The Effect of Restorative Practices on the Social-Emotional Impact of Frequent Transitions in Military Students

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine the socioemotional impact of frequent transitions in military students who move frequently due to changes in their family’s military assignments. This action research study sought to determine how such transitions affect building friendships among these students. The children who participated in the study evaluated themselves using a Social and Emotional Competencies Questionnaire. The intervention involved four weeks of Restorative Practice focused on developing improved peer relationships. The results from the study indicated that participating in Restorative Practices increased the social-emotional development for military students and suggest that by implementing Restorative Practices during morning meeting, teachers can promote a positive social-emotional environment for military students as they move from school to school.
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Overview

Moving is a necessary and inevitable part of military life. On average, military-connected students, primarily those with parents serving active duty, will attend between six to nine schools between kindergarten and their senior year of high school (Bradshaw et al., 2010). This rate is about three times more often than that of civilian children (Ruff & Keim, 2020). Military children can move and change schools at any point during the year. These frequent changes can make it difficult for students to play on a sports team, join clubs, and even establish long-term friendships. As military children move around the country and even the world, they enter and leave schools, having to build new relationships.

Creating and fostering peer relationships is extremely important for children in the primary grades of school (Cervantes & Gutierrez, 2019). It can be a challenge for children who move and frequently change schools to create and maintain friendships. Children may feel uncomfortable starting a conversation or asking others to play with them. Cervantes and Gutierrez suggest that if these students were offered opportunities to practice social skills, they may learn how to eliminate anxious feelings.

However, it can be challenging for educators to find time for students to practice socializing. Children can talk and play during lunch and recess, but it can be difficult to find time for children to have an opportunity to socialize within the classroom. The researcher is a second-grade teacher on an Army base. The researcher observed that “new” students who arrived throughout the school year appeared to be shy and to demonstrate anxiety. It was difficult for these students to start a conversation or find a friend to play with them at recess. Being in social
relationships with peers is integral to a child’s social-emotional development (Cervantes & Gutierrez, 2019). Social interactions can encourage and provide children with the opportunity to learn how to cooperate, to share, and how to be a part of a team. Cervantes and Gutierrez suggest that if educators integrated several social-emotional strategies within the classroom and provided daily opportunities for students to apply those strategies, these students could practice building positive peer relationships. If military children could practice and apply social-emotional skills daily, these children possibly could eliminate feelings of anxiousness, frustration, or exclusion.

**Statement of Problem**

When a young child is known as “the new kid” every few years due to their military family’s job requirements, it can feel frustrating for the child. For example, sitting alone at lunch and having no one to play with at recess, can result in strong negative feelings. Transient military children must leave old peer relationships behind while frequently starting over and creating new friendships. By exploring the socioemotional impact of frequent transitions in military students, this action research study sought to determine how these transitions affect building friendships among these students.

**Hypothesis**

The children participating in the study will evaluate themselves using a Social and Emotional Competencies Questionnaire. The educator will monitor the effectiveness of Restorative Practices as an intervention. The following null hypotheses will be evaluated: The impact of incorporating Restorative Practices in the classroom will not result in a significant amount of variance in military children’s social emotional development.
Limitations and Operational Definitions

This study has potential limitations. The methodology is a limitation. The students were asked to rate themselves and reflect on their own feelings. There were no outside observers who tracked data. All of the students attended the same elementary school on a military base in Maryland.

Social Development: How children learn to interact with one another and how they develop and sustain friendships (Low et al., 2015).

Emotional Development: Learning what feelings and emotions are and understanding how and why they occur. Children learn to recognize their own feelings and those of others (Low et al., 2015).

Peer Relationships: Interactions and connections among others who are the same age.

Transient Military Students: School-aged youth who have been relocated because of a military related move that required a school change (Bradshaw et al., 2010).

