

“God Bless Texas. God Bless the NRA”: Problematizing Texas Teachers as Armed Protectors in the Aftermath of Sandy Hook

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Abstract

The shooting at Sandy Hook elementary and other past and more recent acts of school violence involving guns in the United States have created considerable national dialogue about how we can prevent such horrific acts from happening in the future. In Texas, public conversation has ensued about the possibility of arming teachers, school staff, and administrators to “protect” and “defend” schools from similar attacks. Media discourses produced by the general public, right-wing political leaders, and organizations like the National Rifle Association (NRA) have been instrumental in advocating for teachers and other school personnel to become armed protectors. As such, in this article, I describe the context of the debate to arm Texas teachers as portrayed by newspaper outlets across the state while problematizing the dominant discourses they produce.

Keywords

Sandy Hook, newspaper media, arming teachers, Texas

Tragedy happens, should we shut down all the streets and highways to protect ourselves from being slaughtered? Arm the teachers . . . In a free society, bad things happen to good people. In a dictatorship, bad things happen to most people. Which way will we go? Take away our guns, take away our free speech, just a little at a time . . . What happens next? Totalitarian rule by executive order? God bless Texas. God bless the NRA.

—Freeman (2012, p. 16)

I personally think Texas teachers are underpaid and have a rough time teaching our kids on the budgets we have, and I don't think it should totally be up to them to protect our schools. I think that if you arm them, something much worse could happen—whether it is an accident or not.

—Barnes (2013, para. 11)

Introduction: Texans Respond to Sandy Hook

On December 14, 2012, at Sandy Hook elementary, 20 children and six adults tragically lost their lives at the hand of a gunman armed with a military style assault rifle who then turned the gun on himself. Not since 1999, when the Columbine school shooting occurred in Littleton, Colorado, has the nation engaged in such a heated debate around guns and school safety. While President Obama has pushed for

stricter gun-control legislation since Sandy Hook and states like Connecticut, Colorado, Maryland, and New York have opted to strengthen their gun-control laws (Lieb, 2013), Texas, along with other politically conservative states like Arkansas and Utah, have been moving in a different direction with the debate. In January 2013, Texas Governor Rick Perry spoke before a Tea Party group encouraging them to consider arming teachers and administrators in K-12 schools (Smith Gonzalez, 2013). In addition, Texas Land Commissioner Patterson, who was instrumental in helping to pass concealed handgun legislation in 1995, stated that “school children likely would be safer if more people carried guns on campuses . . . [it] could have changed the dynamic [at Sandy Hook] . . . there would be fewer lives lost” (Holley, 2012, p. 1).

Although K-12 schools are considered gun free zones, current Texas laws give local districts the authority to decide whether guns can be kept by school staff for security

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purposes. Only one district, Harrold in north Texas, had approved such measures years prior to the shooting at Sandy Hook, citing concern that the nearest sheriff's station is 20 min away (Baker, 2012). After Sandy Hook, however, at least seven districts across the state have changed their policies to allow school personnel with Concealed Handgun Licenses (CHL's) to arm themselves, and many more districts are considering similar measures. Furthermore, within only months following the shooting at Sandy Hook, state legislation was passed to support efforts to arm teachers. One such measure, The Protection of Texas Children Act, was passed in May 2013 and permits districts to appoint a volunteer teacher, staff member, or administrator to serve as an armed School Marshal. Texas Senate Bill 1857, enacted in September 2013, allows certified handgun instructors to conduct specialized school safety trainings intended to prepare personnel with CHLs to use their guns within school contexts. Prior to the passage of Senate Bill 1857, Texas Attorney General Abbott suggested "such training would help better prepare teachers and could potentially ease some parents' concerns over armed teachers." He went on to say,

The reality is there is [*sic*] a lot of people in the State of Texas who have a concealed handgun license. Some of these people would be teachers, and the question you have to ask is: Why do we disarm these teachers when they go onto campus when in reality they may be able to provide some safety for their children? (Wiggins, 2013, para. 18).

Not everyone in Texas shares the viewpoint that arming teachers is the best response to the tragedy at Sandy Hook. At a Texas Senate hearing just days after the shooting, representatives from districts across the state, including the Dallas Independent School District (ISD) police chief, supported increasing security at schools rather than arming teachers (Haag, 2013). Although some have seen this as a viable alternative, it raises major concerns about creating (or increasing already) prison-like conditions in schools (Noguera, 2010). In the minority are representations of viewpoints that question whether heightening security with armed protectors provides the most conducive environment for learning and equitable treatment of often already oppressed students, such as those who come from low socioeconomic backgrounds or are of color and historically have been subjected to harassment and unjust treatment in schools (Tatum, 1997/2003). The focus on these and a myriad of other issues has been discussed in response to Sandy Hook by the newspaper media in Texas, making it an important forum to consider when examining the state's initiatives to arm teachers.

