

Fearless? Pre-service teachers' perceptions of school shootings: A case study of education students at a small, private liberal arts college

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Abstract: *As the proliferation of school shootings in the United States is amplified, notably absent in the discussions and research related to addressing this phenomenon are the voices of pre-service teachers on the cusp of entering the profession. This case study explored the perceptions of pre-service teachers at a small, private liberal arts college. The findings show that the pre-service teachers minimize the risks with becoming a teacher as it relates to gun violence. In terms of possible solutions, they expressed a need for mental health programs for students and had mixed sentiments about the idea of being armed in the classroom.*

Key Words: school shootings, pre-service teachers

The media coverage of the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School and reaction by lawmakers and stakeholders has created an elevated awareness of gun violence in schools in the United States. This proliferation of gun violence in schools has sparked debate on what should be done to prevent these types of events from happening again (Cline, 2018). Lawmakers in individual states have often reacted to these events with legislation to weaken laws that encourage more guns on K-12 campuses (Giffords Law Center, 2018). Others turn to research to further understand this phenomenon. A review of the current literature on school shootings examined college students' perceptions of their safety with guns on campus (Lewis, et al., 2015) and perceptions of secondary school principals related to arming teachers (Weiler & Armenta, 2014) and the need for more mental health programs (Price, Khubchandani, Peyton, & Thompson, 2015). Other recent literature revealed that there is low efficacy among pre-service teachers in identifying characteristics of mental health issues of students who may pose a school safety threat (Loninski, Maag, & Katsiyannis, 2015). However, the dominate amount of literature related to school shooting are unfortunately retrospective studies that examined what happened and what could be learned from these events (Beland & Kim, 2016; Elsass, Schildkraut, & Stafford, 2016; Gerard, Whitfield, Porter, & Browne, 2016). Absent in this literature are the voices and perceptions of pre-service teachers—a generation of teachers entering the profession. Therefore, the purpose of this case study was to explore the perceptions of pre-service teachers who are willingly entering a profession during a time period of proliferated gun violence in schools.

METHOD

The case study approach was selected because it examines events and people that are bounded within certain parameters (Stake, 1995). Specifically, the aim of this study was to learn about perceptions of school shootings from one group of pre-service teachers as a means to gain further understanding of the issue. For this study, a 'pre-service teacher' is defined as someone within a year of formally entering the teaching profession. The specific event that defined the time period of this study are the years following the February 2018 school shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. The participants and the site of this study were selected using purposeful sampling (Stake, 1995). A total of eight 'pre-service teachers' were interviewed for this study; two intended to become elementary teachers and six intended to become secondary teachers. The interview questions were semi-structured and open. The interview questions were informed on the proposed solutions in various media outlets following the aforementioned school shooting and research studies focused on prevention. The participants all attended a small liberal arts college in the rural Midwest. This specific site was selected because it lauds a 100 percent job placement of its education students; consequently, their likeliness to enter the teaching profession contributes to the validity and reliability of the data. Other data that was collected included primary documents and webpages; these data were studied to look for patterns and similarities that aligned with the content of the interviews. A holistic analysis was used to examine the data from the whole case (Yin, 2009). To ensure quality and support the findings, peer review and member checks were conducted.

RESULTS

The findings show that the pre-service teachers recognize the associated risks with becoming a teacher, but these risks will not prevent them from entering the profession. Moreover, they expressed a need for mental health services for students and mixed sentiments about the idea of arming teachers. Generally, the pre-service teachers dismissed the risk of becoming a victim of a school shooting. They compared the likelihood of them being a victim of gun violence at their respective schools equitable to if they had entered any another profession. One of the pre-service teachers shared the following representative statement:

I think the same risk runs in every, pretty much every profession. People will shoot up a hospital, a business office, a bank... unfortunately, it's... it's a risk that everyone faces and not just teachers.

However, this *fearlessness* was often accompanied by statements of their commitment to the students' safety and a recognition that they are not immune from a school shooting event.

