Responding to the Needs of Military Students and Military-connected Schools: Perceptions and Actions of School Administrators

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Military children experience a variety of military-specific stressors. Stressors include repeated geographic relocation and parental separation, both of which can negatively affect social, emotional, psychological, and academic outcomes. Educational reform research, however, has found that caring and responsive schools can moderate the effects of psychological stress on the social and emotional outcomes of students. Lacking are studies that examine the transformative role of principals and other school administrators in providing school supports for military children. Hence, this study is guided by multiple objectives. This study examined the military-connected (MC) school administrators' philosophy as it relates to military students, programmatic efforts for military students, and assessment of military social work interns. Data were collected using an online survey tool, and results suggest consensus among most MC school administrators regarding the unique needs of military students and the need for programs and resources that address these needs. This study found that many administrators struggle to provide adequate supports for military students.

KEY WORDS: *military-connected students; public schools; school leaders*

Decades of research have found that military children experience various stressors stemming from military-specific life events, especially during times of war (De Pedro et al., 2011). Deployment-related stressors include parental separation, geographic relocation, and the added stress of the nondeployed parent, all of which can negatively affect the social, emotional, and psychological outcomes of military families. The drive to allocate resources and social supports for military families has emerged at the federal policy level. As part of his presidential directive, President Barack Obama committed federal resources to support the social, emotional, and psychological development of military children (Department of Defense Education Activity [DoDEA], n.d.). A growing body of research has shown that emotionally supportive contexts (for example, household, military installation, community/neighborhood) help alleviate the emotional and psychological burdens of war on military children and families (De Pedro et al., 2011). However, few studies have examined the role of supportive school environments in the outcomes of military students.

MILITARY-CONNECTED STUDENTS IN CIVILIAN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The vast majority of the nation's 1.2 million military-connected (MC) students attend civilian public schools (DoDEA, n.d.). Only 86,000 are enrolled in DoDEA schools worldwide. A small number attend private schools or are home-schooled. Within DoDEA schools, administrators, teachers, and staff are trained to respond to the specific needs of MC students. DoDEA schools also provide a number of structural supports, "some that represent effective levers for educational policymakers[,] others that signal unique features of the military community" (Smrekar & Owens, 2003, p. 165). DoDEA schools foster a social and emotional school climate that is welcoming and supportive of the unique circumstances surrounding MC students and their families (DoDEA, 2009). Parent satisfaction surveys show that DoDEA schools are attuned and equipped to provide the academic, social and emotional, and community supports needed to alleviate the stressors related to military life (Huebner, Mancini, Wilcox, Grass, & Grass, 2007).

In contrast to DoDEA schools, civilian schools are often not aware of the presence, needs, and challenges of MC students and families. Civilian schools often lack systematic procedures to identify MC students, facilitate school transitions, and link military students with local community resources, which may contribute to negative schooling experiences for MC students attending civilian schools (De Pedro et al., 2011). MC students have a greater sense of alienation, lower rates of belonging, and less supportive relationships with peers and adults than nonmilitary students (Chandra, Martin, Hawkins, & Richardson, 2010).

Studies on the development of supportive school environments for military students are warranted, because decades of research have suggested that supportive school climates promote positive academic, social, emotional, and psychological outcomes, including psychologically strained student populations (Lynch & Cicchetti, 1997; McGuire, Anderson, Toomey, & Russell, 2010). Schools that facilitate a healthy school climate for students experiencing stressors (that is, caring relationships with adults and peers, peer and adult awareness of a student's life events, a sense of safety and order, school engagement and belonging) can protect students from long-term negative social, emotional, and psychological outcomes (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009; Zullig, Koopman, Patton, & Ubbes, 2010). Hence, schools that actively create supportive and caring school climates for military students can promote their positive outcomes.

School climate reform efforts aimed at creating supportive school climate for military students may require enhanced involvement from the parents and family members of military students. Culturally relevant pedagogy theorists have posited that a caring school climate is sustained by consistent communication between school staff and family members and the integration of the minority culture into curriculum and school celebrations (De Pedro et al., 2011). As applied to military families, this means that ongoing school–family communication can help teachers and administrators be aware of key military life events—parental deployment, reintegration stress, and, in some cases, parental death. In addition, public schools would need to view parents as educational resources for including military family culture and life experiences into the fabric of school environments (that is, curriculum, extracurricular activities).

