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School-Based Support for Students with a Parent on Military Deployment

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Parental deployment to a war zone brings many changes to family life. Changes in family roles and routines unsettle children and interfere with their educational engagement. Defence School Transition Aides (DSTAs) are employed in qualifying Australian schools to assist students from Australian Defence Force (ADF) families to manage transitions associated with a parental deployment to a war zone. Reported here are findings from a study that explored parents', teachers' and DSTAs' perspectives of school-based support designed to assist students to cope with their changed circumstances when a parent is deployed. Results indicate that an appreciation of students' worries by school personnel eased their distress. DSTAs facilitated processes whereby peers with deployed parents supported each other. Alerting teachers to an intended deployment was also found to be important as it allowed them to be alert to student behaviour changes and prepare ahead for possible student support needs. DSTAs reminded parents through school newsletters to pass on pertinent deployment-related information to the school so that a coordinated school–family approach for supporting students could be enacted. Further research is required to investigate the educational significance of student support offered by culturally aware key adults and student peers during major life transitions.

■ **Keywords:** children, education, Australian schools, military deployments, military family support

Introduction

Australia's intensive international military involvement since the 1990s required the development of institutional support measures for ADF families. As a result, the Defence Community Organisation (DCO) implemented a range of additional family programs and policies to support the needs of families of deployed ADF members (Siebler, 2003). After a successful trial, in 2001 the DSTA program was introduced into qualifying Australian schools to financially assist principals to employ DSTAs (DCO, 2007, 2011).

Funded by the Department of Defence, the DSTA program assists school principals to employ a DSTA as a member of the school staff. The DSTA is normally supervised by the principal or deputy principal and their function is to support students from ADF families during times of transition such as a parental deployment. Deployment, for the purposes of this study, means the assignment of ADF members to overseas military operations to a peacekeeping or combat zone for a period of several months or more. Motivated by annual funding applications and reporting requirements attached to the DSTA program, Australian schools employing a DSTA maintain accurate records of the arrivals and departures of ADF families in their school. From this data, it was estimated that as at June 2015, the DSTA program was supporting over 11,000 students of ADF families with many of their parents being deployed. DSTAs are employed in approximately 200 Australian schools working as a member of the student services team within their school. The majority of DSTAs have a Certificate III in Education Support; however, a small number have other relevant qualifications. Based on social, emotional and transition support, the DSTA practice model includes school capacity building and teacher support.

The specific organisation of DSTA work varies within each school so that their program delivery is adapted to complement the specific characteristics of the school; the school size and sector, the number of ADF student enrolments, individual student needs and available opportunities to work in cooperation with other school-based programs. DSTAs offer proactive and responsive support to students and work closely with principals, teachers and parents to contribute to a school environment that is responsive to

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students' needs. They also work with students individually, in small and large groups, and facilitate whole school projects. DSTAs communicate with parents through school newsletters encouraging them to share deployment-related family information with the school. Working from a dedicated physical location in the school ensures DSTAs are easily accessible by students, parents and teachers. Thus, DSTAs are integrated into the school community and spend the majority of their time working face to face with students, parents and teachers both inside and outside classrooms while maintaining a flexible timetable which gives them the capacity to respond to situations at short notice.

To supplement supervision arrangements by a member of the school administration team, the DCO Regional Education Liaison Officers (REDLOs) are also available to offer principals additional guidance, professional development and opportunities for DSTAs where deemed necessary. REDLOs can also assist principals to facilitate tailored education for DSTAs so they maintain knowledge of local military activities including deployments. REDLOs work closely with the principal of each school to maintain the integrity, including quality assurance, of the program. The recruitment process of the DSTAs normally includes a REDLO as a member of the panel. This ensures the successful applicant demonstrates the potential to understand the needs of students from ADF families and has the capacity to represent their needs in the school community. As sole operators within their school, it is vital for DSTAs to maintain professional networks with other DSTAs in their local area.

