MILITARY-CONNECTED HIGH-SCHOOL GRADUATES’ LIVED EXPERIENCES WITH K-12 CIVILIAN SCHOOLS: A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

Christy L. Thomas

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment Of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Education

Liberty University

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APPROVED BY:

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ABSTRACT

Considering that most military children attend civilian schools, the purpose of this transcendental, phenomenological study is to describe the K-12 lived experiences of military-connected (M-C) graduates of public schools in a large school district located in the southeastern region of the United States. The theory guiding this study is Hamilton McCubbin’s family stress theory as it explores how family members handle situational stressors regarding the ability to thrive and prove resilient or disintegrate to a degree that threatens the family’s stability. Interviews, letters of advice, and focus groups were used to collect data. Data was analyzed to generate codes and themes. Member checks; prolonged engagement; rich, thick descriptions and peer review were used to address any concerns regarding trustworthiness. The central research question investigated how military-connected high school graduates describe their K-12 lived experiences in public schools. The research sub-questions investigated how military-connected high school graduates describe their (a) academic, (b) social, and (c) extracurricular experiences in K-12 civilian schools. The results of this research may provide educational stakeholders at federal, state, and local levels with information that will help enhance the teaching and learning of M-C students who attend civilian schools.

Keywords: deployment, family stress, military-connected, mobility, OCONUS, stressors
Dedication

My dissertation is dedicated to military-connected students around the world, especially those who chose to share their stories with me for this study.

It is also dedicated to my father, George Hazzard Thomas. For more than two decades, my father faithfully served his country in foreign and domestic capacities. If you ever asked him for his title, he would proudly tell you that he was First Sergeant Thomas a Special Forces/Airborne/Army Ranger. During his time in service, he earned numerous awards, which included the Silver Star, Purple Heart and Oak Leaf Cluster Bronze, Army Commendation Medal, Good Conduct, National Defense Service Medal and Bronze Star, Korean Service Medal and Bronze Star, Vietnam Service Medal and Bronze Star, United Nations Service Medal, Sharpshooter Badge, Marksman Badge, Parachutist Badge, and Combat Medical Badge.

My father was my hero. He transitioned to his heavenly home on November 20, 2016.
Acknowledgments

First and foremost, praises and thanks to God. Without Him, the completion of this dissertation would not be possible.

I would like to express my deep and sincere gratitude to my Committee Chair, Dr. Karla N. Swafford, and my Methodologist, Dr. James A. Swezey. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to conduct this study. It was such an honor to work with both of you. I am extremely grateful for your professionalism, wisdom, guidance, support, patience, and prayers throughout this process.

I am very thankful for the love and support God has given me through family and friends. To AJ, my greatest blessing – thank you for your understanding. I realize how much you sacrificed over the past five years so that I could achieve this goal. I love you … better than the world. To my mother – thank you for believing in me, even when I did not believe in myself. I love you. To my siblings (George, Gloria, Timothy, Stephen, Karen, and Edward) – I love you, always. To my “soul sisters” – Jennifer, Diane, and Kierra – thank you for true sisterhood, late night discussions, and your undying support. To my Bronco Family – thank you for your love and patience. I know that it was not an easy task. To Dr. C. Elise Barrett – thank you for the encouraging conversations and the edits. To those I forgot to mention – please, charge it to my head and not my heart.
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**List of Abbreviations**

Academically Intellectually Gifted (AIG)

Community Partnership Forum (CPF)

Department of Defense (DoD)

Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA)

Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan (OEF)

Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP)

Families Overcoming Under Stress (FOCUS)

Family Readiness Group (FRG)

Individualized Education Program (IEP)

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Living in the New Normal Institute (LINN-I)

Local Education Agencies (LEAs)

Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC)

Military-Connected (M-C)

Military Family and Youth Liaison (MFYL)

National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA)

National Military Families Association (NMFA)

Naval Medical Center Portsmouth (NMCP)

Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF)

Operation Military Kids (OMK)

Operation New Dawn (OND)
Outside the Continental United States (OCONUS)

Point of Contact (POC)

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

Temporary Duty (TDY)

Traumatic brain injuries (TBI)

University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA)
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Literature regarding education research has long overlooked military-connected (M-C) students (Esqueda, Astor, & DePedro, 2012). While the federal government executes military operations, the education of more than 80% of M-C students is deferred to schools operated by state and local agencies (Berkowitz, De Pedro, Couture, Benbenishty, & Astor, 2014; Garner, Arnold, & Nunnery, 2014). Military-connected students live a lifestyle that involves various stressors unknown to non-military-connected students, and the public schools are ill-prepared to handle the specific needs of these students (Berkowitz et al., 2014). Even though various stakeholders’ perspectives have been gathered through previous research, the gap in the literature involves the voices of the M-C students who have experienced K-12 civilian schools.

This chapter will introduce a phenomenological, transcendental study that will investigate the overall K-12 lived experiences of M-C high school graduates. The background information will provide the historical, social, and theoretical concepts related to the gap. My ontological, social constructivist position will be addressed, as well as the problem statement and purpose statement, which are supported by literature. The practical, empirical, and theoretical contributions this study may offer will be provided. Immediately before the summary, the research questions and definitions will be provided and supported by current literature.

Background

The well-being of M-C children “has far-reaching significance for the nation as a whole” (Masten, 2013a, p. 199). To understand the value of the lived experiences of M-C children, it is important to have knowledge pertaining to the history of the military. The wars that American soldiers have fought have not only affected the lives of the nation’s citizens but have also
influenced the structure of the military family, specifically the M-C child (Keeton, 2002). The following sections will highlight the historical, social, and theoretical aspects related to the proposed research.

**Historical**

Some children have grown up under the auspices of the military for as long as men and women have served. The term “military brat” (Lange, 2017, para. 1) was given to those children who were raised in military families. The name “brat” is commonly worn like a badge of honor amongst military children, but the origin of the term is unclear (Lange, 2017). “The Recruiting Officer,” a satirical play written in 1707, describes the lives of soldiers and their dependents—wives and brats (Lange, 2017). Some researchers believe the term dates back to the British Regiment Attached Traveler (BRAT) in 1921 (Lange, 2017). Others mention a book written by Frank Richards in 1936, which referred to children who were born in military housing as “barrack-rats” (Lange, 2017, para. 11). In 1942, the term appeared in *The War Dictionary* as one of endearment (Lange, 2017). Regardless of when and where the term originated, there is no doubt that children have been a part of the military since its existence.

Starting with the American Revolution in 1775, the United States has sacrificed the lives of its soldiers in numerous battles. When the United States entered World War I in 1917, the military family was forced to face the possibility that their loved ones may be fatally wounded or suffer shell shock, which is the psychological disturbance caused from the war (Kudler & Porter, 2013). World War II called more than 15 million men to service (Bellou & Cardia, 2016). With the United States serving as a major provider of airplanes and ships during World War II, there was an increased need for manufacturing in the United States (Bellou & Cardia, 2016). This increased need resulted in the family structure changing when women started working
occupations that were traditionally dominated by the men (Bellou & Cardia, 2016). Sandwicched between World War II and the Vietnam War sits the Korean War, which is deemed in history as the “forgotten war” (Lewis, 2014, p. 147). Though the Vietnam War receives more recognition than the Korean War, Vietnam is frequently viewed as the most controversial and traumatic of all wars (Lewis, 2014; Marciano, 2016). While public opinions vary from war to war, hundreds of United States military interventions have been documented “since the end of the shooting war in Vietnam in April 1975” (Marciano, 2016, p. 49). With these numerous battles, the stories of the military service members and their families were frequently cast aside, and the children’s needs were ignored.

The transition to an all-volunteer armed forces in the 1970s caused the family life to become even more commonplace in the military (Clever & Segal, 2013). With the increasing number of parents and guardians entering the military after the all-volunteer transition, the family structure became more dynamic. Children in military families are subject to frequent moves, separation from parents due to deployment, and struggles associated with combat deployment, post-traumatic stress disorder, and death (Cozza & Lerner, 2013). Yet, the unique experiences of military children were not publicly acknowledged by civilians until 1986, when Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger acknowledged April as the Month of the Military Child to show respect and gratitude for the personal sacrifices made by children of military families (April is month of military child, 2010). Weinberger’s act caused others to take notice of the importance of the military child. In 1995, a group of people in Texas started discussing ideas for better education for children of military families. Three years later, this group, along with others who supported the goal of better education for military children, established the Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC). The MCEC “includes individuals, installations,
schools, colleges and universities, corporations and other non-profit organizations, all of whom share its vision of easing educational challenges facing the military child” (Keeton, 2002, p. 26).

Since September 11, 2001, military families have experienced longer and more frequent deployments with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (Atuel, Esqueda, & Jacobson, 2011; Osofsky & Chartrand, 2013). Studies show that since 9/11, stress for military families has increased, which includes an increase in marital conflicts, domestic violence, suicide, spousal depression, anxiety, and parenting stress (Gilreath et al., 2016; Osofsky & Chartrand, 2013). These stressors have the potential to put “children at greater risk for emotional and behavioral problems” (Osofsky & Chartrand, 2013, p. 62). While the lives of Americans are affected by these wars and events, “the lives of America’s military children are turned upside down frequently” (Keeton, 2002, p. 26).

Today, there are approximately 1.2 million military children in the United States (Berkowitz et al., 2014; Garner et al., 2014; Lester et al., 2016). Approximately 80% of these children attend public schools (Berkowitz et al., 2014; Garner et al., 2014). Academic and social-emotional support for military children from civilian schools is a needed area of research (Garner et al., 2014). With the increasing frequency and intensity of conflicts, military children’s health and well-being is an area of interest for educational stakeholders (Rowe, Keeling, Wessely, & Fear, 2014). In efforts to meet the military children’s needs, social work interns (Esqueda et al., 2014) and school-based interventions (Ohye et al., 2016) have been implemented to help students succeed in civilian schools. The problem is that, in the last decade, civilian schools have struggled to meet the needs of military children (Esqueda et al., 2014), and research is limited to why military children’s needs are not addressed in civilian schools (Berkowitz et al., 2014; Garner et al., 2014). The existing research fails to tell the complete
story, which can only be gathered through the M-C students’ narratives of strengths and diversities (Cozza & Lerner, 2013).

**Social**

From a national perspective, military children deserve support from the country to meet the challenges of military life (Cozza, 2015). Since the end of World War II, the Department of Defense (DoD) has established schools for various military installations throughout the United States and in foreign countries where American troops are stationed (Esqueda et al., 2012). These institutes are referred to as Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) schools. DoDEA schools are military focused and designed to address the unique stressors that M-C children face (Esqueda et al., 2012). Peer support programs, parent groups, and uniform standards and curriculum are common in DoDEA schools (Esqueda et al., 2012). In DoDEA schools, M-C children appear to function at “relatively high levels despite the multiple moves and risk factors associated with having a parent (or parents) in the military” (Esqueda et al., 2012, p. 66). The students’ scores on standardized tests, such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress and Terra Nova Achievement Test, are above the national average (Esqueda et al., 2012). In addition, the “achievement gap between racial and ethnic minority groups and White students is also less pronounced” (Esqueda et al., 2012, p. 66). Furthermore, Black and Latino students in DoDEA schools score higher on standardized tests than their peers in civilian schools (Esqueda et al., 2012).

While DoDEA schools are prepared to respond to the unique needs of military children, civilian schools are often unaware of the special circumstances and challenges military children encounter (DePedro et al., 2014). While short-lived stressors are usually well-tolerated by children in general, military children frequently experience sustained stress and find themselves
struggling to deal with the circumstances that the public schools are ill-prepared to address (Ohye et al., 2016). The impact the war has had on children of military families “remains largely unrecognized within civilian public-school settings” (Atuel et al., 2011, p. 1). Research examining the outcomes of military children who experienced supportive school environments in public settings is limited (DePedro et al., 2014). Therefore, additional research that examines the role of civilian schools in the lives of military children is warranted to meet the needs of military students in those K-12 settings.

**Theoretical**

Theoretically, this study will examine Hamilton McCubbin’s (1979) theory of family stress. The family stress theory is a developmental theory that explores how families adapt and thrive or deteriorate and disintegrate when faced with situational stressors. This study may provide a new contextual outlook to the theory because it will focus not on the entire family but on individuals (Moeller, Culler, Hamilton, Aronson, & Perkins, 2015). Individual family members will share their lived experiences regarding various factors faced in a military family while attending public school. Military families are often required to adapt to lengthy absences and change roles in the family system during times of separation (McCubbin, 1979). This study may have theoretical value because it will present the raw narratives of M-C students regarding disharmony and imbalance and adaptability and family hardiness, which is the commitment to work together during stressful times (McCubbin, McCubbin, Thompson, Han, & Allen, 1997). The proposed research may extend existing research and knowledge regarding military children and their ability to adapt or deteriorate. This study has the potential to benefit administrators, policymakers, teachers, parents, and students.
Situation to Self

My motivation for conducting this study comes from teaching M-C children in civilian schools and forming positive relationships with the families of the children. Teaching M-C students gave me the opportunity to witness their struggles and strengths in the classroom and in the community. I was fortunate to keep in contact with several of the M-C children I taught as they completed their K-12 schooling. With these students, I witnessed success and failure. Yet the situations surrounding those outcomes were not always disclosed to me, and those circumstances that I was made aware of were not shared in detail. However, time with most of the students I taught was limited, and I was not privy to the outcome of their schooling experiences.

My ontological philosophical assumption enables me to accept the fact that the participants I will include in my study will possess multiple realities of various situations (Creswell, 2013; Kajee et al., 2017). Knight (2006) stated that ontology is “what it means for anything to be” (p. 18). The reality of a situation for me may be opposite of the reality of another. The participants’ lived experiences may create various perspectives that differ from mine. I realize that a participant who experienced the death of a loved one due to combat deployment may view the military in a negative light, which differs from my experiences and view. Instead of finding error in their reports, I will embrace the fact that the reality I have constructed from my own experiences concerning the phenomenon differs from the participants’ realities, and I will embrace the multiple views and accurately report them as shared (Creswell, 2013; Kajee et al., 2017; Moustakas, 1994).

Epistemology is the philosophical assumption related to the study of knowledge (Creswell, 2013; Gutek, 2011; Kajee et al., 2017; Miller, 2011). Piaget believed that knowledge
is constructed by people’s actions, thoughts, and experiences (Miller, 2011). Thus, the epistemological assumption requires that I form a closeness to the participants of the study to answer how they know what they know (Creswell, 2013; Knight 2006). I will use the first-hand information gathered and the subjective experiences of the researcher to disseminate the knowledge on this study (Creswell, 2013; Guba & Lincoln, 1988). Realizing that knowledge is created through the subjective experiences of individuals, I will seek to conduct all data collection in the places where the participants work and reside (Creswell, 2013; Kajee et al., 2017). It is in those places where I will discover the identity of the individual.

In research, the roles and “examinations of values” (Gutek, 2011, p. 37) are vital, which addresses the axiological assumption (Creswell, 2013). An individual’s ethics, which involve moral problems, and esthetics, which include the arts and feelings, are included under the umbrella of axiology (Creswell, 2013; Vuletic, 2018). Like epistemology, axiology is central to the educational process and qualitative research (Creswell, 2013; Knight, 2006). Oppong (2014) suggested, “Researchers should admit and deliberately include their cultural orientation in the research process” (p. 248). It is natural that people have preferences or biases (Creswell, 2013; Knight, 2006). In the same way biases differ among people, not all people value the same things or prioritize their perceived values in the same way (Knight, 2006). While I am aware of the struggles military families face, I greatly admire the sacrifice made by service members. My overall outlook of military service is best summarized in John 15:13 (King James Version), which states, “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.” It is important that I report these values and biases at the onset of the study so that my voice appears in the text with the voices of the participants (Creswell, 2013).

The paradigm or interpretive framework that will guide this study is social
constructivism. Social constructivism guides my research because the research will rely on the multiple views and the complexity of those views shared by the participants (Creswell, 2013; Kajee et al., 2017). Sterian and Mocanu (2016) emphasized, “The role of the experience lived by the child in the family is decisive for the image he builds himself about life” (p. 100). I realize that the participants’ subjective meanings or realities are closely connected to their social and historical experiences (Creswell, 2013; Sterian & Mocanu, 2016). Therefore, the interactions the participants encounter are vital to unveiling the knowledge I seek, which was cultivated in the conversations with the participants (Sterian & Mocanu, 2016). The findings of this study relate to the interactions and historical and cultural norms that the participants experienced (Creswell, 2013). The questions I designed are general and broad, which allowed participants to construct their own meaning and share varied experiences (Creswell, 2013; Kajee et al., 2017). I analyzed responses to questions for complexity regarding the participants’ viewpoints as they shared their experiences (Creswell, 2013).

**Problem Statement**

Children in military families experience a unique set of stressors such as parental deployment and frequent school changes, which may impede educational success as they matriculate through school (Berkowitz et al., 2014; Garner et al., 2014; Richardson, Mallette, O’Neal, & Mancini, 2016). Approximately 80% of the 1.2 million M-C students in the United States attend civilian schools (Berkowitz et al., 2014; DePedro et al., 2014), and studies have found M-C students can be resilient despite the uniquely situated obstacles they encounter (Gilreath et al., 2016; Richardson et al., 2016). However, research also indicates that although students demonstrate some level of resiliency, civilian schools struggle to fully address M-C students’ unique circumstances, challenges, and needs (DePedro et al., 2014; Esqueda et al.,
Previous studies have focused on M-C students’ academic and emotional success in civilian schools, but those studies have been limited to students at specific grades/ages (Richardson et al., 2016; Skomorovsky & Bullock, 2017; Thompson, Baptist, Miller, & Henry, 2017), teachers’ findings (Ohye et al., 2016; Stites, 2016) and parents’ perspectives (Davis & Finke, 2015; Wolf, Rinfrette, Eliseo-Arras, & Nochajski, 2018). Current research that explores the overall K-12 experience from the perspectives of M-C graduates of public schools is limited. M-C high school graduates’ lived experiences with K-12 civilian schools are not included in research and this omission is a gap in the literature that needs to be addressed. Therefore, the problem is that K-12 civilian schools continue to struggle to meet the needs of M-C students who attend their institutions.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this transcendental, phenomenological study is to describe the K-12 lived experiences of M-C graduates of public schools in the southeastern region of the United States. For this study, M-C students will be generally defined as children who, during their K-12 education, were considered “official dependents of a Military Service member” (Student-Identifier, 2018). The theory guiding this study is Hamilton McCubbin’s (1979) family stress theory as it explores how family members adapt and thrive or deteriorate and disintegrate when faced with situational stressors.

**Significance of the Study**

This study may have empirical, theoretical, and practical significance regarding research involving M-C students in public schools. The empirical basis for this study may add to the existing literature by filling the present gap regarding M-C graduates’ K-12 lived experiences with civilian schools. The theoretical root is McCubbin’s (1979) family stress theory. The
practical implications may provide educators with information to help address the needs of M-C students within the classrooms.

**Empirical**

In the past, information gathered about military children came from studies consisting of convenience samples based on the researcher’s associations with military members and their families, proximity to military bases, or the implementation of military programs (Chandra & London, 2013). While data on military children is limited (Chandra & London, 2013), parents’ and educators’ perspectives regarding the impact a military career has on children have been investigated (DePedro et al., 2014; Rowe et al., 2014). Additionally, “studies investigating the emotional impact of family stress have typically relied on caregiver reports of stressful life experiences, neglecting the youth’s perspective” (Sheidow, Henry, Tolan, & Strachan, 2014, p. 1354). However, this study may add to existing literature by proving to be the first of its kind to explore the lived experiences of M-C graduates of public schools regarding situations and experiences related to their status as children of military parents.

This study may contribute to professional development offered to teachers of M-C students in civilian schools (Garner et al., 2014). The overall well-being of M-C students that may be described through this study may benefit researchers who use data to design youth programs focused on the M-C student (Richardson et al., 2016). Through participants’ narratives, the advantages and obstacles experienced may provide a clearer picture of the lives of M-C students throughout their public education experiences. This clearer picture may assist policy makers serving on local and state school boards in creating a uniform curriculum that will eliminate the gaps in academic achievement commonly experienced by M-C students (Clever & Segal, 2013).
Theoretical

The theoretical foundation for this study is family stress theory (McCubbin, 1979; McCubbin et al., 1997). In the second era of the family stress theory study, Reuben Hill focused on military families during World War II and examined coping behaviors (McCubbin, 1979). Because of the research, McCubbin (1979) extended the theory from a simple focus on weaknesses to include strengths. From the perspective of family systems, predictable patterns and stability allow the family to thrive (Thompson et al., 2017). However, the ability to thrive is threatened during increased periods of stress, which is common to M-C children who experience changes in parental presence and emotional support (Thompson et al., 2017). This study may benefit researchers involved in the research of family stress theory by further expanding the theory with the detailed information found in the study. Specific factors that allow military children to thrive or deteriorate may be shared and investigated through the lens of family stress theorists.

Using family stress theory as the framework for this study may also increase awareness among military parents, guardians, and caregivers, thus encouraging them to provide additional support to their children during times of stress. Parents and guardians fail to realize the amount of stress their children experience (Sheidow et al., 2014). Research suggests that when family relationships are high and supportive in quality and low in conflict, the negative impacts of exposure to stressors are minimized (Sheidow et al., 2014). The participants’ stories may shed light on vulnerability, adaptability, and resiliency factors M-C children experience and possess, which may enable caregivers to provide better support during times of crises.
Practical

The results of this study may allow the researcher to identify weaknesses and strengths of the M-C students’ experiences from this unique perspective. Youth development programs designed and offered to M-C students may be positively affected by this study (Richardson et al., 2016). Suicidality is a concern among educators regarding M-C students, and this study may provide guidance counselors, social workers, and school nurses with information to help eradicate or reduce the risks of suicide among these students (Gilreath et al., 2016).

Results may be analyzed and discussed between policymakers on federal, state, and district levels to create and implement a uniform curriculum between DoDEA and civilian schools (Esqueda et al., 2012). This implementation will help eliminate the achievement gap between the educational agencies (Esqueda et al., 2012). The local education agencies (LEAs) may use the results of this study to help strengthen the pedagogical skills and teaching styles that educators implement in the classroom to better support M-C students. The results may provide curriculum specialists, instructional coaches, and administrators with information needed to create, modify, or advance professional development modules that would help M-C students succeed in civilian schools (Garner et al., 2014). The results may help classroom teachers and teaching assistants identify those M-C students who are at higher risks of struggling early on so that specific intervention strategies can be targeted (Lester et al., 2016) and school climate may be improved (Berkowitz et al., 2014). Resulting information may also be shared with teacher preparation programs to improve candidates’ preparation during clinical experiences to meet the needs of M-C students.
Research Questions

The following questions will frame this study in an effort to understand the lived experiences of M-C high school graduates regarding their time in K-12 civilian schools. These questions will investigate the overall K-12 lived experiences by requesting that M-C high school graduates reflect on three specific areas of their civilian school experiences: academic, social, and extracurricular. A brief rationale is provided after each question is asked.

Central Research Question: How do military-connected high school graduates describe their K-12 lived experiences in public schools? Military life is unique in various ways that many consider stressors (Berkowitz et al., 2014; Garner et al., 2014; Richardson et al., 2016). This way of life contributes to a growing body of research that suggests M-C children are at an increased risk for academic, social, behavioral, and emotional difficulties (Lester et al., 2016). There is a gap regarding military dependent children at all stages of public education (Stites, 2016). Berkowitz et al. (2014) found that military parents held more negative views of school climate than did non-military parents. In general, parents felt that the civilian schools did not meet the needs of the M-C students (Berkowitz et al., 2014). However, students’ views regarding the overall experience are insufficiently represented in research.

Sub-questions:

RQ1: How do military-connected high school graduates describe their academic experiences in K-12 civilian schools?

The average M-C student changes schools six to nine times, which causes significant stress that many civilian schools are not adequately prepared to address (Berkowitz et al., 2014). These frequent moves may force M-C students to repeat lessons, miss lessons entirely, and be placed in classes that are not developmentally appropriate to the M-C student’s experiences or
ability levels (Clever & Segal, 2013). In civilian schools, grade-school students who experienced prolonged deployment of their parents fared worse academically than those students whose parents were not deployed (Clever & Segal, 2013).

RQ2: How do military-connected high school graduates describe their social experiences in K-12 civilian schools?

The social well-being of M-C students “has perhaps received the most attention in recent years” (Chandra & London, 2013, p. 192). M-C students may show academic growth when faced with stressors, “and yet may suffer emotionally, with symptoms of anxiety and depression” (Easterbrooks, Ginsburg, & Lerner, 2013, p. 100). Gilreath et al. (2016) stated that many M-C students feel as if they are invisible and there is little concern for their needs. Berkowitz et al. (2014) indicated that M-C students were targets for bullying by other children who oppose military operations.

RQ3. How do military-connected high school graduates describe their extracurricular experiences in K-12 civilian schools?

Those M-C students who encounter “a military stressor but also participate in programs will be less likely to experience depressive symptoms and anxiety but will report higher levels of self-efficacy than youth who experience the same stressor but do not participate in a program” (Richardson et al., 2016, pp. 1768-1769). Extracurricular activities that give M-C students the opportunity to establish and keep positive relationships may have “a fun, social component” (Richardson et al., 2016, p. 1773).
Definitions

1. **Deployment** – The period of time that an enlisted member of the military is away from his or her family due to an obligation to fulfill requirements involving combat duty stations (Thompson et al., 2017).

2. **Family stress theory** – Contextually, family stress is understood best when regarded within a specific context, such as military life. While this framework focuses on the family system, it can be applied to individuals (Richardson et al., 2016).

3. **Military-connected (M-C)** – Individuals who are the official dependents of those who serve in the military (Student-Identifier, 2018).

4. **Mobility** – The moving of a military family from one location to another. The movement may be across state or international borders (Garner et al., 2014).

5. **OCONUS** – The acronym means “living outside the continental United States” (Richardson et al., 2016, p. 1766).

