

THE MOPE SQUAD: A *CURRERE* EXPLORATION OF AN UNINTENDED RESULT OF A TEEN-SUICIDE PREVENTION PROGRAM

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This essay details the results of a *currere* exploration (Pinar, 1975) embarked upon by a group of recent high school graduates who called themselves the “Mope Squad.” The Mope Squad was an informal, mental-health, peer support group that began organically in response to the students’ high school’s implementation of an official teen-suicide prevention program called Hope Squad. According to the Hope Squad website, Hope Squad is a “school-based peer support team,” whose explicit curricular goals are to work with local health professionals to learn to “watch for at-risk students, provide friendship, identify suicide-warning signs, and seek help from adults” (Hopesquad, 2018, n.p.). The essay provides background into what the Hope Squad is, what its goals are, how it was implemented in this particular school, and how the Mope Squad was formed in response. I then provide results from a group interview with the Mope Squad in which I used the *currere* method as a framework to guide them through the process of developing, together, a clear picture of the circumstances that gave rise to the Mope Squad; an exploration of the future of the Mope Squad, both as an organization and for the individual members; an understanding of the relationship between the Hope Squad curriculum and the formation and function of the Mope Squad; and what actions might be taken by those interested in preventing student suicide and promoting mental health in schools. I close by reflecting in a meta-*currereian* sort of way on the interview process itself and the use of *currere* as a framework for conducting group interviews.

ORIGINS: HOPE SQUAD CURRICULUM AND THE EMERGENCE OF MOPE SQUAD

Hope Squad is a suicide prevention curriculum that has been enacted in schools across the country. As of 2018, Hope Squads could “be found in over 90 elementary schools, over 200 junior high and high schools in Utah; in 60 schools in states such as Texas, Indiana, North Carolina, Alaska, Wyoming, and Idaho; and in seven schools in Canada” (Wright-Berryman, Hudnall, Hopkins, & Bledsoe, 2018, p. 125). The case discussed in this paper is that of a Hope Squad that was initiated in the spring of 2018 in a large, middle-class, suburban, public high school in South West Ohio. As is explained in the Hope Squad literature, the program is initiated by the school engaging in a selection process, where the students of the school nominate students to whom they feel they could open up if they were having a problem they needed to talk about (Hopesquad, 2018). Those nominations are then reviewed by the group of faculty and staff who will administer the program, and “8-10 students per grade level” are chosen as members of the Hope Squad (Wright-Berryman et al., 2018, p. 125). Under supervision of, “three to five school staff who volunteer to supervise the members, providing support, training, mentoring, and guidance for referral of distressed students” (Wright-Berryman et al., 2018, p. 125), the group of students receives training about “suicide risk, communication with peers, how to help a friend, bullying, grief, and self-care” (Wright-Berryman et al., p. 125). The Hope Squad is introduced to the school and engages in activities that center around positive school experiences throughout the school year. In the case of

this particular Hope Squad, for example, the group had hot chocolate donated from a local coffee shop to hand out as students came into the school on a particularly cold winter morning. The intention of the program is that the Hope Squad students will become visible, accessible peers to whom students experiencing emotional difficulties may confide, giving the Squad and its advisors the opportunity to intervene and direct “distressed students” to the help that they may need.

The Mope Squad was initially a group of 6 seniors who met daily for lunch in one of the dressing rooms at the back of the theater in the school. Everyone in the group was involved in the school’s theater program, taking acting classes and participating in the program’s various productions. They all gravitated to their small, quiet meeting space at first in self-defense against the intense, loud, crowded school cafeteria. As they began to spend even more time together, they realized that they all had experienced times of darkness and crises in feelings of self-worth during the course of their high school careers. I asked them when they began to think of themselves as more than a group of students eating lunch together, and they agreed that it was when they adopted the name Mope Squad. On that occasion, one of the Squad members was venting about difficulties in her life and dramatically gestured to the ceiling and shouted, “Hope Squad, where are you? I need you,” to which another member replied, “We don’t need no Hope Squad. We’ve got the Mope Squad right here.” They all embraced the name, and with its spin on the Hope Squad, they all also began to view their time together as an opportunity to engage in providing each other with a safe space in which to discuss difficulties they were having, to talk about any mental health issues they felt they were dealing with, to provide suggestions to each other for improving their mental health, and, above all else, to serve as an unwavering, judgment-free group of peers who would support each other no matter what.

