Academic and Psychosocial Adjustment as a Result of Frequent Relocations Among Military
Children Being Educated in Civilian Schools Versus Military Schools

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Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Relocation is ranked 19th out of 37 most stressful life events for children among military and civilian families alike (Aronson, Caldwell, & Perkins, 2011). During their academic careers, children of military service members are more likely than their civilian peers to relocate, and to do so more frequently (Weber & Weber, 2005). While the Department of Defense (DoD) is working to put more supportive resources in place, the supports that do exist are thought to be inadequate to address the wide scope of needs among military students (Aronson et. al, 2011), particularly those living off-base. Approximately two-thirds of military members choose to live off-base, leading their dependents to be educated within local communities, as opposed to attending DoD schools on base (King, 2006). A study by Russo & Fallon determined that "challenges exist for schools that have children of military families… that are not on a military base (2014)." School and community resources have a large impact on the adjustment of these students (Ruff & Keim, 2014). Marchant and Medway make a case for the study of military students being educated in civilian schools due to the lack of research currently available regarding this population (1987). The purpose of this study is to explore the differences in how students of military service members adjust academically and psychosocially within civilian schools as compared to schools that exist on military bases.

Justification of the Problem

My experience as a military child is largely unusual. I was fortunate enough to spend most of my elementary and middle school years at the same base. I also attended a DoD school on the base my father was assigned to due to living overseas. Schools on military bases are more familiar with the challenges students face with frequent relocations and mid-year moves and are

better prepared to help their students adjust, as opposed to schools within the larger community surrounding the base that serve the civilian population (Russo & Fallon, 2015). Additionally, the curriculum at military schools is typically standardized across bases, making mid-year transitions less disruptive (Marchant & Medway, 1987). There is less likelihood that a student is coming into a classroom expecting to know something that was not covered in their previous school.

My own daughters are military dependents, due to my husband being in the Air Force. Their educational experience has been slightly different than my own, and far more typical of the average military child who moves every 2-3 years (Cabrera, Peralta, & Kurban, 2018). However, the frequency of moves has not necessarily been what makes moving (called a Permanent Change of Station, or PCS, in the military) disruptive. Instead, the time of year has had the most effect on our children's adjustment to transitioning to a new school. For example, our relocations happen in the Fall, after the school year has already started. I, myself, experienced two mid-year moves in elementary school and high school.

Review of the Literature

In the United States, 16% of Americans relocate each year (Weber et al., 2005). Among those, school-aged children of military service members make up about 4% of students nationwide and tend to move three times more frequently than their civilian peers (Cabrera et al., 2018), resulting in the average military student changing schools 6-9 times from the start of kindergarten to graduation from high school (Ruff & Keim, 2014). A study of nonmilitary children who frequently relocate found that relocations increase negative outcomes on a child's ability to adjust (Strobino & Salvaterra, 2000). However, there is a lack of literature examining the academic consequences due to this aspect of military life, particularly in the preschool and early elementary school years (Stites, 2015). The United States Army recognized this shortfall in

research and began a study to examine issues surrounding the roughly 1.2 million students with at least one military parent in the k-12 education system nationwide (Ruff et.al., 2014).

Besides being disruptive to a child's socioemotional life, Permanent Changes of Station are academically disruptive (Jackson, 2014). One study discovered a delay in transfer records, particularly when a child is moving from one state to another, thus causing an obstacle to starting school in a timely manner at the new location (Jackson, 2014). PCS's can occur after the school year has already started, resulting in missed instruction at the incoming school (Jackson, 2014). Additionally, a student might have reduced access to services they were previously benefitting from (Jackson, 2014). Their new school may not have the same special education or even gifted student programs available, and among the ones that do offer such services, the qualification criteria could be vastly different, meaning that they may not qualify for such services at their new school (Jackson, 2014).

A study of 19 military families at an Army base in the United States found that younger military affiliated students did not experience an increase in problematic social behavior as a result of their frequent relocations, compared with highly mobile civilian students (Weber, 2005). It was theorized that the uniformity of Department of Defense schools and base resources available to transitioning families acted as a buffer against negative outcomes (Weber, 2005).

Another study of 40 military students living on a different Army base involving 80 students in either the second, fourth or sixth grades at one of the 3 base elementary schools found that frequent relocation did not negatively impact academic achievement of military students (Marchant & Medway, 1987). Marchant and Medway again attribute this finding to the fact that the curriculum among Department of Defense schools are standardized (1987).

Few studies have been conducted on how to best support military dependent children as the transition into a new school, much less making the distinction between students transferring into schools on a military base versus a civilian school. One study proposes that teachers in civilian schools should be involved in the process of helping guide curriculum and policies to facilitate positive adjustment for military students (Stites, 2016). Because teachers interact daily with children moving into their classrooms, they can provide valuable input regarding the socioemotional and academic impact of adjusting to a PCS, particularly for early elementary schoolers (Stites, 2016). A study of Air Force families found that formal and informal networks within the civilian community (along with the military community) contributes to the success of family adjustment into a new school (Aronson et. al., 2011). Another study emphasized the importance of educators in helping students develop resilience in order to overcome stressors such as frequent school transitions (Russo et. al., 2015). Teachers can act as an informal support system to safeguard the students against challenges caused by mid-year relocations, therefore increasing their ability to adjust (Russo et. al., 2015).

