UNDERSTANDING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF MILITARY-CONNECTED STUDENTS TRANSITIONING FROM THE MILITARY WAY OF LIFE TO HIGHER EDUCATION: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

by

Earnest Kincade Jr.

School of Education, Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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APPROVED BY:

Christian Raby, Ed.D. Committee Chair

George Johnson, Ed.D. Committee Member

Abstract

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to better understand the phenomenon of the lived experiences of military-connected students transitioning from the military way of life to higher education. This study was guided by Schlossberg's 4S theory on transitioning adults as related to situations, self, support, and strategies concerning military-connected students in Alaska. The participants were chosen by criterion sampling to select students based on their military affiliation, who attended the universities in the United States, and who have experienced multiple transitions related to the military lifestyle of their parents. The data collection process involved an initial questionnaire using criterion sampling to determine whether each candidate was a suitable match for the study. The researcher's data collection approach was distributing questionnaires and forming focus groups of 3-5 participants, followed by conducting and recording one-on-one interviews. The participants in this study relied on family and friends as a key strategy when transitioning to higher education. They credited preparing for the transition for reducing the familiar stressors associated with military-connected students. Their ability to adjust and adapt to changing environments was a significant coping strategy pivotal to handling the move to higher education.

Keywords: military-connected, deployment, coping, strategies, transitions, resiliency

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Dedication

First I give thanks to my personal savior, my heavenly father for allowing me this opportunity and the dedication to see this process through, and for the abilities and body of knowledge that I have gained throughout this experience. This is dedicated to my wonderful wife, Eve: without her love, patience and understanding none of this would have been accomplished. I would also like to mention my children who are the four pillars in my life, Amber, Jovante, Keyan and Tatyana—each of you have helped me more than you know. Next, I would like to dedicate this dissertation to the individuals who have encouraged me, cheered me on, and inspired me to not quit and to press on. I dedicate this final project to my loving mother Melze, my other mother Ozie, and my grandmother Mae Ella, who was not able to complete her education. Lastly, I dedicate this to the elementary teacher who told me that I was not allowed to participate in recess until I was able to complete an assignment I did not understand.

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I acknowledge my wife's contributions to this project, which included many sleepless nights, missed engagements, and vacations filled with homework assignments. Know that I recognize your sacrifices and support from the day I mentioned wanting to take on this venture until the day we finished the defense. I know that you were with me all the way.

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Lastly, I acknowledge that this project was made possible by the experiences of the participants who volunteered the time to tell their stories. They were an impressive group of military-connected individuals who have adapted to life outside of the military and who are striving in their chosen profession and completing their education.

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List of Abbreviations

Defense Manpower Data Center (DMDC)

Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC)

Military Interstate Children's Compact Commission (MIC3)

Military Transition Theory (MTT)

Permanent Change of Station (PCS)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

This phenomenological study presented the perspectives of military-connected students' experiences pertaining to transitions from the norms of military lifestyles associated with their parents' military service, examined their coping strategies and support systems, and chronicled their journey to higher education. This project recorded the voices of the students and centered on the data acquired from transcripts. It emphasized the significance of both the inherent identity of military-connected students and understanding their distinctive requirements within the student body of public universities. The compilation of relevant studies presented in the background delved into the nature of transitions and coping skills linked to the military way of life, particularly in relation to higher education. Additionally, the researcher presented the problem statement, addressed the gap in research, and focused on the experiences of the students and their coping mechanisms to solidify the significance of this study. This chapter presents the background of the study, including the historical, social and theoretical constructs. It introduces the problem statement, the purpose of this study, and the significance that this study holds theoretically, empirically, and practically. It is followed by the research questions that inform the narrative and closes with a summary.

Background

Since the 1970s, America has enjoyed the benefits of an all-volunteer armed forces (Rosenheck et al., 2021). Military leadership considers children and families to be heroes for their service (Frain & Frain, 2020). "Families serve too" became a part of the national vernacular, recognizing the millions of military-connected spouses, children, and service members (Briggs et al., 2019). Though military-connected students do not deploy to dangerous

locations, they may often experience transition situations related to their parents' military career (Carlie & Lucier-Greer, 2020). The armed services offer service members an opportunity to experience various places and cultures while continuing with their own personal lives, which includes raising families, and with that comes a variety of behavioral stressors for military families (Briggs et al., 2019), particularly for children between the ages of 3 and 10 years of age (Mustillo et al., 2016). Recent data showed that more than 1.6 million military-connected students are serving alongside their parents (O'Neal et al., 2020). America's armed forces have endured a steady flow of deployments since the early 2000s (Allen et al., 2022; 2021). Military-connected children may fall into two distinct categories of expectations: the warrior mentality or the victimized persona (Blaauw-Hara, 2016; De Pedro & Esqueda, 2020). The problem has been highlighted by others in the context of school leadership and counselors' responsibilities. Although school reform was the focus of a study conducted by Garner & Nunnery (2018) and multitiered systems of support in a study by Fenning (2021), no significant attention was paid to the lived experiences of military-connected students' transitions.