USE OF THE CURRERE METHOD AND MY RESEARCH PROCESS

I went into the process of gathering the data for this paper with the intention of trying to figure out how the official Hope Squad curriculum had resulted in the Mope Squad offshoot. Equally, if not more important, however, was my methodological commitment in conducting this research to, as far as was possible, protect the cohesion and dedication of the Mope Squad to each other and to their continued existence as a support group. As a result of that commitment, I turned to Pinar’s (1975) method of *currere* as a framework for gathering the data that would allow me to examine the Hope Squad/Mope Squad phenomenon. While *currere* is generally engaged in by the individual, more and more often it is being used by pairs and groups of scholars to investigate the nature of their curricular experiences (e.g., Brown & Docherty-Skippen, 2018; Hall, Suarez, Lee, & Slattery, 2017; Poetter & Googins, 2015; Porter & Gallagher, 2017; Wallace & Byers, 2018).

Some scholars even go so far as to argue that *currere* is rooted in a pluralistic, communal, relational mindset (McMulty & Osmond, 2019). “Currere,” as elucidated by Poetter (2018, as quoted in McNulty & Osmond, 2019), “transforms us from the ‘I’ to the ‘we’” (p. 2). Huddleston (2019), explains further that “*currere* insists that our self-reflection is only worth what it allows us to do in conversation with others to cultivate relationships” (p. 29). He adds that “by being in conversation with other people,” as we engage in the *currere* process, “we make sure that our newly crafted understanding of ourselves does not negatively impact other people” (Huddleston, 2019, pp. 29-30). Given that the purpose of the Mope Squad was, indeed, to do just that, to gain a “newly crafted understanding” of self while “not negatively impacting others,” and given that

my central methodological commitment was to, likewise, gain a new understanding of the group's experiences while preventing any negative impact, *currere* was an ideal framework to use as the basis of our work together.

To engage in this work, I first devised a list of questions based on the four moments of *currere* (Pinar, 1975) that would guide our discussion time. Those questions, which were shared with the group ahead of our meeting, were as follows:

- What is the Mope Squad? Describe it for me.
- Think back to the time when the Mope Squad was first formed. Tell me about that experience.
- Describe a memory that you have of the Mope Squad, and tell me why it was significant for you.
- Think about your future. How do you think your lives in college and as adults may be impacted by having been a member of the Mope Squad?
- What do you imagine might be the future of the Hope Squad program at your school? What might be the future of the Mope Squad?
- What can schools learn from the Mope Squad?
- Do you think there are lessons from the story of the Mope Squad that could help make the Hope Squad program better?
- What do you think is the relationship between the Hope Squad program and the formation of the Mope Squad?

In addition to sharing these questions with the group, I took the first 15 minutes of our time together to give them a crash course in *currere*, what it is, what purposes it may serve, and why I chose it as the basis for our work. I then encouraged them to engage in a conversation with each other based on the questions that I would ask and that would be audio recorded so that I could analyze it at a later time. As time passed, we fell into a rhythm of me asking one of the above questions, which would be followed by a frenzy of conversation, interrupted by quite a bit of laughter and the general merriment that accompanies a group of friends discussing something about which they are passionate. Over time, the conversation would slow, as if it were the result of some crank having been turned that was gradually winding to a halt. I would ask another question, and the discussion would ratchet right back up again.

When we had made our way through my questions and they had spent almost two hours with me, we adjourned our meeting. I used a free, online transcription service to transcribe the audio recording and went over the transcript while listening to the recording to ensure accuracy. The transcript was then sent to the group for review and approval. As we had agreed at the outset, they were free to alter, amend, or delete any of the content before I would begin to use it for this paper. They all approved the transcript without changes. I then wrote a draft of this paper, which was, again, sent to the group for their approval. All approved the content as an accurate representation of both what was said and what they feel to be their understanding of the Hope Squad/Mope Squad dynamic. I will return at the end of the paper to further consider the degree to which the choice to use *currere* was beneficial to this process. Before doing so, however, I offer the results of my analysis of the data gathered from the Mope Squad's *currere* exploration.

RESULTS OF THE GROUP INTERVIEW

As is common, yet not required, in the *currere* process, the Mope Squad and I began with regression, as I asked them to tell me about what the Mope Squad is and how

it came to be. In response, they first began to discuss the implementation of the Hope Squad at their school. I asked them to think back to that time and to relate stories to me about it in as much detail as they could. True to the tight-knit nature of the group, they began talking amongst themselves, quickly shifting from addressing me to addressing each other, as they related their memories of the time and began to paint a picture of how the Hope Squad curriculum came to life in their school.

