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Faculty Perceptions Regarding the Inclusion of Military-Connected Children into Educator Preparation Curriculum

Brianna Conway
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Abstract: The current study researched university faculty members' knowledge and perceptions regarding military-connected children in the public-school setting. Faculty members from seven departments at a local university participated in the study. Faculty members completed a short survey regarding general knowledge of military-connected children and their families, as well as their inclusion of information about this population of students into their curriculum. Results suggest faculty members at the university received little to no educational training regarding military-connected children in their pre-service education. Furthermore, many faculty members at the university did not include information on military-connected families in their coursework, but were open to adapting their curriculum to be more inclusive of this population of students.

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Keywords: education, military-connected children, military families, mental health, deployment

INTRODUCTION

A military-connected child is defined as anyone between the ages of birth to 21 who has one degree of separation from a service member (Military Child Education Coalition, 2016). This can be through a biological, adoptive, or foster care relationship. There are over two million military-connected children in the U.S. who have a caregiver (a parent or someone serving in a parental role) who are Active Duty, Guard, or Reserve (MCEC, 2011). Of these two million children, 92% receive their education in the public school setting rather than a school located on a military installation (U.S. Department of Defense, 2011). This means nearly every school district in the U.S. has a population of military-connected students (MCEC, 2016).

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to the U.S. Department of Defense, over two million U.S. children have experienced periods in which one or both caregivers were deployed for a significant amount of time. (U.S. Department of Defense, 2011). Furthermore, military-connected children experience a rate of mobility three times higher than that of children from civilian families (MCEC, 2016). These stressors along with others that often coincide with belonging to a military family can impact children in the school setting.

Research has shown that children who are from active duty families, along with National Guard and Reserve families are being impacted by frequent moves, lengthy deployments, multiple deployments, and more frequent deployments. The impact of these separations can have a negative effect on children's behavioral and mental health, as well as their academic achievement (Geddes, 2011; Gorman, Eide, & Hisle-Gorman, 2010; Flake et al., 2009).

Studies have shown that children who have a caregiver deployed may be more likely to engage in problematic behavior because of stressors due to changes in routine, separation from the caregiver, and the level of parental stress of the remaining caregiver. These behaviors may include both internalizing and externalizing behaviors, such as anxiety, depression, aggression, and conduct problems (Geddes, 2011; Gorman, Eide, & Hisle-Gorman, 2010). These behaviors may be exacerbated when a family has the added stress of having a caregiver deployed to a combat zone (Flake et al., 2009).

Because children's mental and behavioral health is a prerequisite for academic learning, military-connected children who may be experiencing mobility or deployment may also experience academic difficulty (Richardson, 2011). Richardson et al. (2011) found that children who had a deployed caregiver had lower test scores on average and that this was more exaggerated for children experiencing longer deployments and a greater number of deployments (Richardson, 2011). Frequent moves and transitions can also lead to disruptions in education and curriculum content which may also be a cause for academic difficulties and lower test scores (MCEC, 2016).

The military lifestyle can also be stressful for the partner of the service member, regardless of their civilian status. When considering deployment and mobility, the child of the service member is not the only family member who experiences different emotions in response to these changes in routine. Research has shown that the stress level of the at-home caregiver impacts children and is a significant predictor of children's ability to adjust to deployments and transitions (Author, 2016; Flake et al., 2009).

Although the military lifestyle can be stressful for many families, children who belong to military families often have many adaptive behaviors as well. Mobility, routine change, and deployment can offer the opportunity to experience diversity, take on new roles within the family, and increase social skills and maturity within the family and community (Astor, Jacobson, Benbenishty, 2012; Paden & Pezor, 1993). Even though military families and children are often very resilient to difficulties because of their sense of pride and community they feel from belonging to the military, research shows this resiliency can be broken down due to the number of stressors they face. This is particularly true when there is no support system or other services available to the family or the child (Author, 2016).

Despite the importance of support systems, military

families may find it increasingly difficult to access or build these systems. In recent years, the number of individuals with no direct connection to a member of the military has risen. Decades of an all-volunteer military has narrowed military representation to fewer families. This is very different than in the past when nearly everyone had an immediate connection to a service member (Zucchino & Cloud, 2015). This gap may make it difficult for individuals, including teachers, to understand or empathize with military-connected students and their families.

