

FRESHMEN ENGLISH STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF SUICIDE  
BEFORE AND AFTER READING ROMEO AND JULIET

By

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**ABSTRACT**

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Adolescents today are faced with many complex issues as they struggle to find their own identity. So it is only natural that most teachers would be concerned about what is best for their students during these influential years. English teachers often deal with difficult topics, like suicide, that appears in the literature they are teaching. The purpose of this study was to examine the Shakespearean drama Romeo and Juliet and its influence over freshmen English students' perceptions of suicide in order to see if modifications should be made to existing curriculum.

A survey was developed for this study by the researcher. It consisted of twenty-one statements; Menomonie High School freshmen enrolled in English I during the spring semester of 2000 responded to the statements by using a Likert scale of strongly disagree, disagree, unsure, agree, and strongly agree. Students were given the same survey both before reading Romeo and Juliet and again after completing the Romeo and Juliet unit. They

responded to statements such as “suicide is a glamorous way to end one’s life” and “suicide is not an answer to a problem.”

Overall, the findings of this study seem to suggest that teaching Romeo and Juliet in the classroom did not influence the majority of students’ perceptions of suicide. While on the surface this seems reassuring to educators, there was data to indicate that some students did seem affected by the reading of this tragic play. Even though this was a small percentage of the subjects, this study seems to suggest that addressing the topic of suicide, its warning signs, and who is at risk, is an important component to teaching a classic like Romeo and Juliet.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### *Introduction*

In today's world, educators are constantly struggling with how to reach students. Most teachers are concerned about what is best for their students. They want to send a positive message. However, "public schools increasingly are expected to address social issues that previously were the responsibility of the family, religious organizations and social agencies. Educators often feel overwhelmed and underprepared to deal with adolescents at-risk for depression and suicide, alcohol and other drug use, sexual activities, school dropout, and other complex social issues facing today's adolescents" (Putnam, 1995).

Most English teachers recognize the power of literature in moral development because "it mobilizes an affective response as well as a cognitive one" (Zbikowski and Collins, 1994). This study examines the Shakespearean drama Romeo and Juliet and its influence over students. Romeo and Juliet has become a mainstay to most freshmen English curriculum. This classic love story depicts two teenagers, Romeo and Juliet, who fall in love. Their love, however, cannot be because of their feuding families. Determined to be together they develop a plan that eventually goes wrong. In the end, the two young lovers separately commit suicide, so at loss without the other, not knowing that their love was alive.

Teachers love the universality of Shakespeare's play; however, it is this universality that causes dilemma for many teachers. Teenagers disobeying parents or falling in love is a common aspect of adolescent life. The fact that Romeo and Juliet deal with these issues by committing suicide leaves many teachers nervous about what their students will take from this classic drama.

This can be a serious problem. The teen years are a time of great depression (Stupple, 1987). Every 78 seconds an adolescent attempts suicide, and every 90 minutes an adolescent commits suicide (Putnam, 1995). Suicide is now the third leading cause of death for 15 to 24 year-olds (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 1997). It is no wonder that teachers approach this subject with such care and thoroughness.

The students in their classrooms are struggling with their own identities, striving to achieve independence, and finding love. The combination is dangerous, especially when considering teenagers. Stupple considers teen behavior to be a flirtation with suicide. She describes the daredevil kid, the member of a gang, the drug and alcohol abuser, or the accident prone teen as testimony to this behavior (1987).

Whether Shakespeare is glorifying suicide or is condemning it is a favorite discussion topic of English teachers. Jobs, Berman, O'Carroll, Eastgard, and Knickmeyer found that "this distinction between glorifying the person and condemning the folly of suicide may prove an important tactic in responding to the suicides of prominent or much beloved public figures" (1996).

So are Romeo and Juliet considered beloved public figures? The popularity of the 1996 movie William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet shows that teens love the story. They flocked to the movie theaters and fell in love with stars Leonardo DiCaprio and Claire Danes. This modernized version of the classic story combined with the usual teaching of the play in freshmen curriculum has increased the awareness of Shakespeare's classic drama.

Like most consumers, teens fall for social suggestion and the idea that "everybody's doing it." They tend to buy products because some famous person suggests that they should (Bedore, 1992). Would adolescents be influenced in the same manner by something as serious as suicide? "An increasing number of persons are apt to identify with the 'hero' or

newsworthy individual's suicide" (Stack, 1993) yet would that really transfer to the teaching of Romeo and Juliet?

Another factor teachers need to consider is the media. "If the media describe a suicide in a sensational manner or give excessive attention to a particular suicide, already depressed children may decide to attempt suicide" (Herring, 1990). The possibility that teaching Romeo and Juliet might have a negative effect on even one student is frightening for the educator. It is important then that teachers "challenge students to listen carefully to messages... to consider their implications, and to contemplate their potential impact" (Fischler, 1992).

The education and lives of students are in the hands of their teachers and, for teenagers, non-fictional information about suicide is as dangerous as fictional stories (Taiminen, Salmenpera, and Lehtinen, 1992). Even if a small number of students seem affected by Romeo's and Juliet's suicide for love, educators need to make modifications in their curriculum. By approaching the subject directly, teachers can, hopefully, prevent tragedy from occurring. Haddon found that attention to certain moments within Shakespeare's plays may enhance or refine the understanding of moral qualities (1990). While he did not deal specifically with Romeo and Juliet, the implication that Shakespeare can be used in a positive manner is clear. However, before this is possible, a better understanding is needed about the effect that Romeo and Juliet does have on adolescents.