While DSTA work receives high satisfaction ratings from schools, parents and the ADF command (DCO, 2007, 2011), only anecdotal evidence is available to identify the influence of DSTA work on student wellbeing and engagement and, indirectly, educational outcomes. This paper reports on research that explored the significance of having a DSTA on the school staff during a parental military deployment from the point of view of parents, teachers and DSTAs. An overview of previous research on the impact of parental deployments on children's education is provided, followed by a brief description of the research methodology and methods. The findings are discussed and followed by concluding comments.

Effects of Deployment on Children

Little is known about the specific needs of school-aged Australian students during a parental deployment. The Timor-Leste Family Study (McGuire et al., 2012) was commissioned by the Department of Veterans' Affairs to investigate the health and wellbeing of the families of ADF veterans of the Timor-Leste conflict between 1999 and 2010. The large scale quantitative study of over 4000 participants, including 1332 ADF partners, concluded that there was no discernible difference between the health and wellbeing outcomes for the partners and children of Timor-Leste veterans and those of the family members of ADF personnel who did not deploy to Timor-Leste. However, the study did identify that the number of parental deployments did influence the nature of children's responses with an association found between the number of parental deployments and an increased frequency of reported behavioural concerns for children from the second deployment onwards (McGuire et al., 2012). A further finding associated children's increased risk of behavioural and emotional problems with poor mental health in the non-deployed parent (McGuire et al., 2012).

More nuanced findings of Australian children's responses to deployment come from a smaller qualitative study that involved in-depth interviews with ADF Timor-Leste veterans and their partners (a total of 76 participants) (Siebler, 2009). This study gathered information on the physical and mental health of children and adolescents during their parents' deployment from the perspectives of both parents. The findings showed that a large proportion of children's needs during deployments were unidentified and therefore unaddressed (Siebler & Goddard, 2014). Recommendations included that further research be undertaken to enable the development of effective policies and programs to address the needs of children and adolescents during parental deployment.

An increasing number of non-Australian studies, mainly from America, have alerted Australian service providers to the needs of school-aged children during parental deployments. These studies include a number of retrospective reviews of education (Richardson et al., 2011) and health records (De Pedro et al., 2011). Findings suggest that children's academic progress and health outcomes decline during parental deployment, along with an increase in behavioural difficulties. A number of smaller scale qualitative studies (Chandra, Martin, Hawkins, & Richardson, 2010; Huebner, Mancini, Wilcox, Grass, & Grass, 2007; Mmari, Roche, Sudhinaraset, & Blum, 2009) used focus groups with adolescents, parents and school-based personnel, and identified that students experience a range of disturbing emotions and exhibit emotionally charged behaviours during parental deployment (Huebner et al., 2007). These studies highlighted the difficulties arising from a lack of specific military knowledge and understanding of the deployment experience by school staff. Teachers reported feeling hindered in their ability to support these students adequately without further training (Mmari et al., 2009). A comprehensive review of research findings conducted by De Pedro et al. (2011) summarised the extent of the problem and recommended a way forward. The recommendations included further research into the school sector to generate school reform that was informed by and incorporated knowledge of military research findings.

Astor, De Pedro, Gilreath, Esquada, and Benbenishty (2013), Easterbrooks, Ginsburg, and Lerner (2013) and Park (2011) suggest from America that schools have the potential to assist students to manage personal and educational challenges while building on their innate strengths to learn new coping strategies. This was confirmed by De Pedro,

