

The forgotten population: The intersection of military-connected students and special education

by

Nicole Marie Meritt

B.S., Kansas State University, 2007

M.S., Kansas State University, 2009

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

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Abstract

Military-connected students currently make up 1.3 million of K-12 students enrolled in public schools across the United States (US Department of Defense, 2020). There are also more than seven million students with an identified exceptionality qualifying them to receive special education services (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). While states are required to collect data on enrollment of military-connected students, as well as the number of students receiving special education services, they do not collect data on how many military-connected students are also identified as exceptional. As a result, this unique population of students can be thought of as “the forgotten population” and the unique needs of this population are unclear.

In this phenomenological qualitative study, the impact of military-related transitions on the educational experiences of a child with exceptionalities are explored. Four parents of military-connected children with exceptionalities engaged in qualitative interview and timeline elicitation.

These qualitative data were coded and analyzed through the lens of ecological systems theory to identify the impacts of military-related transitions on the school experiences of a military-connected child with exceptionalities. Four key themes are identified and described. Through these themes, the experiences of the forgotten population are shared, and insight into their unique needs is provided.

The first theme, out of compliance, describes the delays and discrepancies experienced by the participants’ children, resulting in the special education being out of legal compliance. The second theme, lack of understanding creates tension, discusses an overall lack of understanding of military culture by educators. The impact of this lack of understanding on the child’s school experiences is explored. The third theme, fear, anxiety, and stress describes the specific internal

feelings of the child, their parent(s), and the resulting impact on school experiences. The fourth theme, advocating for child, discusses how each of the prior themes result in parents needing to advocate for their military-connected exceptional child.

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Major Professor
Dr. Todd Goodson

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Table of Contents

List of Figures	xii
List of Tables	xiii
Acknowledgements	xiv
Dedication	xvi
Chapter 1 - Introduction	1
Overview of the Issues	3
Statement of the Problem	5
Research Questions	6
Definition of Key Terms	6
Definition of Auxiliary Terms	7
Significance of the Study	8
Methodology	9
Organization of the Study	9
Chapter 2 - Literature Review	11
Military Culture	11
Challenges for Military-connected Students	14
Special Education Culture	16
Challenges for Exceptional Students	17
Military-connected Students with Exceptionalities	19
Military Support Programs	21
School Liaison Program	21
Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children	21
Impact Aid	22
Purple Star School Program	23
Exceptional Family Member Program	24
Conclusion	25
Chapter 3 - Methodology	27
Research Questions	27
Methodology	27

Phenomenology	27
Ecological Systems Theory	28
<i>Microsystem</i>	29
<i>Mesosystem</i>	29
<i>Exosystem</i>	30
<i>Macrosystem</i>	30
<i>Chronosystem</i>	30
Research Procedures	31
Research site	31
Participants	33
Methods of recruitment	33
Participant Selection	34
Role of Researcher	36
Data Collection	37
Interviews	37
Timeline Elicitation	38
Researcher Journal	39
Data Analysis	39
Bracketing	39
Coding	40
Research Timeline	43
Trustworthiness	43
Credibility	44
Transferability	44
Dependability	44
Confirmability	45
Summary	45
Chapter 4 - Results	46
Participants	47
Annabelle	47
Grace	48

Nancy	49
Sophia.....	50
Data Analysis	50
Research Question 1: What, if any, military-related transitions impact the educational experiences of a military-connected student with exceptionalities?	51
<i>Permanent Change of Station</i>	51
<i>Deployment</i>	52
<i>Training Cycle Rotations</i>	53
<i>Geo-bach</i>	53
Research Question 2: How do parents/guardians of a military-connected child with exceptionalities describe the impact of military-related transitions on their experiences with public schools?	54
Emerging Theme: Out of Compliance	54
<i>Identification and Eligibility Delays</i>	55
<i>Paperwork Transfer</i>	58
<i>Inconsistent Services</i>	60
<i>Outside Agencies</i>	61
Emerging Theme: Lack of Understanding Creates Tension	63
<i>Parent Rights</i>	63
<i>Military Culture</i>	64
<i>Parent</i>	66
<i>Child</i>	67
<i>Family</i>	68
Emerging theme: Advocating for Child.....	69
<i>Build relationships, but don't be afraid to go to battle</i>	69
Interactions between Themes.....	72
Ripples	73
Summary	77
Chapter 5 - Discussion	78
Overview of the Study	78
Key Findings Summary	78

Research Question 1: What, if any, military-related transitions impact the educational experiences of a military-connected student with exceptionalities?	78
Research Question 2: How do parents/guardians of a military-connected child with exceptionalities describe the impact of military-related transitions on their experiences with public schools?	79
Theme: Out of Compliance.....	79
Theme: Lack of understanding creates tension	81
Theme: Fear, Anxiety, and Stress	82
Theme: Advocating for Child	83
Impact of Military-Related Transitions	84
Limitations	87
Recommendations for Educators	88
Recommendations for Further Research.....	90
Summary	90
References.....	92
Appendix A - IRB Approval.....	101
Appendix B - Informed Consent Form	102
Appendix C - Interview One Protocol	105
Appendix D - Interview Two Protocol	107

List of Figures

Figure 3.1. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory.....	29
Figure 3.2. Grouping of Initial Codes	41
Figure 3.3. Alignment of Codes into Emerging Themes	42
Figure 4.1. Impacted Ecological Systems.....	73
Figure 4.2. Impacts of deployment	74
Figure 4.3. Impacts of PCS	76

List of Tables

Table 3.1. Participant Demographic Characteristics.....	35
Table 3.2. Deductive Analysis Codes	40
Table 3.3. Inductive Analysis Codes	40
Table 4.1. Luke’s Timeline	47
Table 4.2. Jamison’s Timeline	48
Table 4.3. Tyler’s Timeline	49
Table 4.4. Benjamin's Timeline	50
Table 4.5. Transitions Experienced by Participants.....	51

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Dedication

To my family: Thank you for your unwavering love, support and encouragement.

I couldn't have done this without you!

Chapter 1 - Introduction

“This is his third school in 4 years.”

“She’s only 10, but has lived in 6 states.”

“As soon as they make new friends, it feels like we’re packing up and moving again.”

“I’m an Army brat...my home is all over.”

“The only certainty in the military is that nothing is certain in the military.”

Phrases like these, uttered by countless military parents, were common in the elementary schools where I taught. As an elementary teacher in districts neighboring a large military base, I observed and experienced the many opportunities and challenges that frequently accompanied being military connected. I encountered students relocated nearly every year- a cycle of packing up and saying goodbye, meeting new friends and joining new groups, then packing up and saying goodbye again. I taught students who showed new, and often startling, behaviors due to stress when their parents deployed to active combat zones. I had students who struggled to adjust to the new family dynamics upon the celebrated return of a deployed parent. I also supported students whose parent had to temporarily relocate to a different location to attend specialized schools. Our classroom dynamics changed constantly as students moved in and out.

As a teacher, this constant turnover in my student population meant navigating continually changing dynamics in peer groups and classroom environments while identifying where each new student fell academically, socially, and behaviorally while adjusting to a new classroom, new school, new district, or new state. This also meant helping parents navigate new educational systems that were often unlike the one they had just left. Additionally, there was a significant need to provide emotional support as children navigated life with a deployed parent in

active combat zones, endured the stress of multiple transitions, or attempted to return to “normal” life as a parent reintegrated into the home. Despite the rate at which this was occurring, my district offered no professional development opportunities that addressed supporting military-connected students.

These challenges became more complex when I transitioned out of general education and into my role as a special education teacher. Not only was I dealing with the same challenges as before, I had the additional challenge of working with students who were moving in or out while in the middle of the special education evaluation process. There were legal hurdles tied to Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), including delays in receiving the paperwork that identified necessary supports, and determining services for students who qualified in their previous state, yet did not meet criteria requirements for services in Kansas. The process of accepting, revising, or rejecting IEPs became turbulent as parents and teachers faced frustration. Again, despite the number of military-connected students with active IEPs or ongoing evaluations, professional development on this topic simply wasn’t occurring.

I knew there was more I should be doing to support this unique population of students, yet I did not know where to start in finding resources. I simply did not understand the military lifestyle and its impact on a student’s educational experience. As I reflect on my teaching career, I now recognize that the multitude of military-connected students who I taught were often underserved, simply because of lack of professional knowledge and unavailability of professional development trainings.

However, I am only able to view the impact of the military lifestyle on students through the experiences I had as a teacher, which led me to wonder how military families view these same experiences. As an outsider to military culture, components of military lifestyle seem

foreign. I can not understand what it is like to move every few years, or how it feels to be separated from a family member who is serving in combat. Additionally, while I consider myself to be well-versed in teaching students with exceptionalities, I do not have a parent's perspective or personal experience in raising a child with an identified disability or navigating the special education world for my child while also navigating the complexities of military life. Through this research, members of this population can bring a voice to their experiences, providing a better understanding of what military-connected students with exceptionalities experience in schools.

Overview of the Issues

When individuals join the military, they become part of a culture with its own rules, values, and customs that differentiate military culture from civilian world. This culture extends beyond the service member and encompasses the whole family as “when one person joins, the whole family serves” (Alfano et al., 2016, p. 18). While every individual and family within the military is unique, there is a shared collective identity of greater good (Huebner, 2019). As a result, because military families are part of a community that experiences shared stressors, families are trained to mentor, support, and take care of one another.

Military families are prone to the same everyday stressors as civilian families, which include balancing the demands of parenting, leisure, and community involvement with the demands of a career. However, unlike civilian families, military families routinely face unique challenges such as parental deployments, geographical separation, and frequent changes of location. While these events have been found to have positive effects on a military-connected child, negative impacts on the educational experiences of these students have also been documented (Bradshaw et al., 2010; North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO], 2019; Ruff &

Kleim, 2014; Voltz, 2000). Despite the enrollment of nearly 1.3 million military-connected students in public schools across the United States, understanding of military culture, the effects of military transitions on children, and appropriate supports for these students remains limited by civilian educators (Esqueda et al., 2012; Military Child Education Coalition, 2016; Russo & Fallon, 2014). Military students as a unique population are rarely mentioned within federal, state, district, and school-level policies and procedures (Astor et al., 2013). To effectively support the academics and social-emotional needs of students affiliated with the military, a general understanding of the military institution and lifestyle is necessary.

Likewise, more than 7 million public school students identify as exceptional, a prevalence rate that continues to grow. Of these, 95% are enrolled in regular public schools. In addition to rising identification rates, students with exceptionalities spend increasingly more time in general education settings with almost 4.8 million exceptional students spending 80% or more of the school day in the general education setting (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2022). Exceptionality transcends demographic factors and can be found in students of diverse ages, races, and socioeconomic statuses.

Despite the prevalence of students with exceptionalities in general education settings, teachers report feeling unprepared to support the unique needs of these learners (Slanda & Little, 2020). Above all other factors, teacher quality serves as the most important factor influencing student achievement. Zigmond and Kloo (2017) found that while 95% of teacher preparation programs require at least one course in special education, there is wide variance in content. In a majority of general education teacher preparation programs, the focus is on learning to teach content and curricula as opposed to applying pedagogical skills and instructional strategies.

Compounding this problem is teacher licensure requirements, which vary by district, state, and region (Feistritzer, 2005).

Federal legislation, primarily the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), protects the rights of students with disabilities. Under this law, public schools are required to provide services to eligible students under specific timelines. Despite this, nearly 70% of military families report violations of legal rights, including lack of services and accommodations (Barnhill et al., 2021).

As noted, educators reported an overall lack of understanding and preparedness in supporting students who are military-connected, as well as students with exceptionalities. Having prepared educators becomes especially important for military-connected students with exceptionalities. While each student group presents with their own unique needs, students who belong to both cultures may face additional obstacles, and more research is needed to inform teacher practice and advocate for students.

Statement of the Problem

Everyday challenges are faced by civilian and military families alike. However, military families face unique stressors that are known to impact the educational experiences of military-connected students (Atuel & Castro, 2018; Engel et al., 2010; Jagger & Lederer, 2014; St. John & Fenning, 2020). Despite the impact these stressors have on the educational experiences of students, teachers as a whole remain unprepared to meet the unique needs of these learners. For military-connected students with exceptionalities, these stressors may be exacerbated, yet qualitative research in this area remains limited.

Research that explores how the military lifestyle may affect an exceptional child's educational experiences can provide valuable insight for teachers, counselors, and

administrators. As such, specific areas of need and appropriate supports can be identified, and topics for teacher training and professional development can be recommended.

Research Questions

In this research, I seek to gain insight on:

1. What, if any, military-related transitions impact the educational experiences of a military-connected student with exceptionalities?
2. How do parents/guardians of a military-connected child with exceptionalities describe the impact of military-related transitions on their experiences with public schools?

Definition of Key Terms

Educational experiences: Interactions and experiences that take place within the setting of a classroom and/or school.

Exceptionality: One of 13 identified disabilities as recognized under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2018).

Military-connected student: Student with a parent(s) who is a member of the armed forces on active duty (Military Child Education Coalition, 2020).

Military-related transition: Transitions in residences, communities, employment, and/or schools that are directly related to military service (National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019).

Special education process: Process through which a child is referred for special education; steps include referral for evaluation, full evaluation, and eligibility meetings (Kansas State Department of Education, 2022).

Definition of Auxiliary Terms

Active duty: Full-time duty in the active military service of the United States (Veterans Administration, 2012a)

Deployment: The movement of forces into and out of an operational area (Veterans Administration, 2015).

Elementary student: A student enrolled in kindergarten through fifth grade.

Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE): A free appropriate public education must be available to all children residing in the state between the ages of 3 and 21, inclusive, including children with disabilities. (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2017).

Geo-bach: Service member and immediate family members live apart, with the service member in one location, and the spouse and family living in another (Blue Star Families, 2022).

Least restrictive environment (LRE): To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities are educated with children who are nondisabled. (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2017).

Permanent change of station (PCS): A permanent change of duty station; relocation for a service member (Jagger & Lederer, 2014).

Public school: A school or institutions controlled and operated by publicly elected or appointed officials and deriving its primary support from public funds (NCES, n.d.)

Service member: An enlisted member in the United States Armed Forces situated within a hierarchy of officers and other enlisted members (Atuel & Castro, 2018).

Special education: Specially designed instruction, at no cost to the parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2017).

United States Armed Forces: Branches of the U.S. military including the Air Force, Army, Coast Guard, Marine Corps, National Guard, Navy, and Space Force (U.S. Department of Defense, n.d.)

Significance of the Study

Educators in today's classrooms serve a wide array of students, including military-connected students and students with exceptionalities. As of the 2020-2021 academic year, nearly 1.3 million military-connected children were attending public schools in the United States (Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy, 2020). Public schools also serve more than 7 million students with known disabilities, a number that continues to rise (NCES, 2022). Much is known about the impact of military lifestyle on a child's education. Likewise, the impact of exceptionality on a child's education has been explored. However, little research explores the impact of military lifestyle on the school experiences of military-connected students with exceptionalities.

This qualitative research will use the perspectives of the parents of this unique population of students to understand how military lifestyle may affect the special education process and potential impacts on a child's educational experience. By exploring the experiences of military-connected students with exceptionalities and their families through phenomenological inquiry, the aspects of military lifestyle that benefit students can be identified. Likewise, common challenges that are unique to this population can be made known. In identifying and examining these, strategies and supports for both families and educators can be developed and implemented, helping to ensure an equitable school experience for military-connected children with exceptionalities.

Methodology

As stated by Crotty (1998), “Different ways of viewing the world shape different ways of researching the world.” Individuals experience the same event differently, and while experiences are unique, commonalities can emerge. A phenomenological study puts the focus on the lived experiences of participants, allowing for better understanding of what shared experiences the participants have in common and what areas differ (Creswell, 2007). Through the phenomenological approach, a thorough understanding can be gained.

This phenomenological inquiry study will explore how the parents of four military-connected students with exceptionalities perceive the impact, if any, of the military lifestyle on their child’s school experiences, focusing on the special education process. Using participant interviews as a primary source of data collection, the lived experiences of participants will be shared. Additional data sources will include any relevant participant special education and military documents to establish timelines, outline services received, analyze school and parent interactions, and support data obtained through interviews.

Organization of the Study

Chapter 1 serves as an introduction of the issues faced by military-connected children with exceptionalities. This chapter provides an overview of the issue, the statement of the problem, key research questions guiding the study, and definitions of key terms. Additionally, this chapter shares the purpose of the study, the significance of the problem, possible limitations, and the organizational format of the study.

