

Implementing Invitational Education Theory to Address the Unique Needs of Children from Military Families

by

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Abstract

Children from military families comprise nearly 4% of the entire school-age population of the United States. Of those children, approximately 90% attend public schools serving both military and nonmilitary student populations (Ruff and Keim, 2014). Previous literature established some understanding regarding this population's emotional and academic challenges (i.e., Berg, 2008; Esqueda, Astor, and De Pedro 2012; Ruff et al., 2014; and Cole, 2016). However, there is limited empirical scholarship examining how to address the unique social-emotional needs of students from military families. Through an examination of ethical, servant, and democratic leadership approaches and invitational education theory, the purpose of this practice-based study was twofold: (a) to gain a comprehensive understanding of the social-emotional needs of children from military families attending public school systems that serve students from both military and nonmilitary families, and; (b) to discuss ways that educators could effectively respond to these unique social-emotional challenges by establishing an intentionally inviting school environment emphasizing the individual's opportunity for optimal growth. Overall, regardless if students were from military or nonmilitary families, educators within the participating public schools should be encouraged to nurture the various needs of *all* students), recognize their human potential, and optimally enhance the students' development.

Keywords: military and nonmilitary communities, education, social-emotional well-being, servant leadership, ethical leadership, democratic ethos , invitational education theory and practice

Introduction

According to a report from the United States Department of Defense (DoD, 2018), there are 2,101,134 military personnel with 2,627,805 family members that includes spouses, children, and adult dependents. Overall, 41.2 percent of military personnel have children. There are 1,650,464 children from military families. According to the DoD (2018) report, school-aged children from military families are likely to experience frequent school transitions. Military students' transience is associated primarily with nonvoluntary school changes resulting from forced transitions, which often occur with less than 30 days' notice (Gomez & Yabenitz, 2012). Berg (2008) asserts that "unlike most of our citizens, military families have no choice in where they live, work, and raise their families" (p.41). Military transience is clearly defined by a parent transferring from one duty station to another, and the military personnel's dependents relocating with the active military parent. It should be noted that the newly assigned duty station can be in different states or even overseas. For students from military families, the frequency of transitions can average three times more than children from a non-military family, thereby children resulting in attendance at six to nine schools during their K-12 school years (Berg (2008). Transience among children from military families originates primarily from the military system's deployment requirements and training programs for its active military personnel.

Challenges for Students from Military Families

Students from military families face multiple challenges. Some of the associated struggles result from (a) inconsistent academic standards and curriculum; (b) parent absence due to deployment; and (c) social challenges. Children from military families experience a distinctive set of challenges resulting from multiple school transitions and the subsequent educational, emotional, and social struggles accompanying these relocations.

School transitions involve adjusting to different school cultures, sociocultural contexts, or different academic requirements and curricula. Research by Sundhinaraset, Mmari and Blum, (2010) explored the different academic requirements and curricula across various states that influenced educational gaps for military children. An example would be missing core curricular themes such as multiplication and fractions that increased the likelihood that a student would repeat a grade.

Children from military families also experience limited access to extracurricular activities. When involved in sports, students from military families who relocate throughout the school year may miss their tryouts for teams or the new school may simply not offer the same extracurricular programs (Ruff and Keim, 2014). Furthermore, Ruff et al. (2014) also found another factor that limits access to extracurricular activities, stating that "new military students may find that student government elections happened before they entered to school" (p. 105). Overall, children from military families may experience educational and academic gaps as well as limited access to extracurricular school activities due to their distinctive life circumstances, resulting in feelings of frustration and a sense of social isolation based on a lack of access to opportunities and activities that would provide interaction with their nonmilitary peers.

Deployment of a parent is another major difficulty. Studies (Ruff et al., 2014, Cole, 2016) indicate that parental deployment has a negative impact on children from military families. Cole (2016) found that separation from a deployed parent and either living in a single-parent home or with a guardian may: (a) increase misbehavior and aggression issues in the classroom; (b) increase personal anxiety and stress; and (c) result in risk-taking behaviors including self-injury and sexual promiscuity. Aronson and Perkins (2012) underscored this struggle, stating that "studies have

found that children and youth do more poorly in school and have decreased social functioning during parental deployment” (p. 516).

