

Guns, Classrooms, and Politics: Eliciting and Reflecting Upon Education Student Beliefs in the Age of School Shootings

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Abstract

Unearthing the perspectives students bring with them in their college-level education coursework is especially important as education instructors are tasked with interrupting the unexamined proliferation of dominant ideologies among future educational professionals. The introduction to education course serves as an important site for this interrogation. One trend largely unexplored in the scholarly literature is the pedagogical use of controversy in introduction to education coursework. This study analyzes student discussion of the controversy of school gun violence within a redesigned introduction to education course. Data for this study come from student postings and final reflection papers in an online section of that course. Qualitative analysis of student thinking reveals three themes regarding U.S. school gun violence: gun violence as *political*/intrusion into schools, gun *policy* as marginalizing and legitimizing presence, and gun use as *professional*/boundary for teachers. These themes provide insight into the ways education students conceptualize teachers, professional educators, and the context of schooling. The student interactions and reflections in this study also suggest that scaffolded discussions of school gun violence present a poignant opportunity for education coursework to foster authentic student reflection on the policy, politics, and professions associated with American education.

Keywords

introduction to education, education coursework, controversy as pedagogical tool, school gun violence, teacher education

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College of education students enter their education programs with a powerful “apprenticeship of observation” (Lortie, 2002), expectations about schooling learned from their own experience as students in P-12 institutions. In addition, students enter colleges of education with varying degrees of awareness of larger sociopolitical issues that impact the very contexts for which colleges of education prepare professionals—school districts, schools, and individual classrooms. One avenue for unearthing and potentially disrupting students' entrenched views is through reflective and dialogical coursework centered on compelling educational events, phenomena, and trends.

In many teacher preparation programs, these learning experiences begin in an introduction to education course. While often associated with teacher education programs, the purpose of the introduction to education course often cuts across the professional and academic mission of colleges of education. At a large research university in the Southeastern United States, the introduction to education course was recently reconceptualized to provide students from across the college of education with opportunities to engage in real, vital, and thorny controversies regarding the role of schools and teachers in the larger society. This course was relaunched within a redesigned education studies bachelor's degree and degree minor option that attracted many new students beyond the traditional teacher candidates who usually took the course.

Importantly, college of education students often study to earn professional credentials that lead to careers across educational contexts, and many of these professional roles operate in contexts susceptible to the spillover from American gun violence. In short, these future professionals learn, and will likely eventually labor, in an era in which news organizations maintain updated lists of school shootings (Bosman, 2019), policymakers consider whether or not to arm teachers (Gormley, 2019; Stanley-Becker, 2019), and students have “a general sense”, as one columnist put it, “that shootings are a fact of American education and that one ought to be prepared for them psychologically” (Bruenig, 2019). In short, these students inhabit an “age of school shootings” (Interlandi, 2018) that is seldom systematically discussed within colleges of education.

This study focuses on the ways college of education students discussed with one another and reflected individually upon school gun violence. Through structured reflection on potential policy changes toward arming teachers, powerful interactions were fostered in an online section of an introduction to education course for which the co-authors redesigned, revised, and taught.³ Extensive discussion posts and reflective writing revealed not only that these students were grappling with the controversy of school gun violence, but provided vivid data related to their conceptualizations of the purpose of schools, the duties of educators, and the state of the broader U.S. political culture. While much has been written in the mainstream media regarding school shootings, little research has explored budding educational professionals' beliefs regarding this phenomenon. Further, we could find no papers that detailed the use of this particular controversy as a pivot for discussion and reflection within college of education coursework. Thus, this paper examines how students in an introduction to education course interpret the intersection of teaching, schooling, and education professions with school shootings. It is guided by the research question: *What beliefs about K-12 education are revealed through structured student discussion about gun violence in U.S. schools?* Further, we argue that this controversy is a particularly poignant site for student inquiry and reflection into their unexamined beliefs about education and schooling.

³ Author one was tasked with redesigning the course around controversies during the summer of 2018. He then subsequently taught the course online and in-person. Author two assisted with revising the course and taught in-person sections of the redesigned course in the spring, summer, and fall of 2019.

Literature Review

In this section, we review existing literature regarding the beliefs of college of education students, the use of controversy as a pedagogical tool, and the realities of school shootings in the U.S.

College of Education Student Beliefs and Identities

While our introduction to education course was open to any student with interests in the broad array of education professions, most of our students were declared teacher candidates. Accordingly, we borrow heavily in this section from research on teacher candidate beliefs and identity formation, extrapolating from scholarship into concerns that apply across education professions. Indeed, recent scholarship has highlighted the importance of understanding and developing future educators' professional identities (see e.g., Henry, 2016; Nickel & Zimmer, 2019; Noonan, 2019). Gray (2019) calls for programs to continue systematic engagement with their graduates to disrupt the apprenticeship of observation and uncontested beliefs about schooling students often bring with them into their education coursework. This call echoes enduring concerns of many teacher education scholars (see Grossman, 1991; Mewborn & Tyminski, 2006; Westrick & Morris, 2016). Relying solely on one's lived experiences in schools and classrooms in the formation of beliefs and practices about what it means to teach and learn can indeed be problematic. Importantly, Knapp (2012) cautions against a top-down approach to confronting students' beliefs, advocating for protected time and space for critical reflection in order to uncover and challenge existing assumptions.