Chapter 2 presents a review of the literature on military-connected students and students with exceptionalities, exploring key aspects of both cultures that impact a student’s educational

experience. Current supports for students are also described. This chapter also identifies the gap in literature on the school experiences of military-connected students with exceptionalities.

Chapter 3 describes the methodology of the study, which includes a description of phenomenological inquiry. The chapter also provides a description of the participants, research procedures, and the role of the researcher. Finally, this chapter describes the procedures for data collection and analysis.

Chapter 4 presents an analysis of research findings. Findings are analyzed through the ecological systems theory and participant experiences are shared for each system. Emerging themes are provided for each research question.

Chapter 5 provides an interpretation of findings, shares recommendations for educators and future research, and provides conclusions from the study.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Army brat. Navy brat. Air Force brat. Marine Corps brat. The branch of service may change, but the meaning remains the same: a child of a parent(s) serving on active duty in the United States Armed Forces. Unlike the typical insinuation of brat, the *military brat* label is considered a source of pride for a military-connected child. Unlike many traditional civilian occupations, the decision to serve in the armed forces impacts each family member in different ways. While civilian and military families both face similar everyday challenges, military families face stressors caused by aspects of military life that can impact the educational experiences of military-connected students. For military-connected students with exceptionalities, these stressors may be exacerbated, yet qualitative research in this area remains limited.

In this literature review, I seek to address the impact of the military lifestyle on military-connected students with exceptionalities. I will explore military culture and its impact on the education of military-connected students; research on disability culture and its impact on the education of students with exceptionalities; and the intersection of special education and the military, focusing on existing supports provided to military families and the challenges facing these supports.

Military Culture

In 2020, the Department of Defense recorded nearly 2.4 million military personnel serving across the branches of the United States Armed Forces, with many of the nation's military personnel having one or more dependent children (Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy, 2020). More than 1.6 million children identify as military-connected, being raised by one or more active-duty military parents.

Although there are 48 Department of Defense (DoD) accredited schools located across seven U.S. states and Puerto Rico, nearly 80% of military-connected students attend civilian operated public schools across the United States. The remaining 20% of military-connected students attend either DoDEA accredited schools or homeschool. Despite this high enrollment, Russo and Fallon (2014) suggested that the public school system views the military lifestyle as problematic. One challenge faced by military-connected students in public schools is that teachers and administrators are often unaware of military-connected students in the classroom, and as a result, may not be attentive to the unique academic, social, and emotional well-being of these students (Military Child Education Coalition, 2016). According to Esqueda et al. (2012), when it came to identifying military students and their needs, “military students appear to be invisible in many public school districts across the United States” (p. 68) and civilian teachers, counselors, and administrators were inadequately trained to understand and respond to the specific needs of military-connected students.

The military community is unique, with its own language, beliefs, norms, and values that can differ vastly from civilian communities. Identity is multidimensional, Yet for many, membership in the military community is most prioritized and serves as a source of pride. Atuel and Castro (2018) described the military community as a warrior culture with its members in a constant state of combat readiness. Service members share common characteristics of discipline, self-sacrifice, and cohesiveness with a focus on core values to better the collective whole (Huebner, 2019). Specific components of this culture-including military branch and rank-merge together to suppress individual identities, forming a service member’s military identity as a member of a team serving the American people, placing mission before all else (Association of the United States Army, 2021). Through indoctrination, military culture replaces previous

cultural beliefs, reducing many disparities that are found in civilian culture (Meyer et al., 2016). Members of this community describe identity as a perceived colorblindness of green, representing the color of the shared military uniform. Seeing green emphasizes only military rank and position, removing markers of personal identity. Hall et al. (2020) noted that “when you’re in the military, what you see is green before anything else” (p. 40), with military rank overriding all other typical markers, such as race or class (Lundquist, 2004). While the military identity is often a source of pride, the focus on rank as identity can lead to feelings of isolation and disconnect. Some service members report feeling that the military community forced them to mute their heritage, thus losing a source of pride in their identity (Blue Star Families, 2022). Meyer et al. (2016) found that many veterans continued to identify most prevalently with their military identity decades after leaving service, showing the enduring impact that immersion in military culture can have.

The hierarchy of the U.S. military, referred to as chain of command, is one of the most visible components of military culture. According to the Veterans Administration (2012b), the chain of command serves as a clear hierarchy of authority and responsibility. While each military branch has its own titles for each rank, all service members are divided into two overarching categories of enlisted and officer. A service member’s role in the chain of command permeates many aspects of a life, and military identity is largely formed around rank (Cole, 2014). Within this hierarchy, rank impacts pay, training, access to resources, and expected responsibilities. Additionally, rank determines the level of authority the service member holds, which equates to the level of respect earned.

Much like the service member, a military-connected child’s identity is linked in part to the rank of their parent. The subculture of military families holds a set of values and norms

specific to military families (Meyer et al., 2016). Children of service members often feel pressured to meet higher standards of behavior as compared to non-military-connected peers (Clever & Segal, 2013). Additionally, children with parents who are officers often are held to higher standards than those whose parents hold a lower rank (Okafor et. al., 2016). Educational opportunities can also differ based on a service member's rank. While children of higher-ranking service members have increased access to higher-income housing, resulting in higher socioeconomic status (SES) schools, children of lower-ranking service members may find themselves attending schools with lower SES populations. These schools typically employ more novice teachers with less academic preparation, undergo higher rates of teacher turnover, and have higher rates of poverty levels among the student body (Quinn, 2015). Further, while limited, research found that educational disparities as a result of racial and ethnic discrimination are lessened for military-connected students of color. Disparities include impacted test scores, grade retention, dropout and graduation rates, suspension and expulsion rates, participation in gifted and talented programs, and enrollment in higher education (Blue Star Families, 2022). Military-connected students of color attending DoD schools on military installations are found to outperform peers of the same race in public schools in national assessments of math and reading (United States Government Accountability Office, 2022a). Additionally, military-connected students of color are more likely to participate in postsecondary education than their civilian peers of the same race (Blue Star Families, 2022).

Challenges for Military-connected Students

While military-connected children experience many noted positives- increased resilience, independence, family cohesion, pride, and a sense of belonging in the military community (NATO, 2019)- they also face unique challenges that stem from the military lifestyle. In addition

to a lack of understanding of military culture by civilian educators, key challenges impacting educational experiences include geographic mobility and family separation.

Geographic mobility is a hallmark of the military lifestyle. On average, a military-connected child moves three times more often than civilian peers, with relocations occurring every one to four years. By the time military-connected students graduate from high school, they are likely to have changed schools six to nine times (Military Child Education Coalition, 2020; Ruff & Kleim, 2014). Multiple relocations can produce significant ramifications for students. Bradshaw et al. (2010) found that military children attending public schools were more likely to struggle than those attending DoDEA schools for several reasons. First, academic curricula vary drastically from district to district, and learning standards vary from state to state. Multiple midyear transitions can lead to students repeating coursework already mastered while missing critical content that was covered before the student moved in. It can take students up to half of an academic year to adjust and catch up to their peers (Voltz, 2000). High school students are at a particular disadvantage as graduation requirements differ across districts and states, resulting in a potential delay of graduation (Bradshaw et al., 2010). Additionally, a delay in the transfer of student records can increase the wait time for necessary interventions and specialized supports for previously identified learning needs. Because of mobility, military-connected students may encounter challenges in participating in school-sponsored athletics because of missed tryouts, gaps in available athletic programs, and coach reluctance to place military-connected students on teams or in starting positions. Military-connected students may also face obstacles in participating in school-sponsored extracurriculars, such as student government and clubs, because of missing officer elections for organizations, an inability for prior participation in

school activities to be eligible, and a lack of established popularity with peers (Ruff & Kleim, 2014).

Separation of families because of deployment and training serves as another unique characteristic of the military lifestyle. Short separations, typically up to one month, are common while service members travel for specialized trainings and military-related educational programs. During deployments, the service member is involved in active military operations outside of their duty station, often for periods of 9-12 months (Alfano et al., 2016). During times of war, deployments typically mean that a military service member is placed in an active combat zone. Research suggests that during periods of deployment, military-connected students may face increased signs of serious stress (e.g., high levels of emotional response, difficulty concentrating, disconnection from peers and adults, depression, self-harm, and hysteria), which impact the school experience (Educational Opportunities Directorate of the Department of Defense, n.d.). In addition to the hardships of active deployment, military-connected students face similar challenges during the pre-deployment phase-where service members prepare to leave for deployment, and in the post-deployment phase-where service members then reintegrate into the home. This reintegration period serves as the most challenging for both children and caregivers (NATO, 2019). Alongside behavioral changes, military-connected students are observed to have negative changes in academic performance, including failure to complete schoolwork and declines in standardized test scores during these transitional times of mobility and separation (Moeller et al., 2015; NATO, 2019).

Special Education Culture

Much like military culture, disability can be viewed through a cultural framework. Special education has its own language and beliefs, which may differ from general society.

While members of this community often face stereotypes, prejudice, and social stigmatization by general society, there is also a sense of common identity (Hopson, 2019). Steven Brown (2003), cofounder of the Institute on Disability Culture, noted “people with disabilities have forged a group identity...we are who we are: we are people with disabilities” (as cited in Hopson, 2019, p.22). Lawson (2001) added that people who experience the world around them in similar ways gain strength from sharing those experiences with each other.

While members of the military form pieces of their identities based around their role within the military construct, members of the special education community may form similar identities based around their exceptionality, focusing on their unique attributes, strengths, and weaknesses. Hopson (2019) suggested that when individuals accepted their exceptionality, they had higher levels of self-esteem, better coping skills, and increased motivation.

Challenges for Exceptional Students

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA), a reauthorization of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, requires that students with disabilities be provided a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment. However, despite this requirement, many problems with the special education system exist in public schools, and students with exceptionalities continue to face educational injustices.

Much like military-connected students, there is a lack of understanding in teaching students with exceptionalities. This can be attributed to two main causes. First, although teacher preparation positively impacts teacher effectiveness, preservice teachers typically receive minimal coursework and field experience in teaching students with exceptionalities. While positive attitudes toward inclusion are one of the largest factors for success of inclusive classroom practices, insufficient teacher preparation programs often result in negative

perceptions of inclusive practices in general education classrooms (Ko & Boswell, 2013; Lautenbach & Heyder, 2019, Monsen & Ewing, 2014). Upon entering the field, professional development in teaching students with exceptionalities remains limited (Chitiyo & Brinda, 2018). Kahn & Lewis (2014) found that while most teachers want more training and feel it should be required, most training actually occurs on the job. As a result, many teachers perceive themselves as unprepared to teach students with exceptionalities in general education settings. This lack of teacher preparedness often results in increased teacher turnover, and as a result, students with exceptionalities face lower achievement rates as compared with typical peers (Gilmour & Wehby, 2020).

Additionally, students with exceptionalities often lag behind non-disabled peers and are frequently held to lower academic and social expectations (Aron & Loprest, 2012). Similar to military-connected peers, students with exceptionalities also find that opportunities for participation in extracurriculars can be limited. While IDEA and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act require that schools ensure students with disabilities have equal opportunity to participate in the same activities as students without disabilities, participation rates still fall below rates of typical peers (Pence & Dymond, 2015). This can be explained by a lack of available opportunities; inadequate access to appropriate transportation; and limited teacher, administrator and parental support. Students with exceptionalities also often have limited social and communication skills, which may lead to a feeling of alienation from typical peers (Agran et al., 2017).

Another challenge faced by students with exceptionalities is the disproportionate identification of students because of race. In the field of special education, disproportionality refers to the under and overrepresentation of racially minority students identified as disabled

(Sullivan & Proctor, 2016). Disproportionality varies by state, district size, and disability category (Skiba et al., 2016), yet the overrepresentation of minority students has been a known issue since the 1970s (Alhusayni, 2022). Herzik (2015) stated that it would be expected that prevalence rates of students with disabilities would be equally distributed amongst student populations, but in reality, students of color are enrolled at rates far exceeding White peers. It is worth noting that rates of disabilities typically identified through medical models, such as vision, hearing, or orthopedic impairment, are found to be proportionate. However, overrepresentation can be found in disabilities that are predominantly identified in the context of school without biological causes-disabilities such as intellectual disability, emotional disturbance, and learning disability (Saporito, 2020).

Military-connected Students with Exceptionalities

The negative impact of geographic mobility and family separation on military-connected students is well researched (Atuel et al., 2011; Engel et al., 2010; Jagger & Lederer, 2014; St. John & Fenning, 2020). For military-connected students with exceptionalities, Jagger and Lederer (2014) noted a particularly profound impact as families face additional related challenges.

One challenge involves eligibility for special education services. While IDEA mandates specific categories of disability, the US Department of Education allows state education agencies to establish their own eligibility criterion. As a result, a student who is found eligible for special education services in one state may be found not eligible in another (Barnhill et al., 2021). For example, because of differing definitions amongst states, a student who is eligible for services under categories such as developmental delay, intellectual disability, or specific learning

disability may be found not eligible in another state (United States Government Accountability Office, 2019).

Delays are another prominent challenge. Although IDEA established evaluation and eligibility timelines, Barnhill et al. (2021) found that 55% of military-connected students with exceptionalities have experienced violations of these timelines, waiting an average of 23 months from identification of exceptionality to the start of special education services. IDEA states that a school has 50 days to determine eligibility and 30 days to develop the IEP. The IEP must then be implemented as soon as possible to ensure students have timely access to a free, appropriate public education (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2017). For students with active IEPs, additional delays occur in receiving access to required special education services after a PCS, with 39% of military-connected students with exceptionalities waiting 1 month or more (Barnhill et al., 2021).

Following a PCS, families may face difficulty when their child's new school resists or stalls accepting and implementing their child's current IEP because of differences in school, district, and state policies. Families may find themselves in complex battles with the school regarding cost of services, staffing, lack of preparedness, and legal noncompliance. Additionally, many parents reported feeling that their military child was being underserved, with schools "counting down until their next PCS" (Jagger & Lederer, 2014, p. 18). With more than half of military families reporting difficulties in transferring their child's IEP following a PCS, some families choose to geo-bach, where the family lives in a different location from the service member to avoid these difficulties (Blue Star Families, 2020).

Military Support Programs

Throughout their educational careers, military-connected students who attend public schools face challenges related directly to military transitions. As such, programs have been instituted to help ease the burden for these families while supporting military-connected children.

School Liaison Program

The Department of Defense established the School Liaison Program across all branches of service as an external support for military-connected schools. The school liaison acts as a point of contact to assist military families with educational issues by providing free services and supports to students, parents, schools, and communities. One key service is supporting military families as they transition in and out of military installations and schools (Department of Defense Education Activity, 2022; United States Government Accountability Office, 2022b).

While the program was implemented to support military families, there are concerns about its effectiveness. One is applicant requirements. While the job description of a school liaison varies across branches of service, all liaisons work directly with families with children with exceptionalities. Training or experience in special education is not required to be liaison and many are found to have widely varying levels of experiences with special education. Concerns regarding persistent disconnects between military families and liaisons have also been noted, with families stating that the liaison is unhelpful or unresponsive. Liaisons note challenges with connecting with families and difficulty coordinating with other liaisons which directly impacts the effectiveness of the program (United States Government Accountability Office, 2022b).

Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children

In an additional effort to eliminate many of the school transition problems encountered by military families, the Department of Defense established the Interstate Compact on

Educational Opportunity for Military Children. Through enrollment into this compact, each state agrees to address four key areas impacting military-connected students-eligibility, enrollment, placement, and graduation-as a way to provide continuity for military students (DoDEA, 2015). While no funding support is provided by the federal government and participation by each state is voluntary, all 50 states and the District of Columbia have passed legislation to become members of the compact.

Although endorsement of the compact by all states occurred faster than expected, implementation has been an area of concern at both the state and district level. Painter et al. (2021) noted a lack of firm compliance guidance for states and a lack of clarity in expectations for both states and districts. Esqueda et al. (2012) also identified concerns by educators and policy makers regarding the language used in the compact, as well as the potential power of school districts in making policy decisions.

Impact Aid

Another form of support is financial. In the early 1990s, the Department of Defense established two impact aid programs: the Impact Aid Supplemental Program and the Impact Aid for Children with Severe Disabilities Program to provide additional funding to schools with significant numbers of military-connected students. Many schools rely upon property taxes as a funding source; however, most states offer military families a property tax exemption, resulting in less funding for schools serving military-connected students. The Impact Aid Supplemental Program helps to support these schools through federal and state funding.