A review of literature shows that "any problem that contributes to feelings of depression, worthlessness, helplessness, or hopelessness has the potential to trigger suicidal behavior in a vulnerable adolescent" (Putnam, 1995) and that "clustering of suicides seemed to be concentrated among teenagers rather than adults" (Taiminen, Salmenpera, and Lehtinen, 1992). Studies have also shown that there is "no reason to believe that non-

suicidal young people as a group will, invariably, view suicide in a more positive light as a result of...suicidal or violent content” (Biblarz, Brown, Biblarz, Pilgrim, and Baldree, 1991). Therefore, the research hypothesis for this study is that Romeo and Juliet will not have serious suicidal impact on average adolescents unless those adolescents are at a high risk for suicide even before reading the play.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The purpose of this study is to describe the influence of William Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet on Menomonie High School freshmen taking English I as measured by a survey of student perceptions of suicide before and after reading Romeo and Juliet.

### **Objectives**

- To determine if students perceive suicide as glamorous *before* reading the play Romeo and Juliet
- To determine if students perceive suicide as glamorous *after* reading the play Romeo and Juliet
- To determine if Romeo and Juliet influences student perception of suicide
- To determine if curriculum modifications need to be made to educate students on suicide
- To determine if desensitization should be considered for inclusion in a Romeo and Juliet unit

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Review of Literature*

The literature reviewed in this section will focus on several different areas. It will start by examining the concept of suggestibility and how it relates specifically to children. Next, adolescents and suicide and depression will be reviewed as well as examining the influence of media in regards to these topics. Finally, it provides a specific look at literature that deals with suicide and how it can be incorporated appropriately in the classroom.

#### **Suggestibility**

Memory is suggestible (O'Sullivan, Howe, and Marche, 1996). As people we are influenced by what is told to us. One factor that relates to the force of suggestion is the duration of the suggestion (Bancroft, 1995). This is especially true when dealing with children.

Many studies have looked at children as effective witnesses in trial cases. Cassel, Roebbers, and Bjorklund found that children demonstrate elevated suggestibility, particularly to follow-up questions. This finding suggest that non-memory factors were likely involved in young children's higher levels of suggestibility (1996).

While this makes sense with younger children, what effect does suggestibility have on adolescents? As children's memory improves with age, the less suggestible they become and the more their level of suggestibility resembles that of the average adult (Richardson, Gudjonsson, and Kelly, 1995). Singh and Gudjonsson (1992) showed that "even though adolescents are no more likely to yield to leading questions than adults, they are significantly more likely to give into interrogative pressure," like criticism and negative feedback.

(Richardson, Gudjonsson, and Kelly, 1995). Richardson, Gudjonsson, and Kelly found that when “adolescents are pressured (through repeating of the same questions on a number of occasions) then they may in certain circumstances give a false confession to a serious offense,” merely to agree with the interviewer (1995). Children and adolescents tend to be conditioned to accept the suggestions of authority figures without persuasion or argument. “Children are generally more suggestible than adults, probably because the former are more trusting and more influenced by the authority of the source of the suggestions” (Bancroft, 1995).

Musical lyrics is an interesting area to examine in respect to adolescents and suggestibility. Popular music can be seductive, and it is important for teachers to talk about these contradictory issues that are often portrayed in music (Brunner, 1993). Many students, however, honestly do not believe that “a song - especially one with ‘catchy’ lyrics and a good beat - can hurt anyone” (Fischler, 1992).

Brunner writes that “when students suggest to me that kids don’t really pay that much attention to the lyrics of the music they listen to because they are so sensitized, I recognize that response as a conditioned representation of what the knower knows about dominant culture and the status quo” (Brunner, 1993). Educator and researcher Luebke used Ozzy Osbourne’s “Suicide Solution” in a class discussion. “Some parents wanted to censor it, because it contains lines like ‘suicide is the only way out.’ The parents were rightfully concerned about high rates of drug abuse and suicide among young people, and some felt this song encouraged these acts. However, once we began to carefully examine the lyrics, we discovered the song was better described as anti-suicide and anti-drug” (1995).

To say that music and, for that matter, television do not influence adolescents is misguided. “To say that television doesn’t have to have the effects on our cognition and

motivation...misses the point about the effects it does have” (Shrock, 1994). Children often ask questions and make comments as a way of seeking meaning from the problem at hand (Smith, 1996). They are searching to understand and therefore susceptible to suggestion, whether that be from music, television or printed material.

### **Adolescents - Suicide and Depression**

The National Student Health Survey of 8th through 12th graders indicated that 34% of 8th graders had thought seriously about suicide and 15% had actually attempted potentially fatal injuries (Herring, 1990). These statistics are alarming. It is obvious that some students are at a higher risk than others for suicidal behavior. Children who have experienced the suicide of a close family member are nine times more likely to take their own lives than are other youngsters, and 50% of all successful and attempted suicides come from broken homes (Herring, 1990). Children may also develop severe depression from experiences such as losing a loved one or object, being hospitalized, or acquiring an illness, or being force to attend school (Herring, 1990).