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Astor, Gilreath, Benbenishty, and Berkowitz (2015) who found that a positive school climate was protective of student needs during a parental deployment. Fitzsimons and Parello-Krause (2009) developed a comprehensive process of support for implementation by American school nurses that included supplying teachers with relevant data and informing them of increased student needs associated with parental deployment. Supporting parents and facilitating appropriate family referrals formed an important part of the recommended school-based support processes (Fitzsimons & Krause-Parello, 2009). School-based programs such as resilience and skill building programs (Garcia, de Pedro, Astor, Lester, & Benbenishty, 2015; Waliski, Kirshner, Shue, & Bokony, 2012), additional tutoring and the development of hero walls and friendship gardens (De Pedro, 2015), as well as individual counselling (Waliski et al., 2012), have proven to be effective strategies to assist American students to manage the stresses associated with parental deployments. Easterbrooks et al. (2013) suggest that a meaningful relationship with at least one adult is a core protective factor for students during deployment. School-based adults who are familiar with military life and culture, and are willing to spend time with students, can make a contribution to the wellbeing of students with a deployed parent according to the studies by Eccles et al. (1993) and more recently by Mmari et al. (2009).

The Present Study

This study examines the work of DSTAs in supporting students throughout a parental deployment cycle through an ecological lens. Students' educational experiences during a parental deployment are influenced by multiple factors coming from all levels of their environment such government policy, parents' experiences in the deployment zone, family–school relationships during the deployment as well as the care provided to students at school (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Cozza, 2015; Cozza & Lerner, 2013, Gitterman & Germain, 2008). Regular interactions between students and their school environment, including the influences of DSTAs and other adults, and peer supporters with specific cultural and contextual knowledge, are of particular interest to this study (Easterbrooks et al., 2013; Tudge, Mokrova, Hatfield, & Karnik, 2009).

Aims

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of how DSTA work contributed to the school capacity to deliver social and emotional support to students with a deployed parent. In addition, the study was designed to gather evidence for the contention that a program of this sort would be efficacious. This was achieved by capturing those aspects of DSTA practice that were considered by parents, teachers and DSTAs to support students and help them to build on their strengths during parental deployment.

Methodology and Method

A naturalistic inquiry paradigm (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was determined to offer the most suitable means of addressing the study objectives and answer the main research question: What student supports, associated with parental deployment, are valued by parents, teachers and DSTAs? The study was conducted in Townsville where the researcher worked as a REDLO with the DCO. Townsville, a regional Queensland city with a population of 190,000, is home to a major Australian Army base and Air Force base. The 6000 Townsville-based ADF members, their families and the Defence civilian workforce make up 9% of the city's population (Welters & Delisle, 2009).

The researcher negotiated with each of the principals of Townsville schools that employed a DSTA to invite parents and staff members from their school communities to participate in the study. All participation was voluntary. Data were constructed during interviews with an initial cohort of 15 parents, 15 teachers and 15 DSTAs from 13 schools. A further four participants were invited to participate in interviews that were used for data triangulation to ensure credibility. All parent participants were the female partners of male ADF members and aged between 30 and 45 years. These parents had, collectively, a total of 32 students ranging in age from Preparatory to Year 12. Nine teachers worked in primary schools with students enrolled from Preparatory through to Year 7 and eight teachers worked in secondary schools enrolling students from Years 8 to 12. Ten DSTAs worked with primary school students and five DSTAs worked with secondary school students. Except for one male secondary school teacher and one male secondary school DSTA, all teachers and DSTA participants were female. Semi-structured, face to face interviews of between 20 minutes and 1 hour in duration were conducted to elicit subjective perspectives from the participants. Sufficient flexibility in the interview schedule created opportunities for the researcher to pursue themes relevant to the topic while allowing in-depth exploration of the participants' opinions and perceptions (Birks & Mills, 2011; Charmaz, 2006).

Employing an emergent design, it was observed after the completion of several interviews that each group of participants reflected a different focus on the phenomenon. To capture this variance in perspectives the transcripts were initially coded as separate groups of participants; parents, primary school teachers, secondary school teachers, primary school DSTAs and secondary school DSTAs. Methods of coding, collating, collapsing and refining produced focused codes from each group of transcripts (Birks & Mills, 2011; Charmaz, 2006). The combined set of focussed codes was further refined to elicit analytical codes that represented the total data set (Birks & Mills, 2011; Charmaz, 2006; Clarke, 2005).

