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The Effect of the Military Lifestyle on a Dependent Child's Education

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The frequent moves that U.S. military families are required to make during an active duty member's career directly impact student-aged dependents. A study was conducted to determine the particular obstacles these students might face in their K-12 education as a direct result of permanent change of station moves. The findings - stress from the moving process, quality difference in schools, access to special education services, and housing options all contributed to emotional difficulties and impacted academic performance. These findings address issues military families face as they conflate their professional duties with the personal obligations to their children.

Keywords: military dependents, education, permanent change of station

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When discussing military families, a word that is often found in the conversation is "sacrifice." Those in the civilian world often discuss the sacrifice that comes with the frequent separation of families as the active duty member goes on a combat deployment, or a long temporary duty assignment. Videos and photos of military homecomings stir the emotions of many on social media, but what is often missed in the documentation of these moments is the impact that the military lifestyle has on the dependent children's education. The emotional impact of having a parent or guardian away from the home for an extended time can influence how a student performs in schools. In addition to those struggles, the frequent relocations of military families to new states, countries, or schools can, in theory, interrupt student learning. This study focuses on the experiences and perspectives of military parents, both active duty and spouses, on how the permanent change of station (PCS) moves have impacted their school aged children. The goal of this study is to identify the specific obstacles that face military dependent students, so that strategies to combat these challenges can begin to be created. By having the appropriate information, military parents will not only be able to assist their student-aged children through these transitions, but also be able to advocate for them appropriately with their local school systems.

Methodology

The data for this study was done via digital survey that was distributed to military families by virtue of a "Fighter Pilot Spouses" social network. The feedback received was predominately from families whose active duty member is either a pilot or a weapons systems

officer in a fighter type aircraft. The group of spouses surveyed was given access to a link to a 25 question survey. The survey consisted of predominately multiple choice and true/false questions, with one free response at the end of the survey. The survey took respondents through different questions depending on the age group of their student-age child, and the types of schools their child had attended. In addition, spouses were asked to only answer if their military member is still actively serving, and if their student-aged children are still currently in school. The survey remained open for 18 days. The data was exported into an excel document, where the determined number of responses to each question, percentages of answers, and assigned general themes for the free response question in order to organize those responses. The results of the survey were compared to previous research that is discussed.

Literature Review

While the academic needs of military dependent students are important, the implications of a student's mental health and emotional wellbeing within a school setting cannot be ignored. Tunic De Pedro & Astor (2011) noted "How teachers and civilian school personnel adapt and how they support military students are crucial questions that need to be answered in order to respond to their unique circumstances. Rebekah Cole's (2016) study *Supporting students in military families during times of transition: A call for awareness and action* focuses specifically on counselors in the public school setting, and how they interact with the military dependent students within their purview. The deployment of an active duty parent or guardian can completely change the daily life of a student. This is a huge transition that leads to academic challenges and behavioral changes for some students (Cole, 2016). During deployment that usually lasts anywhere from 6 months to 18 months, contact with the deployed member can be sporadic and reliant on inherently unstable internet, and for many family members can be accompanied by a fear of injury or death. These life changes are hard for any family member left behind and can influence patterns of behavior. Another transition military children must endure is frequent changes of station, or moves. Cole (2016) states that military students may change schools anywhere from 6-9 times while in the K-12 system. These moves are challenges as students are not only changing schools but are often moving to new states or countries. As different states and school systems have different curriculum, this can leave a student in a place where it is unclear where they should be placed in their new school. It is also possible that a student could be behind academically if one school system had a more rigorous set of standards than the student's new school. It would stand to reason that these challenges on top of the stress of making new friends and building a new community would be very difficult for a military connected student, and that it would be beneficial for both teachers and counselors to be better prepared for these eventualities (Cole, 2016). Cole (2016) calls for further research into these types of transitions in order to better serve the students of military families.

