

The Monitoring and Implementation of a School District-Wide Grassroots Anti-Bullying Initiative: Because Nice Matters

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Introduction

Studies have found that military children experience tremendous stress, as a result of military-specific life events (De Pedro, Astor, Benbenishty, Estrada, Smith, & Esqueda, 2011). These include stressors associated with deployment, including multiple school transitions, separation from a parent, and left-behind parent anxiety. These deployment experiences can adversely impact a wide range of social, emotional, and psychological outcomes among military students. A growing body of research has shown that emotionally supportive contexts (e.g. household, military installation, community/neighborhood) help alleviate the emotional and psychological burdens of war on military children and families (De Pedro et al., 2011). In addition, recent studies have found that a caring school climate can have a protective effect on the outcomes of military-connected youth. (Lynch & Cicchetti, 1997; McGuire, Toomey, & Russell, 2010). In alignment with this research, educational reformers and policymakers, both federal and local, have called for an increased allocation of social supports and services to military-connected youth and their families. Recently, President Obama issued a presidential directive to reserve federal resources to address the social and emotional development and academic success of military-connected youth (*Military K-12 partners*, n.d).

Key Stressors among Military-connected Youth

A large body of literature has found that the bulk of military stressors stem from experiencing the deployment of a family member, specifically a parent or sibling. Amen, Jellen, Merves, and Lee (1988) have theorized that military families' experience of deployment can be divided into three phases—pre-deployment, deployment, and post-deployment. The pre-deployment phase involves planning and preparing for and the eventual departure of a military parent. The deployment phase includes the challenges associated with maintaining a household with one parent gone, such as managing household finances and accessing social supports when

needed. The post-deployment phase includes the joy of a reunion with a returning parent and facilitating the returning parent's reintegration into society. Overwhelmingly, studies have found that deployment-related stressors have led to an increase in depressive symptoms, high levels of anxiety, and suicidal ideation among military children (Burrell, Adams, Durand, & Castro, 2006; Doyle & Peterson, 2005; Levai, Kaplan, Ackermann, & Hammock, 1995; Reed, Bell, & Edwards, 2011).

During the phases of the deployment context, military children experience tremendous stress. Stress and anxiety stem from repeated and prolonged separation from a parent, fears and anxieties about changes in family dynamics (Huebner, Mancini, Wilcox, Grass, & Grass, 2007), and fear of parental injury and death (Cozza, Chun, & Pollo, 2005; Flake, Davis, Johnson & Middleton, 2009.; Mmari, Roche, Sudhinaraset, & Blum, 2009). Military children also experience the redistribution of household roles and responsibilities (Faber, Willerton, Clymer, MacDermid, & Weiss, 2008; Huebner et al., 2007). Often, when a parent is deployed, military children, especially adolescents, take on household roles and responsibilities, previously assumed by parents and other adults. In a qualitative study of adolescent youth coping during deployment, Mmari and colleagues (2009) found that adolescents' family roles were enhanced and they performed household duties normally reserved for adults. Deployment-period responsibilities included increased household work such as more chores and taking care of younger siblings. Even after a deployed parent is reunited with his or her family, the experience of reintegration can be stressful. Studies have found that reintegrated military families must deal with shifting household responsibilities and roles, the stress of a veterans' re-establishment of employment, and the veterans' process of re-establishing a relationship with the military child

after months or even years of separation (Burrell et al., 2006; Doyle & Peterson, 2005; Peebles-Kleiger and Kleiger, 1994).

School transitions. One significant military stressor is multiple school transitions. Studies have found that military children cope with more school transitions than civilian children and constantly readjust to new school and community contexts (Bradshaw, Sudhinaraset, Mmari & Blum, 2010). Furthermore, qualitative studies have suggested that some civilian school environments lack the knowledge and resources to facilitate healthy school transitions and respond to parental deployment (e.g. excused absences) (Chandra, Martin, Hawkins & Richardson, 2010; Mmari et al., 2009). In some cases, a recent study found that civilian peers ridicule and physically victimize military children (Mmari et al., 2009).