This article describes a component of the theory that was generated from the research into student support during parental deployment. The theory generated from the larger study explains that by *being in the school* and *seeing*

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student need, DSTAs *address student need* and *build school capacity* to support students during parental deployment. The following discussion describes how *DSTAs build supportive relationships with students, parents and teachers,* a theme contained within the *being in the school* code. Ethics approval for this study was obtained from the Department of Defence, Queensland Education, Catholic Education, Townsville Diocese and James Cook University. Pseudonyms are used in the following section to maintain anonymity of the participants.

Findings

The data suggested that all three groups of participants (mothers, teacher participants and DSTAs) felt that the DSTAs performed a vital role in their schools. The mothers appreciated the approachability and accessibility of the DSTAs and the DSTAs' willingness to offer assistance to themselves and their children with everyday concerns. The mothers also felt that DSTAs were well placed to represent their children's needs to teachers. Teacher participants appreciated the availability of the DSTAs to provide additional support to their students when needed and also to share their knowledge about the ADF lifestyle. DSTAs offered teachers practical support and insights that helped them to further understand and address their students' needs. With a professional focus on promoting student wellbeing during a parental deployment, DSTAs developed caring and supportive relationships with students and valued professional relationships with parents and teachers. By attending to students' social and emotional needs, DSTAs helped students to manage the challenges associated with a parental deployment and engage in their educational program.

Building Supportive Relationships with Students

Through knowing children well DSTAs were able to identify individual students' needs and promote supportive processes both within the school environment and also at home. Working with students at school often alerted DSTAs to students' concerns that needed addressing within the family. Lesley, a primary school DSTA, described how her pre-deployment preparation activities sometimes uncovered students' concerns that needed attention by their parents:

> "A lot of them were very frightened about dad being shot or killed or they didn't have a big concept of what dad was actually doing over there so we had a little questionnaire, 'Where's dad going? What do you think he'll be doing while he's there? What job does he do? What might happen?' and write those things down so the parent, when they took it home, could see where things were. So if they think dad's going to be shooting people or killing people, they can then take that information on board and talk about that that might not necessarily be the case."

DSTAs committed to making regular contact with each student throughout a parental deployment cycle. Intentional monitoring of student wellbeing during deployment helped DSTAs and teachers to identify any student difficulties early and promptly implement support structures to help students to regulate their emotions and return to full engagement with their educational program and social relationships.

DSTAs organised lunchtime activities that offered students the opportunity to meet and form friendships with other students from ADF families. Activities, such as making gifts for the deployed parent, were designed to aid communication with the deployed parents. The students' engagement with the activities generated conversations whereby students shared their experiences with others in a similar situation to themselves. Through informal conversations students gained a greater understanding of their own feelings and by listening to others' experiences they discovered self-care strategies. Jacinta, the mother of 11 year old Gemma, described how talking with a small group of similar aged girls assisted Gemma to recognise and communicate her own feelings:

> "It's sort of an opportunity to chat and talk and connect with other kids with the same thing so they knew that someone else in their class or year or school was having the same experience they were . . . And an opportunity for them sort of for them to talk about what was going on . . . It gave her a reason to keep talking where she used to block. She internalises everything and doesn't know how to start that conversation. Where talking about what she is doing and how such and such is going and 'their dad's away and they're missing their dad and I miss my dad' . . . or 'such and such cried themselves to sleep last night and yeah, I cried as well.' . . . It gave her a topic to start with as well, in addition to having an activity and connecting with other kids going through deployment, it also gave her that starter with me. It was her way of saying 'this is what happened, this is what I did.' . . . She's not a child who talks about her feelings easily."

While students enjoyed spending time with the DSTAs and other students from ADF families, their friends offered them a source of support throughout a parental deployment. Friendship groups played an important role in assisting students to adjust to the changes in their families and DSTAs paid close attention to the stability of students' friendship circles during a deployment. Casey, a secondary school DSTA, described her work with students in the playground:

> "I get out in the playground and I stop and talk, ask 'how's it going, is everything alright?' If they are by themselves there is usually something going on. You know your kids before a deployment, what they do, who they are with, how they behave so when there's a deployment you can see if there's a difference and that I think is the most important thing I do. I know them and if there's a different thing happening, I can pick."

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Building Supportive Relationships with Parents

The mothers felt comfortable contacting the DSTAs whom they found to be "approachable", "available" and "willing to help." The mothers were confident that their worries about their children would be understood by the DSTAs. DSTAs responded to parents' concerns promptly by offering information and support. The mothers recognised the DSTAs as an initial point of contact in the school and they were reassured by the knowledge that the DSTAs, who they felt understood both the challenges of deployment and their children's individual needs, were available to their children and advocated for them within the school.

The mothers also appreciated the DSTAs' support to help them connect with other ADF families in the school. Parent gatherings provided opportunities for parents to debrief and they generated processes of mutual support and school engagement. Heather, the mother of four middle school-aged boys, described how the DSTA welcomed her family to the school and kept her informed of local opportunities:

> "[DSTA] really went out of their way to get to know me, welcome us into the school and introduce us to other families which I think is important as well . . . She goes out of her way to help everybody and let us know what's going on with DCO or what's happening at the base or things to do in the holidays or even just having the morning teas are good as well."

Parents contacted the DSTAs by email or phone alerting them to family changes and student difficulties. Parents often asked DSTAs to monitor students' wellbeing at times of particular vulnerability. Those parents, who preferred not to discuss a parental deployment with the school staff in general, were often comfortable disclosing family information to the DSTA who they found to be understanding of their concerns and thorough in their actions. Rita, a primary school DSTA, described a typical email conversation with a parent:

> "We get a lot of emails telling us you know 'so and so is going on deployment, could you keep an eye on' and we will email back 'yep, been down to the classroom, they seem to be fine. Let me know if there's anything else I can do.' Or we'll send them an email saying 'we noticed this at school today, have you noticed this?' or 'we've done a particular craft work or we've visited them, made extra time and they've mentioned something that was bothering them.' So we'll do the communication to home to make sure that they know."

DSTAs recognised the additional pressures on the non-deployed parent. If parents were unable to support students to meet their homework responsibilities DSTAs assisted students to meet their school commitments throughout the school day. Lesley, a primary school DSTA, offered her assistance when students were unable to complete homework at home:

> "I'll say to the parent 'well he hasn't been quite behaving himself or getting his homework done and then he's been getting in trouble at school because he hasn't been getting his homework done.' And sometimes it's just 'what's say you come in of a morning and we'll just get it done and you won't have to get it done at home.'"

With a DSTA in the school the mothers felt welcomed and secure in the knowledge that their children's deployment-related needs were understood and communicated to teachers. As such, the mothers were reassured by the knowledge that their children were well supported at school.

Building Supportive Relationships with Teachers

Teacher participants regarded DSTAs as a very useful resource in their schools. Parents and DSTAs informed teachers of relevant deployment dates and any pertinent information that could impact on students' educational engagement during a parental deployment. DSTAs offered teachers information, expert professional knowledge and practical support that assisted them to better understand and support their students' needs. Being aware of parental deployments alerted teachers to the possibility of additional student support needs and assisted them to prepare ahead as explained by Ricky, an early childhood teacher:

> "[DSTA] will come and tell me or give me the heads up that the parent is going to be away in the near future so that I can prepare for those emotions or behaviours that the child might demonstrate . . . She'll give me a suggestion on what to say or do . . . I'll record that to remember the date and give that little person a bit of space and a bit of me time for the child . . . And that's what you have to be very sensitive of as well and knowing yes even though this is happening, they walk through that door every day and every day's very different and it's very difficult but kids are resilient. It's very difficult and different for them at times but to deal with an absent parent for eight months because that's a big chunk of your life."

A recognition of students' family circumstances allowed teachers to respond more sensitively to changes in students' behaviour as described by Hannah, a secondary school teacher:

> "I think if you are aware of it and the extra stress that it puts on kids, if you know there is stuff going on at home and the kids have other stuff to deal with, I tend to be a bit easier on them than a kid that's just being a smart arse. It's good as a teacher to know."

DSTAs encouraged teachers to stay alert for any changes in student behaviour that may indicate that those students were experiencing difficulties with emotional regulation or coping, or suggest a need for additional student support. In turn this reminded teachers of the possible pressures in students' lives and the importance of early referral. Casey, a secondary school DSTA, described the specific student behaviours that she identified for teachers:

> "I send teachers an email and say 'please let me know if I can help, if there's any changes in behaviour, if there's changes in attendance, if there's any assessment that's not being done, if

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> they're late.' So I give them an idea of what they're looking for not just 'if there's something wrong with this kid, send them to me.' I let them know the sorts of things they would be looking for that might come up. I do that for every child with a deployed parent with permission. Some teachers are really good at it, some not at all and others only as the case arises. But some teachers will email me and tell me how great they are doing. There's good, it's not always just bad."

Building and maintaining professional relationships with teachers was vital to the strength of the DSTA role and required an ongoing effort by DSTAs. Staff turnover was high in some schools with a continuous stream of new teachers in need of an introduction to the DSTA program. DSTAs in large schools found that the large number of teachers and the high volume of internal emails presented challenges to effective communication. As teachers' availability for consultation was limited due to classroom commitments, DSTAs made themselves available when teachers had time to meet. Kate, a primary school DSTA, described her commitment to building relationships with staff:

> "Getting out there on a personal level and letting everybody know ... and just penetrating. Let them know who you are and what you can do for them... it's very much about relationship building in the first instance and of course there's always new staff. It's an ongoing process... It's getting that education through, why you're actually there, what's your role and what you can actually do for them and putting it all together."

Catherine, a primary school DSTA, recognised the demands on teachers' time and explained the importance of DSTAs' flexibility and willingness to meet with teachers when they were available:

> "I think it's important the DSTA has a good understanding and good rapport with all the staff, admin and teachers, and everyone here at the school. Because if you don't have that, that's where you communication breaks down. And you have to understand that when you go to see a student you're not always able to see them there and then at that moment. You've got to arrange a time to fit in with the curriculum. But you have to keep your mind open and you can't be judgemental. You have to be easy going, go from teacher to teacher to get your information and be available early in the morning and late in the afternoon to see them because it's for the students."

DSTAs shared their professional knowledge about the ADF lifestyle with teachers when opportunities arose. They also offered practical support to teachers through working in classrooms as well as working with students outside the classroom. Ongoing supportive relationships that developed between DSTAs and teachers generated additional school-based support that assisted individual students to overcome obstacles to their learning. Pam, a year 7 teacher, explained the benefits of working closely with both the DSTA and the student's mother during the student's father's deployment:

> "It did have an effect on him. He missed his dad when he was overseas... I think sometimes he felt a little bit lost so having [DSTA] that he knew for a couple of years there, getting to know me and that I would support him too, it actually made a difference... We found that having [DSTA] and I working together and working with mum made a big difference and he really, really settled down... [DSTA] supported him in the classroom and it wasn't done in a way that made him feel different or separated from other kids."

However, some teachers viewed student behaviour as isolated from their family situation and failed to grasp an understanding of the cumulative underlying pressures experienced by children throughout a parental deployment cycle. Kathleen, a primary school teacher with a partner in the ADF, expressed the frustration she felt towards those colleagues who did not appear to appreciate the unique challenges for students with a deployed parent:

> "A lot of teachers don't understand how difficult it is for these children. And I think it's one of these things, unless you are defence yourself, I don't think you can quite grasp. Having been through that experience myself, I don't think you can quite grasp what this child is going through, especially when your parent's in a war zone and you've gone from being a two parent family to being a one parent family. It's almost like going through a family split and on top of that you know that your dad is somewhere dangerous. And I don't think people quite understand the severity of it. Most people use, like many teachers use it like 'that's an excuse.' I don't think they quite understand the impact it can have on children."