Erica Culler et al. (2019) focused on the perspective of military spouses, and their observations of the support available to them and their children from schools in their study *School utilization of spouse perspectives on military parental absence for program planning*. Spouses of active duty members often take on the roles of both parents while the service member is away, and thus take the brunt of navigating school systems. Culler et al. (2019) determined the purpose for the study was to evaluate this perspective in order to create suggestions to build better support systems for military dependent children within public schools. Within this study, 32% of spouses mentioned that a risk factor for their families was an overall lack of support, although this observation was not specific to support from the schools, but rather from the entire community (Culler et al., 2019). While Culler et al. (2019) concluded that systems should be

designed within schools to better support those students, this study was the only one reviewed that mentioned that there needed to be a balance between supporting military dependents students and isolating them by creating a stigma that draws unwanted attention to personal matters. Military students end up being the “new kid” several times throughout their K-12 education, so it makes sense that teachers and administrations would need to be careful not to draw unwanted attention to said students, as many are just trying to fit in with their peers. Another issue that this particular study found is that there is a lack of programs available for older kids to support them during a deployment or parental absence (Culler et al., 2019). This is identifiable as a problem as secondary students need activities and programs just like younger students, but for different reasons. An organized activity could, in theory, keep teenagers engaged in positive choices, rather than other options that could lead them down a non-desirable path. Older students are more likely to pick up on the stress within a household due to a deployment than their younger counterparts (Culler et al., 2019). This could be because they need to take on some of the household responsibilities, or because they are more aware of what a deployment means, and the risks involved.

While moving or a “permanent change of station”, is stressful on a military family for a variety of factors, one of the specific challenges for the students of the family is changing schools. Esqueda et al. (2012) analyze the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children (ICEOMC), which was created in order to guide military families through the school transition in a smoother manner in their *A call to duty: Educational policy and school reform addressing the needs of children from military families*. In addition to the school transitions, the ICEOMC is supposed to create an environment in which schools can support all of their military connected students throughout moves, deployments, etc. (Esqueda et al., 2012). The creation of the ICEOMC was supposed to be the first step in creating policies to aid military students in their educational journey and successfully navigate their way through the K-12 school system. Esqueda et al. (2012) comments that a limitation to the ICEOMC is that some states have not created a council, and that there is no firm compliance guidance yet in place for all states. The challenges for military dependent students that Esqueda et al. (2012) identified fall in line with other studies from this review, in that deployments are connected to a negative trend in academic performance, and that transitioning schools is another stress point for military families.

In Garner et al. (2014) paper, *Schoolwide impact of military connected student enrollment: Educators’ perceptions* researchers interviewed various professionals within the educational field, rather than interviewing students or military families. Specifically, their participants were made up of “seven principals, eight school counselors, 55 teachers, and four instructional support staff” (p. 33). One of the issues that the participants identified is that curriculum can differ between school systems, whether they be state to state or international (Garner et al., 2014). As each state can set its own standards for learning, military students who often move between different states can find themselves at a huge disadvantage when compared to their peers. They might have been progressing at a different pace than their new school or could be studying a subject, such as state history, separate from what is now available to them. To make this problem worse, Garner et al. (2014) reported that there were difficulties with gaining previous academic records for students, with only 12% of their participants agreeing that it was easy to place a student based on their prior academic record. With as often as military dependents move schools’ systems, these kinds of challenges can lead to a serious disruption in their overall education.

