Student Support during Parental Military Deployment

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Abstract

Families of Australian Defence Force (ADF) members also contribute to the defence of our nation. Through maintaining family functioning at home, they enable the ADF member to focus on their operational duties confident that the family members at home are proceeding with day to day lives. Schools play an important role in supporting ADF families by providing the necessary emotional support to enable students to maintain academic engagement and progress. The Defence School Transition Aide (DSTA) program assists school to fulfil this role. Through the provision of proactive and responsive support services for students, teachers and parents and the sharing of a contextual understanding of the ADF lifestyle, Defence School Transition Aides (DSTAs) add to the whole school contribution to supporting the ADF.

Keywords: Australian Defence Force; military deployment; education; emotional support

Introduction

The Australian Defence Force (ADF) lifestyle offers many opportunities and presents many challenges for school aged children. Their education is regularly disrupted by routine military postings often across state and territory borders. They are exposed to frequent changes in family circumstances due to the employment conditions of the ADF. ADF members are often called away from the family home for extended periods of time. Department of Defence employees and their families make up approximately 12 % of Townsville's population of 190,000 people (Welters and Delisle, 2009). Since 1999 several thousand of Townsville based soldiers and airmen and women have served on overseas military operations in East Timor, Iraq and Afghanistan. The community of this garrison city has rallied to support the families of ADF members that remain behind in their community.

The Defence School Transition Aide (DSTA) program was introduced nationally by the Department of Defence in 2002. As school based employees Defence School Transition Aides (DSTAs) assist ADF members and their families to become well integrated members of the school community (DCO, 2011). Working closely with classroom teachers, DSTAs enable them to increase their knowledge and understanding of the unique needs of children from ADF

families. Increased awareness enables teachers to recognize contextual factors driving out of character student behavior and to respond accordingly.

This study focuses on the support provided to the children of ADF members at school during a parental military deployment. A brief literature review will be followed by an outline of the theoretical framework and methodology and an outline of some initial research findings.

Literature review

American research reveals that students of military members have faced similar challenges to those represented in this study (Chandra, Martin, Hawkins & Richardson 2009; Mmari et al., 2009). A comparative study of national testing data in two American states, North Carolina and Washington, between students of parents deployed for at least 19 months and those not in this situation revealed a statistically significant difference in academic results (see figure 1). Primary and middle school students of deployed parents demonstrated lower levels of functioning in core subject areas regardless of the gender of the parent or the child (Leuscher, 2012).

The Relationship Between Deployment and Achievement Test Scores: Cumulative Months of Deployment Modeled as Six Categorical Variables
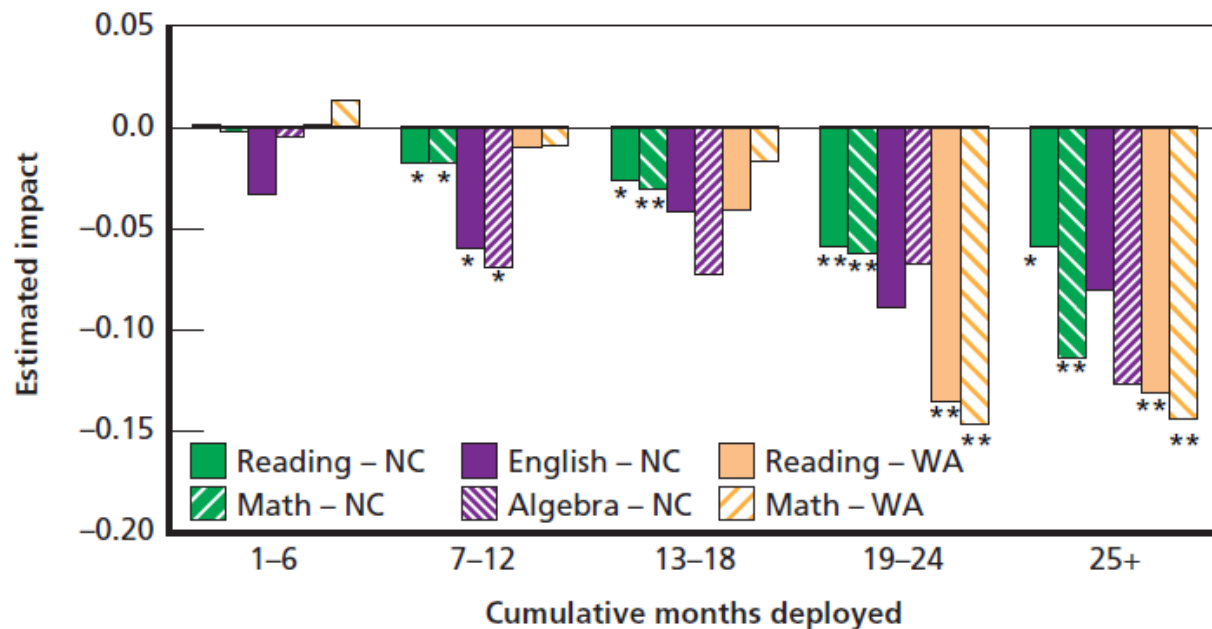
**statistically significant at 1 percent level.