CENTRAL ROLE OF THE SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR IN TRANSFORMING SCHOOL CLIMATE

Studies that examine school climate and military students should first understand the role and perceptions of school administrators. Research has found that school administrators play a significant role in defining a school's mission and shaping the school's climate. Research has also shown that administrators are responsible for making critical instructional and organizational changes that are key to the success of educational reform efforts (Astor, Benbenishty, & Estrada, 2009; Moolenaar, Daly, & Sleegers, 2010; Tanner & Dennard, 1995; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). In a study of nine theoretically atypical Israeli schools—schools that experienced low school violence rates, despite being located in high violence, low socioeconomic status communities—Astor, Benbenishty, and Estrada (2009) found that school administrators can engage school staff, students, and parents to create a school climate that addresses the challenges facing the school. These findings are supported by a number of other studies emphasizing the critical role of school leaders in invoking and sustaining change within the school (Moolenaar, Daly, & Sleegers, 2010; Tanner & Dennard, 1995; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). Reform efforts that aim to create supportive school environments for military students must thus take into account school administrators' attitudes, policies, and practices regarding military students and families.

Within the current educational policy context, school administrators have reform priorities that may take precedence over interventions geared toward military students. Since 2002, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation shaped the current educational policy focus on academic achievement. In the context of NCLB, school principals have had to focus much of their professional responsibilities toward leveraging the academic achievement of historically underserved students (for example, students with disabilities, black students, and English language learners). For many principals, little time or energy can be devoted to supporting the needs of emerging student populations not yet recognized by NCLB and other accountability systems (for example, military students). Second, research has found that public schools have responded to NCLB mandates by focusing professional development and interventions on academic and standardized test preparation.

Often, school administrators and staff have limited opportunities and time to develop and implement interventions aimed at improving the school's social and emotional climate. Future research and practice that aims to support the needs of military students would need to account for potential obstacles to school administrators' engagement with educational reform surrounding military students.

OBJECTIVES OF STUDY

In general, studies investigating school administrators' perceptions of school climate and military students are necessary. To date, studies have focused largely on the psychological, emotional, and social outcomes of military children and adolescents and have ignored factors within school environments that promote the outcomes of military students. Moreover, the few qualitative studies that have assessed the schooling experiences of military students have ignored the perceptions of school administrators (Chandra et al., 2010; Mmari, Roche, Sudhinaraset, & Blum, 2009). Given these gaps in the research, this study seeks to explore how public school administrators view MC students and how their schools address the needs of this unique student group; this is essential to future efforts to improve the school experiences of MC students. This study was conducted as part of a unique partnership between a large research university and eight civilian public school districts located near military installations in the San Diego metropolitan area. The two partners collectively formed the Building Capacity Consortium. The consortium comprises approximately 140 schools that serve approximately 117,000 students. The main objectives of the consortium are to ensure the capacity of public schools to create military-friendly school environments that improve students' social, behavioral, and academic outcomes; to build each district's capacity to sustain military-friendly school environments in the long term; and to create an infrastructure for replication and scaling up in other geographic contexts throughout the United States. The consortium uses a translational scientific approach in practice and research, where data inform research and practice and local and general theoretical paradigms of school change. This approach could ensure the successful implementation of a large-scale evidence-based program (Astor, Guerra, & Van Acker, 2010).

Recognizing the invaluable leadership role of school administrators, the consortium directs part of its main efforts toward developing the administrators' capacity to respond to military students. To achieve this goal, this study seeks to understand the school administrators' awareness and responsiveness to military students, programmatic efforts to facilitate a positive climate for military students, views of military parental involvement, views of consortium interns, and views of future resources necessary to address the needs of military students.

METHOD

During the first year of the consortium (2010–2011), researchers developed an online feedback tool that was administered to all school administrators within the consortium toward the end of the fall and spring semesters.

Sample

A total of 137 participants from 130 different schools responded to the fall administration of the survey. A total of 129 participants from 129 schools responded to the spring administration of the survey. Although a link to the survey was sent to principals, participants included assistant and associate principals or a school administrator designated by the principal. In some schools, more than one school staff responded to the survey. Overall, almost all schools submitted at least one response, which is considered a very high response rate for principals. No demographic information (for example, age, gender) was collected.

Data Collection and Analyses

This study provides an overview of school administrators' perspectives of MC students, school climate, and the consortium's efforts during the first year. Hence, data for this study were collected at two time points, fall 2010 and spring 2011. At each time point, the research team used Qualtrics Research Suite (2005), an online survey tool, to collect the data from participants. A survey link was e-mailed to principals or a designated representative (for example, assistant principals) at each of the 140 consortium schools. Participants were given two weeks to respond. Responses yielded quantitative data that were stored in a password-protected database to preserve confidentiality. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistical analyses in SPSS.