Texas News Outlets Examined

Citing the significance of the media in framing neoliberal public discourse (Giroux, 2011; Herman, 2007; Macedo,

2007; Squires, 2011), newspapers have been utilized as one platform to examine the debate to arm Texas teachers. *NewsBank® Access World News*, an electronic archive system, was used to access 320 news outlets in the state, largely consisting of major local newspapers and sparingly representing other forms of media such as published transcripts from local broadcast television stations (e.g., NBC, ABC, and CBS), university papers, neighborhood bulletins, and online media like blogs managed by major newspapers. The search terms "arm teachers" and "guns" between January 1, 2012, and October 2, 2013, yielded 160 articles that were relevant to the debate. The articles examined, which represent both rural and urban contexts in Texas, primarily consisted of publications by staff reporters and the viewpoints of local contributors who submitted letters to the editor. Not surprisingly, within the time limitations searched, the dialog about arming teachers began on December 15th, 2012, the day after the Sandy Hook shooting. These perspectives have painted a story of the campaign to arm teachers in Texas, which I share in the forthcoming.

Interrogating Protectionist Viewpoints That Support Arming Teachers

We need to arm our teachers and let them defend our kids, there should be no gun ban or legislation, we have our rights from our founding fathers for a reason. (Brooks, 2012, p. 11A)

Like many social and institutional contexts where protectionist views of children satisfy a larger adult-centric agenda, the campaign to arm Texas teachers has been built on the accepted notion that children need adults to "defend" them. And while all human beings have the right to feel safe, especially within the confines of primary and secondary public schools, in the debate to arm teachers, undue emphasis has been placed on the need to protect children. These protectionist viewpoints are driven by modernist assumptions that shape universalized notions of children as less than.

As a constructed category, "children" have historically and contemporarily been viewed within an adult/child binary—as human beings that progress linearly toward "adulthood" moving from place of lacking and toward a place of knowing (Cannella, 1997; Walkerdine, 1993). With its roots in the field of psychology, early childhood studies as a discipline, in particular, has reified dichotomous constructs of adult/child, perpetuating power for adults and the subjugation of those labeled as children (Burman, 2008; Dahlburg & Moss, 2005). Furthermore, these power hierarchies have positioned adults as protectors of younger human beings, who are viewed as vulnerable and therefore in need of constant supervision and surveillance by adults, which not only discounts the agency that children possess but also opens possibilities to silence, control, and exploit them (Pérez, 2014).

Within these dominant constructs of childhood, the push to arm teachers in Texas becomes more viable. When protectionist viewpoints of children are problematized, however, they compel us to look beyond hegemonic reasoning that suggests teachers need guns to defend schools and interrogate underlying neo-conservative agendas promoted by the right-wing, religious doctrines, and organizations like the National Rifle Association (NRA). The following is an example of what normative, protectionist views of children produce when pro-gun enthusiasts consider the idea of arming teachers.

I believe that very shortly, carrying a firearm will become a requirement for all teachers and school administrators. It's the way it has to be and if teachers aren't comfortable with that they're going to have to find a new profession. In a perfect world we wouldn't need to take such measures. But until that happens, critical thinking suggests that we all exercise our second amendment rights, arm our teachers and school officials to ensure the safety of our children, voice our support and keep a close eye on anti-gun crusaders who want to make our decisions for us. A school should be a safe haven where children can learn and grow. And right now, arming teachers is the only practical solution. (Siebold, 2013, para. 8)

An overwhelming number of newspapers in Texas have run similar opinion pieces that argue schools will be safer by arming teachers, with contributors citing second amendment rights, the fear of "anti-gun crusaders" taking away their right to bear arms or, as illustrated in the opening quotes, using religion and their alliance with powerful gun lobbyist organizations like the NRA to convince the public that guns are the solution.

Other protectionist viewpoints that support arming teachers argue from the standpoint of children as resources or commodities, stating "We protect our other resources with arms. Why not our greatest resource: our children?" (Eddy, 2013, para. 6). Objectifying children as commodities in need of protection mirrors the perspective of many politicians and neoliberal childhood advocacy groups who view younger human beings as either monetary assets or hindrances to our economy.