Following each school transition, children from military backgrounds must cope with the stress of establishing new social interactions “and figure how to fit in” (Ruff et al, 2014, p.105) while grieving friends left behind. Bradshw, Sudhinaraset, Mmari, and Blum (2010) examined stressors affecting children from military families during their transitions into a new school environment and found that a crucial struggle related to frequent relocations is the “challenge of initiating and sustaining close friends” (p. 91). These children also reported how difficult it was for them to separate from their long-term friends and stated how their friends would pull away from them in preparation for an upcoming moving. Students from military families also described how challenging it was for them to integrate into the “well-established” social groups that consisted of only children from nonmilitary families who knew each other from kindergarten age (Ruff et al. 2014). This condition often leads military students to feel a lack “of connectedness with others in their new school, which in turn may lead to maladjustment in the transition” (Ruff et al., 2014, p.105).

Students from military families also mentioned some social challenges integrating with established school sports teams. Researchers reported that children from military families “can have difficulty breaking into established athletic programs and teams....they struggled to bond with their new teammates especially if a military student’s new position on the team resulted in an established teammate losing a starting position” (Ruff et al. 2014, p.105). Further than that, students from military families also reported how some” athletic coaches were reluctant to put military students on teams or in starting positions, as doing so could disrupt the team dynamics” (Mmari et al., as cited in Ruff et al p. 105).

Some children from military families revealed some sense of social division between: (a) the “well established” nonmilitary student group (Ruff et al, 2014); and (b) the military student group which consisted of children from military families attending the school for a short period of time. The literature indicates that some military group members experienced challenges integrating into the social fabric and establishing new relationships with students from nonmilitary backgrounds. These social challenges may provide insights into the necessity to intentionally create and implement conditions intended to enable the social-emotional growth of children from both military and nonmilitary backgrounds. These suggested conditions and interventions will be described later in this report.

Educational Opportunities for Children from Military Families

Children from military families have opportunities to live in several areas around the country or even around the world. Transitions exposes them to various circumstances that increases stressors. Depending on various conditions, children in the military families may participate in one of three different educational frameworks: (a) Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) Schools which are located on military bases and serve only students from military families; (b) the Military Homeschooling Program; and (c) public schools, which are administrated by and under the control of local and federal educational authorities and serve students from both military and nonmilitary families. The majority of students from military families (approximately 90%) attend public schools (Ruff et al., 2014) that serve children from both military and nonmilitary populations. Notably, public schools serving children from military families receive Federal Impact Aid provided by the Department of Education; earmarked for the children of active-duty military. Studies on the transience of children from military families by

Berg (2008); Ruff et al (2014); and Cole (2016) focused on the atypical life conditions and the struggles faced by students from military families.

Literature Addressing Leadership Approaches and Invitational Education Theory

Over the last four decades, leadership theories have become more prominent in the fields of social science and education. Ethical, servant, and democratic leadership theories focus upon inclusion, social interaction, trust, respect, and connectedness and therefore may be especially helpful in understanding the complexity of life circumstances faced by children from military families. Application of these leadership theories may also increase the importance of public-school systems that serve students from both military and nonmilitary families in developing and sustaining an inclusive and welcoming school environment.

Ethical Leadership Approach

This approach describes relationships that are based on the moral values of human dignity, diversity, and inclusion (Preedy, Bennett & Wise, 2002). Scholars such as *Eranil* and *Özbilen* (2017) further suggested that ethical leadership reflects a view of the world based on equity, social justice, fairness, and a sense of obligation to others' backgrounds and the public good. Shields and Sayani (2005) proposed that leadership may be instrumental for bridging the divide between diverse values, beliefs, and needs held by members of the school community and the practices of the school. Leadership may create a culture that “eschews binaries—we, you, they, us, other—and one that is careful not to essentialize the very complex, always dynamic lived realities of individuals and groups” (p. 395).