Studies conducted in the past decade indicate that about 8 percent of adolescents suffer from some type of depression, partially because adolescents are subjected to confusing signals from the adult world (Carroll, 1997). For adolescents, ending their lives may be merely presupposed by other goals, such as escaping the pain that they think is overwhelming and inescapable (Campbell, 1996). All too often this depression is manifested in suicide. Completed suicides have increased from approximately 1,200 a year to approximately 5,200 per year in the past thirty years (Carroll, 1997).

As teachers, it is important to recognize certain aspects of depression and adolescents. “Child suicides tend to increase during the fall and winter months, with the

highest rates of attempted and successful suicides occurring between October and March (Herring, 1990). “Those (people) who are depressed are likely to endorse more negative self-statements than those who are not” (Connell and Meyer, 1991). “Adolescents who suffer from feelings of hopelessness in terms of their expectations tend to be more anxious and to have more school problems than do hopeful ones” (Carroll, 1997). And finally, “the most vulnerable child is one who is depressed and impulsive and has experienced several negative life events. Any child attempting to cope with severe emotional problems, alone or in an effective way, however, needs assistance” (Herring, 1990).

Most kids want their own identity. They want to be noticed and they want to be understood. To children “death is still somewhat romanticized” (Stupple, 1987). While conducting a research study of suicidal youths admitted to a state mental hospital, researchers Babow and Rowe met “Debbie.” Their case study of “Debbie” showed that her romantic fantasy “perceived dying as a self-induced long sleep from which one awakened to a blissful world of early childhood” (Babow and Rowe, 1990). While “Debbie” may be an extreme case, the point is well taken - to many children and adolescents, ideas of death and even suicide, seem romantic and even glamorous.

“In Sept. 1774, Goethe published his first novel, The Sorrow of Young Werther, whose hero shot himself, unable to bear his desperate love. The book was a sensation and became a European best seller. Many romantic young men identified themselves with the hero and subsequently the number of suicides rose dramatically” (Taiminen, Salmenpera, and Lehtinen, 1992). It is from this story that the term “Werther effect” was coined. Simply defined, it is an increase in the number of suicides caused by suggestion. After the suicides of movie star Marilyn Monroe in the United States, and well known osteopath Stephen Ward in Great Britain, an increase in suicides was detected in both countries (Taiminen,

Salmenpera, and Lehtinen, 1992). “There is relatively strong evidence that suicide contagion is a real phenomenon, and that the effect for contagion is not necessarily confined to suicides in discrete geographic areas. In particular, non-fictional newspaper and television coverage has been associated with a statistically significant excess of suicides (Jobes et al., 1996). The effect of contagion appears to be strongest among adolescents (Jobes et al., 1996). One suicide in a school often triggers a rash of other attempts (Stupple, 1987).

With all of these studies done on contagion, psychologists and counselors braced themselves after the suicide of rock star Kurt Cobain. Surprisingly Jobes et al. found that “there is no marked difference in frequency after Cobain’s death - an unexpected result following this celebrity suicide” (1996). These researchers also noted that “Cobain’s suicide may have significantly and positively increased public awareness about suicide, crisis services and available treatment in a way that few other of our efforts could so well accomplish (Jobes et al., 1996).

Why would some people be more affected than others by the contagion theory? “It would be anticipated that suicide stories would have their greatest triggering effect on suicide when the mood of the audience was suicidal” (Stack, 1992). It makes sense that if those feelings were present, a person may be more likely to carry out a suicide attempt. Taiminen, Salmenpera, and Lehtinen concluded that “suicides triggered by imitation would have eventually happened, even without the effect of suggestion (1992). While this provides some reassurance to the English teacher discussing Romeo and Juliet, it does not alleviate the problem of that one or two students that may indeed be affected by the play. Jobes et al. writes “my sense from years in the business is that the non-celebrity suicides are the most worrisome suicides. Although young people may worship rock stars, they identify with the normal depressed teen peer” (1996).

Biblarz, Brown, Biblarz, Pilgrim and Baldree's study indicated that "university students not at risk for suicide are, nevertheless, influenced by films with suicidal or violent content." They found that students' arousal scores immediately after viewing the films Surviving and Death Wish increased. However, the increase was not maintained, as "arousal in both groups dropped two weeks later to slight below pre-film levels" (1991). This study suggests that teachers may want to do a short lesson on suicide immediately after reading Romeo and Juliet in an effort to confront any possible problems.

### **Literature in the Classroom**

"Suicide is a theme and a reality that we (teachers) are in a unique position to address in our English classrooms" (Stupple, 1987). "Because teens do turn to young adult fiction as a source of information as well as for pleasure or escape, the body of literature which focuses on their problems should be held up to scrutiny" (Carroll, 1997). The influence is powerful.

It is a positive development that we can discuss issues like suicide more openly (Jobes et al., 1996). Whether as whole group instruction or dealing with individual students, teachers need to be keenly aware of suicidal tendencies. Suicidal stories may be viewed under certain circumstances "as sparks that ignite preexisting suicide potential" (Stack, 1993). Seventy-five percent of children who are severely depressed or suicidal turn to their peers (Herring, 1990). Therefore, it is not just the suicidal student who needs education on the topic. Adolescent literature may be capable of "holding the mirror to their worlds as they move toward adulthood" (Carroll, 1997).