The survey also yielded open-ended responses, which were analyzed using thematic analysis.

Survey Questions

Awareness and Responsiveness to MC Students. Three items asked respondents about their awareness and responsiveness to military students. One item asked about their educational philosophy toward military students. There were three possible responses (for example, military students have special needs and circumstances and therefore need programs and activities that focus on them). A second item asked whether their school had activities focused on military students. There were four possible responses to this item (for example, our school does not have military students or so few that no such activities are carried out). A third item asked participants whether they were or were not interested in learning more about ideas and examples of school activities focused on MC students.

Programmatic Efforts. Participants were asked two items regarding their current programmatic efforts surrounding military students. One item asked participants about the types of programs (for example, cultural celebration, school climate programs) being implemented at their school. Participants were permitted to choose one or more responses (for example, celebrating military-related events such as Memorial Day, Veterans Day, V-Day, and so forth; offering presentations by military personnel and military parents). A second item asked participants about what types of school programs they implement to improve in their schools. Participants were permitted to choose one or more four responses (for example, school safety, afterschool programs).

Parental Involvement. Twelve items asked participants about their views of parental involvement (for example, parental involvement in this school is high). Participants were asked to respond to each item with one of the following choices: not at all true, somewhat true, true, and very true.

Intern Placements. Participants were asked several items regarding the consortium social work interns. One item asked them whether they had interns placed in their school and responded yes or no. Participants were also asked if they were interested in having social work interns placed in their school. They could respond yes or no. Next, a set of seven items asked participants to assess their interns (for example, the student intern was

effective in working with staff). The possible responses to these items were not at all, to a little extent, to some extent, to a large extent, and not sure. Participants were also provided with a space for open-ended responses about their evaluation of the effectiveness of interns placed at their school.

Interest in Future Resources. A set of nine items asked participants about their interest in additional resources for military families and children (for example, academic tutoring for students). Participants were presented with a list of nine resources and asked to rate to their interest in each resource (not at all, to a little extent, to some extent, to a large extent, and not sure).

RESULTS

Awareness of and Responsiveness to MC Students

Overall, results indicate that school administrators included MC students in existing school programs aimed for all students. The largest proportion of principals reported that MC students were included in programs that target other students and are not exclusively for military students (see Table 1). In addition, about one-fourth (24.1 percent) of participants expressed a belief that MC students should not be seen as a distinct group and that each student should be evaluated individually and referred to the programs and resources appropriate for him or her. Participants were also asked if their school had activities focused on military students. Only 21.2 percent said that they have special activities focusing on MC students. Approximately 30 percent of participants indicated that they do not have MC students (or very few), and therefore the school had no particular activities, ceremonies, or rituals that focus on MC students and families. Approximately 39 percent

Table 1: Educational Philosophy		
Philosophy	*n*	%
Military students have special needs and circumstances and therefore need programs and activities that focus on them.	41	29.9
Military students have special needs and circumstances. They should be included in programs that target other students as well.	61	44.5
Military students should not be seen as a distinct group, and each student should be evaluated individually and referred to the programs and resources appropriate for him or her.	33	24.1
Total	135	98.5

Table 2: Parental Involvement (%)				
Statement	**Not at All True**	**Somewhat True**	**True**	**Very True**
Parental involvement in this school is high	17.3	34.6	28.6	19.5
Distance from school is a problem for many parents	51.5	37.1	9.1	2.3
Parents struggle with financial stresses and therefore have fewer resources to get involved	4.5	43.2	30.3	22.0
The school greatly values parental involvement	0.0	5.3	31.6	63.2
Teachers make special efforts to involve parents	0.8	34.6	41.4	23.3
This school provides multiple and flexible options for parental involvement	0.8	22.0	51.5	25.8
Military parents face additional barriers to involvement	21.2	33.3	32.6	12.9
This school considers parents' work commitments when parent events are scheduled	0.0	14.3	59.4	26.3
This school has special policies and practices to support the involvement of military parents	68.2	22.7	6.8	2.3
Parents are highly motivated to get involved	8.3	47.4	32.3	12.0
This school should do more to get parents involved	6.8	35.6	50.0	7.6
Students are not interested in their parents getting involved	64.1	22.1	12.2	1.5

reported that although they have MC students, they do not have particular activities for them. Despite the reported lack of specialized programs for MC students, there was still a general interest in learning more about school activities that focused on MC students. The majority indicated that they were interested in getting ideas and examples of such activities (almost 84 percent), whereas less than 10 percent did not express such an interest.