Funds received under the Impact Aid for Children with Severe Disabilities are required to be used to reimburse incurred costs by a district when providing a free appropriate education to a military-connected child with severe disabilities (United States Government Accountability

Office, 2022a). However, districts may use Impact Aid Supplemental Program funds in any manner they choose; these supplemental assistance funds are not required to be used to support military children and spending of these funds is not tracked. Many districts consider Impact Aid funds to be general aid and used them as part of a district's general fund to pay teacher salaries; purchase textbooks and computers; and support after-school programs, advanced placement courses, and enrichment programs (Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2022).

Purple Star School Program

To emphasize the importance of assisting military-connected children, a grassroots initiative known as Purple Star Schools was developed by the Military Child Education Coalition. While not yet in all states, participation is growing as schools begin to recognize the educational and social-emotional challenges faced by military-connected students in each transition to a new school. The Purple Star School designation lets military families know that the school is dedicated to supporting the academic and social-emotional well-being of their child. In doing so, Purple Star Schools seek to manage academic requirements and planning challenges commonly faced in the transition to new schools, as well as accommodate students as they seek to join sports and club activities. Finally, Purple Star Schools note the social-emotional needs of military-connected students during times of adjustment, including arriving at a new school and during parental absence due to military commitments.

A state's education authority or an individual school district can establish a Purple Star School Program through a formal legislative approach or an informal administrative approach. While the implementation of this program is intended to be flexible, the program requires that schools:

- Designate a specific individual to serve as a point of contact for military students and families.
- Establish and maintain a dedicated page on its website featuring information and resources for military families.
- Maintain a student-led transition program.
- Provide professional development for additional staff on special considerations for military students and families (Military Child Education Coalition, 2020).

Exceptional Family Member Program

Several supports are in place to support military-connected students; however, limited supports exist specific to students with exceptionalities. As noted, the frequent transitions associated with military life compound the challenges already faced by families who have children with exceptionalities and can result in difficult, and often adversarial, relationships between military families and school personnel.

Service members who have dependents with exceptionalities often need to find specialized health care, schools with specific support services, and community support assistance at each new duty station. In 1979, the military established the Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP) as a voluntary program to provide medical support to military families with special needs. In 2010, the Department of Defense established the Office of Community Support for Military Families with Special Needs through Section 563 of the National Defense Authorization Act to “standardize, enhance and improve Department of Defense support around the world for military families with special needs (whether medical or educational needs)” (National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2010, 2009). While each branch of the U.S. military has its own EFMP program, under Department of Defense Instruction 1315.19,

enrollment is now mandatory for all active duty service members with a dependent with special needs. Criteria for enrollment include life-threatening or chronic conditions that require specialized care; current and chronic mental health conditions; asthma or other respiratory related diagnosis; ADHD; chronic conditions requiring adaptive equipment, assistive technologies, environmental or architectural considerations; and/or special educational needs (Congressional Research Service, 2020).

While EFMP seeks to support military families who have dependents with exceptionalities by coordinating PCS assignments to locations with adequate care, it also faces several drawbacks. Key concerns include inconsistencies and difficulties in communication with EFMP staff, significant delays regarding educational and medical services, and a frustrating and time-consuming EFMP process (Brown et al., 2019). In addition, EFMP varies widely between branches of service and installations, resulting in service irregularities (Meadows et al., 2021; Military Child Education Coalition, 2020; United States Government Accountability Office, 2022a).

Conclusion

Research identifies several key challenges that impact a military-connected student, including geographic mobility and family separation. The resulting impacts of these challenges on a military-connected child's education have been well discussed (Alfano et al., 2016; Atuel & Castro, 2018; Bradshaw, et al., 2010; Cole, 2014; Engel et al., 2010; Esqueda, et al., 2012; Military Child Education Coalition, 2014; Moeller et al., 2015; Painter & Hynes, 2021; Ruff & Kleim, 2014; Russo & Fallon, 2014) While several programs exist to support military-connected students-Exceptional Family Member Program, School Liaisons, Impact Aid funding, and the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children-these programs have

inconsistent implementation and support across the branches of the military (Meadows et al., 2021; Military Child Education Coalition, 2020; United States Government Accountability Office, 2022). It is also noted that most public schools are not adequately trained to meet the unique needs of military-connected students.

Military-connected students with exceptionalities face additional challenges compared with their typical peers. Quantitative data notes concerns such as delays in identification, transferability of legally required paperwork, and delays in services (Barnhill et al., 2021). However, little scholarly research addresses how specific aspects of the military lifestyle impact the perceived educational experiences of a child with an exceptionality, particularly for those students enrolled in the public schools.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

While being military-connected has both positive and negative effects on a child's educational experiences, little is known about the impact on military-connected children with exceptionalities. This study explores how military transitions may impact the educational experiences of military-connected students with exceptionalities. Through this study, common elements shared among these students are identified. Phenomenological inquiry explores the lived experiences of military-connected students with exceptionalities in public school settings.

Research Questions

1. What, if any, military-related transitions impact the educational experiences of a military-connected student with exceptionalities?
2. How do parents/guardians of a military-connected child with exceptionalities describe the impact of military-related transitions on their experiences with public schools?

Methodology

Phenomenology

Crotty (1998) said, "different ways of viewing the world shape different ways of researching the world" (p.66). In identifying a theoretical perspective, context for the study is provided. Under the theoretical umbrella of interpretivism, phenomenology emerges as an inquiry approach that seeks to make sense of phenomena.

The phenomenology framework allows the focus to be on the lived experiences of the participants, providing better understanding of participants' shared experiences and differences (Creswell, 2007). Unlike other theoretical perspectives, phenomenology serves as an approach to "identify, understand, and maintain the subjective experiences of the respondents" (Crotty, 1998,

p. 83). The aim is to construct new understandings and to “break free and see the world afresh” (Crotty, 1998, p.86) through analysis of interview transcripts and elicitation activities through a phenomenological lens.

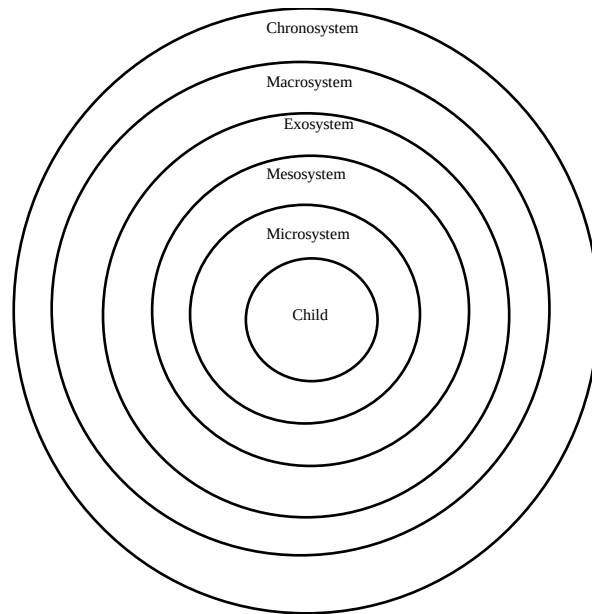
This research examines lived experiences in order to understand the unique experiences of military-connected students with exceptionalities. Research findings can allow the creation and implementation of effective interventions and supports.

Ecological Systems Theory

To understand how military transitions affect the educational experiences of military-connected children with exceptionalities, Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory provides an appropriate lens to consider the relationships between military culture and school experiences.

According to Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory, five socially organized subsystems exist in a nested structure, arranged in the order of impact on a child (see Figure 3.1). With the child at the center, the structure starts with the microsystem and expands outward through the mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem, ending with the chronosystem. This theory was influenced by Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory and Lewin’s behaviorism theory.

Figure 3.1. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory



Note: Adapted from Ecological Systems Theory (102), by E. Yang and B. Sanborn, (2021), Routledge.

Microsystem

The innermost system-the microsystem-refers to those who have direct contact with the child in their immediate environment. This includes family, teachers, and classroom peers. In the microsystem, relationships go both directions, so while the child may be influenced in their microsystem, they too can influence others. Interactions within the microsystem are critical for child development.

Mesosystem

The mesosystem is made up of the interactions between the child's microsystems. This includes interactions between the child's parents and teacher, or between parents and school peers. In the mesosystem, each individual microsystem is connected and influences the others. Positive interactions amongst microsystems are key for child well-being and development.

Likewise, negative interactions among microsystems can occur. For example, a child who is bullied at school may withdraw from his parents at home.

Exosystem

The exosystem considers indirect influences-neighborhood, parent workplace, parent friends, and mass media. While these environments may not actively involve the child, the environments may indirectly influence them through a microsystem. For example, after experiencing a difficult day at work, a parent may come home and be short with the child. While the workplace is not a microsystem to the child, it resulted in an indirect negative experience.

Macrosystem

The macrosystem involves the larger cultural context that surrounds the child. Cultural elements- attitudes, beliefs, socioeconomic status, poverty/wealth, geographic location, and ethnicity-make up the macrosystem and can be thought of as “a societal blueprint for a particular culture of subculture” (Bronfenbrenner, 1994, p. 40). Within the macrosystem, a child’s culture may influence their beliefs and perceptions about events. Macrosystems typically evolve with time.

Chronosystem

The final level is the chronosystem, which includes environmental changes and transitions during the lifetime that impact an individual. Examples can include starting school or moving to a new house.

Because these five systems are interrelated, the influence of one system is affected by its relationships with the others. This theory is particularly interesting for analyzing military-connected students because military-related transitions cause components of subsystems to inevitably remain the same (e.g., membership in the military system and grade-level enrollment).

Military children typically encounter significantly more transitions than civilian peers. As they move locations, their microsystem changes and causes a ripple effect through the remaining subsystems because of influences that result from ecological interactions between school, community, and social contexts such as the military. As children face military-connected transitions, they must adapt to a new school environment while simultaneously adapting to additional ecological interactions.

A complex system of relationships surrounds a child. To understand their experiences, it is important to consider the larger systems that military-connected children are part of and how they interact within those systems. Analyzing the educational experiences of military-connected students with exceptionalities through these five subsystems can provide a deeper understanding of the specific influences resulting from military transitions on an exceptional child's educational experience.

Research Procedures

This study uses the perspectives of military parents who have children with exceptionalities to discover what impact the military lifestyle may have on the child's and family's experiences with public schools. To discover these perspectives, this study uses individual interviews as the primary data source. In addition, the participants used personal documents to establish a timeline of services and military-related transitions. Examples of documents used by participants in creation of this timeline include notice of meetings, IEPs, communication records, PCS orders, and deployment orders.

Research site

The selected site for this qualitative study is a 6A public school district that encompasses four neighboring communities, one of which is an Army post. The communities that make up the

district vary in size, with populations of approximately 23,000; 8,700; 2,000; and 350. The district operates 12 elementary schools that serve students from kindergarten to fifth grade, two middle schools for students in sixth through eighth grades, one magnet program middle school for students in sixth through eighth grades, and one high school for students in ninth to 12th grades. This district employs approximately 685 teachers, more than half of whom hold advanced degrees.

At the time of the study, total district enrollment was 6,781 students across early childhood, elementary, and secondary schools. The district considers its student population diverse: 43% of students identify as White, 19% as Hispanic, 15% as Black, 10% as mixed race, 2.4% as native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 1.7% as Asian, and 0.5% as American Indian/Alaskan. In addition, students and families speak more than 40 languages. At the elementary level, the total student population is 3,653 students in kindergarten through fifth grades. Of those, 668 students receive special education services, equating to approximately 18% of the elementary student population. Additionally, 2,103 elementary students are identified as military-connected, equating to approximately 58% of students. At the secondary level, 3,128 students are enrolled in grades 6-12. Of that, 524 students-17%- receive special education services and 1,197-38%- identified as military-connected. It is unknown how many military-connected students receive special education services, as districts are not required to collect or report data on this population.

Approximately 15,000 active-duty service members are stationed at the Army post within the district. Some 60% of the student population is military-connected, and the district seeks to provide additional support for these students and their families. This district is the first in the state to pilot the Purple Star Program through the Military Child Education Coalition. In

coordination with the military, the district offers two military and family life consultants, who offer support at no cost to military children and youth, as well as to family members who support them. The district also offers information about supports available on post, the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children, and deployment for families via its district website.

Participants

This study sought to learn about the shared phenomenon of the public school experiences of military-connected students with exceptionalities as a result of military-related transitions. In this study, particular participant criterion such as military rank, race or ethnicity, exceptionality type, or socioeconomic status were not requirements, although these criteria should be considered in future research. Purposeful sampling (deMarrais & Lapan, 2014) was implemented to cover a range of perspectives, including variables such as rank, race, and exceptionality type.

The following criterion ensured that all participants have experienced the same phenomenon. Participants were required to be military-connected, with a minimum of one active-duty guardian. Participants were required to have at least one child with an identified exceptionality receiving special education services from a public school. It was also required that participants have experienced at least one military-related transition during the time that their exceptional child was being evaluated, placed, or in receipt of special education services.

Methods of recruitment

To provide study information to potential participants, I first met with the special education director of the school district. In this meeting, I outlined the purpose and methods of my research study, reviewed my participant letter, and outlined the first interview protocol. Additionally, I provided documentation of institutional review board (IRB) approval. Following

this meeting, the special education director shared the study information with the district superintendent, who approved the district's role in serving as gatekeeper.

After receiving district approval, the special education director connected me to building principals via email. Each principal was emailed individually with a description of the research study, a copy of the participant letter, and a request to speak in more depth. Two days after the email, I followed up with phone calls to each building principal and connected with three. In my meetings with each principal, I explained the purpose of the study, the data collection methods, and the requirements for participant participation. Building principals then shared the information with their building's special education teachers, who identified their military-connected students. Parents of these students were then contacted by the principal or special education teacher to inform them that a letter would be sent home with their child. One building principal also included a request to share parent contact information with me as researcher.

Three potential participants reached out via phone and three participants reached out to me via email. I made phone contact with two additional participants after the principal received permission to share contact information. With each potential participant, I held a phone conversation where I outlined my study's purpose and methods, and I shared the participant requirements. I followed this with an email that summarized our phone conversation, a copy of the participant letter and IRB approval, and a screening survey to determine eligibility to participate.

Participant Selection

After receiving the screening survey results, two potential participants did not meet the required criteria. One participant had a child attending private school, and the other had a child on a 504 plan which provided accommodations but not special education services. I contacted

the remaining participants who met the study’s inclusion criteria to schedule an introductory meeting either in-person or via the videoconferencing platform Zoom. All potential participants chose the virtual meeting. In each session, I restated the study’s purpose and explained the participation requirements, including the number of interviews and estimated length of time for each. Each potential participant expressed interest in continuing with the study. The informed consent form was shared via email and reviewed via Zoom. Four potential participants verbally consented to continue. The first interviews were scheduled and participants were asked to return the signed informed consent form prior to the first interview. Upon receipt of the signed informed consent, a demographics survey was shared with participants via email. Table 3.1 outlines participant demographics. Pseudonyms are used to protect confidentiality.

Table 3.1. Participant Demographic Characteristics

Participant and Child	Branch of Military Service	Military Rank	Enlisted or Officer Rank	Child’s Exceptionality	Current Age of Child	Race/Ethnicity
Annabelle and Luke	Army	Self: Lieutenant Colonel Spouse: Colonel	Self: Officer Spouse: Colonel	Primary: autism spectrum disorder Secondary: speech apraxia	16	Caucasian (self and child)
Grace and Jamison	Army	Spouse: Sergeant (E-5)	Enlisted	Primary: specific learning disability (dyscalculia and dysgraphia) Additional diagnoses: ADHD; ASD level 1	18	Latino (self and child)
Nancy and Tyler	Army	Spouse: Sergeant First-Class (E-7)	Enlisted	Primary: emotional and behavioral disorder Additional diagnosis: ADHD	15	Caucasian (self and child)
Sophia and Benjamin	Army	Spouse: Staff Sergeant (E-6)	Enlisted	Other health impaired: ADHD	11	Vietnamese (self) Mixed race (child)

Role of Researcher

While I am familiar with military culture from an educator's perspective, as I spent my entire public school teaching career working with high numbers of military-connected students, I have limited personal interactions with and understandings of military culture. Despite growing up near a large military installation, I was not raised in a military family. My husband is a U.S. Army veteran, however, he had transitioned from soldier to civilian before we met. Additionally, I am well-versed in teaching students with exceptionalities, but I do not have a parent's perspective or personal experiences in raising a child with an identified disability or navigating the special education world for my child. While these should not impact my ability to complete the study, it is important to note that these could have impacted participant interactions and their comfort in sharing their experiences.

