

# **“Protect That Child At All Costs”: How Practitioner Perception of Active Shooter Drills Affects Implementation in Early Years Settings in the United States**

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## **Abstract**

Although 94.6% of schools in the United States performed active shooter drills in the 2015-2016 school year (King, Bracy, Addington, & Muschert, 2019), there has been dearth of research on the use of these drills, especially in early years settings. This study aimed to address this research gap by examining how early years practitioners' perceptions of active shooter drills affect their implementation of those drills. Following a mixed-methods design based in trauma-informed research, this study used an initial questionnaire to invite and screen participants for a follow-up, semi-structured interview. The findings showed that all five interview participants believed that the methodology of drill implementation was important when mitigating negative emotional responses, both for adult and child participants. However, all five participants also believed that the drills served as preparation for a real event that could happen to them at any time, and thus a tradeoff had to be made between positive emotions and true preparedness. As the literature shows that real active shooter scenarios are relatively rare, there should be a better balance between preparedness and emotional security, especially in the formative setting of early years education.

**Key words :** *active shooter drills, school shootings, emergency preparedness*

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## **Introduction**

Emergency drills are not new in the United States. For many years, schools practiced emergency scenarios based on the natural disasters specific to their region, such as fires, earthquakes, and tornadoes (King et al., 2019; Ramirez, Kubicek, Peek-Asa, & Wong, 2009). However, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the U.S. began to focus on a new type of emergency drill: the active shooter drill. The 1999 shooting at Columbine High School prompted fears that violence was a danger to all schools, and active shooter drills became one of many measures employed to protect children (King et al., 2019). In the years since the Columbine shooting, active shooter drills have become widespread, with 94.6% of U.S. schools performing them in the 2015-2016 school year (King et al., 2019).

Though the drills are now commonplace, scholars debate the frequency of real-life active shooter events (Cox & Rich, 2018; Dickson & Vargo, 2017; Goodman-Scott & Eckhoff, 2020; King et al., 2019; Schildkraut, Nickerson, & Ristoff, 2020; Zhe & Nickerson, 2007). What counts as a school shooting for the statistics is unclear, with suicides and accidental discharges on school property sometimes discounted, despite the effect they can still have on those present (Cox & Rich, 2018). Still, schools are widely considered one of the safest places for children (Schildkraut et al., 2020; Zhe & Nickerson, 2007), as many sources agree that school shootings are a relatively rare occurrence (Cox & Rich, 2018; Hara, 2020; King et al., 2019; Schildkraut et al., 2020). However, Dickson and Vargo (2017, p. 407) described school violence as “occasional, but disastrous events with extensive effects,” asserting that the potential scale of damage, rather than the statistical probability, necessitates preparedness.

### **Active Shooter Drill Methodology**

Despite the widespread use of active shooter drills in the U.S., there are no federally-mandated methodologies for them (Ramirez et al., 2009). Two of the most common methodologies are the Standard Response Protocol Extended Edition (SRP-X) and the ALICE Training Institute. The SRP-X methodology instructs teachers and staff to lock the doors, turn off the lights, and hide quietly with students (Schildkraut et al., 2020). The ALICE (alert, lockdown, inform, counter and evacuate) Training Institute advocates a more active

response, teaching students and staff to fight back against active shooters if necessary (O'Regan, 2019).

The U.S. Department of Education and Schools released a 132-page guide for schools' crisis planning which grouped natural disasters with more violent emergencies, like bus crashes, acts of terrorism, and school shootings, under the larger umbrella of crisis management. This guide made several non-legally-binding recommendations for a school shooting plan, though it did not provide exact drilling instructions (US Department of Education & Office of Safe Drug-Free Schools, 2007). In the absence of specific instructions from the federal government, the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) and National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO) partnered to create another set of non-legally-binding guidelines for what they called "armed assailant drills" (National Association of School Psychologists & National Association of School Resource Officers, 2017, p. 1). These guidelines include a development chart to categorize what drilling methods are appropriate for specific age groups.

### **Literature Review: Research on Active Shooter Drills**

Many researchers studying active shooter drills in schools lament the dearth of research in this field (Goodman-Scott & Eckhoff, 2020; Hara, 2020; Peterson, Sackrison, & Polland, 2015; Zhe & Nickerson, 2007). The few studies that do exist can be divided roughly into research into the effects on children and research into perceptions of adults.