Vulnerability to bullying. The stress of family deployment and frequent school transitions may weaken military-connected students' social ties to school, and in some cases, can lead to social alienation, thereby placing them at risk of school victimization (De Pedro et al., 2014; Gilreath et al., 2014). Social development researchers and theorists have posited that youth who experience school victimization tend to be socially isolated, excluded from peer groups, and have few friends (Farrington, 1993; Ttofi, Farrington, & Losel, 2012; Ttofi, Farrington, Losel, & Loeber, 2011). Moreover, social control theorists have posited that alienated individuals who have weak connections to conventional social institutions, including schools, are more prone to victimization (Catalano and Hawkins, 1996; Gasper, DeLuca, & Estacion, 2010).

The Presence of Military-Connected Students in Civilian Public Schools

The vast majority of the nation's 1.2 million military-connected students attend civilian public schools, while only 86,000 are enrolled in Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) schools worldwide. While some civilian schools are culturally responsive to military-

connected youth, there is a widespread perception among military-connected families that civilian public schools lack basic awareness of needs and challenges of military-connected students and families (De Pedro, Esqueda, Cederbaum & Astor, 2014). Recent studies examining civilian public schools revealed that school leaders and teachers lack identification procedures for identifying military-connected students and basic knowledge on how to facilitate healthy school transitions, and/or link military students with local community resources. This lack of awareness contributes to negative schooling experiences for military-connected students attending civilian schools (De Pedro et al., 2011). In addition, the lack of culturally responsive practices result in alienation, lower rates of belonging, and less supportive relationships among military-connected students, when compared to their civilian peers (Chandra et al., 2010; Mmari et al., 2009).

Recognizing the need for civilian public schools to be more responsive to the challenges of military-connected students, the John Warner National Defense Act was enacted, authorizing DoDEA to work collaboratively with the U.S. Department of Education in efforts to support civilian school districts' efforts to educate military-connected students (H.R. 5122- the John Warner National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2007). The grant program aims to provide assistance to support quality programs and strategies to improve the school outcomes of military-connected students. The DoDEA Educational Partnership Grant Program promotes quality education, seamless transitions, and deployment support through outreach and partnership developing. Beginning in 2010, a unique partnership was forged between a large research university and eight civilian public school districts near military installations in the San Diego metropolitan area (Astor, Benbenishty, Wong, & Jacobson, 2014; Benbenishty, 2014). The two partners collectively formed the Building Capacity Consortium. The Consortium is

comprised of approximately 140 schools, serving approximately 117,000 students. The main objectives of the Consortium are to: (1) ensure the capacity of public schools to create military-friendly school environments that improve students' social, behavioral, and academic outcomes; (2) build each district's capacity to sustain military-friendly school environments in the long term; and, (3) create an infrastructure for replication and scaling up in other geographic contexts throughout the United States (Astor et al., 2014; Benbenishty, 2014). The Building Capacity Consortium also aimed to identify intervention programs that could be disseminated as evidence-based programs relevant to military-connected schools (Benbenishty, 2014).

A Local Grassroots Initiative to End Bullying in a Military-Connected School District

Recognizing the need to address vulnerability of military-connected youth to bullying, one school district in the Building Capacity the Temecula Valley Unified School District, implemented a new district-wide anti-bullying program. The initiative, called "Because Nice Matters" (BNM) was inspired, in part, by training workshops offered by the Building Capacity Project. Judy Stapleton, Assistant Principal of Great Oak High School, picked up the slogan from a wall plaque that she saw in a catalog.

The initiative included many activities designed to increase awareness of anti-bullying attitudes and behaviors and the idea that "being nice matters." BNM encourages and recognizes kind behavior and involves a number of symbolic activities, such as wearing purple and black to remind everyone that bullying can cause physical and psychological damage, or wearing white to signify making a fresh start. To raise community awareness of the initiative, a school bus was painted and emblazoned with the slogan.

Objectives

School community initiatives have the potential to not only address problems among youth but also to empower a school community during the process. Many anti-bullying evidence based programs are disseminated ‘top-down’ to schools and districts that may not have the need for such programs or the ability to implement them effectively (Benbenishty & Astor, 2007). This study has two aims and draws from surveys of parents’ and teachers’ perspectives. First, we present a process in which a school district developed and implemented an anti-bullying initiative. Second, from the perspectives of teachers and parents, we evaluate the impact of BNM on school climate and bullying.