Transitioning schools can be even more challenging for military dependent students who are reliant on extra support from the school system. Jagger and Lederer (2014) specifically studied the impact on students who need access to special education services in their work *Impact of geographic mobility on military children's access to special education services*. Jagger and Lederer's sample included a variety of conditions, "10 children had emotional/behavioral conditions, 16 had chronic health conditions, 10 had cognitive delays, 24 had an autism spectrum diagnosis, eight had physical health conditions, and eight had sensory/communication impairments" (Jagger & Lederer, 2014, p. 17). All schools are not created equal when it comes to special education services, with different states requiring different minimums than others, and some schools who go above and beyond to serve these group of students (Jagger & Lederer, 2014). Different disorders might also qualify students in some states for an individualized education plan but may not in others, for example a student with Oppositional Defiance Disorder (Jagger & Lederer, 2014). In addition to this inequality, Jagger & Lederer (2014) identified that it is difficult for military families to properly plan a transition for their special education children into a new school system ahead of time, as most families move to their new location before they have actually found a place to live. Often, military families will move and live in a temporary lodging facility "on-base" until they can locate a home of their own or move into an "on-base" house. Typically, a family would want their student to be out of school for as little time as possible during a move. If an "on-base" school is available, this is less of a problem because military dependent students can attend without having to live in a particular zip code. In contrast to this, "off-base" schools often accept enrollment based on geographic location, so students are out of school for more time as families look for a new living situation. Combine that with the findings in Esqueda's (2012) study about the amount of time it can take for teachers to obtain previous academic records for military dependent students, and it is easy to conclude that this particular subset of the military dependent student population is severely at risk for a negative impact to their education as a part of a military permanent change of station.

It is very clear that students who are attending public "off-base" schools will face challenges directly related to their parent's role as an active duty military member. However, what about the students who attend department of defense schools? While students who attend these schools will inevitably experience the same emotional effects of having a deployed parent, or being the new kid in school, they will be surrounded by other students, teachers, and administrators who have a thorough understanding of their experience as a military dependent student. Kingston (2002) reports on DOD schools, and how they approach curriculum, future planning, and discipline issues in his *What can department of defense schools teach us about school reform* study. His findings include that seventy three percent of DOD teachers were fully accredited and teach in their certified subject area (Kingston, 2002). Overall, he found the DOD school program to be successful, and attributed this success to their "assessments, personnel management, and administrative mechanisms" (Kingston, 2002, p.67).

Overall, this sample of studies seem to come to similar conclusions. These conclusions all focus around the concept that military dependent students are subject to a different lifestyle than the average civilian family, and that the specific challenges of deployments, permanent changes of station, and reintegration do have a marked effect on these student's education. Emotionally, these students are at a higher risk of negative behavior as their active duty parent is absent during a deployment or temporary duty assignment. Differences in state standards and curriculum make it difficult to achieve continuity in subject learning for these students which could affect their actual grades. These grades will become increasingly important as they enter

high school, as they will impact their college applications. Differences in how grade point averages are calculated, especially in regard to how a school chooses to weigh an advanced placement course, can differ amongst districts. While both conclusions seem to be acknowledged, majority of educators and administrators do not seem to have any specific programming in place to prepare their staff to understand and properly address military dependent children's needs within their classroom. As most of the studies reviewed concluded, not only does further research need to be done to enhance understanding the military dependent student experience, but program and policies should be developed to aid in the transitional aspect of these students' lives in order to enable them to be more successful throughout their K-12 career.

Methods

The survey remained open for a total of 18 days, and seventy two participants completed the survey. The survey was a series of 22 questions, intended to gather basic data about the participants military connection, the age level of their student, and then a series of questions with a Likert scale for response in order to determine the obstacles military dependents face. These responses all came from people whose Active Duty member serves in the United States Air Force as an officer, falling in ranks ranging from Second Lieutenant to General.

Findings

The largest percentage of responses (69%) came from those whose active duty member is ranked as one of the following: Major, Lieutenant Colonel, or Colonel. 91% of responses indicated that the participants average length of assignment was between four and six years. Assignment length is considered the amount of time that families remain at one duty station before having permanent change of station orders that would require them to physically move their belongings and families to a new location. Often, "PCS season" falls into the summer, but families are eligible to move at any time during the year. 35% percent of participants indicated that they've never had to move their families during the school year, while 45% reported that they have moved one to three times during that time. As the Air Force has bases all over the United States and the world, student-aged dependents face not only the possibility of changing schools, but also states or countries. From this survey, 64% of these families have changed states or countries one to three times, 23% four to six times, and 9% six or more times.