As providing critically reflective spaces for future educators to reconsider their identity and beliefs is paramount for education coursework, education scholarship provides important considerations for education instructors. As a first step, Rodriguez (2008) argues that instructors must interrogate students' ideologies to promote critical consciousness. Students might struggle, especially in the early stages of their teacher preparation experiences, to visualize future professional experiences realistically and consider the ways in which they might be drastically different from their own learning experiences (Beltman et al., 2015). A second step toward helping students reconsider their educator identity and beliefs is for instructors to carefully consider the lessons and experiences they will scaffold within their courses. After all, much of the time, coursework serves as the space in which these future educators operate. The actors with whom they engage, the experiences they share, and the knowledge they interrogate all contribute to education students' evolving dispositions (Carroll, 2005, 2012). Instructors, then, might be strategic when implementing readings, assignments, and experiences. Responding to Crawford-Garrett et al.'s (2018) call to engage our students in critical conversations, the centering of events, phenomena, and trends deemed "controversial" (such as school shootings) can be one move toward the critical reflection required in conceptualizing inclusive teaching and learning beliefs and practices.

Controversy as a Pedagogical Tool

A controversy is a problematic situation in which there are no clear, compelling, or convincing right answers. Controversies allow space for individuals and groups to explore possible courses of action, potential solutions, and probable outcomes of interventions. Controversial topics and questions foster "true skills of intelligent citizenship: debate, deliberation, and discussion" (Zimmerman & Robertson,

2017b, p. 9). In education coursework, inviting conversations around controversies offers opportunities for students, especially those with "submerged beliefs that are considered closed minded" (Bautista et al., 2018, p. 166), to engage in self-reflection and potentially refine their own thinking. Experiences in education coursework might provide knowledge and skills essential to enacting what Johnson and Johnson (2009) call "constructive controversy," but larger systemic issues around the devaluation of educator professionalism cannot be ignored (Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017a). What education programs can do, argue Andrews et al. (2018), is prepare future educators to productively engage with others through pedagogies that promote discourse and action toward more just, equitable experiences in and beyond school spaces. Specifically, Andrews et al. (2018) recognize gun control and school shootings as topics of personal and professional significance for students, teachers, and others occupying school and classroom spaces.

School Shootings in the U.S.

In the past two decades, school shootings, including those at Columbine High School, Sandy Hook Elementary School, and Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, have received overwhelming attention from media outlets and prompted numerous school safety measures (Chruscziel et al., 2015). Public perceptions about school shootings and, in turn, beliefs about preventative measures are influenced by the media's portrayal of these events. While the academic literature acknowledges popular media sensationalism of school shootings, it also recognizes both the scarcity and limitations of scholarship regarding reasons for, reactions to, and effects of these tragedies (see Elsass et al., 2016; Kolbe, 2020; Rocque, 2012; Wike & Fraser, 2009). More recently, researchers have begun investigating the explicit influence of school gun violence on teachers and their professional roles and responsibilities (Lucas & Lamphere, 2020; Morabia, 2018; Perkins, 2018). Teachers, indeed, are now serving as protectors, and questions around the arming of teachers permeate school culture and political policy. Future education professionals have taken notice of school gun violence, and it is their beliefs about this tragic phenomenon that this study investigates.

The driving scholarship themes that inform this study are: (1) education coursework instructors must consider the ways in which they scaffold learning experiences which prompt and allow preservice teachers to reconsider their apprenticeship of observation; (2) controversies provide a fruitful avenue for this reconsideration; and (3) school shootings are tragedies that have entered the national consciousness—and these tragedies are of unique importance to professional roles college of education students will soon enter.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws upon constructionist and social justice perspectives. Through investigations of student interactions, researchers can gain insight into the constructed meaning of practices and interpretations. After all, "meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting" (Crotty, 1998, p. 43). Further, a constructionist reading invites researchers to "approach the object [under study] in a radical spirit of openness to its potential for new or richer meaning. It is an invitation to reinterpretation" (Crotty, 1998, p. 51). It was important to us, within this constructionist framing, to consider how students' views of gun violence were constructed and then reinterpreted as they interacted with each other, with scholarship, and with popular media interpretations of the issue.

Further, concordant with critical social justice perspectives, we paid close attention to students' interpretations of the inequitable impacts of school gun violence (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). These two perspectives—constructionism and critical social justice—guided the investigation detailed in the following section.

Methods

This section outlines the qualitative research methods deployed in this study. As a study of a reflective and scaffolded space within an introduction to education course, it is important to further clarify the context of both the unit from which study data was derived as well as the larger course context.

Overview of Course Structure

The site for this research was an online section of the introduction to education course offered in fall of 2018. The introduction to education course is a staple of many teacher preparation programs, but our iteration of the course was expanded to include students from across the college of education, including those in a recently instituted bachelor of education studies and associated minor. The course was organized into six modules, each a two-week sequence of learning. At the most abstract level, each of these modules was thematized by a particular foundation of education (e.g., historical foundations, philosophical foundations, etc). Next, in an effort to generate student interest, each module focused on a particular controversial question amenable to discussion and analysis within the corresponding foundational theme (see Table 1).