Gerstl and Aiken (2009) further claimed that school leaders' ethical values should be the foundation for bringing various backgrounds and social voices together. Overall, school leaders should be clear about their values for equity, social justice, inclusion, trust, and fairness. Leaders should also critically reflect on the best means through which to convey these ethical ideas to the members of their school communities through collaborative engagement and shared vision.

Servant Leadership Approach

Greenleaf (1977) coined the term servant leadership approach and argued that servant leaders regard the needs of others first and ensure that “other people's highest priority needs are being served” (p.13). Similarly, Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) suggested that a servant leader is not positioned at the top of a hierarchy but rather is situated at the center of the organization and interacts with individuals from all levels of the organization. “...The central dynamic of servant leadership is nurturing those within the organization and understanding their personal needs” (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005, p.17). Further elaborating upon Greenleaf's theory, Spears (2010) explained that a servant leader is deeply committed to the development of every individual within the organization. “...A servant leader recognizes the tremendous responsibility to do everything in his or her power to nurture the personal and professional growth of employees and colleagues” (Spears, 2010, p.29).

Regarding schools and invitational educational leadership practices, servant leadership has been researched as a variable. For instance, Cerit (2010) argued that educational leaders should intentionally tend to focus on the organization's members, emphasizing caring for them and serving their personal needs. According to Cerit (2010), servant leaders should deliberately strive to foster a nurturing educational setting that promotes an individual's growth.

Overall, in the context of educational settings, the servant leadership approach emphasizes the needs of parents, students, school personnel, and community members before the needs of the leader. In particular, servant leadership may be very relevant to educational settings that serve students from various social backgrounds and life experiences including but not limited to public school systems consisting of student populations from both military and nonmilitary families. The following section addresses ideas of the democratic ethos exhibited by leadership that, like servant leadership, promotes ethical values.

Democratic Leadership Approach

Leaders promoting a democratic ethos considers ideas of inclusion, collaboration, shared vision, diversity of views and backgrounds, as well as empowers all voices in the decision-making process (Kilicoglu, 2018). Woods (2005) elaborated upon this ethos; stating that “democratic leadership aims to create an environment in which people are active contributors to the creation of the institutions, culture, and relationships they inhabit” (p. xvi). He also demonstrates that this nature of leadership considers ideas of inclusion, “respect for diversity, and acts to reduce cultural and material inequalities (p. xvi)

Furthermore, Woods (2005) advocated for committing to principles of inclusion, social justice, diversity, collective responsibility, trust, respect, and connectedness between people and described the leaders’ responsibilities in bringing diverse social voices together in a shared space. According to Woods, leaders that value a exhibit a democratic ethos build conditions for democratic processes and participation within the organization by striving to develop conditions that facilitate social interaction between the various individuals and bringing their voices together. Leaders who employ approaches intentionally exhibiting a democratic ethos aspire to utilize a diversity of values, experiences, and backgrounds as a resource to benefit the organization and its nature. Notably, these leaders would strive to consciously foster a setting that promotes trust and dialogue between various voices towards the enhancement of the group and its moral quality.

This section reviewed diverse leadership approaches impacting the field of education during the last fifty years. The cited sources emphasized the obligation of educational leaders to intentionally bring diverse social conditions, experiences, beliefs, and backgrounds together in a particular common space. This responsibility should include intentional efforts by school leaders to affirm moral values and utilize diverse voices and experiences towards the enhancement of the public good, as should be expected in a democratic society. The most positive attributions of these reviewed leadership approaches are found in Invitational Education theory and practices, which will be discussed next.

Invitational Education Theory and Practices

During the last four decades, Invitational Education (IE) theory and practice has become more prominent in addressing school climate intended to optimize human potential within learning communities. In his introduction to the theory, Purkey (1991) noted “invitational education is a theory of practice to create a total school environment that intentionally summons people in schools to realize their relatively boundless potential” (p.2). The five domains of Invitational Education theory and practice are known as the 5-Ps: People, Places, Policies, Programs, and Processes (Schmidt, 2007; Smith, 2015).

