

Abstract

The majority of roughly 4 million military-connected students, including those with active-duty, reserve, and veteran family members, attend public schools in the U.S. Though military service is generally a positive experience for families, evidence clearly demonstrates that many school-age children face increased social and academic challenges that stem from factors directly related to military service. Schools in particular have the ability to provide support for military-connected students through positive school climate and attention to academic and social emotional needs. Through service-learning programs, universities also have the capacity to effect change that enhances the experiences of military-connected students. This paper presents an evaluation of a service-learning program, Partners at Learning (PAL), where undergraduate university students participate in coursework and fieldwork to provide tutoring and mentorship to diverse and under-served students, such as military students, in local K-12 school settings. Results show that PAL tutors reported greater awareness of the unique experiences of military-connected students, an increased understanding of diverse groups of students in K-12 schools, and many reported increased interest in advocating for social justice. The discussion recommends integrating attention to the needs of military-connected students in service-learning programs in multiple disciplines and locations.

Partners at Learning: A Service-Learning Approach to Serving Public School Students from Military Families

Currently in the U.S., approximately 1.2 million students have a military-active parent or caregiver (Clever & Segal, 2013). This number increases to around 2 million when children under 5 are included (DoD, 2013). Further, there are recent calls in the literature to include children of veterans as military-connected youth (Lester & Flake, 2013; Sherman, 2014), meaning that closer to 4 million youth attend public schools. In general, military service can be regarded as a privilege and unique opportunity, and some evidence shows that military-connected students acquire unique strengths and abilities because of their experiences (Park, 2011). However, a recent and growing body of literature also shows that there are challenges and risks for military-connected students, especially during times of war. These include increased risks for depressive symptoms and suicidality (Cederbaum et al., 2014; Gilreath et al., 2015) as well as school victimization and substance use (Gilreath et al., 2014; Sullivan et al., 2015).

As most military-connected youth attend public schools, it is important to consider how school environments can support military families (Astor, De Pedro, Gilreath, Esqueda & Benbenishty, 2013). Evidence shows that positive school climate has been associated with increased academic achievement and engagement, and decreased risk behaviors and decreased bullying and victimization (Astor et al., 2013; Bond et al., 2007; Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013). However, fostering positive climate for large populations of military-connected students can be a challenge (De Pedro et al., 2011). Though school may be a place naturally prone to provide support for students, efforts are needed to help create and hone interventions that specifically meet the needs of military-connected students. Finding sustainable, cost-effective interventions that may provide this support remains a critical need for schools and

school districts that serve military-connected students and their families, especially in times of economic austerity.

This paper presents a case study of one intervention, Partners at Learning (PAL), implemented in Southern California to address the needs of military-connected students. This program adaptation and evaluation is presented as an exemplar of a sustainable intervention crafted with the input of multiple stakeholders. The following sections present the rationale for using PAL, the process of adapting an existing PAL program at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD), Education Studies and results from quantitative and qualitative surveys administered to PAL participants and affiliated classroom teachers.

Selecting and Creating Programs for Military-Connected Students

The Building Capacity to Create Highly Supportive Military-Connected School Districts, (Building Capacity Consortium) project worked to increase awareness about the existence of military-connected students in public schools, and to increase the presence of supports and services for those students and their families. The Building Capacity Consortium, which operated between 2010-2014 with the support of a grant from the Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) had the main goal of improving academic achievements and the well-being for military children while increasing the schools' capacity to sustain the work and creating a replicable model for military connected schools locally and nationally (Benbenishty, 2014).

Specific principles guided the PAL adaptation described here. First, school-wide interventions provide support for all students and meet the needs of underserved populations without pathologizing or stigmatizing military-connected students. Second, this program adaptation is sustainable because it is part of an existing university program that is part of the

university's mission. Finally, the collaborative nature of this project reflects an effort to integrate university and other community supports with the needs of schools and students

The Building Capacity Project worked in partnership with San Diego–area school districts and one Riverside County district, in order to raise awareness to the distinctive conditions, challenges and strengths of military connected students (Astor, Benbenishty, Wong & Jacobson, 2014). Efforts to improve the public school experiences of military-connected students included an increase in the number of school social work and school psychology interns placed at consortium schools, implementing evidence based programs to address particular mental health needs, amplifying grassroots interventions from particular school sites, and adapting programs that existed in the local area.