Table 1

Correspondence of Foundation of Education Theme and Controversy Questions

Educational Foundation	Controversial Question
• Foundations of Teaching	• Should teachers be able to strike?
• Historical Foundations	• Should schools teach patriotism?
• Philosophical Foundations	• Should schooling support career or culture?
• Sociological Foundations	• Should teachers be armed?
• Legal Foundations	• How should schools be funded
• Curricular Foundations	• Should schools use high-stakes tests?

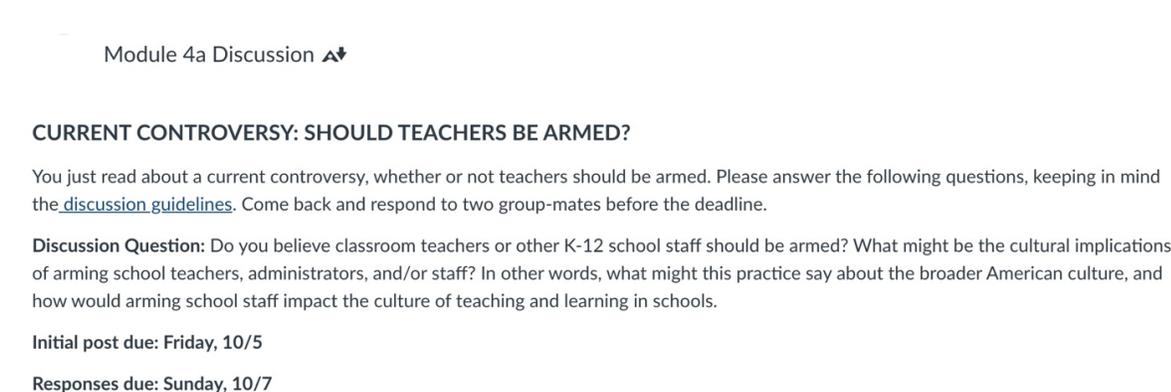
The controversy of school gun violence was embedded within the fourth module of the course. Its structure mirrored the other modules. In the first week of the module, students responded to an ungraded anonymous poll of their initial position on the controversy and completed assigned readings. The initial polling revealed students were, usurpingly, aware of recent news coverage of school shootings. But in order to give the class a common set of texts to work from, their interactions around this controversial question were scaffolded by contemporaneous media texts. Students interacted with three such texts. The first, from *CNN*, discussed the experience of staff at schools that have armed their teachers (Chavez, 2018). The second, from *The New York Times*, discussed the political debate over arming teachers in Florida after the Marjory Stoneman Douglas shooting (Mazzei, 2018). Finally,

students listened to an *NPR* radio interview with a criminal justice expert who argued that arming teachers will disproportionately harm the learning of children of color (Martin, 2018).

After reading and annotating the assigned texts, students were asked to construct an initial response to the controversy question: *Should teachers be armed?* They were then asked to respond to at least two members of their group (see figure 1). These were posted in the appropriate discussion area of the online course platform.

Figure 1

Initial Discussion Post Prompt



In the second and final week of the module, the focus remained on the controversy, but a corresponding foundational lens—in this case, the sociocultural foundations of schooling—was introduced through chapters in their textbook (Johnson et al., 2017). After reading the assigned chapters and completing a brief comprehension quiz, students contributed to a new discussion forum in which they revisited the controversy, this time connecting it with the foundational lens and providing support for their position via evidence cited from the textbook (see figure 2). Finally, students once again commented on their classmates' posts.

Across the two discussion assignments, the course instructor responded to group discussions, highlighting important points, contributing counterpoints, and clarifying areas of confusion. Further, the instructor sent out recap messages to the class highlighting specific comments that informed the discussion. Finally, students were given the opportunity to return to one of the controversies of their choice in their final reflection paper. This assignment tasked students with reflecting on their learning from the controversy discussions as well as connecting the threads of their reading, their interactions with peers, and their experiences across the course. The insights made by students in these final papers were what initially inspired us to look more closely at this particular controversy. A large majority of students across courses chose to return to the controversy of arming teachers, as outlined in the following section.

Data Collection

Since our focus centers on introduction to education students' thinking, dialogue, and reflection about gun violence in American schools, we collected two types of data: discussion assignments and culminating written reflections. Given how much data this entailed, we completed an in-depth methodological analysis on the artifacts from a particular section of the course taught in fall 2018. These

findings were then cross-referenced with the other two sections, as detailed below. Thus, the bulk of the data for this study came from the two discussion boards of that fall 2018 section, which encompassed multiple responses between all 31 students in the course. The first week's initial discussion posts and responses yielded 102 total student posts. The second week's discussion prompt yielded 81 total posts.

Figure 2
Second Discussion Post Prompt

SUPPORTING YOUR VIEW: SHOULD TEACHERS BE ARMED?

Chapters 6, 7, and 8 argue that schools are situated in the larger culture and society while the controversy for this module revolved around the question of arming teachers. Please respond to the following two prompts in **350 words** or less, and remember to **cite your textbook**.