I have many years of experience in supporting military-connected students, with and without exceptionalities, as a classroom teacher, a special education teacher, and a case manager. As such, I have my own experiences in this subject from my perspectives as an educator. However, as a qualitative researcher, it is imperative to identify my subjectivities to ensure my findings are accurate and not based on my own particular assumptions and experiences. Throughout my research, it was important to remember that my experiences and opportunities were not necessarily the same as the experiences and opportunities of my participants. Assuming participants have similar experiences creates blind spots, and as a researcher, it was key that I thoroughly considered my own subjectivity as it related to my participants and identified research purpose.

Data Collection

Interviews

To understand the perspectives of the participants, qualitative interviews served as the primary data source. Participants engaged in two scheduled interviews. The first interview used a formal semi-structured format to ensure that interviews were consistent and to allow for comparison of participant responses. This structure also allowed me to clarify, ask for additional information, and summarize participant responses to ensure my understanding. This interview was scheduled for 60 minutes, but lasted 45 minutes on average. Before beginning the interview question set, I reviewed the purpose of the study, my own personal experiences in teaching military-connected students, and the confidentiality protections the study would provide. I also reminded participants that they could decline to answer any question they were not comfortable answering and that they could end the interview and/or withdraw from the study at any time. All participants opted to meet via Zoom at times and dates of their choosing. Audio and video was recorded through Zoom.

Immediately following each interview, I engaged in self-debriefing in my reflexive journal, noting observations on participant body language, receptiveness to topics, and topics to follow-up on or add in the second interview. The audio recording was transcribed into text through Descript, an audio and video editing software. Following transcription, I listened to the Zoom recording while following along in the transcript, noting changes in speaker, and ensuring that the interview was decoded correctly. Participants were emailed the transcript and asked to review it for clarity, errors, and expansion as desired. Once the participant was finished checking the transcript, it was entered into Delve qualitative software for coding.

The second interview began in a formal semi-structured format and shifted to an informal open-ended format at the end, allowing the researcher and participants to focus on key areas in a conversational manner. Interview protocol for the second interview was developed after member-checks and researcher analysis of findings from the first interview. The average length of time for this interview was 60 minutes. Each interview was again hosted on Zoom and digitally recorded. The same process of self-briefing, transcribing, and member-checking from the first round of interviews was repeated. This time, two of the four participants were asked for follow-up and clarifying information. The final transcript was again entered into Delve.

Timeline Elicitation

In addition to qualitative interviews, I sought to establish a timeline of military-related transitions the child has experienced, as well as a timeline of special education related events. Before the first interview, participants were asked to create a timeline that was then discussed during the first interview and used to explore possible correlation between military-related transitions and special education related events. Participants were free to display their timeline in any manner they chose. Two participants created their timeline in a table format. The third participant hand-drew their timeline and took a photo. The fourth participant used a list-style timeline format.

In creating their timeline, participants referred to personal documentation of military orders for PCS, activation, deployment, and training. They also used their child's special education records. Participants noted referring to annual and reevaluations IEPs as their primary source of data. Additional data sources used by two participants included Notice of Meetings and email records. One participant also referred to medical paperwork from outside agencies, which

included medical diagnoses from the military hospital. Another participant noted using personal social media accounts to verify dates of certain transitions.

Researcher Journal

Throughout the data collection and analysis process, I also engaged in reflexive self-analysis with a researcher journal. My notes were handwritten in a spiral-bound notebook. Before interviews, I recorded topics and possible questions I wanted to consider as I developed my interview protocol. I also used this journal after each interview to note the interview process, my thoughts, and topics to discuss or clarify further with each participant.

I also used my researcher journal as I was coding the data to record of how I was defining codes and preliminary observations of connections. I noted concepts that were emerging and how I viewed these concepts as related to one another. One important part of my journal was its use to define codes as I created them. This helped with coding consistency.

This process of reflexive self-analysis also helped to keep preconceived notions from interfering with my data analysis. In this journal, I examined and logged my beliefs and biases at multiple stages of this process as a way to examine the impact of my personal involvement on my research.

Data Analysis

Bracketing

In considering phenomenology as a methodology, it is important to note that the phenomenological methodology seeks not the facts of an experience, but instead, the essence of the experience. Researchers must first bracket their own experiences. In this study, bracketing required that my experiences in teaching military-connected children with exceptionalities be acknowledged and set aside. Doing so allowed for a fresh perspective through the data

collection, data analysis, and reporting process (Moustakas, 1994). While Creswell (2007) noted that it is difficult and rare to perfectly perceive an experience as though for the first time through bracketing, describing my own experiences in order to bracket views before proceeding with participants ensured that my own experiences were not influencing study outcomes.

Coding

Before beginning the coding process, I read through each participants' transcript twice to get a general sense of my data. Next, through deductive analysis (Creswell, 2007), I started with predefined codes that emerged from the research questions and theoretical framework. These included military-related transition, microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. As I found transcript excerpts aligning to each pre-defined code, I added an inductive code to provide specificity (See Table 3.2).

Table 3.2. Deductive Analysis Codes

Military-related transition	Microsystem	Mesosystem	Exosystem	Macrosystem
• PCS • Deployment • Geo-bach • Training rotation	• Mother • Father • Single parent • Teacher • Peers	• Home to school • Parent to parent	• Workplace (military) • Teach in same school • EFMP	• Culture (military) • Rank and pay grade (SES) • Geographic location

After coding the data with these pre-defined codes, I went through each transcript again to inductively code the data. In this process, I developed codes as I read through each transcript, (see Table 3.3). Codes are presented in alphabetical order.

Table 3.3. Inductive Analysis Codes

Adapt IEP Advocate Behavior after transition Build relationships	Not following IEP Not understood Out of compliance Outside diagnosis
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Child stress	Parent confusion
Communicate	Parent didn't know rights
Community	Parent steps: transition
Delay in identification	Parent stress
Discrepancy: State content	PCS impact
Discrepancy: School resources	Positive communication
Discrepancy: SPED services	School not prepared
Delay after PCS	School quality
Deployment impact	Seek outside evaluation
EFMP	Seek outside services
Fear of PCS	Single parent: deployment
Feel like nobody cares	Starting over
Feel like not priority	Teacher raised initial concern
Identification of disability	Tension
Impact of advocating	Treated like ignorant
Missing paperwork	Understanding of military culture

I then sorted and grouped the codes into related categories. Repetitive codes were combined. Codes with a lack of sufficient excerpts were removed. I completed this process three times, starting anew with codes each time. This allowed me to explore different relationships within the data while ensuring codes encompassed the major categories. Each grouping was hand-drawn into my researcher journal with my thoughts describing the relationships between codes. My final grouping of codes was then organized into the relationships as seen in Figure 3.3.

Figure 3.2. Grouping of Initial Codes

1. Adapt IEP
2. Advocate
a. Built relationships
b. Communication
c. EFMP
d. Steps in transition
3. Community
4. Delays
a. Identification of disability
b. Transfer of paperwork, missing records
5. Discrepancies
a. SPED services

- 6. Lack of understanding
 - a. Military culture
 - i. Not a priority
 - b. Parent rights
 - c. Tension
- 7. Fear, anxiety, and stress
 - a. Child
 - b. Parent
- 8. Out of compliance
- 9. Outside agency
 - a. Seek outside evaluation
 - b. Seek outside services
- 10. Transition impact
 - a. Home
 - b. School

Finally, the grouping of initial codes was further revised and organized into emerging themes. These are depicted in Figure 3.4, and are analyzed in Chapter 4.

Figure 3.3. Alignment of Codes into Emerging Themes

- 1) Out of compliance**
 - a) Delays
 - i) Identification and eligibility
 - ii) Paperwork transfer
 - b) Inconsistent services
 - i) Outside agencies
- 2) Lack of understanding**
 - a) Military culture
 - b) Parent rights
 - c) Tension
- 3) Fear, anxiety, and stress**
 - a) Parent
 - b) Child
 - c) Family
- 4) Advocate**
 - a) Build relationships
 - b) Go to battle

Research Timeline

November

- IRB approval occurred on November 27, 2022
- Began participant recruitment

December

- Continued participant recruitment
- Sent participant screening survey
- Analyzed survey results
- Selected participants
- Began first round of interviews with subsequent transcription and member checks

January

- Finished first round of interviews with subsequent transcription and member checks
- Developed interview protocol for second round of interviews
- Held second interviews with subsequent transcription and member checks

February and March

- Finished second interview with final participant
- Conducted data analysis
- Completed dissertation writing and revisions

Trustworthiness

The interpretative nature of qualitative research has served as a contested issue because unlike quantitative research, replicability is not the goal. Stahl and King (2020) noted that in qualitative research, “different writers can generate unique outcomes” (p.26), even when given the same data set. Although reality is constructed through the lens of the researcher, Lincoln and Guba (1986) found that trustworthiness can be obtained through four criteria: credibility,

transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Through these four criteria, rigor for this study can be established.

Credibility

Credibility seeks to ensure that the findings of the study are accurate. In this research, I sought triangulation of data by using multiple sources of data, including interviews, timeline elicitation, and reflexive self-analysis. In this process, I noted questions of my findings, bracketed my opinions and thoughts to identify potential bias, and provided detailed observations. I also implemented member-checking at the conclusion of each interview to allow participants the opportunity to clarify, correct, and expand on responses. Upon completion of the dissertation, findings will be shared with the participants who expressed interest.

Transferability

Transferability aims to provide external validity. While findings of this research study are not intended to be replicated, transfer of findings to deepen understanding can be done with thorough descriptions. In this study, this is done through the thick and rich descriptions on the study's design that are found in the methodology, participants, data collection, and data analysis sections.

Dependability

Dependability refers to the reliability of the findings, and considers the methods of the study. To establish dependability in this study, I first provided detailed descriptions on the methods used for data collection, data analysis, and interpretation of findings. Member-checking served as another source of dependability.

Confirmability

Confirmability seeks to prove that findings are not influenced by researcher bias; instead, all findings should be supported by the data. In qualitative research, data collection, data analysis, and findings may be influenced by a researcher's underlying beliefs. As such, I remained aware of any potential biases and their influence on the study. I provided confirmability through the process of reflexive self-analysis journaling, in which I examined and noted my own judgments and beliefs as data was collected. This journal shares my relationship with participants, identifies my own values and beliefs, provides procedural notes, and describes how I made meaning of the data.

Summary

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to provide insight on the shared, lived experiences of military-connected students with exceptionalities. Data was collected through interviews and timeline elicitation. Through the lens of ecological systems theory, data was analyzed through both a deductive and inductive coding process, and is shared in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4 - Results

Military families face unique challenges which can impact a military-connected child. Military-connected students with exceptionalities may face additional challenges as a result of these same transitions, yet the impact of military-related transitions on an exceptional military child's education remains unclear. The goal of this qualitative study is to explore and understand the impact that military lifestyle has on military-connected students who receive special education services, specifically focusing on the impact of military-related transitions. This study was designed to address the following research questions:

1. What, if any, military-related transitions impact the educational experiences of a military-connected student with exceptionalities?
2. How do parents/guardians of a military-connected child with exceptionalities describe the impact of military-related transitions on their experiences with public schools?

In this chapter, an analysis of the data is provided and is organized into two sections. In the first section of this chapter, a narrative description of each participant and their child is provided to create context of their role within the military and educational system. A timeline of each military-related transition experienced is provided for each participant, as well as key events in the child's special education identification. The names of participants and their children were replaced with pseudonyms to protect confidentiality. In the second section of the chapter, data is analyzed through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory and emerging themes will be explored.

Participants

Annabelle

Annabelle is a veteran of the US Army who retired from active-duty service as a lieutenant colonel in 2013. Her husband continues to serve as active-duty, and is currently a colonel. In addition, Annabelle is a mother to two sons. Her youngest son, Luke, was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder at two years, three months of age, with a secondary diagnosis of speech apraxia. She describes Luke, now 16, as “very sweet. He’s very affectionate. He is very friendly, outgoing, and just really wants to be a normal, average kid.”

In his 16 years, Luke has experienced multiple military-related transitions. At the age of five months, he experienced a dual deployment, where both his mother and father were simultaneously deployed. He has also experienced additional deployments of his father at the ages of two and six. From the time he turned six, he has moved to new states as a result of PCS orders six times in his life, with an average of only two years between PCS moves. He also experienced “countless” times where his father was away for training, field exercises, or other short-term military assignments. Table 4.1 provides a timeline of each military-related transition during Luke’s youth, as well as his disability diagnosis.

Table 4.1. Luke’s Timeline

2006	2007	2009	2009	2012	2013	2015	2017	2019	2020	2022
Luke born	March-October: Mother and father dual deployed to Iraq	Diagnosed with autism at 2 years, 3 months of age	August-January 2010: Father deployed to Iraq	March-December: Father deployed to Afghanistan for 10 months	June: Mother retires from Army August: PCS	PCS	PCS	PCS	PCS	PCS

Grace

Grace currently serves as an early childhood educator in a unified program, serving children from three to five both with and without exceptionalities. She and her husband have three children, two of whom are adopted. Her daughter is the oldest, and her two sons are aged 18 and 4. Her husband is looking forward to his upcoming retirement from the military, currently serving as a sergeant in the US Army. She jokingly describes her middle son, Jamison, as “a pain in her behind.” She laughs and expands, stating “No, he’s really sweet and he really likes to work with other kids and be helpful.” She notes that he is “stubborn and a prankster. What else can we say about Jamison? He’s Jamison!” Jamison was identified as eligible for special education when he was in the second grade, and currently receives services with a primary label of specific learning disability due to dysgraphia and dyscalculia, with additional diagnoses of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and autism spectrum disorder level 1.

Jamison experienced his first military-related transition before his first birthday, and has encountered multiple deployments of his father since. Due to enrollment in EFMP as a result of his disabilities, he has not encountered any PCS since he was three years old. Table 4.2 displays a timeline of when Jamison began school, became eligible for special education, and the primary military-related transitions that he has experienced.

Table 4.2. Jamison’s Timeline

2005	2006	2006-2009	2009	2010	2012	2013	2017
Jamison born	PCS at 10 months of age; Father deployed to Korea	Geo-bach while father is deployed	PCS	Father deployed to Iraq; Began kindergarten	Found eligible for special education; Father deployed to Iraq during evaluation process	PCS orders; Jamison enrolled in EFMP and PCS orders cancelled	Father deployed to Korea

Nancy

Nancy is a special education teacher and mother of two. In 2022, her husband retired from the US Army as a sergeant first-class. Her youngest son, Tyler, is 15 years old. Nancy shares that Tyler is an “old soul” in that he is very aware of the feelings of others. She adds that while he is compassionate and caring, he “can be really down on himself.” Tyler was found eligible for special education under the category of emotional and behavioral disorder when he was seven years old. His medical diagnosis of ADHD also shows as a secondary label on his IEP under other health impaired.

Military related transitions are nothing new for Tyler, as he was born while his father was deployed overseas. Since his birth, he has been through multiple PCS and deployments. In addition, his family geo-bached for a brief period of time shortly after he started school. During a geo-bach, the service member and their family members live apart (Blue Star Families, 2022). Now that his father is retired, Nancy shares that Tyler is quite excited about “staying in one place” to finish his high school career. Table 4.3 depicts a timeline of the military-related transitions that Tyler has experienced, as well as key educational events.

Table 4.3. Tyler’s Timeline

2007	2009	2012	2013	2014	2016-2017	2018-2019	2020	2022
August Tyler born: Father was deployed to Afghanistan and took leave for 20 days when he was born	July 2009-May 2010: Father deployed	Started kindergarten	Jan-March: Father assigned to training school; Family geo-bached March: PCS	PCS; Found eligible for special education	July 2016-February 2017: Father deployed to Korea	October 2018-March 2019: Father deployed to Poland, came home early after being injured	PCS	Father retired from military service

Sophia

Sophia is married to a staff sergeant in the US Army, and together, they have four children. At 11 years old, Benjamin is their oldest. Sophia describes Benjamin as “pretty shy at first, but once he warms up to you, he gets more open.” She notes that he “hates a challenge. He always puts his best foot forward so he’ll try, but he doesn’t like it when things start to get hard because then he gets frustrated with himself and doesn’t know how to process things right.” Because of his diagnosis of ADHD and its significant impact on his education, Benjamin currently receives special education services under the label of other health impaired.

While Sophia notes that Benjamin is still pretty young, he has already experienced three PCS and three deployments of his father. In addition, the family has already received PCS orders for the upcoming summer. Table 4.4 shares key events in Benjamin’s educational experiences, as well as military-related transitions.