#### ***Effects on Children***

The studies which examine the effects of active shooter drills on students seem to suggest that *how* the drill is conducted plays a big part in whether there are negative emotional responses. When researchers directly led active shooter drills, they did not observe negative emotional responses in the children. First, Zhe and Nickerson (2007) consulted several suggestions for best practice in order to develop a training program for the children, grades 4-6. The researchers did not find significant emotional differences between the treatment group and the control group, though they cautioned against generalizing these findings to schools which do not employ the same drill plan, emphasizing the care they took to develop

an emotionally sensitive drill. Dickson and Vargo (2017) were the next researchers to conduct drills personally, using behavioral skills training (BST) to train Texas kindergarteners how to do a lockdown drill. The researchers did not find any signs of negative emotional response, though like Zhe and Nickerson, Dickson and Vargo (2017, p. 411) warned against generalization, asserting that their “calm and controlled” way of drilling might not match how teachers conduct themselves during drills.

In other studies, researchers studied existing training methods, rather than developing and leading their own drills. Schildkraut et al. (2020) examined the effects of the widely adopted SRP-X lockdown training, gathering students’, grades 6-12, emotional responses through a school climate study. The data showed that as students received training and participated in drills, their perceptions of safety decreased, though their feelings of preparedness increased. Peterson et al. (2015) also found that college students felt both more prepared and less safe after engaging with school shootings, in this case, through educational videos.

Delaney (2017) conducted one of the few qualitative studies, writing a case study of her time as a pre-K classroom participant observer. Delaney described how the children seemed confused and frightened during an initial lockdown drill, though stated that they eventually came to treat it as routine. However, after the introduction of the lockdown drill, she noted that the children played violent pretend games with a new intensity. Delaney concluded that the children were using play to work through their confusion and fear. Delaney interviewed the pre-K teacher, who reported feeling unprepared to have discussions about the drills with the students, instead shutting down all attempts by the children to verbally discuss shootings. This vignette highlights the fact that teachers are responsible for conducting most active shooter drills, and *how* drills are conducted is reliant on how teachers perceive and implement these trainings.

### ***Perceptions of Adults***

A few studies have studied practitioner perception of these drills. Both Hara (2020) and Wender and DeMille (2019) examined how preservice teachers feel unprepared by inadequate active shooter training. The Hara (2020, p. 6) study interviewed seven elementary and high school preservice teachers who described worrying about active shooter scenarios “all the time,” despite knowing how rare they are. Additionally, while they mostly agreed

they would put their student's safety above their own during a school shooting, they resented that this selflessness was now a job requirement. In contrast, the preservice teacher from the Wender and DeMille study reported feeling very protective of her students. The bonded relationship she built with her students over the long hours of the school day inspired "almost a parental instinct within" her (Wender & DeMille, 2019, p. 9).

This sense of duty was echoed by Cooper (2019, p. 199) who stressed "the wholesale commitment teachers make to young children in agreeing to be their teacher." Cooper compared teachers to parents, asserting that good teachers naturally have a parental urge to protect their students. This ethic of care, the presumption that early childhood practitioners have a vocational passion for caring, has been discussed by many scholars (Chalke, 2013; Moyles, 2001; Taggart, 2011). Moyles (2001, p. 82) asserted that "emotional responses to young children" are necessary for creating the strong relationships that are needed for learning. These relationships are especially important for building trust in the potentially high-stress environment of disaster planning (Cooper, 2019; Ebbeck, Yim, & Wei, 2020). However, Taggart (2011, p. 89-90) criticized the ethic of care, describing it as "emotional labour" that is "amenable to exploitation".

### **Research Questions**

In all settings, but especially in the formative early years, it seems important to implement careful drill methodology to avoid traumatizing students. However, while both the Zhe and Nickerson (2007) and Dickson and Vargo (2017) studies were able to avoid students' negative emotional responses by careful drill implementation, the vast majority of active shooter drills are being conducted not by calm researchers, but by practitioners who are working through their own perceptions of and emotional responses to these drills. This research sought to understand how practitioner perceptions affect drill methodology through two research questions:

1. How do early years practitioners in a sample of settings perceive their role in and experiences with active shooter drills?
2. How do these perceptions affect their implementation of active shooter drills, especially in regards to mitigating students' emotional responses?