Sustainable, Locally-relevant Local, Adaptable Interventions

One difficulty resulting from externally funded interventions and projects is sustainment after the project has been completed. For many evidence based programs (EBPs), costs are associated with initial implementation including manuals, staff time, and training. Ongoing costs include ongoing certification, materials, and substantial resources to address needs that emerge from staff turnover or changing needs within an organization (Pitner, Astor, & Benbenishty, 2015). In addition, many EBPs are developed and implemented in a top-down manner, meaning, they are driven by theory or empirical principles and tested by researchers while the context and unique circumstances of each school is not captured in the process, leading to additional difficulties in implementation and sustainability (Astor, Capp, Moore & Benbenishty, 2015).

Thus, the Building Capacity project endeavored to foster recourses and interventions that would perpetuate after external project support and funding was gone. One way to accomplish sustainable interventions is to find existing programs that are already providing services, and

adapt them for specific needs. These programs are often created within the communities they serve, meaning that adapting an intervention is more efficient and is likely to meet the needs of the local community. For programs serving military-connected students, the local context may require different interventions. For example, there may be public schools with a small population of military-connected students, schools with larger proportions of military-connected students, or schools on or near military bases. One important facet of this adaptation of the PAL program was to take into account local issues, like the concentration of military students in a school, as the program was implemented.

Schools constantly develop ground-up solutions which are created by school staff and meet the specific needs of their communities, however often these school-generated processes and programs are not explored, evaluated or distributed amongst other schools and the research community (Astor, et al., 2015). These programs have the potential of being sustainable despite external or internal changes due to them addressing local needs. These types of programs were captured and encouraged through the Building Capacity initiative, The collaboration between Building Capacity Project schools and the PAL program utilized a school-based approach that also helped to raise awareness about the characteristics and needs of military-connected students and families in academic and professional communities.

Partners at Learning

Partners at Learning (PAL) is a service learning program offered through the University of California, San Diego (UCSD) that provides opportunities for undergraduate students to work with underserved students in preK-12th grade. Every year university students in the program mentor and tutor hundreds of K -12 students on an individual basis, contributing over 20,000 volunteer hours to local schools. PAL mentors and tutors strive to enhance pre K-12 students'

achievement and motivation. Coursework for PAL students that accompanies their fieldwork includes theoretical and practical issues in K-12 education (Benbenishty, Esqueda, & Couture, 2012).

University Service-learning programs have long been understood as a way to provide enriching and valuable curricular experiences for undergraduate students while simultaneously meeting needs of the surrounding community (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Flannery & Ward, 1999; Lemieux & Allen, 2007). Service-learning programs are able to target specific community needs, enhance understanding of course content, foster a broader understanding of a given profession, and increase a sense of “civic responsibility” (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). These purposes for service-learning keenly support the Building Capacity Project’s goals of providing support for military-connected students in public schools, utilizing existing resources in the community, and providing non-stigmatizing, whole-school intervention.

There is evidence that service-learning programs may enhance the cultural competence of pre-service educators (Alexandrowicz, 2001; Meaney, Bohler, Kopf, & Scott, 2008). Meaney et al. (2008) specifically concluded that the participation in service-learning enhanced pre-service teachers’ insight into the needs of culturally diverse students, made them more aware of stereotypes, and increased cultural competency. Military-connected students comprise one group of students that benefit from focus through service-learning programs and other pre-service activities for educators, administrators, school counselors and social workers.

Methods

In the first year, we collected data from students participating in the UCSD PAL course and teachers from classrooms where PAL tutors volunteered. UCSD students were surveyed when they entered the course and then again during the last phase. Course instructors gave their

students a link to an internet-based survey and asked them to participate. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Students were asked to provide a code (last five digits of their student id) that would allow linking of the pre- and post surveys. Students were also given the opportunity to provide qualitative feedback about their experiences in the PAL program. In the following sections, results from an evaluation of the PAL program are presented. This adaptation was implemented in multiple stages over multiple years. Each modification to the program was based on feedback from participants. Detailed methods are available elsewhere (Benbenishty, 2014; Benbenishty et al., 2012).

Findings

Initial Adaptation of PAL

The collaboration between Building Capacity and the UCSD PAL program began with work to create a separate course offering that focused specifically on military students. Since there was a substantial population of military families in the PAL service area, there was initially a desire to offer a class focusing on military culture. Also, the relatively large proportion of military families in the region meant that there was a possibility that military-connected students at UCSD might participate in the PAL program. This course focused on the academic, social, environmental and economic characteristics of military-connected students. Current research about the state of military-connected students in California schools was integrated into the course, and considerations of military family dynamics and the roles of school and community connections. Consistent with many PAL courses, teaching and learning theory was also part of the PAL tutors training and coursework. Course objectives from EDS 137/139 included the following (Benbenishty et al., 2012):

1. Assisting all students in host classrooms.

2. Supporting the host teachers' instructional goals.
3. Providing additional support for military-connected students.
4. Implementing projects to increase awareness of needs specific to military-connected students.
5. Facilitating connections between the school and community to support military-connected students and their families.
6. Identifying and sharing resources for all stakeholders.

