmarks by the end of each school year—an expectation so entrenched in U.S. schools that anything else seems unthinkable. This rigid adherence to grading is nonsensical. It is a taken-for-granted requirement of public schooling that we should examine carefully and question critically. This study is not meant to solve the problems of student assessment. But my co-researchers’ concerns suggest to me that it is high time to rethink entrenched systems of measurement. Since public schooling is meant to teach students to examine carefully and question critically, must we not, as educators, dedicate ourselves to doing the same?

In Emerson’s early days, we chose not to award grades, a decision that delighted some students and baffled others. Instead, we used rubrics, invited self-assessment, and wrote narrative reports to track progress (an onerous, but rewarding process). Eventually, we gave up on this more authentic process of assessment—after too many phone calls from colleges asking us to translate narrative records into letter grades. The system could not tolerate our different approach. Emerson continues, however, to weave non-graded work into programs where possible. It is interesting to note that several study participants who expressed feeling overwhelmed by the demands of their core academic work

reported finding refuge and joy working on senior projects—a graduation requirement without any attached grade or credit. Over the years, some of the best work (and, admittedly, worst) that students have produced at Emerson has been for these personal, creative ventures.

***A Final Note on Assessment—Social Emotional Learning Considerations***

As I browsed recent journal articles on Social Emotional Learning (SEL), I became alarmed to learn about a developing trend—the tracking, on school report cards, of students’ social and emotional skills. In fact, ULEAD, USBE’s new research arm, recently published a position paper that calls for the testing and measurement of students’ SEL skills in Utah Schools (Hanover Research, 2019). Among its recommendations: Educators should measure elusive human attributes such as “curiosity, gratitude, grit, optimism, self-control, social intelligence, and zest” using “anecdotal records, narrative reports, behavior frequency counts, and checklists.” (Hanover Research, 2019, p. 19).

While I understand the need to know if programs are accomplishing what we imagine, it is unthinkable that one more aspect of student life should be weighed and measured. Educators are rarely qualified to assess a child’s intention or internal emotional state based on external behaviors. While it may be useful to assess the social and cultural environment of a classroom or school community, we must be wary of systems of assessment that lay responsibility for alleviating personal stress and sorrow, or for controlling the social health of a school environment, at the feet of the students themselves. We certainly should not rate or grade a child’s frame of mind. No one’s soul

should be dissected to fill another spreadsheet.

### ***Experiment with Creative Scheduling***

Most of the young people in this study were unable to suggest structural changes to the school day that might better support their well-being. They did not question taken-for-granted traditions of schooling—discrete subjects, uniform class periods, standardized curriculum and testing—although they clearly expressed frustration over homework and grading practices. While I recognize that deep structural changes to the school day must be supported in state and national policy (a matter I address in *Implications for Educational Policymakers* later in this chapter), I also know that individual schools have the power to envision and implement meaningful changes.

In an effort to address student need and interest, Emerson has experimented with perhaps too many inventive schedules. We built one schedule that included both short and long blocks of class time—to allow for integrated subjects and project work. We continue to set aside a two-week block of time in early spring when regular classes are suspended and students engage in specialized classes, forums, and field experiences that they help create (and occasionally teach). To accommodate the diverse needs of families and students, we once tried to implement a split-day schedule, where students could choose to begin school early or start later. After gathering student and teacher feedback, we gave up on this particular experiment because students expressed a desire to be together during the day. Some innovations we tried were too difficult to sustain, given the prescriptive requirements of our early-college program and increasingly standardized systems of state oversight and reporting. But many have been immensely rewarding. I

encourage all schools to look at their scheduling and ask how they can open and improve things, to build in creative rhythms that better serve the needs of all students.

### *Summary*

We must rethink school practices that harm students. We must devise more encouraging, supportive systems of instruction and assessment suited to the sensibilities and needs of young people. Few of my co-researchers offered suggestions for how to achieve such goals, but nearly all recognized the need for change. I am confident, however, that if we give students and educators the opportunity to engage in serious discussion—and if we help them understand the societal constraints and expectations that make change problematic—they will excitedly take up the banner and help research alternate systems of schooling around the world. They will plot, with enthusiasm, how to circumvent societal norms and expectations (teenagers are good at that) in order to create innovative academic programs that more effectively meet their needs. Brainstorms require, and truly benefit from, many brains.

Bold, brave, progressive movements in schooling are all around us. The following resources celebrate a few of them. Some offer a deep critique of institutional practices that harm students. Some provide patterns for creating transformative, student-centered schools.

- Apple & Beane (2007), *Democratic Schools: Lessons in Powerful Education*;
- Au (2009) *Unequal by Design: High Stakes Testing and the Standardization of Inequality*;
- Au (2012), *Critical Curriculum Studies: Education, Consciousness,*

*and the Politics of Knowing;*

- Cushman (2010) *Fires in the Mind;*
- Giroux (2011) *On Critical Pedagogy;*
- Greene (1988) *The Dialectic of Freedom;*
- Holt (1970/1995), *What Do I Do Monday?;*
- Kohn (1993/2018) *Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, and Other Bribes;*
- Littky (2004) *The Big Picture: Education is Everyone's Business;*
- Sacks (1999) *Standardized Minds;*
- Sobel (2013) *Place-Based Education: Connecting Classrooms and Communities;*
- Wood (1992), *Schools That Work*

### **Embrace an Ethic of Love and Care**

*Authentic Connection • Recognition • Inclusion • Transforming Purpose*

Perhaps the most enigmatic element of critical pedagogy is its insistence on the presence of *love* in education. Although Freire relied on dialogue and *conscientization* (an understanding of the world) as his most essential pedagogical tools, he acknowledged that neither can exist in a landscape void of love (Douglas & Nganga, 2017). Darder (2017) wrote that for Freire, it was unthinkable to teach without love as a guiding force.

She writes:

In Freire's eyes, to attempt daily engagement with the societal forces that dehumanize and undermine our existence, without the power of love on our side, was like walking lost sojourners in a vast desert, with insufficient water to complete the crossing. (p. 95)

Douglas and Nganga (2017) conceptualize Freire's *radical* conception of love as



a transformative and emancipatory political act of courage that requires teachers to relinquish their position of power and establish relationships with students founded on mutual trust, faith, and hope. Such love, they write, requires us to “take risks for the benefit of those we teach and ourselves” (p. 522). This may be a school’s most elusive challenge. How can we create a community of genuinely caring teachers who are willing to engage authentically with students and take risks on their behalf?

At Emerson, we have learned that the capacity to love is difficult to influence—although we do screen carefully for this attribute as we choose teachers to join our community. Despite our efforts, we sometimes we get it wrong. When that happens, the best we can do is offer an abundance of love and acceptance to individuals who seem less capable of affection. While we cannot train educators to love adolescents, we can teach the skills of radical love—the incorporation of classroom activities that foster inclusion, recognition and connection; the creation of safe, third spaces; the crafting of meaningful, substantive conversations with students. We can model discourse that extends to individual’s genuine interest and attention, free of sarcasm, ego, or judgement. Finally, we can inspire love by sharing the wisdom and humanity found in the literature of critical pedagogy—in the words and works of moral, ethical thinkers such as Darder (2017), Fernandes (2003), Freire (1995), and Noddings (1992/2005), who understand the transformative power of love.

The capacity for love may be difficult to influence, but we must try. If we cannot feel an abundance of love for our students, every effort at teaching them to care for themselves and each other will be meaningless. Love is foundational. When Elizabeth

recounted the essential role that loving teachers played in her healing process, she underscored the primary need for each hurting teen to feel connected and loved at school. “It seems almost inhumane to have someone not have any connection at all,” she said. “It’s crazy to think about.”

Many have written eloquently about the power of love to transform students’ lives. I have found the following works to be especially inspiring.

- Darder (2017) *Pedagogy of Love: Embodying our Humanity*.
- Fernandes (2003) *Transforming Feminist Practice: Non-Violence, Social Justice and the Possibilities of a Spiritualized Feminism*.
- Freire (1983/1995) *Pedagogy of Hope*.
- Noddings (1992/2005) *The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education*
- Palmer (1983/1993) *To Know as We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey*.

No guidebook or training can solve the problems of adolescent mental illness in Utah. No skill-building curriculum exists that can magically erase past wounds or heal emotional pain. Mental health protections must be robust and holistic—infused into every aspect of school and classroom life. Of course, we should avail ourselves of research and training to better understand adolescent needs. We should provide the fullest level of professional therapeutic intervention and support our budgets can absorb. Every teacher and school leader should be trained to recognize students who are in crisis and how to offer them help. But these supports alone are not enough to stem the tide of depression, anxiety and suicidality sweeping through the lives of our children. My hope is that we will turn to our students and to the literature of critical pedagogy for a deeper understanding of what can deliver real transformation as we envision better schools for our children.

### **Implications for Educational Leaders and Policymakers**

This study explores the experiences and insights of 14 Utah teens—filtered through the theoretical lens of critical thought and pedagogy. Critical study asks us to look beyond the *epistemological horizon* (Butler, 2005) where the limits of reason can constrain our vision so that we fail to see changes we must make to create a better society. Foucault (as cited in Mason & Clarke, 2010) observed that critique is our best means of “exposing the limits of reason” (p. 176)—of examining our routine assumptions about the societal systems and institutions we live within and influence. This critical ethnographic study invites us to look beyond the epistemological horizon, to question the structures of public schooling that could be harming students, and to envision new ways of effecting change.

The final pages of this study are directed toward Utah’s educational leaders and legislators—with recognition of and appreciation for the earnest efforts they are making to safeguard the mental health of Utah’s youth. These pages are a modest attempt at synthesizing and sharing some of what I have learned from the intelligent, generous teens who informed this study, and from my own experience serving as an educator and administrator in Utah. I am overwhelmed by the task of trying to sum, in a few short pages, the total of what I have learned. I still know too little about the needs of Utah adolescents and of what schools can do to help them be well and whole. In one sense, my “findings” cannot be wholly communicated in any number of pages—understanding is a never-ending project. In another sense, they can be written in a single sentence: *If Utah’s*

*educational leaders and lawmakers truly want to help alleviate adolescent suffering, they must make teens partners in their quest to understand adolescent need.*

Insights shared by these young people suggest their needs are both complex and profoundly simple. They long to be seen by us, heard by us, understood by us, respected by us, and loved by us. They long for meaning in school life and a chance to do transformative work. As we continue to search for ways to stem Utah’s mental health crisis, we cannot forget to address these most basic human desires.

What follows is a synthesis of this study’s findings most relevant to Utah’s educational leaders and policymakers—those who are most able to influence systemic change in Utah schools. For clarity, I have organized my thoughts into eight broad suggestions: *Help Schools to Create Broader Networks of Mental Health Support; Allocate Resources Liberally and Wisely; Rethink School Structures That May Be Harming Students; Eliminate Academic Ranking & Rating; Understand the Differences Between SEL and Mental Health Care; Restructure Teacher Education Programs; Refocus the Purposes of Education; and finally, Return Autonomy and Trust to Schools.*

### **Help Schools to Create Broader Networks of Support**

This study emphasizes that teen anxiety, depression and suicidality are indicative of a complex network of failing societal structures—economic insecurity, isolation, cultural bias, childhood trauma, social media influence, negative self-perception, academic stress, and other conditions of adolescent life we do not fully understand. We have to first acknowledge that schools—the place where youth spend much of each

day—must play a vital role in nurturing and protecting the well-being of students. We must also direct legislative and USBE policy efforts toward helping schools create broader, more holistic networks of care.

Utah’s current approach to school-based mental health care is governed, in part, by cultural reproduction and societal norms. At present, legislative efforts are focused largely on familiar, taken-for-granted approaches to school mental health—tactics such as offering competitive grant funding to help schools hire mental health professional and encouraging schools to partner with local mental health agencies. Yet studies show that these strategies can be ineffectual—a concern addressed earlier in this study (Hargrave, 2015; Swain-Bradway et al., 2015). While professional, therapeutic support is vitally important for some students and should be made available, this one tool alone is by no means sufficient. Schools can and should implement a wide array of holistic supports to broaden their safety net for teens.

Educators, lawmakers and mental health professionals from across Utah have formed coalitions to study the problem of teen depression and suicidality. They also need to talk to the teens themselves. It is imperative that these groups be cognizant of the profound impact school environments, policies, and curricula have on children and youth. These considerations should be factored into the calculus of change.

### **Allocate Resources Liberally and Wisely**

Utah lawmakers have allocated additional funding to mental health initiatives in recent years. These efforts are an important beginning but are not nearly enough. If schools are to implement robust systems of emotional and mental health support for

students, then greater resources are required. With adequate funding, schools can create more effective networks of mental health care that include social workers, school counselors, mental health therapists, and nurses. Currently, even the most basic systems of support for students are woefully underfunded. Take, for example, school counselors. These professionals often serve as the initial point of contact for students who need mental health support. We rely on counselors to provide suicide prevention training and other supports for educators. They are often asked to coordinate schoolwide mental health programs and resources. In small schools, such as Emerson, the counselor's academic support role often takes a back-seat to more immediate student needs as she manages inevitable daily crisis. If Utah continues to rely on school counselors to provide mental health support to schools—a job for which most are not adequately prepared—we must provide these individuals with substantially more training. We must also provide schools with enough funding to ensure that counselor caseloads are manageable. Emerson's current level of funding covers only one-third the salary paid to our full-time counselor who serves 250 students in grades 6-12. Despite having the support of a part-time social worker, she is run ragged by our students' many academic and mental health needs.