6. **Stressors** – Situations that are unique to those M-C individuals, such as parental deployment, parental rank, and frequent relocations (Richardson et al., 2016).

Summary

This study will focus on the overall K-12 experiences of M-C graduates of public schools. The problem is that civilian schools struggle to address the needs of M-C students. By sharing their experiences in this phenomenological study, the M-C graduates will have the opportunity to elaborate on the challenges and successes they experienced in civilian schools during the K-12 years. The theory guiding this study is the family stress theory, based upon the works of McCubbin (1979). This study hopes to gain insight into the M-C graduates’ responses to situational stressors. By sharing the narratives, this study will provide details into the M-C
graduates’ responses that allow them to thrive or struggle when faced with unique situations common to military life. Through this investigation, advancements may be made in the teaching and learning of M-C students in civilian schools. The results of this study may provide a blueprint for educational stakeholders to effectively address the needs of M-C students.

Civilian schools, being non-military, are different from DoD schools in that family values and consideration of the students’ situations can feel absent in the civilian environment. While M-C students can feel a level of empathy from teachers and administration, as well as comfort and familiarity with the way things work within a DoD school, the opposite is true for civilian schools, as teachers, administrators, and, to some extent, other students’ lack of understanding of M-C students’ situations can leave the M-C student feeling isolated and emotionally disconnected on a social level. Participants found ways to adapt and make social connections either with emotional support from family or from other military family friends.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

This chapter provides the reader with an overall picture of M-C children, as described in current literature. This chapter identifies the working definition of M-C children for this study and defines characteristics unique to the military lifestyle, which include deployment, relocation, and mobility. Considering the unique circumstances M-C children encounter, the theoretical framework guiding this study is Hamilton McCubbin’s (1979) family stress theory. This theory examines how family members do well and thrive or struggle and fail when faced with specific stressors. Thus, this theory aligns with the lives of M-C children who are faced with changing family structures/environments on a frequent basis. Using literature to support the stance that public schools struggle to address the needs of M-C children, the perceptions of and experiences in public schools are investigated from the standpoint of parents and educators. In addition, the emotional, behavioral, and academic struggles are explored. The literature review concludes in this chapter with research-based evidence that suggests resiliency is also an aspect of military life for the M-C students. This chapter concludes with a summary of the literature and establishes the gap in literature, which is the essence of this study.

Theoretical Framework

To begin, “Managing stress, particularly for children, is a central task of family life. Thus, families can generate, mediate, or mitigate stress” (Masten, 2013b, p. 279). Family stress theory is a developmental theory that explores how families adapt and thrive or deteriorate and disintegrate when faced with situational stressors (McCubbin, 1979; McCubbin et al., 1997). When family structures change, established boundaries and roles become ambiguous (Moeller et al., 2015). Thus, families are forced to make decisions that may change their structure in various
ways, both negative and positive. The umbrella of the family stress theory seeks to understand two aspects. The first is, “Why do some families falter when faced with difficult events and situations but manage to bounce back?” The second is, “Why do some families never recover when faced with difficult events and situations?” The theory has roots in the areas of family science, which includes multiple child-focused studies, sociology, and nursing. With its origins dating back to the 1920s, theorists gradually shifted from negative perspectives to more positive views. Initially, the theory looked at weaknesses in the family structure during stressful times, which included military stressors such as separation and deployments. However, theorists slowly started noticing that families were developing coping mechanisms that enabled them to thrive during hard times, and acceptance and internalization of the stressors helped families succeed (McCubbin, 1979).

While the first era of family stress theory emerged in the 1920s, most of the research during this time was completed by graduate students (Weber, 2011). In 1936, one of the first published studies on the topic was written by a sociologist, Robert Angell, at the University of Michigan (Angell, 1936; Weber, 2011). Two years later, a sociologist, Ruth Cavan, and a psychiatric social worker, Katherine Ranck, from the University of Chicago followed the research examining the effects the Great Depression had on families (Weber, 2011). Angell, Cavan, and Ranck stressed the importance of studying the family unit as well as individual members to gain an understanding of family functioning during times of stress (Angell, 1936; Weber, 2011). The research in the first era (1920s to late 1940s) involving family stress theories paved the way for the second era (late 1940s to late 1970s), which was led by sociologist Reuben Hill, who was “named the father of family stress theory” (Weber, 2011, p. 8).
Reuben Hill’s (1949) studies of the second era focused on military families during World War II and their coping behaviors involving deployments. The research Hill conducted with World War II families and veterans led him to publish that “two moderating variables could explain the differences in how families meet the challenge of a stressful event” (Sullivan, 2015, p. 90). In addition, the support given to the family unit and the significance of the stressor determine when and if a crisis will follow (Sullivan, 2015). Using this research as support, Hill created the ABC-X model stating that “a precipitating event (A) interacting with the family’s crisis-meeting resources (B) and the meaning the family assigns the event (C) produces a crisis” (Sullivan, 2015, p. 90). Hill referred to the crisis as (X) (Sullivan, 2015). Hill’s family stress theory, which he referred to as ABC-X Model, became the focus of the theory during this era and is still deemed the most influential family stress theory to emerge (Weber, 2011).

Guided by Hill’s (1949) studies, the Naval Health Research Center focused on coping responses of naval wives whose husbands were separated from them for lengthy periods of time due to war and deployments aboard Navy carriers (McCubbin, 1979). They found that the most severe stressor proved to be separation due to combat because military families are “called upon to adapt to lengthy absence and develop a system of operation which involves some changes in roles, processes, and boundaries in order to manage the separation” (McCubbin, 1979, pp. 239-240). However, the wives’ abilities to successfully cope in these studies were underscored by investigators (McCubbin, 1979). Noting that the “family’s ability to manage stress may depend on the efficacy and/or adequacy of the solutions the culture, community or the organization provides” (McCubbin, 1979, p. 242), coping strategies of families regarding external sources were closely examined. Thus, this discovery led researchers into the third era of the family stress theory (late 1970s to mid-1980s), which was guided by Hamilton McCubbin (1979).
Weber (2011) noted that “The third era saw a change in focus of research from family weaknesses to family strengths, coping strategies, and family system concepts” (p. 8). Hamilton McCubbin and Joan Patterson, both family social scientists, expounded upon Hill’s ABC-X and developed the Double ABC-X Model, which included coping strategies for stress (Weber, 2011). A change or loss of social support systems may increase the stress experienced among families (Davis & Finke, 2015; McCubbin, 1979; McCubbin et al., 1997). McCubbin et al. (1997) noted that families can become overwhelmed and challenged when faced with severe adversity and deteriorate when disharmony and imbalance occur. However, McCubbin (1979) also recognized in studies involving military families that the connection between the military family and community is a major factor in successful adaptation and management of stress. Thus, the focus on protective factors when dealing with stressors shifted to a deeper study of recovery factors that allowed for positive interaction, which enabled families to thrive (McCubbin, 1979, McCubbin et al., 1997).

The fourth era (mid-1980s to present day) of the family stress theory focuses on the shared meanings, contexts, culture, and strengths of the family (Weber, 2011; McCubbin et al., 1997). In 1987, the Double ABC-X Model was further expanded by McCubbin and his wife, Marilyn, who was a nurse (McCubbin et al., 1997; Weber, 2011). This model, initially called the Typology of Double ABC-X Model, become known as the Typology Model of Family Adjustment and Adaptation (Weber, 2011). In this model, family strengths became the area of concentration instead of the causes of stress and family weaknesses (McCubbin et al., 1997; Weber, 2011). This model was later adapted to include resiliency factors, and the Resiliency Model of Family Stress, Adjustment, and Adaptation was developed by the McCubbin husband-wife team (McCubbin et al., 1997; Weber, 2011).
From the perspective of family systems, families do best when patterns in their lives are predictable and stability is established (McCubbin et al., 1997; Thompson et al., 2017). When stability is disrupted, family members must adjust their behaviors to adapt to the changes that have occurred to re-establish balance in the family (McCubbin, 1979; McCubbin et al., 1997; Thompson et al., 2017). Youths are vulnerable to stressors, especially during times that threaten parental and emotional resources, such as deployments (Thompson et al., 2017). Whether the deployments are routine/non-combative missions or occur during crises, youth are still emotionally and psychologically affected (Skomorovsky & Bullock, 2017). The absence of the family member calls for a period of disorientation and disorganization, which is a stressor (McCubbin, 1979; McCubbin et al., 1997; Skomorovsky & Bullock, 2017; Thompson et al., 2017).

Cox and Paley (1997) suggested that each individual member of a family impacts the larger family system. Therefore, the way children respond to stressors will ultimately affect other members of the family (Cox & Paley, 1997; Skomorovsky & Bullock, 2017). Family stress models seek to explain how stressors ultimately impact the behaviors of parents and children in the family unit (Gewirtz, DeGarmo, & Zamir, 2017). The family stress theory is a useful lens for this study since the family stress theories were developed through research with military families (Gewirtz et al., 2017; McCubbin et al., 1997; Sullivan, 2015; Weber, 2011). Therefore, this theory is applicable when stressors are related to military culture, such as deployment (Sullivan, 2015). The context and affected group to consider for family stress theory in this study is military life and the children of military families, respectively. While family stress focuses on the family as a whole, “it can be applied to individuals within the family as well as the family system” (Richardson et al., 2016, p. 1766).
Related Literature

The following sections will introduce the reader to military-connected students and the lifestyle these students experience. The stressors the families face will be examined considering current research. Research regarding the ways DoDEA schools and public schools meet the needs of M-C students will be discussed.

Identification of Military Connected Students

Military connected (M-C) students account for over 2 million students whose parents are veterans, members of the National Guard or Reserves, or active duty (Jackson, 2014; Student-Identifier, 2018). It is important to note that the parent may be the biological, adopted, foster, or legal guardian of the student. Regardless of the connection, M-C students are identified as being official dependents of the military service member (Jackson, 2014; Student-Identifier, 2018). According to the official definition, M-C students may be students in elementary, middle, high, or trade schools or higher education institutions (Student-Identifier, 2018). However, for this phenomenological study, the students’ experiences will come from their time as a dependent while enrolled in public schools, grades K-12.

Approximately two-thirds of active duty families reside in civilian areas (Student-Identifier, 2018). Thus, according to reports provided by the Department of Defense (DoD), there are approximately 1.2 million children (ages 4-18) of active-duty service members who attend public school (Berkowitz et al., 2014), and less than 8% attend DoD schools (Student-Identifier, 2018). These students are frequently exposed to moves, deployments, and other life transitions that have the potential to produce stressors and require a certain degree of change to the family structure (Clever & Segal, 2013; Hall, 2008; Student-Identifier, 2018).
Military Lifestyle

Rowe et al. (2014) emphasized that the enlistment of one family member requires the entire family to serve. The military, which is deemed an authoritarian organization, requires that each family member learn the culture of this organization to succeed (Wolf et al., 2018). Within this culture, boundaries exist that include clear rules and intolerance of questioning those in authoritative positions, and specific qualities, such as loyalty, commitment, and integrity, are valued (Wolf et al., 2018). Yet, military families cannot be “pigeonholed. Instead, they are a strikingly diverse population with diverse needs” (Clever & Segal, 2013, p. 13).

Military families not only vary regarding the different branches they serve and the ranks and positions they fill, but they also differ in the struggles they encounter and the needs they must meet over time (Clever & Segal, 2013; Davis & Finke, 2015). Families who serve during wartime face a range of challenges, which include “separation from a caregiver in the context of danger, rapid and frequent changes in family roles and relationships, possible behavioral health problems in at-home parents/caregivers, and behavioral health problems or physical injuries in returning military members” (Lester et al., 2016, p. 939). The M-C children may be impacted by these stressors during key developmental stages of their lives (Lester et al., 2016). On the contrary, those families who serve during peacetime may not be faced with combat deployment issues, but the reality of separations and transitions is still present. Yet, regardless of the dynamics faced within each family, “M-C children grapple with a multitude of military-specific issues” (Esqueda et al., 2014, p. 42). M-C children “informally wear their parent’s rank on their clothing, meaning they are expected to conform to the customs and culture of the military and behave in a manner that does not negatively impact their parents’ career” (Rossiter, Dumas, Wilmoth, & Patrician, 2016, p. 486). This expectation is often met with anxiety and stress as M-
C children deal with parental separations due to trainings, unaccompanied tours, and deployment (Rossiter et al., 2016). Depression, substance abuse, and suicide risk are specific concerns for M-C children. Specifically, the suicide ideation experienced by M-C children is greater than those who have no ties with the military lifestyle (Rossiter et al., 2016). These concerns may be triggered by the emotional and physical injuries the M-C children’s parents experience during combat (Rossiter et al., 2016).

M-C children “represent a distinct and unique subgroup of the military” (Rossiter et al., 2016, p. 486). The issues experienced by M-C children are generally family-related, involving rank, deployment, school transitions, and residency outside the continental United States (OCONUS) (Richardson et al., 2016; Rossiter et al., 2016). Researchers and policy makers on local, state, and federal levels recognize the risk factors connected to the military lifestyle and the need to learn more about these challenges that influence the academic, behavioral, social, and emotional aspects of M-C children (Chandra & London, 2013).

**Stressors**

Clearly, “military families are feeling stressed, and this stress is taking its toll on the family dynamics” (Wolf et al., 2018, p. 84). While stress is not considered an illness, it can undermine the family functioning (Cozza, 2015). For example, children who were involved in the Blitz bombing during World War II showed signs of aggression, depression, and withdrawal when the family structure changed due to parental separation (Osofsky & Chartrand, 2013). Sixty years later, those children still suffered from emotional issues, such as depression and anxiety (Osofsky & Chartrand, 2013).

Even with past studies like those conducted regarding the Blitz bombing, current primary care doctors and mental health clinicians know little about the influence parents’ military service
has on the health and functioning of the military children (Cozza, 2015). This is not an indicator that military children are doomed to permanent damage or troubles, but it does suggest a deeper examination of the significant challenges or stressors military children experience (Kudler & Porter, 2013). Evidence suggests that both military and civilian families are concerned with caring for their children’s welfare (Wolf et al., 2018). However, the source of stress for civilian families is not related to military factors such as deployment, mobility, location, and trauma (Wolf et al., 2018).

**Deployment.** Since the end of World War II, the United States has deployed military troops “all over the world for regional security and peace building” (Heo & Ye, 2017, p. 2). Deployment refers to the movement of military personnel from a home base to a specified location for military action (McGuire et al., 2016; Skomorovsky & Bullock, 2017; Thompson et al., 2017). Deployments can be normative or catastrophic (McCubbin & Figley, 1983). This means that they are respectively routine and noncombat or catastrophic, which indicates they occur during “times of crises, where there is a higher risk of danger” (Skomorovsky & Bullock, 2017, p. 655). Regardless of the type, for military personnel and their families, deployment involves much more than just a physical move from one place to the next (Parcell & Maguire, 2014). The family is required to prepare for deployment before, during, and after the process occurs (Parcell & Maguire, 2014; Skomorovsky & Bullock, 2017).

Military personnel are greatly affected by deployments (McGuire, 2016; Wolf et al., 2018), which is commonly attributed to the fact that any kind of balance military families acquire in their daily lives is upset during the deployment process at all stages (Wolf et al., 2018). The routines that military families have established are initially challenged during the pre-deployment phase when families must face concerns and fears while making sure that all
financial, legal, and medical affairs are in order (McGuire et al., 2016; Wolf et al., 2018). Military families report increased anxiety symptoms during the pre-deployment stage related to the anticipation of the separation from the military member (Lester et al., 2016; Wolf et al., 2018). Realizing that the separation is inevitable, the family is faced with the reality of the separation when the deployment phase arrives (Lester et al., 2016; Wolf et al., 2018). During deployment, as a way of coping with and adjusting to the absence of the military service member, the family must first attempt to push aside the fear that the military service member will be harmed or even killed during deployment (Wolf et al., 2018). This is usually accomplished by focusing on those matters which require immediate attention, such as forming a new set of routines in the family and assigning new roles and responsibilities to family members (Wolf et al., 2018). However, upon the return of the deployed parent, which is the post-deployment phase, the family is forced to re-evaluate their newly defined roles and work to create a new family structure that includes the recently reunited service member (Wolf et al., 2018).

To best explain the dynamics of the deployment cycle, individuals are asked to imagine that the military family lives on a boat in an analogy called “Rocking the Boat” (Wolf et al., 2018, p. 86). The routines that are established during the pre-deployment phase are representative of harmony and calmness in the family structure, which is described in the analogy as the action of each member of the family paddling the boat in rhythm and collaboration with the other members to keep the boat steady (Wolf et al., 2018). When the family learns of an upcoming deployment, worry and doubt set in (Lester et al., 2016; Wolf et al., 2018). The family members are no longer in agreement with paddling techniques, and “the boat begins to rock in anticipation of the big wave” (Wolf et al., 2018, p. 86). The wave hits during the deployment stage, and the family is in crisis. The family is thrown into survival mode
as feelings of vulnerability, insecurity, and confusion increase (Owen & Combs, 2017; Trautmann, Grace, & Gross, 2018), and they must learn to function or row the boat without the assistance of the deployed parent (Wolf et al., 2018). As new routines are established, the family members eventually reach a stable place, which is synonymous to synchronized rowing in calm waters (Wolf et al., 2018). However, the return of the deployed parent(s) causes change, and the structure, which is the boat, is rocked again until adjustment takes place (Wolf et al., 2018). For today’s military families, the depiction of life as explained within this analogy is a frequent occurrence.

Since 2001, over 2.7 million members of the military have served in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, which include Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan (OEF), Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), and Operation New Dawn (OND), and more than 3.3 million deployments have occurred during this time (Bello-Utu & DeSocio, 2015; Lester et al., 2016). With the escalation of conflicts, there has been an increase in the reliance on all members of the armed forces, including the National Guard and Reserves (Bello-Utu & DeSocio, 2015). In support of these operations, over 700,000 have had at least one parent deployed (Ohye et al., 2016). The demands placed upon the soldiers have exposed military families to deployments that are extended in length and number (Bello-Utu & DeSocio, 2015).

When compared to their civilian counterparts, household disruptions caused by lengthy deployments are contributed to an increased risk for violence, substance use, victimization, and suicide risk among M-C youth (Engel, Gallagher, & Lyle, 2010; Gilreath et al., 2016). While exposure to deployment is significant to family adjustment, there are limited studies investigating exactly how deployments impact the adjustment of young children (Lester et al., 2016). However, data collected from more than 390,000 ninth and eleventh grade students in
California suggested that there is a growing need to increase support to military families (Gilreath et al., 2016). The data indicated that 24% of M-C youth contemplated suicide, and approximately 12% attempted suicide (Gilreath et al., 2016). In comparison, less than 7.5% of non-M-C students attempted suicide; thus, the frequency of suicide ideation among M-C youth indicates that family functioning “may be adversely affected by wartime military service” (Gilreath et al., 2016, p. 64). The families of enlisted service members with higher deployment rates reported unhealthy, dysfunctional problem solving and family functioning (Lester et al., 2016). These factors, along with the decrease of family involvement and communication during deployments, are areas of concern (Gilreath et al., 2016; Lester et al., 2016). In another survey recently conducted, military spouses also indicated higher rates of suicidal ideation than non-military spouses (Gilreath et al., 2016). Thus, it is evident that the entire military family system is significantly affected when the deployment cycle occurs (Gilreath et al., 2016).

Marital instability and the risk of depression are also associated with deployment exposure (Chesmore, He, Zhang, & Gewirtz, 2018; Lester et al., 2016; Thompson et al., 2017). A study of 300,000 Army wives indicated that approximately 37% of those with deployed spouses were diagnosed with a mental health condition such as anxiety, depression, sleep problems, and the risk of diagnosis increased the longer the separation (Osofsky & Chartrand, 2013). However, those wives with nondeployed husbands had fewer mental health diagnoses (Osofsky & Chartrand, 2013). Other family members are affected by the way one family member responds to deployment (Skomorovsky & Bullock, 2016). Research indicates that the impact on marital functioning regarding the deployment separation may carry over to the relationship between the parent and the child (Lester et al., 2016). The non-deployed parent’s mental health and functioning during the deployment significantly influenced the M-C child’s
adjustment and emotional well-being (Lester et al., 2016; Thompson et al., 2017). Child neglect and maltreatment increased with prolonged and frequent deployments (Osofsky & Chartrand, 2013). While caregivers and school staff reported that behavioral problems increased with M-C children during deployment (Esqueda et al., 2014), parents reported that their children had fewer problems when the marital relationship was stable (Chesmore et al., 2018).

**Mobility.** Student mobility is common in America (Rumberger, 2016). Most students make at least one nonpromotional change in schools during their K-12 education (Rumberger, 2016). Perhaps no students experience mobility more than those in military families (Jacobson, 2013). Stability is hard to achieve for the average M-C student who attends six to nine schools during their K-12 education (Berkowitz et al., 2014; Garner et al., 2014; Ruff & Keim, 2014). Hall (2008) stated, “the defining word for the military family is change; change is what their lives are about” (p. 193). The average military family moves every three years (Ruff & Keim, 2014). With each move, M-C students “lose their old networks and are required to make new friends, adjust to new residences and military bases, adapt to new social norms and academic standards, and reestablish teacher relationships” (Berkowitz et al., 2014, p. e1). The frequent moves also expose the students to various curriculums and teaching styles, which may put M-C students at risk of academic gaps (Garner et al., 2014; Ruff & Keim, 2014).

Family mobility was linked to depressive symptoms in youth (Mancini, Bowen, O’Neal, & Arnold, 2015). Therefore, social-emotional support is a common concern for M-C students (Garner et al., 2014). The M-C student may worry about building a positive rapport with teachers and students and being able to “fit in at the new school” (Garner et al., 2014, p. 31). Leaving behind friendships becomes harder for M-C students with each move (Ruff & Keim, 2014). “To avoid the inevitable grief, many students will choose to have superficial relationships
instead of close friendships” (Ruff & Keim, 2014, p. 105). Thus, the M-C student often feels disconnected with others, which may contribute to struggles during the adjustment phase (Ruff & Keim, 2014).

M-C families have reported that participation in extracurricular activities boosts confidence levels and supports social connections (DePedro et al., 2014; Farmer, Jackson, & Franklin, 2014; Richardson et al., 2016; Ruff & Keim, 2014). Thus, limited involvement in activities such as sports, contests, and youth programs may increase feelings of disengagement, isolation, and stress for M-C students (Farmer et al., 2014; Ruff & Keim, 2014). For instance, those M-C students who are interested in sports may move to a new school late in the year and miss the team tryouts (Ruff & Keim, 2014). In some cases, out of fear of disrupting the team’s dynamics, coaches are sometimes reluctant to put eligible military students on teams or in starting positions (Ruff & Keim, 2014). In other interest areas, student government elections may have taken place prior to the student’s arrival, or the outcome of the election are connected to student popularity, which the M-C student will not immediately have in the new environment (Ruff & Keim, 2014). As a result, the student’s potential to form desired, lasting relationships with others through extracurricular activities may be negatively impacted (Farmer et al., 2014; Ruff & Keim, 2014).

While the identities of military children are considered heterogeneous, their common experiences are not shared by the civilian population (Garner et al., 2014). Administrators, faculty, and staff realize that there is a need to understand the life experiences of M-C students (Garner et al., 2014). However, the constant mobility makes it hard for schools to build lasting relationships with their M-C students and gain an understanding of the military culture (Garner et al., 2014; Ruff & Keim, 2014). One principal who took part in the qualitative study conducted
by Garner et al. (2014) shared that out of 106 students in Grade 5, only eight had been in her school since kindergarten. She joked, “if you stand in the front hallway you can ‘feel a breeze’ and this is because there is a revolving door and that is because it does not ever change” (Garner et al., 2014, p. 35).

**Location.** Mobility changes more in the lives of M-C students than just school enrollment. Some military families are required to live “outside the continental United States (OCONUS)” (Richardson et al., 2016, p. 1766). Children thrive when lasting, stable relationships are formed (McCubbin & Figley, 1983; Richardson et al., 2016). Social life is regarded as a significant protective factor for M-C youth (Mancini et al., 2015; Richardson et al., 2016). Yet, when families are required to move outside of the United States, they may face factors that isolate them from others, such as language barriers and physical distance (Richardson et al., 2016). Low self-reliance levels were reported for early adolescents who lived OCONUS (Lucier-Greer et al., 2016).

For some military families, living OCONUS is not the only stress factor regarding location. Research suggests that those who live 30 minutes or more from the military base may be limited in available resources and support from others who are familiar with the military culture (Richardson et al., 2016). The support that is provided to those who live near the military installation is related to high self-efficacy rates and lower rates of depression in military children. However, those families who face excessive travel time may not be able to partake in the activities that would help M-C students develop a sense of belonging (Richardson et al., 2016).

**Trauma.** While most soldiers are not wounded during service, some return with physical and mental health problems (Clever & Segal, 2013). Today’s service members, with their improved armor and artillery, are more likely to survive when seriously injured (Clever & Segal,
Since 2002, more than 500,000 men and women have been physically injured in Iraq and Afghanistan and required immediate medical attention (Holmes et al., 2013). The decrease in fatalities “has been accompanied by a corresponding rise in the number of amputations and serious physical injuries that require lifelong care” (Clever & Segal, 2013, p. 105). The caretaking becomes the responsibility of the family, and often the families experience financial and emotional stress (Clever & Segal, 2013).

Thus, “war has created a new generation of individuals who have been impacted by military service and suffer from collateral wounds of war – military children” (Rossiter et al., 2016, p. 488). Some injuries, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and traumatic brain injuries (TBI), are invisible (Atuel et al., 2011; Clever & Segal, 2013; King & Smith, 2016). These conditions date back to antiquity (Levinson, 2015). However, they have received greater attention from the military since the war in Vietnam (Clever & Segal, 2013). The symptoms of PTSD may not be evident for months or years after soldiers return from combat deployment (Clever & Segal, 2013). However, “evidence indicates that symptoms of PTSD can be transferred to family members” (Clever & Segal, 2013, p. 31). Military children’s lives are intertwined with the lives of their parents, and “their health risks reflect their families’ risks” (Cozza, 2015, p. 247). Therefore, it is vital that the family environment is stabilized by ensuring that families have access to basic needs such as housing, education, and health care throughout the recovery and adjustment period (Cozza, 2015). It is also important that the families have open communication and support with outside agencies that will enable them to better understand the negative effects that PTSD and TBI can have on M-C children (Cozza, 2015). Even though the parent may look the same to the child, the mood changes, headaches, depression, fatigue, concentration problems, and other symptoms the parent experiences and
exhibits can significantly affect the relationship between the parent and the child (Atuel et al., 2011; Clever & Segal, 2013).