English teachers everywhere ask "What do we do when the suicide issue comes up in the literature we teach, in the authors we introduce, in the lives of students we touch?" (Stupple, 1987). Teachers are aware of the power of the word. "Language can connect and

disconnect; it can sustain and destroy. Words have the power to hurt as much as - perhaps more than - any sharpened stick or jagged stone” (Fischler, 1992).

“Since the beginning of the written word, authors have used the reality of death to make their messages more meaningful: Consequently, we are the inheritors of a rich legacy of insight and understanding left to us by the past and present great thinkers and writers” (Hill and Stillion, 1995). Not only is Shakespeare taught in the classroom, but Greek tragedy is often an intricate aspect of English curriculum. Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex finds both Oedipus and Jocasta committing suicide, and the follow up tragedy of Antigone finds Haemon, Eurydice, and Antigone all committing suicide.

Kaplan analyzed both the Greek world and the Biblical world and developed the assumption that the Greek world is suicide promoting and the Biblical world is suicide preventing (1992). As teachers we need to reexamine our curriculum to make sure that all aspects of student learning are covered. The prevalence of suicide in a lot of the classic literature taught is amazing.

On a more positive note, it was found that “suggestions that are presented gently will be perceived differently from those delivered with emotive and shock value” (Bancroft, 1995). This is encouraging to teachers because they are still in control of the situation. Another way teachers can help to facilitate a more positive learning environment is by encouraging student contact “if the materials were causing emotional distress. This offer seemed important in establishing trust between students and faculty” (Hill and Stillion, 1995).

“Honoring students’ thinking and using it to guide instructional decisions is a time-consuming process, which often leads us ‘off course.’ But the time spent exploring these unplanned routes pays dividends in opportunities for authentic assessment of students’

thinking” (Smith, 1996). As educators, “accurate knowledge is one of the keys to understanding the causes and characteristics of adolescents who are at risk for taking their own lives” (Putnam, 1995). Teachers need to know that child suicide is rarely precipitated by a single event (Herring, 1990). Instead, it is “usually a lot of things.” But the question still remains as to whether or not reading a classic tragedy like William Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet might influence some adolescents’ thoughts and feelings about a serious issue like suicide.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Methodology

This study will examine the impact that Romeo and Juliet has on students' perception of suicide. By surveying students before and after reading Shakespeare's play, a descriptive comparison can be made.

#### Objectives

- To determine if students perceive suicide as glamorous *before* reading the play Romeo and Juliet
- To determine if students perceive suicide as glamorous *after* reading the play Romeo and Juliet
- To determine if Romeo and Juliet influences student perception of suicide
- To determine if curriculum modifications need to be made to educate students on suicide
- To determine if desensitization should be considered for inclusion in a Romeo and Juliet unit

#### Description of Subjects

Freshmen students ranging in age from 14 - 15 years old were selected for this study because of the use of Romeo and Juliet in its curriculum. Students who were enrolled in the spring semester of English I at Menomonie High School in 2000 were surveyed. A total of 4 sections with an average of 22 students per section were available for study.

### **Sample Selection**

Students enrolled in English I were invited to participate in this study. Student participation in this study was completely voluntary. While discussion of the themes of Romeo and Juliet was required by the teachers as part of the English I curriculum, students who did not wish to be included in the body knowledge used for the purpose of this study informed the researcher. Students could choose not to participate without any adverse consequences. The English department and administration supported this survey as part of the curriculum process (See Appendix A).

### **Instrumentation**

A survey was developed specifically for this study because most scales dealing with depression and suicide did not fit the intent of this study. The idea for the survey came from examining literature and determining the critical aspects of what this researcher wanted to investigate. The survey was developed for this study by the researcher so reliability and validity will not be able to be determined.

The survey consisted of twenty-one statements and included a Likert Scale of strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), unsure (3), agree (4), and strongly agree (5). The statements on the survey looked at several themes of Romeo and Juliet so that subjects would approach the survey as one relating to Romeo and Juliet and not just another survey dealing with suicide. The responses to statements 8 – 21 are the ones that directly relate to this study (See Appendix B).

**Procedure**

The subjects were administered the survey by their English teachers at the beginning of the Romeo and Juliet unit and again at the end. The same survey was used for both pre and post reading of the play.

Before the survey was given to subjects, a statement was read that explained the purpose of the study (See Appendix C). Subjects were assured that all surveys would be confidential. Subjects were also informed that participation was voluntary.

Subjects responded to the twenty-one statements by filling in circles on a scantron sheet. Subjects returned the completed scantron sheet to a large manilla envelope to ensure confidentiality.

A cross tabulation of frequency counts and percentages was done between the pre-test responses and the post-test responses. A mean score was also determined for both sets of responses. Finally, an independent groups t-test using the pre-test and post-test as the independent variable was done to determine if results were statistically significant.

**Limitations**

A few limitations have been identified. First, subjects came from one school and were all freshmen. Second, subjects completed the surveys anonymously so pre and post responses were not able to be matched to individual subjects. Third, subjects were not asked if they had personally been affected by suicide, which may have influenced responses. And finally, because the Romeo and Juliet unit was the last unit to be taught in the curriculum, subjects completed the post survey on the last days of the school year when students can develop an apathetic attitude.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Results

This study examines students' perceptions on suicide before and after reading Romeo and Juliet. Initially, 83 students were surveyed. Three of the 83 pre-test surveys were discarded because the subjects had filled in their scantron sheets with dot patterns making the data invalid. All 83 post-test surveys were deemed valid for use. A crosstabulation of frequencies and percentages was determined for each of the survey statements as well as a numerical mean. Finally, a t-test was done to determine if results were statistically significant.