## **Method**

### **Research Approach**

I adopted a social constructivist perspective, knowing that teacher perspectives on drills could not be divorced from their individual contexts, including factors such as personal political affiliation, employer culture, and individual past experiences (Creswell, 2018). By actively engaging with participants to discover their views, I played the role of knowledge co-constructor, finding meaning together with the participants during our conversations (Neville, Adams, & Cook, 2016).

As a co-constructor of knowledge, I find it important to critically reflect on how my own context influences my interpretation of active shooter drills (Iphofen & Tolich, 2018). When I was employed as a ticket-seller in a municipal theater in Florida, I was required to do active shooter training that focused on lockdown procedures and emergency first aid, including how to triage victims based on chances of survival, how to tie a tourniquet, and how to hold an artery closed. I found this training stressful and fear-inducing. However, my personal experience with active shooter training does not taint my research (Cousin, 2010). From a constructivist perspective, knowledge is socially constructed, so researchers never can approach their research ‘objectively’ (Ellefsen, 2017). By explicitly acknowledging my experience, I am better able to reflect on how my interpretation of this research is naturally mediated through my personal context (Cousin, 2010; Ellefsen, 2017).

### **Sample**

The inclusion criteria for participants was early years practitioners in a U.S. setting with active shooter drill experience. In this case, U.S. setting refers to any school located within the 50 U.S. states or on a U.S. military base abroad. The U.S. Department of Defense operates schools in 11 foreign countries, using American standards of education (Department of Defense Education Activity, 2021). As the child of a U.S. military employee, I have experience with life on several U.S. military bases abroad.

Participants were recruited through snowball sampling, identifying a couple of early years

practitioners who fit the inclusion criteria (including one from a U.S. military base in the UK) and asking them to recommend other participants for an initial questionnaire. The questionnaire included an open-ended question inviting participants to provide their email address if they wanted to volunteer for a semi-structured interview. Of the 17 participants who filled out the questionnaire, seven provided their email address. When invited for an interview, five of those seven consented. See Table 1 for a pseudonymized breakdown of interview participants.

Table 1. *Interviewee Demographics*

| Pseudonym | ECE Setting Location | ECE Role           | Years of ECE Experience | Age Group Taught  |
|-----------|----------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|-------------------|
| Anne      | U.S. military (UK)   | Assistant Director | 11+ years               | Multiple          |
| Brooke    | Florida              | Teacher            | 11+ years               | Pre-K             |
| Danielle  | U.S. military (UK)   | Teacher            | 1-3 years               | 6 weeks - 5 years |
| Emily     | U.S. military (UK)   | Teacher            | 7-10 years              | Infants           |
| Grace     | Colorado             | Teacher            | 1-3 years               | Kindergarten      |

This sample allowed for the exploration of the effects of contextual factors such as location, years of experience, role, and employer culture (military versus civilian).

## Data Collection Methods

### *Questionnaire*

The first stage of research was a multiple-choice questionnaire with very few open-text fields, which was filled out by 17 participants. Though 17 questionnaire participants do not provide a statistically representative sample for analysis, the questionnaire served two purposes. First, the questionnaire responses enabled revision of interview questions. Second, the questionnaire also served as a screening tool to identify a sub-set of participants for the interview stage (Gray, 2017).

The first eight questions collected demographic information. Eleven of the participants were working at ECE settings on U.S. military bases in the UK, while six of the participants were located in the continental U.S. (Colorado, Florida, New Jersey, and New York.) The respondents ranged widely in their reported years of experience, with as many new to the

ECE profession as those with more than 11 years of experience. Participants' collective years of experience conducting active shooter drills were less than their years of experience in the ECE field, perhaps reflecting the way active shooter drills have increased in prevalence over the past decade (King et al., 2019). All 17 of the participants reported that they received training for active shooter drills from their employers, while only one participant reported receiving active shooter drill training from a teacher education program. Based on this information, the focus of the semi-structured interview shifted from teacher education training for active shooter drills to on-the-job training for these drills.

Next, the questionnaire sought out the participants' opinions through eight Likert scale questions, where participants were instructed to indicate how much they agreed or disagreed with a statement. For example, given the liability culture of the U.S. (Levinsky, 2020), there was an assumption that liability would be a very big concern for the participants. The questionnaire posed the statement "I worry about being liable for anything that goes wrong due to the active shooter drills I lead." In contrast to expectations, only a little more than half of the participants agreed with that statement, so the focus on liability was reduced in the semi-structured interview plan.

