Reviewer's report

Title: Do schools differ in suicide risk? The influence of school and neighbourhood on attempted suicide, suicidal ideation and self-harm among secondary school pupils.

Version: 1 Date: 18 March 2011

Reviewer: Sean Kidd

Reviewer's report:

Review of: “Do schools differ in suicide risk?”

General: Overall this paper addresses a very important topic with a useful data set. There are several points that would seem to require further development. These include a better coverage of the existing literature, an improved integration of a theoretical model, and most importantly reframing the paper away from what seems like an exploratory study. A lot of research and theory has concentrated on these issues and specific hypothesis testing would seem indicated.

Introduction:

• Beginning the introduction with coverage of suicide clusters/contagion seems a little peripheral to the central thrust of the paper – seeming like something that warrants more of a sidenote than central commentary. (minor)
• Providing a theoretical framework would assist in providing a clear background (e.g. transactional theory). While the authors introduce Durkheim in the latter part of the introduction, it does not seem well integrated. In some ways the introduction reads more like a discussion of measures and rationale for methods rather than a thorough review of the literature. Whether Durkheim or transaction – introducing it earlier and working a more thorough review into the framework would seem a better approach. (major)
• The authors might look into work with the national longitudinal data set from the U.S., noting that Kidd et al., in SLTB did some work in this area. (major)
• The study is framed as exploratory with no hypotheses. Such an approach would not seem indicated given the existing body of literature. At present a model is implied, but not clearly stated. (major)

Methods:

• More information on the Parental Bonding Instrument is needed (e.g., validity and reliability) – also, why was factor analysis used to divide a validated scale in this context? (major)
• Where did the neighbourhood questions come from/how were they developed? (major)
• See same for school variables. Particularly school context – this measure is
unclear. (major)

Results:

• In the univariate analysis section there is no comment on the parent support measure. (major)
• In the multivariate section greater clarity around outcomes at 15 vs 19 would be helpful. (minor)
• It would seem that a stronger analysis strategy is needed, one linked to a specific model to be tested/hypotheses rather than a general exploration. Possibly by more clearly indicating in the results section which aspects of school support link up with suicidality above and beyond other variables (also consideration of removing prior mental health risk as an IV given overlay with suicidality). Also, an examination of time effects/interactions would seem possible. It would seem the authors could do more with this data. (major)

Discussion:

• Again, as noted above, Durkheim’s model (at least as it is articulated here) is somewhat static with transactional models having better support in the literature. (major)
• As noted above, better coverage of the literature would seem indicated. Overall, the discussion section could be contextualized better than it is at present. (major)
• The implications section focuses almost solely on religion. This would seem to drift from the primary focus of the findings around youth feeling disconnected at school. (minor)

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: Yes, and I have assessed the statistics in my report.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests