

Hidden in Plain Sight: The Unseen Culture of the Military Child in Oklahoma

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Learning the beliefs and customs of other cultures can increase tolerance and understanding, and the classroom offers an excellent setting for this to occur. College coursework for educators often include diversity in the classroom. However, there is one culture overlooked in Oklahoma: the military culture.

Culture is the way in which a group of people with similar behaviors, beliefs, values, and symbols live and share their way of life. While the military is made up of a multitude of different cultures, religions, races, and ethnicities, it is culture in its own right (Hall, 2011). Identification with this culture may not project itself outwardly, making recognizing military students tricky. As such their own specific needs can go ignored or unseen within education spaces.

There are 2 million military children in the country and 44% of all military families have children, so this culture of students is large (Milburn & Lightfoot, 2013). Oklahoma itself is home to five major military installations with more than 130,000 employees (Oklahoma, 2011). Since one in every 16 jobs in Oklahoma is impacted by the armed forces, this makes for a sizable culture in the state.

Where I teach in Lawton, located adjacent Fort Sill, 21% of the total school population consists of military dependents (Lawton Public). Many school districts are not located near a military installation, so it is feasible why this culture might go unnoticed. However, many soldiers serve in a

part time capacity as reservists or members of the National Guard and their children are also part of this culture. As such, educators must try to better understand, serve, and support this culture when it is prevalent.

More Than Meets the Eye

In classrooms across the country, noises help to create an atmosphere for students. Sometimes it is laughter, sometimes it is lecture, but in Lawton, booming sounds are known to consistently permeate our classroom walls. Despite this, students continue working as the sound of the doors rattling and windows vibrating fade into the background. They know it is just the result of a different kind of learning taking place among the soldiers just down the road. Learning to work amidst these sounds is just one of the things that makes teaching in my community and educating military children different than others.

The biggest thing that separates military children is that a parent may be absent for extended periods of time throughout their childhood. Military deployments are common and the loss is compounded when parents are sent to serve in war-torn regions of the world. This stress can impact the social and psychological development of military children (Easterbrooks et al., 2013). Since Lawton is a large military community, the school district supports these students with a traveling military counselor and by sponsoring support groups within

the secondary schools. Teachers can also help by having good communication with the home parent during a deployment since the actions at home and at school don't always match when a student is dealing with an absent parent. Being aware of possible mood swings in military dependent students and remaining supportive works to help these students cope with their loss.

Military children find developing deep relationships problematic. Moving so often in order to meet the needs of the armed forces can prevent them from forming strong bonds with peers (Moore & Baker, 2011). Soldiers generally stay at one duty station for no more than a few years – lifelong military children may move an average of nine times throughout their childhood – so packing up and moving becomes a natural rhythm of life for this culture (Wertsch, 1991). The desire to build strong connections may be repressed for fear of the pain that comes with having to sever those connections. For educators, this results in more guarded students who are reluctant to share and open up to others voluntarily, so keeping an eye on any military students who appear withdrawn is important. This is where good student-teacher rapport is beneficial and teachers can help by helping those students find a strong peers within the classroom.

Since the military is built upon structure and discipline, the student's home can often mirror a similar authoritative style (Wertch, 1991). The values that were instilled into a soldier when they signed up to serve often spill over into the manner in which they parent, which can be both a good and bad thing for teachers. As a whole, I generally have few discipline problems from military children because many have been taught to show respect for those in authority, especially teachers. Some

of my most supportive parents come from a military background because they see the value in being motivated toward bettering themselves and their children through education. On the other hand, because the high level of expectation, any time a military child misses the mark by misbehaving or failing on an assignment, the repercussion at home can be more severe and detrimental, resulting in a more anxious student. In this manner, a call home to a parent can sometimes do more harm than good in building and maintaining a strong student-teacher relationship.

Identity development for a military child can also be more challenging. Once they begin to socialize outside of the military culture, they see the civilian world as different – sometimes even better – because these children don't have to consistently move or deal with a possible extended absence of their parents. These differences can make them feel like outsiders. In fact, most military children state the first time they felt like a foreigner was when they began attending public school (Wertsch, 1991). Moreover, those students who find themselves as both military and minority students get a double dose of feeling like an outcast among their peers. In Lawton, nearly two-thirds of all the military children in the district are also classified under a marginalized race or culture (Lawton Public). Once these students reach the secondary level, this isolation generally causes them to either rebel against the military lifestyle and develop their identity apart from it or immerse themselves more in the culture through JROTC and even enlisting for service themselves when they come of age. Secondary educators can attest that developing an identity can be a messy and tumultuous process for any teenager, but being a military child adds another layer since they must learn to navigate and find their sense of self within both the military and civilian worlds.

It can be difficult to adjust anytime you the new one in the group, but coming into a new classroom as an adolescent is even tougher. Most teachers begin the year with ice-breakers in order for students to learn about each other, however, military students can move into new schools throughout the entire year. One way to help welcome newly-moved military students is to give them a chance to complete the same icebreaker and share it with the class, allowing them to introduce themselves and find those students with similar interests and experiences in the classroom. Our new state standards can also be beneficial, since they closely mirror those in other states, thus making the transition easier since school expectations and curriculum might be on the same track as in their previous school.

Difference is Not Always a Hindrance

Teaching in a school with a large military presence does come with several perks educators may be hard pressed to find in other communities. There is a strong sense of pride, patriotism, and service toward others felt throughout the community and seen among the students we teach. With a vast majority of Lawton's population tied to the military as both active and retired soldiers, living amid the presence of so much bravery and selflessness is nothing short of inspiring. Although their time growing up as a military child may make for a more difficult childhood, these students have also been given a unique opportunity to see the world differently because of their access to more diverse cultures, places, and people than their civilian counterparts (Wertsch, 1991). Often these students grow up more open-minded, worldly, and they have more to share with their peers, which can be a true asset in a classroom environment.

Research has shown that military children grow up more resilient and successful in life because of how often they had to adapt to new situations (Hall, 2011). The pattern of being an outsider in a new city, a new school is repeated every time they move to a new post, so the level of resiliency military children develop continues to increase. Even though a military child can feel adrift at times, they learn how to not only survive but flourish. Their tenacity is nothing short of inspirational, and I couldn't imagine living, teaching or raising my family in anything other than a military community.

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