### ***Interviews***

The second stage of research was semi-structured interviews to explore five participants' experiences in depth (Denscombe, 2017). As part of a trauma-informed research design, the interview participants were provided with the semi-structured interview questions ahead of time, giving them the information needed for informed consent to participate (Day, 2018; Goodwin & Tiderington, 2020). Because they received the questions ahead of time, the participants had more time to consider their answers, meaning they did not give their immediate reaction to the question but rather a planned response (Denscombe, 2017; Neville et al., 2016). However, the extra time for consideration seemed appropriate, given the subject matter.

In order to adhere to restrictions on face-to-face contact during the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews were conducted virtually. Four of the five interviews were conducted on Microsoft Teams with an automatic transcription process. These interviews ranged in length from 22 to 29 minutes, with an additional five to ten minutes of off-the-record conversation

which was not recorded or transcribed. This post-interview conversation was added to mimic in-person research, where participants naturally have an opportunity to speak off-record after the recording is switched off. One participant decided to answer the interview questions via email, which was allowed in the spirit of choice as a central tenet of trauma-informed research (Day, 2018; Goodwin & Tiderington, 2020). I was still able to actively co-construct meaning with the participant by asking follow-up questions via email (Neville et al., 2016).

### **Trustworthiness**

By acknowledging my positionality within the research and engaging in critical reflection, I was able to add checks into my work. I conducted a questionnaire first to help me construct a semi-structured interview based on participant views as well as my own. Additionally, I conducted member checks with participants to increase the credibility of my interpretation (Gray, 2017); after the interviews, I emailed participants, telling them what key themes I defined from their data and asking them to verify that their views were accurately presented. I also created a research summary for interview participants, both to elicit their feedback and to keep them informed about the research results.

### **Data Analysis**

To analyze the data, I applied the process of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method emphasizes the role of the researcher as co-constructor of knowledge; in organizing the data and identifying themes, I made active decisions such as, how often something needed to appear in the data to count as a theme and what themes were relevant to answering the research questions. As a first analysis step, I verified the transcriptions with the recordings to ensure accuracy, and this lengthy process gave me the chance to familiarize myself with the data. I then went through each transcript, assigning codes to excerpts of text, which were my data extracts. Once I had coded all five interviews, I transferred the data extracts, along with their codes and participant pseudonym, to an excel sheet in order to determine their frequency. I then simplified these codes into 3 themes.

## Results

### Theme 1: The Perceived Reality Behind Active Shooter Drills

All five of the participants referenced recent violent events. Brooke, a Florida-based teacher with 11+ years of ECE experience, mentioned the 2012 Sandy Hook shooting. This shooting was also mentioned by Danielle, a teacher who was based on a U.S. military base in the UK and had 1-3 years of ECE experience. Anne, an assistant director with 11+ years of ECE experience, referenced the September 11 terrorist attack, especially in light of her military context, stating, “Many measures are taken across the base to prevent terrorism on the base.” Emily, a teacher with 7-10 years of experience who also works on a U.S. military base abroad, alluded to the recent mass shootings in the U.S., saying, “We’re on the subject of active shooter, which is very serious, especially with everything going on...in the states.” Similarly, Grace, a teacher with 1-3 years of experience, did not mention one specific event but instead explained that her state of Colorado has seen “a fair amount of school shootings.”

One participant, Brooke, did speculate about the actual versus perceived frequency of these events: “I don’t know if it’s because gun violence is more prevalent or, you know, social media makes it more known about the incidents that happened.” However, Brooke, along with three of the other participants, had some personal experience with active shooter events. Brooke’s own children experienced a “Code Black Lockdown” when a student brought a gun to school. Brooke, who received real-time updates on the situation because she was working at a school a couple of miles away, described it as “a gut-wrenching day.”

Anne and Emily both went through real active shooter lockdowns when suspicious gun activity was reported on the respective military bases where they worked. In Anne’s case, the gunman was the father of one of the children at her center, and law enforcement feared that he would try to make his way to his child. Grace did not personally experience a real-life active shooter event, but she explained the effect on her school when one occurred in her school district, saying, “There are a lot of emotions around that...a lot of tears, a lot of anxiety.”

These close experiences, plus the awareness of current events, caused participants to see drills as preparation for the possibility of a real-life active shooter scenario. Wender and

DeMille (2019, p. 11) asserted that the "national average of 10 school shootings a year" creates a climate of fear where it is only natural for teachers to worry about a very real risk. The preservice teachers in Hara's (2020) study were a bit different in that they claimed to know school shooting were relatively rare, but they worried frequently about them anyways.