Table 4.4. Benjamin’s Timeline

2011	2014	2016	2017	2018	2019	2021	2023
Benjamin born	Father deployed	June: PCS August: Start kindergarten	Father deployed; Repeat kindergarten	Repeat kindergarten July: PCS	Father deployed; Found eligible for special education	May: PCS	July: Will PCS

Data Analysis

Individuals live and interact within multiple environments. These interactions, both direct and indirect, have an influence on child development. In this study, data was analyzed through the lens of Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory. As described in Chapter 3, this theory seeks to explain the influences of individuals, interactions, and social environments on a

child's development (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). To understand the impact of military transitions, the specific systems surrounding a child must first be identified and explored.

Research Question 1: What, if any, military-related transitions impact the educational experiences of a military-connected student with exceptionalities?

In analysis of data collected through interviews and participant timelines, it is evident that each military family has experienced a wide range of military-related transitions. The shared transitions identified by participants include PCS, deployment, geo-batching, and training rotations. The number of military-related transitions experienced by participants is summarized in Table 4.5.

Table 4.5. Transitions Experienced by Participants

	Annabelle	Grace	Nancy	Sophia
PCS	6	2	3	3
Deployment	1-self 3-spouse	4	4	3
Training Rotation	Experienced, amount unknown	Experienced, amount unknown	Experienced, amount unknown	Experienced, amount unknown
Geo-bach	n/a	1	1	n/a

Permanent Change of Station

The highest number of military-related transitions experienced by participants was PCS. Annabelle noted that their longest stay in one duty station was six years, partly due to a simultaneous deployment of both parents. Since she retired from the Army in 2013, her family has encountered PCS orders about every 2 years, resulting in a total of six PCS moves since Luke turned 6 years old. Nancy shared that they have a somewhat unusual experience with PCS orders. Her husband has served as an Army recruiter, which allowed the family to stay in one

duty station a “little longer than normal.” Even so, Nancy’s family has encountered three PCS moves from the start of Tyler’s kindergarten year to the time he turned 13, which is when his father retired from military service. Sophia shared that although her family is “still pretty early in military experience,” they have already experienced three PCS moves: when Benjamin was 5, 8, and 10. Additionally, the family already has orders to PCS again this summer, shortly after Benjamin turns 12. Grace considers her family to be an anomaly when it comes to PCS orders. Her son, Jamison, has only encountered two PCS moves in his life, the first at 10 months and the second at almost 3 years old. Grace attributes this to her son’s enrollment in the EFMP program, sharing that because of his disability and need for special education, they were able to stay in their current duty station.

Deployment

The second most common transition experienced by participants is military deployment. The Veterans Administration (2015) defines deployment as “the movement of forces into and out of an operational area.” Participants added to this definition, noting that their spouses’ military deployments were always overseas: Afghanistan, Iraq, Korea, Poland, Germany, and Ukraine. The deployment assignments ranged in length, with one deployment as short as 5 months and another deployment as long as 10 months. As an Army veteran, Annabelle deployed when Luke turned 5 months old, and her husband also deployed at the same time. Since then, Annabelle’s husband has deployed twice more. Sophia’s husband has deployed three times. During the most recent deployment, Benjamin was evaluated and found eligible for special education services. Grace’s husband has deployed four times, and Jamison was also found eligible for special education services during one of the deployments. Nancy’s husband has deployed four times, although she noted his last deployment ended early because he was injured and sent home.

Training Cycle Rotations

The third most common transition encountered by participants was when their service member would leave on rotation. Sophia described rotations as “not really a deployment. They’re going for a training cycle for anywhere from a couple weeks to 9 months.” While each participant acknowledged these training cycles as a regular transition experienced by their family, none of the participants were able to quantify how many they’d encountered. Grace noted, “They happen all the time. It’s just military life.”

During some rotations, families are unable to reach their service members, barring an emergency. Other times, the rotation results in a temporary PCS. Most often, life “just goes on.” While the service member is on rotation, participants find they usually have to take sole responsibility for the family.

Geo-bach

During a geo-bach, the service member and their family members live apart (Blue Star Families, 2022). Common reasons for geo-baching include a service member moving to a new duty station while the family stays at their previous home or moves to an alternate location, such as with extended family. Some military families geo-bach when a service member is going to deploy, choosing to move home with family as opposed to staying in the duty station. In this study, Grace’s family decided to geo-bach when Jamison was 10 months old. Her husband had received PCS orders for Korea, and she felt that it was better that she and her children move to Puerto Rico to live with her family while he was gone. They chose to geo-bach until Jamison turned 2, when her husband returned from Korea and received new PCS orders. However, because this geo-baching occurred prior to Jamison starting public school, she doesn’t feel it had any impact on his educational experiences. Nancy’s family also needed to geo-bach for a shorter

time. Shortly after Tyler started kindergarten, his father received rotation orders for training. Knowing the orders were short in duration, she opted to stay behind with her children to avoid the disruption to Tyler's schooling with a short-term PCS. The family reunited after the training rotation was complete and new PCS orders were given. Nancy describes geo-batching as the only military transition she's experienced that hasn't had negative repercussions on her son's education.

Research Question 2: How do parents/guardians of a military-connected child with exceptionalities describe the impact of military-related transitions on their experiences with public schools?

In analyzing study data, each military-related transition experienced by participants is shown to have an impact on both participants and their children. In some transitions, the impact is indirectly experienced by the child, while other transitions were found to have a direct influence. Analysis of the data provides four emerging themes, which include: out of compliance; lack of understanding; fear, anxiety, and stress; and advocate. Each theme will be discussed in further detail below.

Emerging Theme: Out of Compliance

One of the largest impacts on school experiences is found to be a result of PCS. Because of these orders, participants' children have experienced schools in up to six different states, and they have found that their child's school experiences differ greatly by geographic location. Participants describe significant delays in their child being identified for special education, with a lapse of two or more years for three participants. Following a PCS, participants found that their child's IEP is often out of compliance due to delays in the transfer of the IEP, missing paperwork, and inconsistencies in what special education services each state provides. As a

result of discrepancies across states, an emerging theme is that a child's special education is routinely out of compliance.

Identification and Eligibility Delays

The first impact described by participants is the identification for special education. While Annabelle's son was identified prior to the start of kindergarten, Grace, Nancy, and Sophia's children all shared delays of about two years from the identification of teacher concern in kindergarten to the referral for special education evaluation through the school. For Nancy and Sophia, their respective children were only evaluated following a PCS to a new state, despite two years of noted concerns. Participants felt that school and teacher quality was impacted by geographic location, which led to delays in identification of disability.

Nancy's son, Tyler, began kindergarten in a small, rural town. At that time, her husband was a military recruiter, which meant they were living in an area that was not a military community. She believed this had an impact on how her son was "handled" for his first two years of school. She says, "It wasn't a military community. They had no idea what his life was like. I don't think everything was appropriately looked at and addressed. And handled." Concerns about Tyler's behavior and attention were raised, and a month and a half into the school year, Tyler's teacher requested that he be moved to a different teacher. Nancy said, "That's not right. You shouldn't give up on a kid, that's not right." She added, "His dad had just deployed. He was five years old. That's trauma. And his teacher, the school, they didn't get it." Tyler remained in the district through the end of first grade, and while his teachers continued to raise concerns, their only recommendation was to refer to Tyler's doctor to "medicate him." In the summer before Tyler's second grade year, the family had PCS orders to a new state. Within his first two months of school in the new state, Tyler was referred for a special education

evaluation, where he was quickly evaluated and found eligible for special education before the winter break. After the experiences with her son's first school, Nancy also chose to have an independent evaluation of her child done through the military in addition to the school evaluation, stating that "We wanted to get all the pieces...I didn't want just partial, I wanted everybody to have all the different pieces, like behavioral health and things."

While Sophia's son started school in a military community, she feels that the school just didn't know what to do with Benjamin. In his kindergarten year, significant concerns regarding his attention and immature behaviors were shared by his teacher. She found that while the school was concerned, they "didn't do anything about it themselves." The only step taken by the school was to recommend that Sophia take Benjamin to an outside specialist for a diagnosis. Sophia stated "they advised me to take him to a therapist and then that was it. Like, they just advised, I actually had to do the whole leg work." Benjamin was diagnosed with ADHD and there were multiple concerns about it impacting his education. Sophia said the school "just held him back a year because...it was a school in [state], which is known for poor education." After finishing his second year of kindergarten, the school held him back for a third time. Sophia said, "They just kept saying hold him back because it was a school in [state]." At no point in his three years of kindergarten were any attempts made to evaluate for special education. At the end of Benjamin's third year in kindergarten, the family received orders to PCS to a new state. Upon arrival, the new state placed Benjamin in the second grade. He was 8 years old, and Sophia stated the new school was not comfortable placing him in a first grade classroom with 6 year old peers, so they decided second grade would be a better fit. Again, concerns were quickly noted with his attention, but additional concerns regarding behavior and academics were shared. The school requested a referral for a special education evaluation "almost right away," and Benjamin was

found eligible for services by November. Sophia noted “confusion” because his “first elementary didn’t do much.” “I guess it was just in one of those areas where schooling wasn’t that great kind of thing so they didn’t really do much for him besides giving medication,” she said. She expressed gratitude to her son’s second school, noting that they “knew what they were doing. They were always on top of it.”

When Jamison started kindergarten, Grace became concerned. While his teacher had not raised any concerns, she “knew there was something going on when the kids were learning and he still couldn’t even write his name.” She requested a meeting, and his teacher noted concerns with his attention and recommended that Benjamin visit a doctor for an ADHD rating scale. The teacher also noted that because his mother was bilingual, Grace also felt that because she was bilingual, a lot of her parent concerns were “brushed off as well, he’s bilingual. He’s ELL (English language learner).” Grace kept telling the teacher, “I don’t think it’s ELL.” This continued for two years, and by the time he reached second grade, Jamison was “not reading, basically. He was so behind on everything, even emotionally,” she said. Grace noted that it was like he regressed in “academics, emotional, all of the above.” In second grade, the social worker recommended that Grace take Jamison to a neurologist to “see if there’s something that they can figure out.” Grace laughs and says “I looked at him and said, you’re the first person that actually makes sense. And the next day I made an appointment and took him to a neurologist.” At this appointment, the neurologist had a “bunch of thoughts,” according to Grace. With the neurologist’s formal report in hand, Grace returned to the school which began an evaluation that led to eligibility for special education.

Shortly after Jamison was found eligible for special education, her husband received PCS orders. Grace expressed frustration that it took so long for her son to be identified and was

concerned that now that everything was in place to support Jamison, they were going to “up and move.” With concerns on the potential impact on his behavior, she says

Going to a new environment where they didn’t know what was going on, that’s just one of those things. With transitions to new places, it’s the time it take it takes for kiddos to establish and get used to the routines and get used to new people.

She felt it was better for him to stay than to transition and start over. She called EFMP and filled out paperwork to stay behind. Grace said that EFMP responded, “You can still move to [new duty station].” She contacted the overarching EFMP branch in Washington, DC and sent over her son’s paperwork. She said “the person read them and not even 3 hours later, they called and said they were just going to leave him here.” Grace is grateful that they haven’t had to PCS, noting that “Everyone in the school knows Jamison. When he has a meltdown, they know what to do.”

In addition to the ages of their children at the age of eligibility, Sophia, Nancy, and Grace were also all living in on-post housing in their respective states, which meant their children were attending an on-post school. They felt that this positively impacted their child. Nancy noted that

In a military community, lots of people know what it’s like. They’re [teachers] military spouses, have military kids. They know that sometimes it’s trauma from military life—the deployments, the moving, the starting over. They also know when it’s something more.

Paperwork Transfer

Each time participants had a PCS, their child’s records were required to be transferred to the receiving school. At the start of their special education journeys, participants expected those records to be sent before their arrival in their new district. However, participants found that not

only were records not yet received, often, the records had not even been sent. For several participants, this meant that their child went without services.

Sophia shared that Benjamin “was in school for a couple of weeks not knowing what to do because they didn’t have his stuff yet.” During these times, she saw a rise in his disruptive behaviors. However, because the school didn’t have his IEP, she felt “people didn’t understand why he was getting outlashes. They didn’t understand what was wrong with him.”

Nancy noted that in her experiences, it usually takes a “few weeks” for the receiving school to get the records. To offset the delay, Nancy has tried to bring her son’s records directly to the school herself and was told “We appreciate you bringing it, but we need it from the school. We have to verify the IEP.” As they waited for the records to arrive, Tyler received a lull in services. Even after the paperwork arrived, his IEP was not reviewed and accepted by the district until his annual IEP date, which meant he went without services for a period of several months. Nancy said “This is not legal. That’s like, law 101.”

Annabelle also tried to provide records ahead of time, and while sometimes this is successful, there was one PCS where she discovered “the SPED department never forwarded his IEP to the school.” This meant that when Luke arrived for his first day, the school had no idea that he required special education services. In another district, the transferred records were incomplete and her son’s behavior intervention plan was missing entirely. She wasn’t aware of this missing paperwork until being called by the school to pick up Luke for a suspension. She felt “blindsided.” Following a meeting with the superintendent, Annabelle came to find out that faculty had no idea Luke even had a behavior intervention plan because it hadn’t been attached in the transfer of his records. Annabelle felt that this explained the rise in his aggressive behaviors at the time, because “He had a plan that helped him. It was all written down so that

teachers knew what to do, all they had to do was follow the plan. But they didn't have it. They didn't know."

Inconsistent Services

One of the most recurring experiences shared by participants was that following every PCS, the receiving school would not follow the child's IEP as written because the services in each state varied so much. For participants, this most often resulted in changes in services not based on the child's current performance or needs but on the available resources in the district.

Since Luke became school-age, Annabelle's family has experienced six PCS relocations. She said they have lived in states with "excellent education systems," but have also lived "in other parts of the country where education in the state might not be in the top 50% of the nationwide ranking." She stated it "absolutely has had an impact" on Luke. Annabelle felt that undergoing a PCS so often lets her "see how things are done in different states. I think we've been able to see the worst parts of different schools but also the best parts." She added "different schools in different parts of the country have different resources," which has "been an issue." Annabelle described that "for whatever reason, a lot of the schools just want to say no [to services] upfront." She found that often, these changes are due a lack of resources, either due to financial burden or by choice. Annabelle noted that while districts have always staffed service providers for her son's special education services, which include speech therapy and occupational therapy, they are "unfortunately in high demand." As a result, she has found that when this happens, the receiving school tries to reduce his service minutes on his IEP to meet staffing and caseload needs and she said that Luke gets "shortchanged."

Sophia expressed frustration with the discrepancies in implementing her son's behavioral intervention plan following a PCS. After becoming eligible for special education services, the

family experienced a PCS and the school Benjamin began attending would not follow the special education plan written for her son's behavior. She said the school "wanted to try their own stuff instead of taking the plan, the legal plan, that worked in his prior school." She felt that each time they PCS, he has to start over and shows "significant regression." While Benjamin seems to recoup eventually, she is frustrated that it always takes "so long to get anything in place for him" even though he already has an IEP. In addition, Sophia has found discrepancies in the availability of safe rooms or spaces, finding that her son's current school did not have any form of safe room or safe place for him to go to when escalated to avoid self-injury. As a result, she saw significant increase in self-injurious behaviors. Sophia shared that not only were there significant delays in "getting anything in place for" Benjamin, her son's most recent school "just wasn't following the IEP." As she looks ahead to another PCS in July, Sophia added "The new school, I see all the comments about IEP plans and schools not benefitting them or blocking out parents and I'm just like, oh dear Lord, what did I get myself into?"

Nancy said her current state looks a lot a lot different than the last state they were stationed in when it comes to special education resources and services, particularly "things like para support minutes." In her son's current district, schools don't provide para minutes. When she questioned the district, Nancy said she was told "We don't do that, our district doesn't. Essentially, I was told it's not in the budget."

Outside Agencies

In addition to using outside agencies as an initial source of identification, participants found themselves often seeking outside services because of the resource discrepancies across states. While location impacts the need for services, the family's socioeconomic status as a result of rank and pay grade impacts their ability to seek these services.

Following a PCS, Annabelle often found that the receiving school often was not willing to offer the same special education services. She found that while for the most part the services were offered, they were often reduced in time and frequency. She noted that

My husband's time and service, and his rank and paygrade, has been a financial blessing.

We have the financial resources that we can pay out of pocket for certain things. I felt he wasn't getting enough therapy at school after they reduced it so we augmented that with private therapy we paid for out of pocket.

She expanded, saying,

Unfortunately, those resources are in high demand. So, for instance, they [schools] say yeah, we have a speech therapist, but they have so many other students that need speech therapy that [Luke] gets shortchanged. They just don't have the manpower. In cases like that, we have sought private speech therapy and even paid for it out pocket if TRICARE wouldn't cover it, just because the school district just didn't have the bandwidth, I guess.