Due to advances in weaponry and medical care, combat-related deaths have significantly decreased through the years (Clever & Segal, 2013; Holmes et al., 2013). Still, more than 16,000 service members have died on active duty since 9/11 (Holmes et al., 2013). While families do not necessarily focus on losing their loved ones to the ultimate sacrifice, the possibility remains (Holmes et al., 2013). It is hypothesized that the death of a parent “has a more immediate impact on military children than do visible injuries” (Holmes et al., 2013, p. 152). The events surrounding the death, the family’s overall perception as to whether the death was meaningful or futile, the experiences the family endures after the death, and the degree of unity and support received significantly affect the behavioral, emotional, and social well-being of M-C students in the home and school environments (Holmes et al., 2013).

**K-12 Educational Setting**

M-C students face challenges related to deployment, mobility, location, and trauma unique to the military family (Richardson et al., 2016). Atuel et al. (2011) stressed that public school systems must be aware of these challenges that may have direct bearing on the students’ academic performances. Research suggests that public schools lack the knowledge and skills required to successfully meet the needs of M-C students (Lewis-Fleming, 2014; Masten, 2013a). In a 2013 survey consisting of 5,100 respondents, 38% reported that they were not aware of the experiences M-C students face, such as deployment and transition (Lewis-Fleming, 2014). In addition, 39% did not believe that their schools were proactive or responsive to the unique circumstances military families experience (Lewis-Fleming, 2014).
In contrast, DoDEA schools are viewed superior to public schools (Masten, 2013a); “in DoDEA parlance, on-base schools are ‘inside the gate’” (Richmond, 2015, p. 20). DoDEA schools are “uniquely able to provide for the needs of children in military families” (Russo & Fallon, 2015, p. 411). DoDEA teachers tend to stay in one school (Delisio, 2018). This helps to create a level of stability for students who find themselves in transition. In addition, teachers in DoDEA report that they are satisfied with their jobs, which helps boost the morale of the school environment (Delisio, 2018). Professional development is plentiful, salaries are high, and achievement ranks among the highest in the nation (Delisio, 2018; Masten, 2013a, Titus, 2007).

Yet, most M-C students attend schools in civilian communities (Berkowitz et al., 2014; DePedro et al., 2014; Elfman, 2018; Lewis-Fleming, 2014). Many M-C students of active-duty, Guard, and Reserve soldiers do not have access to DoDEA schools because the parents chose to live off-base for reasons not always documented (Masten, 2013a). These students are scattered all over the nation, and the advantages associated with DoDEA schools are not available to them (Masten, 2013a). While “the research demonstrates that there is little consensus about the impact of a military lifestyle on school performance” (Stites, 2016, p. 107), the distinctions between public schools and DoDEA schools are frequently highlighted in literature, as discussed in the following sections.

**Department of Defense Educational Activity (DoDEA) schools.** There are 194 K-12 schools operated by DoDEA in seven states in the United States, Guam, Puerto Rico, and 12 foreign countries (Clever & Segal, 2013). Schools run by DoDEA are commonly considered “models of excellence” (Masten, 2013a, p. 202), and “in general, parents with children enrolled in installation schools have a high opinion of the quality of education DoDEA schools provide, including instructional quality, safety and discipline” (Anonymous, 2015, p. 54).
Approximately 40% of DoDEA schools are comprised of minority students, and 10% of the total student population is comprised of special education students (Delisio, 2018). Over 90% of the students’ parents have only a high school diploma (Delisio, 2018). Yet the graduation rate at DoDEA schools is 97%, and the majority continue to higher education (Delisio, 2018). Studies suggest that students enrolled in DoDEA schools outperform their civilian peers and are more effective at closing achievement gaps between white and black students (Burnette II, 2017; Delisio, 2018).

Further, “within DoDEA schools, administrators, teachers, and staff are trained to respond to the specific needs of MC students” (DePedro et al., 2014, p. e18). Parental satisfaction surveys have indicated that the staff and faculty at DoDEA schools are aware of the issues military families experience and equipped to provide support and alleviate stressors (DePedro et al., 2014). For example, DoDEA schools regard mobility “as a way of life rather than an intractable problem” (Jacobson, 2013, p. 5). However, less than 13% of M-C children attend DoDEA schools (Clever & Segal, 2013).

**Public schools.** More than one million M-C children attend public schools (Berkowitz et al., 2014; DePedro et al., 2014; Lewis-Fleming, 2014). Yet, in contrast to DoDEA schools, civilian schools are not aware of the challenges and needs of the M-C students (DePedro et al., 2014). In a study conducted with 55 teachers in a heavily military-affected school district, only 38% felt that they were equipped to meet the needs of the M-C children in their schools (Garner et al., 2014). The high mobility of these students can cause substantial gaps in education (Berkowitz et al., 2014; Garner et al., 2014; Lewis-Fleming, 2014). School transitions have involved varying eligibility and delayed transfer of students’ academic records (Berkowitz et al., 2014). The M-C student may not have been exposed to subject matter in their previous school
system. Thus, the arrival to a new school may call for additional assistance and academic support (Garner et al., 2014). The M-C student who starts high school in one state and transfers to another state may not be able to fulfill the requirements at the new school in time to earn enough credits to obtain a high school diploma (Esqueda et al., 2012). This may cause the M-C student to postpone higher education or reject the idea of going to college altogether (Esqueda et al., 2012).

Research suggests that when M-C students are immersed in caring, supportive public-school environments, they are more likely to be shielded from the impact of despair, alienation, and academic failure (Esqueda et al., 2014). Some teachers reported that M-C students “had an increased ability to make friends, were more adaptable and ‘worldlier’ than their nonmilitary dependent peers” (Stites, 2016, p. 116). Peer and student-teacher relationships that were supportive, caring, and structured contributed to students’ well-being (Berkowitz et al., 2014). However, the overall positive emotional climate was not achieved because counselors and teachers did not have a solid understanding of the military culture, and students reported that they felt disconnected from the peers and staff (Berkowitz et al., 2014; Esqueda et al., 2014). In addition, “military parents had consistently and significantly lower assessments of school climate” (Berkowitz et al, 2014, p. e6).

Garner et al. (2014) indicated that more effective professional development is needed for teachers so that they can better address the needs of M-C students in public schools. The limited experience civilian schools’ staff and faculty have with military families creates a knowledge gap that affects effectiveness and competence with M-C students (Ruff & Keim, 2014). This lack of understanding has the potential to create a staff whose interactions with M-C students may range “from overly sensitive to completely insensitive to their needs” (Ruff & Keim, 2014,
Some teachers may encourage M-C students to share their perspectives of their unique experiences during class discussions. In contrast, some teachers discourage conversations regarding M-C students’ experiences when the teachers harbor negative feelings about war or military life or if they are fearful of upsetting the students (Ruff & Keim, 2014). Regardless of the reasons, the varying degrees of interaction with M-C students may create uncomfortable learning environments (Ruff & Keim, 2014). In addition, civilian students who were against military operations made M-C children prime targets of bullying (Berkowitz et al., 2014).

Over the past decade, evidence indicates that civilian schools have become more aware of the issues M-C students face (Lewis-Fleming, 2014). Some public schools actively work to raise awareness of the needs M-C students possess, and those schools offer resilience-building practices and activities that foster academic and emotional success with M-C students (Ohye et al., 2016). The Department of Education, DoD, and MCEC have collaborated to help eliminate the problems M-C students experience in public schools and to help provide an equal educational opportunity (Masten, 2013a; Shaw, 2018). Through this collaboration, the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunities for Military Children was developed (Masten, 2013a; Lewis-Fleming, 2014; Shaw 2018). The program was brought into existence “to level the educational playing field for military children” (Lewis-Fleming, 2014, p. 921). All 50 states, District of Columbia, and DoDEA participate in the Interstate Compact (Shaw, 2018), which “aims to reduce barriers and facilitate achievement among military children by tackling issues such as placement, transfer of records, access to special programs and extracurricular activities, and on-time graduation” (Masten, 2013a, p. 202). In 2013, survey results indicated that 50% of schools were not aware of the Interstate Compact (Lewis-Fleming, 2014). School awareness has increased since the 2013
survey, but additional measures are needed to transform the civilian school system to make it comparable to DoDEA (Lewis-Fleming, 2014; Masten, 2013a).

**Special Education**

Schools have long been implicated for risk and resilience in M-C children (Masten, 2013b). Thompson et al. (2017) found that many military youths found school to be “a source of refuge or stress, depending on needs and expectations” (p. 1054). For military families who have children with disabilities, finding a school equipped to meet the needs of the child may become an added stressor (Russo & Fallon, 2015). In public schools, where enrollment greatly surpasses that of DoDEA schools, meeting the instructional demands of all students, specifically those with special needs, may prove overwhelming (Russo & Fallon, 2015).

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990, which has been amended multiple times, guarantees free, equal opportunity for individuals with disabilities to be included in public schools (Lewis-Fleming, 2014). The United States Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, reported in 2013 that approximately 13% of public-school students receive special education services (Woodworth, 2016a). Special education directors within public school districts “are intimately aware of the issues associated with special education-related services in their school system” (Lewis-Fleming, 2014, p. 921). However, due to the mobility of military families, the intense awareness is not always present with M-C children (Lewis-Fleming, 2014; Woodworth, 2016b).

Additionally, “there are approximately 220,000 active duty and reserve Service Members who have a family member with needs” (Aronson, Kyler, Moeller, & Perkins, 2016, p. 423). Families with a special needs family member have reported less favorable views of military life, more symptoms of depression, and poorer coping skills (Aronson et al., 2016). The constant
mobility of military families increases the likelihood that needed services for family members with special needs is interrupted, which may contribute to additional stress of the family (Aronson et al., 2016; Jagger & Lederer, 2014). It is important that military families discuss the educational needs of their children when relocating to new schools to obtain the best possible services (Aronson et al., 2016).

In 2009, after apparent inconsistencies and gaps in education, the Neurodevelopmental Pediatrics Division of Naval Medical Center Portsmouth (NMCP) started exploring ways to connect and build relationships with schools (Lewis-Fleming, 2014). This led to the creation of a Community Partnership Forum (CPF), which focused on creating a “process to facilitate professional opportunities to enhance a mutual understanding of military lifestyle as well as military and civilian resources, particularly related to the educational needs of the military child and of the Individualized Education Program (IEP) process” (Lewis-Fleming, 2014, p. 920). DoDEA and MCEC have worked with state and federal agencies and schools and communities to improve adjustment and academic success of M-C students (Masten, 2013a).

In addition, the 2010 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) recognized the need to provide support to military families who have children with special needs (Aronson et al., 2016). To address this need, the Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP) was designed to identify those dependents who “(1) require special health care services; (2) receive ongoing medical services from specialists; (3) have significant behavioral health concerns; or (4) receive early intervention or special education services” (Aronson et al., 2016, p. 424). Once identified, the students’ needs are documented, and the families are offered support through referral services, non-medical management of cases, and family support groups (Aronson et al., 2016). EFMP reports that approximately 120,000 families are enrolled (Aronson et al., 2016).
In states where the Academically Intellectually Gifted (AIG) program is part of special education, different policies and procedures may apply (Jackson, 2014). Parents may find inconsistencies in programs within various states and districts (Jackson, 2014). Mobility “can also be socially and emotionally stressful for gifted children, whose intensities and sensitivities may affect their responses to the change” (Jackson, 2014, p. 10). In some instances, parents have discovered that those M-C students who have been identified as gifted in their previous schools do not automatically qualify in their new school’s gifted program (Jackson, 2014).

**Economic Conditions**

Military rank and pay grade are significant in the social status of military families (Landers-Potts et al., 2017; Lucier-Greer, O’Neal, Arnold, Mancini, & Wickrama, 2014). Economic status speaks “to varying levels of opportunity, agency, responsibility, and prestige in the military system” (Landers-Potts et al., 2017, p. 3268). Finances may affect the behaviors of and the relationship quality between family members (Ross, O’Neal, Arnold, & Mancini, 2017).

**Benefits.** Usually, the economic conditions of military families are good (Hosek & Wadsworth, 2013). Military families spend less on taxes, food, and health care than civilian families (Hosek & Wadsworth, 2013). While the dangerous work, deployments, and long hours make the work challenging, salaries have improved over the past decade (Cozza & Lerner, 2013; Hosek & Wadsworth, 2013). In addition, free or low-cost health-care coverage, one month of paid vacation, housing allowances, combat zone tax exclusion, and hostile fire pay are provided to the active-duty service member (Hosek & Wadsworth, 2013). In civilian life, white males tend to earn more than women and minorities (Hosek & Wadsworth, 2013). Yet, gender and race do not affect military salary; thus, military employment and pay “looks even better relative to civilian pay” (Hosek & Wadsworth, 2013, p. 45).
Disadvantages. While the active-duty military member is provided with benefits and increased salaries, “military couples rate finances as one of the top three stressors they face” (Ross et al., 2017, p. 574). Military spouses may be unemployed or work less than their civilian counterparts due to the military family’s constant mobility (Hosek & Wadsworth, 2013). The cost of childcare may also deter the non-military parent “from seeking employment, especially if the family consists of more than one child that has not reached school age” (Woodworth, 2016b, p. 46). Approximately 17% of military couples of junior enlisted rank report serious troubles with finances, “such as problems paying bills and falling behind on rent or the mortgage” (Ross et al., 2017, p. 574). Therefore, military service members may seek other options to alleviate any financial stress (Hosek & Wadsworth, 2013). These other options may include excessive credit use and becoming victims to predatory lenders who try to entice active-duty service members with short-term, high-interest loans that are hard to repay (Hosek & Wadsworth, 2013). In addition, those who leave the military and enter the civilian workforce “can expect to earn about what they would have earned if they had never joined the military” (Hosek & Wadsworth, 2013, p. 53).

Influence on children. The children of military families, like civilian children, are affected by their family’s economic situation. It is important to note that DoD “receives wide acclaim for offering accessible, affordable, high-quality child care” (Cozza & Lerner, 2013, p. 8). However, challenges may arise in providing such child care when families are faced with multiple deployments and/or live off-base, in civilian communities (Cozza & Lerner, 2013). While the family may benefit from the combat zone tax exclusion and supplemental pay for the time spent away, the stress placed upon the family increases during those times (Woodworth, 2016b). Birthdays, holidays, and other important milestones are missed during those times away
(Woodworth, 2016b). For children with excessive medical needs, the healthcare may not always provide the best benefits (Woodworth, 2016b). The children may have to wait for long periods to see professionals and specialists, and the family may have to meet “additional copays and catastrophic caps” (Woodworth, 2016b, p. 47).

**Resilience**

While M-C students are documented as facing numerous hardships, they also demonstrate success, health, wellness, and rich traditions in many ways (Cozza & Lerner, 2013). For some, learning how to positively, effectively cope with stress can improve the outcomes of some families (Russo & Fallon, 2015), and “throughout history, military children and families have shown great capacity for adaptation and resilience” (Park, 2011, p. 65). The way that stress affects individuals varies (Easterbrooks et al., 2013; Masten, 2013a, 2013b; Ohye et al., 2016). The length of time an individual is exposed to a stressor, the severity of the stressor, and the coping strategies an individual possesses influence the effect stress has on each person (Easterbrooks et al., 2013). The ability of an individual to remain positive and competent in the face of adversity is resilience (Easterbrooks et al., 2013). Resilience is the ability of an individual, family, or organization to withstand or recover from the stressors or threats that disturb the family system (Masten, 2013a). It comes from human and environmental interactions (Easterbrooks et al., 2013; Masten, 2013a). The capacity for resilience is affected by caregivers, teachers, and community services (Masten, 2013a). Cultural practices and traditions are also contributors to resilience (Masten, 2013a).

While resilience is not considered a character trait or personal attribute, certain characteristics are believed to “promote resilient functioning” (Easterbrooks et al., 2013, p. 104). Though the complete list is not agreed upon, cognitive flexibility, intelligence, sense of humor,
optimism, good health, and a sociable temperament are commonly accepted (Easterbrooks et al., 2013). These traits are found more frequently in children who have supportive social networks with peers, adults, and programs (Easterbrooks et al., 2013). Military families, for instance, “may help children see their experiences as a ‘badge of honor’ rather than a burden” (Easterbrooks et al., 2013, p. 104). Positive interaction, communication, and attachment between M-C children and their peers, parents, and other adults may positively affect emotional stability and increase resilience (Richardson et al., 2016).

**Supportive individuals.** Children’s peers, neighborhood friends, teachers, and parents may support resilience (Easterbrooks et al., 2013; Esqueda et al., 2014). When children spend time with one another, they tend to imitate each other. During this time, the coping and sharing strategies that they see modeled may help them acquire social, emotional, and material resources that will assist them in their own struggles (Easterbrooks et al., 2013). In lieu of face-to-face interaction, researchers found that an increase in e-communication among peers builds and strengthens relationships and fosters connectivity (Landers-Potts et al., 2017). For M-C youth who frequently move, e-communication may play a vital role in connecting with others and maintaining stability (Landers-Potts et al., 2017).

Educators may also support resilience (Easterbrooks et al., 2013). The fact that K-12 students spend more than 30 hours a week in schools may contribute to the influence educators have on them (Easterbrooks et al., 2013). The success students have in school and extracurricular activities is largely contributed to coaches and teachers (Easterbrooks et al., 2013). School social workers also provide services to address at-risk M-C youth (Easterbrooks et al., 2013; Esqueda et al., 2014; Wolf et al., 2018). School social workers may “conduct psychosocial assessments, facilitate small-group therapy sessions, or serve as a family-school
liaison” (Esqueda et al., 2014, p. 42). In a study conducted with more than 100 administrators in San Diego, results indicated that the school administrators celebrate military culture with events and activities (DePedro et al., 2014).

Parents are also a major factor in children’s resilience. Parents can help children thrive “by maintaining parental authority and spending lots of high-quality time with them, combining warmth with a high level of monitoring” (Easterbrooks et al., 2013, p. 105). When compared with their civilian counterparts, M-C children functioned better “in several domains that help build resilience, including self-regulation, intellectual and academic performance, and emotional wellbeing” (Easterbrooks et al., 2013, p. 108). A study investigated how 1,500 M-C youth, ranging in ages from 11-17, coped with their parents’ deployment. The results showed that two-thirds of the youth reported no emotional difficulties, which was contributed to strong parental communication and guidance (Easterbrooks et al., 2013).

**Military-sponsored support programs.** Programs such as the Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC), National Military Families Association (NMFA), Families Overcoming Under Stress (FOCUS), and Operation Military Kids (OMK) base their approaches on factors of resilience (Easterbrooks et al., 2013). MCEC recognizes, supports, and builds on existing strengths (Easterbrooks et al., 2013). The organization offers students and families technology tools, research-based publications and programs to assist during the deployment stages. One such program is Student 2 Student. This student-led program offers peer support to high-school students during transitioning (Easterbrooks et al., 2013). The belief that positive peer interaction and connection builds resilience is the driving force of this program.

The NMFA offers resources such as military spouse scholarships and family camps and retreats to military families (Easterbrooks et al., 2013). Operation Purple Camp is a specific
program through NMFA. This camp has served more than 45,000 M-C students who parents were wounded through military service (Easterbrooks et al., 2013). The camp works to build resilience by helping M-C youth create and maintain connections with other M-C youth while building psychological strength during times of adversity (Easterbrooks et al., 2013).

A team of researchers at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and Harvard developed FOCUS to help military families build resilience. FOCUS is an eight-session training program designed to teach families how to regulate emotions to better communicate to solve problems and set goals (Easterbrooks et al., 2013; Ohye et al., 2016). A study of 488 families at 11 military installations in Japan and the United States showed use of positive coping skills, which helped to decrease the emotional and behavioral difficulties the students faced (Easterbrooks et al., 2013). In Mashpee, Massachusetts, 115 school professionals, which included teachers, guidance counselors, nurses, and psychologists, were trained to implement the program (Ohye et al., 2016). The participants were satisfied with the training. They indicated that their confidence in understanding family stresses increased from 64.5% to 97.4%. Their preparedness to implement resilience supports increased from 50.0% to 95.8%, and they felt more equipped to guide M-C children to resources and discuss deployment concerns (Ohye et al., 2016).

The Army and 4-H/Army Youth Development Project collaborated to create OMK (Easterbrooks et al., 2013). This program offers educational, social, and recreational support for families, while encouraging M-C youth to educate their civilian counterparts about military life (Easterbrooks et al., 2013). One such youth-led program, Speak Out for Military Kids, takes place after school. In addition, OMK has created an initiative that allows the civilian students to take the lead. In Hero Pack, “civilian youth fill backpacks with items for military youth to help
recognize their sacrifices” (Easterbrooks et al., 2013, p. 112). Like the other programs, this program works to build resilience through effective communication and strong relationships (Easterbrooks et al., 2013; Ohye et al., 2016).

**Civilian-sponsored support programs.** In addition to the MCEC, the National Military Family Association (NMFA) is also used to address the weaknesses and strengths of M-C children and their families (Kudler & Porter, 2013). Living in the New Normal Institute (LINN-1) is an innovation of MCEC that helps families cope with trauma, stress, and uncertainty to build resilience (Kudler & Porter, 2013). The core tenet of LINN-1 is that, with the active participation of educators, nurses, guidance counselors, military leaders, social workers, parents, and other concerned adults, “military children’s inherent attributes of courage and resilience can be strengthened through deliberate encouragement at the community level” (Kudler & Porter, 2013, p. 176). Other programs, such as Give an Hour and Talk Listen Connect, advocate for M-C children across their communities (Kudler & Porter, 2013).

The above support programs, both military- and civilian-sponsored, have yielded positive results (Easterbrooks et al., 2013; Ohye et al., 2016). However, programs to foster resilience were not always in effect. Today, most of the ones in operation are established by military installations and DoDEA. In many cases, resilience programs were not implemented until well after conflicts such as 9/11 had begun (Easterbrooks et al., 2013). It is recommended that formal supports of military installations are aligned “with the informal supports of the nonmilitary community” (Easterbrooks et al., 2013, p. 113). This alignment may create a model that will help improve the lives of M-C youth (Easterbrooks et al., 2013). Further, this model is a departure, as “most research on military children has taken a deficit approach, and very little research has examined the strengths that help them thrive” (Easterbrooks et al., 2013, p. 113).
While some military children struggle, it is important to remember that all military children are not doomed, and many thrive during adversity (Kudler & Porter, 2013). However, relationships and programs must help M-C children cope to prove resilience (Easterbrooks et al., 2013; Kudler & Porter, 2013; Ohye et al., 2016). The DoD has the ability and capability to provide support to military families, especially the children (Kudler & Porter, 2013). However, without the support of the civilian communities where the families live, there are limits to what can be achieved (Kudler & Porter, 2013). Civilian communities must consider that M-C children may become the next line of service members, “and that they carry a complex legacy of stress and resilience into the future” (Kudler & Porter, 2013, p. 171). Therefore, they must be recognized and supported (Kudler & Porter, 2013).

Summary

Understanding the needs of M-C students could help educators reduce the struggles students face and increase resiliency. The literature suggests that M-C students live a life filled with situations that are exclusive to military families, and public schools are ill-prepared to meet these needs. However, the research does not sufficiently address how this problem can be solved. The gap in the literature can only be filled when educational stakeholders gain a firm understanding of the lived experiences M-C students encounter in the public schools and use those experiences to better address the unique needs of the M-C student. Thus, this phenomenological study is an appropriate methodology for this problem because interviews will provide rich, deeper information on current literature.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe the lived experiences of M-C high school graduates with K-12 civilian schools. This chapter will explain the methods the researcher employed and provide details of the research design used. The setting and participants will be identified, and the researcher’s role will be provided to give the reader background information about the person conducting the research. Data collection, interview questions, and analysis, as well as procedures that will be used to guarantee trustworthiness and ethical considerations, will be discussed before ending with a summary.

Design

A qualitative method is required for this transcendental, phenomenological design. Qualitative research is the best method for this study because it is conducted in a natural setting, uses the researcher as the main component in data collection, gathers data via multiple methods, and forms patterns and themes to “develop a complex picture of the problem or the issue under study” (Creswell, 2013, p. 47). The qualitative research process is emergent (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It affords the researcher flexibility because it is not “tightly prescribed” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 44). Rather than learning about the problem through numbers and measures, qualitative research allows the researcher to learn about the issue from participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative research is appropriate because it presents a holistic, complex picture of the proposed study that can only be achieved by talking directly with participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

To begin, “different qualitative research methodologies have different strengths when it comes to meeting the needs of different design concepts” (Chenail, 2011, p. 1719). For the
proposed study, phenomenology is appropriate because it is used to describe the lived experiences of several individuals regarding a phenomenon or concept (Chenail, 2011; Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). The phenomenological approach was used to gather narratives about the participants’ lived experiences (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). The participants’ narratives reflect their perceptions, which are “regarded as the primary source of knowledge, the source that cannot be doubted” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 52). Phenomenology emphasizes subjectivity, and the core of the phenomenon can only be discovered by examining it from various angles and perspectives, which are shared through the participants’ stories (Moustakas, 1994). The participants’ stories will hopefully shed light on the existing phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

The proposed study does not seek to interpret the experiences shared, which defines the hermeneutic approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Thus, transcendental phenomenology, which does not search for interpretative meaning, is appropriate because it “is a scientific study of the appearance of things, of phenomena just as we see them and as they appear to us in consciousness” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 49). The transcendental approach is pure and descriptive (Creswell, 2013). Moustakas (1994) suggested the use of a transcendental phenomenological study when focusing on the experiences of the participants instead of the researcher’s experiences. Since the core of transcendental phenomenology is meaning (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004), the transcendental, phenomenological design meets the objective of gaining first-hand knowledge from those affected by the phenomenon.

**Research Questions**

Central Research Question: How do military-connected high school graduates describe their K-12 lived experiences in public schools?
RQ1: How do military-connected high school graduates describe their academic experiences in K-12 civilian schools?

RQ2: How do military-connected high school graduates describe their social experiences in K-12 civilian schools?

RQ3. How do military-connected high school graduates describe their extracurricular experiences in K-12 civilian schools?

**Setting**

The setting of this study will be a large school system, which will be called Collaboration District, located in the southeastern section of North Carolina. This region of North Carolina is situated along Interstate 95 and Interstate 40, and the state capital is accessible within an hour’s drive. The beaches of North Carolina are less than a two-hour drive from this area, and the mountains of the western part of the state are less than a four-hour drive. The region is close to various military installations, which include Air Force, Army, Marines, National Guard, and Navy. The closest installation is approximately 20 minutes from the school system’s Board of Education, and the furthest is approximately two hours east. This region is home to the third largest concentration of M-C children in the world, with approximately 26% of military/federally connected students (Pender, 2018).

Collaboration District is governed by a nine-member nonpartisan board. The members serve four-year terms. Collaboration District ranks fifth in size out of 115 districts in North Carolina. It operates 87 schools and serves more than 51,000 students from prekindergarten to grade 12 (Pender, 2018). The school system includes 52 elementary schools, 18 middle schools, and 17 high schools, and employs over 6,000 employees (Pender, 2018). The student demographics consist of 45.25% Black, 29.77%, White, 13.04% Hispanic, 1.82% Asian, 1.71%
Native American, .45% Hawaiian/Pacific, and 7.96% Other (Pender, 2018). Approximately 60% of the students receive free/reduced meals (Pender, 2018). Exceptional Children Services are provided to 13.7% of the student population, and 10.1% are enrolled in the Academically Intellectually Gifted Programs (Pender, 2018). The graduating class of 2017 consisted of 3,506 students, and 296 of those individuals joined the military (Pender, 2018). There were 89 military scholarships awarded (Pender, 2018).

The setting was chosen for this study because it features a mix of rural, suburban, and urban communities, and several other private and public colleges and universities are nearby. The setting has a diverse population of students regarding military experiences from the different branches of the military. In addition, this school system has employed a Military Family and Youth Liaison (MFYL) full-time to coordinate and support efforts, assess needs, and build a connection with military families.

**Participants**

Since it is essential that all participants have experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994), purposeful, criterion sampling was used to select participants who are graduates of the Collaboration District’s 17 high schools. With more than 200 M-C graduates in the most recent graduating class (Pender, 2018), the study included 11 participants and was conducted until data saturation was attained (Creswell, 2013). It was also important that the research participant was interested in understanding the nature and meaning of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). While the participants varied in ethnicity, gender, and current occupation, they were close in age, ranging from 18-23 years. The participants had to be able to articulate their lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Thus, this age group was the focus because the phenomenon was more recent to them than those who experienced it more than five years ago.
Also, the more diversity found among the individuals’ characteristics, the more complex for the researcher to pinpoint “common experiences, themes, and the overall essence of the experience” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 153).

The participants were selected by first confirming their interest in the study and their willingness for their interviews to be recorded (Moustakas, 1994). The participants also had to be willing to have their experiences/narratives published in the researcher’s dissertation and in other publications, as deemed appropriate (Moustakas, 1994). The participants were selected by confirming their relationship/dependency to a member of the military, their enrollment in civilian schools for at least four years of their K-12 experience, and their graduation status from a high school in the Collaboration District. Confirmation was provided through various documentation, such as school transcripts, high school diplomas, and military identification cards. The participants also had to be willing to participate in the lengthy interview process (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher attained written permission in a consent form from each participant stating an understanding of the selection criteria and a willingness to participate (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

**Procedures**

First, the researcher sought approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Approval of the IRB was obtained before collecting data to ensure the risk-benefit ratio met requirements and to ensure that equitable selection of participants took place (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). Once approval was granted, the researcher began the communication and recruitment process.

The researcher contacted the MFYL via email to schedule a meeting. Since the district’s MFYL reports to the superintendent, the researcher included the district’s superintendent on all
email correspondence. At this meeting, the researcher explained the nature of the study and requested a list of recent M-C graduates from the MFYL. The researcher was aware that the graduates’ permission must be on file with the district to make contact, and this may not apply to all situations. Therefore, the researcher requested that the school district’s MFYL serve as a point of contact (POC) with the graduates. The researcher sent the details of the study and criteria to the MFYL, who emailed the information to graduates. Realizing that this method might not be available at the time of the study, due to any unforeseen changes in the organization’s structure, the researcher sought another route to secure participants.

As a second method of eliciting participants, multiple community-based methods were used (Landers-Potts, O’Neal, & Mancini, 2017). The study’s detail and criteria, including the researcher’s name and email address, were printed and posted at local universities and campus stores, with permission. The information was also posted to social media sites, Facebook and Twitter. The researcher determined, based on the criterion listed in the section above, which individuals met the intent of the study. Those selected individuals signed the consent form, which included the intent/purpose of the study, the known risks and expected benefits associated with participation in the study, the participants’ right to confidentiality, and their right to withdraw from the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data collection began as soon as the participant was selected.

Questionnaires and surveys are too structured to allow the participants to engage openly and honestly (Moustakas, 1994). Therefore, to acquire perception and maximize the depth of the data collected, interviews were conducted since they provide the best source of data collection (Moustakas, 1994). Individual interviews, a letter of advice, and focus group interviews were
employed to collect data from the participants (Creswell, 2013). The participants’ responses and reactions were recorded for data collection (Creswell, 2013; Gilstrap, 2007).

**The Researcher’s Role**

I am currently the Professional Development Schools Coordinator in the College of Education at a university in North Carolina. I was a classroom teacher for 15 years in the Collaboration District, prior to securing a position in higher education. I have achieved National Board Certification, and I am licensed in Reading (K-12), Elementary Education (K-6), Language Arts (6-9), and English (9-12). I have worked with M-C students for more than 20 years, and my focus during my National Board Certification renewal cycle was the military child. My father retired from the Army after more than two decades, serving in multiple wars. I was not born during his time of service, but because of his service I have a strong emotional connection and admiration to military service. Even though my father was not active duty when I was born, his lived experiences were shared with me, and his parenting style was influenced by his time in the military. While I was not an M-C student as defined in this study, I still needed to bracket personal experiences regarding my teaching of M-C children (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). There was no relationship between the participants and me.

**Data Collection**

Data in transcendental phenomenology is typically collected through use of the long, informal interview (Moustakas, 1994). However, multiple means of data collection are required in a phenomenological study (Creswell, 2013). The multiple sources of data collection serve as corroborating evidence to gain insight on perspectives and themes (Creswell, 2013). This process is called triangulation. The researcher triangulated the data using face-to-face interviews, letters of advice written by the participants, and focus groups.
Interviews

The interview is the main procedure used for qualitative data collection (Englander, 2012). It is “often longer and thus richer in terms of nuances and depth” (Englander, 2012, p. 27). Therefore, the researcher first conducted face-to-face interviews, using a semi-structured approach with each participant. Interviews were designed so the participant would feel comfortable in the environment where the interview was conducted to “respond honestly and comprehensively” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 114). While each interview was intended to last approximately 45-60 minutes, the researcher cleared her schedule to allow for more time, as needed. Comments were welcomed, and questions were loosely structured, open-ended, and administered verbally (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). The questions were designed to explore the lived experiences of the M-C students. The precise wording and order of the interview questions had flexibility so that each respondent would have the opportunity for a positive, natural interactive experience (Merriam, 1988).

The times, dates, and locations of the interviews were jointly decided upon by the researcher and participant. The researcher used an online calendar to determine the availability and convenience of the students and to choose a place where the students felt safe and comfortable to speak freely. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the researcher. The participants were provided an electronic copy of their transcriptions to verify correctness and clarify any areas (Creswell, 2013).

Semi-Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions

1. Please state your first name and tell me a little about yourself.

2. How long have you been considered a military-connected student?
3. Please tell me how you feel that your family’s connection to the military made your life different from children whose families were not in the military.

4. Please share your overall perception of life in the military. Think about both positive and negative aspects.

5. How do you think being the child of a military parent influenced your pursuit of an education in a public-school setting, regarding academic achievement? Tell me a story about a time you transferred to a new school. Explain how you perceived teachers’ expectations of you because of your military connectedness. Tell me about a time that you found the curriculum to be more/less challenging when moving from one school to another. Share with me an example of when you found this to be more common from state to state or from DoDEA to public sites.

6. How do you think being the child of a military parent influenced your social life in the public-school setting? Tell me the level of difficulty you experienced making new friendships. Explain to me how the family structure (discipline, chores, responsibilities, etc.) varied among military-connected students and non-military connected students. Tell me how your military-connectedness influenced your dating experiences. Share with me a time that you sought out other military-connected students as a support system when transitioning to a new location. During your parent’s deployments, share with me if you felt that you shared similarities to those students who lived in single-parent homes. Tell me what you feel was harder – starting over in a new school or leaving behind a school you had a level of comfort and security with.

7. How do you think being the child of a military parent influenced your extracurricular activities in the public-school setting? Tell me about your interests in school (sports,
public-speaking, acting, music, dance, etc.). Tell me the opportunities or missed opportunities you had to explore your talents throughout your K-12 years. Tell me about a time that you were not allowed to participate in an extracurricular activity due to your military-connectedness.

8. Tell me about the support you received as a military-connected student in a public school regarding the academic, social, and extracurricular aspects. Tell me about a teacher or principal who assisted/encouraged you during a rough time pertaining to your military-connectedness.

9. How do you believe this experience would have been different in a DoD school? Explain.

10. If you have experience attending DoD schools and public schools, compare the support received at both schools. Give me an example of how a DoD school addresses parental deployment and mobility compared to that of a public school.

11. If you do not have experience attending DoD schools and only attended public schools, what support was provided for military connected students?

12. What specific challenges did you encounter at the public school that were associated with your family’s military connection?

13. What additional support measures could have addressed these challenges?

14. How do you feel about public schools educating military-connected students?

15. If you were the parent of a military-connected child enrolled in civilian schools, what would you do to help him or her succeed?
16. Imagine that you are being interviewed by a public-school system’s panel, which consists of superintendents, principals, and teachers. What advice would you give them regarding the education of military-connected students?

17. I appreciate the time you have given to this study. What else do you think is important for me to know about the education of military-connected students in public school settings?

The 17 questions above are broad, open-ended questions, which are designed to “facilitate the obtaining of rich, vital, substantive descriptions” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 116). Questions one and two are knowledge questions because they inquire about factual information (Patton, 2002). Question two is a linear question (Evans & Whitcombe, 2016). A linear question helps the researcher determine information about the circumstance and requires participants to orientate themselves with the phenomenon (Evans & Whitcombe, 2016). The responses are not feelings or opinions (Patton, 2002). To elicit an emotional response concerning the phenomenon (Patton, 2002), questions three and 14 are raised during the interview. Questions five through eight and 10-13 deal with experience/behavior (Patton, 2002). These questions are asked to determine the individual participant’s experiences and whether all participants share common behaviors and actions regarding the phenomenon (Patton, 2002). Questions four, nine, and 15-16 are designed to discover the participant’s values and opinions (Patton, 2002). The last question is designed to give the participant an opportunity to share valuable information that may have been overlooked. This question is considered a one-shot question (Patton, 2002).

**Letter of Advice**

While Moustakas (1994) focused merely on interviews, Adams and van Manen (2017)
found it valuable for participants in phenomenological studies to write first-person descriptions of their experiences. Considering this, the researcher requested that each participant compose a 300-500-word personal letter to either their younger self or to an M-C child in the public school. The letter could be typed or handwritten, dependent upon the participant’s preference. This data collection method took place after the interview since the participant was required to revisit and examine the phenomenon in detail (Englander, 2012). Each participant was given the option to write the letter immediately after the interview before leaving or to write the letter at home. If the participant chose to write the letter at home, they were able to email or mail the letter to me or have me pick it up in person. The participant was encouraged to write the letter the same day, since the conversation from the interview was fresh in their mind.

If participants chose to write to their younger selves, they were to refer to their younger selves as ‘you.’ They were instructed to start the letter by greeting their younger selves. They should tell their younger selves who they are today regarding their job, school, family, etc. Then, they should tell their younger selves something they wish someone would have told them that would have helped them navigate through public school and life as an M-C child. The participants could have focused on specific elements asked during the interview. The participants were encouraged to discuss stressors such as deployment, mobility, and trauma. If the participants chose to write to a M-C child in the public school, they were to offer advice for students today who may be facing the same situations. While the participants were told to be compassionate and empathetic in the letters, they were encouraged to write freely and honestly. Honesty is highly important, or the activity could be ineffective and unproductive (Englander, 2012).

The freedom that comes from this writing was intended to add richness to the research
(Creswell, 2013; Ortlipp, 2008). This writing added transparency to the qualitative research process (Ortlipp, 2008). The participants may have been able to gain clarity or closure on certain issues from this assignment. These letters also provided the researcher with snapshots of the participants’ lives during their K-12 experiences that may not have been addressed during the interview (Creswell, 2013).

**Focus Group**

Lastly, the participants were asked to participate in a focus group. The frequency of focus group meetings can range from a single meeting to multiple encounters (Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech, & Zoran, 2009). In this study, the researcher scheduled one focus group while keeping in mind that more than one could be needed to reach data saturation (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). Focus groups should “include enough participants to yield diversity in information provided, yet they should not include too many participants because large groups can create an environment where participants do not feel comfortable sharing their thoughts” (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). Onwuegbuzie et al. (2009) recommended six to 12 participants. The researcher did not eliminate the possibility of conducting mini focus groups, which must include at least four participants (Krueger, 1994).

The focus group was conducted after the initial interviews were completed. Online focus groups are prone to problems “such as obtaining complete informed consent … and choosing times to convene” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 164). Therefore, like the interviews, the focus group was held face-to-face in a conference room on the campus where the researcher works. The participants agreed that the time and place were convenient, comfortable, and accessible to all. The focus group may “help people to explore and clarify their views in ways that would be less easily accessible in a one to one interview” (Kitzinger, 1995, p. 299). Topics raised during
the face-to-face interview were discussed at the focus group. The participants were encouraged to share ideas, opinions, and writings. The focus group meeting was audio-recorded and transcribed. The participants were provided an electronic copy of their transcriptions to verify correctness and clarify any areas (Creswell, 2013).

Semi-Standardized Open-Ended Focus Group Questions

1. What is the first thing you think of when you hear the phrase military-connected child?
2. What was your most challenging moment as a military-connected student?
3. What was your greatest success as a military-connected student?
4. How would you compare your academic experiences/preparation to those experiences/preparation of non-military-connected students?
5. Describe how your peers and teachers responded to your military connectedness.
6. How much of an influence do you believe your military connection had on the social aspect of your life while enrolled in public schools?
7. What aspects from your military connectedness do you feel affected your extracurricular activities in public schools?
8. What resources or supports assisted you during your K-12 education?
9. What is your outlook on educating military-connected students in public schools?
10. What advice would you give your younger self, regarding the experiences you encountered in public-school settings that were related your military connection?
11. Looking back, how much of an impact do you think your military connection had on the person you are today?

When focus group discussion guides are filled with numerous questions, the researcher
may become consumed with getting through the questions and neglect spending time on probing the participants’ reasons for their responses (Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007). Therefore, only 11 questions were listed to ensure that ample time was provided during focus groups for active conversation to occur between participants (Stewart et al., 2007). The first question sought to obtain the overall orientation each participant had toward the topic (Stewart et al., 2007). This is referred to as the “grand tour” question (Stewart et al., 2007, p. 114). The remainder of the questions were designed to stimulate discussion with wide ranges and encourage interaction among the participants (Stewart et al., 2007).

**Data Analysis**

The data collected in this study were analyzed using Moustakas’ (1994) modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method as outlined in Creswell and Poth (2018). Since the study was solely concerned with the participants’ perspectives, preconceived notions about the data collected were first eliminated (Moustakas, 1994). This component, called epoche, means “to refrain from judgment” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 33) and is commonly referred to as bracketing (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Thus, the researcher attempted to set aside personal experiences by giving a full description of her own experience regarding the phenomenon that was investigated.

The researcher was tasked with describing exactly what she sees in the relationship between the person and the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Therefore, the researcher transcribed the interviews verbatim and read and reread the transcriptions to form a sense of understanding regarding each participant. As ideas surfaced, reflective notes were written. This is a process called memoing, which allows the researcher to gain a sense of the interview in its entirety before breaking it into themes or parts (Creswell, 2013). This practice is essential, as “through the use of memos, the researcher is able to immerse themselves in the data, explore the
meanings that this data holds, maintain continuity and sustain momentum in the conduct of research” (Birks, Chapman, & Francis, 2008, p. 69).

The researcher found significant statements in the interviews and other data sources collected that reflected how the participants experienced the phenomenon. These significant statements were listed, and each statement was treated as equal in value (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Gilstrap, 2007). The process of looking and describing was constantly repeated, and each new degree of perception was equal in value and contributed to the understanding of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). This process is what Moustakas (1994) referred to as horizontalization (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2018). This process is unlimited, but stopping points are reached when repetition of the data, referred to as data saturation, occurs (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Thus, the researcher was able to cluster the horizons, or statements, into themes and organize the themes into textual descriptions following the next step, which is the Imaginative Variation (Moustakas, 1994).

The Imaginative Variation process requires the researcher to be reflective and examine the many possibilities found in the textual descriptions obtained (Moustakas, 1994). For each of the statements identified, the researcher sought for interpretative meaning. The researcher sought possible meanings and varying perspectives of the phenomenon from different vantage points and various roles (Moustakas, 1994). The countless possibilities that emerge through this process “are intimately connected with the essences and meanings of an experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 98). The statements were grouped into broader units of information, referred to as themes or units. The larger units “provide[d] for the foundation for interpretation because [they] create clusters and remove repetition” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 201).
The researcher then created a description of what the participants experienced and included examples verbatim. This is the textural description (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). A description of how the phenomenon occurred was created as well. This is the structural description (Creswell & Poth, 2018, Moustakas, 1994). During the final stage of Synthesis, the researcher wrote a brief description that combined the textural and structural descriptions. This is referred to as the composite description. While the researcher must realize that “essences of any experience are never totally exhausted” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 100), the composite description becomes the essential, invariant structure of the study’s experience (Moustakas, 1994). Here, the researcher has reached what is deemed to be the true meaning, or essence, of the phenomenological study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). The essence statement was verified by participants (Moustakas, 1994). If there were any errors or inconsistencies, the researcher addressed those concerns (Moustakas, 1994).

For the focus group, the data was carefully analyzed like that from the interviews. The interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009; Stewart et al., 2007). It was important that the participants’ responses and comments were maintained during transcription because “too much editing and cleaning of the transcript is undesirable and counterproductive” (Stewart et al., 2007, p. 111).

After the focus group was transcribed, the constant comparison analysis, which was first used in grounded research, was applied to the focus group (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). This method entails three stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). Once the interviews were transcribed, the data was chunked into small units during open coding. A code or descriptor was attached to each unit (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). During the axial coding stage, the codes from stage one were grouped into categories (Onwuegbuzie et al.,
Finally, themes were developed from the grouped categories during selective coding (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009).

Qualitative software called NVivo was used to assist in organizing and analyzing the data. The software supports audio files, digital phones, spreadsheets, plain text, PDF, and Word documents. Repeated codes within the data were used to determine the themes.

**Trustworthiness**

The research must be valid and reliable (Creswell, 2013). Trustworthiness addresses the issue that all data is collected and analyzed as accurately as possible in the proposed study. The following sections will address various ways trustworthiness was ensured.

**Credibility**

Credibility refers to the truth of the data (Creswell, 2013). To support credibility, the researcher employed member checks, triangulation, peer debriefing, and external audits (Creswell, 2013). First, “one of the main means of achieving credibility is by performing a member check or validation interview” (Buchbinder, 2011, p. 106). Member checking allows participants to provide their own views and determine revisions, and it assists in avoiding the researcher’s bias (Creswell, 2013). The participants critiqued preliminary analyses, to include the description of strategies and themes (Creswell, 2013). The participants also had the right to “review and confirm or alter the research data to correspond to her or his perception of the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 110).

The researcher triangulated to gain insight on the perspectives and themes of the study by corroborating the data gathered from various sources, methods, and theories (Creswell, 2013). Peer debriefing offers an external check, keeps the researcher honest, asks hard questions, and serves as a means of catharsis for the researcher (Creswell, 2013). The researcher used an
external audit to examine the process and product, examine the findings in relation to the data, and ensure that there was no connection to the study that would alter the overall truthfulness and accuracy.

**Dependability and Confirmability**

Dependability refers to the constancy of data over similar conditions (Creswell, 2013; Cope, 2014). This can be achieved through prolonged engagement and clarification of the researcher’s bias (Creswell, 2013). Through prolonged engagement the researcher was readily available and kept scheduled meetings and interviews pertaining to the study. This increased the reliability of the study and enabled the researcher to see common themes throughout the study (Creswell, 2013). In clarifying the researcher’s bias, the researcher provided positions, biases, and assumptions from the outset to help inform readers of the researcher’s stance (Creswell, 2013). Dependability occurs when the study’s findings are replicated with similar participants and settings (Koch, 2006).

Confirmability is the ability of the researcher to demonstrate that the study’s findings are not the viewpoints or biases of the researcher (Creswell, 2013). The researcher ensured confirmability by showing that the findings came directly from the data (Cope, 2014). Peer review is like interrater reliability and allows for an external check of the process (Creswell, 2013).

**Transferability**

Transferability refers to the likelihood that the findings of the study can be applied to other settings (Creswell, 2013). The themes and ideas generated in the study may be transferable from one participant to another. The findings of the study may potentially fit other participants
around the country. The reliability and future replication of the study are enhanced by rich, thick descriptions (Creswell, 2013).

Ethical Considerations

Researchers must be guided by ethical principles (Moustakas, 1994). To adhere to ethical standards outlined by the IRB, safeguards were implemented to ensure ethical treatment. First, it was vital that participation was voluntary and informed consent was received from all participants (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). The purpose of the study and how the data will be used was provided to the participants to ensure them that hidden agendas and deceit are not part of the study (Creswell, 2013). Liong (2015) stated that although the researcher has no intention to deceive participants, the feeling of deception may still surface. In addition, to eliminate conflict to participants and sites, identifiers were eliminated, names will never be disclosed, and pseudonyms were used (Creswell, 2013; Johnston, 2015; Moustakas, 1994). The participants were free to withdraw from the study at any time (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Data was password-protected and electronically stored (Creswell, 2013). Any hard copies are kept under lock and key in a filing cabinet.

Summary

Chapter Three described the qualitative methods used in this transcendental, phenomenological study to investigate the lived experiences of M-C graduates from K-12 civilian schools. The research site was in the southeastern region of North Carolina. The participants were purposely selected, and the data was collected through means of face-to-face interviews, letters of advice, and focus groups. Data were analyzed using the Moustakas’ (1994) modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen analysis and NVivo computer software. Member checks, triangulation, peer debriefing, external audits, prolonged engagement, peer review, and rich,
thick descriptions were used to ensure trustworthiness (Creswell, 2013). Measures to eliminate deception and safeguard data and participants’ information were implemented to ensure ethical treatment during the study. To fill the gap in literature, the study may provide insight to educators for future teaching methods regarding M-C students in civilian schools.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

This chapter contains the results of the data analysis. The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological is to describe the K-12 lived experiences of M-C graduates of public schools in the southeastern region of the United States. The data was acquired from participants’ individual interviews, written letters of advice, and focus group interviews. This chapter provides a brief description of each participant. The four themes that emerged from the data analysis are discussed. The themes include: (a) lack of support from classroom teachers and principals in public schools, (b) loneliness and isolation, (c) adaptability to new context and environment, and (d) drive to succeed. Rich descriptions extracted from the participants’ data are included. Following the presentation of the themes, the central question and sub-questions are answered narratively using the data collected. Finally, a summary is provided to conclude the chapter.

Participants

After receiving IRB approval (see Appendix A), participants were secured. Participants included 11 recent graduates from the Collaboration District. After meeting with the MFYL and obtaining an email list of M-C graduates who had permission on file, only one participant was secured. The other ten participants were recruited when the study’s detail and criteria were printed and posted via social media sites (see Appendix C). An individual interview was scheduled with each participant as soon as he/she signed the consent form (see Appendix B). The focus group was conducted after all individual interviews were completed and letters of advice were written. There were 8 female participants and 3 males, ranging in ages 18-22 years. Two participants had both parents who were in the military. Seven participants’
fathers/stepfathers and two participants’ mothers were in the military. Nine of the parents were in the Army, one of the parents was in the Marines, one of the parents was in the Air Force, and two of the parents were in the Navy. The average number of years the participants have been considered M-C students is 18.09. This information is in Table 1. Participant information was removed, and a pseudonym was provided to protect anonymity. All participants completed individual interviews and letters of advice. Seven of the participants took part in the focus group. This information is in Table 2.

Table 1

Participants’ Parents, Branch Served, and M-C Experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Military Parent</th>
<th>Branch</th>
<th>Years of M-C Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elijah</td>
<td>father</td>
<td>Army</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ariel</td>
<td>mother</td>
<td>Army</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoey</td>
<td>step-father</td>
<td>Army</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabriella</td>
<td>father</td>
<td>Army</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tyson</td>
<td>mother/father</td>
<td>Marines/Army</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charity</td>
<td>father</td>
<td>Army</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nevaeh</td>
<td>father</td>
<td>Air Force</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gianna</td>
<td>father</td>
<td>Army</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
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<td>Navy</td>
<td>19</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nicholas</td>
<td>mother/step-father</td>
<td>Navy/Army</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isabella</td>
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Table 2

Participants’ Contributions by Data Collection Methods

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<td>x</td>
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<td>x</td>
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Elijah

Elijah is an African American male who is 22 years old. He was pursuing a paramedic degree at a local community college. He plans to enroll in a four-year university after earning his associate’s and major in biology. He has been an M-C student since he was born. His father served in the Army and recently retired.