## **Theme 2: Drills as Preparation**

Since all five participants believed in the real possibility of an active shooter event, they approached the drills as real preparation, both logistically and emotionally.

### ***Logistically Prepared***

Brooke described an active shooter drill where she was in the hall sprinting to reach her classroom before the door was closed: "You're not supposed to open the door. Even if someone is, you know, begging, because you don't know if that's the shooter, if the shooter has a person." Emily described a similar situation where the director of the center she worked at knocked on the closet where she was hiding with her colleague and several infants. Neither she nor her colleague responded to the knock, so the director of the center identified herself. Still, Emily hesitated to open the door, asking, "How do you know that there's not someone with her?"

These descriptions highlight a logistical question: how can teachers know for certain when it is safe to come out after a real active shooter event? These two participants, the teachers with the most experience, also raised other logistical concerns. Brooke brought up the fact that the two security guards at her school are the only people able lock the roughly 12-16 outer doors of the three buildings, expressing her concern that they would not be able to do so quickly enough during a real incident. Emily described a setting she previously worked at where the only place to hide was behind a changing table, which she did not feel provided enough protection.

After years of active shooter drills, Brooke and Emily pointed out flaws in the drill design, suggesting areas for improvement. Several advocates of emergency drilling assert that this reflection for improvement represents one of the primary purposes of these drills (Lee, Trim, Upton, & Upton, 2009; Ramirez et al., 2009). Ramirez et al. showed that participants who do

not see the real-life applications of the drill will not attempt to make these improvements, but perhaps years of experience also play an important role in enabling this reflection. All five participants in my study believed in the real-life applications of the drill, but only the two most experienced teachers suggested improvements.

In contrast, Danielle and Grace, the teacher participants with the least amount of experience, voiced concerns about lack of clarity in drill instructions which cause them confusion or stress. With less than a year of active shooter training under her belt, Danielle described contradictions at her early years setting, such as whether or not to turn off the lights and what code to call over the intercom (“code black” versus “active shooter”). She expressed frustration, saying, “It seemed like no one really knew what they were supposed to be doing.”

Grace described how she was made to watch two different types of training videos: a “Run, Hide, Fight” options-based video for scenarios outside of school and a “Locks, Lights, Out of Sight” lockdown video for scenarios at school. In response to what she perceived as contradictory training, Grace said, “My greatest fear is that I make a decision...and it turns out to be for the worst.” The preservice teachers in Hara’s (2020) study expressed similar concerns over unclear drill instructions. While Danielle and Grace were a bit better informed than these preservice teachers who had yet to complete an active shooter drill, the combination of these studies suggests that these drills are especially confusing at the start of a teacher’s career.

While the experienced teacher participants raised questions of logistical flaws and the less experienced teacher participants raised questions of logistical confusion, Anne, the one participant in a management role, raised questions of logistical convenience. As someone with organizational responsibilities, Anne wanted to minimize the inconvenience of the drills. She said, “If I could design the drill, I would do it about 8:30, after breakfast and before it would interfere with staff members lunch breaks, which start at 10.”

### ***Emotionally Prepared***

Imagining the real-life possibility of a shooting also created emotional responses. Brooke described that particular drill, where she was sprinting down the hall, as “very scary...very troubling.” When asked how she felt doing an active shooter drill, Danielle responded, “Emotional...the thought of somebody hurting my children...I was a little, like, teared up.”

Despite the negative emotions brought up by the drills, all five of the participants believed that repeated drills prepare teachers emotionally. Anne said, "The more we practice the more confident we get." Brooke and Grace expressed how they felt better about the drills after more practice. Brooke explained, "At the beginning I felt scared more...[now] I know how to respond better." Grace's explanation was similar: "I think as the drills go on, you feel a little bit better about like, OK, this is where we go. This is what we do."

Additionally, Brooke and Emily, the two more experienced teacher participants, expressed a specific desire for emotional training. Brooke said, "We need more mental, I think, more mental training...we need to learn how to how to be strong." Emily emphasized a need for training that would complement her role as "a caregiver," such as how to support her colleagues and the children both during and in the "aftermath" of a real active shooter event.