First Year Results

In the first year of the program (2011-2012), 30 PAL tutors provided feedback about their experiences. Feedback was also gathered from several preK-12 teachers who had PAL tutors working in their classrooms. PAL students were asked about their reasons for enrolling in the military-specific PAL course. More than 80% of students indicated that an interest in learning more about diverse groups in society was a reason, as well as the desire to gain experience in education and see if teaching is a viable career. More than 90% of students indicated that their interest in working with military-connected students and an interest in helping others were reasons for enrolling. In contrast, more than 40% indicated that a good fit with their schedule and graduation requirements were *not* reasons for enrolling.

After their experiences working in classrooms, PAL tutors were asked questions about changes in their thinking or perceptions. Table 1 shows responses to these items. Crosstabulations revealed statistically significant increases in volunteer tutors' awareness of military connected students, appreciation for a diverse society, and interest in becoming an educator. Approximately 80% of college volunteer students reported that they felt they made an

impact on students they worked with, while 93% expressed increased appreciation for social issues and teaching experience.

Table 1

PAL participant reports of benefits and/or drawbacks of course participation

	Not at all/a little true %	Pretty much true %	Very much true %
I am now more aware of the issues of military-connected students	0	27.6	72.4
I feel like I have made an impact on the children I worked with	0	48.3	51.7
I have gained an appreciation for the diversity in our society	10.7	42.9	46.4
I have gained valuable teaching experience	10.3	34.5	55.2
I am now more interested in being an educator	37.9	37.9	24.1
I am now more interested in volunteering	27.6	48.3	24.1
The course has helped me make decisions about my future	48.3	27.6	24.1
I became disillusioned with our public school system	64.3	17.9	17.9

PAL tutor qualitative comments. One class requirement for tutors was to keep a journal detailing their activities each week in their classrooms, impactful experiences, and connections between their coursework and fieldwork experiences. Journal entries indicated that tutors felt they were making an impact with students, and that their interactions with military-connected students were particularly impactful. For example, PAL tutors learned about the unique experiences of military-connected students:

When I started here, my first thought was that the students were unmotivated and didn't really care. Now that I'm learning more about them, I'm realizing that there may be other things going on in their lives that are in turn affecting their school work.

The students having their parents come back to see them and witnessing a reuniting moment really opened my eyes to the reality and the struggles these young 2nd graders have to endure while their parents are away.

Second Year Results

One major shift in the utilization of the PAL program was to include military-connected students as one of several under-served diversity groups in the PAL curriculum. Instead of a single course serving a smaller number of UCSD students, all PAL students would learn about needs specific to military-connected students and their families, as well as needs of other under-served groups. Though the first year of the PAL intervention appeared successful, there were several hundred PAL students who were not exposed to the particulars of military-connected students and their families. Incorporating military-connected students into many sections of PAL courses thus increased the awareness of military-specific needs for PAL participants.

In the second year, 80 participants responded to the survey. Roughly 60% of these students indicated that it was pretty much or very much true that they were interested in becoming an educator, and almost 90% endorsed an appreciation for diversity in society. Only 14% indicated that it was pretty much or very much true that they were aware of the issues related to military-connected students.

When asked about reasons for enrolling in the PAL class, students overwhelmingly reported that helping others, gaining experience specific to education and teaching and learning about diverse groups in society were their reasons. In contrast to the first year of implementation, only 18% indicated that a specific interest in military-connected students was a reason. The large number of PAL students not exposed to specific military-connected issues was one reason for the

change in the program structure for the second year. Other responses from students reinforce the importance of seeking a broader exposure for military-connected students. Almost 84% of students in the second year indicated that they had interacted with minority students “to a large extent,” and 94% indicated that they worked to some extent with other diversity groups. But nearly 60% of these students reported that they had not worked with military-connected students at all.

PAL participants expectations before their fieldwork experiences and their reports after their experiences are presented in Table 2. In general, students reported that they expected a variety of outcomes based on their experiences, including directly impacting students they would tutor, and gaining understanding of societal interactions and public education. Notably, most students indicated that it was “pretty much” or “very much” true that they expected to increase their understanding of diverse cultural groups in public schools. However, responses were less focused regarding military-connected students. More students indicated this was “a little true” for them, and nearly 20% did not believe this would be a result of the PAL class. Student reports after participating were consistent with their expectations. For example, the majority of students indicated it was pretty much, or very much true that they had an impact in their classrooms, gained valuable experience, and are more interested in social action on behalf of diverse groups in our society. Also consistent with their expectations, a sizeable portion of students (35%) said it was not at all true that they have a better understanding of military-connected students. It may be that these students were not placed in schools or classrooms with significant proportions of military students.