Elijah believed that his father’s military connectedness greatly influenced his life. He described his father as a “real calm, cool, collected guy on most days, but he’s always been super strict” (Elijah, personal communication, January 27, 2019). His father believed in rules and procedures, and with Elijah being the only child, there was very little room for him to “get out of
line” (Elijah, personal communication, January 27, 2019). He was always reminded to do well and stay focused on his studies. He remembered that he got in trouble one time for talking too much in class. It was elementary school, and his teacher called his parents. Once his father found out that he was not doing as he was told, he was punished. Elijah stated, “It didn’t take more times than that for me to learn what to do or not do. I got it together. I knew my dad wasn’t playing around” (Elijah, personal communication, January 27, 2019). Elijah’s father suffers from PTSD. Elijah remembered a time when he had broken a glass and the red Kool-Aid went all over the floor. Elijah stated:

Pops zoned out for a second. He touched me and just stopped breathing for a good second. I didn’t understand it then, but now I understand. I didn’t want to give him any reason to be upset with me, ever. I knew I had to tread lightly around him. (Elijah, personal communication, January 27, 2019)

Elijah’s parents divorced toward the end of his high school career. Even though his father was no longer in the home, Elijah’s father maintained a positive presence in his life. “I’m close to my dad. My dad is the one I talk to about everything. He and Mom didn’t work out, but he’s a great dad” (Elijah, personal communication, January 27, 2019).

Ariel

Ariel is an African American female who is 18 years old. She graduated from an early college in the district with almost 80 credit hours, earning herself a classification as a junior at a local four-year university. She has been an M-C student since birth. Her mother has been in the military for more than 20 years and is still serving in the Army.

Ariel’s mother does not live in the same state. Ariel, her 15-year-old sister, and her 6-year old brother live with their father. Her parents are not divorced, but her mother’s military
career requires her to travel and fulfill a TDY (temporary duty) in other states and countries. Ariel stated that while she understands her mother’s obligations to the military, it is still hard to deal with. However, Ariel does like the benefits that are involved with being an M-C student. Ariel acknowledged that the health insurance offered through the military and the benefits are nice bonuses. Ariel stated:

I like being able to go on base and shop at the commissary. I like showing my military ID card and getting 10% or 20% off purchases. I like getting discounts at the movies and restaurants. It’s nice, but I wish my mom was here instead. (Ariel, personal communication, January 29, 2019)

Zoey

Zoey is an African American female who is 18 years old. She has an older brother and a stepbrother. Like Ariel, she earned enough credit hours at her early college high school to earn the classification of junior at the local four-year university she attends. Her major is pre-nursing. She stated that she has been an M-C student through all of her public-school education, beginning with Kindergarten. Her stepfather recently retired from the Army.

Zoey did not provide any details about her biological father. However, she did state that her stepfather is “the best dad a girl could ever ask for” (Zoey, personal communication, February 1, 2019). She stated that her stepfather’s constant deployments concerned her. She was always worried about his safety. She remembered that her mother constantly wore “a smile and pretended to be brave” (Zoey, personal communication, February 1, 2019). However, Zoey said that she now knows that her mother was worried all the time: “There are just some things you don’t really get as a child. Especially a military kid. But, when you get older, it all kind of clicks, and you are like – oh, yeah, so that’s what was going on” (Zoey, personal communication,
February 1, 2019). Zoey expressed that she loves being part of a military family. She admitted, “It’s hard, but it’s so worth it. I wouldn’t trade my experiences for anything” (Zoey, personal communication, February 1, 2019).

**Gabriella**

Gabriella is a multi-racial (African American, Pacific Islander, and White) female who is 22 years old. She has an older sister and is a junior at a local four-year university. She is majoring in education. She has been considered an M-C student since birth. Her father retired from the Army shortly after Gabriella started college.

Gabriella’s father was a Special Forces soldier, which required him to be part of numerous missions and deployments. Thus, Gabriella at times felt abandoned by her father. She admitted, “I’m a daddy’s girl, and I hated it when he left, which was all the time” (Gabriella, personal communication, February 7, 2019). Gabriella was thankful for the community aspect of the military during her father’s deployments. The Family Readiness Group (FRG) and wives’ groups provided support to Gabriella and her mother during times of separation. Gabriella stated:

> I think FRG and wife groups helped families and spouses maintain a sense of community and communication, as well. I found out that I had a lot more friends within the military community than I did outside. The community helped me understand things that the civilian world had no knowledge of. Yeah, the negative part of dad being gone was there, and there was always a level of uncertainty. Not knowing where he was or when we would hear from him was a problem, and we never knew how he was doing. But it was easier to deal with when I dealt with other military families. They got me. Civilians didn’t really get the whole concept. I saw that, and I didn’t work too hard to make them
see it my way. I sort of gave up on them because I felt like they gave up on me and my family (Gabriella, personal communication, February 7, 2019).

Gabriella shared with me that her boyfriend is enlisted in the Army. He plans to be in the Army for a long time. Her boyfriend wants to become a Special Forces soldier, like Gabriella’s father. Gabriella admitted that she is proud of him, and they have talked about getting married. She stated that she is certain she will become a military wife. “It’s what I know. Honestly, I love living a military lifestyle. Good and bad and all in-between” (Gabriella, personal communication, February 7, 2019).

**Tyson**

Tyson is an African American male who is 18 years old. He is currently a sophomore at a local four-year university. He has been considered an M-C student since birth. His mother served in the Marines, and his father is currently serving in the Army. Tyson also has an older brother who serves in the Air Force and an older sister who serves in the Navy.

Tyson stated that growing up he and his family were distant. He admitted that he was usually left in the care of a family friend or distant relative. Thus, the connections he made with people were limited. He declared that things were not great, but conflicts did not arise. He shared:

I guess I just had a different state of mind. I was okay with it. Everyone in my family was off doing something for the country. We all just kind of understood our situation. We worked to make it work, and I guess it did. The only time all of my family was together was for a brief time when we were in South Korea. My mom was retired, and my dad was deployed there. Shortly after, my brother and sister were sent to South
Korea for a few months on separate TDYs, too. (Tyson, personal communication, February 8, 2019)

Tyson said that it feels a bit strange for him to be in college. Since all of his immediate family members have either retired from the military or are currently serving in the Armed Forces, he feels that he is the “black sheep of the family” (Tyson, personal communication, February 8, 2019). When asked if he will join the military in the future, he stated, “Probably not. I love my experiences, but I want to give my wife and children something that I never had – stability” (Tyson, personal communication, February 8, 2019).

Charity

Charity is an African American female who is 19 years old. She has one younger sister. She is currently a sophomore at a local four-year university majoring in Forensic Science with a concentration in biology. She hopes to one day work with a crime scene investigation team. She plays volleyball for the university. Charity is also a dog lover. She stated that she hopes “to open a Dog Café as a retirement job, long after working in forensics” (Charity, personal communication, February 14, 2019). She has been considered an M-C student since birth. Her father is currently serving in the Army.

Charity shared that a lot of her family members on her mom’s side are serving in various branches of the military. The same is true for her dad’s family. Even though the military lifestyle is all she has known, she stated:

I wouldn’t join the military because I don’t want to move a whole bunch and have to pick up and just go somewhere else. I mean you have to do exactly what you are told to do right then right and there (Charity, personal communication, February 14, 2019).
While Charity states that joining the military is not in her future plans, she does not refute the fact that she has enjoyed being raised in a military home. She admitted that during her K-12 experiences she was able to travel and meet new people and “experience different states, cultures, and environments. Not a lot of people can say they have left their home state, let alone the United States. So, I would tell others to sit back, relax, and enjoy the ride” (Charity, personal communication, February 14, 2019). She stated that she does not regret any of her travels. She embraces the good and bad of her M-C experiences. However, she stressed that faculty and staff in public schools need to be “more aware of the military kids at the school and connect with them. They have the power to help change negative experiences to positive ones, and sometimes they really fail at doing that” (Charity, personal communication, February 14, 2019).

Nevaeh

Nevaeh is an African American female who is 18 years old. She is currently a freshman at a local four-year university. Nevaeh participated in ROTC throughout high school. She has been considered an M-C student since birth. Her father is currently serving in the Air Force. Currently, her father is stationed in Germany. Her mother and younger siblings did not follow her father on this TDY since he is only there for one year.

Nevaeh’s father has deployed several times during her life. Nevaeh stated that each deployment or TDY felt different from the previous one: “You get used to one way of life, and then everything changes again. So, you have to adjust. It’s either deal with it or struggle with it. I dealt with it, but it was hard” (Nevaeh, personal communication, March 26, 2019). Nevaeh explained that, for her, knowing her dad is safe and in Germany is easier than when he is in war zones, such as Iraq and Afghanistan. She said that it is easier to accept his absence now that she is in college, but it is also easier when there are open lines of communication, such as emails and
social media. Her father’s TDY in Germany is not as stressful as his tours in hostile environments, and it is easier for her to focus on her studies.

When Nevaeh was questioned about how her military connection made her life different from non-military families, she quickly responded, “Constant moving. Um, I feel like now I’m expected to move a lot … like I’m not supposed to stay in one spot now. It’s weird being in college and just staying put” (Nevaeh, personal communication, March 26, 2019). Nevaeh considered a career in the Air Force, but admitted:

I decided to go to school at the last minute. I may change my mind about going to the Air Force one day, but it will not be anytime soon. I need to see other options. When and if I go in, I’m going in with a degree so that I can be an officer. (Nevaeh, personal communication, March 26, 2019)

Gianna

Gianna is an African American female who is 18 years old. She has a younger brother. She is currently a freshman at a local four-year university studying psychology and plans to work as a forensics psychologist. After she receives her baccalaureate, she wants to continue her education and earn her master’s degree and possibly a doctorate in psychology. She has been considered an M-C student since birth. Her father is currently serving in the Army.

Gianna described herself as a young lady who likes to have fun. “I like to – at times – I like to stay to myself. I like to chill, relax” (Gianna, personal communication, April 12, 2019). Gianna explained that she is friendly, but she does not go out of her way to meet people. Her father was Army Intelligence, and he was often gone. She recalled other people celebrating birthdays and holidays with their entire families, but she did not have that opportunity growing up: “I wouldn’t see my dad, so I’d have to spend Christmas without him or have to video chat
with him just so that he could see me opening gifts and stuff like that” (Gianna, personal communication, April 12, 2019).

After Gianna discussed the challenges she experienced regarding her father’s absence, she also shared that she enjoyed the benefits associated with her military connection. Like Ariel, Gianna enjoyed going to the mall and receiving discounts on purchases because of her father’s career. She felt fortunate because her family did not have to struggle and pay out of pocket for medical coverage like some of her friends’ families did. Gianna shared:

If I was hurt or sick, I went to the hospital. As a child, I had really bad asthma. I got the best care possible. My parents didn’t worry about who was going to pay the bill. They knew that the military had us covered. Not everyone can say that. (Gianna, personal communication, April 12, 2019)

Gianna is using her father’s GI Bill to attend school. While she is appreciative of the financial support, she is aware that she receives this assistance because of the sacrifices her father has made for this country. Gianna explained:

When people tell me, oh, you’re going to college for free, I get upset. I mean I really get mad. Yeah, I am going to college for no money, but they don’t know what my family has given up for this opportunity. I need my dad to know that I love him and thank him for all that he did. That’s why I keep my grades up and work hard. My dad transferred his benefits to me and my brother. He’s in school now, but he’s not leaving the military when he graduates. He chose to make a career in a job that could really kill him just so we can have our education. That’s not exactly free. I don’t think it is anyway. (Gianna, personal communication, April 12, 2019)
Destiny

Destiny is an African American female who is 19 years old. She has younger siblings, a brother and a sister. She described herself as “athletic, goal-driven, charismatic, and outgoing” (Destiny, personal communication, May 21, 2019). She is currently a sophomore at a local four-year university. She joined ROTC her freshman year of college. She is also active in track at the university. She has been considered an M-C student all her life. Her mother retired from the Navy when Destiny was a senior in high school.

Destiny credits her mother’s role in her life for the success she has achieved. She explained how her mother not only expected her to be great in school, but her mother also expected the house to be maintained in a certain way.

My mom doesn’t like it when the drawers are pushed out a little bit and the clothes are sticking out of it. They have to be tucked in at all times. The bed had to be made every single morning. Like, you can’t just get up and go to school with the bed being unmade. Shoes have to be in a line. Shoes comes off at the door. Dusting has to be done every other day. It was insane growing up with her [laughing]. (Destiny, May 21, 2019)

While Destiny elaborated on her mother’s cleaning rules, she laughed and joked about it. She admitted that as a young child, she did not like the rules of the house. However, as a young adult, she is very appreciative of the way her mother raised her. She explained that her mother was not just worried about her grades, but she was concerned with all aspects of life. Destiny said that she feels confident in her abilities. During her interview she explained that she is knowledgeable about books and the world. She stated that she can make good grades, excel in sports, manage her finances, clean her house/dorm room, and cook her own meals. Her mother worked hard to make her a well-rounded individual.
Destiny does have a boyfriend. They met her senior year of high school. When Destiny first met him, her mom was on a TDY in Virginia. Her father met him and seemed to like him, but when her mom came home, her reaction was not what Destiny had expected. Her mother was shocked to find out that she had a boyfriend and that her father was okay with it. Her mother invited Destiny and her boyfriend out to lunch.

She was like interrogating him with all these questions. Where were you born? What do your parents do? What are your goals? It was insane! Then, she asked him if he would be okay with her running a criminal background check on him. I was so embarrassed, but he agreed to do it! That’s what is even crazier. But my mom is the best. She’s my favorite person, even when she’s gone. (Destiny, personal communication, May 21, 2019)

Nicholas

Nicholas is an African American male who is 18 years old. Nicholas has two older siblings who no longer reside in the home. He recently graduated from high school and plans to attend a four-year university in the southeast region of the United States and major in mechanical engineering. He has been considered an M-C student all his life. His mother and stepfather both served in the military. His mother retired from the Navy when he was in elementary school. His stepfather still serves in the Army.

Nicholas shared that he was born in New York but lived in Virginia, Kentucky, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Georgia before starting his freshman year of high school. In his descriptions of his moves, Nicholas explained:

It’s pretty much like a hard reset. You know, you make friends, you get to know them, and then you have to do the same thing over again. Everything changes. The lingo they
use from state to state is completely different. Especially from the North to the South.

That was probably one of the hardest transitions for me, just getting used to the words people used in different areas. I didn’t know whether to ask for a soda, a pop, a cola, or just a drink. (Nicholas, personal communication, June 12, 2019)

Nicholas shared that all aspects of being an M-C child could prove both stressful and beneficial. He discovered that sports were an effective outlet for his stress. Dealing with his parents’ deployments was difficult, so he focused hard on his academic studies and involvement in athletic events. His frequent moves made it hard for him to form lasting relationships with individuals, but he admitted that the difficult times helped instill a strong degree of independence. He explained that even though he is grateful for the opportunities he was afforded as an M-C student, he does not want to pursue a career in any branch of the military. He said that he would never try to talk anyone out of enlisting, but he knows that it just is not the path he wants to take.

Isabella

Isabella is a multi-racial (African American, Hispanic, and White) female who is 19 years old. She has an older brother. She is a sophomore at a four-year university in the southeast region of the United States and majoring in sports science fitness management with a concentration in business management. She hopes to one day be a marketing consultant or part of a major marketing team for a professional basketball or football team. She plays the clarinet in the band at the college she attends. She has been considered an M-C student since the age of 5, when her father joined the Army. He is still actively serving.

Isabella was born in Puerto Rico. Once her father enlisted and completed his basic training, she and her mother remained in Puerto Rico for a couple of years. Isabella stated that it
was hard not seeing her father all the time. However, she acknowledged that the move to the United States was horrible for her. She felt as if she was ripped away from the family she knew and loved. She felt as if she had been “thrown into unfriendly territory” (Isabella, personal communication, June 12, 2019). The language, culture, food, and people were completely different to Isabella, and the elementary school she attended was nothing like the one she went to in Puerto Rico. “It’s a really big adjustment, moving from what you’ve known your whole life to something new. I hated it at first, but I learned to deal with it. I actually learned to like it” (Isabella, personal communication, June 12, 2019). Isabella said that she realized that her mother was under a lot of stress when they first moved, too. However, she confessed that she felt as if her stress at such a young age went unnoticed by her parents, especially her father. As she got older, she found ways to deal with the moves and deployments.

**Results**

Participants interviewed face-to-face with the researcher. Ten of the participants chose to interview in a secure area at the researcher’s workplace. One of the participants, Elijah, invited the researcher into his family home to complete the interview. The first interview was conducted on January 27, 2019. The last two interviews were conducted on June 12, 2019. The 17 interview questions (see Appendix D) were asked to all participants. Additional questions were asked if clarification was needed. Each interview lasted 30 to 45 minutes. Once interviews were completed, each participant was provided instructions on how to address the writing prompt for the letter of advice (see Appendix E). Participants were asked to compose a letter to either their younger self or to an M-C child in the public school regarding their own experiences discussed within the interview process. All participants composed a letter. Seven participants wrote their letter of advice immediately following the interview while at the researcher’s workplace. The
other four participants chose to reflect upon their interviews for a couple of days before writing
the letter. Once the letter was written, those four participants returned the letter to the researcher
within a week, via email. After the last interview was conducted, participants were emailed a
request inquiring about a time that was convenient for the focus group. Eight of the 11
participants agreed to attend the focus group on June 19, 2019. The other three could not attend
due to personal obligations. An email was sent to participants, which contained the focus group
meeting information (see Appendix G). On the day of the focus group, the researcher met with
seven of the participants. One participant was called into work and could not attend. The
researcher continued with the focus group since seven is an acceptable number for a focus group
according to Onwuegbuzie et al. (2009) and Patton (2015). The participants were asked 11
questions (see Appendix F).

Each interview and the focus group were audio-recorded and transcribed by the
researcher. Once the interviews were transcribed, they were sent to participants for review (see
Appendices H and I). The participants did not make any corrections or additions to the
transcriptions. The researcher initially coded the transcripts by hand, using different colored
highlighters and pens. This process increased the researcher’s familiarity with the experiences of
the participants. Unique experiences and commonalities were noted by the researcher. The
researcher also used the qualitative software NVivo to assist in organizing and managing the
data. The transcriptions, void of any identifiers, were uploaded to NVivo. Repeated codes and
word frequencies were used to determine the themes (see Appendix J). Once the themes were
revealed, the researcher sent the list to the participants. The participants agreed that the themes
were evident.
Once data was collected and reviewed, it was analyzed using Moustakas’ (1994) method for transcendental phenomenology, as outlined in Creswell and Poth (2018). Aligned with this method, the researcher bracketed or eliminated preconceived notions (Moustakas, 1994) about M-C students in the public-school system. All personal experiences were set aside. This process was used throughout the data collection and analysis stages through the use of memoing, which allowed the researcher to gain a sense of the interview in its entirety before constructing themes (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). The reflective notes used in the memoing process were gathered during the reading and rereading of the transcribed interviews. Using the reflective notes, the researcher listed significant statements that participants used to describe the experience of the phenomenon. This process, referred to as horizontalization, continued until data saturation occurred (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). From these statements, the researcher was able to discover the underlying meaning of the experience through analysis, which is referred to as phenomenological reduction (Moustakas, 1994). For each statement, the researcher searched for interpretative meaning. This stage of phenomenological research, termed imaginative variation, is where the larger units or themes are finalized. The researcher considered countless possibilities for the essence of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). The larger units, or themes, were created. Table 3 shows the specific codes that were used to create the four themes.

As explained by Moustakas (1994), the essence identifies the nature of the experience and allows others to understand the shared phenomenon. Using the significant statements, the essence statement describes the individual experiences while holistically expressing the phenomenon. The essence statement was shared with the participants via email on July 24, 2019:
The unique experiences (parental deployments, high mobility, concerns for parents’ safety, etc.) of the military-connected (M-C) students in this study affect their academic, social, and extracurricular activities in public schools. In an educational environment mainly composed of civilians who lack knowledge and/or understanding of the military lifestyle, meaningful ties with principals, teachers, and peers are not easily created. This detachment leaves the M-C student feeling isolated and forces him/her to frequently face experiences in public schools alone. However, from the stories shared, the M-C student’s spirit is unbreakable, and, following their parents’ examples – they rise to the challenge and succeed.

Gabriella replied, “Oh, yes, ma’am. That sums up my experience with public school.” Tyson wrote, “I think that pretty much describes every military kid in public schools. The time there is not easy, but if you are military – you’re used to change.” Isabella replied, “This is what we ALL said? Wow. I thought I was the only one. It’s kind of nice to know it wasn’t just me feeling like that.” Nicholas stated, “I read it. Man, being a military kid is hard work! You just don’t know how hard it is unless you’ve been one yourself.”

Table 3

*Themes from Codes Identified in Phenomenological Reduction*

<table>
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<th>Themes</th>
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<td>Public school teachers seem uncaring</td>
<td>Lack of support from classroom teachers and principals in public school</td>
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<td>DoDEA teachers are supportive</td>
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<tr>
<td>Principals were unsupportive</td>
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M-C students suffer from loneliness
Friendships are short-lived
M-C students feel the need to sacrifice
Missed opportunities for extracurricular
Worry about parents
Two-parent homes feel like single-parent homes

Loneliness and Isolation

School transitions become easier
Enjoy travels and new places
High mobility

Adaptability to new context/environment

Accelerated responsibility/maturation
Always have to be the best
Academic success
Financial stability

Drive to succeed

Theme Development

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the K-12 lived experiences of M-C graduates of public schools in the southeastern region of the United States. Data analysis was theoretically grounded in Hamilton McCubbin’s (1979) family stress theory as it explores how family members adapt and thrive or deteriorate and disintegrate when faced with situational stressors. Through immersion in the data and coding, four themes emerged: (a) lack of emotional support from classroom teachers and principals in public schools, (b) loneliness and isolation, (c) adaptability to new context/environment, and (d) drive to succeed.

Theme 1: Lack of emotional support from classroom teachers and principals in public schools. During the data analysis, the first theme to emerge was that all 11 participants expressed a lack of emotional support from their classroom teachers and principals in public
schools regarding their military connectedness. This theme addressed the central research question and the second and third sub-questions of how M-C high school graduates describe their social and extracurricular in public schools. When the participants were directly asked about the level of support they received in the public school regarding the academic, social, and extracurricular aspects, the replies were similar. The support was minimal to none, especially when compared to those participants who had experiences with DoDEA schools.

Elijah described his public high school experience as one filled with patriotic events, but there was nothing set up to address the emotional needs of M-C students. His high school was one with a high population of M-C students, so he attributed the events to this fact. Elijah said, “I feel like it was a very deep support, as far as the military itself, but not support for the military students” (Elijah, personal communication, January 27, 2019).

Ariel recalled a time in elementary school when the guidance counselor was trying to form a group that involved military students. The guidance counselor wanted to get the students to meet and talk about their life and if they were sad or concerned about their parents’ military connectedness. Ariel said that she remembers meeting only one time. She stated:

I felt like they [teachers] knew who the military kids were, but they didn’t have time to really be bothered with our issues. I mean, my mom was gone all the time. It would have been nice to have another female to talk to about things, but it didn’t happen. Military kids need adults to talk to. You know someone to give some adult guidance to them. The schools don’t help us do that. At least they didn’t help me (Ariel, personal communication, January 29, 2019).

Zoey mentioned that she was part of a group that focused on the needs of M-C students at only one public school during her K-12 experiences. This group, which was facilitated by the
guidance counselor, met once per week and discussed M-C issues, such as deployment and mobility. However, that group was short-lived during middle school. Once the guidance counselor took a new job in a different school, the group was nonexistent.

Gabriella spent three years of her K-12 experience in a DoDEA school. When questioned about the support received from public school, she stated:

Yeah, um no. The only time I ever experienced that in a public school was in middle school. Um, I had a teacher that was concerned with my behaviors. I was just becoming more aggressive and a bit defiant in classes. This was when my dad was gone, and my mom wasn’t really handling it very well at that time. I had a complete behavior change. This one teacher was concerned because I wasn’t acting how I was normally acting at the beginning of the school year. And, he had taught me the previous year, and he knows how I am, and he knows my normal temperament, and he just knew something was up. (Gabriella, personal communication, February 7, 2019)

When questioned further for clarification purposes, Gabriella informed the researcher that this occurred in Grade 7. There was never another time that a teacher reached out to her regarding her military connectedness. Gabriella described the support system at DoDEA schools as one that was superior to public schools. She explained:

When you arrive at a DoD school, you’ll be assigned to a committee of students who have been there the longest, and they’ll show you around the school for the first month you are there. So, it’s kind of like you already have a friend when you get there. They show you how things normally are, like the operations of the school. You can even hang out with them after school. They’ll have these hangouts with other kids, too, that are new. I remember when I went. I actually still talk to her until this day. We went
downtown every other weekend, and we would hang out. She was my support, and the school set it up. But, also, the teachers knew what you were going through, and they were there. (Gabriella, personal communication, February 7, 2019)

Tyson spent seven years of his K-12 experience in a DoDEA school. When asked about the support he received in a public school, he replied, “I can’t think of any” (Tyson, personal communication, February 8, 2019). When probed further for clarification, he stated, “I was not supported. No. I just kind of had to deal with it on my own really” (Tyson, personal communication, February 8, 2019).