A different study demonstrated that school social worker involvement also promotes good outcomes for military students during transition (Strobino et. al., 2000). Social workers can help identify new students and their needs and work together with the family, the school and other community services to help the student better adjust to their new environment (Strobino et. al., 2000). Their role is especially important in larger schools with middle and high school aged students, where the teachers do not have time to get to know the new students and help them adapt (Strobino et. al., 2000).

In their own literature review regarding the impact of multiple relocations for military children, Ruff & Keim posit that a "lack of familiarity with the military culture by public school

professionals" may negatively impact the social, emotional and academic well-being of military students (2014). Strobino & Salvaterra conducted a study which revealed that, besides the level of parental support, military children are greatly served by the level of involvement their incoming school takes in their transition (2000).

Methodology

I will be pursuing a mixed methods study. The quantitative portion would be to gather data through surveys in civilian schools to determine which students have at least one active duty parent in the military. Once the surveys are complete, I will separate the civilian students from the military students. Then I will conduct focus group interviews with both the students attending civilian schools and the students attending military schools.

Sampling

Due to the number of elementary schools available within a 20-mile radius of a military base, I will use stratified sampling to choose which civilian elementary schools to survey as part of the research study. Since I am interested in seeing how military affiliated students in civilian schools adjust as compared to their peers in military affiliated schools, my sample must include students who have at least one parent who is an active duty service member. Stratification in random sampling will allow me to first sift the elementary schoolers out of the population of k-12 students, and then further allow me to find participants who will represent the military child population (Creswell, 2014, p. 144). This is especially useful because military students make up less than 5% of k-12 students nationwide. Stratified sampling will allow me to make sure that the military student population is adequately represented within civilian schools despite them being a smaller proportion of the population. It also ensures that the results I do get will be significant

enough to analyze (Creswell, 2014). Creswell recommends approximately 30 participants for a correlational study (2014).

After the participating schools have been identified but before surveys are sent out, I will need to gain permissions from the school district. I will also need to gain permission from the principle of each participating school and further from the parents of students to be surveyed. A written consent form will be provided for parents to sign, consenting to participation in the study. The written consent form will briefly discuss the purpose of the study, the type of data I will be gathering, and information about how their data will be used and destroyed at the conclusion of the study.

Once I have gathered quantitative data measuring the quantitative portion of my research, I chose to conduct qualitative studies as part of my research for its ability to present various perspectives of the academic experiences that the children of military service members experience. For this portion of my research, I will employ homogenous sampling due to my target population being students with at least one active duty parent in the military. Creswell advises using homogenous sampling when research involves purposefully sampling a target population based on "membership in a subgroup that has defining characteristics." (Creswell, 2014, p. 208). I will then briefly interview the participants in a series of focus groups about the academic and socio-emotional impact they believe that frequent relocations have had/are having on their academic career. I will also ask parents to provide grade reports for their children, which will be coded according to the proximity of the grade release to a student's relocation. This will allow me to identify trends of the effects of relocation on academic performance and compare it at different intervals following the relocation (for example, 6 months, 1 year, and 1.5 years after

relocation). I will also use the grade reports and make note of any behavioral observations the teachers have noted at these intervals.

Data Collection

Once I have identified my study subjects and obtained all the necessary permissions, I will begin by collecting data using performance measures such as grade point average (GPA) and resiliency and attitudinal measures such as emotional and social adjustment within the first year after relocating.

For the qualitative portion of my research I will be conducting focus groups. Creswell recommends using focus groups of 4 to 6 people when those being interviewed share similar experiences and time is limited to gather the necessary data from a larger volume of participants (2014, pg. 218). The focus group discussions will be recorded using directional recording devices (Creswell, 2014, 221) and later transcribed to provide a thorough and accurate written record of the questions and responses. Participants will be assured that their interview tapes and transcripts will be destroyed at the conclusion of the research study in order to preserve their identities.

Data Analysis

My quantitative data will be analyzed into 2 categories from children attending the civilian schools: military students and civilian students. Only the data from the military students will be of use to me moving into the qualitative portion of the research. The surveys from the civilian students will be properly destroyed, and the military student's data will be further evaluated and coded thematically according to their responses.

In the qualitative portion, I will perform a preliminary exploratory analysis to identify themes after the focus group interviews are completed. Interviews will also be coded thematically. At this stage, audio from the focus group interviews will also be transcribed, reviewed for themes and coded as well. Qualitative findings will then be presented in a comparison table, comparing the academic and socioemotional adjustment of military affiliated students of civilian schools versus Department of Defense Schools.

Limitations of the Study

By sampling more than once civilian school, I hope to gain enough samples to be able to generalize about the well-being of military students being educated in civilian schools. The study will be conducted in Tampa, Florida. I will use MacDill Air Force Base as the control for the military students. However, MacDill is an incredibly large base that hosts servicemembers from all branches of the military, as well as international service members. While the results may be representative for this geographical area, it may not generalize to students living on or near smaller bases with a more homogenous military culture (such as all Air Force) and little to no international military students. Further studies on smaller bases will need to be conducted to better generalize how the overall military student population adjusts in civilian schools.

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