As legislators consider bills and allocate resources, they should look beyond routine therapeutic and crisis intervention models of care. They can encourage schools to leverage funding opportunities to develop innovative models of care. For example, Emerson would like to create a student wellness center—a safe, welcoming space that offers students a broad range of physical and mental health resources and supports. We

would love to hire a passionate, creative educator or mental health professional to direct this effort—someone who understands the complex relationship between student well-being and a school’s environment, policies, programs, and curricula. This individual should have mental health training and enough curricular expertise to coordinate the efforts of teachers and administrators. She would work closely with students to understand their needs and implement student-led initiatives and ideas. She could help the school to develop a range of mental health supports, from workshops such as thai chi and mindfulness, to nature-based learning, to mental health literacy and learning across the curriculum. You can see how immense this job would be—as big as it is important. More funding for full-time student support specialists in schools could truly spark significant change for the better.

A student wellness center is only one of many possible approaches to creating better networks of care. But funding for such innovation is not currently available. Emerson’s current \$35,0000 mental health grant provides only minimal support and is limited by our agreement to partner with a local mental health agency (a condition that was *strongly* advised in grant guidelines). Our only choice, presently, is to spend this funding on a contracted social worker who provides services at Emerson just over 15 hours each week and divides this limited time between two school locations.

### **Rethink School Structures that May Be Harming Students**

Utah is currently undergoing a renaissance, of sorts, as the State considers alternate structures of schooling such as personalized and digital learning. But critical

examination is needed to learn how these programs will impact *all* students.

We also need to examine how increasingly standardized systems of reporting and oversight might be constraining our ability to create unique classes and curricula to meet the needs of students. We claim to champion innovation, yet we create rigid systems of data collection, scheduling, and assessment that make innovation difficult. At the level of policy, bureaucratic constraints unwittingly penalize schools when they try to create new classes or programs that do not fit neatly into USBE structures. Overly restrictive rules and requirements dampen the spirit and creativity of administrators and educators.

I turn to experiences at Emerson as examples. In the school's early days, educators and students worked collaboratively to create an array of imaginative, integrated core classes that were built around student interest and need. Students especially loved a blended social studies/literature class we called *Into the Wild: A Study of Our Essential Character*. Another favorite class—*Ethics and the Environment*—combined elements of literature, social studies and science. Local academics, scientists, and theists visited this class to share their perspectives about environmental issues. During several of these seminars, students sat in rapt attention and then engaged in discussion long past scheduled class times. Experiences such as these happened much more often before CACTUS and SIS began to rigidly dictate the suitability of course codes and student schedules—or before we were savvy enough to realize that these wonderful classes were not comprehensible to either the Utah State Office of Education (now USBE) or to the majority of college admissions offices.

Here is another example: For a number of years, Emerson offered language and



literature classes organized around themes such as *The Literature and Language of Nature* or *The Study of War and of Peace*. Rather than band students together in 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grade-level classes, we invited students to choose the classes that most appealed to them. English teachers learned to differentiate and provide a wide range of work so that students could both learn basic skills, and also engage in more challenging work. Older students worked with younger students to teach literacy skills and model mature, engaged behavior. We had great success with this model of instruction. This format became nearly impossible to continue once Utah's student information system (now Aspire) began to automatically generate year-end exams based on the 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, or 11<sup>th</sup> grade English classes to which students were assigned in the database. For several years, we battled this constraining system using a complicated, time-consuming, technical workaround. But mounting pressure to conform to state norms led us, eventually, to give up. Emerson students are now, sadly, sorted into conventional age/grade bands in English classes.

It is not, perhaps, immediately evident how these complaints are relevant to student well-being. My point is this: If we hope to respond effectively to the mental health needs of our students and to address their most urgent needs, if we hope to provide teens with school experiences that are meaningful and compelling, we have to be brave enough to implement radical reforms. To do so, schools must be given greater freedom and flexibility to innovate. Scheduling systems, databases, and state-level administrators who provide oversight have to be more accommodating. We cannot fix what is broken without rethinking the structures and systems we impose on ourselves.

### **Eliminate Academic Ranking and Rating**

One of the most stunning revelations of this study is that so many young people feel harmed by our strident focus on academic outcomes—by the grades, transcripts and standardize testing that define them at school. My co-researchers expressed that they do not mind some level of authentic, meaningful evaluation. Most of them do not shy away from challenge and hard work, but they almost universally felt that schools should slow down, create stronger communities, and allow more time for authentic, assessment-free learning.

I have keen empathy for these young people. Over the past decade, my colleagues and I have felt increasing pressure to focus narrowly on improved academic outcomes. This constant tension clouds the experience of both educators and students. Utah’s “report card” system, introduced by legislators in 2010, is one example of the shift. This system rates and ranks schools based on metrics such as year-end test scores and college acceptance rates. USBE has worked with this legislative mandate as responsibly as possible, factoring in student growth and ensuring that only schools with similar demographics are compared on USBE’s Data Gateway. But despite these efforts, the Data Gateway dashboard continues to stigmatize low-performing schools and present a shallow profile of what schools actually offer. It surprises no one that most low-performing schools serve large populations of ethnic minorities, special needs students, low-income families, dual-language learners, and other students at the edges of society—a pattern that plays out on the national stage (Au, 2009; Sacks, 1999). Educators recognize that demographics factor heavily into school rankings and ratings, but the

public does not always understand the sociological implications of performance scores.

An inevitable, unintended consequence of a ratings-obsessed culture is marginalization. When schools feel pressure to outperform or outrank other schools, they are subtly encouraged to sluff off low-achieving, high-needs students who skew their scores downward. Whether calculated or not, schools encourage struggling students—often those with the most urgent mental health needs—to transfer to alternative or charter schools. Many young people who have transferred to Emerson report that they were “referred out” of their neighborhood school because they were underperforming. A high percentage of these students struggle with some level of anxiety or depression. More often than not, they arrive with damaged academic records and cannot see a clear path to graduation. In talking to other schools of choice in Utah, we have learned that Emerson is not the only small school that “collects” these unwanted students.

When schools direct struggling students elsewhere, they may believe it is for the best. They may justify their actions, rationalizing that smaller schools staffed with caring adults are better-equipped to support overwhelming needs. But what does this pattern of exclusion say about our society? Do only high-performing students deserve to be a part of mainstream society? Are youth who struggle to succeed academically somehow less valuable than their peers? Do we really aim to sort students into piles and reject those who are most vulnerable? These choices do not align with the values of equity and compassion we claim to uphold as Utah communities. Educational leaders and policymakers must reexamine policies that encourage schools to abandon their most vulnerable youth. The practice is inexcusable.

As adults we intrinsically know when balance is off. Our students do too. They thrive within balanced systems. We *can* craft policies and curricular standards that have the power to return balance to school life. In the perpetual cycle of school reform, student well-being must be foremost in our minds as we reexamine school structures and systems. Our legislative priorities and USBE policies must show that we value the sanctity of students' lives—that we recognize individuals must be mentally and emotionally whole before any level of academic success is useful to them. Until we are willing to place as much focus, energy, and funding into helping students live joyful, meaningful lives as we do into ensuring that they know calculus, we will not resolve Utah's mental health crisis.

### **Understand the Difference Between Social and Emotional Learning and Mental Health Support**

Utah is at a critical juncture right now as we begin to adopt policy and programs to support student well-being. As we consider the possibilities, we should take care to understand the difference between SEL programs that focus primarily on skill-building and behavioral change, and those that advocate for more holistic, schoolwide approaches to mental health care. SEL literature often makes the claim that SEL-branded programs are protective of student mental health (a claim I examine at length in Chapter 2). A few of these programs are specifically marketed as a solution to student depression and suicidality. But currently, scant evidence exists for these claims—although programs are evolving and study continues. Regardless of the verity of such claims, it is clear that delivering a handful of SEL lessons in a single class, such as health, over one semester,

cannot truly address and redress the challenges our students' face.

My close examination of SEL literature shows that many SEL programs approach instruction from a behavioral standpoint—teaching students the skills of self-management and good behavior, but failing to help them develop a genuine sense of empathy and community or to foster enduring emotional well-being and mental health. Still, SEL programs are increasingly implemented in schools and only a handful of public intellectuals express concern about this trend (Bartholdsson et al, 2014; Hoffman, 2009; Stearns, 2017). If our goal is to find more robust ways of supporting student mental health, we must look beyond such programs. The SEL field's entrenched deficit thinking, behavioral approaches, and fuzzy conceptualization of “mental health,” make it an unreliable resource for effecting meaningful change. Moreover, there is danger that reliance on some of these programs may actually confound our efforts to build authentic community and student trust (an argument I make in Chapter 2).

USBЕ's research arm, ULEAD, currently says little about student mental health, but encourages all Utah school districts to adopt at least one commercial SEL program specific to their needs. However, by the time this recommendation was published (Hanover Research, 2019), USBЕ had already mandated that all Utah secondary schools adopt a single SEL program—*Botvin's Life Skills*. This mandate may have been well-meaning, but is concerning for several reasons: (1) Schools must be able to develop or adopt the social and emotional supports best suited to their students' unique needs; and (2) Schools do not always understand the limitations or potential problems of SEL curricula and may gain a false sense of security, believing that by adopting an SEL

program they have provided robust mental health support for their students.

The teens I talked with for this study had plenty to say about *Botvin's Life Skills*. Without the benefit of theoretical understanding or critical grounding, these teens observed that while *Botvin's* curriculum offers a handful of useful strategies for self-care, it ignores the deeper causes and consequences of their struggles and is blind to the realities of their lives. Some felt that Botvin's exercises—such as stretching arms wide and repeating self-affirming phrases—underestimate their intellect and fail to recognize who they are or what they need. Teens who participated in these lessons were sometimes left uninspired and unimpressed.

If SEL programming is going to be mandated in Utah schools, it is imperative that we encourage schools to also create or adopt programs that foster genuine connection and empathy and that build empowering, transformative environments. We need to reject programs that assume student deficiency as a starting point, or that fail to recognize the intellect and moral grounding students possess. My co-researchers expressed repeatedly that they thrive in environments where they are trusted, respected, and empowered. SEL programs sometimes ignore these most elemental needs of teens.

If USBE ultimately does insist upon requiring schools to implement commercial, “evidence-based” SEL curricula, as ULEAD has recommended, then they should encourage districts and charter schools to choose wisely. By CASEL's own admission, only a few SEL-branded programs advocate for comprehensive, holistic networks of care (CASEL, 2019). *Expeditionary Learning* is one of several SEL-sanctioned programs developed for high school students. *Facing History and Ourselves* is a subject-specific

SEL curriculum worth investigating. Programs such as these were generally not created under the auspices of CASEL or SEL, but have sought endorsement from the CASEL organization—most likely for commercial purposes. In my observation, the best SEL-sanctioned programs hold more in common with the aims of critical pedagogy than with the foundations of SEL.

Ultimately, the most comprehensive and effective mental health supports a school can offer will be developed within each school—the result of passionate, collaborative efforts between teachers, administrators and students who respect each other and strive together for the well-being of their community.

### **Restructure Teacher Education Programs**

Teachers need training to know how best to identify and find help for students who are in emotional or mental health trouble. But they also need to understand the essential value of creating inclusive, caring, classrooms where students engage in socially and personally transformative work. Administrators, counselors, and teachers need training to learn how to weave complex systems of care into the daily life of schools.

Schools are grateful for quality professional development opportunities offered through various divisions of USBE. Online trainings such as those that support suicide prevention and trauma-informed practice are becoming increasingly accessible and well-developed. Predictably, educators often lack the time or incentive to participate in these important trainings. In the future, we might consider funding additional professional development days for educators, or offering more coordinated, statewide conferences where all school adults can learn optimal ways to address student mental health needs.

Critical examination is needed of the preparation we offer to teachers in university programs. How much time is devoted, in these programs, to learning how to create inclusive, empowering environments at school? How many classes teach the ethical, humane, socially just principles embedded in critical pedagogy? How much focus is placed on the crucial importance of offering students trust and respect? Is adequate time spent teaching preservice teachers to create learning opportunities that are meaningful and transformative? These questions can be easily answered by data and investigative study. The difficulty will be in shifting the focus of Utah's teacher education programs to a place of balance. But universities thrive on pedagogical improvement and will welcome the challenge to more robustly address student well-being in teacher preparation programs—if they are given support and encouragement from the institutions that govern them.

In my experience, the influence of critical pedagogy is felt in a handful of teacher preparation classes in Utah universities—in the requisite diversity seminar, or in social studies classes where work is centered on the forward-thinking standards of the *National Council for the Social Studies* (NCSS, 2010). But the language and literature of critical pedagogy rarely surfaces in literature on school mental health or in Utah's ongoing conversations about student well-being. The inherent connections between critical pedagogical theory and student well-being seem obvious—they are suggested in the work of critical scholars who address the needs of marginalized youth (e.g., Camicia, 2016; Gabel, 2005; Giroux, 2011; Sadowski, 2016). I find this disconnect between critical theory and discussions of mental health in schools curious, so I offer this study as starting



point for discussion.

Perhaps the intersections of critical thought and school mental health are largely unexplored because critical theory has lost some of its influence in the academy—especially in teacher preparation programs (Bartolomé, L., 2004; Busk, 2018). Busk writes:

Universities in the West are increasingly inhospitable places for critical theoretical work.... Even in the era of the Alt Right, neoliberalism, and anthropogenic climate change, the Academy is no hotbed of resistance. At times it seems like the most critical theorists can do is shout at one another from iceberg to (melting) iceberg. (p. 2)

And yet critical thought and pedagogy offer a wealth of ideas that support essential elements of a healthy school environment. It advocates for caring, inclusive communities and deeply engaging and transformative curricula. When I engaged my own class of preservice teachers in a discussion about critical approaches to education (all were in their final year of a university elementary education training program in Utah), none could recall having had any exposure to Freire, Giroux, hooks, Kincheloe, Noddings, or other critical thinkers whom I had assumed were foundational to a teacher's preparation. We are impoverished if we ignore this body of literature.

Reimagining school mental health through a critical theoretical lens may return us to more authentic and effective ways of fostering student resiliency and well-being. Critical pedagogy invites us to tailor programs to localized contexts and cultures and to address the needs of individual students. It insists that we use the tools and supports most relevant to our unique populations of youth. It emphasizes relational models of teaching and learning founded on principles of inclusion, recognition, and respect. It asks us look

beyond the epistemological horizon so that we can understand how societal systems and expectations impact the well-being of students. It asks us to equip students with the information, inspiration, and tools that they need to lift themselves from oppressive conditions. Anxiety, depression and suicidality are, perhaps, their most oppressive foes of all.

### **Refocus the Purposes of Education in Policy and Law**

The young people in this study expressed appreciation for their teachers and school community. Most were positive about their classes and school activities. But many were frustrated by what they see as an unhealthy societal focus on the preparation for college and their future marketability. Several students offered surprisingly sophisticated critiques of this system. They expressed resentment at being commodified by a system of schooling that clearly values academic performance over personal fulfillment—marketability over the living of consequential, joyful lives.

Even at Emerson, a school where educators strive diligently to help students create balance in their lives, the ever-present mantra of “college-and-career-ready” clouds the more essential purposes of schooling. In a rush to prepare students for high-stakes testing, educators often feel powerless to provide students with the mental health supports and transformative experiences young people need. Teachers are torn between slowing down to create community and engage in meaningful work, or pressing on to cover required content. This is an impossible either-or proposition that no teacher should have to contemplate.

Educational leaders and policymakers must acknowledge this tension and work

earnestly to signal to educators—in both policy and legislative priorities—the importance of creating socially and emotionally healthy school environments. Curricular standards should give teachers permission and time to address students’ most pressing needs. Standards must also acknowledge the inspiring, but flawed and fully human innovators of all races, cultures, creeds, and gender identities, who are prevalent in every field of study—the mathematicians, writers, artists, and scientists who reflect the diverse identities of our students. Student need to be able to see themselves in the individuals they study. We have to be able to explore, with our students, what it means to be human and what it takes to transform the world and our own lives.

These issues deserve as much discussion and attention in Utah’s legislative halls and USBE boardrooms as they receive in school faculty meetings and worried conversations between teachers. We need to create, in both policy and law, a more balanced and inspired vision of what life at school can and should be.

### **Return Autonomy and Trust to Schools**

As they implement new policy and devise systems of reporting, Utah’s educational leaders and lawmakers should think deeply about the impact of their decisions on schools. Rather than dictate narrowly restrictive solutions in response to Utah’s mental health crisis, they should provide wise counsel, ethical guidelines, and a wealth of resources.

With respect to the important work that legislators do, they must acknowledge that they are lawmakers, not educators. They should place more trust in the educational professionals who are trained to care for students and give these professionals funding,

policy support, and latitude to implement meaningful change at the local level.

Legislators must quit drowning schools in new laws—175+ new education bills each year (Dickson, 2019, 2020). They should instead craft policies and fund initiatives that encourage schools to innovate and create unique programs specific to local needs. They should ensure that onerous oversight and reporting duties do not extinguish the passion most educators feel when they first choose teaching as a profession. Over the past decade, my colleagues and I have become frustrated by the increasingly restrictive and fearful environment in public education. Without our deep love for students, many of us would have little incentive to stay involved in an institution so entrenched in burdensome rules and oversight.

Most local education agencies (districts and charter schools) understand that Utah's educational leaders and lawmakers are entrusted with overwhelming responsibilities. We appreciate the individuals who work tirelessly to improve programs and outcomes, streamline processes, and ensure state and federal compliance. It is a tough job and these folks are invariably kind and supportive to schools. Nevertheless, I will conclude by extending to them this last gentle plea: As you create new rules, policies and systems of accountability to protect student well-being, please step back for moment to acknowledge that there has been a dramatic increase in the level of oversight, reporting, and standardized procedure in recent years. This is beginning to take a toll on administrators and educators and, by extension, students. Overly burdensome and punitive systems of reporting and accountability create a climate of frustration and fear. We need to loosen the bureaucratic chokehold on schools so that educators can refocus

their energies on meeting the urgent needs of our children and youth.

### **Limitations and Opportunities for Future Study**

This study is limited in scope. It offers the perspectives of 14 students and one administrator in a small public school embedded in a culturally homogenous community of Utah. The experiences and insights these young people generously shared are immensely important. But this is only a beginning. Every school community must listen to the unique perspectives of the young people in their care.

The teens who participated in this study suggest that we have much to learn about the traumas, mental health demons, hopes, fears, and dreams of adolescents. The dizzying barrage of messages teens receive—that they can do better, be smarter, stronger, more resilient, more successful—leaves some of them reeling as they struggle simply to survive. A rapidly changing cultural milieu—evolving technology, overwhelming world events, and constantly shifting media messages—confound our efforts to understand the world of teens. We can and do theorize about what schools should be doing to protect the well-being of students, but how can we possibly know what is most important, at any given moment in time, if we are not continually engaging in discourse with young people themselves?

When I began this study, I focused largely on the literature of school mental health—a field that offers important insights about the importance of climate, connectedness, and inclusivity. In a meta-analysis of mental health studies, Aldridge and McChesney (2018) call for more clarity about what “mental health” actually means, and

for a study of the discrete variables that influence student well-being at school. They express an urgent need for more qualitative study to inform these concerns. Their conclusions are valid and important and I would add the following observation: We cannot possibly study any single component of school life in isolation. Each element is inextricably linked with all others. It will not serve us to try to isolate discrete variables. A better approach is to acknowledge the complexities of school ecosystems and students' lives, and to explore the intersectional nature of student need. Critical ethnography complexifies and enriches our understanding of phenomenon. It is a perfect vehicle for better understanding the complex mental health needs of Utah's youth. Too many important elements of school life are largely ignored in current studies of school mental health. The literature of critical pedagogy draws us back to consideration of the fundamental human needs for safety, connection, recognition, respect, empowerment and transforming purpose. Each of these needs must be considered in future study.

At present, the literature of critical pedagogy remains largely theoretical, punctuated by an occasional ethnographic study of school life. These studies span nearly 30 years, from McLaren's (1989/1994) publication of *Life in Schools* to Sadowski's (2016) recent *Safe is Not Enough: Better Schools for LGBT Students*. Passionate, socially conscious educators continue to draw from the well of wisdom that is critical thought and pedagogy. Critical teacher-researchers share vignettes of classroom life to illustrate what supportive school environments should be (Apple & Beane, 2007; Au., 2012; hooks, 1994; Kozol, 1989/ 2016; Littky, 2004). These accounts remind educators of truths we intuitively feel—of important work we want to be doing but too often postpone. We need

to place critical ethnographic study at the intersection of student mental health and critical pedagogy to spur us on.

Inspiration for the work ahead already exists—we need not create a rounder wheel. Critical pedagogy provides a powerful framework for thinking about how schools can enhance student well-being holistically in classrooms, curricula, and policies. Its literature explores pedagogical practices designed to build safe, inclusive environments where individual difference is recognized and valued and students are empowered to participate as co-creators of their educational lives. Critical pedagogy encourages us to engage in candid, critical dialogue with our students and to inspire them to transform the world and their own lives.

Thus, critical qualitative research should be happening in every school and classroom. Educators and students should be engaged in continuous ethnographic study—gathering data, observing, reflecting telling stories, weaving multiple perspectives together, and weighing collective insights against the sociological structures and theories that govern us. Each new study must culminate in action—in the creation of socially and personally transformative coursework and projects. School policy and programs must be guided by the conviction that every individual deserves safety, inclusion, recognition, connection, empowerment, and engagement in transformative work at school. Working together, educators and students can create the kind of safe spaces, inclusive relationships, and impassioned intellectual discourse that hold true power to lift individuals from darkness and, in doing so, shed light everywhere.

## Summary

This study is an exploration into the sorrows and challenges of adolescent anxiety, depression and suicidality, and how schools might combat them. Chapters 6 and 7 offer a synthesis of what I have learned from both the adolescents who joined the study and my own experiences at Emerson. Its findings are filtered through the lens of critical thought and pedagogy. My co-researchers' experiences and insights brought new urgency and clarity to my understanding of what is needed. They have caused me to confront my own bias and revisit ideals I have too often forgotten or brushed aside in the crush of reporting, compliance, and perfunctory administrative school duties. The study's most important findings are as follows.

- Students must be both physically and emotionally safe at school. As we conceptualize what safety looks like, we must recognize that students are harming themselves daily—sometimes physically through self-harm behaviors, but more often emotionally with the unhealthy, shaming beliefs they hold about themselves. We must create and implement curricula and a culture that does battle with these realities.
- We must create inclusive environments where all students are recognized and deeply respected, both by educators and each other. Too many students are invisible and need to be enfolded into our school communities more generously and completely.
- We must forge authentic relationships with students, founded in love.
- We must build curricula around students' interests and needs—addressing in equal measure their intellectual, social, and emotional development. Coursework should inspire both personal and societal transformation and should equip students with the knowledge and tools they need to engage in purposeful change.
- We must recognize that adherence to the rigid, sometimes nonsensical systems of schooling we have created for ourselves compromises the well-being of both youth and adults in schools. Learning should bound up in joy more often than stress.



- Students must be fully included as equal partners in shaping their lives at school.

My co-researchers expressed a longing to be recognized as the young adults they are, but also to be cared for compassionately when they are overwhelmed and frightened. As educators, we must see with unflinching clarity that the young people in our care do not belong to us. We have no right to exert our power in harmful ways. Rather, we are responsible to nurture their social, emotional, and intellectual well-being—to recognize and honor who they are and keep in view the promise of who they will become. We must create avenues, both in classroom work and school activities, that allow students to tell their stories and share their sorrows, hopes, and dreams. Finally, and most crucially, all of our work must emanate from a place of love. Love was often the only force powerful enough to sustain these young people when their lives felt especially painful or meaningless. Love pulled some from the brink of an irreversible decision to end their own lives. Our schools and classrooms must be filled with love, hope, and laughter.

As I turn now to the reporting, grant writing, and other concerns that I set aside on behalf of this research project, I will remember to engage colleagues in the more urgent task of planning curricula and activities that promote safety, recognition, inclusion, connection, empowerment, transformation—and joy—in school life. We often forget, amidst the noise, what we hold most important in life. Working to help our students create safe, mentally healthy, meaningful lives for themselves remains our most vital endeavor—one that gives shape and meaning to my own life. It is my greatest hope that a renewed collaboration between students and educators—and a willingness to re-imagine the very nature of our educational systems—will ultimately have the power to uplift and

transform student lives.

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APPENDICES

## Appendix A

### Sample Questions for Semistructured Interview

### **Proposed Pool of Interview Questions**

*Before beginning an interview, I will help students to feel comfortable by exchanging pleasantries and asking a few questions that have nothing to do with the study. I want to reassure them that they are known and cared for.*

*I will stress to participants that they should not name or provide information about friends. I will not use any such information that might be provided inadvertently. I will avoid asking questions that might elicit responses that include information about friends.*

#### **Overarching questions in the first interview:**

Are you willing to share an experience you have had with depression, anxiety, or even thoughts of suicide? You can tell me your story using as much detail as you want. I am interested in everything, but I also want you to be comfortable. What you share is up to you.

*Participants' responses to this initial question may fill the first interview if I offer supportive verbal and physical encouragements, such as a nod of the head or phrases, such as "can you tell me more about that?" I will be prepared with additional questions for more reluctant storytellers.*

- When you experience depression/anxiety/suicidal ideation, is it more likely to happen because of something going on at home, at school, or somewhere else?
- Do you generally talk about what those feelings with others (family, friends, teachers, etc.)?
- How important are your relationships with your friends for helping you to fight depression, anxiety, and/or suicidal thoughts?
- Have you had relationships with any adults at Emerson, or in your previous school that have made a difference in how you feel?
- When you have felt this way—have you gone to someone for help? Why or why not?
- Who are you most likely to go to? A school counselor? A teacher? An administrator? A friend? A parent? A professional psychologist or psychiatrist? A church leader? Someone else? Why?