Tyson’s frustration with public schools was increased when he was forced to retake courses when he moved from Kansas to North Carolina. He described the experience as a catastrophe (Tyson, personal communication, June 19, 2019). During the focus group session, Tyson stated:

I had to retake my Spanish, which greatly messes me up. And not only that, but for some reason, my high school doubled up on my classes. So, in one semester I had to take two gym classes, two health classes, and two histories. And, I was like what? I was a whole semester behind because of that one decision. And I’m asking teachers and counselors, who chose this? Like, I’ve never been hurt like that academically, and the teachers didn’t care. No one tried to help me fix it. (Tyson, personal communication, June 19, 2019)

Isabella related to Tyson’s comments. She stated that the guidance counselors and principals need to “educate themselves. They need to really look at records and see if students have already taken courses. If I’ve already taken this class or if this matches up with this class, then why should I have to backtrack or whatever?” (Isabella, personal communication, June 19, 2019). Isabella recalled this happening to her in elementary school. “I had already finished the
reading book they were reading when I came here, but I had to read it again. I was bored. I told my teacher, but she didn’t do anything different” (Isabella, personal communication, June 19, 2019).

Like Tyson, Gabriella struggled with courses when moving from one school to the next. During the focus group, Gabriella shared that history has always been a favorite course for her. However, after transferring from DoDEA schools, she realized that public classroom teachers teach history differently than DoDEA schools: “Learning history at a DoD school was fun. It was from multiple perspectives. Here, it was very western. I only learned about the conqueror, not all the players” (Gabriella, personal communication, June 19, 2019). When questioned by Elijah if she spoke to the teacher about it, she replied, “Yeah. I asked her to give us more detail, but she didn’t. She said she was teaching what needed to be taught. She didn’t care if I was interested or not” (Gabriella, personal communication, June 19, 2019). Gabriella felt as if the whole issue was “the lack of effort and caring” (Gabriella, personal communication, June 19, 2019).

Charity played volleyball in high school. She stated that her coaches helped her because they were aware that her father was military. “My coaches, they would be there for me, talk to me, and just make sure that I help lead the team and always stay positive doing any sport I played” (Charity, personal communication, February 14, 2019). When asked if there were any teachers, she replied, “Teachers? Teachers, not really. Well, I could say my history teacher. She would ask questions about how I was doing because she knew when my dad was deployed because her husband was military, too. But that’s it. No other teachers” (Charity, personal communication, February 14, 2019).
Nevaeh, like Charity, could not recall a classroom teacher or principal who reached out to provide emotional support while she was enrolled in public schools. Her middle school guidance counselor would reach out on occasion, but only if Nevaeh went to her and asked for some sort of counseling. Referring to support and counseling, Nevaeh stated, “I definitely had to look for it or ask about it and different stuff because it wasn’t just out in the open. You had to go ask” (Nevaeh, personal communication, March 26, 2019). Nevaeh said that her main support came from her participation in ROTC. When asked whether support came from any additional source Nevaeh stated, “No. It was always the chiefs and officers that were in ROTC. No one else” (Nevaeh, personal communication, March 26, 2019).

Gianna remembered only one teacher who offered support. The teacher taught Gianna in first and second grade, and she stayed in Gianna’s neighborhood. Gianna described the teacher as a caring educator, she stated:

She helped me a lot through, you know, academically and emotionally. She helped me, you know, get over crying, not crying as much, little things like that. So, she was really good, and plus she understood, too, because her dad was in the military. She lived my life when she was my age. So, she helped me a lot. (Gianna, personal communication, April 12, 2019)

Destiny, like Elijah, attended a public school with a high population of M-C students. However, she does not recall the school and its faculty/staff providing much support. The only aspect she remembers that involved M-C students was when officials from various military branches would come to the school and try to recruit. For some of her classmates, the military recruiters became a source of support, but they were not affiliated to the school in any way. Destiny attended a couple of DoDEA schools, and she explained the differences she noticed.
DoDEA schools understand that different people’s parents deploy and come back and how it affects us because we’re not seeing them every day. Like, when I was in a DoDEA school, I could literally just walk into the office and inform them that I needed to talk to a certain person for a specific military connected reason, and they would see me right then and there. Not a public school. It was different, and not in a good way. They would be like, no, you have to come back during this time, or no, they’re not available. I tried to talk to the guidance counselor one time, and I was told that I would have to come back later that week. I never went back. If I’m coming to you with an issue right then and there then I’m feeling a certain way at that time, and I need help. I shouldn’t have to wait like a whole week to schedule an appointment and do all the extra stuff. It’s not right. It’s like public schools don’t care, but DoDEA did. (Destiny, personal communication, May 21, 2019)

Nicholas, like Charity, found his support through sports. His high school did not offer counseling or support groups. His football coach was the only who helped him work through emotional issues by working out in the gym or weight room: “That’s pretty much how I got through everything. Just playing football and working out. Whenever I really needed help, I would talk to the coach” (Nicholas, personal communication, June 12, 2019). When asked if any support was provided for M-C students in public schools, he responded, without reservation, “No, not from my view. No” (Nicholas, personal communication, June 12, 2019).

Isabella could not recall one person who helped her sort through military-connected issues. Her father was frequently deployed, but she described the public schools as uncaring for her needs. However, she described her early experiences with DoDEA schools as positive.
I think they’re more supportive. Like they’re more understanding because they know, and they care. The teachers know how to deal with the students. They know about deployments and moves and all that stuff. They can relate. But, public schools, they just look at you like, okay, well I’m sorry to hear that, but life goes on” (Isabella, June 12, 2019).

**Theme 2: Loneliness and isolation.** The second theme to emerge was that all participants shared feelings of loneliness and isolation. This theme addressed the central research question and the second and third sub-questions of how M-C high school graduates describe their social and extracurricular experiences in public schools. The participants shared their experiences of moving from state to state or state to international country. With each move, the participants had to form new relationships with teachers and peers.

Elijah moved a couple of times during elementary school. During the interview, Elijah recalled the pressure and loneliness he felt when he moved. He stated:

I got bullied a lot actually because of how different I was when I moved. I was the only Black kid in this one school. The students would just treat me differently because I was the Black kid, the big, Black kid in the class. Then my teacher would treat me kind of differently, too. It was not fun when I had to move. And being the only child, I didn’t have anyone to talk to a lot of time. Being treated differently and not being a big talker just sort of made me want to go into a shell, be more quiet, be more toward myself. So, when I got older, like in high school, I didn’t really search for friends. I was just ready to graduate (Elijah, personal communication, January 27, 2019).

Elijah shared that when he went to high school, his parents decided to get a divorce. He was 15 years old. His father remained in the same city, and Elijah still spent time with him.
However, when questioned about how the home environment changed, Elijah commented, “It didn’t change. Dad was always gone because of the military. I always felt like it was just me and mom in the house” (Elijah, personal communication, January 27, 2019).

Ariel was the only participant who did not move around like the others. She informed the researcher that she had stability throughout her K-12 years. Her mother did a lot of deploying before Ariel’s birth. However once Ariel was born, her mother decided that when she was called upon for deployments or training that Ariel and her younger siblings would remain stationary with their father. Ariel’s mother is currently stationed in Georgia. Ariel stated that she misses her mother. She sometimes feels as if her parents are separated or divorced, but that is not the situation. Ariel stated, “It’s hard, but at the same time we can Face Time, and she comes up as much as she can, and we go down to Georgia when we can. It gets lonely, but it’s her job, and we have to respect that” (Ariel, personal communication, January 29, 2019). Ariel’s parents’ schedules made it hard on her during middle school. Even though she was not moving from place to place, she still had to give up her plans of playing basketball.

I remember 8th grade. I was trying out for the basketball team, but it was hard with my parents’ schedule. So, I had to back out before the first game. I just couldn’t get a ride to practice. I decided to play ball for the recreation center. I was able to make the team in high school, but things were just crazy in middle school. Mom was gone. Dad was busy, and I was left to figure things out myself. (Ariel, personal communication, January 29, 2019)

Unlike Ariel, Zoey was able to participate in sports. She played soccer and ran track. However, she remembers “there was nobody in the crowd to cheer me on” (Zoey, personal communication, February 1, 2019). In Zoey’s letter of advice to her younger self, she expressed:
Having different homes, schools, and friends will make it hard for you. When you settle down and get comfortable at one house you will have to pick back up and leave. You will begin to accept that not all friends are permanent but temporary. It is hard. But just know that you are never alone and there is always someone to help you out. Just look at your family. Only one thing is permanent, and that is family. I didn’t know it then, but I know it now. (Zoey, letter of advice, February 1, 2019)

Zoey explained that her step-father was always away on deployment. As Zoey entered high school, her step-father worked hard to stop the family from always having to pick up and move. He would leave them behind and complete his duties alone. Zoey stated, “My mom raised us, well he raised us, too, but from a distance. We would talk every week, but it was still kind of hard” (Zoey, personal communication, February 1, 2019). Zoey explained how at open houses and parent/teacher conferences, only one parent would show. “I would look at other students and they would bring both parents. But me, I only had Mom most of the time” (Zoey personal communication, February 1, 2019). Zoey explained:

There were times when he could only communicate through emails. That’s when I felt the loneliest of all. My mom tried to put on, not put on a show, but she just tried to be brave for us. Then I would start worrying. Like, was I the only one thinking that maybe he wouldn’t come back? I know it wasn’t a good thing to think about, but I couldn’t help it. I was constantly worried about him, and it seemed like I was the only one. Now, I know that isn’t true, but then, that’s all I thought. (Zoey, personal communication, February 2, 2019)

In Gabriella’s letter of advice, she advised her younger self to not “shut people out and close yourself off to people” (Gabriella, letter of advice, February 7, 2019). She tells herself that
it okay to be emotional and cry, but she needs to “Try one club again, or after school program, talk to someone in class. This isn’t permanent” (Gabriella, letter of advice, February 7, 2019).

Gabriella participated in chorus, drama, and Science Olympiad. However, she stated, “When we had to move, I always missed it. It always happened. We always left right before I had a solo in the concert or before competitions. I stopped trying to do extracurricular stuff” (Gabriella, personal communication, February 7, 2019).

In Gabriella’s personal interview, she shared that, like Elijah, she was bullied in public schools. She stated, “There wasn’t really a sense of belonging, and I just felt different from the other kids in general. The structure of my house, with my dad always gone, was astronomically different than most of my peers” (Gabriella, personal communication, February 7, 2019).

Gabriella expressed that it was hard for her to make friends in public schools.

Tyson shared his story of being the youngest one in the family, with both siblings and both parents in the military. He was never around the same people for long, and the friends he made were lost when he was forced to move. He described these events as “terrible and mentally taxing”, and, consequently, he believed that “meeting new people was going to be purposeless” (Tyson, letter of advice, February 8, 2019). Gabriella and Tyson shared the most travel experience of all participants. Tyson, like Gabriella, did not see the point of trying out for extracurricular activities. He stated,

There were many, many missed opportunities. There were a lot. I wanted to play football at one point, but the requirement to play football would vary depending on the school. So, say you would have to be a sophomore to play varsity in one school, when I transferred, now you have to be a junior. And, I’m like, well, I can’t do that anymore.
Then, I would move out of that school in like a year and go somewhere else. There was no point. I had no stability (Tyson, personal communication, February 8, 2019).

At first, Tyson explained that he liked moving from place to place. He deemed himself as a “person of interest” (Tyson, personal communication, February 8, 2019). However, with each move and each severed friendship came the feeling of isolation. In addition, Tyson’s parents were always at work. They may not have been simultaneously deployed, but their schedules left Tyson at home – alone.

Charity elaborated on her loss of opportunities and friendships, as well. When she was younger, she played volleyball. However, she did not get the opportunity to travel or remain on a team for a long time because her family was always moving. It was not until she got to high school that her father traveled alone. In her letter of advice, she wrote,

As your dad gets further into his military career you might think it’s the end of the world because you move so often and don’t get to really experience a lot. You don’t really get to experience the saying “friends last forever” as you may hear because you move so often and don’t get to create a strong bond with them. (Charity, letter of advice, February 14, 2019)

Nevaeh stated that she “definitely experienced hard times, as far as making friends” (Nevaeh, personal communication, March 26, 2019). She stated that with each move, she actively sought out students who were M-C. This was the only way she felt secure establishing friendships. Nevaeh took part in ROTC in high school, and she even considered joining the Air Force. However, she stated that she is not sure about that anymore because she moved to four different schools through her high school career. There was one club that she wanted to be a part of at one of her high schools. She stated, “I didn’t have a piece of mail verifying our new
address because I was new. Then, I moved a few months later, so I wasn’t able to be part of the club. I also missed my prom because of moving” (Nevaeh, personal communication, March 26, 2019). She expressed that she is not excited about having that happen to her children in the future.

Gianna is cautious when it comes to making friends. In her past, students have asked her to go shopping with them so that they could use her military discount. She does not believe that her military connectedness always attracts true, genuine friends. Therefore, she prefers to keep contact with others limited. Gianna’s trust is solid only with her immediate family. Her father was deployed a lot while she in K-12. Her mom was her support unit. She explained that her mom had to take her to school events and practices. Gianna said, “It kind of felt like my dad was gone, like he wasn’t in my life, but he was. It’s just he wasn’t physically there. The phone, Face Time, was our connection” (Gianna, personal communication, April 12, 2019).

Like Nevaeh, Destiny searched for other M-C students when moving from school to school. She stated, “Those were the main people who understood where I was coming from” (Destiny, personal communication, May 21, 2019). Destiny said that the hardest part of being an M-C student was leaving behind those that she befriended. She recalled moving four times in one year. Consequently, she adopted a new attitude on making friends and maintaining relationships. She stated, “I’d have a different mindset having friends. I’d be like, okay, we’re going to be friends for this long. If you can’t handle that, let me know” (Destiny, personal communication, May 21, 2019). She said that it may come across to others as harsh, but that was her way of coping with the constant mobility.
When Elijah stated that his father’s absence, “him having his own life”, may have been a contributing factor to his parents’ divorce (Elijah, personal communication, June 19, 2019), Destiny replied:

I get it. For me, it [parent’s absence] kind of broke, not the relationship with our family as a whole, but definitely with my siblings. My mom wasn’t there. Not just for my big events, but for my younger siblings. Me, personally, of course I was older, and I understood it a little more. But for my little brother, it took him a good minute to get over it. She missed his 8th grade graduation. She missed that! She missed his first football game. He would literally cry and everything. I felt bad, but I also had to let him know that this is what she does for us. This is her job. She does this so that we can have nice things and freedom. In time, he got it, but it was hard. He was hurting and lonely. I mean, I was, too, but he was worse than me (Destiny, personal communication, June 19, 2019).

With both of Nicholas’s parents being in the military, “no one was there” (Nicholas, personal communication, June 12, 2019). Nicholas did not feel like he lived in a single-parent home. He felt like a child who lived completely alone. During his interview, Nicholas shared that he had social struggles due to his parents’ constant deployments and busy work schedules.

I didn’t really know how to do a lot of stuff. I didn’t know how to talk to people. I didn’t know how to impress girls. I had to go on YouTube and watch YouTube videos. That’s how I got my first girlfriend. I had to look up how to kiss a girl. Dad was gone. Mom was home, but I was not comfortable talking to her about it. Yeah. And then, uh, I also had to learn how to tie a tie from watching videos on YouTube. So, it was me doing things by myself. (Nicholas, personal communication, June 12, 2019)
Isabella, when asked about her experiences and her father’s deployment, stated, “Money was there, but the parent wasn’t. I mean I know who my dad is, but I don’t really know him on that level” (Isabella, personal communication, June 12, 2019). Isabella explained that her mother was the one who was always there while her father was always away. Isabella stated that she was always interested in dance, but since her mother was the only one around, she did not bother to mention it. She confided, “I feel like I missed out on that opportunity with lacking confidence and not having that second parent around to give me that support I needed” (Isabella, personal communication, June 12, 2019).

Isabella stated that she expected a lot from others. She admitted that her expectations of others were extremely high, and, in the past, she “just ended up getting hurt again and again and again” (Isabella, personal communication, June 19, 2019). Over time, she realized that not everyone was raised the same as she was, and her expectations for all people may have been a bit unrealistic for some. However, she admitted that she does not lower her expectations for what she will accept in her life, saying, “I can’t change people. I don’t try. I may be young, but I know I would rather be without genuine friends than with fake people. So, I find myself alone more than with others, and I’m okay with that” (Isabella, personal communication, June 19, 2019). Gabriella commented:

Yeah. I don’t know if it’s me projecting my expectations that I have for myself on others, but I would like to think that at 22 years old I surround myself with good people, great people. But, when I was younger, these expectations caused me a lot of heartache. I’m glad I’m out of high school. It sucked making friends there. (Gabriella, personal communication, June 19, 2019)
Tyson’s only response to this conversation was, “Yes. It just disappointment. High expectations of others equal disappointment within myself. Like, that’s the only emotion I get. It’s just disappointment” (Tyson, personal communication, June 19, 2019).

During the focus group, Tyson commented that he was raised to go to school to learn, not to worry about making friends. He stated that he could only think of one close friend from high school. Isabella stated that she could count her close friends on “less than one hand” (personal communication, June 19, 2019). Zoey stated, “I can count five, but that’s because I went to an early college, so it’s a small school. We didn’t have that much people. We were a cohort of kids put into college classes. We had the same expectations” (Zoey, personal communication, June 19, 2019). Elijah, Nicholas, Charity, and Gabriella stated that they had more associates, not close friends. Elijah admitted that playing basketball “earned cool points, but, other than that, I didn’t have any friends like that. It was me, myself, and my parents” (Elijah, personal communication, June 19, 2019). Nicholas admitted, “Yeah, football was great, but after the season was over, we hardly had anything in common. They were spending time with their parents and family. I was home alone” (Nicholas, personal communication, June 19, 2019).

**Theme 3: Adaptability to new context/environment.** The third theme that emerged during data analysis was that all participants expressed an ability to adapt to new situations within schools and communities. All participants voiced that a positive aspect of being a M-C graduate was the ability to adapt to new situations and areas. This theme addressed the central research question and the first, second, and third sub-questions of how M-C high school graduates describe their academic, social, and extracurricular experiences in public schools.

Elijah stated that his military lifestyle afforded him the opportunity to “go into different environments and adjust to them without fear or reservation” (Elijah, personal communication,
January 27, 2019). He believed that transitions can be pretty awkward at first, but, in time, the transitions become easier to accept. He felt like his military connection made him more “adaptable” (Elijah, personal communication, June 19, 2019). He stated:

I can now help others with adaptability with certain things they go through in life, you know. I can speak to people that are not the same as me, and we can all be, you know, good and have a good, happy life (Elijah, personal communication, June 19, 2019).

Ariel did not move a lot, but she was able to accept changes as they occurred. The unique lifestyle she lived opened her up to new experiences. She learned in elementary school that “things are not always what you think they should be” (Ariel, personal communication, January 29, 2019). Changes in curriculum or class instructors were not a huge issue for Ariel. She felt that each day was new and came with new situations: “My mother is in the military. She is never home. Things change from day to day. I accept change, whether I like it or not” (Ariel, personal communication, January 29, 2019).

Zoey accepted the fact that, “Most kids do not get to choose their parents’ careers or lifestyle. They are born into it and the biggest key is adjusting” (Zoey, personal communication, February 1, 2019). When Zoey realized that her new school did not have a group to help support military students, she took it upon herself to reach out to other M-C students. She set up an online blog for the students to interact with each other by sharing their travels and experiences, asking for help, or just talking about their daily events. She stated, “the fact that the school did not have a support group was not going to stop me from creating one myself. Yeah, we couldn’t meet during the day, but we could chat online” (Zoey, personal communication, February 1, 2019).
For Gabriella, adaptability meant accepting the many different emotions that came with the moves and her father’s deployments. She realized, “It’s okay to be scared, it’s okay to be angry, and it’s even okay to be happy. Your feelings are important, and they are valid” (Gabriella, personal communication, February 1, 2019). She realized that she had “a bit more travel and world experience than her peers” (Gabriella, personal communication, February 1, 2019). Initially, she ignored this part of herself. However, she realized that once she let others see that she was a worldly, intelligent individual, the novelty of new schools became a bit easier for her to face.

Tyson, as well, embraced the loneliness and isolation that he felt: “Being alone all those times were emotionally exhausting, but it enabled me to venture into my own thoughts and discover things” (Tyson, letter of advice, February 1, 2019). He stated that he learned something through his isolation, saying “I was trapped in a situation that I could not help or stop. There was no reason beating myself up or hating everyone and everything. Instead of looking outside and feeling lost, I could try looking outside and feeling happy” (Tyson, letter of advice, February 1, 2019). Tyson stated that he started trying to view everything as a “steppingstone” in his life. There were no bad days anymore. There were only days that “could be made better” (Tyson, personal communication, February 1, 2019).

Charity believed that leaving behind friends “sucked,” but “traveling to different places and seeing new things was amazing” (Charity, personal communication, February 14, 2019). Now, as an M-C graduate, Charity believes that these experiences have helped her excel in college and sports. She is not fearful or embarrassed to step out of her comfort zone and take risks (Charity, personal communication, February 14, 2019).
Nevaeh’s father deployed in 2001, 2006, and 2018. Like the other participants, she is accustomed to change. In order to speak to her father when he was away in Afghanistan or Russia, she had to adjust. She would alter her sleep schedule or study time to accommodate her father’s agenda. By making this a habit, Nevaeh learned that “the world does not revolve around me, and I have to take other people’s situations into account. Once I started to do this, things like substitute teachers, cancelled pep rallies, and last-minute assignments did not bother me anymore” (Nevaeh, personal communication, March 26, 2019).

Gianna and Destiny realized that patience and understanding are the first steps to adjusting and adapting to new situations. Gianna said, “Things are not always going to go your way. Honestly, they might never go your way, but you have to endure those days” (personal communication, April 12, 2019). Destiny stated, “Yeah, I might have not had a parent around to walk me down the football field for Senior Night, but that’s okay. I know why my parents could not be there, and I just wiped my tears, smiled, and walked out there waving to the crowds” (Destiny, personal communication, May 21, 2019). Destiny acknowledged that it was not easy to do, but it was something that had to be done. “To be angry about it only hurts me,” she said (Destiny, personal communication, May 21, 2019).

For Nicholas, learning the culture of the new school and the community was vital; “it’s like everything changes. The lingo they use, the things they find funny, the things they like, it’s completely different from the last school. I have to find out what’s up and use it in order to get by” (Nicholas, personal communication, June 12, 2019). Nicholas expressed that his home was also like that when one of his parents would return from deployments:

But, when one parent goes away and comes back it’s like two different lifestyles. I have
to learn how to go with the flow with each departure and return. But, it’s all good. I’ve mastered that part of this life now. (Nicholas, personal communication, June 12, 2019)

Isabella stated that when she moved from Puerto Rico to the mainland of the United States she struggled adjusting to the new environment, school, and community. Like Nicholas, learning the culture was important to Isabella. She would sit, watch, and listen to the people:

As I got older, it was easier to navigate through the moves because I knew how people were. I had been around so many different people in my life that I could detect who in my new school was like someone from my old school. I knew how to create relationships that benefited me. (Isabella, personal communication, June 12, 2019)

**Theme 4: Drive to succeed.** The fourth theme to emerge from the data collection was that all participants expressed a drive to succeed. They felt that their actions in school were a direct reflection of their parents’ military careers. They strived for excellence in sports and academics because the push to be the best was instilled in them from their military parents. This theme addressed the central research question and the first and third sub-questions of how M-C high school graduates describe their academic and extracurricular experiences in public schools.

Elijah believed that the discipline his father instilled in him, along with the work ethic to be great in all things he pursues, has always given him leverage to conquer his goals in school, sports, and job. His father always told him to “do the right thing because you’re a reflection of me” (Elijah, personal communication, January 27, 2019). He said that his dad always expected him to be the best, be the top of his class. He recalls his father’s pride when Elijah worked hard in elementary school to make the grades and pass the necessary assessments to secure placement in a classroom for academically gifted students. He stated that because of his father he had a
competitive mindset in track and basketball; “My dad always told me to get out there and dominate. You know, that was our motto” (Elijah, personal communication, January 27, 2019).

For Ariel, attending an early college for her high school years was not what she had expected. However, her military connection and upbringing enabled her to accept the rigor that the early college classes demanded. “It’s like we were supposed to grow up because we’re in an early college because it’s so fast-paced. Some kids struggled, but I didn’t really. My mom has always had high expectations, so high school was no different,” she said (Ariel, personal communication, January 29, 2019).

Zoey felt a need to be great; “I mean, if my dad can save the country, the least I can do is bring home good grades and not get in trouble at school” (Zoey, personal communication, February 1, 2019). Even though her mother was not in the military, Zoey stated that when she gets older and becomes a mother, she will “follow her [mother’s] footsteps and be there for her child. I have great parents. My dad is a hero and provider and so is my mom. I cannot let them down. I have to be great, too” (Zoey, personal communication, February 1, 2019).

Gabriella’s words echoed those of Elijah’s. She stated:

I am a reflection of my dad, so there was no misbehaving. There is just this higher standard. I am expected to behave. I am expected to make good grades and get a good job. I am required to do the right thing, always. It makes me better. (Gabriella, personal communication, February 7, 2019)

Gabriella described her father as “old school Army” (Gabriella, personal communication, February 7, 2019). From daily dustings to weekly room inspections, everything had to be “pristine and clean and orderly in our home. And if that wasn’t done? Well, I had to do it until it was done right” (Gabriella, personal communication, February 7, 2019). She shared that these
rules of the house have carried over into her adulthood, making her take pride in all that she does, which includes simple things like cleaning the house and complex things such as making Chancellor’s List and winning academic scholarships.

Gabriella expressed that her responsibility at home influenced her push for excellence in school. She just knew that shortcomings were not permitted. During the focus group discussion, she explained, “When I do something, I put my heart and soul into it. More than 100%. I don’t do the bare minimum. I don’t do anything half-assed. If I catch myself slipping, I hold myself accountable” (Gabriella, personal communication, June 19, 2019).