Grade Level Impact

The responders were asked to classify their student-aged dependent into one of the following categories: Elementary (Kindergarten through 5th grade), Middle School (Grades 6 through 8), and High School (Grades 9 through 12). The answer to this question determined what questions would be available next, with the selection of "High School" leading to questions about end of year testing and subject areas, while the selection of "Elementary School" or "Middle School" routing to questions relating to grade placement and appropriate skill sets. Only 48 out of the 72 responses continued to this section of the survey, as the survey ended for those participants that had selected that their child had never had to change schools due to the military.

Out of the 48 responses from those whose children had moved, only 9 selected that they had students in the high school category. Of those 9, all graduated high school in what would be considered "on time." Six of those nine also reported that at some point throughout their high school education, they had been placed in a class or subject area that was different than their age peers because of different state standards in their new school compared to their previous school.

Thirty nine survey participants responded that they had middle or elementary school children. The first question they were asked used a Likert scale if they felt their children had the

appropriate skill level for the grade they were placed in, with 64% of responses categorized in the “somewhat agree” category. About 25% strongly agreed, and 4% somewhat disagreed. The next question asked if their student had to change grade levels due to differing state standards at their new location. These responses were more varied than the skill set question with 5% strongly agreeing, 8% somewhat agreeing, 26% neutral, 8% somewhat disagreeing, and 54% strongly disagreeing. This indication that just over half had never had to change grade levels due to different state standards, other reasons for changing grade levels were not considered.

The Moving Process

In order to change schools, a student’s academic record must also find its way to the new school from the old for the new school to be in the best position to serve that student’s educational needs. The results on how smoothly this transition has occurred for the surveyed individuals were varied. Out of the forty eight responses, 31% strongly agreed that record transmission has always occurred without delay or issue, 34% somewhat agreed, 12% were neutral, 6% somewhat disagreed, and 15% strongly disagreed. This indicates that majority of these moves went smoothly, but that there have been instances where this is not the case.

When asked how many days their students were out of school during the PCS process, zero days received the highest number of responses at 40%. However, 21% reported that their student spent ten or more days out of school, a further 21% reported one to five days, and the lowest grouping was five to ten days with 19%. If a family had always moved during the summer PCS season, it is possible that their child would never have to miss any school. In addition, it is common for military families to stay behind at a duty station while their active duty member moves to the next location in order to let their children finish out the school year.

Another concern for military families is that they don’t always know where exactly they will be living before they physically arrive in their new location. Most, if not all military families, will end up spending some amount of time in a military temporary lodging facility, essentially an “on-base” hotel, while they search for their new home. The implication of this on a student’s education is that the parents may not know the district or school their student will be attending before they arrive. However, 66% of participants in this survey reported that they did know the district and/or school that their children would attend before they physically moved.

Types of Schools

As with non-military connected families, military families can choose to have their student attend a variety of school types, such as public schools, private schools, charter schools, or homeschooling. Another option open to these families, in certain locations, is to place their student in a Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) school. These schools are usually located on a military base, are attended only by those who have a parent connected to the military and are mostly available at bases that are Outside the Continental United States (OCONUS). When asked what types of schools their children attended, the survey participants could choose multiple answers. Out of the total responses, 27% had children attend private school, 43% had attended public or charter, 19% had attended DoDEA schools, and 11% chose to homeschool their children.

For those that had answered that their child had attended DoDEA schools, they received a question that asked them if they felt that DoDEA administrators and teachers had a better understanding of how deployments and temporary duty travel affected their family than public schools. 50% responded that they strongly agreed, 33% somewhat agreed, with neutral, somewhat disagree, and strongly disagree claiming one response each.

Public, Private and Charter school responses were led to a question which asked if they felt their child was supported by the school during deployments or TDY's. The highest responses rate was somewhat agreed at 35%, followed by somewhat disagree with 25% and then strongly disagree with 18%.

Every participant, except for those who chose to homeschool, was asked if they felt their child was properly supported during their active duty parents' deployments and TDY's. The responses were very similar to those found in the public and private school group, with 37% somewhat agree, 25% somewhat disagree, and 13% chose strongly to agree, strongly disagree, and neutral. While some agreed that their school was supportive, there was no indication in the free response answers of what type of support that might be.