Elaborating upon the five domains (5Ps): People refer to human beings. Places are associated with the physical environment in which people typically interact. Polices refer to the

rules and codes used to regulate the ongoing functions of organizations. Programs are linked to organized activities with a specific purpose. Processes relate to a systematic series of intentional actions directed to some end. In other words, Invitational Education (IE) theory and practice emphasizes and assesses these five factors; perceiving them inter-dependently as means to intentionally focus on all students' social, emotional, and academic development.

IE theory advances five basic tenets: intentionality, care, optimism, respect, and trust [I-CORT] to optimize personally and professionally inviting behaviors (Purkey & Novak, 2016; Anderson, 2019). IE theory assumes an intentionally inviting teacher understands that some students may accept the teacher's invitation while others may decline it. Teachers invite autonomy as an inclusive practice. IE theory supports autonomy as an "ethical" approach used by inviting teachers to share the responsibility of learning (Purkey & Novak, 2016, p. 8). Trust is associated with thoughts, behaviors, and beliefs based on consistency and reliability. Respect is linked to the belief that all people are valuable, able, and responsible and should be treated accordingly. Optimism relates to the expectation of positive, realistic outcomes for self and others, and intentionality is a belief underlying behavior with a purposeful direction and aim. It is important to note that additional assumptions contribute to Invitational Theory, these elements are critical components in moving from theory to practice.

Elaborating upon the ethical aspect of IE Berg (2008); Novak, Armstrong and Browne (2014); and Shawa, Siegel, and Schoenlein (2013) explained that IE is an ethical way of creating welcoming learning environment based on trust, respect, optimism, care and intentionality. IE theory and practice has "its philosophical/theoretical roots arising from a variety of humanistic models of human behavior" (Shawa. et al , 2013, p.30). These include but are not limited to John Dewey and Abraham Maslow. IE theory and practice "draws from John Dewey's democratic ethos. Carl Rogers' client centered psychotherapy, Sidney Jourard's self-disclosure, Albert Bandura's self-efficacy and Martin Seligman's learned optimism" (Berg, 2008, p.47).

IE is a theory that aims to deliberately establish and foster a welcoming, inclusive, and respectful learning environment that highlights the importance of the individual (Purkey & Novak, 1996, 2016; Berg, 2008; Novak, Armstrong & Browne, 2014; Shawa, Siegel, & Schoenlein, 2013). I-CORT minded educators within an IE setting exhibits a moral responsibility towards the students and willingly considers their diverse needs, values, and opinions by intentionally inviting optimal human potential. Therefore, by assessing the 5Ps: People, places, policies, programs, and processes, the I-CORT minded educator intentionally creates conditions that promote each individual's emotional, social, and academic growth, through democratic and ethical invitations to realize her or his potential. The individual must have an equal opportunity to contribute to the shared space, and all individuals should be considered capable of engaging with a variety of ideas and activities (Purkey & Novak, 2016).

The basic assumptions of IE theory and practice is associated with the core ideals held by ethical, servant, and democratic leadership approaches. For instance, both IE theory and ethical leadership approaches share a philosophy emphasizing the concept of acting ethically in the human realm while reflecting a view of the organization based on moral values of trust, respect, empathy, equity, fairness, and a sense of obligation to others' needs. Both IE theory and the servant leadership approach centers on empowering the organization's stakeholders, members, or students, understanding their personal needs, and optimally enhancing their growth. Specific to an educational framework, both IE theory and servant leadership approaches support the premise that

servant leaders and educators should be committed to intentionally serving the needs *of all* students while fostering a nurturing, caring, and supportive educational setting that promotes the individual's growth,

Likewise, both IE and democratic leadership approaches are grounded in ideas of inclusion, fairness, collaboration, shared vision, and equity. They both perceive the individual as an active agent who could contribute to the shared sphere and enhance the common good. Clearly, IE theory and practices and democratic leadership approaches both advocate for democratic values but they also describe the responsibility of democratic leaders and educators to intentionally build conditions empowering a democratic ethos through processes and participation at all levels of the organization or school. These leaders and educators strive to consciously foster a setting that promotes a respectful dialogue between the individuals towards the enhancement of the individual and the group. Both IE theory and democratic leadership approaches provide theoretical roots for practical application, suggesting strategies for moving from theory to practice. Evaluation of the 5Ps, utilization of an I-CORT mindset, and empowerment of a democratic ethos would be applicable to public school systems serving students from both military and nonmilitary families. These opportunities will be further described next.

