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TEACHING

After a Mass Shooting, Education Programs Confront a Question: 'Am I Obligated to Take a Bullet for My Students?'

By Emma Kerr | FEBRUARY 21, 2018

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Joe Raedle, Getty Images

Observers at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, in Parkland, Fla., last week, where the police arrested Nikolas Cruz, a former student, for allegedly killing 17 people.

The day after 17 people, 14 of them students, were killed by a lone gunman at a high school in Parkland, Fla., Carolyn Parker faced a room of aspiring teachers in Washington, D.C. They had questions: Can teachers hug and comfort students after a massacre? After a shooting, what's the best way to support traumatized kids? One student asked her directly: As a teacher, "am I obligated to take a bullet for my students?"

"My response was: As a parent, I hope you would do that for my own children, but that's a personal decision," said Parker, director of the master's program in teaching at American University. "Intellectually, I would understand, because I'm not sure if I would if I were in a classroom. In the end, it's a personal decision."

With images of students hiding under desks still fresh in their minds, Parker and her education students spent hours talking about how they might respond to an active shooter. She began to tear up, she said. Her daughter was in the third grade at the time of

the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School, and she remembers wanting to protect her from even knowing about the shooting.

Now, Parker says, her 12-year-old daughter's middle school had a walkout on Tuesday to protest gun violence. She speaks to her class of future teachers as a mother and as an educator.

Colleges' education programs typically do not require aspiring teachers to train for a shooter in the classroom. But with each mass school shooting, these programs face questions about what the role of teachers should be in caring for their students and themselves. Some programs offer crisis-preparedness courses or seminars, and often deal with more common classroom scenarios, like a student's bringing a knife to class or facing drug addiction. But in response to last week's shooting, others are rethinking their curriculum.

Schools of education have typically left active-shooter-response training up to the school districts where student-teachers are placed in internships, or for their first teaching jobs. At education programs with that policy, like Arizona State University, "the context makes a difference," said Carole G. Basile, dean of the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College. She added that each school district has its own different safety policies for active shooters that teachers have to learn.

To help her students learn how to talk with their own students as teachers, Parker conducted a demonstration on Thursday. She asked them to sit in silence for a few minutes. "I want you to think deeply about what you want to know about this," she told them as she passed out index cards. Students were instructed to write down any questions they might have about facing an active shooter in a school; they then answered them one by one in class. Parker suggested they do the same with their students, who might be afraid or embarrassed to ask about something they worry about when it comes to a possible school shooting.

Natalie Hagler, a graduate-student instructor who teaches "Effective Teaching & Classroom Management" at the University of Florida, felt she needed to start a conversation with her student-teachers. She said she felt responsible for preparing her

student-teachers, who are sometimes just 18 years old and taking their first education course.

"I was a teacher for 18 years," Hagler said. I've had kids strike me and curse at me, but those responses are not about me, it's about them. I know what I can take, but it's very different when you're looking at a young person who's so passionate about helping people but really doesn't know what that means," she said. "I'm going to give you all the tools I can to help you do this, but it's going to be so hard. You might be hurt doing this."

Two of Hagler's adult daughters are in education as well, and she said she wants her student-teachers to be safe just as she does her own children. The classroom discussion is an opportunity, she said, to remind her students of their role in helping to prevent kids from turning to violence. The troubled students who aren't as likeable or who make teachers feel uncomfortable are the ones who most need teachers' vulnerability and love, she said.

"Some day, some of these student-teachers may find themselves in a position where they have to choose between saving their own lives and saving the children's lives they are responsible for. How do you train someone to do that?" Hagler asked. "And still look at every student in their classroom with care rather than looking at them as the person who potentially kills them?"

"There is no answer, but the student who needs your love and care more than anyone else is that potentially violent student."

While professors are responding to questions from soon-to-be elementary and secondary schoolteachers as they come up, Parker sees a need for a more-structured curriculum on preparing for an active shooter, while teachers are still in college.

"I've been at three other institutions, and I have not seen it as part of the curriculum. It happens ad hoc when there's a shooting. Sometimes it doesn't happen at all," she said. Training in school districts is "very much on the procedures of what one needs to do

when there's an active shooter in the building," Parker said. "It doesn't get to the emotional part of it, both what teachers can do in the classroom for students and for teachers themselves."

That's where schools of education can come in. They have an opportunity to prepare future teachers to care for the physical and emotional needs of students — being careful to make students aware of what to do in a shooting without causing them unnecessary anxiety, Parker said. Then, she said, they can take that a step further by helping future teachers cope with the emotional challenges of being a teacher.

New York University's Steinhardt education program updated its crisis-preparedness curriculum a few years ago to create a large, seminar-style requirement where students tackle specific cases and hear from guidance counselors, experts, and elementary through high-school students themselves. Rosa Pietanza, a clinical assistant professor at Steinhardt, said cases in the past have included those involving students bringing a weapon to school, but never active shooters. Since Parkland, Pietanza said, she and her colleagues plan to make a school shooting one of the cases students must tackle to graduate.

"You have that clear sense in your mind of what you need to do, but some people in the moment will freeze. Some people have a very hard time responding," Pietanza said. "By looking at the cases and asking a lot of questions, it is really helping students prepare. To know, how am I going to respond to this? Who do I go to? It gives them language and the action to take should they be confronted with these situations."

These events get education classrooms talking, Parker said, but next, training to confront an active shooter needs to be universally part of the programs' accreditation requirements.

"Your obligation as a teacher is to keep your children safe, but you're not first responders. They shouldn't be. They're not police officers," Parker said. They have not talked about school shootings "from the teacher-preparation standpoint," she said. "But as the students gain their voice in Florida, we're going to work to support that."

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