As noted above, the Hope Squad curriculum begins with the nomination of students who members of the student body feel they could approach if they needed to discuss difficult and/or emotional issues they were having. While the process as it played out in their high school resulted in certain members of the Hope Squad who cared for their fellow students and who earnestly hoped to make a difference in the culture of their school, the process was largely perceived by the members of the Mope Squad as a popularity contest, which also resulted in some students becoming members of Hope Squad who admitted to members of the Mope Squad that they had only taken the post because it would look good on a college application. Additionally, in this particular manifestation of the Hope Squad, the results of the nomination process were made public before the final selection process had taken place. Once the nominees were selected, the students and their parents had to attend an information session and then had to agree to take their spot on the Squad. The Mope Squad related stories of students who felt like they couldn't say no to being on the Squad because it would make them seem callous or selfish.

The group of 10 students who ended up on the Hope Squad felt to the members of Mope Squad to be an inauthentic community (Sergiovanni, 1994, which will be discussed further below) that was a mixture of those who really wanted to be there and those who did not. When we would talk later in our session together about what made the Mope Squad work, all of the Mope Squad members noted that they, themselves, were well equipped to help each other because they had experienced struggles with self-esteem and feelings of just not having their lives together. The perception created by the curriculum of the Hope Squad was that its members were selected for the job because they seemed to be sailing through high school without any difficulties, making them, perhaps, not the best sources of advice for their fellow students.

When we moved from talking about the past to talking about the future of the Hope Squad at their alma mater, we quickly and organically shifted through the progression, synthesis, and analysis phases as they discussed the possibilities. First, the Mope Squad was both adamant and clear that the Hope Squad would, given time, become an effective organization. However, they argued that one of their biggest problems with the curriculum was the public nature of the organization. The amount of time and money spent marketing the organization to the student body was perceived by the Mope Squad as all flash and no substance. One of the members of the Mope Squad was also on the Hope Squad, and she acknowledged that the group probably made a mistake in deciding to focus all of their time and efforts on promoting positive school culture. Their attempts at doing so came off to the rest of the group as somewhat shallow and as being more about trying to make the school look good than about providing the students with the support they needed. Additionally, they felt that the publicizing of the group negatively impacted its effectiveness. One of the central components of the Hope Squad curriculum is to make visible and available a group of students to whom those in distress may apply for support. In making these students visible, however, they may also have made them less approachable. Mope Squad members told compelling stories of having heard rumors about a student's mental state starting simply because someone had seen that

student talking quietly with a Hope Squad member, which brings us to the central flaw in the Hope Squad curriculum as identified by the Mope Squad—a lack of trust.

The members of Mope Squad argued that, other than the Hope Squad member who was part of their ranks, they didn't know any of the Hope Squad contingent well enough to confide in them. They said that this was simply a flaw in the original curriculum, which is designed to field a group of 8-10 members for each grade of the Hope Squad. The senior class of which the Mope Squad members had been a part was made up of over 700 students. It didn't take much analysis for the group to conclude there were, certainly, many in their class who did not know any of the Hope Squad members at all. Further, the students said that there was a general fear in the school that every encounter with a Hope Squad member would get kicked up through the ranks of the organization to counselors and administration, perhaps when it wasn't necessary. Shifting again organically back to the regressive mode, one of the Mope Squad members told a story of venting about having a bad day only to receive a text offering official assistance from a member of the Hope Squad. The experience suggested to him both that the Hope Squad member couldn't be trusted as someone to whom he could blow off steam without it becoming an issue and made him question the training that would cause someone to mistake that simple venting as a cry for help.

While it may seem, given what I have related so far, that the majority of our time together was taken up with complaining about Hope Squad, that is far from the truth. However, the flaws in and difficulties with the Hope Squad curriculum that were pointed out by the Mope Squad were central to their understanding of the circumstances that led to the formation of their group. When asked if the Mope Squad would have formed if it had not been for the Hope Squad, the group was unanimous that it certainly would have not. Further, they agreed that, to a great extent, their group formed in response to what they viewed as problems with the Hope Squad, coupled with an appreciation for the intentions of the Hope Squad curriculum and the efforts of the members of Hope Squad who were dedicated to the program.