Programmatic Efforts and Parental Involvement

School administrators reported that their schools have events and activities that celebrate military culture. The majority of school administrators reported the celebration of military-related events such as Memorial Day and Veterans Day (53.3 percent). School administrators also reported presentations by military personnel and military families (29.2 percent) and ceremonies and activities to honor fallen soldiers or those currently serving (24.1 percent). About one-fifth of administrators reported school-wide celebrations of events, such as the birthday of the Marine Corps, whereas 16.1 percent reported encouraging students to create artwork and murals related to military life and families.

The results also show a strong belief in the importance of parental involvement: 63.2 percent of participants felt that it is very true that their school greatly values parental involvement, and another 34.6 percent believed this to be true (see Table 2). There was a widespread consensus that

military parents may have challenges becoming involved in their children's school; however, few schools have policies designed to enhance the involvement of military parents. As seen in Table 2, 45.5 percent of participants believe it is true or very true that military parents face additional barriers to involvement, yet only 9.1 percent say that the school has special policies and practices to support involvement of military parents.

Intern Placements

The Building Capacity Consortium is one of the first major efforts in the nation aimed at improving the school experiences of MC students in public schools. As such, it is important to examine how the consortium schools respond to these efforts. A major component of the consortium involved the training and placement of social work interns in consortium schools. Assessments of the interns were quite positive. The most positive assessments, however, were related to the interns' effectiveness when working with students, the interns' ability to integrate into the school community, and the quality of the communication between the school and university field staff. Open-ended responses further illustrated a general appreciation for the interns and their ability to provide additional supports to military students and other high-risk student groups, to help with supervision, and to address counseling issues with students. Some participants further commented that the interns' ability to work effectively with student clients had a positive effect on

the students' social interactions and social skills with peers and adults.

Despite primarily positive evaluations of interns, participants' assessments of the interns were slightly lower in regard to the interns' ability to work effectively with school staff, the extent that the intern brought new resources to the school, and the interns' effect on military students and families. Of those who provided open-ended feedback related to concerns and challenges specific to the interns, some noted that their interns lacked counseling experience and lacked the ability to be self-starters, and that they, themselves, did not fully understand the professional role of interns in their schools. Regardless, results indicate a strong interest in the continued placement of social work interns to help address the unique challenges of military students in schools. Participants who reported having an intern placed at their school site during the 2010–2011 school year expressed an interest in having an intern placed at their school in the future. Of the 78 who did not have an intern placed at their site, 59 (75.6 percent) said they were interested in having interns in the future.

Need for Future Resources Aimed at Military Students

School administrators also expressed interest in and identified other resource needs for military students. The resource that almost all schools were interested in, at least to some extent, is academic tutoring: There were 96.7 percent of respondents who reported that, to a large extent or to some extent, they were interested in academic tutoring. More than 70 percent were interested, at least to some extent, in Families OverComing Under Stress training—family resilience training for military families—and transition centers to help address the needs of students transitioning from other schools. There was slightly less interest in a parent–PTA summit/conference or a threat assessment program to address school crises. Of the participants who provided open-ended comments, several expressed an interest in resources to create a better school climate for military families, including more literature about military families and culture for students, connecting military families with each other, and a Veterans Day celebration. Some participants also requested more resources for tutoring and more antibullying information.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The consortium endeavors to help schools and districts create a positive and welcoming school climate for all students, with a special emphasis on students from military families. To this end, the consortium recognizes the critical role that school principals play in creating and sustaining an environment that is attuned and proactive toward the issues surrounding military students. In partnership with consortium principals, efforts were directed toward creating a more military-friendly school climate. The present study describes the principals' educational philosophies, needs, resources, and perceptions of interventions related to MC schools and military students.

Educational Philosophy and Programs for MC Students

The results indicate that a sizeable proportion of school administrators (about 25 percent) believe that MC students should not be viewed as a distinct group. Instead, school administrators expressed a general belief that each student should be evaluated individually and referred to the specific programs and resources for him and her. Given the belief that MC students are not a distinct group, it is not surprising that less than a quarter of school administrators reported that they had any special school activities focused on MC students and that almost 39 percent reported that although they had MC students, they did not have particular activities for them. Moreover, the vast majority of school administrators (87.6 percent) reported that their school climate improvement programs were focused on the entire student body, whereas most reported that they were not currently implementing programs that focused on military students as a group (77.4 percent). Given current research on the stressful schooling experiences of MC students (Chandra et al., 2010; Mmari et al., 2009), future research and evidence-based programs may need to focus on transforming school administrators' beliefs regarding MC students as a unique cultural group as well as programs and services specialized to the schooling needs of MC students.