Finally, there have been countless perspectives printed in the news media that question the mental health of the larger public and schoolteachers in particular, once again, without critical reflection on how this rhetoric reproduces not only protectionist viewpoints but also modernist binaries of normal/abnormal, sane/insane. As one opinion page contributor wrote, "I think that our schools should have teachers that are certified in concealed handgun classes and who have passed a psychological test . . . to know they are stable mentally. We need to protect our children" (Crocker, 2013, para. 7).

Each of these examples, while naming different rationales, illustrate dominant media representations of the

campaign to arm teachers in Texas. Markedly, the ultimate reasoning behind pro-gun commentary has been that children are in need of protection. Protectionist viewpoints have become the driving force behind not only conservative efforts to arm teachers but also for initiatives in opposition to arming teachers that instead advocate for heightened security at schools, whether by means of hiring armed guards or creating prison-like surveillance conditions.

The Conservative Agenda to Arm Teachers

Both democratic and republican party leaders have contributed to the discourse on advocating for guns to be used to protect our nation's schoolchildren. However, republicans, in particular, representing state and national interests, have been central to the argument that teachers should carry concealed handguns at schools. As an illustration, just days following Sandy Hook, a San Antonio newspaper ran a story that reported,

In the wake of the Connecticut massacre, State Representative Debbie Riddle, R-Tomball, plans to introduce new legislation in the next session. She believes teachers and others on school campuses with handgun permits should be able to carry, whether school districts like it or not. "It is just logical," Rep. Riddle said. "'No gun zones' means that there's a big sign that says 'hey we have no way to protect ourselves.'" She is not alone. This week U.S. Representative Louis Gohmert, R-Tyler, suggested something similar at the national level. Gov. Rick Perry also believes those with the proper training and background checks should also be able to carry their weapons freely. "You should be able to carry your gun anywhere in the state," Gov. Perry said. (Horansky, 2012, para. 1)

As evident by the pro-gun agenda pushed by the republican political party in the state, school districts and constituents who favor arming teachers clearly have had their views legitimized by conservative leaders. With this support, gun organizations have been able to move forward with little political backlash on initiatives to arm teachers, such as holding CHL training on school campuses for education personnel. One such training took place just months following Sandy Hook, targeted at preparing teachers to handle firearms. The free clinic for school employees, which was held at a high school gym outside of Fort Worth, was organized by a former Navy SEAL (Sea, Air, and Land) sniper and a local Police Chief. Touted as the "largest CHL class ever held," approximately 700 teachers and administrators attended. Local schoolteachers were asked to respond to the training as illustrated in the following newspaper excerpt:

Smith, a Grand Prairie first-grade teacher, said she would support arming teachers who received proper training. "More protection can't hurt," she said. "Maybe it would save lives." Marilyn Mykel, a special-education teacher in Argyle, said she

and her husband bought a handgun several years ago after an attempted backyard kidnapping of her son, now 10. They had long considered obtaining concealed-carry licenses but never got around to it.

Then came Sandy Hook. “We said, ‘This is it,’” Mykel said. “We need to protect ourselves.” (Bahari, 2013, p. A01)

The Argyle teacher goes on to say that “although her school does not allow guns, she hopes that will change.”

To Arm or Not to Arm?

While a large majority of Texas school districts have not permitted teachers to carry firearms on campuses, since Sandy Hook, there have been at least seven school districts that have changed their policies to allow school personnel to carry firearms. One of the districts, Christoval ISD in San Angelo, just 1 month after the shooting at Sandy Hook approved policy that allows schools to name armed “guardians.” To train the guardians, the district hired “an out-of-state private firearms instructor who has experience training military, law enforcement, private companies and security firms” (Atterbury, 2013, para. 6). Each appointed guardian received US\$600 to be used for further “outside training or to secure a properly functioning firearm.” Furthermore, with the support of legislation like Texas Senate Bill 1857 (mentioned in the opening of the article), Levelland ISD also changed their policies to allow teachers with CHLs to bring their guns to campus. In response, a Texas Tech University newspaper published an opinion column with the following commentary that opposes to the district’s decision:

Even if bringing guns into the classroom makes the few teachers who genuinely want to carry handguns in the classroom feel in some way empowered, it puts additional stress on other teachers and students as a whole and detracts from the open learning environment the public school classroom is supposed to be. (Reynolds, 2013, para. 7)