Grace also found herself having to rely on paying for outside therapies and evaluations. When concerns were first raised about her son in kindergarten, she began play therapy, which was not covered under insurance. She also took Jamison to a neurologist, where he was first diagnosed with ADHD, and later completed a more thorough evaluation. As she waited for the school to consider an evaluation, Jamison began outside service for occupational therapy and speech, which she paid for out of pocket when insurance denied coverage. She added that when the school "finally recognized it's not just ADHD, he has something here, they added those services into his IEP after evaluation." Despite this, she has continued to seek outside services for speech, his psychologist, and his psychiatrist.

Due to the inconsistencies in the quality of service providers and frequency of service times following PCS moves, Nancy has found a need to seek outside service providers for counseling throughout her son's education. She noted that

The school he came from had a wonderful social worker. She just, she got his lifestyle.

Here, the counselor he sees for his IEP isn't enough. She isn't qualified to do what he is needing. You know, here in [state], it's not a military community at all. They have no idea at all.

Emerging Theme: Lack of Understanding Creates Tension

A common thread of tension between the school and participants was described, with a lack of understanding regarding parental rights and military culture as the primary source.

Parent Rights

At the start of their child's special education journey, several participants expressed that they felt they did not fully understand their legal rights as a parent. This led to tense interactions and relationships between the parent and the school. For example, Sophia said she did not know that she could "fight for his education and go against what the school said." As a result, Benjamin was retained in kindergarten not once, but twice. She said she felt that her lack of knowledge and advocacy with the school resulted in him being left significantly behind. She stated "If I knew then what I know now, I would have demanded an evaluation the first time they retained him." She also noted that in their first PCS, she did not know that she could take copies of Benjamin's records with her. As a result, there was a significant delay in getting his IEP acceptance meeting scheduled and services started, which resulted in a "significant regression in his behavior." Although she is no longer new to the world of special education, she finds that in each PCS, she feels that she is treated as "ignorant" by teachers, stating that "they [schools] treat

parents like they don't know." She explained, "It's not that I don't know. It's just because different states call things different."

Although Luke had been identified with autism spectrum disorder before he started in public schools, Annabelle found that she had to "self-teach" when it came to her rights as a parent and Luke's rights as an exceptional child. She said she found that each PCS taught her a little more about Luke's "right for a free, appropriate public education in his least restrictive environment." She also noted that, overall, schools supported his transitions, but at times they tried to "override" her parent rights and make decisions "for, not with."

Nancy found herself in a different situation. After earning her degree in special education, she was "well aware of her rights." Yet she said she felt that schools often treated her as if she didn't, saying "I don't like to go in all, you know, at first, but hey, I was a special education teacher. I know what this says. Laws are, you know, laws." She said she felt that being treated as "uneducated" frequently led to "tense interactions."

Military Culture

Another key factor contributing to tension was a perceived lack of understanding of military culture by the schools. One significant aspect of military life is "frequent change" because of military-related transitions. Participants found that not all schools are prepared to understand the impact of these. In her experiences, Nancy said she felt that a school's understanding is dependent on the geographical aspect of whether the family lived in a military community. Particularly for schools off-post, Nancy said she found that teachers were not always very understanding of the impact that transitioning into a new school following a PCS has on a child:

Going to a new environment, they [children] didn't know what was going on. It takes time for kiddos to establish and get used to the routines and get used to new people. And that is something I feel like in my experience, schools jump too quickly instead of understanding the transitioning that comes alongside that and needing to give kids time to adjust and learn.

Nancy shared that one of the biggest areas that lack understanding is the trauma caused by military transitions, which often result in behavioral and/or academic changes. "They [school] look at our kids and see the behavior. They don't know our kids. They make assumptions."

Sophia said she felt that her son is seen as a "temporary problem," noting frustration in being asked "How long are you here for?" She added "It feels like Benjamin's needs are not being seen as a priority. It just felt like, you're not here that long, I don't have to input so much time into your child." Sophia said that Benjamin's behavior negatively changes at school following transition and she felt that instead of understanding the reasons behind the behavior, his teachers "just see him as a problem."

While Grace does not have to worry about the impact of a PCS, she noted an overall lack of understanding of the impact of deployment on a child, stating

The hardest thing is that they [teachers] don't understand the impact of deployments on kids. They're [service member] in and out. It's not like, oh, they're divorced, you know, we have them every other weekend. It's like, for however many months he's not gonna be here.

In addition, she said that she faces resistance when taking her child out of school for block leave, where the service member is given leave without a choice of dates:

The soldiers nor the families have control of when they're going to be given their block leave. It's the only time they have to spend with the family. So this is it, this is what it is. This is the only time they've got with dad for nine months. They need to spend this time as a family.

Emerging Theme: Fear, Anxiety, and Stress

In addition to the tension felt between parent and school, participants expressed noting feelings of fear, anxiety and stress in themselves and their children. Participants found that their internal feelings were mirrored in their children.

Parent

All participants in this study have experienced multiple periods of separation from their service member because of military-related transitions such as deployments or training rotations. During these times, participants said they found themselves "single parenting," trying to fill the role of both mom and dad. It also meant that each child had to adapt with having just one parent again, then re-adapt when that parent returns. As Grace put it, "I was wearing all the hats."

Grace found that as a result of her husband frequently being gone during deployments or trainings, the decision-making for Jamison fell largely on her. She recalled the decision to begin medicating her child. Her husband was deployed, and in a phone call, he asked "But why?" She replied

I'm not trying to sound mean, but dude, you're not here dealing with this. I'm not asking you. I'm telling you. And he didn't have a say in it, I mean, it's like you're over there.

I'm the one dealing with this.

She noted that while the school always tried to include Jamison's dad in meetings through speaker phone or Zoom, it wasn't always successful. In addition to a frequent poor connection, it was hard for her husband to track the meeting. She added "I know he had other

things to worry about and I know I kept a lot of things from him to reduce his stress. I wanted him to be safe.” This was not easy for her, and her husband was deployed during Jamison’s evaluation for special education services. She had “done the whole process” by herself, so when it came time for the eligibility meeting, she requested her husband be sent home early because she “didn’t want to have more bad news by herself.”

Sophia had a similar experience. Her husband also was deployed during their son’s evaluation. They tried to include him over Zoom, but his participation was limited. As Sophia tried to make these decisions, she said she found it “hectic.” She added, “The whole process of special ed is so confusing and there’s so many different moving pieces and it’s so different in each state.” She said she felt as though her confusion and stress added to her son’s difficulty in transitioning during deployment, resulting in more aggressive behaviors. As her son’s aggression increased, her stress increased. She said it was a “never-ending cycle.”

Annabelle noted that PCS orders in particular bring a “fear of the unknown.” She expanded, stating “Personally, I am always stressed out with a PCS move. I mean, even though I’m a pretty organized person and very methodical, it’s just, it’s stressful.” She stated, “For every military family, it’s the fear of the unknown. The Army’s always throwing curveballs at us, so you don’t always have control over the situation. And so it’s very stressful for me.”

Child

Annabelle believed that while her son’s resiliency “deserves a medal,” the frequent changes in household status and moves are “stressful for him too.” When her husband is away for extended periods, Annabelle shared that Luke often does get upset. “He definitely misses his dad...when he is gone. I mean, he’s close to me too, but he loves his dad. I’ve noticed that sometimes that does impact his behavior.” Luke has shown significant behavioral differences as

a result of these transitions. She emphasized that, overall, the transitions have “pushed beyond his comfort level and comfort zone to the point where’s he just a really resilient child.” However, she also shared that despite his resiliency, he has experienced “horrible meltdowns. I mean, violent self-injury” at school after a PCS. She also noted seeing some regression in skills, particularly in his fine-motor skills. Sophia’s son Benjamin has experienced similar behaviors. She shared that his behavior always changes following a transition. After a recent PCS, he would “lash out and hit his head against the wall. He’d refuse to do things. They [school] just sent him to the office multiple times.” Sophia also saw feelings of frustration in her son.

Grace said she saw similar behavior changes each time her husband was gone for military reasons, sharing that Jamison has had “troubles separating from me again. He regressed...academics, emotional, all of the above.” Jamison “closes down. He won’t ask or talk about it, but then he kind of bottles up and bottles up and bottles up until he just explodes out of nowhere. He has such a big reaction for something so small.” School during these transitions was “rockier than usual,” she said.

Nancy found that during deployment transitions, her son, Tyler, demonstrated signs of trauma, including bedwetting and heightened anxiety. In addition to behavioral changes, Tyler also experienced regression in academic skills. Nancy shared that “transitions are traumatic for a little person that doesn’t know how to process the emotions and things.”

Family

The stress each individual experiences compounds, resulting in family stress. Annabelle noted that when she is stressed during transition, Luke “picks up on that a lot. He senses when I’m frustrated and stressed, and so the moves and frequent changes can be stressful for him too.” In her turn, his stress adds to her own.

Nancy also finds that in addition to his own stress, Tyler absorbs the stress of his parents and siblings during transitions. She said,

When you're in transition, everybody is stressed. Parents are stressed because moving is expensive. You're trying to get all the pieces together, get it figured out. Siblings are stressed. They're anxious, anxious about having new friends, what their new school will be, what the house will look like, what their new neighborhood will be like. Everyone is on a short fuse. There's times where you get hurt feelings or are frustrated because of the short fuses.

She also noticed behavior changes during transitions. She shared that as a family, they get frustrated so much easier, but really it's unconscious, because it's easier to have dad leave on a bad note and get to be mad at dad than leaving on a good note and getting feelings hurt. Unconsciously, thinking maybe then it won't hurt so bad.

Emerging theme: Advocating for Child

As a result of multiple PCS moves, participants expressed a strong need to advocate for their child because of the number of times they had to start over.

Build relationships, but don't be afraid to go to battle

Annabelle referred to her advocating journey as "learning as I go." Annabelle said she felt that "showing gratitude and appreciation goes a long way" and that she is "so grateful for the teachers." However, she noted that you "have to be firm." She said she takes a very proactive approach to advocating, making sure to communicate "early and often." She found that by respectfully advocating for Luke, a "teamwork kind of relationship" is formed. She has found that this proactive approach has helped to build a "good, cordial, teamwork kind of relationship with the schools." She hoped the school staff felt that they are on the same team for Luke.

Although Annabelle works hard to establish positive relationships with Luke's teachers, she has encountered PCS transitions where she had to "go to battle with the school." She has worked hard to educate herself on her legal parental rights and felt like she had a good understanding of what schools can and cannot do legally. In some transitions, the new school is unwilling to provide the services of Luke's IEP. When this happens, she tells the school upfront "these are my expectations. Who is making that decision? Show me what data you have." She added that she is "an advocate" and a "no nonsense person." She found that "You can't be a pushover and you have to stand up for yourself and your child if you feel like you're getting steamrolled." Annabelle finds that advocating helps to ensure that Luke receives the services he needs.

Sophia found that most of her interactions with each new school have felt like a battle. Even after receiving records, Benjamin's new school "wanted to try their own stuff instead of doing what worked at his prior school." After experiencing the delay in records, and her son going "so long" without being understood, Sophia said that she "won't make that mistake again." She said that when they PCS in July, she will hand-carry copies of all of his pertinent records to the school well ahead of Benjamin's first day. Sophia said she felt that as she learns about a new school system and special education, her experience as an advocate for her son has grown. She found that the school's receptiveness to building relationships has an impact, noting that

The school now is really hands-on with him. They update me when there's times he needs more support or more help and we revisit together how to rework the plan to better suit him. It's comforting knowing that somebody is protecting my child.

In Grace's experience, she said she felt that she was a "pain in the neck." She recalled several times the school was not implementing her son's accommodations, so she "blindsided the

school.” She noted, “They weren’t happy with me, but I was really frustrated at that point.” She believed in serving as an advocate for her child, noting that schools “need to know that. They need to know that parents are frustrated, so that way they [school] respond and are proactive.” She said she was adamant that her son is “not going to slip through the cracks.” Grace shared that at first, “they blew me off to be honest.” She said she now felt that her constant communication and presence at the school helped to make sure Jamison’s needs were being met, because the school “knows I’m going to be here. They’re scared of me, but everyone knows Jamison. They’re going to be proactive.” She pointed out that even when relationships between herself and the teachers were tense, she made a point to never express it in front of Jamison. “I never took the teacher’s power away, I didn’t want [Jamison] to lose respect for an authority figure.”

Nancy has become more comfortable in advocating for Tyler. When concerns about Tyler were first raised, Nancy was a new special education teacher. She stated that at the time, she was “young and not wanting to buck the system in a new job.” However, looking back, she said she realized this meant that she does not think that “everything was appropriately looked at and addressed.” As she gained experience, she found that she was more ready to “fight back” when she felt her son’s needs were not being met. She said she found a need to advocate most often following a PCS, which she does proactively. She hand-carries all records-including medical and educational records-to the school. Despite this, she said her son has experienced delays in starting services. In two districts, she has been told that even though she brought a copy of the IEP, the school still had to request a transfer of records from the prior school to validate the IEP. She noted this “doesn’t happen quickly.” In one district, the receiving school waited until the annual IEP date to accept the IEP, which put the IEP out of compliance. She has also

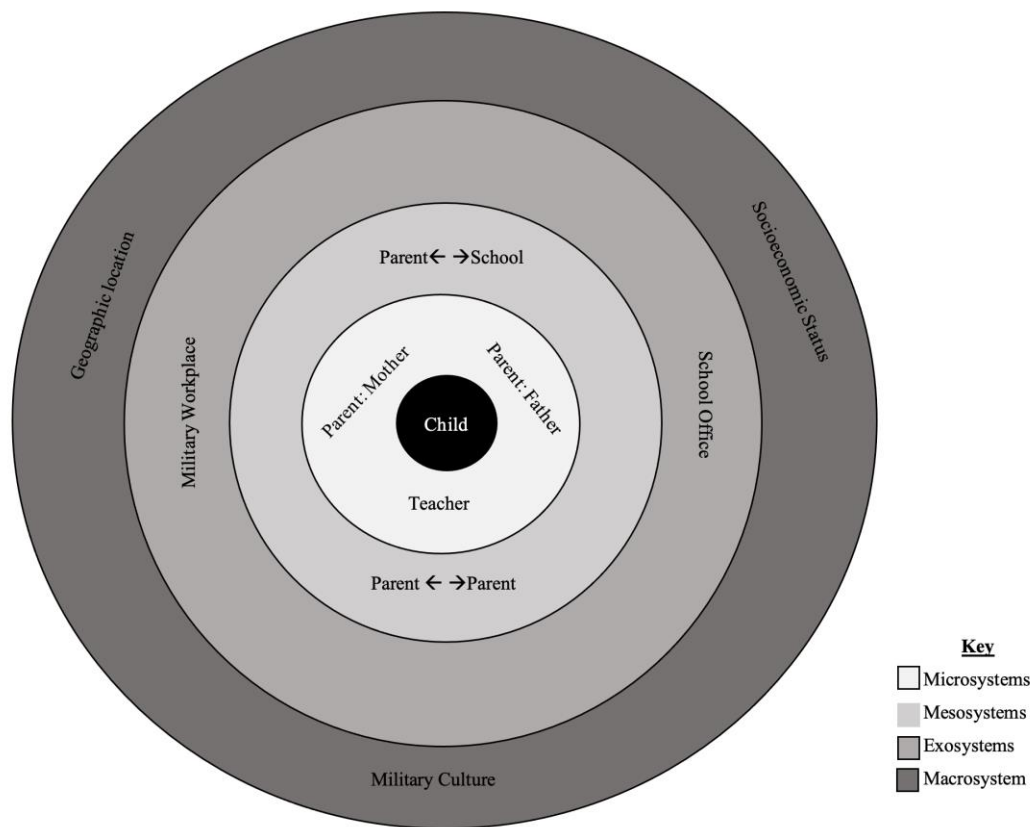
experienced schools stating that they “don’t do that” regarding specific services and placement. In her experience, she said that because she “refused to back down,” Tyler was eventually provided the services in the placement identified on the IEP.

Interactions between Themes

In examining the lived experiences of the participants in the study, I sought to identify which military-related transitions had been experienced, and the impact of those experiences. In filtering the data through the systems of ecological systems theory, I found that military-related transitions impacts each of the subsystems in different ways, with direct and indirect influences. While the prior section of this chapter identifies emerging themes, it is worth noting that each lived experience and relationship has an impact across ecological systems.