When relating tales about the origins of their group, they noted that, in contrast to the way in which the Hope Squad group was formed, membership in the Mope Squad was entirely rooted in mutual interests, a love of theater and a need to retreat from the chaos of the school cafeteria. In engaging in my own *currere* analysis and synthesis of the data provided by the Mope Squad, I immediately was reminded of Sergiovanni (1994), who defines authentic communities as “collections of individuals who are bonded together by natural will and who are together banded to a set of shared ideas and ideals” (p. xvi) and who “share a common place” (p. xvi). He goes on to note that organizations, like Hope Squad, are made up of relationships that are constructed, while communities are made up of relationships that form around mutual ideas, purposes, and values (Sergiovanni, 1994). The Mope Squad formed through their natural affinity for performing arts and because they had the ability to share the backstage space as a place in which they could meet. All of the members agreed that having that space to get together informally during the middle of the school day was key to the formation of their group. Access to that space was made possible by the tacit agreement of the drama teacher who allowed them to gather there during lunch as long as they didn't disturb anyone and didn't leave a mess. The Mope Squad noted that they never would have transitioned from just being a group of friends to being a mental health support group had they been amidst the crowd of the rest of the school in the cafeteria, where those who were less trusted may have overheard their conversations. That said, the group originally began with only 6 members but

then grew when Mope Squad members had conversations with those outside the group about mental health issues and enacted what I have come to think of as the Mope Squad curriculum by providing others the opportunity to discuss their issues in a supportive, judgment-free, safe space. When those outside the group expressed appreciation for the support and said how much they felt it helped them, they were invited to join the lunch group, which by the end of the year had at least doubled in size.

As together the group analyzed the differences between the Hope Squad and Mope Squad curricula, they surfaced a few key distinctions. Where often the actions of the Hope Squad were seen as self-aggrandizing, the efforts of the Mope Squad were clear of any external agenda, since no one knew about their activities other than the drama teacher and a few other theater students who were not a part of the group. The group was clear that the support they were providing was only serving the goal of helping others deal with situations that were similar to those they had been through themselves. Contrary to the interpretation of the Hope Squad members as having it all together, the members of the Mope Squad were very open with each other about their flaws and their struggles, which allowed them to form deep bonds with each other and view each other as fellow travelers on similar journeys. Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton (2008) define the person who is leading a full life as “one that has...encumbrances, but whose encumbrances make connections to others easier and more natural” (p. 152). The Mope Squad students bonded through the admission of their own brokenness and in healing their wounds together became all the stronger in their sense of authentic community.

Their willingness to be open with each other fostered the trust that they felt was missing from the Hope Squad curriculum. As noted above, the original 6 members of the Mope Squad all already knew each other quite well before they began to enact their mental health support curriculum. The actions of the Hope Squad most often felt to the other students to be rooted in a lack of authentic sentiment, while the Mope Squad, especially as they discussed issues of self-esteem and personal difficulties and as they made a safe-space for each other to admit flaws and ask for help, engaged in what Sergiovanni (1994) calls the hallmarks of authentic community, “authenticity, caring, and unconditional acceptance,” as well as a “total commitment to each other” (pp. xvi, xvii). In contrast to the curriculum of the Hope Squad, the Mope Squad curriculum focused on providing a safe space where the members could vent about their problems with no repercussions other than being on the receiving end of unconditional support. Several members repeated during our time together the phrase, “It’s okay not to be okay,” in talking about what they had learned from their membership in Mope Squad. That said, at least three of their members, with the support and assistance of the Mope Squad, realized that they needed to seek professional, adult assistance with the problems they were facing, without having that assistance thrust upon them. In talking about their activities, the Mope Squad members discussed their support of each other as relentless, as a refusal to allow a hurting friend to isolate themselves, and as a continued, physically demonstrated effort to always be there for each other. Even now, as the Mope Squad has sprawled across several states in their pursuit of college degrees, they maintain a group chat on their phones where they can seek support and assistance from each other at any time of the day or night.

As noted above, the Mope Squad all agreed that the Hope Squad curriculum could be effective given time and given some changes to its procedures. I asked them what they thought the Hope Squad and schools in general could learn from the Mope Squad

curriculum, and I was surprised to hear them reach back to reference what had seemed, during their regressive discussion, to be a small and perhaps insignificant detail. One key priority that the group recommended was that of fostering more authentic relationships between students and teachers. The group agreed that close-knit friend groups and communities of students largely occur naturally in the school setting, but authentic, caring relationships with teachers are rarer and also necessary to fostering the intimacy that the Mope Squad was able to achieve. Had it not been for their close relationship with the drama teacher, they would not have been able to secure a safe space for their daily meetings. The group also mentioned another teacher in their school whose room was known, even to those who never had him as a teacher, as a safe, quiet space to which students could retreat if they were feeling overwhelmed. This teacher was also noted as one who took a clear, pointed interest in the lives and well-being of his students. All of the members of Mope Squad expressed interest in seeing more authentic and more intentionally positive teacher-student relationships. This is, of course, also part of what the Mope Squad saw as a need for a space in which students can meet together informally to discuss issues of interest to them or even spaces where students can take quiet time on their own, away from the hustle and bustle of the school day.