*Students spend between seven and nine hours at school each day, depending on their participation in before and after school programs. The following set of questions explores, from a student perspective, what educators and administrators can do during that time to support student mental health.*

- Does your daily interaction with teachers and other adults at school have any effect on your mental/emotional health? Can you share any observations or stories to support your thoughts about this?
- Do you generally feel cared for and respected at Emerson? At your previous school?
- What are some teacher behaviors that make you feel accepted, respected and loved? What teacher behaviors make you feel unloved, insignificant, or disrespected?
- Can you think of any class activities or lessons that have helped you to feel a greater sense of caring or connection with others? Can you think of any lessons or activities that have had the opposite effect? Can you think of classroom or school experiences that made some you feel more anxious or depressed?
- Do you feel like students accept and respect you at Emerson? Do you sometimes feel excluded from the community? Talk about that.
- Have you ever experienced bullying—either online or at school? Are you willing to share that experience? Did those experiences cause you to feel anxious or depressed? Do you think this is a common experience?
- Do academic expectations at school contribute to your depression/anxiety/suicide? If so, what can teachers and administrators do to help minimize academic stressors?
- What issues haven't we talked about that we should be thinking about? What is happening in your school or your social life—anything that might be adding stress or causing depression—that adults may not completely be aware of or understand?
- How can the adult leaders in schools—the teachers, administrators, counselors, and staff—be a better support and help for you?

Appendix B

Portions of Study Website at [www.teenvoices.org](http://www.teenvoices.org)

[Home](#) [Why This Study?](#) [Overview](#) [Procedures, Risks & Protections](#) [Mental Health Data](#) [More...](#)

AN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH STUDY

## Supporting Mental Health in Schools: Inviting Adolescents to Utah's Mental Health Conversation

The purpose of this study is to explore how we can better support adolescent mental health in schools. We cannot understand what is needed until we have a better understanding of the lived experience of students. To reach that understanding, we must include student voices in Utah's mental health conversation.



Appendix C

Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval Document

Wednesday, May 23, 2018 at 10:01:16 AM Mountain Daylight Time

**Subject:** Approval letter from USU IRB  
**Date:** Wednesday, May 23, 2018 at 10:00:08 AM Mountain Daylight Time  
**From:** noreply@usu.edu  
**To:** Steven Camicia, diana@waldenschool.us

## Institutional Review Board

USU Assurance: FWA#00003308



Expedite #6 & #7



### Letter of Approval

FROM:

Melanie Domenech Rodriguez, IRB Chair

Nicole Vouvalis, IRB Administrator

To: Steven Camicia, Diana West  
 Date: May 23, 2018  
 Protocol #: 9203  
 Title: Supporting Adolescent Mental Health Within School Culture And Curriculum: Inviting Adolescents To Utah'S Mental Health Conversation  
 Risk: Minimal risk

Your proposal has been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board and is approved under expedite procedure #6 & #7 (based on the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) regulations for the protection of human research subjects, 45 CFR Part 46, as amended to include provisions of the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects (November 9, 1998):

#6: Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

#7: Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

This approval applies only to the proposal currently on file for the period of one year. If your study extends beyond the approval period, you must contact this office to request an annual review of this research. Any change affecting human subjects must be approved by the Board prior to implementation. Injuries or any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or to others must be reported immediately to the Chair of the Institutional Review Board.

Prior to involving human subjects, properly executed informed consent must be obtained from each subject or from an authorized representative, and documentation of informed consent must be kept on file for at least three years after the project ends. Each subject must be furnished with a copy of the informed consent document for their personal

records.

4460 Old Main Hill    Logan, UT 84322-4460    PH: (435) 797-1821    Fax: (435) 797-3769    WEB: [irb.usu.edu](http://irb.usu.edu)    EMAIL: [irb@usu.edu](mailto:irb@usu.edu)

Appendix D

Teen Voices Recruitment Flyer

## Have You Ever Experienced Depression? Anxiety? Hopelessness?



In a survey given to students across the State of Utah in 2017, high school students made some startling revelations

- 29% reported feeling “very hopeless, sad, or suicidal” for two weeks or more.
- 52% did ***not*** talk to anyone about those feelings.
- 19% considered committing suicide.
- 5% teens tried to end their own lives.

Most teens struggle with mild depression at some point. That’s normal. But in Utah, the rate of serious adolescent depression is increasing every year.

We are looking for high school students to participate in an important research study. We want to listen to you—to learn more about your experiences with depression, anxiety, and/or suicidal thoughts. Your story will help us to understand the many reasons that Utah teens sometimes feel sad and hopeless. We want to know what Utah’s policy makers and educators can do to help.

You can participate in this study if you have experienced depression, anxiety, isolation, feelings of hopelessness, or thoughts of suicide any time over the past few years.

If you choose to be a part of this study, you will be invited to share your experiences in one 40-60 minute interview. You may also be invited to come back for one or two more interviews, if you would like to talk more. You can share as much, or as little, as you want to share. Parental permission is required to participate.

To learn more, visit [www.teenvoices.org](http://www.teenvoices.org) or contact [redacted]

About the researchers:

Dr. Steven Camicia is a professor of Cultural Studies in The School of Teacher Education and Leadership at Utah State University. Dr. Camicia has written and published extensively on inclusive education and has been honored as USU’s Teacher Education and Leadership Scholar/Researcher of the Year (2010) and Graduate Mentor of the Year (2017). You can contact Dr. Camicia at [steven.camicia@usu.edu](mailto:steven.camicia@usu.edu)

Diana West is a doctoral candidate at USU in Teacher Education and Leadership. Diana is passionate about ensuring the safety and welfare of adolescents. She believes that listening to teens can help adults to make Utah’s schools safer and more emotionally supportive environments.



Appendix E

Sample of Artifacts Submitted by Students

i'm sad in the back stall of the girls bathroom and I can't pinpoint why

Anonymous Participant

you will not find roses on my wrists.  
 there is no fresh soil not matter how deep I dig.  
 beauty cannot bloom here.  
 nothing appealing can grow here.  
 so please don't romanticize my scars.  
 there is nothing more disgusting than feeling absolutely nothing.  
 the proof of my addiction are not additions to my personality.  
 they are showers that sting and long sleeves in July and stains on my bedsheets that won't  
 come out and forgetting how it feels to get chlorine up my nose because I haven't gone  
 swimming in ages.  
 how can there be beauty in something so disturbing?  
 my covered limbs do not belong framed on your wall.  
 there is no place in art museums for-  
 scar admirations and skin deformations and first aid education and thought out locations  
 and a life expiration.  
 mental illness isn't a fucking painting.  
 it's a pill every damn morning and every damn night.  
 it's paying a stranger with a degree to listen to me twice a week.  
 it's not giving a fuck because i'm sure i'll be dead by tomorrow.  
 it's being stuck in a hospital for a week, trapped by doctors unable to escape because I am  
 told I am not safe in my own body.  
 it's being tired of being tired of waking up.  
 it's the craving for physical pain so the hurricane in my mind can shut up for once.  
 but it never shuts up.  
 it never shuts up.  
 it never shuts up.  
 pain loves to talk more than I can keep up.  
 pain isn't skin deep.  
 pain isn't pretty.  
 I have a body that likes to believe it is dying  
 so please don't say my terminal illness is beautiful or makes me more attractive  
 because it's not fair that the left side of my body takes the blame for everything I can't do  
 right.

## The Act of Showering

### Anonymous Participant

#### The Act of Showering

I wake up in the morning, and for a split moment, I feel okay, good even. I feel as though everything will be alright for today. I hug my pillow tight when the rush hits me. I wish I could go back to sleep and forget this day, this life. School calls, but my feet will not move. Every movement of my body is exhausting. I have no motive for my existence today, and I didn't the past month for that matter. Getting out of bed is a struggle, all I want to do is sink deep into my mattress and sleep until the good times come around. A black force is pushing me further into my bed, begging me to sleep forever. I obey this greater being, shrouding myself with blankets.

There's a deep abyss in my stomach when I hear a voice call from outside my room. Mom tells me it's time to get up, to take a shower. I think about the act of a shower. I contemplate how far away it is from my room, down the hallway. You have to twist the knob and find the right temperature. You have to strip, revealing your body. Being bare makes you vulnerable. I like my barriers. I have no walls protecting myself without my clothing on. You have to wash your whole body, head to toes. You have to explore every crevice of your figure when you're unsheltered like that. My body is the creaky pipes in an old kitchen. These pipes work just fine if someone came along and cured them, but until then, they ached to be cleaned. Yet no amount of soap could rid the disgust contained inside no matter how hard you scrub.

It's funny to me that showers seem to be an enemy these days, when it was my safe place during my stay at a psychiatric hospital. I had to be watched, to make sure I wouldn't hurt myself or try anything against my life. The shower was the one time I was allowed to be alone and unmonitored, despite the risk of letting a suicidal kid be in a secluded room with nothing but their mind and bare body. They told us they would check for self-infliction after. I did the last thing the nurses would expect when I tried my best to squeeze myself tight and let myself feel love. I remember the limbs in my body losing their functions when the water hit my skin. The cracked tiles on the floor were my companion as I felt pure relief. Many of the other teenagers lost their privileges of being alone when showering because their arms and legs bared proof of harm. I wanted my shower. The shower was mine and I didn't want to lose it. It often felt as though nothing existed outside of it. I thought if I opened the bathroom door, there would be emptiness. All the history Earth had obtained, all the creatures and lives they had lived, every single individual thought to ever be generated, ceased to exist outside the door. The shower was unadulterated peace. No problems and issues could enter my fifteen minutes of freedom. If a dark notion dare enter under the crack in the doorway, it disappeared immediately. I was safe.

When I was able to return to my family, I realized there was no bathroom like that one. The showers at home could not compare. Maybe the temperature was off. Maybe the light that bled through the window was a wrong hue. Maybe I wasn't in the correct position. Something was always off. All I wanted was to sleep, to maybe restore the relief of the hospital shower. I still have not been able to recreate that emotion. I carry it as the main exhibit in my museum of a brain. But I can never get the intricacies just right. How could heaven be copied?

Despite not living in that feeling anymore, I got out of bed this morning. I took a shower. I came to school and I wrote this. That's a start. A start means I will have more hospital shower emotions. And that is something to live for.

**Moon Girl: The Story of Two Friends Who Find Each Other A World Apart**

(a two-page excerpt from a 22-page storybook created by a participant)



She also told Chris  
that she didn't like herself  
much because no one else ever had.



## Personal Speech

Submitted by Gabriel

Three years ago, I never would have been able to imagine that I would be here, standing in front of you because three years ago, I thought I would be dead.

Three years ago, getting up every morning was a battle against myself that I felt destined to lose.

And three years ago, I was scared, suicidal, I thought I was worthless, unwanted.

I've struggled against chronic depression since I was young. Bullying, rejection and an overwhelming loneliness wore me down. Put apathy where my hope had been. Dread in place of passion.

Throughout my early education I was unwelcome and removed from the communities that surrounded me

I'm a gay, transgender kid who grew up with the dangerous mentality that the pain I experienced was my fault, that I deserve something less than happiness.

I thought that unless I could do something amazing as a child, I would never accomplish anything great as an adult.

Three years ago, I was hopelessly sick of myself and everything I was.

The most remarkable change in the mentality I had towards myself came when I found a community.

It started with Emerson, a small, tight-knit school with students and staff that gave me the option to socialize, and it grew with the programs that were offered by Boys and Girls club.

I was struggling to find my place, but the [Improv] club gave me somewhere that I belonged. I found safety in...people that accepted me for who I was, who didn't need to be reminded what name or pronouns to use.

I found a community and a comfortable entrance into the world that stood menacingly ahead of me.

I want to give back to the communities that gave me the strength to keep fighting, starting with my place in Boys and Girls club. I've co-founded the Environmental Club at

my school, a way for us to share our passions and encourage the natural stewardship that we've devoted our lives to.

The support I've received from \_\_\_\_\_ not only given me the confidence and motivation I need to show my school what I'm passionate about, they've also given me the experience and resources to share my work with the world.

Three years from now, I see myself in college, working towards a degree in Environmental Studies from \_\_\_\_\_.

Three years from now, I'll be preparing for work as a Conservation Officer with the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources. A career that gives me the privilege to serve the people, the wildlife, and the land of my beautiful state. I'll teach people about what I love and why it's worth fighting for what they love.

Three years from now I plan on reaching more people with a destigmatized conversation about mental health and suicide.

And three years from now, I'm not only alive, but happy, striving to learn new ways to improve myself and the world around me.

I am standing here to represent the natural resources of my state.

I'm standing here to represent the youth of Utah, who for some reason or another, thought they would only have a place in the bottom of a hole.

I'm standing here to show my peers that they have worth in their communities regardless of where they've come from or where they've been.

And I'm standing here to represent myself, and my place in my community.

**Honest Introspection**

<https://soundcloud.com/nuclearbee/honest-self-introspection>

Submitted by Liam

*Here are some writings and art I've done in relation to mental illness and stuff. Despite being told I'm conventionally attractive, a mindset that's kept me company for years makes me wish I looked different, as if having a different eye color or differently shaped lips would banish the dangerous thoughts I have and heal me into a person not affected by flawed parental figures. (Liam Interview, 2019)*

Honest Self Introspection (a song by me)

I don't know if I wanna say no tonight  
 But I know that I should, right?  
 I wanna take your hands and make them into paper machete [sic]  
 Put them on my shelf so I can look at them all day

I don't think I wanna die like all my friends do  
 I just wanna pray and get an answer  
 Well don't you?

And I've learned that self love is honest self introspection  
 Noticing when you're playing the game of deception

and when I fall asleep tonight  
 It won't be after you  
 And when they tell me it's alright  
 I'll know it's true

Beautiful sparkling darling on the illuminated screen  
 And if I tell him how I feel  
 I guess we'll see

I've done it before  
 Some other guys reflection knocked down  
 I've seen inside myself  
 I'm ok with it now



## Participant Journal Entries

April 9: good morning. Everyone worships something. A lot of people worship god or Jesus. A lot of people worship money or sex. If you worship money and things you will never feel you have enough. If you worship sex and your body you will never feel you are enough. Take time to notice all the things you worship and whether or not they deserve that from you.

April 11: good morning. Today there are seven and a half billion people in the world. That means that the odds that a one in a million thing will happen to you aren't that bad after all.

Goodnight. Tonight there are seven and a half billion people in the world. Which means there is absolutely no way you are the only one who doesn't belong. No matter how many times you convince yourself you are.

April 12: good morning. Being attractive to other people is not the rent you pay to exist in the world. You have no obligation to look or act a certain way.

April 13: goodnight. When things don't work out how you need them to make sure you're changing the plan, not the goal. I believe in you.

April 14: good morning. The logical choice is not always the correct choice. Your heart doesn't work logically.

Goodnight. Your history does not define your identity. Today does not define tomorrow. Get some rest.

April 15: goodnight. It's hard to heal in this environment when it's exactly what made you sick in the first place. But someday you can leave it behind. Someday you will be in the right place at the right time. Someday. Get some rest, let's see if it's tomorrow.

April 16: goodnight. Every decision you have ever made was the best possible decision you could have made at the moment. You did your best with the knowledge and options you had. You did your best today. You will do your best tomorrow. You got this.

April 18: goodnight. No matter how defeated you feel, you have not lost yet. You are breathing, your heart is beating, you have people who love you. This is not how your story ends.

April 19: good morning. Think about all the pain that's waiting for relief. Think about all the love that's waiting to be required. Think about all the people who are waiting to see you. Think about all the good things that are waiting for you today. Now go find them.

April 19: Goodnight. think about all the pain that has found relief. Think about all the love that has found a way. Think about all the the people who have found you. Think about all the wonderful things you have found today. It's only a matter of time until the next good thing finds you.

April 21: good morning. You are enough. You are so enough. It is unbelievable how enough you are.

Goodnight. Success is not an objective concept. You get to define success for yourself. Success can be getting straight a's. Success can be getting out of bed. Success can be making it through today. All of that is enough. You are still here. And that is enough.

April 23: goodnight. No one else can ever fully understand you. So don't ever let anyone else decide how you carry on from here. You are smart. You are capable. You can do it however you please but you have to carry on from here.

April 28: good morning. Take time to recharge. It's hard to know who you are when you don't get time to clear your head. Be gentle with yourself.

April 29: good morning. I know it feels easier to run away and start over, I promise it's not. Instead of running away choose to run forward. You'll end up in the place you need to be. I promise you. You are going to be okay. You are going to be safe. You are going to see everything clearly. I promise.

April 30: goodnight. You have lived through thousands upon thousands of days. They can't all be winners. Take the small victories today. It's okay to celebrate.

May 5: good morning. You don't have to be strong all the time. You don't have to power through. Sometimes it's best to leave it behind. It's not giving up, it's going on.

Goodnight. Cry now. Scream now. Get it all out now. Complain now. Pick yourself back up now. This is your time to recover. You've got a lot to do tomorrow and you can't waste any of that time dwelling on today. You are going to get through this. You are strong. You are smart. You are capable. Get ready.

May 7: good morning. Success is not linear. That's okay. It's okay to fail. It's okay to fall down. As long as you get back up. As long as you try again. I believe in you.

May 16: good morning. Every day, just before the dawn, birds sing to let their families know that against all odds they have made it through the night. Against predators, and weather, and human interference, they are still here. And somehow, against all odds, you have made it through the night. You are still here. Sing it out. Celebrate it. Tell the world.

**Participant Journal Entry During Hospital Stay**

03-09-18 11:06 PM

I think I'm beginning to realize the value of my existence. While I am unaware of my exact purpose, I am learning my meaning in the events of the universe. I have the ability to change people. Maybe not even other people, just myself. And I am content with this. Good days are coming if I allow them to, if I change the way I view my life. My future can be glorious and beautiful if I open my mind to positive opportunities. This is what I want. I want to know my worth. I'm determined to. Life is so fucking strange, but I swear it's going to be worth it someday. And until that day comes, I'll just keep on going. I am strong enough.

Appendix F

Informed Consent Form for Parent and Assent for Student



Page 1 of 7  
 Protocol # 9203  
 IRB Approval Date: 05/23/2018  
 Consent Document Expires: 05/22/2019  
 IRB Password Protected per IRB Coordinator

v.8.3; May2017

## Informed Consent

### Supporting adolescent mental health within a school's culture and curriculum: A critical ethnography that invites adolescents to Utah's mental health conversation

#### Introduction

Your child has been invited to participate in a research study conducted by Dr. Steven Camicia, a professor in the *School of Teacher Education and Leadership* at Utah State University, and Diana West, a doctoral student in the *School of Teacher Education and Leadership*. The purpose of this study is to try to better understand how high school students in Utah experience depression, anxiety, isolation, feelings of hopelessness, and/or suicidal ideation. It will explore, from the student perspective, how a school's climate, culture, programs and curriculum might impact student mental health, and how the adults at school can do a better job of supporting adolescent mental health.

This form includes detailed information to help you decide whether or not to let your child participate in this study. Please read it carefully and ask any questions you have before you agree to let your child participate.

#### Procedures

Your child will be asked to participate in one or more informal interviews with a researcher about their experience with or general impressions about adolescent depression, anxiety, feelings of hopelessness, and/or suicidal ideation. Your child will be asked to think about how the policies, practices, climate, and curriculum of a school might impact student mental health. The researcher will use a set of questions (attached) as a springboard for discussion and will record observations and insights that your student is willing share. Your child's participation in the initial interview is anticipated to last between 40 and 60 minutes. The researcher may invite your child to continue with the study after the initial interview, and to meet for one or two additional 40 to 60 minute conversations. We anticipate that between 12 and 40 students will participate in this research study. Participation is completely voluntary.

As a part of this study, your student will be invited to share any creative work that they have produced (such as poetry, artwork, original music, essays, photography, film, etc.) that addresses the subject of adolescent depression, anxiety, isolation, feelings of hopelessness, and/or suicidal ideation. Nothing that your child has written or created will be used in this study without your and your child's explicit consent. Any identifying information, such as names, places, or information about families, will be omitted. Your child may also choose to submit one or more artifacts (poetry, artwork, original music, essays, photography, film, etc.) without being interviewed. You will find a check box at the end of this consent form to choose this option.

Because the researchers do not want to put any child at risk, each student participant will complete the Columbia Suicide Severity Risk Scale (C-SSRS), a very short, simple survey that is designed to detect suicidal ideation or behavior. If your child is rated as "at risk for suicide," you will be notified immediately and will be provided with intervention resources. For your child's protection, their participation in the study will be ended and any data gathered will be destroyed immediately. A child with suicidal intent or behavior needs to work with clinical professionals who are qualified to support them during a time of crisis.

The day after each interview, your child will receive an email from the researcher checking in and reminding your child of the mental health resources available to them and encouraging them to access those resources if they feel they need to. Your child will also be reminded of the voluntariness of the study and their right to review their interview transcripts, and they you wish, clarify or expand on anything discussed in the interview.



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### Risks

This study presents minimal risk to your child, meaning that the risks are no greater than those your child encounters in everyday activities. The foreseeable risks include potential discomfort during the interview process, possible feelings of anxiety or depression triggered by talking about past experiences, or a risk of loss of confidentiality. To minimize these risks and discomforts, the researchers will follow ethical guidelines and standards of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and of the American School Counselor Association (ASCA). They will be guided by the Code of Conduct of the American Psychological Association (APA) throughout the study to ensure that conversations are supportive, non-threatening, and non-coercive and that your and your child's privacy and confidentiality are fully protected. The researchers are not mental health professionals, but will follow these professional ethical guidelines to ensure that your child is always treated with respect and dignity and that their needs are recognized and addressed. During each interview, the researcher will check with your child frequently to be sure that they are comfortable continuing with the interview. The researcher will encourage your child to ask for clarification when needed, and will encourage them to end the conversation if they are uncomfortable in any way. Your child will never be required to answer a question they are not comfortable answering. For the duration of this study, your child will have access to additional support from the school's social worker, high school counselor, or a school administrator upon request. No one but the researchers will know who is participating in this study, but the school's administration and counselors are aware of the study and are happy to meet with you or your child should the need arise. You can also request a referral to a local mental health professional for your student. These services are available to your child, whether or not you feel that any discomfort or trauma they may be feeling is the result of this study. If, at any time, you feel that you have a bad research-related experience or that your child is harmed in any way during their participation, please contact Dr. Steven Camicia, the principal investigator of this study, at 801-518-3193 or [steven.camicia@usu.edu](mailto:steven.camicia@usu.edu).

### Benefits

Research is an important way to learn more about adolescent depression, anxiety, hopelessness, and suicidal ideation so that we can do a better job of creating school environments that promote positive mental and emotional support for students. Participation in this study may directly benefit your child by providing them with an additional avenue for sharing their experiences with depression, anxiety, and/or suicidal ideation. More broadly, this study will help the researchers to learn more about how educators and educational policy makers in Utah can develop school programs and curriculum that will do a better job of supporting the mental and emotional health of Utah's teens in the future. As a participant in this study, you and your child are provided with access to the website [www.teenvoices.org](http://www.teenvoices.org), which was created for this study and provides information about local mental health organizations and links to mental health literature and information.

### Confidentiality

Researchers will make every effort to ensure that the information your child provides as part of this study remains confidential. Your child's identity and the identity of the school will not be revealed in any publications, presentations or reports resulting from this research study. Although it is unlikely, it may be possible for someone to recognize your child's particular story/situation/responses. Before any responses are included in this study, your child will be invited to review what is written and to revise or withdraw any information they choose not to include in the study. Every effort will be made to conceal your child's identity by using pseudonyms, altering details of narratives and, if necessary, creating composite characters in the narrative so that no individual child's story is identifiable. Once you have provided permission for your child to participate in this study, you will not be given access to your child's interview transcripts or recordings unless there is a concern that your child might harm themselves.



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The researcher will collect your child's responses during interviews using typewritten notes and with digital audio recordings to ensure accuracy. This data will be securely stored in a restricted-access folder on Box.com, an encrypted, cloud-based storage system and in a locked drawer in a restricted-access office. Recorded data will be destroyed as soon as recordings are transcribed. All other data and study materials will be destroyed upon completion and publication of this study, estimated to be December 30<sup>th</sup>, 2018, but no later than December 30<sup>th</sup>, 2019. This form will be kept for three after the study is complete, and then it will be destroyed.

It is unlikely, but possible, that others (Utah State University or state or federal officials) may require the researchers to share information gathered for the study to ensure that the research was conducted safely and appropriately. We will only share your information if law or policy requires us to do so. If the researchers learn that you or your child are abusing or neglecting another individual, or if your child expresses intent to harm themselves or another individual, state law requires that the researchers report this behavior or intention to the authorities.

#### **Voluntary Participation & Withdrawal**

Your child's participation in this research is completely voluntary. If you and your child agree to participate now and change your mind later, you may withdraw at any time by contacting Dr. Steven Camicia either by phone (801-518-3193), or email ([steven.camicia@usu.edu](mailto:steven.camicia@usu.edu)), or Diana West, either by phone (801-623-1388), or by email ([dianamadsen1@gmail.com](mailto:dianamadsen1@gmail.com)). If you or your child choose to withdraw after we have already collected information from your child, your child's data will be destroyed immediately. If you decide not to allow your child to participate, the education and support your child receives from Walden School of Liberal Arts will not be affected in any way. The researchers may choose to terminate your child's participation in this research study if your child is rated as "at risk for suicide" on the Columbia Suicide Severity Risk Scale (C-SSRS). In the event that this happens, you will be notified by phone and email immediately.