Narratives of participant experiences describing impacted subsystems and the resulting impacts on the child due to military-related transitions are provided above. Figure 4.1 provides a visual depiction of the ecological systems that emerged through the analysis of data.

Figure 4.1. Impacted Ecological Systems

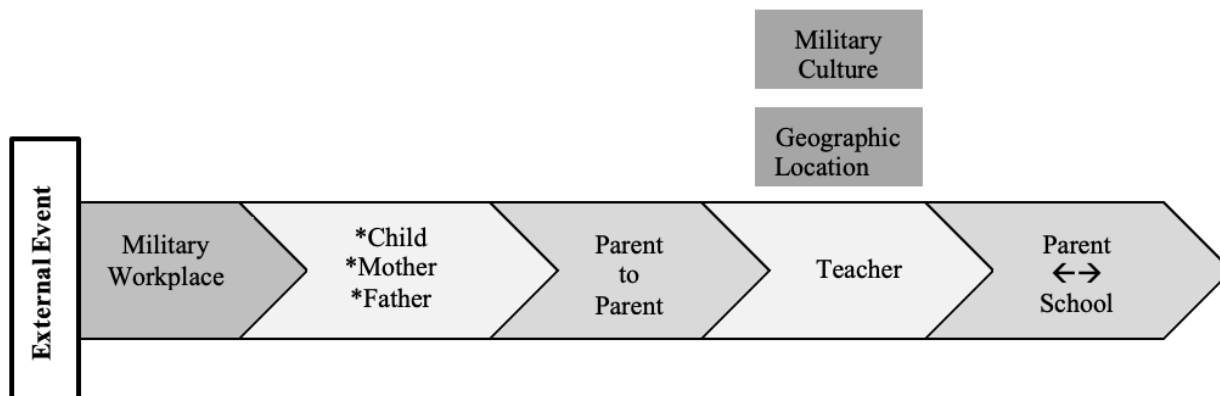


Ripples

Participants identified four forms of military-related transitions that impact their child's educational experiences: deployment; PCS; geo-batching; and training rotation cycles. Not all military-related transitions were found to have an equal impact, with participants identifying deployments and PCS as having the most impact on their child. Multiple ecological systems are found to be impacted as a result of military-related transitions. While Figure 4.1 displays these impacted systems, not all subsystems have equal impact on the child. Additionally, the impact of one subsystem is not contained within the same system, instead, the impact of one subsystem causes a ripple effect across other subsystems. While there are similarities in the impacts, not every military-related transition resulted in the same order or depth of impact. A second layer of

data analysis explores the sequential impacts of each transition. Figure 4.2 provides a visual of the rippling impacts following deployment, while Figure 4.3 provides a visual of impacts following PCS.

Figure 4.2. Impacts of deployment

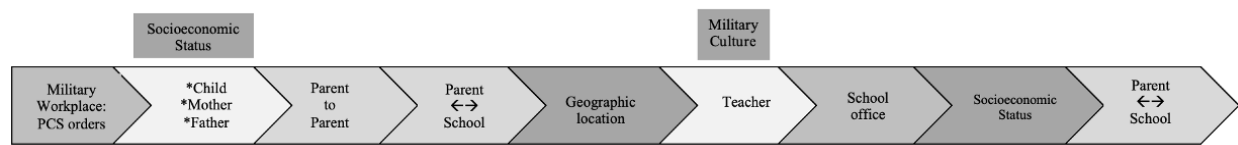


For a military deployment to occur, an external societal event must first take place, which is often related conflict with or in other countries. Other potential reasons for deployment include “humanitarian aid, evacuation of U.S. citizens, restoration of peace, or increased security” (Veteran’s Administration, 2015). This activates the military workplace system, which serves as the initial subsystem that triggers all following impacts. The initial impact is to the microsystems, creating stress, anxiety, and fear to both the child and each parent. For the child, the stressors center around fear for their father and anxiety about the unknown over the months the father is deployed. Annabelle noted that no matter how many times his father deploys, this “has always been an adjustment for [Luke]. This often manifested in a wide range, from an overall state of sadness to aggressively violent meltdowns. The mother, while also worried for her husband’s safety, has the additional stress of serving as sole caregiver and decision-maker. As Grace noted, “You’re over there. I’m the one dealing with this.” For the father, stress includes fear of the deployment compounded with worry for his family in his absence. Sophia shared that although her service member is supportive, he “has his own worries.” The stress of each

individual is felt by the other family members, which compounds into family stress, impacting the parent to parent mesosystem with increased tensions and “short fuses.”

This stress isn’t contained solely to the home, instead, children of study participants were found to carry this stress into the school setting with noted changes in behavior and academic performance. Participants describe these as both internalized behaviors, such as withdrawal, and externalizing behaviors of aggression, meltdowns, and self-injury. Periods of regression were also noted, with Grace sharing that in his early years of schooling, her child regressed in his potty-training with increased accidents and anxiety in separating from her. Nancy also found her son regressed around the same age during periods of deployment, with frequent day and nighttime potty accidents. Annabelle, Grace, and Sophia also saw periods of academic regression. Participants said that although they felt that these changes were a result of the impact of deployment, their child’s teachers did not understand military culture and subsequently, did not understand the cause for these changes. The geographic location of the family impacted overall understanding of military culture, with schools that are located in heavily military-populated areas having a better understanding of what military children are going through. Nancy stated, “They didn’t know what his life was like,” adding “These kids aren’t just problems. There may be underlying factors. Transitions are traumatic.” This lack of understanding often resulted in tense interactions between parent and school. As a result, participants found that they must advocate for their child. Annabelle explained that she tries to be proactive in communicating about upcoming deployments, hoping that the teacher will better understand changes in Luke’s behavior. Sophia found that even when she communicated about deployment, her son’s behavior changes often resulted in being sent to the office. “Every time the school calls, you’re like, what happened now?”

Figure 4.3. Impacts of PCS



While the initial cause may be different, the beginning ripples following a PCS begin much like those of deployment. PCS orders are part of the military workplace exosystem. In the first ripple following these orders, each child and parent experienced fear, anxiety, and stress. For the child, common worries described by participants included anxiety about having friends, and worrying about what the new house, school, and neighborhood will be like. For each parent, there are many sources of stress, including “putting all the pieces together,” as they tried to ease the stress of their children, wrap up work obligations, and for some spouses, search for new employment. There is also financial stress with each PCS. Nancy noted that “moving is expensive. You know, everyone thinks the Army pays for it all, but every time we have to move, it’s a significant cost.” Each parent also had worry for their child about whether they would fit in and have friends, and what their child’s new teachers would be like. In addition, parents worried about their child’s exceptionality and how it would be addressed in each new school. These individual feelings led to overall family stress, with Grace saying “They’re stressed. I’m stressed. We’re all stressed.” However, unlike deployment, the child and family encountered a change in geographic location, which introduced new microsystems into the child’s life as he encountered new teachers and peers. Annabelle described this as a “huge transition, you know, having to get used to a new environment, new house, new school, new people, neighbors, friends, classmates, and providers too, you know, doctors, therapists, et cetera.” The change in geographic location ripples to the school office system, as the transfer of records between the prior school and receiving school are managed. As noted by participants, this is not a seamless, nor quick process.

As a routine result of delays, the children of participants often endured gaps in services. Additionally, missing paperwork from the transfer of records led to inaccurate implementation of the IEP. These both served as an additional source of tension between home and school.

Participants described experiencing inconsistencies in the implementation of their child's IEP, as well as discrepancies in the quality of schools. Participants shared the need to seek outside services to supplement these inconsistencies. However, a family's ability to do this is dependent on their socioeconomic status as military healthcare doesn't always cover the cost. Sophia noted that in their early years as a military family, this caused significant financial strain on her family. Due to the frustration this caused participants and their attempts to advocate for their child, tense relationships were often felt between home and school. Annabelle shared that as a result of multiple PCSs, many of her military-related friends had an "us against them" mentality, stating that "If there's a negative experience, you're gonna be kind of apprehensive moving forward."

Summary

This chapter provided an analysis of study findings. Data was first analyzed through the lens of the ecological systems theory to identify the specific impacts to a military-connected child's micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems as a result of military-related transition. A second layer of analysis explored the relationships and rippling interactions between each of these subsystems.

Chapter 5 - Discussion

This chapter is comprised of five sections. In section one, an overview of the study is provided. The second section presents a synthesis of key findings, and the third section addresses limitations of this study. As a result of study findings, the fourth section provides recommendations for educators and further research. Chapter 5 concludes with a summary.

Overview of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to explore the impact of military-related transitions on the public school experiences of military-connected children with exceptionalities. This study was guided by two research questions:

Research Question 1: What, if any, military-related transitions impact the educational experiences of a military-connected student with exceptionalities?

Research Question 2: How do parents/guardians of a military-connected child with exceptionalities describe the impact of military-related transitions on their experiences with public schools?

Four participants were included in this study. Participants held the role of spouse to an active-duty military service member and parent to an exceptional child. Children of participants, who currently range in age from 11-18, held primary exceptionalities of autism spectrum disorder, emotional and behavioral disorder, other health impaired, or specific learning disability. Through qualitative interviews and timeline elicitation, military-related transitions were identified and resulting impacts were discussed.

Key Findings Summary

Research Question 1: What, if any, military-related transitions impact the educational experiences of a military-connected student with exceptionalities?

In order to explore what impact military-related transitions have on an exceptional child, the specific transitions experienced must first be identified. While military-connected children with exceptionalities encounter multiple transitions as a result of the military system, participants in this study identified four key transitions that impacted their child. These included deployment, PCS, geo-batching, and training rotations. Findings suggested that while all military-related transitions have some impact, deployment and PCS have the most significant impacts for military-connected children with exceptionalities.

These findings are supported by prior research. The Military Child Education Coalition (2020) found that the geographic mobility of a military-connected student is a critical factor that impacts the student. Researchers found that military-connected students relocate every one to four years. Similarly, Alfano et. al., (2016) found that short separations due to specialized trainings and deployments are another aspect that these students face.

Research Question 2: How do parents/guardians of a military-connected child with exceptionalities describe the impact of military-related transitions on their experiences with public schools?

Findings of this study suggest that as a result of military-related transitions, military-connected students with exceptionalities are impacted in four key ways.

Theme: Out of Compliance

Findings from this study suggested that the military-related transition of PCS frequently result in a child's special education being out of legal compliance. Following a PCS, children of study participants experienced significant delays in the identification of eligibility for special education services, delays in the transfer of special education records, and inconsistent implementation of identified services and supports.

While Barnhill et al., (2021) found that military-connected children with exceptionalities wait an average of 23 months from the identification of eligibility to start of special education services, this study found delays that began prior to the school evaluation for identification. In this study, 75% of the children of participants waited an average of two years from the identification of educator concern to the completed evaluation confirming eligibility for special education services. During these two years, specialized instruction, materials, or interventions for the area of concern were not being provided. Instead, educators referred the child to an outside agency for diagnosis. Despite obtaining an outside diagnosis, for two participants, a school evaluation was not completed until completing a PCS move to a new state.

This study also suggested that frequent PCS moves result in delays and discrepancies in implementation of special education services. Although several participants attempted to offset these delays by hand-delivering copies of special education records, their child still went without special education services for two to four weeks. Behavior changes that occurred as a result of the military-related transition were compounded by the lack of necessary special education supports and educator understanding of transition traumas. Temporary declines in academic performance were also found. These findings support prior research in this area. Ruff and Kleim (2014) found that routine delays in the transfer of records led to significant delays in the implementation of necessary interventions and specialized supports. Additionally, Barnhill et al., (2021) found 39% of military-connected students with exceptionalities faced delays of special education services.

In this study, the children of participants represented a range of exceptionalities. As such, their needs and correlating services and supports were widely varied. Additionally, participants attended schools in military bases across the United States. Despite these differences, all

participants reported facing difficulties in the acceptance and implementation of their child's IEP at new duty stations. Findings suggested that although special education services are legally mandated, the acceptance and implementation of these services were up to the discretion of each school, district, and/or state. In this study, once eligibility was determined, all participants remained eligible for special education services in each new state. However, due to budgets, staffing, and caseloads, the frequency and duration of services provided were regularly reduced following each PCS. Jagger and Lederer (2014) suggested that this may be common following a PCS, noting complex battles with the school regarding the cost of services, staffing, lack of teacher preparedness, and legal non-compliance.

Theme: Lack of understanding creates tension

The participant experiences described in this study suggested an overall lack of understanding of military culture. Specifically, educators may not understand the impact of military-related transitions on a child in the public school system. This finding aligns with prior research that suggested that overall, civilian educators aren't aware, nor trained to understand, the unique needs of military-connected students (Esqueda et al., 2012; Russo & Fallon, 2014). The Military Child Education Coalition (2016) noted that the lack of understanding of military culture results in inattentiveness to unique academic, social, and emotional well-being of military-connected students. In this study, findings suggested that the academic, social, and emotional needs of the child were compounded by exceptionality. In addition to experiencing the same stressors found in military-connected students during times of transition, this study suggested that these stressors are heightened for military-connected exceptional children.

These behavioral changes and academic regression in the student can be linked back to an overall lack of understanding by educators. As Nancy states, "schools jump too quickly instead

of understanding the transitioning.” She described that as a result, educators “see the behavior...they make assumptions.” Participants describe these behaviors as a direct result of the traumas encountered during transition, yet find that educators commonly don’t have training on how to identify and address military-related trauma.

Theme: Fear, Anxiety, and Stress

Military-related transitions typically serve as a source of fear, anxiety, and stress for all affected family members. During times of transition, military-connected children often display high levels of emotional response (e.g., difficulty concentrating, disconnection from peers and adults, depression, self-harm, and hysteria), which are shown to have an impact on the child’s school experience (Educational Opportunities Directorate of the Department of Defense, n.d.). While these emotions are common for all military families during periods of transition (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2019), findings of this study suggested that in addition to the fear, anxiety, and stress correlated to the military-related transition, the child’s exceptionality added to the stressors for the parent(s). As a result, the child’s own stressors were often exacerbated.

Participants shared worries for their child that would be considered typical for a military family, such as whether their child would fit in, make friends, and have an understanding, high-quality teacher during PCS transitions. Participants also identified concerns during periods of deployment or training rotations, noting worries about how their child was processing their internal fears about their father’s safety and adjusting to the change in household dynamics.

However, as a parent of a child who was both military-connected and exceptional, the stress was compounded. In addition to the typical worries of a military family, participants said they have anxiety about the impact of exceptionality during military-related transitions. During PCS transitions, participants described significant concerns about new schools. Commonly

shared worries were raised concerning the quality of the school and district, the availability of special education services, and how long the child would go without necessary services after the PCS. During transitions that resulted in a service member's absence, the school location was not directly impacted. Despite this, participants described concerns about their child's external manifestation of the internal fear, anxiety, and stress while in the school setting.

In this study, participants described behavioral challenges that were part of their child's diagnosed exceptionality, for example, challenges adjusting to change in routine is common for students with autism spectrum disorder. Students with emotional and behavioral disorders commonly have behavioral outbursts. Students with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder often display internalizing behaviors like inattention and distraction, as well as externalizing behaviors like hyperactivity and impatience (Gargiulo and Bouck, 2021). However, the stressors of military-related transitions from the parent were found to heighten negative behaviors in the child. Participants felt that while their own concerns were not outwardly shared with the child, findings suggested that the child was able to pick up on the fear, anxiety, and stress the parent is enduring. Significant behavior changes resulting in self-injury, aggression, and outburst identified were found to impact the child in the educational setting.

Theme: Advocating for Child

Advocating for the needs of your child is not specific to military-connected parents or parents of exceptional children. However, findings of this study suggest that as a result of military-related transitions, parents of military-connected children with exceptionalities may have more need to advocate for their child. In this study, all identified themes resulted in the need to advocate.

With the exception of Grace, participants of this study found that on average, they move to a new duty station just over every two years. This meant that the child was constantly starting over. As previously described, each time a child starts in a new school, there were delays in the transfer of paperwork. During this time, the child was without services which are necessary to support the academic and emotional needs of the child caused by exceptionality. At the same time, children regularly displayed behavioral and academic regressions as a manifestation of the internal fear, anxiety and stress caused by the military-related transition. Although the child was new to the school and had not yet had time to adjust, educators often did not take the time for “understanding the transitioning...and needing to give kids time to adjust and learn.” Instead, educators just “see the behavior” and “make assumptions.”