Restorative Practices: A strategy that educators can incorporate into daily morning meetings to build relationships with students and get a sense of their social-emotional mindset (IIRP, n.d.).
CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Overview

Children in military families are resilient but face unique challenges that are not comparable to the general student population. This literature review seeks to explore the social-emotional impact of frequent transitions in military students and how these transitions affect peer relationships. Section one discusses the social-emotional importance of having positive peer relationships. Section two provides background information on military life and how often moves occur. Section three examines how being highly mobile affects peer relationships. Section four explores effective strategies for educators and school personnel to help improve peer relationships, and section five describes the application of these strategies to military students. The last section provides a summary.

The Socioemotional Importance of Peer Relationships

Social development is how children learn to interact with one another (Low et al., 2015). Emotional development refers to when feelings change or remain the same as children grow (Low et al.). Together, both social and emotional development can reflect changes in a child’s emotions and relationships with others. Peer relationships are interactions and connections with others (Low et al.). Schools are the main learning environment for most social conduct and social skill practice during childhood. Developing healthy emotional peer relationships in school enables students to have a sense of belonging (Cervantes & Gutierrez, 2019). Positive peer relationships encourage children to feel emotionally satisfied. These relationships can provide students with the opportunity to practice managing various emotions while also allowing them to learn how to understand other perspectives. The development of empathy is a crucial part of
emotional and social development in childhood. Being able to understand another person’s perspective creates more optimistic relationships with others, including those who value and believe in different things (Cervantes & Gutierrez). The ability to identify with the feelings of another peer helps in the development of positive friendships.

Given how frequently they move, fostering these positive relationships in military children is particularly essential. Peer relationships are extremely important because they give students the ability to develop and sustain positive relationships within and outside of the classroom (Daniel et al., 2017). Children need to feel loved and that they belong. These needs are met through positive relationships with others. A student with poor relationships will be less likely to participate in classroom social learning opportunities than a student with positive peer relationships (Maslow, 1954). The ability to learn is built on a foundation of comfortable relationships with peers (Maslow). A socially interactive environment will help these transient students develop strong emotional understanding, social intelligence, and confidence to adjust and succeed in new school settings (Daniel et al.).

Background Information on Transient Military Children

Transient military students are school-aged youth who have been relocated because of a military related move that required a school change (Bradshaw et al., 2010). Relocation is part of a military lifestyle and military families frequently are required to move to another state or possibly to another country. The Department of Defense (DOD) Demographics Report (2010) revealed that approximately 1.85 million children have one or both parents serving in the U.S. military. The report further explained that 1.2 million of these children have active-duty parents and approximately 90% of the 1.2 million school-age children with military parents attend public schools (Ruff & Keim, 2020). Those students who do not attend public school may attend
schools operated by the U.S. Department of Defense on military bases worldwide. DOD schools educate the children of military service members and other United States government employees when American public schools are not available.

**How Being Highly Mobile Affects Peer Relationships**

Relocating as a school-aged child presents unique challenges, such as establishing emotionally positive peer relationships (Vernberg et al., 1994). Frequent moves intensify existing social-emotional issues due in part to difficulties with keeping in touch with friends and support systems from previous schools (Bradshaw et al., 2010). Saying goodbye to friendships is extremely difficult for military students. Many of these military students will choose to have fake relationships instead of real friendships to prevent feeling hurt when they must move to another location (Bradshaw et al.).