Emotional Impact

Military dependent students often find themselves as the "new kid" in school, which can be an adjustment. When asked if their student struggled to adjust to a new school, 21% of responses were strongly agree, 50% somewhat agreed, 8% were neutral, 15% somewhat disagreed, and 6% strongly disagreed. Even though every student is different, and every school district is different, it seems that a majority of students have been seen to struggle by their parents when adjusting to a new school after a PCS move.

In addition, when asked to respond to "My child's education has never been interrupted by a PCS," 46% strongly disagreed, 33% somewhat disagreed, 2% were neutral, 15% somewhat agreed, and 4% strongly agreed. This leads to the conclusion that many families had their student's education interrupted by a military mandated move, even if those experiences were varied.

Free Response

For the final question on the survey, the participants were given the option to answer, "The most challenging parts of a PCS in regard to my education are..." in a free response format. The responses to this question were understandably varied, but several patterns emerged. The first of these indicated that one of the most common challenges of the frequent moves required by the military lifestyle, is that there is very little consistency of school expectations. It was reported that some of the schools have higher expectations than others, differing state standards for curriculum, and a lack of continuity in general. Quality of schools was another area where many of the participants reported an issue. One commented that "My child currently attends school in Hawaii. This state puts less than 1% of their taxes into the school. Up until middle school she never received a letter grade it was basically a thumbs up or thumbs down. I have no idea where my child will stand when we PCS back to the mainland. It is common knowledge that children moving back to the mainland from Hawaii will be behind those that are in the same grade or of the same age." Other quality of school concerns revolved around looking for housing and knowing where the good schools are in order to find homes in that zone.

Several of the responses focused around schools meeting individual student needs. Some of these were specific in that the challenges were related to getting their child's "individualized education program" (IEP) set up with new teachers and having lots of additional testing at each new school. Other focuses were on meeting the accelerated learning needs of their students. At the high school level, there was concerns about differences between honors and AP classes at different schools, and how those grades would be weighted for overall grade point average.

Another concern that was prevalent throughout the free response question was that making new friends was a concern for parents. In some instances, this revolved around students missing their old friends, and others stated that it was more about fearing that their child would

struggle making new friends. This could lead to emotional stress for students that would ultimately impact their academic performance.

Discussion

The literature that was reviewed and the findings of this study were full of similarities, but there were some instances where the results varied. Some of the responses were different than what an individual might assume about the military lifestyle and moving process.

Garner's study indicated that one of the issues that their participants identified is that curriculum can differ between school systems, whether they be state-to-state or international (Garner et al., 2014). This was heavily supported in the results from the survey, especially in the open ended section. Some of the responses included, "Different schools have different standards and my child is the one always having to adjust," "Not every school teaching the same things in the same way," "the difference in state and country standards," and many more. In addition, 66% of those with students in high school reported that their child had been placed in a class or subject area that was different than their age peers because of differing state standards. Despite this, 64% of those with students in middle or elementary school grades reported that they agreed that their student had the appropriate skill set for their grade level at both old and new schools, with a further 26% strongly agreeing.

Jagger & Lederer (2014) identified that it is difficult for military families to properly plan a transition for their special education students into a new school system ahead of time, as most families have moved to their new location before they have found a place to live. This study was in one way supported by the survey, but in another was not. The free responses identified "Getting... IEP set up with special Ed and regular teachers," and "SPED resources" as areas of concern. However, 62% of participants said that it was true that they knew the school district that their child would be attending prior to physically moving. Often military families must wait until they are at the new location before they can start to house hunt, this is seen in Jagger and Lederer's study.