Table 2

PAL Participants’ expectations of and experiences with PAL course

Not at A little Pretty Very

	all true	true	much true	much true
	%	%	%	%
Expectations prior to PAL course				
I expect to have an impact on the children with whom I will work	2.5	10.1	30.4	57
I will gain valuable teaching experience	1.3	6.3	30.4	62
The course will help me make decisions about my future	1.3	19.5	32.5	46.8
I will gain appreciation of the social issues facing our society	2.6	14.1	41	42.3
I will have a better understanding of our public school system	3.8	11.5	33.3	51.3
I will have a better understanding of military connected students	18.2	37.7	28.6	15.6
I will have a better understanding of diverse cultural groups in P-12 schools	2.6	10.5	40.8	46.1
Reports of experiences after PAL course				
I had an impact on the children with whom I worked	0	16.1	52.9	31
I gained valuable teaching experience	0	9.2	41.4	49.4
The course helped me make decisions about my future	6.9	19.5	37.9	35.6
I gained appreciation of the social issues facing our society	1.2	8.1	43	47.7
I now have a better understanding of our public school system	1.2	9.3	41.9	47.7
I now have a better understanding of military connected students	34.5	24.1	24.1	17.2
I now have a better understanding of diverse cultural groups in P-12 schools	1.1	10.3	50.6	37.9
I am now more aware of issues of social justice and inequality	2.3	14.9	52.9	29.9
I am more interested in getting involved in social action on behalf of diverse groups in our society	5.7	21.8	42.5	29.9

Qualitative comments. Several comments from PAL tutors help to illustrate the array of benefits that came from their participation in the PAL program:

I am looking forward to sharing my love of learning with my mentees. I believe that we as mentors can make a difference in these children's lives and influence them to view education from a positive perspective.

The students have taught me many things and one of them is how to connect with people from different countries and cultures. I have also had the privilege of learning about the students' countries and cultures.

This course has allowed me to understand challenges and issues that underserved students as well as teachers face every day. I have a deep appreciation for teachers' dedication to these students' success.

Third Year Results

In the 2013-2014 school year (the third year of the program), A total of 302 students responded to surveys, and 130 participants were matched from the beginning and end of their program. Consistent with findings from the first two years, the majority of students reported that that their reasons for enrolling in PAL courses were to gain experience in education and teaching, helping others, improving skills as an instructor, and learning more about diverse groups in society. Again, a smaller proportion targeted PAL courses for military-connected students, with 85% indicating this was not the expressed reason for enrolling. Also similar to previous years, the vast majority of students (approximately 90%) indicated that they had prior interactions with minority students, students from low income families, and people from other diverse groups. However, 54% of respondents reported that they had no experience with military-connected students.

Participants' expectations for PAL courses were similar to years one and two. Most students (above 80%) expected to have an impact on P-12 students, gain teaching experience, increase their understanding of the public school system, and increase their understanding of

diverse cultural groups in P-12 schools. Expectations about military-connected students were also consistent, as Nearly 20% did not expect to learn about military-connected students, and 40% believed it would be “a little true” that they would learn about military-connected students.

PAL tutors reports after their year working in schools are shown in Table 4. For most of the categories shown, the vast majority of students reported that it was “pretty much” or “very much” true that their experiences as a PAL tutor were seen as positive influences. However, this positive change was not reflected for military-connected students. Nearly 38% of PAL tutors reported that it was *not* true that they had an increased understanding of military-connected students.

Table 4
Participants Experiences of the PAL Course (N = 177)

	Not at all true %	A little true %	Pretty much true %	Very much true %
I had an impact on the children with whom I worked	0	18.1	47.5	34.5
I gained appreciation of the social issues facing our society	0.6	6.3	34.1	59.1
I gained valuable teaching experience	0	6.2	37.9	55.9
I now have a better understanding of our public school system	0.6	6.9	37.1	55.4
I now have a better understanding of diverse cultural groups in P-12 schools	0.6	12.4	43.5	43.5
I am now more aware of issues of social justice and inequality	1.7	11.3	42.4	44.6
I am more interested in getting involved in social action on behalf of diverse groups in our society	5.1	16.9	38.4	39.5
The course helped me make decisions about my future	4	21.5	33.9	40.7
I now have a better understanding of military connected students	37.9	30.5	19.8	11.9

Finally, PAL participants were asked about changes in their personal interests, or changes in their ideas about their vocations. These responses include a comparison of tutors' answers to a pre and post assessment and are shown in Table 5. For example, 50% of the students indicated that it was "very much true" that they were interested in volunteering, and 72% indicated it was "very much true" that they had an appreciation for diversity in society; this last category reflects a significant increase between pre and post assessment. Significant increases were also noted in the number of PAL tutors who reported being interested in being an educator and in the awareness of issues related to military-connected students.