Applying Invitational Education Theory and Practices to Support the Social-Emotional and Academic Needs of Students from Military Families in Public School

Given the review of the literature noted above, this advocate further directly examined reports on children from military families (Ruff et al. 2014; Bradshaw et al., 2010). This process clearly identified a need to consider the factors and conditions associated with the social needs of children from military backgrounds who attend public schools serving students from both military and nonmilitary families. Particularly, it became evident that it is not enough to just bring individuals from various backgrounds into a shared geographical or physical space and expect success or attainment of the learning for all mission. By contrast, there is a need to actively support the social-emotional needs of all students, including the unique needs of children from military families.

Given the opportunity to implement ethical, servant, and democratic leadership approaches through Invitational Education (IE) theory and practice, the distinctive social blend of public schools serving students from both military and nonmilitary families, there is a need to intentionally empower and expect exhibition of ethical values of inclusion, care, optimism, respect, and trust in the pursuit of equity and fairness. I-CORT minded educators should perceive their role in terms of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977, Cerit, 2010); seeking to intentionally serve and respond to the social-emotional needs of both student groups. There should be an urgency to intentionally adjust the school's 5Ps: People, places, policies, programs, and processes to ensure conscious support for the social-emotional needs of students from military families. Thereby creating an intentional inviting, welcoming, and inclusive school environment. I-CORT minded educators are also encouraged to establish and sustain conditions to develop effective social interactions between students from military and nonmilitary families. The following paragraphs offer practical guidance for educators to support the social needs of students from military families.

Educational practitioners should initiate and facilitate a viable partnership between the school's military and nonmilitary families. All stakeholders should collectively be empowered to contribute to a shared school vision. This endeavor should focus upon establishing and maintaining a social and civic dialogue between individuals from both military and nonmilitary

backgrounds while emphasizing democratic and ethical ideals of inclusion, care, optimism, respect, and trust in the pursuit of equity and fairness. These intentional actions should create a school climate that actively and continuously brings diverse voices together to enhance social and civic development.

Also, educators working in schools requiring improved social and civic dialogue between individuals from both military and nonmilitary backgrounds should collectively develop community norms and “habits,” providing conditions for individuals to engage with one another (Woods, 2005). To sustain systems’ change, school leaders need to comprehend and understand their school’s climate, to effectively lead a group of diverse stakeholders to understand and acknowledge how things are done and how students and teachers perceive these things (Marzano & Waters, 2009). For instance, I-CORT minded educators should initiate and sustain ongoing school discussions between stakeholder groups by conducting civic forums and focus groups consisting of families from both military and nonmilitary backgrounds. Such intentional opportunities for dialogue provide opportunities to address school community issues and provide networks for establishing and sustaining social relationships.

Another opportunity to address the social-emotional needs of students from military families is to conduct some social-focused extra-curricular activities, which might include but not be limited to bowling leagues, food festivals, book clubs, Play Station tournaments, intermural sports activities, and movie nights. These events may serve as an opportunity to develop and sustain social interactions between students from the two unique groups. Furthermore, educators in this kind of school could ensure that roles and positions within community boards such as the Chamber of Commerce are available for military and nonmilitary individuals. The goal should be to make stakeholders from both groups feel fairly included, adequately heard, and equitably empowered to contribute with any decision-making processes involving school decisions or other social-civic organizations. These efforts underscore the ideal that diversity within their community boards and organizations is fundamental for building an inclusive experience for all stakeholders.

In addition, due to the dynamic and unpredictable nature of the population of students from military families in the public school, there are good reasons for educators to establish more systematic practices for assisting entering and exiting students from military families. For instance, practitioners could institute more thorough procedures for welcoming students and expediting the manner whereby teachers and other staff members become acquainted with each student’s background. Thus, teachers and staff would be able to prepare for the reception of new students, including those from military families, and assist them with the distinctive emotional, social, and academic needs during the student’s time of transition. As part of this process, educators could develop policies and practices for learning the new student’s prior academic achievements with the goal to create academic continuity based on prior experiences. Proactively responsive and inclusive approaches to transitioning students may assist with mitigating social, emotional, and academic stressors caused by the relocation.