Other media outlets have covered oppositional viewpoints to arming teachers, not only in their opinion columns but also when reporting the perspectives of teachers’ organizations, who vehemently oppose arming teachers. In response to the many pro-gun legislative campaigns that were put forward in Texas since Sandy Hook, the Houston Federation of Teachers’ president was quoted as saying “all we would succeed in doing is getting some teachers killed” (Political Buzz, Houston Examiner, 2013, p. 1). In addition to teachers’ groups opposing the arming of teachers, some have expressed outrage at the prospect of the state using already scarce funding to finance gun initiatives, citing the Texas legislature’s US\$5.4 billion cut to education funding in 2011 (Wallach, 2013). An opinion column contributor wrote,

In 2011, thousands of teachers were laid off because of budget cuts. I love how conservatives are always so quick to spend money on things that fit their ideology, but when it comes to common-sense spending like educating kids, they just can’t find the funding. God forbid that instead of training these teachers to kill, we give them pay raises or hire more teachers so that they can focus on giving kids better educations instead of trying to manage oversized classrooms. Apparently we just don’t have the money for that. (Kaplan, 2013, para. 6)

To ask people’s opinion about the possibility of arming teachers, one north Texas district, Cleburne ISD, surveyed 1,134 parents and employees and found that collectively, 59% were opposed to arming school personnel. Parents, however, were marginally in favor of it. In the same district, a high school English teacher surveyed her 10th grade students and found that “the overwhelming majority said they didn’t want their teachers to carry guns. They suggested some alternatives, such as allowing teachers to use Tasers or Mace and installing metal detectors” (Campbell, 2013).

Heightening Security With Armed Guards

Like the high school students surveyed in north Texas, others in opposition to arming teachers have instead advocated for heightening security, not by arming teachers with mace or installing metal detectors but rather by hiring armed guards as a means of protection. This viewpoint was one of the most dominantly represented in the media as the solution to keeping children safe. As an example of the discourse of hiring armed guards as an alternative to arming teachers, one south Texas newspaper reported,

Kenneth Trump, president of National School Safety and Security Services, is familiar with the arguments [about arming teachers] and thinks the debate has spun out of control. “Gun-control advocates have shamelessly seized upon Sandy Hook to push their political agenda,” . . . Schools should look at hiring armed police officers—whether it be a larger district with its own police force or a smaller district with one security resource officer. “Teachers want to be armed with textbooks and computers.” (Reynolds, 2013, para. 39)

Similarly, an opinion page contributor, who agrees with Trump’s alternative to arming teachers, says,

Public school teachers are asked to do so much with so little. Now the governor of Texas asks that they wear one more hat. They are to become “hired gunslingers.” . . . I am not against the Second Amendment at all. I own several handguns. But I believe it would make more sense to hire trained armed security guards, rather than arm teachers. (El-Amin, 2012, para. 6)

The NRA has also focused its campaign on heightening security in schools by way of hiring (or increasing the

amount of) armed guards on K-12 campuses. Executive vice president, Wayne LaPierre, said,

if it's crazy to call for putting police and armed security in our schools to protect our children then call me crazy . . . I think the American people think it's crazy not to do it. It's the one thing that would keep people safe. (Curry, 2012, para. 2)

In support of LaPierre's remarks, in Waco, another opinion column read "Why not try the NRA's suggestion of posting armed guards in all schools? Nothing else has worked—especially feel-good legislation such as outlawing semi-automatic weapons or large magazines" (Ahart, 2012, para. 1). Some opinion page contributors have even recommended that schools allow armed volunteers to help secure campuses, a discourse similar to that espoused by the minutemen project in Arizona who claim to be armed "volunteers" that "protect" the United States/Mexico border, when in actuality they are a patriarchal, colonialist, anti-immigrant militia group who seek to violently harass Mexican border crossers (McCarthy, Cuadros, & Ressler, 2005). As one contributor suggests,

There are thousands of retired military and peace officers in this country who would volunteer to guard schools and daycare centers and anywhere else where children are involved. My guess is they would even provide their own uniforms, weapons, ammunition and Kevlar vests. The mere presence of an armed guard would prevent assaults. (Ahart, 2012, para. 1)

While many opinion page contributors have shown similar support for LaPierre's recommendations, others have disagreed with his comments, even interrogating the NRA's neoliberal agenda.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to realize that current NRA leadership is all about improving bottom lines for gun manufacturers. When will the rank and file of the NRA realize their leadership is in an unholy alliance with the gun industry and is using them to line the pockets of the gun industry? (Moerbe, 2012, para. 3)