Lack of Specialized Training for MC Students

The results also indicate that schools lack the infrastructure, coordination, and capacity to improve the climate for MC students. In this study, school

administrators reported a lack of resources, training, and time in schools to support the needs of MC students. Fiscal resources, specialized personnel, awareness/specialized training, and systematic identification procedures among school administrators, teachers, and staff were identified as needed resources to improve school climate. In addition, the results indicate that schools also lack policies to enhance the involvement of military parents, a potentially valuable resource for MC schools. For instance, whereas 45.5 percent of school administrators believed that it is true or very true that military parents face barriers to parental involvement, only 9.1 percent reported that the school has special policies and practices to support the involvement of military parents.

In addition, in the present educational policy context of NCLB, school leaders and teachers focus on academic interventions, testing preparation, and other school programs aimed at meeting state accountability laws. Given the gaps in training, resources, and programs for MC students, it is not surprising that all school administrators who reported having an intern placed at their school site expressed an interest in having an intern placed at their school in the future; in addition, 75.6 percent of participants who did not have an intern placed at their school site reported an interest in having interns in the future. Overall, future research, evidence-based practices, and interventions need to focus how to build the capacity of schools to improve the climate for MC families.

Recommendations for Future Practice in MC Schools

There are several recommendations for principals and other school administrators on how to make the current public school climate more military friendly. First, public schools should document MC students during the enrollment process. This procedure could also include the collection of relevant family information, with respect to parents' concerns (for example, parents should be informed of the need for such data, how this data will be used, and how their privacy will be maintained). Another recommended procedure is to collaborate with appropriate military authorities, on and off base. This process could provide districts with additional sources of data on the number (but not the identity) of military students enrolled in each school.

Second, this study has tremendous relevance in defining the role of school social workers in transforming a school's responsiveness to military students, both at the macro and micro levels. School social workers can play a significant role in coordinating in-service training, and other professional development activities can be directed toward increasing school staff awareness of the special circumstances surrounding military students. Topics could include military culture, deployment issues, mobility issues, and so on. It is critical to address this gap in the knowledge base of the current pool of professionals, because learning about the challenges faced by military students and their families will have a direct bearing on school policies, programs, and practices. On a related note, school activities and programs should also focus on addressing the needs of military students and enhancing the participation of their families. School social workers can coordinate opportunities to help school administrators and other change agents to learn more about military students and to be reflective of current school cultural norms, policies, and procedures as they relate to military students.

Third, findings in this study indicate that military students should be included in current educational reform models and policy. At present, only a few states have begun to identify military students in large-scale school climate surveys. The California Department of Education created the MC module in the California Healthy Kids Survey, a statewide survey of school climate and risky behaviors among elementary and secondary students. The module includes a military student identifier and military-specific questions (that is, experiences with deployment). However, to date, no state accountability system has identified military students. Hence, it is not currently possible to track the academic achievement of military students as a demographic group.

Limitations

This study also had some methodological limitations. The sampling method of this study may pose sampling bias. This study used a regional sample. Administrators within MC districts participated in the consortium and completed surveys about military students and school climate. We acknowledge also that the administrators' involvement in the consortium may have affected their responses to the survey. Hence, researchers should be cautious

in generalizing the findings of this study to other school contexts.

The overall results of this study suggest that, from a school leadership perspective, the transformation of a public school climate into a military-friendly climate requires greater resources, professional development, and capacity building. The reality, though, is that more districts and schools are experiencing financial constraints with each school year. School administrators are hard-pressed to make the academic, fiscal, and programmatic decisions of their respective school based on the competing needs of their constituents. However, as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan draw to a close, more service members will be returning to their duty stations, their children, and their families. As service members reunite with their families and are reintegrated into their communities, a collaborative effort among various institutions and agencies is needed to ensure a successful transition. Schools can play a critical role in the reintegration process by providing military students the appropriate and much needed academic, social and emotional, and community supports. There is no better time than now for school administrators to direct academic, personnel, and programmatic resources to military students and their families. **CS**

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