From a developmental perspective, frequent transitions can hinder a student’s ability to form and maintain stable peer relationships, and this situation affects a child’s social-emotional development as a child continues to get older (Vernberg et al., 1994). In a qualitative study of military children, the most reported stressor related to school transitions was the challenge of making and maintaining close friendships (Bradshaw et al., 2010). Military students often transition at random times throughout the year and find it difficult to mix in with already-established social groups. These already established groups have been formed for some students since early childhood. Some social groups are formed through sports. Students involved in sports who transition late into the school year may miss the opportunity to play on school or community teams which can hinder their ability to form relationships through sports. Highly mobile students tend to report having fewer close friends and are more likely to be less involved in peer social networks (Haynie & South, 2005).
As military children move around the country and even the world, they enter and leave schools that have different cultures. Relocation increases feelings of stress for children due to the need to learn about and adapt to different cultures and new beliefs (Gomez, 2015). Coming from a military culture into a civilian-majority setting, an international culture to a domestic one, or simply from one very different school culture to another can affect peer relationships. Some military children may have experience with different parts of the country and world, which provides them with unique opportunities to understand and enjoy diversity (Daniel et al., 2017). On a negative note, these experiences can create a barrier between same-age peers who have had fewer or different experiences. Subsequently, military-connected students may learn to be resilient self-starters. Since they grow up in such diverse environments, they are particularly broadminded, resourceful, adaptable, responsible, and outgoing (Daniel et al.). These repeated transitions and their required adaptations help students develop independence that can hinder developing new peer-relationships. This situation continues to affect a child’s social-emotional well-being.

**Effective Strategies to Help Improve Peer Relationships in the Classroom**

A variety of strategies have been designed to help improve peer relationships in the classroom. Those discussed below address the factors of classroom climate, class meetings and social skills training, and informal interventions to welcome and include military students.

**Climate**

Fostering a safe, respectful, and positive environment can affect peer relationships within the classroom. Children who feel safe, appreciated, and respected can focus their attention on forming emotionally stable relationships (Ruff & Keim, 2020). Children may feel as if they need to protect themselves when they are worried about forming peer relationships (Kemple & Hartle,
1997). This concern may considerably influence how much energy children have available to interact competently and have fun with others (Kemple & Hartle). A positive environment or classroom climate provides a rationale for the importance of establishing a caring community of children.

**Class Meetings/Social Skills Training**

Facilitating a structured morning meeting helps to increase the use of social skills among classmates. Restorative Practices is a strategy that educators can incorporate into daily morning meetings to build relationships with students and get a sense of their social-emotional mindset (IIRP, n.d.). McCold, founding faculty member of the International Institute for Restorative Practices graduate school, found that following these practices helps promote inclusiveness, relationship-building and problem-solving (IIRP). Restorative practice celebrates each individual student. Implementing restorative practices in the classroom starts with modeling and discussing basic restorative skills that can be practiced in the classroom, such as listening, mindfulness, and empathy. It is important that educators ask genuine questions to allow students learn more about their peers. Students should feel safe when sharing and they also should listen intently to their peers when it is not their turn. This allows children to develop more patience and the ability to reflect on thoughts, feelings, and actions. When children have other people listen to them, both trust and understanding develop, leading to stronger relationships ( Getty, 2018).

It is important to assist students to develop coping skills to assist them to identify emotions and express their feelings appropriately. Second Step is a skills-focused socioemotional learning curriculum that teaches students' skills that strengthen their ability to learn, develop empathy, manage emotions, and solve problems (Low et al., 2015). Socioemotional learning teaches children new strategies that help improve their cooperation skills, communication, and
decision making. These skills are necessary in fostering positive relationships. Each lesson in the Second Step curriculum presents a new skill to enhance learning and getting along with others. It is important that children learn to practice using positive self-talk to calm their worried or anxious feelings. Scenarios are included within the curriculum to help the class practice putting the new skills into action.

**Informal Interventions to Welcome and Include Military Students**

Military children routinely face frequent moves and parental absences (Ruff & Keim, 2020). These challenges increase the risk of social and emotional difficulties at home and at school absences (Ruff & Keim). Teachers can facilitate creation of a support group or after-school program for military children. Such groups and programs can help children who are going through similar experiences connect with one another (Dunlea, 2019). In addition, having a supportive school environment can foster a sense of belonging and help military students feel comfortable fostering positive peer relationships (Dunlea).