Because of the amount of military-connected children being served in public schools, the amount of time in general children spend at school, and the potential impact stressors related to mobility, routine change, and caregiver separation can have on children, it is imperative that educators and other school professionals are aware of military-connected children in their schools and classrooms. Furthermore, it is important that pre-service educators and other school professionals receive the appropriate education regarding military-connected children and their needs so this population of students is appropriately served and supported in the school setting.

The research studying educators' awareness and knowledge regarding military-connected children in the school setting has been limited. However, research determining university faculty members' knowledge and perceptions regarding this population of students is non-existent. In order for pre-service educators to receive educational training on this population of students and their families, faculty members within educator preparation programs must also be educated in this area. An increase in knowledge and awareness of military-connected children at the university level could potentially have a major impact on future educators' abilities to meet the needs of this population of students.

Research Questions

Currently, limited research exists on educators' preparation in regard to meeting the needs of military families. Furthermore, research geared toward answering what educator preparation programs are doing to prepare future educators is non-existent. This study attempted to answer the following questions:

1. How much do university faculty members know regarding military-connected children and their families?
2. How much do university faculty members

include the topic of military families in their coursework with their students?

3. Are university faculty members interested in including military-connected students and families into their curriculum?

METHODOLOGY

Participants & Setting

Data collection for this study began in December of 2016 upon approval from the Institutional Review Board and ended in February of 2017. Participants were recruited from a university in the Midwest located near a military installation. Specifically, faculty members from seven different departments related to education were given information about the study. The sample of participants was a convenience sample based on faculty members who consented to participate in the study, and all participation was voluntary. Demographic information on each participant's involvement with the U.S. military and the department/college in which they were employed at the time of the study were collected. Researchers determined no other demographic information was necessary in order to answer the research questions. See Table 1.

TABLE 1: Demographics of Participants

Dependent	Percentage
Yes	9%
No	91%
Current/Past Member of U.S. Military	
Yes	3%
No	97%
Department/College	
Counseling	6%
Educational Leadership	9%
Health & Kinesiology	11%
School Psychology	9%
Social Work	11%
Special Education & Communication Disorders	6%
Teacher Education	48%

Measures

Participants answered a 14 question survey created by the researchers. The survey contained multiple choice items asking participants to indicate their level of agreement and level of knowledge regarding statements related to military-connected children. The survey also included items asking participants about the amount of information regarding military-connected students currently included in their coursework.

Data Analysis

Thirty-five participants returned the surveys. Researchers calculated the percentages of the response options for each question to describe the level of knowledge of the respondents, as well as their current level of inclusion of military families in their curriculum. Researchers analyzed the results and examined the willingness of participants to adjust their curriculum to include military-connected children in future coursework.

Results

When asked how much time was spent discussing military-connected children in their own education and preparation, 51% of faculty members indicated very little time was spent focusing on this population, while 43% indicated no time was spent. Furthermore, only 9% of faculty indicated they knew a substantial amount of information regarding how the military culture/lifestyle might impact military-connected children's mental health and education. Finally, only 9% of participants were aware of specific resources related to supporting military-connected children and their families at the time the survey was given.

Faculty members were also surveyed regarding their knowledge of The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and the military student identifier requirement included in the 2015 legislation (MCEC, 2016). Only 20% of faculty indicated they were aware of the new federal legislation. Furthermore, only 14% of participants stated they currently include information regarding military-connected children into their semester coursework, while only 23% were aware of other faculty members who include information on this population of students into their coursework.

Finally, the survey contained items regarding participants' interest in adapting their curriculum to include information on military-connected children and their families. Most participants (80%) indicated they

were interested in making changes to their coursework to include this population of students in their educator preparation programs. Furthermore, 83% of faculty members understood the importance of including this population of students in educator preparation programs.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate, in general, educators and school professionals need more specific training regarding military-connected children and their families in their preparation programs. Faculty members at this particular university may not be prepared to provide this type of educational training without first engaging in professional development focused on military families. The majority of faculty members in the study indicated they received little-to-no training on military-connected children in their educational preparation, which limits their ability to provide training on this population of students in their current curriculum.

Although the results showed a lack of general knowledge regarding this population of students, faculty members at this university indicated they need and want to include more content regarding military-connected children and their families into their coursework so educators will be better prepared to relate to and understand the military lifestyle. This mindset is especially important for universities near military installations where educators may be more likely to work in districts with high populations of military-connected students and families.