Zoey echoed Gabriella’s comments. She stated:

Yeah, mine’s kind of the same as [Gabriella]. My parents have set goals. My stepdad was no joke. He was tight. My mom was kind of the same, but he was super tight. With him, you have one goal. But my mom is like, you have this area or this area, but you’re still going to be successful. My dad is like – straight road, no shortcuts or anything else. This is how you will achieve your goal. Seriously, my mom’s like – if you fall off the horse, you get back on. But, my dad’s like – You fell off the horse? Why did you fall off? So, I guess his ways have stuck with me. The bar is set higher. (Zoey, personal communication, June 19, 2019)

Tyson commented to Zoey: “Right. That’s what my parents would be like. You fell off? How?” (Tyson, personal communication, June 19, 2019). Tyson thrived on excelling in academics. With a 4.0 GPA in college and ranking top of his class in high school, his drive to succeed is evident. Since playing sports proved difficult, due to Tyson’s frequent moves, he emerged himself into the academic world. He competed in Battle of Books and Science Olympiads. In the focus group, he recalled a time when he was competing in a geography
competition at a DoD school in South Korea. He boasted about his academic achievements and his wins:

Being military affiliated and from the United States molded me. Um, it has definitely struck me to do better than the average person. I believe I have to always do better than what I did before. I always strive to do better than others and myself (Tyson, personal communication, February 8, 2019).

Charity believed that schools, when compared to her family structure, were not difficult. She believed that public schools did not have high enough standards for students, and students had to want more than what the schools asked of them. She recalled a time when her high school biology teacher was pleased with a test score of 80%. However, Charity knew that was not acceptable – for her or her parents. A’s were the only acceptable grades in the house, and she knew that she had to bring home at least a 90% or higher on the next assignment and all subsequent work.

Nevaeh stated, “Education has always been important in my family. It’s either books or boots at my house. After you graduate, you have to do something. And you have to do it good” (Nevaeh, personal communication, March 26, 2019). Nevaeh made sure to keep her grades up, rise through the ranks of ROTC, and work hard at any task set before her. She was proud of the fact that she never quit and never accepted defeat in anything. This is a trait that she contributed to her father’s influence in her life.

During the interview, Gianna shared that her father went straight into the military because he did not have an option for college due to financial hardships. During his 20 plus years in the military, he has earned high ranks and has been awarded numerous honors. He enrolled in college during her junior year in high school, and he will earn his baccalaureate degree in May
2020. He has been able to maintain a high GPA and serve his country full-time. Gianna said that seeing her father strive for a better life reinforces her desire to do great things. She contributed her motivation to remain on the dean’s list to her father. She mentioned the fact that she has considered joining a branch of the military, but she is not sure whether it will be Navy, Army, or Air Force. She does know that if she decides to enlist, she will enter as an officer.

Destiny wrote to her younger self, “I don’t ever want you to look at Mom differently because of her job. It is because of her that you’re going to have scholarships and be able to go to college” (Destiny, written communication, May 21, 2019). Destiny said that she knew that her mom worked hard to provide for her. She realized,

The only way I could pay her back for what she did was to be great at school. One day she was practicing for her physical training test, and we just started running and running. I liked it, and I kept with it. She pushed me to be great physically, and here I am with scholarships. Because of her, I joined ROTC when I got to college, too. (Destiny, written communication, May 21, 2019)

Nicholas believed that his military connection taught him “how to be more independent and how to aim for success, especially in athletics” (Nicholas, personal communication, June 19, 2019). Nicholas shared that even though he spent a lot of time alone, he never took his parents’ hard work for granted. “I would see them give everything to their careers. I saw the good life we lived, as far as the house and the cars. I wanted that, and I knew I had to work long and hard to get it” (Nicholas, personal communication, June 12, 2019). Nicholas had a few road bumps in math. However, the road bumps made him want to study more. “Now, math’s one of my best subjects, and I am going to become a mechanical engineer after college” (Nicholas, personal communication, June 12, 2019).
Both of Nicholas’s parents are football fans. Granted, his parents were not there for the majority of his games, but he noticed that he did play harder when they were able to attend. He said, “They gave me encouragement. When they had time, they helped me train and become a better athlete. I just wanted to win for them more than for me. They were my inspiration, and I guess they still are” (Nicholas, personal communication, June 12, 2019).

Isabella strived to do great in school. She felt that her military connection contributed to her confidence. She recognized that everyone was not going to be the same as her, and that was okay with her. When school got hard, she studied harder. “I made A’s even when I thought it might be impossible. That’s all I knew. My parents didn’t play. They stayed on top of me to be great, especially dad. I was in serious trouble if my grades slipped” (Isabella, personal communication, June 12, 2019). Isabella shared that those friends and family members who were military-affiliated expected more of her because they knew what all she had already achieved by being an M-C student and facing deployments and isolation. “My family and friends believed in me, and I wanted to succeed for them, too” (Isabella, personal communication, June 12, 2019).

During the focus group, Isabella stated that if her father was not in the military, she believed that he would not be as strict as he is. While his strictness may seem like a negative for some, she stated for her it was a positive. “I might not be as disciplined as I am today, which also means I might not have gotten the scholarship I got today. So, if it wasn’t for the military, I may not be me. Does that make sense?” (Isabella, personal communication, June 19, 2019). To this comment, Elijah replied, “Yeah, I get it. On a scale of 1 to 10 of how much the military has influenced me, it’s a 10” (Elijah, personal communication, June 19, 2019). Gabriella agreed: “Yeah. Same here. It’s a 10” (Gabriella, personal communication, June 19, 2019). Jala
responded, “Yes! In a military home, when you say something, that’s word. It’s Bible. It’s law. Amen!” (Jala, personal communication, June 19, 2019).

As the responses indicate, the motivation and drive culture to succeed in school is created as a result of a parent or parents’ military service. This all for one disposition, whether a sense of duty or gratitude, led participants to perform at a high level in school because these actions were a direct reflection on their parents’ military careers and the principles they value. Examples of hard work, discipline, and perseverance filled the participants’ stories when talking about their parents, and the same principles the parents valued are highly regarded by the participants.

**Research Question Responses**

The following section provides a short narrative answer to each of the research questions used during data collection. The themes that were identified with each question are outlined in the section. The central research question and sub-questions one, two, and three are discussed individually. Quotes from participants were selected to support responses.

**Central Research Question**

The central research question guided the study: How do military-connected high school graduates describe their K-12 lived experiences in public schools? The participants’ responses to this line of questioning created the four main themes: (a) lack of support from classroom teachers and principals in public schools, (b) loneliness and isolation, (c) adaptability to new context and environment, and (d) drive to succeed. These aspects emerged in every interview, letter of advice, and the focus group. While the participants shared stories of struggle and hardships, they also shared the belief that their M-C lifestyles offered great benefits. As Elijah wrote, “Though life can appear complicated, and things may not always go your way, it will make sense in the
long run. The way you are being raised will show you great benefits socially, physically, academically, and mentally” (personal communication, January 27, 2019).

During the focus group (June 19, 2019) when asked what was the first thing that came to mind when they heard the phrase M-C student, the responses were summative of the themes. Gabriella said, “adversity,” and Zoey said, “risks.” Tyson said, “opportunities,” and Isabella voiced, “benefits.” Elijah said, “different lifestyles,” and Nicholas chimed in with “change and understanding.” Destiny stated, “better academics with DoDEA.” While their stories may have occurred with different parents, in different states, and different schools, the experiences shared were common, and the themes were evident.

**Research SQ1**

Sub-Question One asked, “How do military-connected high school graduates describe their academic experiences in K-12 civilian schools?” While analyzing the data, two major themes emerged regarding sub-question one: adaptability to new context/environment and drive to succeed. With each move, participants were forced to adapt to new homes, schools, and communities. With each deployment of a parent, participants were forced to restructure their roles and responsibilities within their family lives and push forward to maintain homeostasis within an environment of change. The ability to adapt to new cultures and communities, new schools, and new surroundings was a critical skill for the participants.

Although participants adapted to all things news, the struggles persisted, especially when in public schools. Setbacks were reported, especially by those who transferred from school to school. However, the setbacks did not prevent the participants from achieving their goals. Tyson deemed his academics his greatest success as an M-C student. He stated, “I think transferring to a new school, beating everyone, and then leaving the next year was the greatest. I
was like just this random, smart guy.” (Tyson, personal communication, June 19, 2019). As the focus group conversation continued, Tyson explained that even with his disadvantages of high mobility and absence of parents, he was able to make high marks by adapting to each situation using his competitive nature to excel.

Elijah and Nicholas believed that their academic success was triggered because of their adaptability. Elijah’s father’s deployments were a bit unsettling for him in the early years of his life. However, he became accustomed to the “roller-coaster lifestyle” (Elijah, personal communication, January 27, 2019). Elijah quickly learned that when his father was called away for deployment family roles changed. During the interview (January 27, 2019), Elijah stated that he was able to “be the man of the house” during his father’s absence, but he knew that he had to “stay in a child’s place” when his father returned. This type of code-switching adaptability taught Elijah how to adapt to change and play different roles in the family, as needed. Nicholas felt that the experiences he faced when moving from state to state or school to school allowed him to embrace a strong sense of self. The high level of independence and adaptability needed at times within a military family forced Nicholas to seek alternate resources, which enabled him to do well in all areas.

Gabriella shared that she was diagnosed with learning disabilities at an early age, but the drive to succeed was imbedded. She believed that her time in DoD schools gave her the type of support she needed, and she was able to use those strategies to succeed in public schools. The influence of high expectations, a significant aspect of military culture, is passed to children by parents and reinforced in DoD schools. Within the DoD school environment, family values and expectations are reaffirmed creating a level of comfort and familiarity with the way things work. In addition, adaptability to new contexts was a standard response, as the participants all believed
that they were able to acclimate and excel academically regardless of the new situation and constant changes.

**Research SQ2**

Sub-Question Two asked, “How do military-connected high school graduates describe their social experiences in K-12 civilian schools?” While analyzing the data, themes one and two -- (a) lack of emotional support from classroom teachers and principals in public schools, and (b) loneliness and isolation – emerged. The third theme, adaptability to new context/environment, was also present.

Within K-12 civilian schools, a lack of emotional support from classroom teachers and principals, as well as a sense of loneliness and isolation were perceived as having a significant impact on students’ school experiences and social development. The ability to adapt and overcome loneliness and emotional issues is what allowed students to prevail. Social experiences were not always pleasant for the participants. High mobility made it hard for the participants to maintain friendships. In the focus group, Gabriella stated, “You have a lot of mixed emotions. You’re constantly moving. You know you have to. You kind of want to, but then you don’t” (Gabriella, personal communication, June 19, 2019).

In the focus group discussion, Destiny stated:

Yeah. Mixed emotions. That’s it. And it’s just like you have so much anger and grieving built up inside that you don’t know what to do. You don’t know who to give it out to, so the only person that you’re giving it out to is the people that you’re living with. Then, when Mom comes back from deployment, I give it out to her. I give it out to my new classmates at school. Looking back, I regret it, but I didn’t know how to communicate my issues, and the teachers didn’t care. I was just a new kid. Nothing more or less.
Zoey recalled having to deal with her brother’s anger and acting out; “he just had all this rage and stuff, and no one at school reached out to him” (Zoey, personal communication, June 19, 2019). Zoey’s brother was seven years older than her, so she admits that he “got the bad end of the deal. He was alone and dealing it without help. I was too young to understand. At least he understood what I was going through when I got older” (Zoey, personal communication, June 19, 2019).

Yet, while the struggles were present, so were their efforts. Destiny stated, “I learned how to adapt though. I mean I am sure that all you guys have military friends that your parents know, and they would come over. So, you learn who you can talk to and depend on” (Destiny, personal communication, June 19, 2019).

Civilian schools, being non-military, are different from DoD schools in that family values and consideration of the students’ situations can feel absent in the civilian environment. While M-C students can feel a level of empathy from teachers and administration, as well as comfort and familiarity with the way things work within a DoD school, the opposite is true for civilian schools, as teachers, administrators, and to some extent other students’ lack of understanding of M-C students’ situations can leave the M-C student feeling isolated and emotionally disconnected on a social level. Participants found ways to adapt and make social connections either with emotional support from family or from other military family friends.

**Research SQ3**

Sub-Question Three asked, “How do military-connected high school graduates describe their extracurricular experiences in K-12 civilian schools?” With constant mobility, it was difficult for the participants to take part in sports and other competitions. In addition, the
absence of a parent made it difficult for those who were playing games or needed a parent escort for special events. Theme one, lack of emotional support from classroom teachers and principals in public schools, was evident. Theme two, loneliness and isolation, was present. Themes three and four, adaptability to new context/environment and drive to succeed, respectively, were also clearly addressed through this question.

Gabriella stated, “I think that school was really hard for me, and I didn’t really do sports because of the constant moving. I probably would have come out a little bit better and stronger if I had something to um, channel all of that” (personal communication, June 19, 2019).

Tyson, like Gabriella, wished that he would have had the opportunity to be active in sports. However, with all the moving he did, that was not an option. At one point in the focus group, Elijah asked Tyson, “Do you feel like you were a victim to arrested development as a kid? Like that distance between your parents, did you feel that it kind of messed with you as a person growing up?” (Elijah, personal communication, June 19, 2019). To which Tyson responded:

To a degree. Well, in fact I actually think it kind of enhanced it – my development. Um, it was more like when I was growing up, I wasn’t necessarily raised by my mother and father. I was kind of growing up on my own, and I was being supported by my mother and father. It was a little bit different for me, but I think that it made me a better person because of it. I am not scared to be alone or take risks. I am definitely not co-dependent.” (Tyson, personal communication, June 19, 2019)

**Summary**

This chapter provided the results that originated from the data collected from the 11 participants who shared experiences as M-C high school graduates in public schools. The descriptions of all participants were provided. The four themes that emerged from the data were
provided, along with detailed descriptions of each. The themes that emerged included: (a) lack of emotional support from classroom teachers and principals in public schools, (b) loneliness and isolation (c) adaptability to new context and environment, and (d) drive to succeed. The participants’ experiences were shared through rich descriptions, both textural and structural. This allowed the participants’ stories to be presented and the phenomenon to be examined. Finally, the themes and participants’ quotations were used to support the narrative responses to the research questions.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the K-12 lived experiences of military-connected (M-C) graduates of public schools in the southeastern region of the United States. The theory guiding this study was Hamilton McCubbin’s (1979) family stress theory, which examines how family members do well and thrive or struggle and fail when faced with specific stressors. This study attempted to answer the central research question: How do military-connected high school graduates describe their K-12 lived experiences in public schools? Common themes were discovered by using multiple data collection methods. This chapter includes a summary of the research findings in relation to the literature review presented in Chapter Two. Implications of the study are discussed, and delimitations and limitations are presented. Recommendations for future research are followed by a final summary.

Summary of Findings

Multiple data methods, which included individual interviews, written documentation, and a focus group interview, were utilized in order to allow the M-C graduates to tell their stories. Eleven M-C graduates from public schools in the Collaboration District participated in this study. Moustakas’ (1994) methods of data analysis were used for transcendental phenomenology, as outlined in Creswell and Poth (2018). The researcher’s perceived notions were bracketed or eliminated in order to view the M-C students’ experiences through an unbiased perspective (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher transcribed the interviews verbatim. Once the interviews were transcribed, the researcher gave the participants the opportunity to review the transcribed documents from their individual and focus group interviews. No changes or corrections were made by the participants. During the data analysis process, the researcher
used reflective notes during the reading and rereading of the transcribed interviews. Using the reflective notes, the researcher was able to list significant statements that participants used to describe the experience of the phenomenon. This process, called horizontalization, continued until data saturation occurred (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). These statements allowed the researcher to discover the underlying meaning of the experience through analysis (Moustakas, 1994). In addition, NVivo was used to assist in the organization and analysis of the data. From the data analysis, four themes emerged. The themes included: (a) lack of support from classroom teachers and principals in public schools, (b) loneliness and isolation, (c) adaptability to new context and environment, and (d) drive to succeed. The themes addressed the research questions that guided this study.

**Central Research Question:** In answering the central research question, M-C high school graduates described their K-12 lived experiences in public schools. This central question aimed at understanding the overall experience M-C students had with public schools. School involves not only academic learning but also the social and extracurricular facets of a student’s life. The four themes that emerged through the data analysis showed both positive and negative effects of being an M-C student in public schools. Ultimately, the participants shared that their military parents were a prime source of encouragement and motivation. For example, in Elijah’s interview he mentioned how his father’s rules and procedures kept him on the right track. For Gabriella, she strived to be like her father at home with cleanliness and in school with academics. She shared that her father was a “really good role model. He showed how someone should work hard and be the best and what they should be like in morals and everything” (Gabriella, personal communication, February 7, 2019). Destiny shared that she started running because she joined her mom running when she “was practicing for her physical training test” (Destiny, personal
communication, May 21, 2019). For Destiny, this was the defining moment of her own physical ability, and she continued to push herself physically. Thus, the participants’ drive to succeed in academics and sports was heightened because of their parents’ influences. The participants shared that their parents had high expectations and nothing less was accepted. In addition, their parents’ mobile lifestyles forced the participants to acclimate to new homes, schools, and communities. While these factors proved beneficial for the participants, they still struggled with making new friends and maintaining relationships. Feeling left out of groups and teams caused stress for the participants. Yet, overall, the participants were able to push beyond their feelings and still thrive in their environments. The participants shared that their support from teachers and principals was minimal to none. However, their families’ love and care and the support the participants received from their military community compensated for the lack of public-school support. Each participant provided insight into how they were able to successfully navigate through the public schools as children of military parents.

**Research SQ1:** In answering the first sub-question, M-C high school graduates described their academic experiences in K-12 public schools. Two themes emerged that addressed sub-question one: adaptability to new context/environment and drive to succeed. Ten of the eleven participants moved to different schools due to their parents’ careers in the military. All of these participants recalled a time when the transition to a new school was difficult. Isabella described her transition from Puerto Rico to the United States as being “thrown into unfriendly territory” (Isabella, personal communication, June 12, 2019). Gabriella felt out of place in public schools, especially when transferring from DoDEA schools. Nicholas shared that moving from school to school felt “like a hard reset” (Nicholas, personal communication, June 12, 2019).
Meeting new teachers and learning a new curriculum was a challenge for the participants. Several shared that they had to retake certain courses because the school in the new state or district did not recognize a previously taken course. They also had to take additional courses to earn enough credits for graduation at the new school. Tyson shared his experiences with having to take two courses in gym, history, and health when moving from state to state. Gabriella shared her experience regarding her confusion with her history teacher’s teaching methods, to only discover that it did not matter to the teacher. While this was frustrating to the participants, it did not prevent their success. All participants in this study provided examples of their academic success, such as earning excellent marks and winning scholastic competitions. Tyson excelled in high school, winning geography competitions and Science Olympiad awards. In addition, he has maintained a 4.0 college GPA. Nicholas, who once struggled in math, applied to college to become a mechanical engineer. The participants described their military parents as individuals who pushed them to do their best in all academic areas. Failure was not an option, even in the face of difficult times.

**Research SQ2:** In answering sub-question two, M-C high school graduates described their social experiences in K-12 civilian schools. Similar to the findings for sub-question one, adaptability to new context/environment emerged as a theme. The participants learned how to navigate through new school halls, classrooms, and texts. This related to their drive to succeed. However, two new themes emerged: (a) lack of emotional support from classroom teachers and principals in public schools, and (b) loneliness and isolation. With high mobility, feelings of awkwardness and exclusion were present for the participants. Elijah and Gabriella shared that they were bullied. Gabriella stated that she felt out of place and different from the others. The participants stressed that they were hesitant to make friends because they knew that their time
with them would be shortened due to the next move their parents were obligated to take. Tyson described his life as one with no stability, which caused him to feel that meeting new people and making friends was pointless. Even for those who did not move as frequently, there was a disconnect between them and the classroom teachers and principals. For example, Ariel was not mobile, but she felt the effects of her mother’s absence. She mentioned that it would have been nice to have had additional support from her teachers and guidance counselor, but that option was not available to her. All participants’ parents were required to take a TDY or be part of a deployment. The participants expressed that these times were hard. Some, like Zoey, remained constantly worried about their parents, but all expressed that they missed their parents and longed for that additional adult support. Learning how to deal with these feelings was difficult for the participants. They rarely received adult support from their teachers and principals. The support that was given to the participants usually came from coaches or ROTC staff. Thus, the participants faced their fears and depressions alone.

**Research SQ3:** Sub-question three required the participants to describe their extracurricular experiences in K-12 public schools. All four themes related to this sub-question. Playing football for Tyson, traveling out of town for a volleyball game for Charity, attending prom for Nevaeh, and walking across the field with a parent on Senior Night for Destiny were just a few of the extracurricular experiences that participants missed due to their parents’ duties in the military. For some, joining a team was almost impossible because by the time cuts were made or games were played, the participant would have to relocate to a new area. For example, Tyson’s wish to play football and Gabriella’s desire to sing the solo in the school concert were never granted due to their constant moves. In addition, Charity’s opportunity to travel for volleyball was lost because of her parent’s duties. For those who were able to play and
participate in other competitions, they strived to be the best at the game and take home the trophies in order to make their parents proud. They worked hard to become an integral part of team. For instance, Nicholas used his parents’ love for football as his motivation to excel in the sport. For all, this meant adapting to the culture of the school with each move. Nicholas mentioned learning the everyday language of the students was major in his ability to adapt to new surroundings. However, participants asserted that classroom teachers and principals and even some of the coaches were not willing to work with them when they missed club meetings or practices due to lack of transportation or some other military related reason. Thus, since the participants were not allowed to become part of the school in ways outside of the classroom, feelings of loneliness were reinforced.

**Discussion**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of M-C graduates of public schools in the southeastern region of the United States. This design was used in order to examine the essence of the participants’ experiences. The problem guiding this study was that K-12 public schools continue to struggle to meet the needs of M-C students who attend their institutions. The information presented in Chapter Two was corroborated both empirically and theoretically by the four themes: (a) lack of support from classroom teachers and principals in public schools, (b) loneliness and isolation, (c) adaptability to new context and environment, and (d) drive to succeed. Prior to this study, research that explored the overall K-12 experience of M-C students in public schools was limited. Previous research focused on specific ages or grade levels (Richardson et al., 2016; Skomorovsky & Bullock, 2017; Thompson, Baptist, Miller, & Henry, 2017), classroom teachers’ observations and findings (Ohye et al., 2016; Stites, 2016) and the views of parents (Davis & Finke, 2015;
Wolf, Rinfrette, Eliseo-Arras, & Nochajski, 2018). As a result of this study, the voices of M-C graduates from public schools in the southeastern region of the United States has broadened the evidence base. This section is organized so that the theoretical literature is first examined. The examination of the empirical literature will immediately follow.

**Theoretical Literature**

This study added to the existing body of research on Hamilton McCubbin’s (1979) theory of family stress. The family stress theory is a developmental theory that explores how families adapt and thrive or deteriorate and disintegrate when faced with situational stressors. This study examined M-C high school graduates’ academic, social, and extracurricular experiences while attending public schools, thus addressing a gap in the literature and extending the current literature.

Four themes were developed from this study: (a) lack of support from classroom teachers and principals in public schools, (b) loneliness and isolation, (c) adaptability to new context and environment, and (d) drive to succeed. McCubbin’s (1979) family stress theory focused on the coping behaviors and interactions between the family unit and community. The first two themes, which include lack of school support and loneliness and isolation, are viewed as negative effects within McCubbin’s (1979) theory. McCubbin et al. (1979) stated, “Families can and often are overwhelmed and challenged severely in the face of adversity, and they do stumble, experience disharmony and imbalance” (p. 6). The participants confirmed that constant mobility, deployments, and parental absences due to deployments and duty assignments were challenges that rocked the stability of their families. The last two themes, adaptability and drive to succeed, are categorized as positive effects within McCubbin’s (1979) theory. Based on the results of this study, participants shared that while their parents’ absences and high mobility rates may have
caused unwanted feelings of isolation, those factors also contributed to their adaptability to new environments. McCubbin (1979) expressed lengthy absences cause the family to manage the separation by changing processes and roles in the family structure. This study and the themes revealed substantiated McCubbin’s (1979) theory.

Roles and boundaries that have been established become ambiguous when family structures changes (Moeller et al., 2015). McCubbin (1979) believed that these significant changes cause stress in families. The results of this study support this finding. For example, Tyson and Nicholas both felt like they were raising themselves. Nicholas shared that his father was who he wanted to confide in about dating, but that was not possible because of the constant deployments. In his father’s absence, his mother was the only one available for him to speak to. This was not comfortable for Nicholas, so he used the internet to research how to talk to girls, kiss girls, and even tie a tie. For Nicholas, the paternal role was definite and not one that could easily be filled by his mother.

McCubbin (1979) noticed that some parents failed to recognize the pressure and anxiety the children felt during times of high stress. This finding was supported by this study’s results. For example, Zoey stated that she was constantly worried about her stepfather. This endless concern became a source of Zoey’s loneliness because, at the time, she felt as if she was the only one who felt such apprehension. Now that she is older, Zoey realized that her mother was worried, but she just failed to show her worry to her children or discuss her concerns with them.

The first two themes, viewed through a negative lens, form the origin of the family stress theory. However, the ability to thrive during hard times and acceptance of the stressors are equally part of the theory (McCubbin, 1979). This study’s results indicated that all participants developed coping mechanisms that enabled them to thrive during the stressful periods. The
participants admitted that in order to reestablish balance when their stability was disrupted, they had to adjust their behaviors to adapt to the changes (McCubbin, 1979; McCubbin et al., 1997; Thompson et al., 2017). For instance, as the moves continued to take place for Gabriella, she decided to let others see her as a well-versed and traveled individual instead of ignoring the person her military connectedness made her. Tyson also changed his attitude. He stopped looking at the negatives of his military lifestyle, and he started embracing each new day as an adventure.

Also confirmed in this study is that the connection between the community and the individual can help the individual successfully adapt and manage stress (McCubbin, 1979). For example, the support of coaches and ROTC instructors proved beneficial to Nevaeh and Nicholas. Gabriella admitted that she felt abandoned when her father was required to deploy, but the wives’ support groups and Family Readiness Group offered assistance and provided information during times of stress. The self-reliance of the family was encouraged and supported, while helping to keep positive communication between the military parent and family.