Discussion Question 1: In [discussion 4a](#), you stated your beliefs about whether or not teachers should be armed as well as possible implications arming teachers will have on the school culture. **Briefly** support your position with at least 2 citations from your textbook chapters 6 - 8. It is okay if your position has changed since the first post.

Discussion Question 2: The issue of arming school staff is both highly politicized and divisive. Yet, as educators of various sorts, I believe we have to believe fruitful dialogue is possible. Consider the advice of [Blaise Pascal](#).²⁸

Pascal suggests that before disagreeing with someone, first point out the ways in which they're right. And to effectively persuade someone to change their mind, lead them to discover a counter-point of their own accord.

Go back to the first discussion in this module and select someone who disagrees with your position. Respond to that group mate by following Pascal's advice.

1. Show you understand their position by briefly recapping it and acknowledging their position/concern.
2. Then try to "lead them to discover a counter-point" by asking thoughtful questions.
 1. Try to come up with three to five questions that might point your group mate toward understanding your position or at least a more nuanced understanding of the issue.

Please check if your chosen group mate already has a response before you post. If they are the only person who was on the opposing side to your view, it's okay to respond to them. You may end up responding to someone who shares your point of view. In that case, it's your job to play [devil's advocate](#).²⁹

As to your **two required responses**, this is meant to be a conversation. You may respond to the responses to your post last week, or to the responses you received.

Remember, our goal here is to practice disagreeing without being disagreeable. This is a heated topic, but I have every faith you can complete this assignment with tact and courtesy.

INITIAL RESPONSE DUE: 10/19

POST TWO RESPONSES DUE: 10/21

The second major source of data was the students' culminating written reflections. A specific prompt in that assignment asked students to reflect on the controversy they found most intriguing, concerning, or thought-provoking—as well as how their beliefs about the controversy may have changed during the course. Eighteen of the 31 students (58%) in the fall 2018 section returned to school gun violence. This means that, of the six modules they could have chosen, students overwhelmingly chose to further reflect on this controversy. These 18 reflections were used as data sources. While this research focuses on a single section of the course, we crosschecked our findings

across two other sections and found a high percentage of those students also chose to focus on this controversy in their reflection papers. In the section taught in fall 2019, 60% (15 out of 25 students) chose to return to the controversy of arming teachers. In the summer 2018 section, 76% (13 out of 17 students) chose to return to this controversy. As mentioned above, the fact that students across sections overwhelmingly chose to return to this controversy prompted us to embark on the data collection and analysis culminating in this research project.

All data collection procedures were reviewed by our Institutional Review Board, and the project was approved as exempt on December 20, 2018. To prevent any coercion, all data were collected after the conclusion of the course and the recording of grades.

Participants

Students in this course section were roughly representative of the larger population of our institution's college of education. The class included 26 women and five men. Nine students of color, including three international students, attended, and the majority of students originated in-state. Of note, multiple students revealed their permanent residence was close to the site of a well-known school shooting, and some students spoke of personal connections with the victims of that shooting.

As justice-oriented scholars, we recognize the importance of other identity components (sexuality, language, religion, class, and ability, among others) and understand the ways in which positionality influences perspective, especially on controversial topics. As this singular study includes all students within the identified learning community, we rely on the collective positionality of the class. We are eager, in future research, to focus on individual experiences and perspectives in consideration of contextual and cultural identity influences.

Data Analysis

Students' discussion posts and reflective writings were compiled into a large data table. All discussion posts and responses from the module were found to directly address the controversy that focuses this study. As mentioned above, 18 students returned to school gun violence in their reflections, and the relevant passages of these reflections were compiled into a second data table. These two large data tables were then reread and coded for emergent patterns (Creswell & Poth, 2018, pp. 187-194).

Concurrently, we deployed discourse analysis techniques, when appropriate, to investigate the broader conceptualizations students brought with them into their posts (Gee, 2011, 2014). We then described three themes derived from these emergent patterns (Saldaña, 2013). After establishing the three themes, we reread each student's posts and reflective writing examples, copying specific words, phrases, and poignant sentences to thematic data analysis tables. These tables allowed us to investigate data that supported each theme as well as outliers—for example, the data from the small group of students who supported arming teachers. Insights related to this form of analysis are identified in the findings below. Excerpts from these more detailed analysis tables are provided in this manuscript as well as cited throughout the findings section. Finally, we corroborated our findings by comparing our derived themes with the final reflections written by students in the other two sections of the course. The three derived themes appeared across course sections.

Having outlined the context, participants, and data collection and analysis procedures of this study, we now center student voices and experiences in the presentation of our findings.

Findings

Considering our research question, *What beliefs about K-12 education are revealed through structured student discussion about gun violence in U.S. schools?*, data analysis revealed three themes: *politics* (gun violence as sociopolitical intrusion into schools), *policy* (gun policy as humanizing and legitimizing presence in the classroom and beyond), and *profession* (gun use as professional boundary for educators).