While Brooke and Emily were the participants who placed the most emphasis on emotional training, their years of experience also led them to question the complacency that can come with feeling relaxed about these active shooter drills. Although the NASP and NASRO (2017) guidelines asserted that knowing ahead of time carries less potential for trauma, both Brooke and Emily suggested doing unannounced active shooter drills, allowing for ambiguity over whether it's a drill or real.

Emily made the case for surprise drills, saying, "I think I take them [the drills] for granted a little bit now, because I'm, I'm just so well-versed in them." Similarly, Brooke argued that when "it's just a drill, then you kind of let your guard down." Additionally, Emily thought that having someone role-play the shooter by rattling door handles, which was also not recommended by the NASP and NASRO guidelines, would help "to make it feel more real." Despite being at odds with NASP and NASRO guidelines, Brooke and Emily are not alone in their privileging of realistic preparation over emotional comfort. Many participants in the Ramirez et al. (2009) study also suggested that more realistic drills would give them a better opportunity to rehearse real-life reactions and responsibilities.

Danielle and Grace, with much fewer years of experience, did not share these feelings of complacency during drills nor the desire for unannounced drills. Danielle, who reported feeling confusion about the proper drill protocol, insisted that she would "absolutely want to know ahead of time." Grace also felt knowing ahead of time was important, so she could prepare the children.

While all five participants of this study asserted that repeated drills prepared people emotionally by increasing their confidence in the routine, several active shooter drill studies found the opposite. Schildkraut et al. (2020) found that as students participated in more trainings and drills, their feelings of preparedness increased, while their perceptions of safety decreased. Similarly, Peterson et al. (2015) found that students felt both more prepared and less safe after watching educational videos about active shooter scenarios. However, Schildkraut et al. only conducted two drills, while Peterson et al. showed students education videos only once. None of my participants specified a number of active shooter drills that ensures emotional preparation, but both Brooke and Emily, the two teachers confident enough to worry about the complacency of routine, reported having seven to ten years of active shooter drill experience. Additionally, the Schildkraut et al. and Peterson et al. studies focused on students, not practitioners.

### **Theme 3: Protecting Children as a Moral Purpose**

While the participants disagreed about drilling methods, they did not disagree about their moral purpose: they had a “mission,” Emily’s word, to protect the children in their care. Again, this theme split along logistical and emotional lines, as participants outlined the need for protection both from physical harm and trauma.

#### ***Protection from Physical Harm***

Emily explained that keeping children safe from physical harm was an overarching principle that guided her work, from the smallest dangers to active shooter scenarios: “I don’t like it if one of my kids gets a little scrape...if anything major happens to any of them, I would not forgive myself.” In this statement, Emily referred to the children in her care as “my kids,” but, as a mother, she also literally has children of her own, a fact which she included in her reflection on protection. She discussed how parents must trust her to protect their children, just as she trusts her children’s caregivers: “Our parents, myself, I trust in these caregivers to, you know, make sure my kids are safe. Beyond everything else. And that’s what we’re going to do.” Brooke, also a mother, expressed a similar sentiment, saying, “I would want the teacher to, you know, not to value their life less, but, but to also value the life

of a child, you know, and protect that child at all costs. Just as I would hope to do...I would put my life to save a 3-year-old's life."

While not a mother herself, Danielle also referred to the children in her care as "my children," expressing a deep instinct to protect them: "I can't imagine not defending them." Such a willingness to sacrifice themselves for their students confirms Taggart's (2011) assertion that the ethic of care is exploitable. The preservice teacher participants in Hara's (2020) study echoed this concern when many of them said they probably would sacrifice themselves for their students, but still they resented the assumption that such a sacrifice was a necessary.

While still focused on protecting children, not all participants went so far as to mention self-sacrifice. In her management role, Anne expressed the need to keep staff safe as well, describing her instructions to her staff as: "They need to do the best they can to keep themselves and the children safe." Additionally, not all teachers feel so strongly about their role as protector. Danielle mentioned conversations after an active shooter drill where different coworkers told her "We don't get paid enough to do this" and "I would not take a bullet for these kids." Danielle was shocked by these statements, wondering if her co-workers were "monsters." Danielle's shock mirrors Cooper's (2019) strong reaction to an assertion that teachers would not save their students from a burning building. But while Danielle believed the unwillingness to put students first demonstrated a lack of basic "human decency", Taggart (2011), Hara (2020), and Ramirez et al. (2009) demonstrated how this perspective may not be as fringe as Danielle assumed. None of the participants in my study expressed this unwillingness, but that could be due to the sample size or the nature of snowball sampling.