#### **IRB Review**

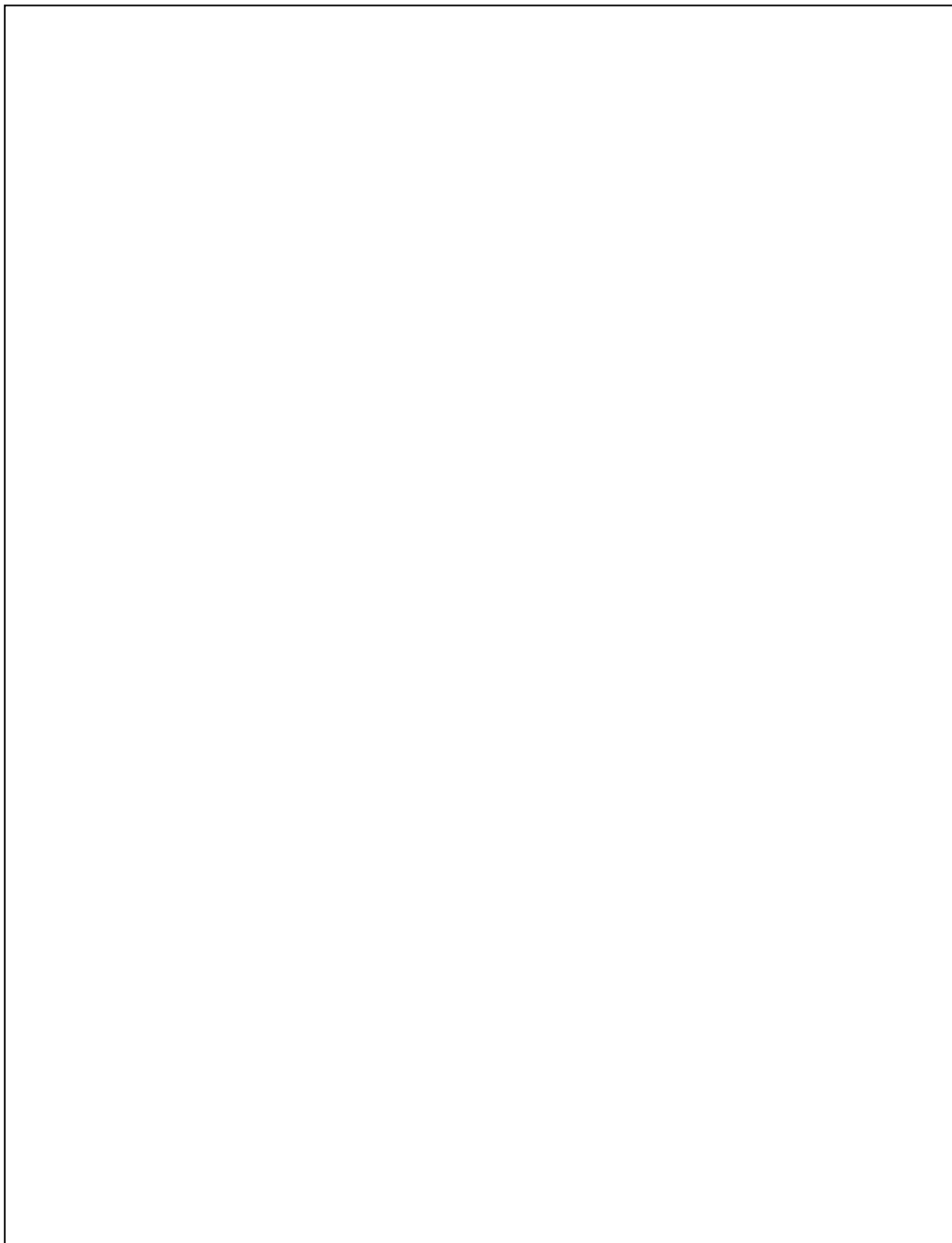
The Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the protection of human research participants at Utah State University has reviewed and approved this study. If you have questions about the research study itself, please contact the student investigator, Diana West, either by phone (801-623-1388) or by email ([dianamadsen1@gmail.com](mailto:dianamadsen1@gmail.com)) or contact the Principal Investigator, Dr. Steven Camicia, by phone (801-518-3193), or by email ([steven.camicia@usu.edu](mailto:steven.camicia@usu.edu)). If you have questions about your rights or would simply like to speak with someone other than the research team about questions or concerns, please contact the Utah State University IRB Director at (435) 797-0567 or [irb@usu.edu](mailto:irb@usu.edu).

---

Dr. Steven Camicia  
 Principal Investigator  
 (801)-518-3193; [steven.camicia@usu.edu](mailto:steven.camicia@usu.edu)

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Diana West  
 Student Investigator  
 (801)-623-1388: [dianamadsen1@gmail.com](mailto:dianamadsen1@gmail.com)







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## Youth Assent

### Introduction

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Dr. Steven Camicia, a professor in the School of Teacher Education and Leadership at Utah State University, and Diana West, a doctoral student in the School of Teacher Education and Leadership department at Utah State University. The purpose of this study is to try to better understand how high school students in Utah experience depression, anxiety, feelings of hopelessness, and/or thoughts of suicide.

This form includes detailed information to help you decide whether or not to participate in this study. Please read it carefully and ask any questions you have before you agree to participate.

### Procedures

If you are willing to be a part of this study, you will be asked to participate in a 40 to 60 minute conversation with the researcher. In this conversation, you can share experiences you have had with depression, anxiety, feelings of hopelessness, or even suicidal thoughts. You may be asked to think about how the programs, climate, and curriculum at a school (Walden, or any other school) impact student mental health. The researcher will ask you some questions, but she is mostly interested in listening to your stories. After the first interview, you may be asked if you are willing to participate in one or two additional 40 to 60 minute conversations. You can end your participation at any time—even during the first interview.

As a part of this study, you may be invited to share any artistic work that you have created (such as poetry, artwork, original music, essays, photography, film, etc.) that addresses the subject of adolescent depression, anxiety, feelings of hopelessness, and/or suicidal thoughts. Nothing that you have written or created will be used in this study without your consent. You do not have to share anything at all.

For your safety, you will also be asked to complete a short simple survey that is designed to detect suicidal ideation or behavior. If you are rated as “at risk for suicide,” you and your parents will be notified immediately and will be provided with intervention resources. For your protection, your participation in the study will be ended and any data gathered will be destroyed immediately.

The day after each interview, you will receive an email from the researcher checking in and reminding you of the mental health resources available to you and encouraging you to access those resources if you feel you need to. You will also be reminded of the voluntariness of the study and your right to review your interview transcripts, and if you wish, clarify or expand on anything discussed in the interview.

### Risks

Before you agree to participate in this study, you should know that there are possible risks to you. During the interview, you might feel uncomfortable or anxious. Please know that you can ask to stop the interview at any time. Because of the difficult topics we will talk about, you may experience feelings of sadness or depression during the interview, or even after the interview is over. We will do everything we can to minimize any discomfort. The researcher will check in with you throughout the study to make sure that you feel supported and that you don't feel threatened or coerced in any way. The researcher is not a mental health professional, but she will follow professional and ethical guidelines to ensure that you are always treated with respect and dignity and that your needs are being met. She will be available to talk with you if you have additional questions or concerns. During interviews, the researcher will check in with you to be sure that you are comfortable continuing. She will encourage you to ask for clarification when you don't understand something, or to redirect or end the conversation at any time. You will never



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be required to answer any question that you are not comfortable answering. During this study, you can ask for additional support from the school counselor, social worker, or administrator. They do not know who is participating in this study, but they are willing to talk to any student who needs their help. You can also request a referral to a local mental health professional. These supports are available to you whether or not you feel that any discomfort or trauma you are feeling is the result of this study. If at any time you feel that you have a bad research-related experience or that you are harmed in any way during your participation, please contact the principal investigator of this study, Dr. Steven Camicia, either by phone (801-518-3193), or email (steven.camicia@usu.edu).

### **Benefits**

Research is an important way to learn more about adolescent depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation so that we can do a better job of creating school environments that promote positive mental and emotional health for high school students. You may directly benefit from this study by having an additional avenue for sharing your experiences with depression, anxiety, and/or suicidal ideation. This study will help us to learn more about how adults can support the mental and emotional health of Utah's teens in the future. As a participant in this study, you will also be provided with a packet of mental health support resources, including information about local mental health organizations, mental health literature, and links to online resources.

### **Confidentiality**

The researcher will make every effort to ensure that the information you provide as part of this study remains confidential. Your identity and the identity of the school will not be revealed in any publications, presentations, or reports resulting from this research study. However, it may be possible for someone to recognize your particular story/situation/response. Before any responses are included in this study, you will be invited to review what is written and to revise or withdraw any information you choose not to include in the study.

As the researcher talks to you about your experiences and thoughts, she will use a digital audio recording to ensure accuracy, but she will destroy any tapes as soon as they are transcribed. The written and recorded information she collects will be securely stored in a restricted-access folder on Box.com, an encrypted, cloud-based storage system and in a locked drawer in a restricted-access office. All data and study materials will be destroyed upon completion and publication of this study, estimated to be December 30<sup>th</sup>, 2018, but no later than December 30<sup>th</sup>, 2019. This form will be kept for three years after the study is complete, and then it will be destroyed.

### **Voluntary Participation & Withdrawal**

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. If you agree to participate now and change your mind later, you may withdraw at any time by contacting Dr. Steven Camicia either by phone (801-518-3193), or email (steven.camicia@usu.edu), or Diana West, either by phone (801-623-1388), or by email (diana@waldenschool.us). If you choose to withdraw after we have already collected information from you, your data will be destroyed immediately. If you decide not to participate, the education and support you receive from Walden School of Liberal Arts will not be affected in any way. We may choose to end your participation in this research study if you are at risk for suicide, as determined by the Columbia Suicide Severity Risk Scale (C-SSRS). If this should happen, we will notify your parents and provide your intervention resources and support as requested.

### **Your Permission:**

Not everyone who is a part of research studies will benefit from it. During the study, it is possible that nothing directly good will happen to you. But your participation in this study is important for helping us to learn more about how to better support the mental health of Utah adolescents in the future.



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If this sounds like something you would like to do, we will ask you to say that you understand what we talked about, and that you do want to participate. You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to be. No one will be upset if you don't want to do this, or if you change your mind later.

You can ask any questions you have, now or later. Your parents know about this research study and they have said that you can participate, if you would like to.

If you would like to be in this study, please check the box or boxes that apply to you, sign your name and write the date.

- I agree to be interviewed.
- In addition to being interviewed, I may be willing to share artifacts I have created (such as poetry, artwork, original music, essays, photography, film, etc.) that address the subject of adolescent depression, anxiety, feelings of hopelessness, and/or suicidal ideation. (Even if you check this box, you can change your mind later.)
- I would rather not be interviewed, but I may be willing to share artifacts I have created (such as poetry, artwork, original music, essays, photography, film, etc.) that address the subject of adolescent depression, anxiety, feelings of hopelessness, and/or suicidal ideation. (Even if you check this box, you can change your mind later.)

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Date

Appendix G

Inform Consent for Adult Student



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## Informed Consent

### Supporting adolescent mental health within a school's culture and curriculum: A critical ethnography that invites adolescents to Utah's mental health conversation

#### Introduction

You have been invited to participate in a research study conducted by Dr. Steven Camicia, a professor in the *School of Teacher Education and Leadership* at Utah State University, and Diana West, a doctoral student in the *School of Teacher Education and Leadership*. The purpose of this study is to try to better understand how high school students in Utah experience depression, anxiety, isolation, feelings of hopelessness, and/or suicidal ideation. It will explore, from the student perspective, how a school's climate, culture, programs and curriculum might impact student mental health, and how the adults at school can do a better job of supporting adolescent mental health.

This form includes detailed information to help you decide whether or not to participate in this study. Please read it carefully and ask any questions you have before you agree to participate.

#### Procedures

You will be asked to participate in one or more informal interviews with a researcher about your experience with or general impressions about adolescent depression, anxiety, feelings of hopelessness, and/or suicidal ideation. You will be asked to think about how the policies, practices, climate, and curriculum of a school might impact student mental health. The researcher will use a set of questions (attached) as a springboard for discussion and will record observations and insights that you are willing share. Your participation in the initial interview is anticipated to last between 40 and 60 minutes. The researcher may invite you to continue with the study after the initial interview, and to meet for one or two additional 40 to 60 minute conversations. We anticipate that between 12 and 40 students will participate in this research study. Participation is voluntary.

As a part of this study, you will be invited to share any creative work that you have produced (such as poetry, artwork, original music, essays, photography, film, etc.) that addresses the subject of adolescent depression, anxiety, feelings of hopelessness, and/or suicidal ideation. Nothing that you have written or created will be used in this study without your explicit consent. Any identifying information, such names, places, or information about families, will be omitted. You may also choose to submit one or more artifact (poetry, artwork, original music, essays, photography, film, etc.) without being interviewed. You will find a check box at the end of this consent form to choose this option.

Because the researchers do not want to put you at risk, each student participant will complete the Columbia Suicide Severity Risk Scale (C-SSRS), a very short, simple survey that is designed to detect suicidal ideation or behavior. If you are rated as "at risk for suicide," you will be notified immediately and will be provided with intervention resources. For your protection, your participation in the study will be ended and any data gathered will be destroyed immediately. A child with suicidal intent or behavior needs to work with clinical professionals who are qualified to support them during a time of crisis.

The day after each interview, you will receive an email from the researcher checking in and reminding you of the mental health resources available and encouraging you to access those resources if needed. You will also be reminded of the voluntariness of the study and of your right to review your interview transcripts, and to clarify or expand on anything discussed in the interview.