**Applications to Military Students**

According to a study on school transitions among military students, military culture generates problematic stressors for students (Bradshaw et al., 2010). Data from the study indicated that the most common stressors on the students resulted from strains on their relationships with peers and teachers and adapting to a new school environment. This study was created to better understand the move-related stressors affecting mobile military students during their transition into a new school environment, how military students cope with the stress of changing schools, and the strategies that school psychologists and other school personnel can employ to help them adjust to the new school environment. This study concluded that fostering
connections among students was a valuable strategy that helps military students cope more successfully with school transitions (Bradshaw et al.).

**Summary**

In conclusion, peer relationships play an important, and sometimes critical, role in military children's lives. Military-connected students are always on the move. It is vital that they have the skills and encouragement to build supportive peer relationships. Research such as that cited above suggests that educators can promote supportive peer interactions. Using interventions such as Restorative Practices and Second Step can be effective in supporting peer interactions. Both interventions can help military students eliminate the stress of feeling uncomfortable in new settings and with new peers. In addition, educators can facilitate group activities to encourage relationship building. Since most military students will continue to move from school to school until high school graduation, it is important to establish and maintain a positive classroom environment in each school they attend. Because transient military students generally have many struggles to overcome, having a positive classroom environment enables them to have an easier time adjusting and allows them to feel safe when interacting with others.
CHAPTER III

METHODS

Design

The purpose of this study was to identify the socioemotional impact of frequent transitions in military students’ educational experience and how these transitions affect peer relationships. This research was conducted using a descriptive study design. The study used a questionnaire to record student responses regarding how they felt socially and emotionally about their school experiences. The students evaluated themselves using a Social and Emotional Competencies Questionnaire at the beginning and end of the study. The independent variable of the study was time. The results of the study were reviewed, and a summary of the results is presented in Chapter IV.

Participants

The participants in this study included 10 second-grade elementary students who attended an elementary school located on a Military Base in Maryland. The study included both male \((n = 6)\) and female \((n = 4)\) participants ages seven to eight. The participants were ethnically diverse including students who were Multi-racial \((n = 4)\), Caucasian \((n = 4)\), and Black American \((n = 2)\). All the participants were in the same second-grade classroom and all have families active in the military. The sample group was selected through non-random sampling.

Instrument

The instrument that was utilized in this study was a Social and Emotional Competencies Questionnaire, with a total of 13 questions. The instrument included three sections: self-awareness, self-awareness and motivation, and social-awareness and prosocial behavior. There were four questions within the self-awareness section, three questions within the self-awareness
and motivation section, and six questions within the social-awareness and prosocial behavior section. This questionnaire was used to gain information on how the students felt about their own social emotional development. The questionnaire was given at the beginning and at the end of the study. The choices for respondents were “never,” “sometimes,” “often,” and “always.” The students were scored no points for selecting “never,” one point for selecting “sometimes,” two points for selecting “often,” and three points for selecting “always.” The maximum number of points that could be scored was 39, and the lowest score was 0. A score of 30-39 indicated a positive self-reflection on self-awareness and social-emotional relationships. A score of 20-29 indicated a neutral self-reflection on self-awareness and social-emotional relationships. Lastly, a score of 19 and below indicated a negative self-reflection on social emotional relationships and their quality of peer-relationships. The 13 questions given from the Social and Emotional Competencies Questionnaire are included in Appendix A.

**Procedure**

The sample group was selected from among students who had family active in the military and attended school on a hybrid schedule, meaning that they physically attend school two days a week. These students remained in a virtual learning situation three days a week.