Politics: Gun Violence as Sociopolitical Intrusion into Schools

The first theme, politics, can be understood as the broadest field in which important national questions are discussed and debated. This overlaps with the partisan political context in which decisions are made at federal and state levels, but here it more specifically relates to the beliefs students themselves have about how school gun violence is discussed at the national level and how political arguments about that topic are formed and propagated. In considering school gun violence, students clearly understood the classroom as a part of the larger socio-economic and political world. Overwhelmingly, students saw gun violence not as a school problem, but as a political problem—a problem stemming from federal and state political decisions.

Awareness of School Violence

Unsurprisingly students related a sense of unease with the potential for gun violence in American classrooms and schools. What was striking was a discourse that signaled—and lamented—a radical change of norms regarding expectations of school safety within a single generation. Students pointed to multiple sources for their heightened awareness: media reporting, political conversations, and personal experience. Aisha⁴ pointed out that school shootings are part of American students' experiences: "all they have to do is watch the news or overhear parental conversations" (Aisha, October 19 discussion). Descriptors such as "constant" and "frequently" appeared across postings, demonstrating that students saw the phenomena of school gun violence as an, in their words, "epidemic" sparking "constant discussions" and "debate".

Brittany's discussion post exemplified the ubiquity of school gun violence in U.S. political and media discourse:

In my lifetime I've become way too familiar with the headline 'School shooting at _____. ' Shootings such as those that occurred at Stoneman Douglas High School and Sandy Hook Elementary School are prime examples of the horror that comes along with these acts. (Brittany, October 5 discussion)

Her post deployed a fill-in-the-blank structure to indicate these headlines are so common as constitute their own genre. In her post, the "school shooting" becomes its own, identifiable type of event that could prepositionally occur "at" any school in the nation ("_____"). In the second sentence, she identified two well-known incidents, positioning them as "prime examples" of "horror." Importantly, she did not see "Stoneman Douglas High School" or "Sandy Hook Elementary School" as eponymous entities, the way one might speak of "9/11" for a uniquely terrible event. The school names serve instead as descriptors

⁴ All names presented in this study are pseudonyms.

for a common phenomenon, akin to the way “Challenger” or “Columbia” is appended to “explosion”—these represent tragic incidents that occasionally occur in an otherwise routine sociopolitical practice.

A steady slate of active shooter drills, media coverage, and—for some—personal connections with school shootings have irrevocably impacted these students' expectations of school safety. The events of the Parkland shooting were invoked repeatedly. As has been reported in the media, advocacy by survivors of Marjory Stoneman Douglas has shaped the debate around gun rights across the nation (Cottle, 2018). This news coverage served as the political background in which students were able to tap as they debated the issue of arming teachers. In sum, unlike some practices that students sometimes see as settled (the bell scheduled, standardized testing, letter grades), school shootings and gun violence occupied a more transitional space. The phenomenon was understood as contingent on contemporary political practices, as explained in the following section.

The Need for Political Solutions

While awareness of school gun violence was ubiquitous among participants, students recognized that it is not essentially a school issue. Most students saw gun violence as an intrusion into schooling—a “gun control problem” in need of a political solution. For example, the following two students demonstrate how those who opposed arming teachers approached the argument.

I believe that the further guns are removed from the equation, the safer the students will be. Fighting fire with fire is not the solution in this situation. Ultimately, a change inside schools is not what needs to be made, but a change outside of schools must take place. (Alice, October 4 discussion)

For Alice, arming teachers was “fighting fire with fire” when, ultimately, the availability of guns was the salient issue. The availability of guns, in turn, is a national problem. Lily summed up the political origin of school gun violence in her reflective writing: “School shootings are a gun control matter and will not be resolved by using more guns in schools.”

The majority of students disagreed with arming teachers, but even the responses of the few dissenters reveal that students thought the issue of arming teachers was essentially a political rather than educational problem. Those few students who supported arming teachers conceded it is appalling to make the argument, but given the ubiquity of guns in U.S. culture, they argued arming teachers is a pragmatic response. These students argued for arming teachers because of concerns for safety rather than a belief that gun culture should inform school culture. For example, in sensing the fractured nature of the gun control debate, Kelsey suggests that a large-scale political solution is not tenable:

I believe the culture has come to accept that there is no way to stop these mass shootings other than getting rid of guns entirely. With guns being in schools, students would feel safer knowing that, if a shooting incident did happen, they would be protected by their educators. (Kelsey, October 5 discussion)

For her, without a total prohibition on guns, there the only way to safeguard children is to have armed educators. Among the few students who argued for arming teachers, this pragmatic logic was at play: guns are part of U.S. culture, schools operate within this culture, so arming teachers—no matter how distasteful—is the best way to safeguard children.

In summary, across discussions and reflections, students understood the roots of gun violence as more a political problem than a school issue. It is worth noting that the controversy of arming teachers

was unique among the other five controversies in the course with regard to the degree to which students were able to clearly see and articulate the sociopolitical situatedness of schooling. The following section demonstrates how, in discussing the classroom-level impacts of national gun *politics*, students also considered what state-level *policy* responses may mean for schools.