DSTAs shared their professional knowledge with teachers as they worked with them collaboratively to support the wellbeing of students. Through experience and professional observations DSTAs developed a keen appreciation of the potential influences of emotional distress on the learning process. They used this knowledge to offer insights to teachers. Lesley, a primary school DSTA, felt that the DSTAs' acknowledgement of teachers' focus on student learning helped teachers to recognise the connection between learning and student wellbeing:

> "The more you focus on their learning to the teachers it makes them feel a lot better about letting them go. It's a bit of a manipulation but that's what you've got to do and I focus on that a lot with the teachers; that sometimes the emotional needs that we meet for them enables them to meet their education needs better and that seems to work quite well with the teachers."

The DSTAs provided essential support for teachers that in turn assisted schools as a whole to support the increased needs of students from ADF families throughout a parental deployment. By providing professional knowledge and practical support to teachers, as well as targeted support to students, DSTAs contributed towards the holistic adjustment of students to the changes that were occurring in their lives. By integrating their practice into existing school structures DSTAs enhanced the whole school's capacity to support

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students during parental deployment. Furthermore, increased communication between families and schools generated a greater understanding, by school personnel, of each family's circumstances and created opportunities for schools and families to work together to support the social, emotional and educational needs of students.

Discussion

This study investigated the perspectives of parents, teachers and DSTAs on school-based support for students with a deployed parent. While each individual participant approached the interviews from a different experience base, many commonalities were evident within the data collected from each group of participants; parents, teachers and DSTAs. Commonalities were also evident across the groups. Study participants recognised the positive influences flowing from the supportive relationships built between DSTAs and students, parents and teachers. Teachers particularly valued the availability of peer support opportunities for their students; however, parents focussed more on the strength of the individual relationships between the students and DSTAs as a major protective factor as did Easterbrooks et al. (2013), Astor et al. (2013) and de Pedro et al. (2015) in America. By anticipating student needs and implementing supportive processes and structures DSTAs assisted students to establish help seeking behaviours and engage in supportive peer processes.

De Pedro et al. (2015) found that a positive school climate that featured caring adult–student relationships, peer support and cultural awareness of military life promoted student wellbeing for American students with deployed parents. DSTAs contributed to a positive school climate by raising cultural awareness of the ADF work and family lifestyle (Astor et al., 2013; Chandra et al., 2010; Mmari et al., 2009) through newsletter items, whole school projects and classroom discussions. They also arranged opportunities for students to meet with others, who also had a deployed parent, from outside their usual friendship circle, thus creating a sense of community and connection within the school for students from ADF families. DSTAs also encouraged the development of informal support networks by offering lunchtime activities for students from ADF families where they could bring a friend. Huebner, Mancini, Bowen, and Orthner (2009) recognised informal support networks as the foundation work of community development as the peer relationships offer participants opportunities to give and receive social and emotional support. Lunchtime groups for students reduced the isolation often felt during parental deployment as also recognised by Mmari et al. (2009). Peer interactions with other students from ADF families assisted students to make sense of their experiences and was found by Easterbrooks et al. (2013) to be an important stress reducing process.

Parents were reassured by the DSTAs' availability to their children if they required additional support during the school day. DSTAs reported parent requests for feedback on their children's participation at school as common during a deployment. The student focus and informality of the relationship developed between DSTAs and parents appeared to suffer less from the stigma often associated with more formal helping relationships as found in a recent Australian study by Siebler and Goddard (2014) and provided opportunities for DSTAs to offer incidental support to parents. Parents engaged with the DSTA as a member of their known support group; however, DSTAs reported that many parents were reluctant to follow up on referrals they made to professional agencies. This tendency reflects the findings of previous Australian research by McGuire et al. (2012), Siebler (2009) and Siebler and Goddard (2014). ADF families were used to coping well with the many transitions associated with their lifestyle and seemed unwilling to discuss their situation with someone they did not yet know.