After the sample group was selected, the questionnaire was administered to the research participants virtually, using a Google form format. All participants were given the same set of directions for completing the pre and post questionnaire. Participants were instructed to reflect on their own feelings in terms of social and emotional development. The teacher read each question aloud while the students followed along and chose the best answer for each, “never,” “sometimes,” “often,” or “always.”
When the questionnaires were completed and submitted, the results were reviewed by the researcher. Restorative Practices were implemented during morning meeting for four weeks thereafter. During morning meeting, the students sat in a circle and the teacher posed a question. A talking piece was used and passed around the group members to encourage one student sharing at a time. The student with the talking piece was invited to share or pass. This procedure helped the students practice social skills and enabled them to get a sense of their social-emotional mindset. The same questionnaire was given again at the end of four weeks. The researcher reviewed and compared the results from the pre and post questionnaire. A summary of the results appears in Chapter IV.
CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

This action research study focused on the social-emotional development before and after incorporating Restorative Practices. During the study, the researcher implemented Restorative Practices during morning meeting for four weeks. The researcher gave a pre and post questionnaire for the students to reflect on their own social-emotional development. By exploring the socioemotional impact of frequent transitions as they affect military students, this action research study sought to determine how these transitions affect students’ social-emotional development. Figure 1 illustrates the overall score difference before and after implementing Restorative Practices.

Figure 1

*Social Emotional Reflection Results of Restorative Practice*

A dependent groups *t* test revealed that there was a statistically significant difference in social skills score before Restorative Practices (*M* = 14.90, *SD* = 4.25, *n* = 10), as compared to after Restorative Practices (*M* = 24.60, *SD* = 3.06, *n* = 10), with large effect size, *t*(9) = -13.86, *p* < .001, *d* = 2.62. On average there was a 9.7 point increase.
These results suggest that transient military students who participate in Restorative Practices will score a higher social emotional self-reflection than those transient military students who did not participate in Restorative Practices. Consequently, the hypothesis that the impact of incorporating Restorative Practices in the classroom will not predict a significant amount of variance in military children’s social emotional development, was rejected. These results and implications are discussed in Chapter V.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION

This study examined the impact of frequent transitions in military students and how these transitions affect building friendships among these students. The researcher sought to evaluate whether practicing social-emotional skills in the classroom daily could eliminate feelings of anxiousness, frustration, or exclusion among military children. The researcher hypothesized that the impact of incorporating Restorative Practices in the classroom for four weeks would not predict a significant amount of variance in military children’s social-emotional development. After the study was completed, the hypothesis was rejected. There was a significant difference in the students’ reflection upon their own social-emotional development.

Implications of Results

The results of this study indicate that implementing Restorative Practices in the classroom will improve military students’ reflection on their own social-emotional development. Before implementing Restorative Practices, the average score on the student’s reflection on the Social Emotional Questionnaire was a 14.9. The average score increased to 24.6 after four weeks of experiencing Restorative Practices. This is a difference of 9.7 points. Providing transient military students with opportunities to share experiences and perspectives during morning meeting allowed them to practice expressing their own thoughts and emotions. In contrast, Restorative Practices gave students the opportunity to practice listening to different stories and perspectives from their peers as well as reflecting on their own experiences.

Furthermore, the researcher noticed differences in the attitudes and behaviors of the students as a result of implementing Restorative Practices. It was observed that sitting in a community circle provided a safe and structured environment for military students to build
relationships within the classroom. The students for whom the intervention was intended were more likely to participate during morning circle and comment on their peers’ thinking. Overall, there was increased participation, productive small group collaboration, and better whole class discussions. These positive peer relationships increased engagement among students, while also creating a more comfortable social-emotional environment for all.

**Threats to Validity**

There were several threats to the external validity of this study. First, the sample size was small. Ten students were chosen and selected through non-random sampling. The participants were in the same second grade class with the same teacher. The participants all attended the same elementary school on the Military Base and were part of an active military family. Due to these factors, the results could vary if this study were conducted at a different school with greater diversity among the student population.

This study also had threats to its internal validity. This study relied on the participants to complete the social-emotional reflection questionnaire honestly. It is impossible to judge how honest the participants were with rating themselves. Also, the participants may have interpreted the scale differently. For example, some participants may have viewed “sometimes” and “often” as similar terms.