#### **Objective 1 – to determine if students perceive suicide as glamorous before reading the play Romeo and Juliet**

The survey asked subjects about their perception of suicide as glamorous at the beginning of the Romeo and Juliet unit. Question 17 on the survey stated “Suicide is a glamorous way to end one’s life.” Eighty-six percent of the subjects disagreed with the statement. This seems to suggest that adolescents are aware of the tragedy of suicide. However, 5.1% of students did agree with the concept of suicide being a glamorous way to end one’s life and another 8.9% were unsure. Table 1 presents the findings from the survey completed before the reading of the play.

**Table 1**

Suicide is a glamorous way to end one’s life.

	1 - Strongly Disagree	2 -Disagree	3 - Unsure	4 - Agree	5 – Strongly Agree	Mean Score

PRE	frequency %	60 75.9%	8 10.1%	7 8.9%	1 1.3%	3 3.8%	1.47
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**Objective 2 – to determine if students perceive suicide as glamorous after reading the play Romeo and Juliet**

After completing the Romeo and Juliet unit of the curriculum, subjects were again asked their thoughts about suicide as a glamorous way to end one’s life. Eighty-eight percent of subjects did not agree with the statement that “suicide is a glamorous way to end one’s life.” The number of unsure responses decreased to 4.8%, but the number of subjects who agreed with the idea of suicide as glamorous increased to 7.2%. Table 2 presents the specific breakdown of subjects’ responses to the statement.

**Table 2**

Suicide is a glamorous way to end one’s life.

		1 - Strongly Disagree	2 -Disagree	3 - Unsure	4 - Agree	5 – Strongly Agree	Mean Score
POST	frequency %	53 63.9%	20 24.1%	4 4.8%	5 6.0%	1 1.2%	1.57

**Objective 3 – to determine if Romeo and Juliet influences student perception of suicide.**

Statements 8 – 16 and 18 – 21 of the survey dealt with general thoughts concerning the issues of depression and suicide. Subjects responded to these statements both before and after reading the tragedy of Romeo and Juliet.

Nearly 73% of subjects said they were satisfied or content with their lives before reading the play compared to 74.7% after reading the play. Subjects’ perception of their peers was measured as they responded to the statement “Depression is common among teenagers.” A high percentage of subjects were unsure, 36.3% before reading and 28.9%

after reading. The majority of subjects, 55.1%, felt that depression is common among teenagers before reading Romeo and Juliet. On the other hand, just 40.9% of subjects agreed that depression is common among teenagers after the reading of the tragedy.

Subjects reported on the pre-test that they felt the chances of suicide are less when teenagers have peer support groups (62%), and that number went up to 69.5% after reading Romeo and Juliet. Similarly, 65.4% of subjects agreed that parental support decreased the chance of suicide before reading Romeo and Juliet, and with 61.7% recognizing the importance of parental support after reading the tragedy. It was encouraging that 82.6% of subjects reported on the pre-test that they had a peer to turn to when they felt sad or hopeless and 75.9% agreed on the post-test that they had a friend to turn to when they felt sad or hopeless. Interestingly, the percentage of subjects who have an adult in their life to turn to when they feel sad or hopeless is slightly lower. On both the pre and post-tests, 67.5% of subjects remarked that they had an adult to turn to in their lives.

Statements 12 and 13 of the survey examined whether or not teens feel that they are influenced by suggestive music lyrics or by the violence in movies and television. Not surprisingly, subjects disagreed, 63.8% before and 59.1% after reading Romeo and Juliet, that the behavior of teenagers is influenced by suggestive music lyrics. On the other hand, only 48.8% of subjects disagreed that the behavior of teenagers is influenced by the violence in movies and television before reading the play. However, after reading Romeo and Juliet, the disagreed responses went up to 60.2%.

Subjects were also asked to respond to the statement that “teenagers engage in behavior where they abuse or hurt themselves;” 56.3% of subjects agreed with that statement before reading the play, but only 37.9% of them agreed after reading the tragedy.

Other statements on the survey looked at perceptions specifically related to suicide. When responding to whether or not one unfortunate life event may lead to suicidal behavior, 57.5% of subjects agreed on the pre-test with only 46.9% agreeing on the post-test. When posed with the statement “suicide is not an answer to a problem”, pre-test subjects agreed 85.1%, with 63.8% of them strongly agreeing. The number dipped slightly after reading the play with 76% of subjects saying that suicide is not an answer to a problem.

Subjects also responded to the statement of “talking about suicide to troubled teens may give them suicidal ideas;” 41.8% of subjects were unsure about this possibility before reading the play and 33.7% were still unsure after completing the Romeo and Juliet unit. On the pre-test, 38% disagreed that talking about suicide may give teens suicidal ideas and 45.8% disagreed on the post-test.

Another statement that had a wider range of responses to it was “suicide often occurs without any warning signs.” Before reading Romeo and Juliet, 49.4% of subjects disagreed while 30.4% agreed with the statement; 20.3% were unsure. After reading the play, 43.4% of subjects disagreed and 32.5% agreed with 24.1% stating that they were unsure if suicide often occurs without any warning signs.