Policy: School Gun Policy as Existential and Legitimizing

While students overwhelmingly saw gun violence as a political intrusion into U.S. schools, they also recognized that policy decisions can impact individual classrooms and the broader society. The distinction between politics and policy in this context is that the political background to this controversy is one without immediate resolution. However, the very focus of the controversy itself was on whether to provide guns to teachers—a question of actual policy being debated across state legislatures. First, through grappling with potential policy changes aimed toward arming teachers, students expressed concerns that schools may become sites of increased anxiety, fear, and hostility—especially among marginalized students. Second, while students recognized that national problems impact local classrooms, they also believed classroom-level policies can legitimate new social practices.

Guns as Emotional and Physical Threat

In considering arming teachers, students repeatedly invoked the need for educators to protect their young charges. This was understood to take the dual form of physical and emotional safety. Paige, who initially supported arming teachers, expressed concern with *physical* safety:

I believe the arming of teachers would impact the students who are witnessing the change. They would see several drills per year and an appropriate seminar for the parents and children. Imaging myself as a student, the implications of this change make me frightened. [Imagining myself] as a teacher, I would want nothing but to assure my students' 100% safety. (October 5, discussion post)

Here, she imagined herself as a teacher, using the construction “100%” to emphasize that a teacher’s primary duty is to safeguard student physical safety. In her post, she repeated the pragmatic logic mentioned above: a teacher’s job is to assure students’ physical safety no matter what, and an armed teacher can best protect students.

All students in the discussion believed schools should ensure the safety of children. Most students, however, spent considerably more time considering the *emotional* impact of arming teachers. Emily emphasized this thread in her discussion post:

Having guns in the school is a constant reminder of the ‘what if’s’. What if my teacher gets angry at me and shoots me? What if a mad student comes in and tries to steal the gun and it accidentally goes off? Another aspect is violence at home or students who are victims of abuse. Students may have been involved in a shooting before (this happened at my school) and the idea of their teacher or principal having a gun may terrorize them. What if the gun brings back images in their head and they can’t focus? What if this is a constant reminder of how they lost a loved one? (Emily, October 19 discussion post)

Ariel, as well, considers the emotional impacts of arming teachers:

There is not only gun violence happening inside the schools; gun violence also happens outside of school. Some children have had family experiences with gun violence and could be traumatized by it and may not feel comfortable with a gun being in a learning environment (Ariel, reflective writing).

Both students gave voice to the possibility that children are likely aware of the potential of school gun violence. This discomfort would be compounded by continuously armed school staff. These constant reminders could interfere with the learning environment. Put another way, while the physical safety of children is tautologically existential, their emotional safety is essential to their roles as learners. Even the few who supported arming teachers recognized students' mental health as paramount. Amy made this clear:

Nobody wants their kids to feel unsafe in school, and nobody wants their teachers to be an image of fear for their students; however, putting guns in the classrooms can at least try to ease the fear of a potentially bad situation. (Reflective writing)

Students identified another existential concern in the inequitable impacts of arming school staff.

Many of the students believed sanctioning guns in the classroom would be more problematic for minoritized students. Two students provide examples speaking to this concern:

I can see why black, male students would be worried about the situation. They might be hesitant with their teachers having a weapon. They might feel stereotyped and misjudged as well. There are already cases of racial disparities in the discipline of students (Jenny, October 5 discussion post).

The feeling of being separate and dangerous can be amplified with a weapon... but with the history of minority students being treated badly in the U.S., many could constantly feel threatened. And that could in turn make their mental health bad. (Veronica, October 5 discussion post)

Each drew upon one of the controversy sources—an *NPR* radio segment—to consider how marginalized students may be negatively impacted by gun policy changes. Put simply, the presence of armed teachers could harm the learning environment more than the fear of gun violence. For minoritized students, armed staff could be even more detrimental. Overall, students' beliefs about gun policy demonstrated concerns with the humanity of children, with their physical and emotional well-being as well as their multifaceted identities. Exploring questions about school gun violence provided a space that pressed these students to consider the very real lived realities of school children—a consideration that can become lost in abstract discussions that often happen in introduction to education courses.

The following section outlines how students also imagined the potential impact of armed teachers on the beliefs and practices of the broader society.

Legitimizing U.S. Gun Culture

Discussion of the controversy over whether or not to arm teachers revealed the belief that classroom-level policies have a broad impact upon the larger world. In some ways, this is an inversion of theme 1, above, in which students recognized gun violence as a sociopolitical intrusion into schools. This section explains how students believed that arming teachers could legitimize and further entrench U.S. gun culture.

Students saw that what happens in America's classrooms impacts the rest of the culture. For example, Hannah wrote that "having to arm our teachers and school staff says that America is slowly becoming a hateful nation" (October 5 discussion post). Aisha elaborates this point:

With regard to American culture, arming teachers shows our loyalty to guns, and that we believe the only way to fight fire is with more fire. I'm not saying that I disagree with having armed staff members, but I do believe that before making guns as much of a part of school campuses as water-fountains, all other measures of school safety should be implemented. (Aisha, October 5 discussion post)

Guns do not represent a neutral means of protection, per Hannah. Their sanctioned presence in schools is a form of moral decline. For Aisha, U.S. citizens should think carefully about expanding the standard equipment associated with schools to include guns.