Conclusion & Implications

Many people describe military-connected children as resilient and even as heroes in their own right. As part of belonging to a military family, these children are able to travel the world, observe and experience diversity, and take on new roles within their families that build this resiliency. However, these children have unique stressors that impact them in and outside of school. Previous research has shown that military-connected children may experience more problem behavior and academic difficulties as compared to their civilian peers. Furthermore, certain variables such as the number of moves experienced, length of deployment, number of deployments, and stress-level in the home may exaggerate these difficulties. Educators can play a vital role in providing support to mitigate these stressors.

The fact that many civilians today no longer have an immediate connection to a U.S. service member may make it more difficult for educators to relate

to children from military families. Educators need to be prepared to identify students who are displaying mental health or educational concerns, and to adequately meet the needs of these students. It is necessary for educators to be aware of students in their buildings who belong to military families and to actively seek information to improve their knowledge of this population of students. Therefore, educator preparation programs should be providing focused training on the military lifestyle, benefits and difficulties that accompany the lifestyle, as well as ways in which military-connected children and their families can be supported in the school-setting. More research is needed to determine the level of preparation pre-service educators are receiving in working with military-connected children and how awareness and education in this area can be improved. Furthermore, research should continue to investigate educators' perceptions of their skill-set related to working with this population of students to inform changes in educator preparation programs. Building awareness within university faculty may be one way of improving the level of training regarding military families in educator preparation programs.

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Appendix A

Definition of a Military-Connected Student: A child with one or both parents, caregiver, or family member serving in the military

1. Are you the dependent of an active duty, National Guard, or reserve U.S. service member or a retired member?
 - Yes
 - No

2. Are you currently or have you ever been a member of the U.S. military?
 - Yes
 - No

3. In the course of your education and preparation to become a faculty member, how much time would you estimate has been spent on discussing and preparing you to work with and appropriately address the needs of military-connected children?
 - None
 - Very Little
 - A Moderate Amount
 - A Substantial Amount
 - Almost all of my training has involved military-connected students in some way

4. In general, how much do you know regarding military-connected students, their families, and how their culture/lifestyle may impact their mental health and education?
 - None
 - Very Little
 - A Moderate Amount
 - A Substantial Amount
 - I am well educated in this area

5. On a scale of 1-5, I feel as though have adequate knowledge in order to prepare pre-service teachers and other future school and mental health professionals in meeting the needs of military-connected children?
Strongly Disagree Somewhat Strongly Agree
1 2 3 4 5

6. On a scale of 1-5, I feel as though I am aware of specific resources related to military-connected students.
Strongly Disagree Somewhat Strongly Agree
1 2 3 4 5

7. I am a faculty member in the:
 - School Psychology Program
 - Teacher Education Department
 - Grace Abbot School of Social Work
 - Counseling Department
 - Educational Leadership Department
 - Special Education and Communication Disorders Department
 - School of Health & Kinesiology (Health ,Physical Education, and Recreation)
 - Other: _____

8. I would like to know more about how I can prepare my undergraduate and/or graduate students to meet the educational and mental health needs of military-connected students?
- Strongly Disagree
 - Disagree
 - Neither agree nor disagree
 - Agree
 - Strongly Agree
9. I feel as though military-connected students go through the same struggles as every non-military connected students and appropriately adapt to changes on their own. Therefore, I believe there is no reason to add content regarding military-connected children to my curriculum.
- a. Strongly Disagree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neither agree nor disagree
 - d. Agree
 - e. Strongly Agree
10. I am aware the new federal legislation, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), requires PK-12 schools to formally identify students from military families.
- Yes
 - No
11. As a faculty member preparing PK-12 teachers, school personnel, and administrators, I understand the importance of including military-connected children into my program curriculum.
- Strongly Agree
 - Agree
 - Neither agree nor disagree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
12. I currently include information regarding military-connected children in courses I teach.
- Yes
 - No
13. I am aware of colleagues within my program who include information regarding military-connected children in the courses they teach.
- Yes
 - No
14. I am open to and interested in adapting my program curriculum to include topics related to military-connected children and their families.
- Strongly Agree
 - Agree
 - Neither agree nor disagree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree