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SUPPORTING MILITARY STUDENTS: INSIGHTS FROM THE FRONTLINE

Research Article

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Abstract

Military connected students face unique challenges that civilian students do not. This study aims to highlight common challenges that may be present when teaching military connected students including; academic, behavioral and emotional obstacles. The authors are military spouses, parents and educators who have decades of practice navigating the intricate details of active duty military life inside and outside the classroom. Having experienced multiple relocations and deployments the authors provide authentic examples and advice for educators supporting military students. This frontline insight adds a rich layer of understanding and provides a distinctive lens through which to examine the topic. The results suggest using a culturally responsive teaching framework, wrapped in compassionate teaching practices, to better service military connected children. This approach encourages educators to look for and incorporate students' strengths as areas of opportunity and as important assets in a child's education. Examining military connected students' education through this context helps steward the children of those who serve the country.

Keywords: Military connected students, challenges of military students, military education, culturally responsive teaching

1. Introduction

There are roughly two million military connected students residing in the United States of America with 1.2 million being school aged children (James, 2017). Military students can anticipate moving between six to nine times during their K-12 educational years (Saum, 2024). Frequent moves and disruptions caused by deployments can have a significant impact on the development of adolescents resulting in notable learning gaps, behavioral issues and psychological stress (Ismail, 2022). With proper professional development and training educators can better understand and support military students and their families thereby reducing the adverse effects caused by military related disruptions.

2. Framework of Support

Theoretical frameworks help provide a structure to better understand how phenomena relates to a topic thereby allowing for broader holistic learning. When theoretical frameworks are combined with conceptual constructs, new discoveries and inferences can be made adding to foundational knowledge. This assists in bridging the gap between theoretical awareness and practical applications (Ivanović & Ho, 2019). Within the field of education, a social science approach is frequently used to explain human behaviors and phenomena (Benton & Craib,

2023). In this article the authors suggest adopting the Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) framework as a means of supporting military connected students with academic, behavioral and emotional challenges. Specifically, they examine the principles of CRT as pillars of support for military connected learners while also including concrete examples of best practices that educators can immediately add to their toolbox. They close the paper by underscoring the often-overlooked strengths military children bring to the classroom. The hope is that educators who work with military connected students will gain a better understanding of how to bolster efforts towards lifting up this distinct population of learners.

3. Historical Context

The landscape of the military lifestyle is often reflective of the political and social environment of the host country. In the United States financial backing and expansion efforts related to military efforts ebb and flow depending on the political party in office. Times of conflict and unrest also impact the lifestyle of the service member's family. Military connected children deeply understand the impact of conflict on daily life. For example, military connected students may have a parent who deploys frequently and for long periods of time during seasons of unrest, requiring them to adjust to a single parent household and the stressors that accompany. Compared to their civilian classmates, military connected students move three times more often and frequently relocate great distances away from their starting residence, including settling in other states or countries (Clever & Segal, 2013; DePedro et al, 2018; Kremkow, 2023).

Embedded and often hidden stressors of relocating include the need to find professionals such as doctors, dentists and optometrists. For military connected students with special education or health related needs the list of professionals required could be elaborate including; behavior intervention therapists, speech and language therapists, psychologists and so forth. Frequent moves can be complicated and exhausting especially in locations where resources are limited or non-existent. Understanding and supportive educators can make transitional or fearful moments less intimidating and worrisome for military families.

Military children are defined as children of all service members including; active duty, reserve, guard and retired (Chikezie-Darron & Jordan, 2024). The terms military children, military students and military connected students will be used interchangeably within this article and will encompass those learners ages five to eighteen years. Important to note is the country of origin of the military service members. This paper is written as a tool to support educators of students within the United States of America and therefore the article should be considered through this lens. The authors recognize the universal importance of this topic however they have focused their research in an effort to lean on their collective experience as it pertains to United States military involvement. They appreciate that their authentic familiarity and participation with military service members is a reflection of United States Marine Corps involvement and may not transfer to organizations abroad.

4. Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT)

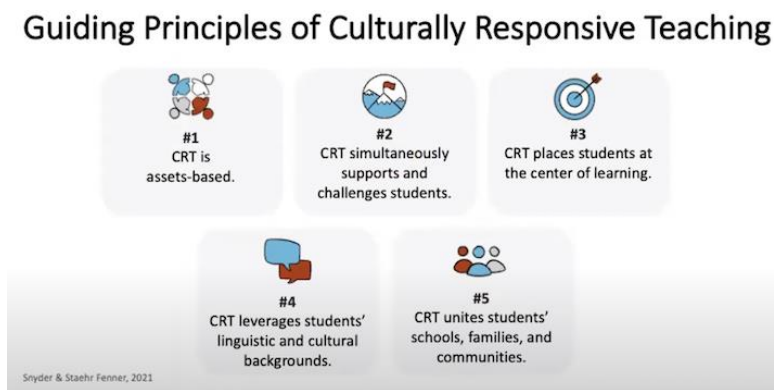
Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is a pedagogy that recognizes the importance of including students' cultural references in all aspects of learning (Ladson-Billings, 1994). While the origins of this pedagogy began with teaching students of color through the leverage of personal and cultural experiences, it has evolved to connect teachers and students across many cultures and backgrounds. A culturally responsive classroom integrates influential factors that shape a population's values, beliefs, and how an individual operates in the larger world (Bunner, 2017). Ladson-Billings (1995) emphasizes that culturally responsive teaching is



grounded in student achievement, is committed to developing positive cultural and social identities, and is dedicated to evolving critical consciousness.

The military student population is less known in communities that have no direct ties to local military establishments. This unique population of students shares cultural intricacies that are little known without understanding the culture of the military community. Like the second language learners and students of color in which culturally responsive teaching evolved from, military students can benefit from a pedagogy that creates a learning space in which every student feels acknowledged, valued, and included as equal members of the community (Bunner, 2017). Snyder and Staehr-Fenner (2021) outlined five guiding principles of culturally responsive teaching for multilingual learners as (1) assets based, (2) simultaneously supports and challenges students, (3) places students at the center of learning, (4) leverages students linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and (5) unites student's schools, families and communities. These five principles can be applied to the military student population highlighting unique experiences that enhance the education of all stakeholders in any K-12 educational setting.

Table 1. *Guiding Principles of Culturally Responsive Teaching*



(Snyder & Staehr-Fenner, 2021, p. 22).

4.1 Principle 1: Asset Based Mindset

Snyder and Staehr-Fenner (2021) describe assets-based mindset as placing value on a students' home language and culture and recognizing these traits as assets for future learning rather than obstacles and hindrances to overcome. Asset based mindset originated from teaching multilingual learners with the approach that honors students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds while building upon what students already know (Hammond, 2015). This principle emphasizes that there is a correlation between centering instruction around a student's life and the positive impact it has on student learning (Snyder & Staehr-Fenner, 2021). Educators must prioritize understanding a student's unique background to effectively discover students' assets. This guiding principle is easily applied to a military student population as it relates to culturally responsive teaching.

Military students bring many diverse experiences into a classroom setting. Educators who integrate an asset-based approach to understanding students take the necessary time to learn about the unique student population that comprises their classroom. Educators who learn about a student's personal history as well as academic background are able to design effective instruction using the student as a resource (Snyder & Staehr-Fenner, 2021). Military students often have unique experiences that can be used as entry points to student discussions. These diverse entry points can be considered gifts and serve as the foundations for future learning (Snyder & Staehr-Fenner, 2021). For example, in a typical classroom setting, a military student

may be the only student who has experienced living abroad. This first hand experience can be leveraged to provide peers with insights on living in a different country. These experiences provide more than cultural insights and can be linked to many aspects of learning. Depending on their geographic location, some military students are exposed to different climates and weather experiences. These experiences can be used when connecting concepts to lessons in science for the benefit of all learners in the classroom. Adopting an asset-based approach to understanding students allows educators to learn as much as they can about their unique student population to support future learning for all students.

4.2 Principle 2: Simultaneously Supports & Challenges Students

This principle examines the need for all students to have access to standards-based grade level material while recognizing that student specific support is needed for some learners to access the curriculum. This principle also involves teaching students about the issues in their own communities and having them develop an understanding on how to change. To accomplish Principle 2, educators must provide all students with access to content and programs while they are simultaneously challenging students to think critically and build connections when learning new content (Snyder & Staehr-Fenner, 2021). Military students are a unique population with different academic identities. Frequent moves from state to state exposes military students to different learning standards and experiences. Educators must be aware of a military student's background and how their background knowledge can enhance learning, even if they have not been exposed to the current standard of learning. Educators are positioned to facilitate the learning of military students by capturing and cultivating a growth mindset through supporting and challenging students.

Supporting and challenging students simultaneously involves creating learning experiences that connect to the military student's own personal experiences. Snyder and Staehr-Fenner (2021) suggest challenging students through interdisciplinary and project-based learning activities can both support and challenge learners. These types of activities are ideal for the military student population where individual learning experiences can connect the student to multiple content areas. When educators support learning through experiences, military students are able to showcase their own experiences. Military student experiences range from living in different geographic locations, experiencing a variety of emotions, and fostering new friendships. Due to the transient nature of military students, this population may enter and leave a school system at seemingly random times during the school year. This transient nature can create the potential for social emotional and academic learning gaps for military students. Educators are challenged to support these students while maintaining academic rigor and access to grade level academic content. While educators adapt to the learning needs of new students, scaffolded lessons provide the vehicle that allows the student to access content until they have the skill to do so.

4.3 Principle 3: Places Students at the Center of Learning

This principle of culturally responsive teaching emphasizes the importance of ensuring student-centered learning. Staehr-Fenner (2021) defines this for multilingual students by placing students at the center of the learning in which the students in the classroom shape the content, instructional activities, materials, assessment, and/or pace of the learning within a structured learning environment. For military students, this principle is essential in connecting learning using student experiences. To accomplish this, teachers must first understand this unique population of students beyond academic strengths and needs. Military students often have limited time in a school setting due to changing duty stations every two to three years. Unlike non-military students where a school or district may have consecutive years of history



and data on student performance, teachers are at a disadvantage in knowing a military student's background. Integrating a student-centered approach for the military student population enables teachers to build rapport while guiding students in their own learning.

Making students feel valued is essential when incorporating student centered learning into a K-12 classroom. While this is essential for all students, the military student population benefits from this principle due to the complex background of the military lifestyle. Deployment hardships paired with frequent moves are factors that make the military student population the prime targets for a student-centered learning environment. Ensuring that these students feel comfortable learning from their new peers is the goal for teachers. This can be accomplished by incorporating storytelling as a class activity where students and teachers learn about the different cultural backgrounds of their students (Snyder & Staehr-Fenner, 2021). Also, knowing that a military connected student is likely transient, it is imperative for educators to goal-set with these students. Understanding a military student's long term goals will facilitate educators with creating short term goals for their students. Combining these strategies for military connected students places the student at the center of the learning and creates an avenue for military students to thrive in any educational setting.

4.4 Principle 4: Leverages Students' Linguistic and Cultural Backgrounds

Understanding students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds positions educators to maximize the learning of all students by leveraging individual strengths. A tenant of culturally responsive teaching is that it promotes growth in all students through the opportunities to learn and hear varied perspectives (Snyder & Staehr-Fenner, 2021). Military connected students have diverse backgrounds and have been exposed to experiences that other students may not have encountered. Educators are able to tap into these experiences by understanding the culture of the military lifestyle. Educators who have a basic understanding of the military lifestyle are better equipped to support military students and allow them to feel connected to the curriculum and classroom discussions. Teachers who integrate military friendly resources and visuals as part of the classroom promote an inclusive atmosphere that can lead to naturalistic opportunities to share experiences with peers. For communities where there is not a strong military presence, schools can invite families to share experiences. Involving families promotes connections within the school community and further strengthens learning for all stakeholders.

School districts often have planned events in which military service members are honored. Using events like Veteran's Day and Month of the Military Child serve as starting points that connect learning about the United States Military and service members to a school community. These events allow the platform for military connected students to share about their unique experiences. Military students can offer insights when traveling on field trips or learning about a variety of topics. Culminating field trips to Washington D.C. provide opportunities for students to understand the government of the United States. On this same field trip, a military student may share personal experiences regarding the role their parent(s) held in serving the White House. When learning about geography and world cultures, military students may have unique perspectives to share if they have lived in different states or foreign countries. A military student who lived in Hawaii has the opportunity to share their first hand experiences with peers. Leveraging military student backgrounds provide opportunities for all learners to gain a deeper understanding of learning standards through these unique first-hand experiences.

4.5 Principle 5: Unites Students' Schools, Families & Communities

Culturally responsive teaching is most impactful when it successfully unites schools, families, and communities. The primary focus of this principle is continuous family engagement to support students. Family engagement is the ongoing, meaningful interactions

between schools and families that is characterized by two-way communication that ultimately supports student learning (Garcia, et al., 2016). For most schools that are not directly connected to a military community, this would involve holding events beyond mainstream norms. Events like Veteran's Day and celebrating the Month of the Military Child promote singular events during the academic school year. This principle of culturally responsive teaching focuses on intentional and ongoing activities that support this unique population of students and families. Involving military families in all aspects of the school community facilitates engagement and promotes belonging.

Military families often transition from duty stations with intact resources and support networks. Military families are accustomed to the resources and support when living in close proximity to a military installation. In areas without military base access, it is essential for school districts to have resources available to provide families. When families move away from military bases into new communities, they may not know the support systems available in their new community. Military families actively seek out resources in their new location to help them with various needs associated with raising school age children in a military lifestyle. Schools and school districts who anticipate the needs of this population are better positioned to support transitional military students and families. School districts can assist families by inquiring about specific needs, having knowledgeable counselors who are familiar learning standards from other states, and providing access to school based behavioral health services are some ways to support military families for any length of time, short or long.

5. Understanding the Challenges

On September 11th, 2001 a terrorist attack on American soil launched the United States into a global war on terrorism which resulted in an unprecedented and enduring military mission unlike any the country had experienced (Moses & McCrary, 2021). The subsequent fifteen years would generate the deployment of 2.77 million service members to wartorn areas abroad (Wenger et al., 2018). The repercussions of these and ensuing deployments can be felt across the nation as military connected families spiral through the emotional cycles of deployment. The Defense Health Agency (2021) continues to recognize that there are five emotional stages of deployment; 1) pre-deployment, 2) deployment, 3) sustained deployment, 4) redeployment, and 5) post deployment, as initially identified through the work of Pincus et al. (2001). Each stage encompasses associated stressors for military connected children such as anticipated loss, fear, sadness, loneliness, anger, resentment and confusion. It has been the authors observation that the emotional disruptions experienced by military connected students frequently manifests in one of three ways; through academically, behaviorally, or emotionally challenging conduct. It should be emphasized that not all military connected students experience the stages of deployment similarly nor do they each portray challenging outputs. This paper is intended to serve as a resource for educators working with students who are in need of additional support and understanding due to their military affiliation and individual circumstances.

5.1 Academic Challenges

Military connected students may experience academic challenges unlike those of other populations due to the unstable nature of the student's learning environment. It is not uncommon for military students to transition between multiple schools during their educational journey. Varying academic policies and regulations influence outputs and expectations thereby impacting the student's experiences. For example, a military connected student may attend a public school in California and be successfully meeting grade level standards only to relocate to Virginia and discover the educational standards are different and the child is now notably



behind his or her peers. Conversely, a student may relocate to a different state and have to repeat content previously mastered. These realities lead to barriers in the form of learning gaps and redundancy for students (Moses & McCrary, 2021; Saum, 2024). A comprehensive government report of more than 7,400 military respondents identified dependent(s) education as the fifth most commonly identified concern after spouse employment, time away from family, pay, and housing concerns (Blue Star Families, 2023).

Differing expectations between states may be particularly troubling for graduating students as they attempt to navigate the state's requirements against their prior accomplishments.

Other areas of academic challenge include navigating special or exceptional student education services. Educational support services and opportunities are a reflection of district and community development programs. In affluent suburban areas a military connected student may have access to gifted education opportunities such as accelerated curriculum and pathways whereas more rural communities may not. Pivoting from one educational environment to another can be difficult for many students and families alike. Kremkow (2023) suggests military connected students wait an average of 5.75 months for special education services following a relocation. Compounding lag times in assistance services can be detrimental to a student's academic success.

5.2 Behavioral Challenges

Elevated behavioral challenges are a reality for some military children. New, changing, or unknown expectations can lead to unpleasant physical expressions in the form of disobedience, withdrawal, combative altercations or lack of self-control and motivation. Behavioral challenges may be accelerated or amplified as a result of deployments and relocations as families adjust to their new normal (Moore et al, 2017). According to the Center for Public Research and Leadership (2017) military mobility and deployments can inhibit significant behavioral outcomes including fostering meaningful peer relationships. The absence of meaningful peer relationships can contribute to disruptive and isolating behaviors. Research suggests that children who have meaningful friendships are more likely to have positive social interactions, academic accomplishments and healthy self concepts (Abrams, 2023).

Without successful intervention the range and severity of negative behaviors may increase for those students who struggle. As students accrue more moves and deployments and advance into secondary school settings unwanted behaviors may become more complex including; substance abuse, bullying, carrying of weapons and physical altercations (Center for Public Research and Leadership, 2017; Moses & McCrary, 2021; Moore et al, 2017; Sullivan et al, 2015). It behoves educators to foster meaningful peer-peer relationships through interactive learning activities and collaborative projects. When educators champion connected relationships at the peer-to-peer and student-to-teacher level they offer additional layers of support.

5.3 Emotional Challenges

Optimal educational environments are those where students feel a sense of belonging. Unfortunately, frequent moves and changes in educational settings inhibit or stunt these feelings for some military connected students resulting in feelings of isolation and loneliness. If left unattended these feelings can manifest and present as childhood anxiety, depression and other neurodivergent behaviors (Saum, 2024; Moses & McCrary, 2021; Cramm et al, 2019). Research suggests that military connected children are more vulnerable for psychosocial issues than their nonmilitary peers. This risk increases as the number of parent deployments and family relocations rises (Saum, 2024; Cramm et al, 2019; Center for Public Research and Leadership, 2017). Another factor contributing to these challenges is the inconsistency in

support services. The lack of continuity between school, home and community services compounds the problem. Educators who approach these challenges with a compassionate heart and openness to understand provide pathways for healing and wellness for students and families.

6. Area of Opportunity

Applying the principles of culturally responsive teaching to military connected students can both mitigate challenges and support student learning. The way military connected children experience deployment may vary by family situation (Lester & Flake, 2013). Culturally responsive teaching empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by emphasizing the importance of including students' cultural references throughout all aspects of learning (Ladson-Billings, 1995). It is essential for educators to foster connections within the classroom and school community to support military connected students academically, behaviorally, and emotionally.

Utilizing an assets based approach when teaching military connected students supports students by gaining an understanding of student strengths. Integrating an assets based approach directly corresponds to leveraging students' cultural background in the framework of culturally responsive teaching. Both principles are essential in supporting the emotional needs of students by valuing each student's own unique experiences and prior knowledge. When teachers understand the impact the military lifestyle has on children, they are better equipped to create intentional learning experiences in the classroom. Conversely, teachers need to understand how to determine when a child or family truly needs support related to a military issue (Stites, 2016). The end result is that educators place students at the center of learning by creating connections to unique experiences.

School districts not in close proximity to military installations have a unique opportunity to create a school community that fosters military connected families. Culturally responsive teaching emphasizes the importance of uniting schools, families, and communities. Culturally responsive teaching emphasizes the importance of fostering family relationships through the integration of supportive communities. One way to accomplish this is to invite military families to join school advisory committees and parent teacher organizations to foster relationships between the school and home. Enhancing the lives of children in military families also enhances the quality of their families' lives (Cozza & Lerner, 2013). When families feel supported and take an active role in their students' education, military connected students benefit academically, behaviorally, and socially.

7. Highlighting Students' Strengths

Military students are a unique population who possess unexpected strengths that are as individual as their own personal experiences. Every military connected student will have a different experience depending on their service member's career trajectory. Many experiences enrich a military child's life, but these adventures can bring both opportunity and hardship (Lester & Flake, 2013). Despite the fluctuations in family life, military connected students engage in prosocial and resilient behavior despite the increased risks of emotional and behavioral problems (Mahar et al, 2023). For some youth, moving frequently will allow them to see more of the world or their own country, enjoy new experiences, learn how to adapt to new and different learning and social situations, enhance their relationship building skills, expand their social network across provinces and territories and strengthen family bonds (Cramm et al, 2018, 2019). The ability to adapt to new communities, understand different cultures, and develop leadership skills are some strengths that military connected students possess from their cumulative experiences living in the military lifestyle.



7.1 Aptitude to Adapt

Military students are often recognized for their resilience in mainstream culture. This recognition is gaining support at the national, state, and local level as communities are recognizing the sacrifices that military students experience (U.S. Department of Defense, n.d.). April is designated as the Month of the Military Child and often depicted by a dandelion being blown into the wind. This symbol is intended to embody how the military child is subjected to the service member's duty to the country. A military childhood is often subjected to constant change and uncertainty. While constant change and uncertainty is not the norm for most children, military connected students have a greater aptitude to adapt and excel academically, socially, emotionally, and physically (DoDEA, n.d.).

Military children are often more resilient than non-military children in their ability to face adversity (Lester & Flake, 2013). For some military children, moving frequently allows them to see more of the world or their own country, enjoy new experiences, learn how to adapt to new and different learning and social situations, enhance relationship building skills, expand social networks, and strengthen family bonds (Cramm et al, 2019). This aptitude to adapt does not occur in isolation or without a support structure. In a recent study examining military adolescents and school success, it was noted that military students with higher levels of social support averaged better academic performance, more school engagement, and more homework commitment (O'Neal et al, 2023). Military students have the ability to quickly adapt to novel situations through cumulative experiences that are grounded in a supportive community.

7.2 Cultural Understanding

Military students are exposed to different geographic locations and accumulate personalized experiences that can provide a deeper understanding of world and local cultures. However, gaining a deeper understanding of different cultures is not only acquired by moving from place to place. Military connected students gain a deeper understanding of culture through the people they meet. In a recent study of military families, teachers found that military children are worldlier and more adaptable than their nonmilitary dependent peers (Stites, 2016). Military families are also predisposed to meeting other families of different cultural backgrounds through the diversity of the military population. When living on a military installation, families live in close proximity to many other families, some who may have lived in foreign countries or have married spouses from different countries. Military children are exposed to cultural differences resulting in a broader understanding of people and cultures.

These experiences shape the cultural understanding of military connected students by normalizing a culture of diversity. Military connected students seek a sense of community among other military students through shared experiences of growing up in the military culture. Educators who have experience with military connected students note that they have more background knowledge and are more able to have perspectives on issues (Stites, 2016). Overtime, these encounters help military students to join groups and clubs when they move to new communities. Teachers who have worked with a military student population observe that these students had an increased ability to make friends and were more adaptable than nonmilitary dependent peers (Stites, 2016). The cumulative experiences of military connected students enable this population to have a deeper understanding of other cultures in the absence of direct instruction.

7.3 Leadership Skills

As students age in the K-12 school system, military connected students often emerge as leaders among their peers. In the midst of the challenges they face, military children take on manageable responsibilities that enhance their sense of efficacy and promote their personal

development (Masten, 2013). This population of young adults demonstrates the skills to easily adapt and thrive in new situations. Military students bring a collection of experiences from previous schools and extracurricular activities to new settings. These experiences translate into leadership skills when moving to new locations. Military connected students are accustomed to a tight knit community and seek out ways to belong. Stepping into leadership roles is one way military students utilize their skills of cultural understanding and fostering new friendships.

Military connected students are equipped to prove themselves beyond the classroom. The military lifestyle provides students with experiences that can support them later in life. These experiences include the ability to navigate moves or separations, adjust to new schools, and understand other cultures (Masten, 2013). High School aged military students may use their leadership skills and resiliency to join student-led leadership positions and participate in school events. Military students possess resilience which supports the successful adaptation to significant challenges (Masten, 2013). These challenges may emerge as taking advanced coursework to support their individual academic journey and post-secondary goals. Teachers who have worked with this population observe that military connected students who join mid-school year were able to adapt to new routines since they are used to making the adjustment (Stites, 2016). Military connected students possess leadership skills that manifest in different ways depending on the opportunities presented before them. Growing up in a military lifestyle and witnessing service member promotions and career celebrations fosters the academic and social leadership skills that military connected students often possess.

8. Conclusion

As this paper highlighted, military connected students bring distinct traits to the classroom. These traits are sources of challenge as well as origins of strength. Educators who intentionally invest the time to get to know their military students will be far better equipped to support them. Approaching challenges using a lens of compassion, coupled with a posture for celebrating individual strengths, allows military students an opportunity to successfully acclimate. Educators who are familiar with this population and lifestyle have the unique opportunity to leverage these experiences to enhance the learning of all students. CRT is one way that educators can support the academic, behavioral, and emotional needs of military connected students. Cultivating a deeper understanding of the military student population promotes the learning for all stakeholders while strengthening the collective school community. It is the authors' hope that educators who read this article will feel compelled to serve as exceptional stewards in educating our military children.

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