Methods

As part of the district’s partnership with the Building Capacity Consortium, the USC team was asked to evaluate the initiative, focusing specifically on the perspectives of parents and teachers in the school. Data were collected using internet-based surveys that were designed by the Building Capacity evaluation team in collaboration school district officials and distributed to all parents and teachers in the school district. A total of 89 parents completed the survey, 77 (86.5%) of whom were female, with children who ranged in age from 1st to 12th grade (several parents had more than one child and some of these children were students in other schools). Parents were predominantly female, and 69.7% of parents who responded had a female child. A total of 67 teachers completed the survey and 41 (61.2%) identified themselves as females. While the teachers who completed the survey teach a range of classes, the majority of them teach at a high school.

A parent survey assessed parents’ perceptions of the impact of BNM on their school’s climate. Parents were also asked an open-ended questions. These open ended questions assessed

parents' perspectives on the following: (1) whether they thought that there was a need for a program to improve school climate; (2) recommendations for how to make the school and the BNM program more effective; additional thoughts and comments. A teacher survey assessed teacher perspectives' on the impact of BNM on their school. In addition, the teacher survey included open ended questions, which asked teachers to describe (1) their participation in and support for student involvement in school-wide activities; (2) whether there is a need for a program to improve the social climate of the school; (3) any additional ideas and comments.

Results

89 parents and 67 teachers responded to the link of the Because Nice Matters (BNM) Survey. Of the 89 parents who completed the BNM Survey, the majority of the sample was female (86.5%). Students' grades ranged from 1st to 12th grade and the majority of the parents' responses indicated they had a female child (69.7%). When asked about their familiarity with the program, 84% of the parents responded that they heard about it and 41.5% were able to name the colors associated with the program. 16.9% of the parents mentioned that they were involved in the activities of the program. 34% of the parents agreed that there was a need for a program to improve school climate. When asked to rate the impact the program has on the school, based on several statements, with responses ranging between 1= strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree, 39 of the parents responded (table 1). Most of the responses indicated a positive view of the impact of the program on school, with about 77% indicating that other schools can learn from them, about 80% agreeing or strongly agreeing that BNM helped students understand that bullying is very bad, 70% agreeing or strongly agreeing that BNM makes them proud of their school and helped make students more supportive and caring for each other. Positively strong responses were also assigned to the statements that BMN made it easier for students to report

when they saw bullying (69% agreed or strongly agreed), that BNM helped make teachers more supportive and caring to students (64% agreed or strongly agreed), that BNM makes them feel good when they visit the school (67% agreed or strongly agreed), and that BNM helped make the school safer (64% agreed or strongly agreed). Less parents, but still the majority of the sample, agreed or strongly agreed that BNM helped students find ways to make the school more peaceful (53%). Fewer parents agreed or strongly agreed that BNM makes everyone in school nicer to others (38.5%).

When asked to describe the program in open-ended questions, 27 parents responded with several common themes that rose from their description. First, most parents described the program as a bullying prevention program. Most parents also indicated that the program focuses on relationships between the students while encouraging kindness “*(the program)...reminds students to treat each other fairly and with respect*” “*encourages good deeds and kindness on campus*” “*take time to lend a hand, include others and acts of kindness*”. Some parents gave recommendations for strengthening the program, for example by extending its duration or taking more suggestions from students. There were also a few critical comments regarding the program, stating that bullying remains a problem and that other solutions should be emplaced such as the formation of clubs for students.