Teacher participants reported that teachers, in general, lacked a sound understanding of the needs of children during a parental deployment. This finding reflects those from American studies by Chandra et al. (2010) and Mmari et al. (2009) and supports a case for further exploration of this situation within the Australian context. While the teacher participants prioritised student wellbeing, their heavy workload demands relating to curriculum, assessment and reporting made it difficult for them to fully assimilate the diverse cultural needs of all students in their classroom.

Supported by their ADF community connections (Huebner et al., 2009), DSTAs integrated their knowledge of the emotional cycle of deployment (Esposito-Smythers et al., 2011), the ADF lifestyle and related student needs with their experience and professional skills to support students, parents and teachers throughout the deployment cycle (Easterbrooks et al., 2013; Tudge et al., 2009). Practices developed to support students from ADF families are potentially applicable to other students experiencing similar challenges.

The establishment of a school-based student support network is also relevant for supporting the unique needs of students from other cultural groups within the school community. Opportunities to anticipate and respond flexibly to the needs of students, teachers and parents are possible to achieve for a school-based practitioner with the necessary cultural knowledge and skills. Normal school processes provide opportunities for practitioners with in-depth cultural knowledge to advocate for families and offer a school-based resource to other staff members during the school day. Employment on the school staff brings an understanding of the school culture that is only available to school employees according to Huebner and Mancini (2005).

The focus on student wellbeing that was identified by the Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the 21st century (MCEETYA, 1999) is supported by the work of DSTAs. The national goals set a direction for state and territory governments towards explicit policy development to enhance student wellbeing. The Declaration clearly

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identified student wellbeing and engagement as key directions for educators stating:

> 'Staff in all sites . . . play an important role in fostering engagement and wellbeing so that each child and student is able to achieve their best and enjoy their educational experience' (p.8)

The national goals provide a vision and a set of guiding principles for safe and supportive school communities. Australian schools strive to build school cultures that represent and support the needs of their local communities. Research findings related to the unique needs of students from ADF families offers important knowledge to Australian school communities.

Limitations

This article reports some of the findings from a small study involving 47 participants and therefore the results cannot be generalised. At the time of the data collection the participants were all located in Townsville, a regional Queensland city that is home to a major ADF operational base. The DSTA work discussed in this study does not necessarily represent the experiences of DSTAs working in other areas of Australia. DSTA priorities vary greatly amongst different military locations and within different schools. For example, schools in proximity to ADF training bases experience high rates of student mobility while parental deployments are not common, therefore DSTA work in these areas is more focussed towards supporting high levels of student mobility.

All parent participants were the female partners of male ADF members. The increasing number of female ADF members, single parents and duel serving parents in the ADF were not represented. Student voices would also have contributed a valuable perspective to this study. However, this was not possible for ethical reasons. Because of children and young people being considered as a "special group" a study including student interviews would require a separate study proposal for consideration by the Australian Defence Human Research Ethics Committee (ADHREC).

Conclusions

Increasing demands on teachers' workloads indicates a need for schools to not only provide targeted support for students beyond the classroom, but to also support teachers to address culturally specific student wellbeing needs within their classrooms. Culturally aware practitioners working within the school structure can familiarise themselves with school operations and integrate culturally compatible processes that not only support students and families but also raise teacher awareness of the cultural nuances that influence academic engagement.

Many schools have widely adopted DSTA developed practices to support student mobility. Similar consideration is needed for students who experience long periods of parental absence associated with dangerous occupations for instance, bush fire response teams. Strategies employed by DSTAs to assist students to manage the emotional demands of a parental deployment are also applicable to the children of emergency services and mining industry employees as indicated in work carried out by Kudler and Porter (2013). Furthermore, the described school response can potentially be used in cases of recent family separation or divorce where the child is learning to adjust to the new family configuration and its associated stresses.

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