Kingston (2002) focused on department of defense schools and how they support their students with a rigorous curriculum and by creating an environment that truly understands the military lifestyle. When asked in the survey, 83% of those who had students attend department of defense schools responded that they agreed that their students were supported better in this school setting, than that had been in public school. This could be from a variety of factors, including the fact that the entire student body has some connection with the military. This means that not only are the administrators and teachers very aware of the needs of this population, but students have peers who understand what they're going through. Being the "new kid" in a school where everyone has been the "new kid" at some point, is bound to be less stressful than in a school where majority of the students have been attending together for years.

In Culler's study, 32% of spouses mentioned that a risk factor for their families was an overall lack of support (Culler et al., 2019). One of the free responses answers very specifically mentions that one of their challenges is "very little support" throughout the PCS process. While other responses don't necessarily mention the word support specifically, many of the concerns can fall into that category. In some cases, this was finding the right support for their child's individual learning needs, and in others it was that their child struggled because their friends and teachers did not really understand the military lifestyle.

Esqueda's (2012) study discussed the implications of how a delay in obtaining school records from a student's previous school can negatively impact the student's transition into their new school. Without records, it is unclear in what academic setting a student should be placed. In

my survey, 66% of responses indicated either “strongly agree” or “somewhat agree” that their student’s records had always transferred without delay or issue. Newer technologies and the shift to most records being kept digitally rather than on paper could have led to a rise in efficiency when transferring these records since the time of Esqueda’s study.

Cole (2016) identifies that student-aged military dependents may change schools anywhere from 6-9 times while in the K-12 system. This claim was supported by the data collected in the survey. While only 7 participants responded that their student had to change schools more than 6 times due to PCS, only had 9 participants that identified their students as high school aged. This means that many of the survey takers have students in grades K-8, and 20 of those responded that they had already moved between 3-6 times due to a PCS. It can be reasonably expected that those students will move a few more times during their K-12 education, as it was also reported by 91% of participants that assignments only last between 4-6 years before having to PCS.

Conclusions and Implications

Based both upon the results of the survey and the studies in the literature review, it is reasonable to say that the military lifestyle, especially the frequency of PCS moves, has a definite impact on student-aged military dependent’s education. Both the studies and the survey indicated the curriculum standards, emotional stressors, and a lack of continuity in schools created obstacles that these students must overcome. The implication of the work is that military families need to be prepared that they will face some sort of obstacle, but the first step in combating those obstacles is to be armed with the knowledge of what they will be facing. Unfortunately, one of the biggest obstacles is that curriculum are so incredibly varied from state to state and country, so there would need to be significant improvement on the government level of education to eliminate this challenge.

Based on the survey, things are not as dire as they might have been 10 years ago. Transmission of school records does not seem to be a large issue, potentially due to the digital age we now live in. Also, most participants reported that they knew the district their child would attend before they physically moved, which could be explained once again by the advance in technology. Families are now able to look at homes through websites like Zillow, or Rightmove, before they move to a new area. This gives them a better idea of the area they can afford to live in, where they would want to live, and the school zoned for that area.

One area that could be addressed is teaching administrators and teachers what the implications of having an active duty parent means for a student. Participants reported that there was average support in non-department of defense schools. Support can be difficult to define, but at minimum school staff should be trained on what a temporary duty (TDY) or deployment is, how long they typically last, and how that can affect a student. Simply informing school staff that 5 minute Facetime calls that don’t happen daily can be the norm during a deployment, and the emotional impact of that on a child can be significant. They might also be subject to more stress at home as the at home parent takes on the responsibilities that are normally split with another adult.

However, it must be acknowledged that the survey was very limited in its scope. For example, all of the people who took the survey were those whose Active Duty member is an Air Force Officer. Different career fields, ranks, and branches of service could very well have different PCS schedules, or the average length of assignment could be longer or shorter. In addition, Officers receive a higher pay than many Enlisted members, so it is more feasible for these families to afford private schools or have the flexibility to afford homes that would zone

their students for a higher rated school. Given the time and resources, it would be beneficial for a study to be conducted that could survey all ranks, career fields, and branches of the United States military. That would give a more accurate picture of the struggles that military dependent students face, rather than from one subset of that population.

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