In terms of possible solutions to prevent future school shootings, the pre-service teachers cognitively wrestled through what exactly would be a responsible solution to prevent gun violence. They directly and indirectly leaned towards the value of creating safe learning environments focused on building positive relationships with their students. Six of the pre-service teachers agreed that having more guns in schools through the arming of teachers, including themselves, could potentially create long-term problems. The problems they mentioned included a negative impact to the learning environment, school culture, and the power dynamics in a school which they

lamented are ultimately not worth the risk. One pre-service teacher provided an example of this general sentiment:

I think that would be the wrong way to go. I think it sets up a different power dynamic between the teacher and the students, like I said, it's all about trust. I do not want to live in a society that on 'syllabus day' I have to tell Johnny and the first row, 'Hey, if you mess up, I have a loaded hand gun underneath my desk in a safe and I have the authority to shoot you'—like that is not what I want to do and that's not the type of place I want to go teach.

However, not all of the pre-service teachers agreed, two of them shared a level of comfort with the idea of arming teachers:

I work in a rural area and hunt often, so I am okay with the idea. If I am able to commit myself to doing something, I would rather do that than be a sitting duck.

Nonetheless, this conflict was not superseded by the pre-service teachers having emphasized the importance of building positive relationships with their students and schools offering mental health services for students as means of preventing future school shootings.

DISCUSSION

The pre-service teachers showed a level of fearlessness and dismissiveness in terms of being a victim of a school shooting. As college students, they offered opinions related to the presence of guns on campus similar to the college students surveyed by Lewis, et al. (2015). In their study, over half of the participants responded with unfavorably with having guns on campus. However, in the same study, a small majority of the college students expressed affirmations of teachers being armed on campus. This is inconsistent with the sentiments expressed by the pre-service teachers in the present study. The divergence in opinion in this case can be rooted in the fact that the pre-service teachers themselves would be the ones armed, whereas this did not apply to the college students surveyed by Lewis et al. Furthermore, within the context of arming teachers, Weiler and Armenta's (2014) study of secondary principals perceptions of arming personnel, revealed that the principal's agreed with the majority of the pre-service teachers in the present study who would not feel comfortable being armed while at school.

The pre-service teachers also placed value in building relationships with their students and providing them mental health services as means to preventing school shootings. The literature expressed similar concerns as it relates to the mental health of students. Price, Khubchandani, Peyton, and Thompson's (2015) survey of secondary principals support the statements of the pre-service teachers related to the inadequacy of available mental health programs. These concerns are amplified by Loninski, Maag, and Katsiyannis (2015) that shared that pre-service teachers, in their study, interpret what exactly qualifies as a 'mental health issue' very differently from each other. This dynamic attitude toward defining mental health issues infers that there is a need to inform pre-service teachers on characteristics of mental illness. Although this presents cause for alarm, the present study shows that the pre-service teachers recognize the importance of the mental health of students and would be willing to do the work of learning more about this topic in order to support their students and to prevent a school shooting. With the shared concern of principals and

the pre-service teachers of the mental health of their students, it is recommended that teacher education programs consider how they can integrate content related to mental health or mental illness into their respective curriculums and that school districts implement professional development to bridge the knowledge gaps related to mental health and illness.

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The limitations and further research to be discussed are associated with the site of the study. The site of the study is in rural area that tend to have different attitudes regarding societal issues related to guns; for example, one of the pre-service teachers expressed comfort in being armed in the classroom because of their experience with regularly shooting firearms while hunting. Therefore, there would be value in replicating the case study at a different site, perhaps an urban environment, that may have different types of relationships with firearms. These findings create opportunities to further examine pre-service teachers in other types of schools and localities to better understand how this problem is perceived in other communities. Further research should also examine the attitudes and perceptions of in-service or experienced teachers; findings of such studies could illuminate other possible solutions in preventing school shootings.

CONCLUSIONS

It can be argued that the future generation of teachers has been desensitized to school shootings. Moreover, regardless of how often school shootings occur, there remains no clear or ‘silver bullet’ solution to prevent such events. The results of this study illuminate that even at the case study level, many questions arise, and variety of solutions are offered—this amalgam reflects the *work* ahead of those stakeholders interested in ending gun violence in schools. Although they may be desensitized to school shootings, there should be a level of confidence in the pre-service teachers’ awareness of the needs of students and willingness to do that aforementioned work. This work also needs to be done by teacher education schools that can integrate more content related to mental health into their curriculum, local and state governments need to fund mental health programs at the district level, and our legislatures need to write responsible guns laws that protect students and teachers. Again, if we truly want to prevent schools shooting, that ‘work’ should not only be the burden of the teachers.

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