Appendix D presents a crosstabulation of each statement and contains a specific breakdown of subject responses both pre- reading and post- reading of Romeo and Juliet.

#### **Objective 4 – to determine if curriculum modifications need to be made to educate students on suicide**

By taking a closer look at the statements and subjects’ responses, the researcher will be able to make suggestions for possible curriculum modifications based on some of the above discussed statements in the final chapter of this paper.

**Objective 5 – to determine if desensitization should be considered for inclusion in a Romeo and Juliet unit**

A t-test was done on the statements in the survey. A statistically significant difference was found in three of the statements. Interestingly, in all three cases, the subjects' change in perception was for the positive.

Before reading the play, the mean score to the statement “Depression is common among teenagers” was 3.66, but after reading *Romeo and Juliet*, the mean score was 3.08. This statistically significant change seems to imply that subjects felt depression was less common after reading the play.

Likewise, a statistically significant change was found in the statement “Teenagers engage in behavior where they abuse or hurt themselves. The mean score before reading the play was 3.54, but after completing the unit was 3.01. Again, this suggests that subjects felt that teenage self-abusive behavior was less prevalent.

And finally, the statement “one unfortunate life event may lead to suicidal behavior” also saw a statistically significant change. On the pre-test, subjects reported a mean score of 3.49, but on the post-test the mean score dropped to 3.09. This change in responses was especially encouraging for the researcher. It seems to imply that what is currently being taught in the Romeo and Juliet unit is increasing student awareness about the topic of suicide. Table 3 presents the complete results of the t-test.

**Table 3 t-test for Equality**

Statement	t	df	Sig (2-tailed)	Significance level
Depression is common among teenagers.	3.526	161	.001	.001
Teenagers engage in behavior where they abuse or hurt themselves.	3.275	161	.001	.001
One unfortunate life event may lead to suicidal behavior.	2.244	159	.026	.05

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

In the June/July 2000 issue of Young Miss the article “I Love You to Death” focuses on the double suicides of three teenage couples. It discusses how some teenagers may suffer from the “delusion that suicide is, ironically, the ultimate declaration of undying love” (Howard 2000). The article also examined the suicide message of one couple who declared “We want to be like Romeo and Juliet” (Howard 2000).

This article, printed in a popular female oriented adolescent magazine, reminds adults that the issue of suicide is a serious one for teens, and the reference to Romeo and Juliet is especially frightening for educators. This chapter will examine the results of the study on students’ perceptions of suicide before and after reading Romeo and Juliet in an effort to gain understanding as to what needs to be done, if anything, to current English curriculum that often includes the teaching of this popular Shakespearean tragedy.

#### Discussion

In the spring of 2000, eighty-three Menomonie High School freshmen students were surveyed both before and after reading Romeo and Juliet on their perceptions of suicide. For the purpose of this study, several aspects related to suicide were examined.

On the pre-test, 55.1% of the subjects agreed that depression is common among teenagers while another 36.3% said that they were unsure. This seems to suggest that adolescents in today’s society are faced with issues of depression. Because depression is fairly prevalent, educators need to be aware of this when dealing with difficult issues like suicide and the media. The subjects disagreed with the statement that “the behavior of

teenagers is influenced by suggestive music lyrics” or “violence in movies and television”. Studies, however, have shown that children are more suggestible than adults when it comes to the media (Bancroft, 1995 and Shrock, 1994). The subjects’ responses could possibly be attributed to the fact that teens honestly believe that they are not affected by violence in the media. This point is important to keep in mind when examining other issues dealing with adolescents.

Subjects recognized the importance of peer support groups and parental support when dealing with issues of suicide. And fortunately, 82.6% of subjects reported on the pre-test that they had a peer to turn to when they felt sad or hopeless.

On the other hand, only 67.5% of subjects agreed that they had an adult to turn to when they felt sad or hopeless. This number remained the same for both the pre and post reading of Romeo and Juliet. While the percentage seems relatively high, there are approximately 1/3 of the subjects who do not have an adult to turn to in their lives. This is an alarmingly high percentage of the subjects.

The portrayal of suicide in Romeo and Juliet is often discussed in the English classroom as educators help their students examine whether or not Shakespeare makes suicide appear to be a glamorous way to end one’s life. Only 5.1% of subjects felt that “suicide is a glamorous way to end one’s life” when given the pre-test. After reading the play, that number increased to 7.2%. While this increase is small, it seems to imply that Romeo and Juliet may have some influence over a certain percentage of the student population.

Likewise, 3.8% of subjects strongly disagreed with the statement “suicide is not an answer to a problem” on the pre-test, but on the post-test that percentage jumped to 9.6%.

This increase from 3 to 8 students is a small percentage, but when the issue is of such a serious nature, any increase seems to indicate that the topic needs to be addressed.

The survey also showed that subjects were unsure if talking about suicide to troubled teens would give them suicidal ideas. They were also split on the statement “suicide often occurs without any warning signs.” On the pre-test, 49.4% disagreed, 20.3% were unsure, and 30.4% agreed. Similarly, on the post-test, 43.4% disagreed, 24.1% were unsure, and 32.5% agreed. This seems to indicate that students need more information about suicide and its warning signs.