While viewing the teachers’ responses, several commonalities with parents were recognized. Of the 69 teachers who completed the BNM survey, 61.2% were female with the majority teaching in high school. Except for one teacher, all teachers were familiar with the program and were able to describe its characteristics with most teachers describing it as an anti-bullying campaign. About 60% described the manner in which they participated in the program both as being involved in school-wide activities and in integrating the program’s concepts in

their teaching. When asked about their views regarding the school's need for a program to improve the school climate of the school, 70% agreed and 15% said they were not sure while only two teachers said no. When asked to rate the impact the program on the school, based on several statements, with responses ranging between 1= strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree, 60 of the teachers responded (table 1). Most of the responses indicated a positive view of the impact of the program on school with about 75% indicating that other schools can learn from them, about 80% agreeing or strongly agreeing that BNM helped students understand that bullying is very bad. Most of the teachers agreed or strongly agreed that BNM makes them proud of the school, makes them feel good in school, and makes it easier for students to report bullying when they see it. However, when asked whether BNM is making everyone in school nicer and whether BNM helped teachers find a way to make the school more peaceful, less agreement was recorded, indicating variance in opinions among teachers.

When asked to describe the program in open-ended questions, several shared themes were stemmed from their description. Most teachers described the program as an anti-bullying campaign which promotes kindness. Many teachers emphasized that the program helps in raising awareness to bullying and to being nice: *"(the program)...highlights the good that comes from being kind to one another and the detrimental defects of bullying"*. Some teachers had recommendations for strengthening the program. Similar to the parents' suggestions, some teachers expressed the need to extend the duration of the program or to hold it monthly. While comparing the feedback received by parents and teachers and views of the program based on the statements (table 1), the overall trends are similar, with parents having a slightly more positive perspective of the program. The results indicate that the BNM program is raising

awareness in school while promoting kindness and anti-bullying messages. The responses suggest that there is a need to explore different ways in which to maintain sustainability.

Insert Table 1 here

Discussion

Anti-bullying evidence-based programs are often implemented “top-down” in schools with minimal participation from school community stakeholders. Often, schools and districts may not have the need for anti-bullying programs and/or the capacity to sustain successful anti-bullying initiatives. In the context of a military-connected public school district, this study examined a grassroots anti-bullying initiative spearheaded by multiple school stakeholder groups, including parents, teachers, principals, and students. This school community initiative aimed to enhance awareness of bullying and promote kindness among students. Overall, the findings, showed that parents and teachers perceived that the main goals of the program—raising awareness of bullying and promoting kindness—were accomplished. Parents and teachers also recommended that BNM ideas and activities should be expanded district-wide in order to make more long-term changes. While parents still remained concerned about bullying, teachers in particular were concerned with social media-related violence and wanted to see continued attention to this issue.

A key contribution of this study is the examination of a grassroots program that was developed by school staff. Studies on anti-bullying and school climate interventions have indicated a lack of sustainability and efficacy in schools over time, especially during attempts to scale-up to district-wide initiatives (Bradshaw, Reinke, Brown, Bevans, & Leaf, 2008). Often, anti-bullying and school climate programs are created outside of a school community and fail to account for the unique cultural dynamics and programmatic issues in the school. When teachers,

principals, and students collaborate in creating a program, they naturally understand these issues, and can ensure successful implementation. Moreover, school community initiatives can also have the result of empowering multiple stakeholder groups, since they take ownership of the program and have a sincere interest in sustainability.

One critical finding from this study is that parents perceived more programs in addition to BNM are necessary to address bullying and school climate in the school community. Public schools often have competing priorities that impede the buy-in and implementation of grassroots anti-bullying programs. For instance, a decade of school accountability policies and, more recently the implementation of the Common Core Standards, have resulted in the proliferation of test preparation programs and instructional planning and time devoted to technical skills in math and literacy. However, this program, however, may not be enough to achieve the educational goals of the districts and schools, and there is a need to identify additional ways to reduce violence and increase positive school climate.

Universal implementation to the whole school

Having a whole-school approach that does not target one subset population or individuals who are involved in bullying is different from having a problem-centered approach which is narrowed and reactive (Manning & Bucher, 2005). BNM is focused on the entire school system, based on the belief that a positive and preventative approach, which includes the whole school, will not only provide better and more sustainable results but also will help in developing a sense of community and advance the social-emotional skills of the students and staff. Despite the fact that military-connected kids is a population at risk for bullying and at the heart of the grant, BNM relies on the understanding that improving the schools as a whole, based on grassroots programs and intervention, will benefit military kids and other vulnerable populations. Similarly,

the evaluation process included all the parents and teachers in the school, while aiming to gain the most inclusive evaluation of the impact of BNM to all the different populations. Some of the responses specified the military connection, enabling learning more about the impact of the program for this specific population.