However, this study also confirmed that the lack of community support can add to the stress individuals experience (McCubbin, 1979). The lack of support received from principals and teachers in public schools was shared by all participants. For those participants with DoDEA experience, like Gabriella, Tyson, and Destiny, the contrast of non-DoDEA schools was unwelcoming and upsetting. The support offered in DoDEA schools made the participants feel a sense of community. Thus, the participants’ levels of stress and anxiety were handled differently, which was in a manner more consistent with a family-like, supportive unit. On the contrary, the lack of support in public schools intensified the feelings of loneliness and isolation experienced by the participants.
Military families do not always “live in controlled environments and/or ambiguous situations” (McCubbin, 1979, p. 242). Their surroundings vary, and the circumstances of each new setting bring stress, both positive and negative (McCubbin, 1979). However, the family’s internal relationship and social participation outside the home are vital in the management of stress (McCubbin, 1979). The participants’ stories support McCubbin’s (1979) previous findings. Overall, the current theoretical literature related to the phenomenon examined is supported by the themes that emerged from this study.

**Empirical Literature**

Since this study focused on the lived experiences of M-C graduates of public schools, it extends the current literature. Approximately two-thirds of M-C students reside in civilian areas (Student-Identifier, 2018). Thus, nearly 1.2 million M-C children, ages 4-18, attend public schools. The participants’ narratives provided a clearer picture of the lives of M-C students throughout their public-school experiences.

Results from this study, based on participants’ experiences, revealed that high mobility and parental deployments subjected youth to stressors (Rumberger, 2016; Thompson et al., 2017). Their emotional and psychological states were affected by times that jeopardized their stability (Skomorovsky & Bullock, 2017; Thompson et al., 2017). According to study results and M-C graduates’ experiences with the military lifestyle, routines and stability were most influenced by the need to move to different schools and times of parental separations due to deployment and unaccompanied tours. The M-C graduates in this study confirmed that they felt the effects of the career requirements and decisions their parents made, which strengthened the claim that the entire family serves when one member of the immediate family is enlisted (Rowe et al., 2014).
Wolf et al.’s (2016) “Rocking the Boat” analogy was confirmed from this study. When the military parents were at home, the M-C graduates in this study felt a sense of normalcy, and the family was functioning as a whole. However, their parents’ deployments brought about a new sense of worry. With this worry, new roles were defined, and greater responsibilities were given to the M-C graduates. However, once parents returned, the M-C graduates had to readjust their lifestyles again. For example, Nicholas confirmed that dealing with his parents’ deployments and returns forced him to constantly live differently. Nicholas, like Tyson and Gabriella, realized that family duties and independence levels varied during different stages of deployments.

Since all M-C graduates expressed loneliness and isolation, the risk of depression associated with the military lifestyle was confirmed (Chesmore, He, Zhang, & Gewirtz, 2018; Lester et al., 2016; Thompson et al., 2017). The high mobility caused the participants in this study to feel isolated. Thus, many of the participants felt disconnected from their peers, which made it difficult for them to build lasting relationships (Ruff & Keim, 2014). In conjunction with the lack of friendships, all of the participants shared that they did not feel support coming from teachers and principals (Garner et al., 2014; Ruff & Keim, 2014). However, those M-C graduates who attended DoDEA schools believed that the emotional support provided was superior to that of public schools (Delisio, 2018). They confirmed that DoDEA schools’ principals and teachers worked to create a friendly, stable environment, which was supportive of all M-C students before, during, and after deployments and moves (Delisio, 2018).

The risk of isolation and depression was increased by the M-C graduates’ missed opportunities for involvement. For example, Tyson expressed how he could not play football because he frequently moved. This aligns with the research (Ruff & Keim, 2014), which
described M-C students missing team tryouts and/or not being able to meet the school’s requirements when moving from one school system to another. While the loneliness and isolation experienced by the participants indicated periods of depression, the presence of substance abuse and suicide ideation was not present in the participants’ shared experiences as suggested by the research of Rossiter et al. (2016).

While high mobility and parental deployments contributed to the participants’ shared experiences of isolation, loneliness, and lack of emotional support from school faculty, the results of this study also indicated that the M-C graduates’ military lifestyles helped them become more worldly and better able to adapt (Stites, 2016). For example, Gabriella asserted that her travels gave her an advantage over her peers because she had experienced various international cultures they had not. This study confirmed that stress affected all participants in various ways (Ohye et al., 2016). However, all participants were able to find ways to thrive and become resilient (Richardson et al., 2016). For Gabriella, the military-sponsored support programs, such as the Family Readiness Group, helped her and her family remain positive and connected during hard times (Easterbrooks et al., 2013; Ohye et al., 2016). Neveah realized that creating positive interactions and attachments with people such as her ROTC officers and sports coaches helped her deal with the negative stressors of the military lifestyle (Richardson et al., 2016). Overall, all participants found ways to cope with their daily stresses while conducting themselves appropriately in ways that would never “negatively impact their parents’ career” (Rossiter et al., 2016, p. 486). As all participants confirmed, the best is expected of them at all times because their actions and reactions represent the United States military (Rossiter et al., 2016).
Implications

The literature review in Chapter Two presented concepts that were both evident and absent during the data collection. Through continuous immersion in the data, the four themes emerged: (a) lack of support from classroom teachers and principals in public schools, (b) loneliness and isolation, (c) adaptability to new context and environment, and (d) drive to succeed. These themes were derived from the written letters of advice, one-on-one interviews, and focus group interviews of the M-C high school graduates. The findings of this study produced theoretical, empirical, and practical implications. This section addresses these implications and recommendations for M-C high school graduates, parents, teachers, and principals.

Theoretical

This study was based on Hamilton McCubbin’s (1979) theory of family stress to provide a voice to M-C high school graduates who attended public schools. The aim was to enhance the literature on McCubbin’s (1979) theory, specifically how M-C high school graduates adapt and thrive or deteriorate and disintegrate when faced with situational stressors. This study’s examination of M-C high school graduates’ academic, social, and extracurricular experiences extends the current literature.

This study’s theoretical implications hold importance for those who work with M-C students in public schools, grades K-12. This study and its findings substantiate McCubbin’s (1979) theory that students who experienced high mobility due to their parents’ military careers and parental absences due to deployments experienced increased periods of stress (Thompson et al., 2017). These periods of stress threatened the students’ abilities to thrive by causing changes in emotional support, which can increase the risk of depression (Thompson et al., 2017).
The results of this study affirmed McCubbin’s (1979) theory, as M-C graduates who were faced with negative stressors were able to eventually thrive (McCubbin et al., 1997). The ability of the participant to thrive suggested that supportive relationships helped alleviate the stress experienced by M-C graduates (McCubbin, 1979; Sheidow et al., 2014). M-C graduates who were able to build positive, nurturing relationships with parents, other family members, and coaches were able to better manage the stress experienced. Overall, the study extends the current literature, since it focused on a distinct group of M-C students, which is those who graduated from public schools.

**Empirical**

The voices of M-C youth are largely missing in research (Davis & Finke, 2015; Ohye et al. 2016; Richardson et al., 2016; Skomorovsky & Bullock, 2017; Stites, 2016; Thompson, Baptist, Miller, & Henry, 2017; Wolf, Rinfrette, Eliseo-Arras, & Nochajski, 2018). Listening to the lived experiences of M-C graduates is one way to address and examine this issue. Since this study examined the academic, social, and extracurricular activities of M-C graduates from public schools, there are empirical implications for K-12 principals and teachers in the public-school settings.

The results of this study are beneficial to principals in public schools, as these findings validate the need for principals to create an atmosphere of inclusion for M-C students. The results indicated that high mobility rates leave M-C students feeling disconnected from the school climate and culture (Rumberger, 2016). Since school principals are tasked with ultimately creating and implementing the emotional climate of the school, it is important that the voices of M-C students are considered.
In addition, principals set the tone for how teachers build rapport with their students, both in and out of the classroom. The narratives shared by the M-C graduates in this study provided a clearer picture of the needs of M-C students, in general. Thus, their stories validate the need for professional development aimed at addressing the social and emotional aspects of M-C students (Garner et al., 2014).

**Practical**

The results of this study indicated that for public schools to address the needs of M-C students, there must be a commitment to policies and programs that help strengthen and support the military families. Various organizations offer public educators training designed to help ensure M-C students receive quality, inclusive education in public schools, in spite of the challenges they may face due to transitions and separations. The Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC) is perhaps the most well-known of these organizations. The professional development offered by the MCEC should be mandated for principals and teachers in civilian schools. The webinars and conferences can provide administrators and educators with valuable information that will allow them to better address and support the needs of the M-C students in public schools. The knowledge and skills gained from the MCEC’s training can then be used to develop programs at public schools that will promote positive, encouraging relationships between M-C youth and their parents, peers, and community members (Richardson et al., 2016).

Guidance counselors, school nurses, and social workers should be involved in staff developments that focus on the M-C child. These practitioners may be able to influence feelings of safety and happiness among M-C youth (Gilreath et al., 2016). Specifically, guidance counselors should meet with M-C students on a regular basis for an open discussion forum. This would give the students a chance to share their feelings and concerns and interact with other M-C
students. Establishing an open-door policy would encourage M-C students to discuss important matters in an open, honest fashion.

Principals can help create a welcoming, supportive environment for M-C students. Principals can use programs, such as School Dialer, to specifically communicate to M-C families. For example, if a unit is deploying, the principal can broadcast messages of support, concern, and gratitude with the simple send of a voice message. Principals can also conduct quarterly assemblies or pep rallies to support M-C students and their families. For those public schools that do not have a high enrollment of M-C students, weekly newsletters and personal emails from the teachers will open communication lines and help create a positive rapport.

Peer support can also create a welcoming environment for M-C students. When M-C students transfer to a new school, a peer buddy system should be in place. This is simply the process of pairing the M-C student with a student who is already enrolled in the school. This arrangement has the potential to not only help the M-C student find his or her way around the school, but it also supports and promotes social interaction and friendships between the two students. If the school is aware that the M-C student is transferring, the buddy can reach out via email or text with a simple greeting before the M-C student ever reports to class.

Findings from this study suggest that policymakers on federal, state, and district levels should work together to address the gaps that occur when M-C students transfer to civilian schools from DoDEA schools. While the establishment of a national curriculum between the two would be best, the reality of an academic plan that is applicable to both public and DoDEA schools may not be immediately available and feasible. However, it is important for all educators to remember that the high mobility rate of M-C students (Ruff & Keim, 2014; Rumberger, 2016) can cause frustration. The results of this study indicated that when students
transferred from one school to another that courses and credits were not always applied. Thus, it would be beneficial for curriculum specialists and principals to collaborate in order to closely evaluate high school transcripts when a transfer occurs. A closer inspection of programs and curriculum may eliminate M-C students repeating courses that cover the same material. At the elementary level, the Academically Intellectually Gifted (AIG) teacher should be involved when students, who have already successfully completed the curriculum, transfer in. Since elementary schools do not offer a variety of courses like high schools, the AIG teacher could supplement the instruction to help enhance the knowledge and comprehension of the M-C student.

**Delimitations and Limitations**

This study has delimitations, which are purposeful decisions made by the researcher in order to define and limit the study’s boundaries. The first delimitation was that all participants had to be a dependent of a military service member. Since the theory guiding this study was Hamilton McCubbin’s (1979) family stress theory, it was important that all participants were M-C students who had experienced the similar stressors, within their families, that were related to the military. The second delimitation was that all participants had to be recent graduates of the Collaboration District’s 17 high schools. Therefore, purposeful, criterion sampling was used to select participants to ensure that participants had experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). In order to provide an accurate description of the essence of M-C graduates of public schools from this school district, a transcendental, phenomenological approach was used. The third delimitation was that all participants had to fall within a certain age bracket. Past studies focused more on teachers’ findings (Ohye et al., 2016; Stites, 2016) and parents’ perspectives (Davis & Finke, 2015; Wolf et al., 2018) or specific grades and ages (Richardson et al., 2016; Skomorovsky & Bullock, 2017). Therefore, the participants for this
study ranged in age from 18-23 years old. This was implemented for this study to explore the overall K-12 experience.

Several limitations were present in this study. Limitations are potential weaknesses which cannot be controlled. The first limitation was the age. Since the researcher set an age limit between 18-23, the study eliminated those individuals who were younger than 18 years and older than 23 years. The second limitation that was presented in this study involves the type of research study chosen. Qualitative research requires data collection in a natural setting (Creswell, 2013). Therefore, it could prove difficult to replicate this study. The third limitation regards any preconceived notions about the questions asked to participants. While the researcher bracketed to eliminate preconceived notions and biases (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002), it is difficult to ensure whether the participants did the same and truthfully communicated their lived experiences (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). The final limitation in this study was the exclusion of participants from other school districts. Since the study was limited to the Collaboration District, it cannot be determined if other M-C graduates from other districts within the southeastern region of the United States face the same stressors.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This study was limited to 18-23-year-old M-C high school graduates who graduated from the Collaboration District, which is located in the southeastern region of the United States. In the future, researchers could replicate this study in various districts across the nation with high concentrations of M-C youth. This study was based on data from participants who graduated from high school within a five-year period, maximum. Future research could expand the time frame in order to capture a broader range of students’ experiences following graduation. All of the participants in this study were pursuing higher education. It would be informative for future
researchers to expand this study to other groups. Those groups could include those who chose a military career, specific trade, or other job. Future studies could also include those who decided to marry a military service member.

**Summary**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the K-12 lived experiences of M-C graduates of public schools in the southeastern region of the United States. The theory guiding this study is McCubbin’s (1979) family stress theory, which explores how family members adapt and thrive or deteriorate and disintegrate when faced with situational stressors.

This study attempted to answer the central research question: How do military-connected high school graduates describe their K-12 lived experiences in public schools? Data collection methods included: individual interviews, participants’ written letters of advice, and a focus group. Data was gathered from 11 participants, and Moustakas’ (1994) methods, which were designed for transcendental phenomenology, were used to analyze data. Four themes emerged: (a) lack of support from classroom teachers and principals in public schools, (b) loneliness and isolation, (c) adaptability to new context and environment, and (d) drive to succeed. These themes were used to provide implications and suggestions for future research.

Looking toward the future, it will greatly benefit principals and teachers in public school to provide stronger emotional support to M-C youth within their schools. Based on this study and potential future studies, policymakers at federal, state, and local levels will have an opportunity to learn from the experiences of M-C high school graduates. Thus, the need to create a uniform curriculum may be implemented. Overall, this research provides a basis for families, schools, communities, and educational leaders to expand their knowledge base and implement
best practices, programs, and services that meet the needs of the M-C child in the public-school systems across the nation in order to help them reach success in academic, emotional, and social areas.
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APPENDIX A: IRB Approval

January 18, 2019

Christy Louise Thomas
IRB Approval 3644.011819: Military-Connected High-School Graduates’ Lived Experiences with K-12 Civilian Schools: A Transcendental Phenomenological Study

Dear Christy Louise Thomas,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Your study falls under the expedited review category (45 CFR 46.110), which is applicable to specific, minimal risk studies and minor changes to approved studies for the following reason(s):

6. Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies. (NOTE: Some research in this category may be exempt from the HHS regulations for the protection of human subjects. 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2) and (b)(3). This listing refers only to research that is not exempt.)

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office

Liberty University | Training Champions for Christ since 1971
APPENDIX B: Consent Form

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board has approved this document for use from 1/18/2019 to 1/17/2020
Protocol # 3644.011819

CONSENT FORM
Military-Connected High-School Graduates' Lived Experiences with K-12 Civilian Schools:
A Transcendental Phenomenological Study
Christy L. Thomas
Liberty University
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study on military-connected high-school graduates who were enrolled in and graduated from public schools. You were selected as a possible participant because you graduated from a public high school in [redacted], you were/are a dependent of a military service member, and you are between the ages of 18-23 years. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Christy L. Thomas, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information: The purpose of this study is to discover how military-connected high school graduates describe their K-12 lived experiences in public schools.

Procedures: If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:
1. Take part in a face-to-face interview, which will use a semi-structured approach. The interview will be audio-recorded and may last approximately 45-60 minutes.
2. Write a letter of advice. There will be two options for the letter. The first is to write a letter to your younger self, regarding life as a military-connected child. The second is to write a letter to a current military-connected student in a public school, offering advice for military-specific issues that he/she may face in the public school. The letter writing may take 30 minutes to an hour.
3. Take part in a face-to-face focus group where you will be encouraged to share ideas, opinions, and writings (if desired). The focus group will be audio-recorded and may last approximately one hour.

Risks: The risks involved in this study are minimal, which mean they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

Benefits: Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Compensation: Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

Confidentiality: The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. I may share the data I collect from you for use in future research studies or with other researchers; if I share the data that I collect about you, I will remove any information that could identify you, if applicable, before I share the data.
I will conduct the interviews in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation. I will assign participants a pseudonym.

Data will be stored on a password locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.

Interviews and focus groups will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

I cannot assure participants that other members of the focus group will not share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

Voluntary Nature of the Study: Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

How to Withdraw from the Study: If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Contacts and Questions: The researcher conducting this study is Christy L. Thomas. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at________________________. You may also contact the researcher's faculty chair, Dr. Karla Swafford at kswafford@liberty.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.

Statement of Consent: I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

_________________________ _________________________
Signature of Participant Date

_________________________ _________________________
Signature of Investigator Date
APPENDIX C: Recruitment Flyer for Social Media Posting

WANTED PARTICIPANTS

The purpose of this research is to discover how military-connected high school graduates describe their K-12 lived experiences in public schools.

WHO DO WE NEED?
* Participants between 18-23 years of age
* Graduate of
* Dependent of a Military Service Member

YOUR DUTIES WILL INCLUDE:
* A face to face interview
* A written letter of advice
* Take part in face-to-face focus group

Please know that names/identifying information will remain confidential.

For more information on participating in this study, or to schedule an interview, please contact: Christy L. Thomas, a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, at cthomas290@liberty.edu
APPENDIX D: Interview Guide

Christy L. Thomas

Military-Connected High-School Graduates’ Lived Experiences with K-12 Civilian Schools: A Transcendental Phenomenological Study

Semi-Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions

1. Please state your first name and tell me a little about yourself.

2. How long have you been considered a military-connected student?

3. Please tell me how you feel that your family’s connection to the military made your life different from children whose families were not in the military.

4. Please share your overall perception of life in the military. Think about both positive and negative aspects.

5. How do you think being the child of a military parent influenced your pursuit of an education in a public-school setting, regarding academic achievement? Tell me a story about a time you transferred to a new school. Explain how you perceived teachers’ expectations of you because of your military connectedness. Tell me about a time that you found the curriculum to be more/less challenging when moving from one school to another. Share with me an example of when you found this to be more common from state to state or from DoDEA to public sites.

6. How do you think being the child of a military parent influenced your social life in the public-school setting? Tell me the level of difficulty you experienced making new friendships. Explain to me how the family structure (discipline, chores, responsibilities, etc.) varied among military-connected students and non-military connected students. Tell me how your military-connectedness influenced your dating experiences. Share with me a time that you sought out other military-connected students as a support system when
transitioning to a new location. During your parent’s deployments, share with me if you felt that you shared similarities to those students who lived in single-parent homes. Tell me what you feel was harder – starting over in a new school or leaving behind a school you had a level of comfort and security with.

7. How do you think being the child of a military parent influenced your extracurricular activities in the public-school setting? Tell me about your interests in school (sports, public-speaking, acting, music, dance, etc.). Tell me the opportunities or missed opportunities you had to explore your talents throughout your K-12 years. Tell me about a time that you were not allowed to participate in an extracurricular activity due to your military-connectedness.

8. Tell me about the support you received as a military-connected student in a public school regarding the academic, social, and extracurricular aspects. Tell me about a teacher or principal who assisted/encouraged you during a rough time pertaining to your military-connectedness.

9. How do you believe this experience would have been different in a DoD school? Explain.

10. If you have experience attending DoD schools and public schools, compare the support received at both schools. Give me an example of how a DoD school addresses parental deployment and mobility compared to that of a public school.

11. If you do not have experience attending DoD schools and only attended public schools, what support was provided for military connected students?

12. What specific challenges did you encounter at the public school that were associated with your family’s military connection?
13. What additional support measures could have addressed these challenges?

14. How do you feel about public schools educating military-connected students?

15. If you were the parent of a military-connected child enrolled in civilian schools, what
would you do to help him or her succeed?

16. Imagine that you are being interviewed by a public-school system’s panel, which consists
of superintendents, principals, and teachers. What advice would you give them regarding
the education of military-connected students?

17. I appreciate the time you have given to this study. What else do you think is important
for me to know about the education of military-connected students in public school
settings?
APPENDIX E: Participant Instructions for Letter of Advice

Dear [Recipient]:

Participation in this research requires that you respond to the following writing prompt:

“Compose a personal letter to your younger self or to an M-C student in the public school.”

Specifically, you should address personal experiences related to academic, social, and extracurricular experiences that relate to M-C students in the public-school system.

If you choose to write a letter to your younger self, please refer to your younger self as ‘you’. Start the letter by greeting your younger self. Tell your younger self who you are today regarding your job, school, family, etc. Then, tell your younger self something you wish someone would have told you that would have helped you navigate through public school and life as an M-C student. You may wish to focus on specific elements asked during the interview. You are encouraged to discuss stressors such as deployment, mobility, and trauma.

If you choose to write to an M-C student in the public-school system, introduce yourself, tell him/her who you are today regarding your job, school, family, etc., and offer advice for students today who may be facing the same situations you experienced. You are encouraged to write freely and honestly; however, please be compassionate and empathetic in the letter you write.

The letter may be typed or handwritten. You are encouraged to write the letter immediately after your one-on-one interview. However, you may take the letter home and return to me via email, within one week, if more time is needed. The letter should be between 300-500 words.
Thank you again for your help!

Sincerely,

Christy L. Thomas

Doctoral Student
APPENDIX F: Focus Group Questions

Christy L. Thomas

Military-Connected High-School Graduates’ Lived Experiences with K-12 Civilian Schools: A Transcendental Phenomenological Study

Semi-Standardized Open-Ended Focus Group Questions

1. What is the first thing you think of when you hear the phrase military-connected child?
2. What was your most challenging moment as a military-connected student?
3. What was your greatest success as a military-connected student?
4. How would you compare your academic experiences/preparation to those experiences/preparation of non-military-connected students?
5. Describe how your peers and teachers responded to your military connectedness.
6. How much of an influence do you believe your military connection had on the social aspect of your life while enrolled in public schools?
7. What aspects from your military connectedness do you feel affected your extracurricular activities in public schools?
8. What resources or supports assisted you during your K-12 education?
9. What is your outlook on educating military-connected students in public schools?
10. What advice would you give your younger self, regarding the experiences you encountered in public-school settings that were related your military connection?
11. Looking back, how much of an impact do you think your military connection had on the person you are today?
APPENDIX G: Focus Group Interview Email to Participants

Dear [Recipient]:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the focus group for the research study, *Military-Connected High-School Graduates' Lived Experiences with K-12 Civilian Schools: A Transcendental Phenomenological Study*. Participants are encouraged to share ideas, opinions, and writings. The focus group meeting will be audio-recorded. The focus group meeting will meet at 11:00 a.m. on Wednesday, June 19, 2019, at the address listed below. The gate to the parking lot will be open. Please send me an email if you have any questions.

Thank you again for your help!

Sincerely,

Christy L. Thomas

Doctoral Student

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Butler Building – Conference Room

1200 Murchison Road

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APPENDIX H: Sample Interview Transcript Approval Letter

Dear [Recipient]:

Thank you for volunteering to be a participant in my research study. In this email, you will find an attached copy of the transcript of your one-on-one interview. I ask that you please review this document within the next two weeks and let me know if you have any questions or comments. If I do not hear back from you within the next couple of weeks, I will assume that you are satisfied with the transcribed document.

Thank you again for your help!

Sincerely,

Christy L. Thomas

Doctoral Student
APPENDIX I: Sample Focus Group Transcript Approval Letter

Dear [Recipient]:

Thank you for volunteering to be a participant in my research study. In this email, you will find an attached copy of the transcript of the focus group interview. I humbly ask that you review this document within the next two weeks and let me know if you have any questions or comments. If I do not hear back from you within the next couple of weeks, I will assume that you are satisfied with the transcribed document.

Thank you again for your help!

Sincerely,

Christy L. Thomas

Doctoral Student
### APPENDIX J: Sample from NVivo – Word Frequency/ Similar Words

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Length</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Similar Words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>change</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3375</td>
<td>adapt, adaptation, add, address, adjust, adjustment, affect, age, aid, air, appreciate, approach, assist, assume, back, beat, become, beginning, better, birth, black, blow, blue, boost, breaking, bring, bringing, burning, call, calm, carry, catch, change, changed, changes, chew, chill, cleaning, close, color, combination, come, comfort, coming, compare, complete, concentration, confirm, conform, confusion, connection, cool, cream, cry, culture, cutting, death, decide, development, difference, discount, dive, dot, downfall, draw, dress, drop, dynamic, ease, eat, elaborate, encounter, end, ending, equal, even, experience, fail, fall, felt, figure, fill, find, finish, fit, fix, focus, form, full, gain, get, glass, going, graduate, green, grow, guy, hang, help, hit, hurt, hush, impact, impress, improve, incorporate, inspiration, introvert, irritate, joining, judge, key, know, land, leap, let, level, limit, line, live, make, mess, mix, mixture, move, movement, narrow, negate, opening, organization, pain, parallel, people, perfect, piece, play, point, preparation, prepare, provide, purple, pursuit, push, raise, reach, react, ready, realize, relax, reset, retirement, right, run, running, sacrifice, scale, season, separate, separation, service, set, shifting, silver, sitting, soak, soaking, socialize, split, spot, spotlight, start, stay, step, still, stop, stuff, switched, take, teach, test, think, tie, time, top, touch, transcribe, transfer, transition, travel, traveling, treat, trouble, true, try, turn, turning, upset, varies, vary, wake, walk, walking, waste, wear, white, wind, work, worrying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>moved</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1822</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>