## **Conclusions**

Overall, the findings of this study seem to suggest that teaching Romeo and Juliet in the classroom did not influence students’ perceptions of suicide. While this is reassuring to educators, the fact that some students did seem to be affected by the reading of the tragic play is noteworthy. Even if only one student’s perception of suicide is made more glamorous after reading the play, educators need to address the issue.

Because the topic is of such a serious and important nature, suicide needs to be discussed when teaching the unit Romeo and Juliet. It is encouraging from the results of this study, however, that what is currently being done in the curriculum appears to be working for the majority of students.

This study does seem to indicate that more education is needed on the topic of suicide. Perhaps educators should include a short mini-unit on suicide, its warning signs, who may be at risk, and who to turn to in times of hopelessness. This short unit might just help save that depressed teen by making his/her peers more aware and more able to offer

appropriate assistance or even for a peer to come forward when concerns arise about another student.

Another conclusion of this study that schools can address is the high percentage of students that appear to be lacking a supportive adult in their life. It is important for teens to feel that they are valued; educators need to take the time to get to know students and to be available if students need to talk.

The majority of students are able to distinguish the difference between fiction and real-life. That, combined with the fact that a high percentage of subjects are content with their lives, is reassuring for educators who often deal with difficult subjects such as suicide.

### **Recommendations for further research**

One of the limitations of this study was that subjects completed the surveys anonymously so pre and post responses were not able to be matched to individual subjects. It would have been beneficial in some cases to examine certain subjects' responses and to make a clearer comparison of students' perceptions. It would also be interesting to conduct this survey with students in a different school district, where the teaching of Romeo and Juliet may be slightly different, to see if the results are similar.

The survey itself was created by the researcher and may have had its own limitations. The use of negatives such as "not" in statements may have confused subjects who are not good readers. Subjects may have had an apathetic attitude towards the survey because it was not "for a grade." Also, subjects completed the post-test on the last days of the school year. It would be interesting to reproduce the study at a different time of the school year.

Finally, it may have been beneficial to ask subjects if they had been personally affected by suicide. This may have influenced their responses to the statements because dealing with suicide is such a personal issue.

While this study confirmed the hypothesis that Romeo and Juliet will not have serious suicidal impact on average adolescents, it does not look directly at the student who is at a high risk before reading the tragedy. Today's adolescents are faced with many complex issues in their lives. Students are struggling with their own identities, striving to achieve independence, and finding love. If educators are going to reach students, they need to be aware of teens' perceptions of suicide and other important issues, and they need to take the time to let students know that they care.

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## Appendix A



## MENOMONIE SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL

School District of the Menomonie Area

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SchoolDistrictWebPage a <http://msd.k12.wi.us>

THOMAS WIATR  
Associate Principal

PEGGY KOLDEN  
Director of K-12 Student Activities

KEVIN L. MATTHEWS Principal

April 24, 2000

Dear UW-Stout Graduate Program:

Jennifer Smith has received the approval of the Menomonie High School English Department to complete necessary research for her research proposal *neines ofromeo and Juliet. a study of the perceptions offreshmen English students before and after reading the play*

The themes that she is examining for her research paper, including concepts of love, parental involvement, and issues of suicide, are all established themes of *Romeo and Juliet*, and are a part of the English curriculum at Menomonie High School. These themes are discussed and examined in detail when our freshmen English students read this classic Shakespearean play.

If you have any questions concerning the curriculum, please feel free to contact me at (715) 232-2609 ext. 201.

Sincerely,

Al Foxwell  
English Department Chair

**Appendix B****Thoughts on the Themes of Romeo and Juliet**

Please respond to the following statements by filling in the appropriate circle on the scantron sheet:

**Strongly Disagree = A    Disagree = B    Unsure = C    Agree = D    Strongly Agree =E**

1. I believe in love at first sight.
2. When you are in love, you want to be with that person all the time.
3. Teenagers are too young to experience true love.
4. The adults in my life expect me to act in a certain manner.
5. It is the parents' responsibility to protect their child from bad influences.
6. Parents do not need to know what their teenagers are doing.
7. It is important to me that my parents approve of my boyfriend/girlfriend.
8. I am satisfied or content with my life.
9. Depression is common among teenagers.
10. I have a peer (friend) to turn to when I feel sad or hopeless.
11. I have an adult to turn to when I feel sad or hopeless.
12. The behavior of teenagers is influenced by suggestive music lyrics.
13. The behavior of teenagers is influenced by the violence in movies and television.
14. Teenagers engage in behavior where they abuse or hurt themselves.
15. One unfortunate life event may lead to suicidal behavior.
16. Suicide is not an answer to a problem.
17. Suicide is a glamorous way to end one's life.
18. Talking about suicide to troubled teens may give them suicidal ideas.
19. Suicide often occurs without any warning signs.
20. The chances for suicide are less when teenagers have peer support systems.
21. The chances for suicide are less when teenagers have parental support.

**Appendix C**

## Agreement to Participate as a Research Subject

Project title: FRESHMEN ENGLISH STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF SUICIDE  
BEFORE AND AFTER READING ROMEO AND JULIET

Jennifer Smith, graduate student at the University of Wisconsin- Stout, is conducting a research project to determine if the reading of Romeo and Juliet has any impact on students' perceptions concerning the central themes to the play. We would appreciate your participation in this study as it might determine the need for alternative lessons or curriculum expansion. We do not anticipate that this study will present any medical or social risk to you. The information we gather will be kept strictly confidential and any reports of the findings will not contain your name or any other identifying information.