Figure 1
(Leuscher, 2012)

Student focus groups (Chandra et al., 2009) comprised of American adolescents revealed emotional stress and social difficulties amongst students who had experienced extended periods of parental deployment. Students reported a lack of understanding by teachers and school

counsellors regarding the pressures involved (Chandra et al. 2009). They reported additional family responsibilities, increased concern for their deployed parent and a sense of responsibility towards supporting their parent at home. They felt they carried many of these extra responsibilities on their own with little understanding or support from the school community. They reported heightened levels of family stress and conflict resulting after the deployed parent's return from deployment. They said it often took several weeks for the family to resettle into a more stable pattern of functioning. These additional pressures were reported to take a toll on academic focus and engagement.

Focus groups of teachers and school support staff (Mmari et al., 2009) reported that school staff felt challenged and often overwhelmed with challenging student behaviour during a parental deployment or during the weeks following the parent's return (Mmari et al., 2009). They felt that while there had been some initial attempts from school administrators to provide additional support to students during the early years of America's engagement in the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts, the situation had become normalized and the students involved no longer received the required attention. Teachers expressed a level of helplessness in not knowing how to best support the student's with their plight.

Several other American studies have found that children experience emotional distress during parental deployment (Barker & Berry, 2009; Chandra, Martin, Hawkins & Richadson, 2009; Huebner & Mancini, 2005; Huebner, Mancini, Wilcox, Grass & Grass, 2007,Tunac de Pedro et al., 2011). They have recognised that schools have an important role in play in supporting students through a parental deployment. However the literature does not offer specific, targeted direction to guide schools in supporting students during parental deployment.

The University of Queensland completed a study 2854 ADF East Timor veterans and their families through questionnaires and focus groups in 2012 (McGuire et al., 2012). This study revealed that approximately 10% of the children involved were emotionally affected by their parent's deployment. Repeated deployments as parental mental health were found to be particular risk factors for children. Unlike ADF spouses who increased resilience with each successive deployment, children's resilience to deployment declined from the second deployment onwards.

Theoretical framework and methodology

This study reported in this paper has been driven by the desire to provide schools with specific evidence based means of supporting students during a parental deployment. It was designed as a qualitative study collecting data from semi-structured interviews with teachers, parents and DSTAs and analyzing the data using constructivist grounded theory methods. Through the identification of key actions undertaken by research participants and the processes to which they contribute, focused codes emerge from the data to respond to the research questions (Charmaz, 2006).

The research questions are:

- What student supports are valued by teachers, parents and DSTAS during a parent's military deployment?

- What school programs or strategies best activate student strengths during parental deployment?
- What further measures of support could benefit students during a parental deployment?

The findings were viewed through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner describes the environment in which a person develops as a series of interdependent nested systems. The innermost system, the microsystem is a complex of relationships between the developing person, in this study the student, and their immediate environment, including the family and school. The surrounding layer, the mesosystem includes the interrelationships between the elements of the microsystem such as family school partnerships. The next layer, the mesosystem is an extension of the microsystem and contains other specific social systems such as the parental work place, in this study a war zone, and the mass media. The mesosystem does not contain the student but has the potential to impact on their family environment and relationships at school. The mesosystem is represented in figure 2 as the relationship developed between the school and family that sits outside the microsystem, between the school microsystem and the family microsystem, both of which support the student.
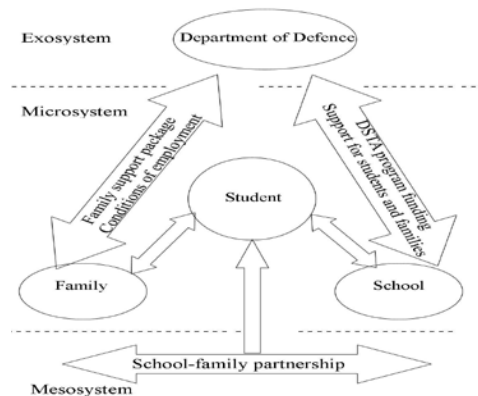

Figure 2

The data for this study has come from 45 semi-structured interviews with 15 teachers, 15 parents and 15 DSTAs. All participants were voluntarily recruited through school principals. The findings from each group of participants were analysed using contructivist grounded theory methods (Birks & Mills, 2011; Charmaz, 2006). Data collection and data analysis have occurred concurrently to enable emergent themes to be included in future data collection. Initial action codes were identified and analysed to reveal the focused processes they represented. Theoretical codes emerging from further analysis of the process codes were found to be supported throughout the data.