Finally, the time frame of the intervention affected the validity of the study. This study was implemented in March 2021, which is the third quarter of the year. The students had interacted together through prior months and had established friendships. If the intervention were duplicated at the beginning of the school year or at the end of the year, the results could vary.
**Relationship to Literature**

Military students are three times as likely as civilian students to experience a school transition (Department of Defense, n.d.). In a study conducted by Bradshaw et al. (2010), military students reported that the inevitable ending of close relationships led them to avoid making close connections with peers at new schools. It is challenging with such relationships to gain acceptance from already established cliques and social groups. This leads to military students often lacking a feeling of connectedness with others, which in turn may lead to social-emotional difficulties in the transition (Bradshaw et al.). This study was conducted to identify ways in which students cope with the stress of changing schools and the strategies educators can use to help them adjust. Increasing communication skills between and among students was suggested as a strategy for integrating students into new environments and helping them connect with other students. After the study was completed, it was reported that transient military students had developed coping strategies that helped them adjust to the new school environment. Additionally, they expressed an interest in professional development to increase their comfort discussing military-related issues with students and training on specific strategies that can be used in the classroom to support military students. This study demonstrates that incorporating communication skills in the classroom can reduce social-emotional difficulties and provide evidence that interventions can be effective with transient military students.

**Implications for Future Research**

Further research is needed to develop effective school-based interventions to help military students cope with the stress of deployment and military-related moves. This study could be improved by addressing the weaknesses of the study. Future research could replicate the
study and add a control group that does not receive an intervention. However, the person who implements the study must be careful not to do a disservice to the students in the control group.

Additionally, future research could apply the intervention with different grade levels. For example, this study could be implemented in middle school or high school with mobile military students. It also would be beneficial to complete this study with an entire school as opposed to individual classes. A school-wide intervention likely would help students of all ages develop and practice social emotional skills.

Finally, future research should consider the length of the study or time of the year for implementation. This study was conducted for four weeks beginning in March. If this study were duplicated and implemented for more than four weeks, it would be helpful to learn if military students’ social-emotional self-reflection score would be increased. Subsequently, if this study were conducted in September, rather than March, it would be important to learn if the data from the student’s self-reflection would reveal more growth. Such research would provide more information on how to help transient military students with their social-emotional development.

**Conclusions**

In conclusion, supportive relationships have a positive influence on military students’ social-emotional development (Ruff & Keim, 2020). Given how frequently transient military students move, fostering these positive relationships is essential. The results from this study indicate that participating in Restorative Practices increased the social-emotional development for military students. This increase was evident shown in their pre and post self-reflection questionnaire. This study suggests that by implementing Restorative Practices during morning meeting, teachers can promote a positive social-emotional environment for military students as they move from school to school.
References


## Questionnaire

Form description

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<th>Question</th>
<th>Options</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>1) I know how to label my emotions. *</td>
<td>Always, Often, Sometimes, Never</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) I am aware of the thoughts that influence my emotions. *</td>
<td>Always, Often, Sometimes, Never</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) I differentiate one emotion from another. *</td>
<td>Always, Often</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4) I know how my emotions influence what I do. *
- Always
- Often
- Sometimes
- Never

5) I know how to motivate myself. *
- Always
- Often
- Sometimes
- Never

6) I have my goals clear. *
- Always
- Often
- Sometimes
- Never

7) I pursue my objectives despite the difficulties. *
- Always
- Never
Often
○ Sometimes
○ Never

8) I know what people expect from others. *
○ Always
○ Often
○ Sometimes
○ Never

9) I pay attention to the needs of others. *
○ Always
○ Often
○ Sometimes
○ Never

10) I usually know how to help others. *
○ Always
○ Often
○ Sometimes
○ Never

11) I have a good relationship with my classmates. *
○ Always
12) I usually listen in an active way. *
- Always
- Often
- Sometimes
- Never

13) I offer help to those who need me. *
- Always
- Often
- Sometimes
- Never