Your participation in this project is completely voluntary. While discussion of the themes of Romeo and Juliet is required by your teacher as part of the English I curriculum, if you do not wish to be included in the body of knowledge used for the purpose of this study, simply tell the researcher. You may choose not to participate without any adverse consequences to you.

Once the study is completed, we would be glad to share the results with you.

NOTE: Questions or concerns about participation in the research or subsequent complaints should be addressed first to the researcher or research advisor and second to Dr. Ted Knous, Chair, UW-Stout Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research, 11 HH, UW-Stout, Menomonie, WI 54751, phone (715) 232-1126.

Appendix D

Crosstabulation and Mean Score

		1-Strongly Disagree	2 - Disagree	3- Unsure	4- Agree	5-Strongly Agree	Mean Score
I am satisfied or content with my life.	PRE frequency %	5 6.3%	6 7.5%	11 13.8%	43 53.8%	15 18.8%	3.71
	POST frequency %	6 7.2%	6 7.2%	9 10.8%	42 50.6%	20 24.1%	3.77
Depression is common among teenagers.	PRE frequency %	1 1.3%	6 7.5%	29 36.3%	27 33.8%	17 21.3%	3.66
	POST frequency %	9 10.8%	16 19.3%	24 28.9%	27 32.5%	7 8.4%	3.08
I have a peer (friend) to turn to when I feel sad or hopeless.	PRE frequency %	2 2.5%	4 5.0%	8 10.0%	29 36.3%	37 46.3%	4.19
	POST frequency %	6 7.2%	7 8.4%	7 8.4%	32 38.6%	31 37.3%	3.90
I have an adult to turn to when I feel sad or hopeless.	PRE frequency %	2 2.5%	8 10.0%	16 20.0%	30 37.5%	24 30.0%	3.83
	POST frequency %	5 6.0%	12 14.5%	10 12.0%	37 44.6%	19 22.9%	3.64
The behavior of teenagers is influenced by suggestive music lyrics.	PRE frequency %	26 32.5%	25 31.3%	13 16.3%	12 15.0%	4 5.0%	2.29
	POST frequency %	32 38.6%	17 20.5%	18 21.7%	10 12.0%	6 7.2%	2.29
The behavior of teenagers is influenced by the violence in movies and television.	PRE frequency %	20 25.0%	19 23.8%	18 22.5%	18 22.5%	5 6.3%	2.61
	POST frequency %	30 36.1%	20 24.1%	18 21.7%	13 15.7%	2 2.4%	2.24

Teenagers engage in behavior where they abuse or hurt

PRE frequency % 2

2.6% 9  
11.3% 24  
30.0% 34  
42.5% 11

13.8% 3.54 POST frequency % 11

13.3% 12  
14.5% 28  
33.7% 29  
34.9% 3

3.6% 3.01 One unfortunate life event may lead to suicidal behavior. PRE frequency % 4

5.0% 9  
11.3% 21  
26.6% 36  
45.0% 10

12.5% 3.49 POST frequency % 13

16.0% 12  
14.8% 18  
22.2% 31  
38.3% 7

8.6% 3.09 Suicide is not an answer to a problem. PRE frequency % 3

3.8% 3  
3.8% 6  
7.5% 17  
21.3% 51

63.8% 4.38 POST frequency % 8

9.6% 3  
3.6% 9

10.8% 11  
 13.3% 52  
 62.7% 4.16 Suicide is a glamorous way to end one's life. PRE frequency  
 % 60

75.9% 8  
 10.1% 7  
 8.9% 1  
 1.3% 3

3.8% 1.47 POST frequency

53  
 63.9%  
 20  
 24.1%  
 4  
 4.8%  
 5  
 6.0%  
 1  
 1.2%  
 1.57

Talking about suicide to troubled teens may give them suicidal  
 PRE frequency

10  
 12.7%  
 20  
 25.3%  
 33  
 41.8%  
 11  
 13.9%  
 5  
 6.3%  
 2.76

POST frequency

17  
 20.5%  
 21  
 25.3%  
 28  
 33.7%  
 13  
 15.7%  
 4  
 4.8%  
 2.59

Suicide often occurs without any warning  
 PRE frequency

15  
 19.0%  
 24  
 30.4%  
 16  
 20.3%  
 18  
 22.8%  
 6  
 7.6%  
 2.70

POST frequency

12

14.5%  
24  
28.9%  
20  
24.1%  
23  
27.7%  
4  
4.8%  
2.80

The chances for suicide are less when teenagers have peer support  
PRE frequency

4  
5.1%  
5  
6.3%  
21  
26.6%  
26  
32.9%  
23  
29.1%  
3.75

POST frequency

9  
11.0%  
4  
4.9%  
12  
14.6%  
32  
39.0%  
25  
30.5%  
3.73

The chances for suicide are less when teenagers have parental  
PRE frequency

6  
7.7%  
6  
7.7%  
15  
19.2%  
25  
32.1%  
26  
33.3%  
3.76

POST frequency

6  
7.4%  
5  
6.2%  
20  
24.7%  
23  
28.4%  
27  
33.3%  
3.74