Most educators teaching in public schools have not served in the military system. Thus, the established school culture does not have staff with the personal experiences and familiarity with circumstances created by military transitions (Risberg, Curtis, and Shivers, 2014). To address this disparity, it is recommended that the school personnel organize and attend professional development workshops on the nature of military life, frequent transitions faced by related students, and the dynamics involving school personnel, military compared to nonmilitary families,

and the need for leadership councils within both groups to create a unified community. As aligned with the IE theory and practices, the goals of such professional development should be to intentionally invite: (a) Enhanced awareness of the nonmilitary population regarding the military population's distinctive life experiences and atypical emotional, social, and academic needs; and (b) Established, detailed, and shared plans for assisting the needs of all the students within the educational system.

Additional practical, research-based suggestions are associated with curricular and extracurricular aspects of school life. It is critically important to intentionally create opportunities for students from military and nonmilitary families to engage with each other. Educators should ensure that the seating groups in lunchtime and classrooms consist of students from both groups enabling them to establish and optimize social interactions and mitigate cliques. I-CORT minded leaders and educators should ensure that extracurricular activities include more than school athletic teams and student government, but provides activities notes above, thereby enabling inclusion from students that may transition after the school year has begun.

Finally, another intentional IE practice addressing the social-emotional needs of students from military families is establishing a mentorship program. Mentorship programs can connect new students from military families with current students from nonmilitary families, provide consistency through regularly scheduled meetings, increase awareness of small group social activities, and empower towards planning subsequent monthly social events. Student-to-student interactions may provide an opportunity to intentionally promote a school environment that supports all students' emotional and social well-being. These practical ways for intentionally inviting others exhibit the cornerstones of IE theory and practices. They address all domains of the school's 5Ps: People, places, policies, programs, and processes to enhance all students' potential. Crucially, these steps advance the central ideals of ethical, servant, and democratic leadership approaches.

Conclusion

Approximately 90% of children from military families attend public schools that serve both military and nonmilitary student populations. Due to dynamics unique to the military culture such as multiple relocations, parental deployment, and social struggles to establish and sustain social relationships with their nonmilitary peers, children from military families experience atypical life circumstances, stressors, and challenges. The reviewed literature indicates that some challenges associated with frequent school transitions include (a) inconsistent academic standards and curriculum between schools; (b) limited access to extracurricular activities; (c) social challenges integrating into the established social fabric familiar to the student from nonmilitary families; and (d) and lack empowered of connectedness to the school's social setting (Berg, 2008; Ruff et al, 2014; and Cole, 2016).

Most of the reviewed literature involving the challenges faced by children from military families in public school clearly established the negative affect upon these students' academic achievements and social-emotional well-being. Research suggested that a welcoming and inclusive school environment would be effective, regardless if students were from military or nonmilitary families. Yet, it is clear students from military families are inherently more at risk and

therefore would benefit from a proven set of practices to cope with their unique social, emotional, and academic struggles. It is well-established that educators play an essential role in meeting all students' academic, social, and emotional needs. Through this discussion of previous research, public school leaders and educators should now be more aware of the distinctive social, emotional, and academic needs of children from military families and the value of implementing Invitational Education theory and practice in response to these needs. Just as military personnel serve our country, it is our responsibility to serve the particular social, emotional, and academic needs of the children from military families and promote their social integration with students from nonmilitary families. Given the suggestions set forth in this paper, you have been intentionally invited to effectively respond to this distinctive social reality whenever called upon.

Further studies should continue to explore the unique needs and social dynamics that confront children from military families. Further qualitative research might focus on the possible impact of the child's age upon the nature of the social dynamics or the need to examine the nature of social conditions presented by adults of students from both military and nonmilitary families. Another important qualitative study would be an investigation of the nature of the social circumstances faced by students from military families specifically during the time a parent is deployed and therefore away from the family for an extended period.

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