Brittany encapsulated this succinctly:

By arming teachers, we would essentially be normalizing the use of weapons... If we allow teachers to carry [guns], then I feel that it sends a message to the public that we predict more school shootings will occur. Carrying firearms in schools would be a very sad reality that I don't want to face. (October 7 discussion post)

Two months later, in her reflective writing, Brittney stated, "Placing guns into the hands of educators does not fix the issue of gun violence, but rather accepts it as a given." For her, and many other students, school policy breaches the walls of the classroom—it can reshape the very fabric of national social life. Thus, the controversy of whether to arm teachers prompted student thought about how classroom practice impacts social expectations at the broadest levels.

Students' discussions of school gun policy revealed beliefs regarding the importance of student mental health, the disproportionate burden of gun policy on marginalized students, and the potential for classroom-level policies to legitimize cultural practices. In the following section, we describe student beliefs regarding gun violence and the profession of teaching.

Profession: Gun Use as a Professional Boundary

Overwhelmingly, the students in this course believed being armed did not align with teachers' professional responsibilities. The few who felt differently made it clear that no teacher should be forced to carry a weapon—only those who are willing and capable should be armed. The majority of students, however, were repelled by the idea of adding weapons training to teachers' professional education and obligations. Lilly wrote of the limits of teacher professional responsibility:

Teachers do have a certain level of responsibility when protecting their students; however, being expected to wield a deadly weapon in a classroom is not in their job descriptions. (Reflective writing)

John echoed this:

Teachers [are] in schools to teach, not to shoot a potentially dangerous person. If this did become a requirement to become a teacher, I could see many very capable people shying away from the profession because they do not feel comfortable with firearms. (October 7 discussion)

Lilly acknowledged the importance of teachers protecting students, but she positioned “wield[ing] a deadly weapon” as beyond a teacher’s professional boundaries. John made the point that should teachers be expected to handle firearms, many potential teachers may seek other professions. Echoing this point, Jenny posed a rhetorical question: “I never want to be responsible for possessing a gun, so why should I have to if I choose to become a teacher?” (Reflective writing).

In her final reflection, Alice argued that “teachers should be able to focus on their teaching and not have to worry about playing the role of a police officer” (Reflective writing). Other students invoked this professional division between law enforcement and educating, with matters of training mentioned repeatedly. Just as many would argue it takes a special kind of person to be a teacher, Leah believed only certain people are fit to make life and death decisions involving firearms:

I believe that the amount of training that would be required to make sure that teachers could use the guns in a way that does not endanger students, but protects them from potential harm, is too much to ask of the teachers. They are not a security force. They are educators. It also takes a certain kind of person to be able to stand up to an armed intruder. This is the same reason why not everyone becomes a police officer—many are just not cut out for that kind of job/situation, and we should not require that teachers be. (Leah, October 2 discussion)

Maria alluded to recent controversies involving police use of deadly force while also defending the profession of policing:

If we want more training for police officers whose sole job is to handle a gun safely and keep citizens out of harm's way (which I believe is greatly needed), then how can we even consider allowing teachers to be armed? The two jobs are on opposite ends in terms of schooling and training. (Maria, October 21 discussion)

Even though the use of firearms is a professional responsibility of police officers, scrutiny of that profession implies that arming teachers is untenable. Maria invoked a dichotomy familiar to teacher educators—the divide between training and education. For her, the use of firearms involves intensive “training” while the skills required for good teaching surpass *training* but instead are acquired through, in Maria’s words, “schooling.” These students did not disparage the policing profession in their posts and reflections, but they tacitly acknowledged that firearm use is a skill foreign to those necessary to be a professional educator.

In sum, in imagining the impacts of arming teachers, students argued that teacher professionalism precludes the use of firearms. Like in the previous theme, discussion of this controversy pressed students to consider essential characteristics and expectations. Students need emotional and physical safety, and teachers need a clear professional boundary between themselves and law enforcement.

Discussion and Implications

This study of introduction to education students' discussion and final reflections about school gun violence analyzes and amplifies the voices of university students considering careers as educators. The findings above delineated three themes. First, students thought carefully and critically about how sociopolitical forces impact the classroom, seeing school gun violence as less a school issue than a political issue. Second, students recognized potential ramifications of pro-gun school policies on

classrooms, students, and the larger society—these included deleterious impacts on marginalized groups as well as the potential to further legitimize U.S. gun culture. Third, students argued for continuing a professional boundary between educator and law enforcement.

We also argue that this study demonstrates that a pedagogical focus on the controversy of arming teachers creates a uniquely poignant space in which to consider the political, policy, and professional boundaries of teaching and future educators' beliefs regarding schooling in general. In our experience with this redesigned introduction to education course, allowing students space for structured discussion of this controversy is a pedagogical activity uniquely well-suited to prompting forms of student reflection that support long-standing goals within education scholarship of promoting critical reflection on the structure, purpose, and social context of schooling. We now draw inferences regarding the importance of this controversial discussion as well as implications for education instructors and teacher educators more broadly. This section discusses three inferences: Discussion of arming teachers as space to (1) consider one's identity as an educator, (2) consider the identity of the teaching profession, and (3) consider the connections between school and society.