Table 5

Participants Personal Interests after Class Participation

	Not at all true %	A little true %	Pretty much true %	Very much true %	Mean	SD
I am interested in being an educator	9.6	37.9	21.5	31.1	2.74***	1.006
I am interested in volunteering	1.7	18.1	29.9	50.3	3.29	0.82
I have an appreciation for the diversity in our society	0	3.4	24.3	72.3	3.69***	0.533
I am aware of the issues of military-connected students	19.8	36.7	29.9	13.6	2.37***	0.952

*** $p < .001$ in paired t-test comparing between students who responded in two points in time. All significant changes were in the direction of increase in the post-class assessments.

Qualitative comments. As in previous years, students were asked about their reasons for enrolling in the PAL course. Their comments reflect a range of reasons related to personal and vocational goals:

My reasons for enrolling in this PAL class was to be able to continue exploring issues in the education system especially in regards to the communities that I am working with.

I wanted to give back to my community because when I was in school I had a lot of people helping me and pushing me to attend a university. It is a huge reason why I am here today.

After their experiences with PAL fieldwork, tutors offered summary thoughts about working with schools, teachers, and students, and the impact on their vocational goals:

I never thought I would fall in love with high school ever again. These students with their rich background have taught me so much more than I have been able to teach them. I have no doubt that they have encouraged me to continue to volunteer my time in schools just like theirs.

These students were extremely different from the students I have interacted with in my high school years. However, all of these differences just made them very interesting and I loved working with them. I will continue EDS courses in the future.

Discussion

The presence of military-connected students and families in public schools requires creative efforts from teachers, administrators, and community members to identify and to provide support for the unique needs and opportunities that come from being part of our nation's military. While many lessons emerge from the burgeoning literature on military-connected students, this evaluation highlights two themes that are important for future work. Interventions come from many places, and marshaling the resources of universities and utilizing local programs are promising ways to meet the needs of military-connected students. This program evaluation also shows the importance of considering an intervention that is holistic. That is, rather than a direct academic intervention to improve skills for military-connected students in a particular domain, this intervention shows that providing support for military-connected students has value in multiple contexts and for multiple stakeholders, including student discipline, student relationships, and the PAL tutors.

Overall, this evaluation showed that PAL students gained valuable experience working with diverse students in K-12 classrooms. In particular, students reported that they had a better understanding of public education, a better understanding of diverse cultural groups in schools, and an increased awareness for social justice and inequality. In the first year of the PAL adaptation, nearly all students reported that one benefit of their participation was an increase in their knowledge about the issues facing military-connected students. This reflects a direct goal of the Building Capacity Project and the partnership with UCSD, and the PAL tutor's reports presented above indicate that this was successful.

In the second and third years of the PAL program, fewer PAL tutors indicated that learning about military-connected students was an expected outcome. This shows that efforts to increase exposure to military-connected students, and to consider them one of many diverse groups on school campuses, were important. Shifting military-connected students from a designated class to one of many diverse groups in multiple course sections allowed many more PAL tutors to learn about military-connected students, and allowed greater diffusion of the idea that military-connected students exist and need support. In addition, the process of using existing and sustainable interventions in this case allowed military-connected students to be characterized as a one of many diverse groups in public schools that require careful consideration. Service-learning programs may be especially important as vehicles for changing attitudes about diverse groups of students and building cultural competence (Alexandrowicz, 2001; Meaney et al., 2008). Direct contact with members of marginalized populations may be a critical element in changing stereotypes (Conway et al., 2009).

Other changes in the perceptions of PAL tutors are consistent with other service-learning programs that endeavor to establish meaningful partnerships between universities and K-12

schools that directly benefit K-12 students, enhance pre-service experiences for future teachers, and foster the desire for civic participation or service to others (Alexandrowicz, 2001; Conway, Amel, & Gerwien, 2009; Flannery & Ward, 1999).

Universities can make an important contribution to military-connected students and their families by including military modules in their service-learning courses. Such programs are inexpensive and sustainable, contribute to the universities and students' awareness, and support military-connected students. The adaptation of PAL presented here provides an example of one adaptation of a local, sustaining program, and suggests that there are other programs that can be adapted to increase awareness and target resources to military-connected students and families.

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