#### Risks

School of Teacher Education and Leadership | 435-797-1473 | 2805 Old Main Hill | Logan, UT 84322



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This study presents minimal risk to you, meaning that the risks are not greater than those you encounter in everyday activities. The foreseeable risks include potential discomfort during the interview process, possible feelings of anxiety or depression triggered by talking about past experiences, or a risk of loss of confidentiality. To minimize these risks and discomforts, the researcher will follow ethical guidelines and standards of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and of the American School Counselor Association (ASCA). They will be guided by the Code of Conduct of the American Psychological Association (APA) throughout the study to ensure that conversations are supportive, non-threatening, and non-coercive and that your privacy and confidentiality are fully protected. The researchers are not mental health professionals, but will follow professional ethical guidelines to ensure that you are always treated with respect and dignity and that your needs are recognized and addressed. During each interview, the researcher will check with you frequently to be sure that you are comfortable continuing with the interview. The researcher will encourage you to ask for clarification when needed, and will encourage you to end the conversation if you are uncomfortable in any way. You will never be required to answer a question you are not comfortable answering. For the duration of this study, you will have access to additional support from Walden's social worker, high school counselor, or a school administrator upon request. No one but the researchers will know who is participating in this study, but the school's administration and counselors are aware of the study and are happy to meet with you should the need arise. You can also request a referral to a local mental health professional. These services are available to you whether or not you feel that any discomfort or trauma you may be feeling is the result of this study. If, at any time, you feel that you have a bad research-related experience or that you have been harmed in any way during your participation, please contact Dr. Steven Camicia, the principal investigator of this study, at 801-518-3193 or [steven.camicia@usu.edu](mailto:steven.camicia@usu.edu).

#### **Benefits**

Research is an important way to learn more about adolescent depression, anxiety, hopelessness, and suicidal ideation so that we can do a better job of creating school environments that promote positive mental and emotional support for students. Participation in this study may directly benefit you by providing you with an additional avenue for sharing your experiences with depression, anxiety, and/or suicidal ideation. More broadly, this study will help the researchers to learn more about how educators and educational policy makers in Utah can develop school programs and curriculum that will do a better job of supporting the mental and emotional health of Utah's teens in the future. As a participant in this study, you are provided with access to the website [www.teenvoices.org](http://www.teenvoices.org), which was created for this study and provides information about local mental health organizations and links to mental health literature and information.

#### **Confidentiality**

Researchers will make every effort to ensure that the information you provide as part of this study remains confidential. Your identity and the identity of the school will not be revealed in any publications, presentations or reports resulting from this research study. Although it is unlikely, it may be possible for someone to recognize your particular story/situation/responses. Before any responses are included in this study, you will be invited to review what is written and to revise or withdraw any information you choose not to include in the study. Every effort will be made to conceal identity by using pseudonyms, altering details of narratives and, if necessary, creating composite characters in the narrative so that no individual's story is identifiable.

The researchers will collect your responses during interviews using typewritten notes and with digital audio recordings to ensure accuracy. This data will be securely stored in a restricted-access folder on Box.com, an encrypted, cloud-based storage system and in a locked drawer in a restricted-access office. Recorded data will be destroyed as soon as recordings are transcribed. All other data and study materials will be destroyed upon completion and publication of this study, estimated to be December 30<sup>th</sup>, 2018, but no later than December 30<sup>th</sup>, 2019. This form will be kept for three years after the study is complete, and then it will be destroyed.



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It is unlikely, but possible, that others (Utah State University or state or federal officials) may require the researchers to share information gathered for the study to ensure that the research was conducted safely and appropriately. We will only share your information if law or policy requires us to do so. If the researchers learn that you or your parents are abusing or neglecting another individual, or if you express intent to harm yourself or another individual, state law requires that the researchers report this behavior or intention to the authorities.

#### Voluntary Participation & Withdrawal

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. If you agree to participate now and change your mind later, you may withdraw at any time by contacting Dr. Steven Camicia either by phone (801-518-3193), or email ([steven.camicia@usu.edu](mailto:steven.camicia@usu.edu)), or Diana West, either by phone (801-623-1388), or by email ([dianamadsen3@gmail.com](mailto:dianamadsen3@gmail.com)). If you choose to withdraw after we have collected information from you, your data will be destroyed immediately. If you decide not to participate, the education and support you receive from Walden School of Liberal Arts will not be affected in any way. The researchers may choose to terminate your participation in this research study if they determine, using the C-SSRS, that you are at risk for suicide. If you are suicidal, for your safety and as required by law, the appropriate authorities will be contacted.

#### IRB Review

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the protection of human research participants at Utah State University has reviewed and approved this study. If you have questions about the research study itself, please contact the Student Investigator, Diana West, either by phone (801-623-1388) or by email ([dianamadsen3@gmail.com](mailto:dianamadsen3@gmail.com)) or contact the Principal Investigator, Dr. Steven Camicia, by phone (801-518-3193), or email ([steven.camicia@usu.edu](mailto:steven.camicia@usu.edu)). If you have questions about your rights or would simply like to speak with someone other than the research team about questions or concerns, please contact the Utah State University IRB Director at (801) 518-3193 or [irb@usu.edu](mailto:irb@usu.edu).

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Dr. Steven Camicia  
 Principal Investigator  
 (435) 797-518-3193; [steven.camicia@usu.edu](mailto:steven.camicia@usu.edu)

---

Diana West  
 Student Investigator  
 801-623-1388: [dianamadsen1@gmail.com](mailto:dianamadsen1@gmail.com)

#### Informed Consent

By signing below, you agree to participate in this study. You indicate that you understand the risks and benefits of participation, and that you know what you will be asked to do. You also agree that you have asked any questions you might have, and are clear on how to stop your participation in the study if you choose to do so. Please be sure to retain a copy of this form for your records.

- I agree to be interviewed.
- In addition to being interviewed, I may be willing to share artifacts I have created (such as poetry, artwork, original music, essays, photography, film, etc.) that address the subject of adolescent depression, anxiety,



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feelings of hopelessness, and/or suicidal ideation. (Even if you check this box, you can change your mind later.)

- I would rather not be interviewed, but I may be willing to share artifacts I have created (such as poetry, artwork, original music, essays, photography, film, etc.) that address the subject of adolescent depression, anxiety, feelings of hopelessness, and/or suicidal ideation. (Even if you check this box, you can change your mind later.)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Signature  
*(Use this form only if the participant is 18 years of age or older, otherwise parental consent is required)*

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Name, Printed

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date



Appendix H

Community Resources Booklet Given to Participants

## **Community Resources for Emotional/Mental Health Support & Crisis Intervention**

- Online Adolescent Mental Health Resources (page 2)
- Abuse & Neglect (page 5)
- Crisis Hotlines (page 6)
- Eating Disorders (page 7)
- General Mental Health (page 8)
- Gender Identity/LGBTQ Support (page 9)
- Suicide Prevention/Crisis Intervention (page 10)
- Online Mental Health Resources (page 11)



## Girl's Health

**<https://www.girlshealth.gov/feelings/index.html>**

The “Your Feelings” section of this website offers guidance to teenage girls on recognizing a mental health problem, getting help, and talking to parents.

## Health Talk

**[www.healthtalk.org/peoples-experiences/mental-health](http://www.healthtalk.org/peoples-experiences/mental-health)**

A collection of videos where adolescents and mental health professionals talk about experiences with depression, substance abuse, self-harm, identity relationships, school stress, and other issues, and share strategies for dealing with these struggles.

## MentalHealth.gov

**<https://www.mentalhealth.gov/talk/young-people>**

This website helps young people to recognize the signs of a mental health illness and provides support for them, and for their parents, caregivers, friends, educators, and community and religious leaders. The site also helps to identify and prevent bullying behavior.

## Mindfulness for Teens

### **Mindfulnessforteens.com**

“Being a teen can be really stressful! Mindfulness is a powerful way to handle stress, and live life more fully. Mindfulness is all about living fully in the present moment, without judgment, and with an attitude of kindness and curiosity. It’s about breathing, noticing what’s happening right here and now, sending a gentle smile to whatever you’re experiencing in this moment (whether it’s easy or difficult), and then letting it go. You can be mindful anytime, anywhere, no matter what you’re doing. It sounds simple, but it’s not always easy to do, especially when you are stressed! This website provides information, tools, and resources to help you get started” (mindfulnessforteens.com).

## National Alliance on Mental Illness: Teens & Young Adults

<https://www.nami.org/find-support/teens-and-young-adults>

This website provides mental health information, services, and support for teens and young adults. It talks about how to find help for yourself, help a friend, connect with nurturing friends, and choose a college that will fully support you.

## National Alliance on Mental Illness: Family Guide on Adolescent Depression

<https://www.nami.org/getattachment/Press-Media/Press-Releases/2010/NAMI-Releases-Family-Guide-on-Adolescent-Depressio/FamilyGuide2010.pdf>

This 36-page guide inform families about the unique causes and symptoms of adolescent depression. It helps guide families to accurate diagnosis and effective treatment options for teenagers experiencing depression.

## Reach Out

**<https://au.reachout.com/>**

Practical articles that help young people deal with mental health issues, relationships, identity and gender, helping others, bullying, disturbing videos, and preparing for the college experience.

## Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine (SAHM)

**<http://www.adolescenthealth.org/Resources/Clinical-Care-Resources/Mental-Health/Mental-Health-Resources-For-Adolesc.aspx>**

This website is loaded with online Mental Health Resources for Adolescents and Young Adults. It provides a series of guides on emotional health, including on test anxiety, depression, bullying, and eating disorders, and it shares links to additional mental health websites, apps, and organizations.

## TeenMentalHealth.Org

**[Teenmentalhealth.org](http://Teenmentalhealth.org)**

Tool for teens and educators. Provides information about mental disorders, brain injuries, suicide, teen behavior, the teen brain, healthy sleep, self-harm, understanding stress, understanding stigma, and how to enlist parents, educators, health professionals and friends to help.

## The Trevor Project

**[TheTrevorProject.org](http://TheTrevorProject.org)**

Resources for LGBTQ youth and their families, including an online question and answer forum for sensitive issues and a crisis help line (866-4-U-Trevor).

## Abuse & Neglect Support

Name	Address	Website	Services	Fees	Contact/Notes
Children's Justice Center	315 South 100 East Provo, UT (801)851-8554	<a href="http://www.utahcounty.gov/Dept/CJC">www.utahcounty.gov/Dept/CJC</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parent &amp; Children Support Groups.</li> <li>• Children 3-12 yrs. and 13-18 yrs -- educational support groups.</li> <li>• Girls Teen Sexual Abuse Group (On going group)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bill's all insurances (No Co-Pay).</li> <li>• Crime victim's funding.</li> <li>• Grants available for those needing services without means of paying.</li> </ul>	Treatment Coordinator: (801)851-2433
Family Support & Treatment Center	1255 North 1200 West Orem, UT (801)229-1181	<a href="http://www.utahvalleyfamilysupport.org">www.utahvalleyfamilysupport.org</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children/adults/family</li> <li>• Works to treat victims of abuse &amp; Violence.</li> <li>• Ages 18 months +</li> <li>• Prevention classes to help children prevent their own abuse.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accept most insurances.</li> <li>• Can apply for grant, then cost goes to a sliding scale.</li> </ul>	• Waiting list is about 1-3 months for some services.
Division of Child & Family Services	861 East 900 North American Fork, UT (801)374-7005	<a href="http://www.hsdcsf.utah.gov">www.hsdcsf.utah.gov</a>			
Intermountain Specialized Abuse Treatment (ISAT) Center	8013730210	<a href="http://www.utahcounty.gov/Dept/CJC">www.utahcounty.gov/Dept/CJC</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offers Counseling for victims &amp; perpetrators.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most insurances accepted</li> <li>• If no insurance sliding scale</li> </ul>	
Provo Police Department	801-852-6375		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provides spanish-speaking therapy groups &amp; services to domestic violence victims.</li> </ul>		
Victims Advocate Program	Provo 801-852-6375 Orem 801-229-7128				
Utah County Sherriff	801-851-8364				

## Crisis Hotlines

Name	Time	Phone Number	Description
Center for Women & Children in Crisis	24 Hours	800-371-7897	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Crisis Counseling.</li> <li>• Safe &amp; Secure Shelter</li> </ul>
Child Find	24 Hours	800-426-5678	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Helps parents to locate children.</li> <li>• Helps lost children who need assistance.</li> <li>• Offers support services</li> <li>• Service are free.</li> </ul>
Crisis Line of Utah County	24 Hours	801-691-5433	• Free listening agency and referral service for people of all ages who have problems of almost any nature. It is not designed to solve problems, but to help the callers find solutions to their problems through personal and community resources.
Domestic Violence Hotline	24 Hours	801-377-5500	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Crisis Counseling.</li> <li>• Safe &amp; Secure Shelter</li> </ul>
Division of Child & Family Services - Abuse Reporting	24 Hours	801-374-7257 801-376-8261	
Family Support & Treatment Center - Respite Nursery	24 Hours	801-229-1181	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parents needing a time out.</li> <li>• Babysitting for parents to go to appointments. Schedule 1 week ahead of time.</li> <li>• If it is an emergency, appointment can be made the day before.</li> </ul>
Hope Line - Utah Valley Regional (Crisis/Suicide Prevention)	N/A	801-375-4673	
National Center for Missing & Exploited Children	24 Hours	801-843-5678	
National Children Abuse Hotline	24 Hours	800-422-4453	
National Runaway Switchboard	24 Hours	800-786-2929	
National Suicide Prevention Lifeline	24 Hours	800-273-8255	
Rape Crisis Center (Utah County)	24 Hours	801-229-1181	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hospital or Police Station Advocacy.</li> <li>• Crisis Counseling</li> <li>• Help if you've been raped or sexually assaulted.</li> </ul>
Rape Crisis Center (Statewide)	24 Hours	888-421-1100	
SafeUT Crisis Line	24 Hours	801-583-2500 safeut.med.utah.edu	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 24/7 crisis intervention through texting.</li> <li>• Confidential tips about bullying, loss/grief, self harm, relationships, etc.</li> <li>• Licensed clinicians in call center respond to all incoming chats, texts, and calls by providing counseling, suicide prevention,</li> </ul>

			and referral services.
Utah Coalition Against Sexual Assault	24 Hours	801-746-0404	
Utah County Crisis Hotline	24 Hours	801-691-5433	•Call for support death of a loved one, abuse, addiction, stress, depression, thoughts or suicide, and local resources to find long-term solutions.
Utah Poison Control		800-456-7707	
Wasatch Mental Health	24 Hours	801-373-7393	• Crisis mental health consultations to all age groups. Crisis services are provided over the telephone and through face-to-face assessments.