Limitations

This study utilized self-reports in the form of an on-line questionnaire and open-ended questions as its main methodology in order to evaluate the program's implementation. Self-reports is a widespread methodology in various fields of empirical research which is often criticized for having threats to validity that might hinder the inferences made based on the data (Chan, 2009). Although studies and research have demonstrated the importance, advantages and contribution of these kinds of data, observational data is needed in order to provide an optimal validation of the research and hence the results.

Another limitation lies in the survey itself as it did not capture competing priorities, programs and school reforms that might have influenced or interfered with the results of teachers' and parents' views of the program and its outcomes. This study has focused on teachers' and parents' perspectives regarding the BNM program and its outcomes. Despite the fact that these findings are crucial in order to evaluate the program, additional perspectives are significant for gaining a wider understanding of the implications of the program. The study did not encompass multiple additional views that are important to explore for addressing the school community as a whole. These additional perspectives include students, administrators, school counselors, psychologists, social workers and support staffs. The perspectives of the different stakeholders might differ and add valuable insights to enlighten the implementation and evaluation of the program and its sustainability (Astor, Guerra & Van Acker, 2010).

Future Research

Due to the limitation of not encompassing multiple perspectives in this current study, future research should include the various views of different interacting groups, including students, principles, staff and administrators. This will allow for the inclusion of each distinctive perspective as well as insights which will better inform the implementation and sustainability of the program. In addition, conducting a longitudinal study which measures the outcomes of the program over time will provide additional and valuable information about the sustainability and implications of the program and will better help to capture the impact of the intervention.

Another important direction to explore would be to conduct studies which investigate comparisons with other anti-bullying programs, specifically grass-roots interventions, in order to understand the unique characteristics and impact of BNM. It may also add insights that could potentially improve the program or inform other anti-bullying programs in order to advance bullying prevention in different locations. Future studies should also aim to capture additional factors that might influence sustainability of the program overtime including staff turnover, school reforms, organizational changes and other programs implemented.

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Table 1: Parents and Teachers

Parents (N=39) and Teachers (N=60) Assessments of BNM program on their school

	Strongly Disagree=1		Disagree=2		Neither Agree Nor Disagree=3		Agree=4		Strongly Agree=5		Mean	
	P%	T%	P%	T%	P%	T%	P%	T%	P%	T%	P	T
BNM helped students understand that bullying is very bad	7.7	5.0	2.6	1.7	12.8	15.0	23.1	51.7	53.8	26.7	4.13	3.93
Other schools can learn from us	10.3	5.2	5.1	1.7	5.1	19.0	35.9	48.3	43.6	25.9	3.97	3.88
BNM makes me proud of my school	10.3	5.1	5.1	1.7	12.8	30.5	46.2	40.7	46.2	22.0	3.72	3.73
BNM makes me feel good in my school	10.3	5.1	5.1	5.1	15.4	33.9	48.7	39	48.7	16.9	3.64	3.58
BNM made it easier for students to report when they see bullying	7.7	5.0	5.1	1.7	28.2	36.7	35.9	41.7	35.9	15.0	3.62	3.60
BNM helped make the school safer	10.3	5.1	7.7	3.4	17.9	39.0	41.0	44.1	41.0	8.5	3.59	3.47
BNM helped make teachers more supportive and caring to students	10.3	5.1	5.1	8.5	17.9	37.3	48.7	40.7	48.7	8.5	3.59	3.39
BNM helped make students more supportive and caring of each other	10.3	5.0	7.7	5.0	17.9	25.0	48.7	56.7	48.7	8.3	3.51	3.58
BNM helped me find ways to make my school more peaceful	10.3	5.1	10.3	6.8	25.6	37.3	35.9	45.8	35.9	5.1	3.41	3.39
BNM is making everyone in school nicer to others	10.3	6.8	12.8	10.2	38.5	37.3	30.8	42.4	30.8	3.4	3.13	3.25

*P= Parents, T=teachers

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