This study also found that discrepancies in special education services are cause for parent advocacy. As described by participants, upon receiving the special education records, schools revise the IEP, most notably the special education and related services. Study participants found that these revisions were not being made to address their child’s specific needs, instead, schools were adapting the IEP to fit their staffing, caseload, and budget. In an IEP, the special education and related services are identified as the minimum amount necessary to meet the child’s needs, yet decisions to reduce these services were being made without data to support the change. While participants found that advocating for their child was necessary for the child to receive the required services, they also found that they had to advocate in another way by seeking outside service providers to fill in the gaps.

Impact of Military-Related Transitions

There are complex and distinct ecological systems that surround a child, and the impact on a child’s experiences and development are both directly and indirectly influenced by

interactions with these systems. This framework considers not only the immediate systems that impact the child, such as family and teachers, but also broader systems, such as military culture.

In this study, ten specific examples of impacted subsystems were identified. In the microsystem, these included the child's mother, father, and teacher(s). The mesosystems are comprised of the interactions between these three microsystems. The military workplace and school office are identified as two key exosystems that the child is not directly involved with, yet have an impact. Geographic location, socioeconomic status, and military culture comprise the macrosystems identified in this study.

In order to most effectively support the needs of military-connected students with exceptionalities, the interactions between these subsystems must be considered. These interactions, and resulting impacts, often differ depending on the type of military-related transition experienced. However, there are subsystems that regardless of the type of military-related transition were found to have significant impact on the child's school experiences.

In this study, it was found that the more intimate systems, such as the microsystems and mesosystems, had the greatest impact on the child's experiences. These include each parent and teacher(s) as microsystems, and the interactions between these, which make up the mesosystems. This supports prior research findings that suggests that teacher quality directly impacts student achievement (Gilmour & Wehby, 2020).

However, these microsystems are influenced by other subsystems that the child is not directly involved in. In this study, participants described military culture and geographic location as two key macrosystems that had significant influence on other subsystems. Most notably, military culture was found to directly influence the teacher microsystem as seen in a lack of educator understanding. This was found to impact the child, as behavioral and academic changes

were described following military-related transition. Participants described significant negative behavioral changes in their child, both at home and at school. However, they described feeling as though teachers viewed their children as problems due to these behaviors, as opposed to understanding that the stressors that come from membership in military culture were leading to behavior changes. Participants felt that this perception was largely due to a lack of understanding of how military culture impacts a child. This then led to influences in the mesosystem as parents and teacher(s) interacted, often with tension, regarding these behaviors.

Geographic location was a second macrosystem that was found to have significant influence on other subsystems. Participants described the impact on teachers, noting that location impacted teacher quality. Participants also described that geographic location had an impact in the understanding of military culture, noting differences in schools that were in a heavily military-populated area as compared to heavily civilian based areas. This macrosystem also impacted the availability of special education services offered both in school as part of an IEP, and out of school through outside service providers. Participants described significant discrepancies in available services based on geographic location. Changes in geographic location as a result of military-related transitions also served as a source of fear, anxiety, and stress in parent microsystems, as well as in the child.

Although military-connected students with exceptionalities face stability in certain ecological systems, this study finds that they face frequent changes to multiple ecological systems as a result of military-related transitions. Understanding of these systems and their interactions is important for identifying the shared needs of this population of students in order to design and implement appropriate supports.

Limitations

This qualitative study served as an introductory study. Like all qualitative studies, there are limitations as described below.

One limitation involves the perspectives of participants. This study involved a small number of participants, and each of the four participants were mothers to an exceptional child and spouse to an active-duty service member of one branch of the military. While there are aspects of military culture that transcend across all branches, each military branch has its own unique customs and traditions. Additionally, active-duty military service is different from reserve or National Guard duty. This may impact factors such as the number of relocations a family encounters, the number, length, and locations of deployments, and the services and supports available at each base and neighboring public schools. In addition, the perspectives of the military service member, military-connected student themselves, and school staff such as teachers, social workers, counselors, or administrators were not considered. Similarly, this particular study does not delineate the experiences as connected to race, culture, socio-economic status, or military rank. While the perspectives of only the mothers associated with one branch of the military were provided in this study and be considered a limitation, a deeper understanding of the shared experiences of military-related transitions was possible.

An additional limitation is that this study does not consider differences in student exceptionality. Students with high-incidence exceptionalities typically require less intensive supports than students with low-incidence disabilities, and severity of need may impact the family and school, which may lead to differences in experiences.

Finally, this study only considers the experiences of students enrolled in public school setting. In addition to public schools, military-connected children with exceptionalities may

attend Department of Defense schools, private schools, or schools in other settings. In considering these limitations, the experiences of these participants may not align with the experiences of other military-connected students with exceptionalities.

Recommendations for Educators

Military-connected children make up 1.3 million of the K-12 students enrolled in public schools (U.S. Department of Defense, 2020). Similarly, there are over seven million public school students receiving special education services for an identified exceptionality (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2022). While the actual number is unknown, there is guaranteed overlap with students who are identified as both military-connected and exceptional. However, because states are not required to track this population, the true number of students impacted is unknown. This study suggests that overall, educators don't understand how membership in military culture impacts an exceptional child's educational experiences. Participants' descriptions of the behavioral and academic impacts following military-related transition were described in Chapter 4.

To support these challenges, one recommendation is to provide regular professional development to educators. Study findings suggest that although educators may be knowledgeable of an exceptionality, overall educator understanding of the challenges faced by military-connected exceptional children is lacking. Professional development that focuses on not just the military-related transition, but the academic and behavioral impacts on a child should be regularly provided.

To support professional growth, connecting the support systems for exceptional military children directly to educators is recommended. Study findings suggest that overall, educators lack understanding of military culture, and subsequently don't understand the impact of military

culture on a child's experiences in school. As described in the second chapter, the School Liaison Program was established by the Department of Defense to support families as they transition by providing services and supports to students, parents, schools, and communities (United States Government Accountability Office, 2022). Of this study's four participants, only one utilizes the school liaison officer during transitions, but finds that there is no collaboration between the liaison and her child's teachers. "Families and the school could use the liaison together" to provide smoother transitions for the child. A second military-based system of support, EFMP was designed to support families by coordinating PCS assignments with military bases with adequate care. In addition, EFMP is intended to provide information about the local school. While enrollment in the EFMP program is meant to be mandatory, only two of the four participants in this study had enrolled their child. Although these military programs are meant to coordinate with schools, Annabelle finds that in her experiences, the SLO, EFMP, and school are very disconnected. Nancy, who has not enrolled in her son in EFMP, doesn't find value in the program, noting that "they don't do anything with his teachers in school." Connecting SLO, EFMP, and educators could have several implications. First, EFMP and SLO could offer information on the purpose and benefits of their programs for military families. Educators could then provide this information for families who aren't aware or are hesitant of utilizing the services. Educators could also inform EFMP and SLO on the district's special education program. This could result in a collaborative approach where EFMP, SLO, and educators work together when a military-connected family with an exceptional child is arriving in the district to ease the transition.

Recommendations for Further Research

This topic, while underrepresented in current literature, should continue to be researched with three key recommendations. The first recommendation considers participant criterion. In this study, the impact of specific participant criterion on the child's school experiences was not considered. Future research lines should consider criterion relating to military service, including military branch, military rank, and active duty vs. reserve/National Guard. The impact of cultural implications such as race, ethnicity, gender, and family structure should also be explored. Finally, the impact of educational criterion of the student, including exceptionality type, setting of services, and school type (public, private, DoDEA) should be researched.

The second recommendation for further research considers the perspectives of participants. In this study, only the spouses of service members served as participants. As such, findings were limited to the perspective of this caregiver. This study did not take into account the perspectives of the service member, the military-connected exceptional child, or the teacher(s) of the child. Further research including these perspectives should be conducted to gain a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of military-connected children with exceptionalities.

Finally, findings from this study suggest that while all military-related transitions have an impact on the child, the educational impacts are not the same for all transitions. Research that specifically addresses each military-related transition on its own is recommended.

Summary

This qualitative study used a phenomenological approach to explore the impact of military-related transitions on the educational experiences of military-connected children with exceptionalities. Through analysis of individual qualitative interviews and timeline elicitation,

four themes emerged. Findings suggest that as a result of common military-related transitions, delays and inconsistent services often occur across states. As a result, a child's special education is regularly out of compliance. Second, this study suggests that there is an overall lack of understanding of military culture by educators. Most notably, many educators aren't aware of how military-related transitions impact a child, and as such, don't implement strategies to support the child's unique behavioral and academic regressions during these times. Third, military-related transitions can cause fear, anxiety and stress to both parents and children. The impact of these transitions is compounded by fear, anxiety, and stress related to exceptionality. Finally, this study finds that as a result of military-related transitions, parents of military-connected children with exceptionalities have a need to advocate for their child.

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Appendix A - IRB Approval



TO: F Goodson
Curriculum and Instruction
Manhattan, KS 66506

FROM: Lisa Rubin, Chair
Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects

DATE: 11/28/2022

RE: Approval of Proposal Entitled, "The forgotten population: The intersection of military-connected students and special education."

Proposal Number IRB-11394

The Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects has reviewed your proposal and has granted full approval. This proposal is **approved for three years from the date of this correspondence.**

APPROVAL DATE: 11/27/2022

EXPIRATION DATE: 11/26/2025

In giving its approval, the Committee has determined that:

No more than minimal risk to subjects

This approval applies only to the proposal currently on file as written. Any change or modification affecting human subjects must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation. All approved proposals are subject to continuing review, which may include the examination of records connected with the project. Announced post-approval monitoring may be performed during the course of this approval period by URCO staff. Injuries, unanticipated problems or adverse events involving risk to subjects or to others must be reported immediately to the Chair of the IRB and / or the URCO.

Electronically signed by Phill Vardiman on 11/28/2022 10:48 AM ET
On Behalf of IRB Chair

Appendix B - Informed Consent Form



Institutional Review Board (IRB) Informed Consent Template Form

comply@k-state.edu | 785-532-3224

PROJECT TITLE:

The forgotten population: The intersection of military-connected students and special education

**PROJECT APPROVAL
DATE:**

11/27/2022

**PROJECT EXPIRATION
DATE:**

11/26/2025

**LENGTH OF
STUDY:**

1 year

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Dr. Todd Goodson

CO-INVESTIGATOR(S): Nicole M. Meritt

CONTACT DETAILS FOR PROBLEMS/QUESTIONS: Dr. Todd Goodson
tgoodson@ksu.edu

IRB CHAIR CONTACT INFORMATION:

Lisa Rubin, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224;
Brad Woods, Associate Vice President for Research Compliance, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224.

PROJECT SPONSOR:

Department of Curriculum & Instruction, KSU College of Education

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH:

Thank you for being part of this research study. Through your perspectives as a parent, this study seeks to identify military-related transitions that impact your child's education, as well as better understand the impact of these transitions on the educational experiences of your child.

PROCEDURES OR METHODS TO BE USED:

As a participant, you will be asked to participate in 2-3 individual interviews. These will be approximately 1 hour in length each time and will be audio-recorded to allow for text transcription. In addition, you will be asked to share any documents you feel would support your child's educational experiences. These may include documents like Notice of Meetings, your child's IEP, meeting summaries, or communication records.

BIOLOGICAL SAMPLES COLLECTED (Describe procedure, storage, etc.):

n/a

Whole genome sequencing will not be included as part of the research

Not Applicable.

ALTERNATIVE PROCEDURES OR TREATMENTS, IF ANY, THAT MIGHT BE ADVANTAGEOUS TO SUBJECT:

n/a

RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS ANTICIPATED:

You may find the topic of your child's educational experiences can feel personal. As a participant, you have the right to decline to respond to any questions. Additionally, you will be asked to shared components of special education records that are considered to be confidential. Only information essential to the research will be collected, and will be securely stored (password protected One Drive if digital, locked file drawer if physical).

BENEFITS ANTICIPATED:

This research will allow you to share the educational experiences of your military-connected, exceptional child. This will help inform the educational field on the unique aspects of your child's experiences, as well as inform the identification of appropriate supports for students and professional development for educators.

EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY:

Study documents will implement pseudonyms to protect confidentiality, and all names and locations will be excluded from published materials. Digital data will be housed in a password protected One Drive file to be destroyed upon conclusion of the study (no more than 1 year). Physical documents will be kept in a locked file drawer in Bluemont Hall 308 and will be shredded upon conclusion of the study (no more than 1 year).

The information or biospecimens that will be collected as part of this research will not be shared with any other investigators.

IS COMPENSATION OR MEDICAL TREATMENT AVAILABLE IF INJURY OCCURS?

☐ Yes ☒ No

PARENTAL APPROVAL FOR MINORS:**PARENT/GUARDIAN APPROVAL
SIGNATURE:**

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DATE:

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Terms of participation: I understand this project is research, and that my participation is voluntary. I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time, and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits, or academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled.

I verify that my signature below indicates that I have read and understand this consent form, and willingly agree to participate in this study under the terms described, and that my signature acknowledges that I have received a signed and dated copy of this consent form.

(Remember that it is a requirement for the P.I. to maintain a signed and dated copy of the same consent form signed and kept by the participant).

PARTICIPANT NAME:

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PARTICIPANT SIGNATURE:

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DATE:

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**WITNESS TO SIGNATURE:
(PROJECT STAFF)**

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DATE:

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Appendix C - Interview One Protocol

Introduction:

Hello (insert name of participant(s)). My name is Nicole Meritt, and I am so grateful that you have taken the time to be interviewed. You have been asked to participate to hear about your child's educational experiences.

This interview will take about an hour, and you may end the interview at any time. This interview will be recorded for transcription purposes. Following the interview, I will provide the transcript to you for review. You may add, edit, or clarify as needed. Throughout this interview, I will also be taking notes as you respond to each question for my reference.

Question set:

First, I want to establish you and/or your spouse's role(s) in the military with some background information:

- *What rank is the service member currently?
- *Is this rank an enlisted or officer rank?
- *What is the service member's MOS (military occupational specialty?)

Thank you. Next, I'd like to establish some information about (insert child's name):

- *How old is your child?
- *What grade is your child in currently?
- *What exceptionality is your child identified with?
- *How would you describe your child?

Thank you. Now that we've established some baseline information, I'd like to hear about your experiences as a military family.

- *First, I'd like you to think about the military transitions your family has encountered. Using your timeline, could you describe these?

*On this timeline, when did (insert child's name) become school age?

I'd like to talk a little bit about (insert child's name) background at school.

- *At what age were concerns first noted?
- *Who noted these concerns—a parent, teacher, or someone else? If someone else, who?
- *Can you describe the concerns that were identified?

*Once the concern(s) was shared, what did your child's school do next?

*About how much time elapsed between the identification of concern and the referral for special education evaluation?

Now, I'd like to talk about your child's experience in the special education process:

*Can you describe what you remember about the special education process?

Clarify as needed: Evaluation, eligibility for services, writing of IEP, consent

*In what ways did your child's school communicate with you throughout this process?

I'd like to learn more about the military transitions you experienced both during and after (insert child's name) became eligible for special education services.

*During the special education evaluation process, did you experience any military transitions? If so, what were they?

*How would you describe the impact on (insert child's name) evaluation process?

*Have you experienced any military transitions since (insert child's name) became eligible for services? If so, what were they?

*How would you describe the impact of these transitions on (insert child's name) educational experiences?

Conclusion:

Thank you for taking the time to share your thoughts and experiences with me during this interview. I will be sending you a transcript of this interview so that you can review it and ensure it is accurate before we move on to the next set of interviews. Please do not hesitate to reach out to me at any time, I look forward to meeting with you again!

Appendix D - Interview Two Protocol

Interview Protocol #2:

In our last interview, we talked about how and when your child was identified for services, as well as the different types of military-related transitions they have encountered thus far. Today, I have a few specific questions, but would like for the bulk of our time to be for you to share about your experiences.

- 1) First, I'd like to learn a little bit about the process you face(d) each time you had a transition. When you learned about transitions that resulted in a new school, what were these transitions? What were the steps that followed?
 - a. How did you feel the transition impacted your child's progress?
 - i. Academic
 - ii. Behavioral
 - iii. Social
 - b. Following the transition, did you find that the new school was able to pick up where the prior school had left off? Describe.
 - c. In these transitions, what were some of the feelings you and your child felt?
- 2) When you had to transition to a new school, did you live on-post, off-post, or a combination?
- 3) Do you feel there were any differences between an on-post school compared to off-post schools? Explain.
- 4) Thinking about your experiences overall, what are some things that schools/teachers did that helped support the transition?
- 5) What are some things that schools/teachers didn't seem prepared for or could use additional training/supports?

Now, I'd like to spend some time discussing your experiences.

*Use participant responses to guide as needed.