### ***Protection from Trauma***

Another important aspect of protecting children during active shooter drills is protection from trauma. Grace explained how the preparations necessary for physical safety can be at odds with the prevention of negative emotions: "You do want to make sure that they know it's a drill and that it's OK, but, on the other hand, you do want to prepare them...and so most kids are pretty nervous when you're pretty serious." The other participants also acknowledged this conflict and suggested several strategies for navigating the delicate balance.

*Strategy 1: Relationships*

The most common suggestion participants made was building a relationship with children. Anne said, “I think the trust is so great between children and staff that we can avoid the negative response.” Danielle, Brooke, and Emily each described their relationship with children as a reflection of family relationships. Emily said, “I try to be that motherly aspect.” Danielle said, “You’re kind of like another parent, because the amount of time that you spend with them.”

Brooke echoed this idea, saying, “We see these kids, you know, six hours a day, five days a week...we’re mom, dad, sister, brother.” Knowing them so well allowed Brooke to plan drills specifically for individual’s needs, for example bringing fidget toys for certain children. Grace similarly used her relationship with the children during drills, describing how she especially monitored the reactions of the children she knew had a history of past trauma. Using the knowledge they gained through their relationships with children to tailor their drill responses to those particular students was recommended by the NASP and NASRO (2017) guidelines. Additionally, the Cooper (2019) and Ebbeck et al. (2020) examinations of emergency planning also asserted that strong relationships with children enable trust during emotionally taxing drills.

*Strategy 2: Discussion*

The participants listed discussion as another important strategy to mitigate negative responses. Emily said, “The approach of how you talk to the kids and how you explain this situation can kind of make or break how it goes for you.” Danielle described a scenario where two preschool classes reacted differently based on the explanations given to them, saying, “it’s all about the approach of what, that, how the teachers handle it.” Grace put a lot of effort into discussing the drills with the children ahead of time to prepare them emotionally. However, she acknowledged that she did not have the training for those discussions: “They don’t really talk about it in your training...it’s kind of just left up to you as to what you say to your class.”

Despite the participants wishing for direct training on what that ‘right’ way to handle the situation was, they still had strong opinions on how to conduct these discussions. Brooke asserted, “Bad, we have to use the word bad...you know, there could be something bad happening outside.” Grace used the word “dangerous” to similar effect. While the two teacher

participants from a military context, Emily and Danielle, agreed that they did not want to scare the children, they seemed more confident ascribing the danger to a person, perhaps reflecting a military normalization of the existence of 'bad' people. Danielle described her co-teacher as saying, "Sometimes there are, are, are bad people that want to come and hurt us." Emily also suggested acknowledging the presence of "a bad guy in the building." The importance of discussion was also asserted by Zhe and Nickerson's (2007) study, Delaney's (2017) study, and both the U.S. Department of Education and Schools (2007) and the NASP and NASRO (2017) guidelines. Additionally, the desire for discussion training was expressed by adult participants in several studies (Goodman-Scott & Eckhoff, 2020; Hara, 2020).

### *Strategy 3: Modeling Behavior*

The two teacher participants with the most experience, Brooke and Emily, were the ones to suggest one additional support strategy: modeling behavior. Brooke emphasized that "Kids are looking to us." Speaking from the point of view of the children, she said, "OK, let's do it, because she knows, you know, she doesn't look like a chicken without a head, running around not knowing what to do." Emily confirmed this sentiment, saying, "If we're calm, then they're going to be calm."

Though perhaps it is their years of experience leading Brooke and Emily to suggest this strategy, it may also be the demographic of the children in their care. Emily was working in an infant classroom, where she said, all she could do was "keep them occupied and keep them calm." Brooke was working with 3 to 4-year-old special needs children who already have "a big load on their shoulders" just transitioning into school, so she had put extra effort into helping them through the active shooter drills. The NASP and NASRO (2017) guidelines, the Zhe and Nickerson (2007) study, and the Dickson and Vargo (2017) study express the same assertion, that calm practitioners can avoid negative emotional reactions in children.

## **Discussion**

### **Limitations**

Due to the small sample size, there are limits to the generalizability of these findings.