Findings

This study revealed that children can face many challenges when they have a parent deployed to a war zone. Whilst many children appear to manage these challenges well, others do not and

require additional support. Children described as particularly close to the deployed parent were thought by the participants to suffer most. Their sense of loss was often described as affecting many aspects of their lives, including school work, behaviour and social relationships. Older children were described as taking on more adult roles within the family including the provision of emotional support for the at home parent. Many parent participants described the reunion stage of the deployment as particularly difficult for adolescent children and the deployed parent. Focused codes have emerged for each group of participants relating to the first research question. These codes have been grouped according to Bonfenbrenner's environmental level that they represent.

Micosystem
Teachers
Teachers expressed concern for student well-being during parental deployment. They provided a supportive classroom environment and individual support for students but recognised the demands of the modern classroom did not leave sufficient time for the individual needs of some students. They appreciated the additional support their students received from the DSTAs both within the classroom as well as through individual support and monitoring, targeted group programs and lunchtime activities. They used the expertise shared by the DSTAs to support their students.
Parents
Parents were conscientious in supporting the unique needs of each of their children and worked in partnership with the school to minimize disruption to their children's education. They appreciated emotional support provided to their children by teachers and DSTAs .They appreciated that their children had the DSTA room to go to before school and during lunch breaks when needed. They also appreciated the ready availability of the DSTAs for themselves and their facilitation of parent gatherings
DSTAs
DSTAs provided a professional service to students, teachers and parents. They supported teacher's work and the school mission while raising a whole school awareness of ADF family circumstances. They were attuned to the needs of the whole school, teachers, parents and provided support where needed. They attuned closely to the unique needs of individual students who were struggling with their parent's deployment and developed targeted individual programs to support them through their parent's absence.

Mesosystem
All groups of participants were conscious of the importance of positive school family relationships, particularly during times for stress. Many participants were active in maintaining the inclusion of the deployed parent within the school community through various means of communication.

Exosystem
Parents in particular were conscious of the impact of the deployed parent's circumstances on their children. The at home parent endeavoured to maintain active family communication and understanding, maintaining the deployed parent as a participating member of the family.

Macrosystem

All groups of participants encouraged student to take pride in the deployed member and their service to the nation. Protecting children from the mass media became increasingly difficult for parents of older children

Conclusion

Parental deployment can affect children emotionally and interfere with their educational engagement and progress. By attending to their needs through proactive and responsive processes, schools can help to reduce negative effects of a parental deployment on a student's academic achievement.

The implementation of the DSTA program acknowledges the contribution that the families of ADF members make in defence of our nation. The Department of Defence demands a lot from its members during military operations and this can take its toll on all family members. The DSTA program is one of many family support programs provided to assist families to navigate the challenges that can be associated with military deployment.

The DSTA program has assisted schools through the provision of additional resourcing and expertise delivered to the classroom teacher. DSTAs bring expert contextual knowledge of the ADF lifestyle to the school community that is shared with teachers and other members of staff. The additional time available through the program for DSTAs to work with individual and groups of students on a needs basis relieves pressure on classroom teachers.

DSTA have more flexibility in their daily routine than teachers and are available to meet with parents and students on a needs basis. As an integrated member of the school staff they are familiar with the support structures available within the school and make appropriate referrals. They are also familiar with support structures available through the Department of Defence and refer when appropriate.

The final report from this research study will describe specific details of programs and strategies developed through the DSTA program to support student during a parental deployment and assist them to remain academically engaged. The programs and activities will have reach beyond the students from ADF families. Any students whose parents are employed in occupations that take them away from the family home or who work in dangerous occupations will benefit from similar support at school.

Disclaimer

This article relates to the author's research towards a Doctor of Education. This doctorate study is approved by the Australian Defence Human Research Ethics Committee (ADHREC), James Cook University, Queensland Education and Catholic Education, North Queensland diocese. The National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research has been adhered to in meeting the requirements of these approving bodies. The author is employed by the Department of Defence and in her role as the Regional Education Liaison Officer with Defence Community Organisation (DCO) North Queensland, provides professional support and development opportunities to the Defence School Transition Aide (DSTA) program in North Queensland. This article reflects work

undertaken by the author during her employment with DCO. The article reflects the opinions of the author and does not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Defence.

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