Inference 1: The Discussion of Arming Teachers Serves as a Powerful Space to Reimagine Educator Identity and Obligation

While the students in our class declared intentions to pursue a variety of careers in education, the course itself was anchored in an exploration of the teaching profession. After all, the students entered the course with a powerful apprenticeship of observation that informed their views on schooling and on the teachers with whom they had worked (Lortie, 2002). This apprenticeship provided a key anchor for exploring course content. While multiple controversies were highlighted (see Figure 1), a unique aspect of the gun-violence controversy was the degree to which it prompted student exploration of educator identity. Discussing whether or not to arm teachers led many students to reconsider the teaching profession through an "as if" lens. Holland (1998) argues that imagining a situation or identity through an "as if" lens is key to gaining access to assumptions regarding agency, significance, and value within various social worlds. After all, "people have the propensity to be drawn to, recruited for, and formed in these worlds, and to become active in and passionate about them. People's identities and agency are formed dialectically and dialogically in these 'as if' worlds" (p. 49). Thus, the course discussion and reflections functioned as a space where these students reimaged their view of educators and schools.

The themes outlined in the findings section above detail the degree to which students moved beyond abstract consideration of schooling into deliberation about their own beliefs as to what it means to be an educator. For example, in theme two above, students considered the impacts of arming teachers on children's emotional and physical safety. Students' imaginings were concerned with the lived experience of children to a stronger degree than the other controversial topics in the course. We infer that because of the drastic nature of this controversy, students thought carefully about how policy choices could impact actual children in classrooms.

Inference 2: The Discussion of Arming Teachers Allows Space to Consider the Identity of the Teaching Profession

The professional salience of arming teachers prompted unique and insightful imaginings of what roles and responsibilities are appropriate for teachers. Given constant discussions of teacher attrition and

professional turnover, the deep forms of "as if" imaginings prompted by this controversy could serve teacher educators, especially, in helping their students develop realistic and workable frameworks for professional boundaries. Given widespread awareness of teacher attrition (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Dunn et al., 2017; Sutchter et al., 2016), and questions surrounding teacher professional status (Anderson & Cohen, 2018; Schneider, 2018), gun policy serves as an important space for education students to consider the future of the teaching profession. The students in this study—including the large number of declared preservice teachers—held clear aversions to arming teachers. While some students argued in the abstract to arm currently practicing teachers, when they shifted toward imagining themselves as an armed teacher, they had no desire to take on that responsibility, and they would reconsider their choice of profession if being a teacher meant carrying a gun. This mirrors discussion by in-service teachers (Lucas & Lamphere, 2020; Morabia, 2018; Perkins, 2018). We argue that this shift from arguing policy in the abstract to considering potential practice is well aligned with discussions of school gun policy. Echoing both themes two and three of the findings, the controversy over arming teachers presents a tragic tension in which students can wrestle reflectively and critically with their own beliefs about teaching and schooling, and this opens space for the critical reexamination suggested by scholars (Beltman et al., 2015; Rodriguez 2008).

Inference 3: The Discussion of Arming Teachers Allows Space to Consider the Connection Between Society and School

Finally, these findings point to overlaps between professional concerns and concerns for the broader society, a perennial interest in critical and social-justice-oriented education coursework and scholarship (e.g., Anderson & Cohen, 2015; Darling-Hammond, 2017; Zeichner, Payne, & Brayko, 2015). The controversy over arming teachers provides several hooks that can be connected with broader questions of social justice that have salience across education coursework. For example, in exploring this controversy, instructors may be able to help students draw links between school gun violence and police use of force in minoritized communities. Instructors can also potentially emphasize the paradox that gun violence is a political intrusion into American schools, but local policy decisions regarding arming teachers can reinforce social beliefs and practices far beyond the classroom. Further, while groups of educators may not have much agency relative to national partisan politics, those same groups can have much more agency when mobilized at the district and state levels. Practically, as instructors, we were able to pull on these threads throughout the remainder of the course, helping students continually reconsider the human consequences of school policy. In short, because school gun violence is widely reported (as evidenced in theme 1) and connected with the very physical and emotional safety of students (as evidenced in theme 2), discussion of this controversy enabled more thoughtful reflection by the students throughout the course.

Limitations

This study examined the discussions and reflections of introduction to education students related to the controversy of arming teachers. While we argue it holds implications for the use of this particular controversy in introduction to education and other education coursework, we acknowledge that it examines the contributions of a single section of the course. Attempts to overcome thematic myopia included comparing the researchers' findings with each other and corroborating the themes enumerated

above with the reflections of two other class sections. Still, future research can draw upon a larger pool of participants, potentially across institutional types.

Conclusion

We argue that the structured and scaffolded discussion of school gun violence is a powerful way to unearth and clarify education students' beliefs about schooling, teaching, and society. While the use of controversy in the P-12 classroom is well-documented, discussions of its use in colleges of education are less widespread. Further, this study fills in the more specific gap of analysis of how teacher candidates and college of education students understand and make sense of the controversy of arming teachers. As argued above, the nature of this controversy is such that it prompts reflective depth that is sometimes difficult to achieve in introduction to education coursework. The implications outlined above are critical for education programs as they aim for professional educator learning that goes beyond, as Rust called it, "a patina of beliefs layered over a lifetime of learning" (as quoted in Olsen, 2008).

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