However, the purpose of a qualitative study is to gather deep, insightful data from a limited sample, rather than to collect limited data from a representative sample of the population (Creswell, 2018). Considering that goal, the sample was made up of five eager participants, who expressed great interest in the research topic and, therefore, served as good co-constructors of knowledge. However, this eagerness does open up another potential limitation to the study. During the initial questionnaire, the interview participants volunteered themselves to discuss the issue further, creating a self-selected sample of participants interested in this topic. This interest could have resulted from some of their exposure to real-life active shooter scenarios or some of their common opinions. For example, all five of the participants believed that active shooter scenarios were a real, potential threat, which may have prompted their desire to discuss the issue. However, strong feelings of the opposite nature could also prompt an interest in discussion.

Some of the common opinions found may actually result from the nature of snowball sampling, where participants recommend their friends and colleagues as other participants, potentially creating a sample of people from similar contexts (such as the several U.S. military employees) or a sample of like-minded people. For example, the participants generally agreed on underlying values, such as the importance of protecting children. However, there were still differences in their suggestions for drill implementation, especially along demographic lines such as years of active shooter drill experience, early years role, and setting context.

### **Suggestions for Further Study**

There are several possible areas for future research. Firstly, the participants seemed to differ from each other in several ways based on demographic differences. For example, the teacher participants with the most experience expressed concerns about the complacency of routine, advocating for more surprising, realistic drills. Meanwhile, the teacher participants with the least experience expressed logistical confusion and depended upon knowing about drills ahead of time in order to prepare themselves and their students. Future research should examine how years of experience with active shooter drills impacts the individual implementation of these drills. Another example of these differences is that of setting context.

When exploring how to talk to the children, teachers from civilian contexts avoided ascribing the danger to a person, while teachers from military contexts were comfortable confirming the existence of "bad people." It would be interesting for future research to examine how the culture of a U.S. military base influences the perception of active shooter drills.

Aside from exploring the differences among participants, it would be interesting to explore the differences between these findings and the findings of other studies. For example, all five of these participants believed that repeated drilling increased confidence and decreased fear. However, two active shooter drills measuring student emotions (Peterson et al., 2015; Schildkraut et al., 2020) found that increasing drills, albeit only by a couple, decreases perceptions of safety as it increases feeling of preparation. Further research could explore how many drills are necessary before feelings of safety increase, as well as whether this answer is different for students versus practitioners.

## **Conclusion**

Although a majority of U.S. schools conduct active shooter drills (King et al., 2019), there is a dearth of research on their use, especially in early years settings. This study made a small contribution to closing this gap, by examining the link between a sample of early years practitioners' perceptions of active shooter drills and their implementation of these drills. Overall, the participants viewed the drills as serious preparation, important to their moral purpose of protecting children. However, in terms of both preparation and child protection, participants set up a contrast between the logistical and emotional aspect of drills. They wanted to be prepared emotionally, building confidence through repeated drilling, but more importantly, they wanted to be logistically prepared, knowing the best thing to do in the event of a real crisis. They wanted to protect children from trauma, developing strategies to mitigate negative emotional reactions to the drills, but they also wanted to protect children from physical harm, with some participants going so far as to suggest self-sacrifice.

Sometimes these logistical and emotional goals conflicted, and in those cases, the participants mostly seemed to favor logistical preparation over emotional comfort. They privileged physical safety over safety from trauma, because their personal experiences,

combined with the media focus on real life active shooter events, led them to believe that an active shooter event was a credible threat. However, the necessity of this emotions/preparedness tradeoff remains a matter of debate. Real-life active shooter events remain relatively rare (Cox & Rich, 2018; Hara, 2020; King et al., 2019; Schildkraut et al., 2020). While some scholars assert that the potential scale, rather than the statistical probability, of damage drives the focus on preparedness, these same scholars designed drills to have the least amount of emotional impact possible (Dickson & Vargo, 2017; Zhe & Nickerson, 2007). Their studies showed that, when considering the frequency of these threats, it is possible to strike a better balance between preparedness and the mitigation of negative emotional responses.

There is no intent to criticize the participants in any way. If they have been privileging physical protection over emotional protection, it was through no fault of their own. They all demonstrated extraordinary commitment to their students, pledging to keep them safe no matter what. Additionally, they really wanted to do so in the ‘best’ way possible, expressing the desire for more training, which was reflected in several other active shooter drill studies (Delaney, 2017; Goodman-Scott & Eckhoff, 2020; Hara, 2020; Wender & DeMille, 2019). Hopefully, future active shooter drill regulations will insist on giving teachers exactly that: training to ease their safety concerns and drill procedures that emphasize emotional sensitivity.

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