Although perspectives critical of the NRA were minimal, one other article ran a story that questioned the motives of retailers and manufacturers using the tragedy at Sandy Hook to increase gun sales. In Humble, just outside of Houston, a story read,

the parking lots and gun ranges were full at gun shops throughout the community and employees remarked they had seen an increase in business over the past month . . . local gun owner Stacy Seay, who is a Certified Handgun License holder . . . has visited several of the local gun shops and remarked on how the prices for some guns have increased especially since the Sandy Hook Elementary shooting. (Summer & Taylor, 2013, p. A1)

Guns Are Not the Solution, but We Do Want More Security: Legitimizing Prison-Like Conditions in Schools

As yet another alternative to the conservative calls to arm teachers and the NRA's campaign to hire armed guards, some have stated that at the very least, more security in schools is needed. As an example, in a south Texas city, a local newspaper reported,

Card readers, additional walls, cameras and peepholes are four new security enhancements that could be coming to a few school campuses over the next few weeks . . . Shields Elementary School front office clerks Monica R. Torres and Celia Mendoza said they're excited about the changes. "It's going to be safer not only for the children but for our staff as well," Torres said. (Astrain, 2013, para. 1)

Even though historically some districts in Texas have had their own police departments or have contracted with local Sheriff departments to provide added security at schools, newspapers representing cities across the state have reported that because of the shooting at Sandy Hook, superintendents are asking that schools review their current safety measures and "lockdown procedures" (Smith Gonzalez, 2013, para. 16).

Supporting this intensification of security on school campuses, one opinion page contributor in north Texas wrote,

I firmly believe more security is needed. In a perfect world, little children would come and go at school in perfect safety, because no one would wish them harm. However, this is not a perfect world; we have corrupted it to the point that even our school kids are not safe. So, obviously, we need more security, because that's the one thing we can change and change quickly. (Fish, 2013, para. 1)

Very few media outlets have reported perspectives that were critical of heightening security. One, however, the Weatherford Democrat, published the following viewpoint of one frequent opinion page contributor:

Do you parents really want your schools to be like prisons? . . . It is my opinion that we should keep the schools pretty much as they are. Sure, we can improve safety, but improvements should be as invisible as is possible to the students, especially in the grade schools. Give our children their childhood happy days at school. Do not have them go to school in fear every day. (Kelly, 2013, para. 1-21)

Interrogating the notion of schools as prisons was rarely part of the dialogue in the Texas newspaper media, illustrating the political and general public's view that protective security measures by any means of necessary—whether by arming teachers, hiring armed guards, or heightening surveillance—should foreground the Texas response to the shooting at Sandy Hook.

Concluding Thoughts

The reaction of many Texans to the prospect of arming teachers discussed in this article merely scratches the surface of the debates that have transpired in the media since Sandy Hook. Other emergent themes include disputes about the burden of funding gun and/or increased security initiatives, responses to President Obama's call for greater gun-control, national security, the discursive construction of mental health, the role of religion and the second amendment in shaping people's responses to Sandy Hook, and minimally represented discussions about race and nationality. These themes were omitted from the discussion, or not covered in depth, because they tended to focus more on gun-control (in support of or opposition to) rather than on the specific issue of arming teachers. Noticeably missing from the media discourse was the perspective of children themselves, who are the "resources" adults have argued they seek to protect within the dialogue to arm teachers. Furthermore, each of these themes, whether made central to the discourse or invisible within it, illustrate how a violent act like the one that transpired at Sandy Hook Elementary can spur a national debate about guns in America, much of which has not been critically reflected upon.

Returning to an earlier discussion, threaded throughout the media discourses are protectionist viewpoints. The pro-school gun movement relies heavily upon this dominant rhetoric to intensify the presence of firearms on school campuses not just in Texas but nationally and, in turn, raise capital for gun retailers, manufactures, and lobbyist groups (and the politicians who benefit from their campaign contributions)—all at the expense and further subjugation of already oppressed/disenfranchised human beings, children. Moreover, we must not forget that fundamental to fostering the hyper-capitalist pro-gun agenda to arm teachers is its reliance on fear-based politics, which is practiced and encouraged by those on both ends of the political spectrum and also fueled by the masses' discriminatory assumptions about "others." Until critical dialogue is opened about the role of identity politics and the expansion of neo-conservatively embedded social systems in creating the context for violence, erroneous campaigns such as the one in Texas to "defend" children with the same apparatuses that have been used to hurt them will continue.

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