## Eating Disorders

Name	Address	Website	Services	Fees	Contact/Notes
Center for Change	Center for Change	<a href="http://www.centerforchange.com">www.centerforchange.com</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eating Disorders Anonymous, •</li> <li>Balance &amp; Awareness Groups •</li> <li>Recovery Group,</li> <li>• Coping Skills Group</li> <li>• Outpatient Groups</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No Fee</li> <li>• \$8 per group</li> <li>• \$25 per group</li> <li>• \$35 per group</li> <li>• \$25 per group</li> </ul>	



## General Mental Health

Name	Address	Website	Services	Fees
Preferred Family Clinic	1355 N University Ave Provo, UT (801)221-0223	www.preferredfamilyclinic.net	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Covers all areas of mental health</li> <li>Anxiety/Depression</li> <li>ADHD</li> <li>Drug abuse</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Accept most insurances</li> <li>\$170 first visit, \$120 subsequent. Discounted if paid at time of service.</li> <li>Interns \$100 for first visit, \$50 subsequent</li> </ul>
LDS Family Services		www.providentliving.com	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>One-to-one counseling and referrals for families and individuals.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Varies depending on services.</li> <li>In-network for DMBA &amp; Blue Cross Blue Shield. Will bill other insurance as out-of-network.</li> <li>Needs bishop referral if LDS church is helping with cost.</li> </ul>
The Green House Center	194 South Main Street Pleasant Grove, UT 801-785-1169	www.greenhousecenter.org	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Play Therapy</li> <li>EMDR</li> <li>Neurofeedback</li> <li>DBT/Attachment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Does not bill insurance</li> <li>Each session is approximately \$115-\$135</li> <li>Possible discounts with bundled services</li> </ul>
BYU Comprehensive Clinic	1190 N. 900 E Provo, Utah 801-422-7759	cc.byu.edu/Pages/Home.aspx	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Help with high suicide risk, alcohol and substance abuse, violence, court involvement.</li> <li>severe/chronic conditions referred to other appropriate community agencies.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fees negotiable when financial need exists</li> <li>\$15 per session therapy</li> <li>One time \$15 for group</li> <li>\$50 for psychological assessment</li> <li>* \$400 for neuropsychological and developmental assessment</li> </ul>
Wasatch Mental Health	580 E. 600 S. Provo, Utah 801-852-3789	www.wasatch.org/wrcl.html	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Intake screenings/assessment</li> <li>Group therapy</li> <li>Case management</li> <li>Psychiatric evaluation</li> <li>Medication assistance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Free</li> <li><b>Guidelines:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No medical insurance; can be underinsured (private insurance doesn't cover mental health)</li> <li>Substance abuse is not the primary DX</li> </ul> </li> <li><b>Exclusions:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>WRC does not offer crisis service and is not an emergency room</li> <li>No court-ordered mandated treatment</li> <li>Other specific long-term treatments may be denied.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

## Gender Identity/LGBTQ Support

Name	Address	Website	Services	Fee
Affirmation: Gay & Lesbian Mormons	1355 N University Ave Provo, UT (801)221-0223	www.preferredfamilyclinic.net	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Covers all areas of mental health</li> <li>• Anxiety/Depression</li> <li>• ADHD</li> <li>• Drug abuse</li> </ul>	Free
Encircle	91 West 200 South Provo, Utah 84601	Encircletogether.org	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Counseling</li> <li>• Friendship Circles</li> <li>• Guest Speakers</li> <li>• Parent Groups</li> <li>• Family Groups</li> <li>• Writing</li> <li>• Fun Events &amp; Game Nights</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• First session of counseling is free, subsequent from \$15 to \$35.</li> <li>• Groups and activities free.</li> </ul>
Family Fellowship	801-374-1447	www.ldsfamilyfellowship.org	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Volunteer service org for Mormon families with LGBTQ members</li> <li>• Blog Post</li> <li>• Activism</li> <li>• Information on legal initiatives</li> </ul>	Free
Parents and Friends of Lesbians & Gays (PFLAG)	1233 S 1000 E. SLC, UT 801-224-6423	community.pflag.org	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Serves the needs of LGBTQ individuals and their families through social and educational activities</li> <li>• Support groups for caregivers</li> </ul>	Free
Peer Listening Line for LGBTQ Youth	800-399-7337			Free
The Trevor Project	866-488-7386	www.thetrevorproject.org		Free
Utah Pride Center	355 N 300 W. SLC, UT 801-539-8800 Ext 29/14	www.utahpride.org	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Youth activity center,</li> <li>• Safe place for LGBTQ youth</li> <li>• Support groups for youth, families, caregivers, and professional who work with LGBTQ youth.</li> </ul>	Free

## Suicide Prevention/Crisis Intervention

Name	Address	Website	Services	Fee
Family Support and Treatments Center	1255 N. 1200 W Provo, UT 801-229-1181	www.utahfamilysupport.org	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• children/adults/family</li> <li>• victims of abuse/violence</li> <li>• abuse prevention classes for children</li> </ul>	Free Utah Valley Regional Medical Center
Heart & Soul Support Group	1134 N. 500 W. Provo, Utah 84601	Encircletogether.org	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Counseling</li> <li>• Friendship Circles</li> <li>• Guest Speakers</li> <li>• Parent Groups</li> <li>• Family Groups</li> <li>• Writing</li> <li>• Fun Events &amp; Game Nights</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• First session of counseling is free, subsequent from \$15 to \$35.</li> <li>• Groups and activities free.</li> </ul>
HOPE Line	801-375-4673			Free
Hope Task Force	801-374-4802			Free
National Suicide Prevention Lifeline	800-273-8255			Free
SafeUT Crisis Line	801-583-2500	safeut.med.utah.edu	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 24/7 crisis intervention through texting.</li> <li>• Confidential tips about bullying, loss/grief, self harm, relationships, etc.</li> <li>• Licensed clinicians in call center respond to all incoming chats, texts, and calls by providing counseling, suicide prevention, and referral services.</li> </ul>	Free
The Trevor Project	886-4UTrevor	www.TheTrevor Project.org	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• National helpline for crisis and suicide prevention for LGBTQ and questioning individuals. Also available to family members.</li> </ul>	

## CURRICULUM VITAE

DIANA WEST

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**EDUCATION**

<b>Utah State University</b>	<b>2020</b>
Ph.D. in Curriculum & Instruction - Teacher Education & Leadership	
<b>Brigham Young University</b>	<b>2002</b>
M.Ed. in Teaching & Learning, Magna Cum Laude	
<b>Brigham Young University</b>	<b>1983</b>
B.A. in English Literature and B.A. in Theater & Cinematic Arts	

**ADMINISTRATIVE EXPERIENCE**

<b>Superintendent—Walden School of Liberal Arts</b>	<b>2015-present</b>
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Although I relocated to Logan, Utah in 2015, I commute to Provo on a regular basis and continue to support Walden School of Liberal Arts in multiple ways. I work collaboratively with school administrators and instructors to shape the vision and direction of the school and I manage 26 state and federal programs. I also serve as Walden's chief business administrator, providing financial oversight and managing grants, budgets, reporting, and capital development. In general, I serve the school and school community in any way that is needed.

<b>Executive Director—Walden School of Liberal Arts</b>	<b>2003-2015</b>
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Working with a small group of university professors and educators, I wrote the chartering documents for Walden School of Liberal Arts and obtained significant grant funding to establish the school. When our charter was granted in 2003, I was invited to serve as the school's executive director, a position I held until I relocated to Logan in 2015. During my twelve years serving as Walden's chief administrator, I worked collaboratively with teachers and staff to develop innovative programs, write curricula, and guide the mission and vision of the school. For the first few years I was Walden's sole administrator and was responsible for professional development, human resources, financial management,

reporting, and student academic achievement. I successfully obtained grant funding and provided oversight for dozens of state and federal programs. During this time, the school grew from a small middle school, to a K-12 program with a Montessori emphasis in elementary school and an inclusive International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme in our 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade high school.

## TEACHING EXPERIENCE

### **Certified Instructor— English Language and Literature** **2004-Present**

I hold a Utah State teaching license in secondary school instruction—English Language and Literature.

### **Instructor—Elementary Education 4050 at Utah State University** **2017-2018**

I stepped in temporarily (the regular instructor did not have room in his schedule) to teach this social studies theory and methods course to preservice teachers in the final semester of their elementary education program at USU. I also supervised students during their practicum experience.

### **Instructor—Walden School of Liberal Arts** **2004-2015**

During my tenure as Walden School of Liberal Arts' executive administrator, I taught multiple classes (generally one course per year), including the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme core class, *Theory of Knowledge*, and a variety of integrated-subject and English language and literacy classes.

### **Instructor—Instructional Psychology 620 - Brigham Young University** **2001-2003**

I was hired to work collaboratively with senior faculty to re-envision and rewrite curriculum and delivery methodologies for this foundational methods course for preservice teachers. During this time, I taught multiple sections of IP&T 620 each semester.

### **Instructor—Mountainside and American Montessori Academies** **1985-1989**

I developed curricula and taught social studies, science, and literacy to students in grades 6-8 at *Mountainside Montessori*. Together with students, we produced *ACCESS*, a school literary journal. Previous to that, I served as an elementary school K-3 literacy specialist and instructor at *American Montessori Academy* where I wrote much of the literacy curricula.

**Taught English 115 at Brigham Young University****1985- 1988**

I taught multiple sections of this freshmen English course during my tenure as a graduate student in the BYU English department (generally two classes each semester, including summers).

**WORK EXPERIENCE****Executive Producer - Utah Film & Video Corporation****1991-2003**

My husband and I owned and operated Utah Film and Video Corporation for a decade. During that time, I helped to produce, write, and edit both commercial and non-profit documentaries and films. I also managed all financial aspects of the business.

**Writer & Editor - WordPerfect Corporation****1987-1991**

During the last few years that WordPerfect existed as a corporation, I served as a writer and editor for multiple publications, including instructional manuals and reference guides. I wrote *WordPerfect for the Mac*, which received an "Excellent" rating from the Society of Technical Communication.

**PUBLICATIONS**

*Utah Profile, editor* (1991), American Heritage Publications

*Reader for Life* (1991). Utah Film & Video. Researched, wrote, filmed, produced & edited this instructional film about literacy for young children.

*Enterprise Mentors International* (1993, 1995). Utah Film & Video. Wrote, co-edited, and helped to film on location in Guatemala, Mexico, and the Philippines. A documentary film for Enterprise Mentors, an NGO based in Salt Lake City, providing microfinance to struggling entrepreneurs in underserved communities.

*A Foundation of Love* (1995, 1997). Utah Film & Video. Wrote, co-edited and helped to film on location in Guatemala. A documentary film for the Rose Education Foundation, an NGO providing quality schools to indigenous children in Guatemala.

*Marlin Bay Resort* (1998, 2001). Wrote, co-edited, and helped to film on location on Beqa Island, Fiji. Two Marlin Bay Resort promotional films.

*WordPerfect Reference 2.0* (1990) WordPerfect Corporation

*WordPerfect Training Manual* (1990) WordPerfect Corporation

*Getting Started Manual 2.0* (1990) WordPerfect Corporation

*WordPerfect On the Macintosh*, editor, (1989) South-Western Publishing Co.

*Questioning the Answers*, essay in *The Restored Gospel and Applied Christianity* (1998)  
BYU Press

*They Gladly Taught*, co-author, (1986) BYU Press

*Surrogate*, Inscape Magazine (1986) BYU Press

## **INTERESTS**

Together with my husband, I design and nurture an annual themed garden that is visited widely by the community. In recent years we created tributes to MC. Escher, Buckminster Fuller, *The Little Prince*, *Wizard of Oz*, *Winnie the Pooh*, and our neighbor, Jack Keller, who devoted his life to building affordable irrigation technologies in developing countries.

I have travelled extensively with students, planning and leading trips to India, Vietnam, Mexico, Turkey, Ecuador, & Guatemala, and leading backpacking treks throughout the mountains and deserts of Utah.

## **ADDITIONAL SKILLS**

Strong communications skills, including public speaking and grant writing. Skilled with a wide variety of software applications, including multiple web applications, Microsoft Word, Excel, PowerPoint, and QuickBooks Online.