Another suggestion was prioritizing giving time, as well as space, outside of the regular curricular business of the school day to groups of students who already share common goals and values. The Mope Squad originally formed as a group of like-minded students with similar interests who saw each other in classes, at lunch, and after school. Instead of needing to seek out members of the Hope Squad for support, they had support already built into their authentic community. The Mope Squad members suggested that schools making an effort to provide opportunities for students of similar interests, goals, and values to have some downtime during the day with each other would help foster the kind of community that had been such a great help to them.

Finally, the Mope Squad urged the implementation of a mental health and self-care curriculum into the official curriculum of the school. Their member who also served on Hope Squad benefited greatly from the information she received during the Hope Squad retreat on identifying signs of mental distress in students, active listening techniques, and self-care strategies and activities that would help them deal with the stress of their own lives while being a support for others. The Hope Squad member regularly shared things that she had learned with the Mope Squad group, and they all felt that the information was not only useful, but was crucial to their being able to support each other as they did. In fact, one could argue that the ultimate result of the Hope Squad and Mope Squad curricula was a conviction on part of the Mope Squad members that a curriculum focused on fostering positive mental health and self-care is something that should be required content for all high school students. While the Mope Squad believed that providing students with time and space in which to foster authentic relationships with other students is critical, they were equally adamant that providing students with the tools they would need to help each other understand and deal with what was going on in their lives, and also the wisdom that would come from such understanding that would allow them to know when seeking additional help was necessary, would enable authentic communities of students to support each other in a way that could help prevent suicide and promote mental health in their schools.

META-CURRERIAN MOMENT: I REFLECT ON THE USE OF CURRERE

As promised, now that I have completed my analysis of the Mope Squad's joint *currere* exploration of their experiences, I will engage in a brief, *meta-currereian*

process, in which I use *currere* to think about this research project, specifically centering on the choice to use *currere* in this way, which is, as far as I know, unique to the field and perhaps a bit on the *avant garde* side. *Currere* is still, by and large, a solitary process through which individuals come to understand the past and present “nature” of their “educational experience” (Pinar, 1975, p. 2). However, as noted above, there is a growing body of work being done in which two or more scholars engage in the process dialogically. In this case, providing my research participants with a basic understanding of *currere*, especially as it aligned with my desire to gain an understanding of a particular curricular phenomenon to which they had all been witness and my desire to maintain their strong group dynamic, allowed us to benefit from the ways in which *currere* feeds into not just an understanding of self, but an understanding of the self as a relational being and an understanding of self as defined by membership in authentic community.

I noted above in my discussion of the research method used that the group fell into a rhythm of addressing my questions as we explored the Mope Squad phenomenon. A part of that rhythm was that, when I would ask a question, they would spend, as a group, a few minutes talking to each other rather cryptically about what topics, memories, or ideas they would share with me. For example, when I asked them to discuss a significant memory relating to Mope Squad and explain its significance, they began by deciding together how they would respond. “Should we talk about December?” one of them asked. “I’m an open book,” another responded. “Well, we don’t want to...” another replied, hesitating, clearly uncomfortable. “I was thinking more about before Thanksgiving,” the open book replied. “Are you comfortable with that?” the hesitant member asked. “Yeah. Yeah,” open book responded. From there, having decided collectively on the memory to be shared, the group engaged in a discussion of who would narrate, which was followed by the story of one of the group needing support, told by one member of the group, with all of the others interjecting and laughing and sharing with me the memory that they were bringing to life together.

In the years in which I have studied and worked with the *currere* method, this was the first time I had engaged in it as more than a solitary pursuit. It worked well as a tool for group engagement in this instance when we were working together to surface the important lessons we could glean from their collective educational experience. I continue, on a regular basis, to be amazed at the quality and depth of curricular exploration that is made possible by engaging in *currere*. Its potential as a framework for eliciting collective experience, especially with groups of four or more participants, has yet to be fully discovered. In this process, I found it to be an extremely generative method for creating an environment in which participants could negotiate a collective understanding of their experiences while supporting and nurturing each other as individuals.

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