Historical Context

The Department of Defense estimates more than 1.35 million active-duty members are a part of an all-volunteer force, according to the Defense Manpower Data Center (2017), and more than 18 million veterans are living in the United States (Vespa, 2020). Since 2001, service members have been deployed to hostile environments, leaving their families behind for multiple and extended periods of time, according to the Department of Defense (2022). For many military families, the detrimental effects (Farnsworth & O'Neal, 2021) of deployment cycles are characterized by sequences of transitions that may manifest as uncertainty, lack of control, and unpredictability (Ross et al., 2021). They are innately exposed to aspects of military life which

Cramm et al. (2019) characterized as a triumvirate of mobility, family seperation, and risk; they concluded that studies investigating the mental health conditions of military-connected children are in a deleterious state. Recent data from the U.S. Department of Defense (2022) showed that as many as 1.7 million children are united with their parents' service (Gewirtz et al., 2020) and recognized the reality of military-connected children. While some believe that when a parent joins the military, the entire family serves in some capacities (Spencer et al., 2020), others have lamented the expectation placed on military families by the armed forces (Yarwood et al., 2021). During both major wars, the broader social anxieties navigated by the changing roles of wartime women workers generated conversations about the responsibility of mothers (Darian-Smith, 2020). One of the first studies of military deployments' effects on children from World War II posited that enduring absences could affect the returning service member's ability to reintegrate with their family (Hill R., 1958). Lagrone (1978) coined the expression "military family syndrome" to explain the the significant harm to children and families caused by the demands of military service on the family unit. Like non-military families, military families have changed over time to reflect new cultural and traditional frameworks. During the Vietnam War, only 10% to 15% of service members were married with children. Over the past decade, that number has grown to 56% (Lester & Flake, 2013). The Afghan and Iraq wars have led to disconcerting psychological, behavioral, and academic outcomes for military-connected families (De Pedro et al., 2011). America's longest wars have placed significant demands on military-connected children (Lester & Flake, 2013), brought national attention to military families, and spotlighted the need to better understand the effects that combat deployments may have on military-connected children (2013). According to the authors, over the past decade, communities,

branches of services, and the Department of Defense have implemented a wide array of mental health and family support initiatives.

Social Context

Socially, military-connected children may fall into distinct categories of expectations. On the one hand, military-connected children (students) may be perceived as having their parents' structured persona. The familiar term "military grit" may be defined as exhibiting resiliency in the face of adversity and having a sincere military mindset towards future goals (Blaauw-Hara, 2016). Military lifestyles construct pressured family members to conform to military standards, signaling that the families reflect the members (Harrell, 2001). Recently researchers have found that military-connected children are more likely to join the military themselves (Kleykamp, 2006). A study steered by social ecological and attachment theories emphasizing the importance of parent-adolescent relationship quality for adolescent adjustment as related to military families found that military stressors were not broadly related to perceived parent-adolescent relationships. It also highlighted military families' ability to adjust to stressors (Farnsworth & O'Neal, 2021). As often heard in military circles, when one member joins, the whole family serves (Park, 2011; Frain & Frain, 2020). On the other hand, military-connected children may have the perception that they are maladjusted in being faced with several transitions and may fall prey to social bullying and other victimizations (De Pedro et al., 2020). Younger children in particular may also present suicidal ideation across military installations (Frain & Frain, 2020).

Public school districts are vital to the academic success of military-connected students, as they promote awareness and the inclusion of all students. Transitions not only affect military families, but civilians may also experience transitions, such as changing jobs, moving to a new location, or even experiencing the loss of intimate relationships. However, there is a constant

expectation for military-connected children to leave their school friends and for parents to regularly prepare to leave friends and colleagues (Farmer et al., 2014). This phenomenon affects public school teachers, and educators in public school settings report that they are not professionally trained in military culture with respect to seeking help, transitions, and military societal sensitivities (Kranke, 2019). Most of these military-connected students attend local public schools near military installations (De Pedro et al., 2016; MIC3, 2019; Garner et al., 2014), and those fortunate enough to be near an installation tend to stay within familiar confines of informal social groups to promote military resiliency (Huebner et al., 2009). Canadian researchers stated that military-connected students experience the same social reckoning as US military-connected students (Hill & Cathcart, 2021).

Spencer et al. (2020) recognized that there are barriers for families seeking supportive services whether within or outside the military. Researchers have reported similar findings in other countries. For example, African military-connected children experience a transitional period related to deployments, fear of not fitting in, multiple moves, and family seperations (Aigboje & Legbeti, 2018; Ormeno et al., 2020). On average, military-connected children may expect to transition to a new location every two to four years (Karre et al., 2018) depending on mission, rank, and military necessity (Military Child Education Coalition, 2021; Sullivan et al., 2019). According to Ormeno et al. (2020), military culture is founded on organizational structure and discipline. However, studies show that military spouses want a stable environment for their children, the same as any civilian parents would; in short, both groups want healthy, happy kids (Trautmann et al. (2018).

Theoretical Context

Researchers have addressed military-connected students in the context of school-wide reform (Garner & Nunnery, 2018) and multi-tiered systems of support (Fenning, 2021) without offering any theoretical context. They studied military-connected support systems for coping with transitions as part of the military way of life. Astor et al. (2009; 2012) studied military-connected students without committing to a particular theoretical context. Still others have used Adlerian psychology to address this population (Kent & Buechner, 2021; 2019). Each study addressed deployments, academics, and social/emotional issues that require individual coping skills to be developed.

Schlossberg (1981) has been credited with formulating a theory of transitions. Although Schlossberg based this theory on transitioning adults, many of the concepts are applicable to military-connected students. The assumptions concerning adulthood that have been acknowledged throughout history are unremittingly contested by a backdrop in constant fluxion (Schlossberg, 2012). Schlossberg's theory of transition focuses on the 4Ss: situation, self, support, and strategy. Her research showed that people differ in their ability to adjust to change. A permanent change of station (PCS) may trigger anxiety in one military-connected child and a total sense of adventure in another. For that matter, the same person may not react the same way to similar circumstances each time he or she facing a particular transition. Everyone learns to adjust and build coping strategies to deal with challenging periods.

Problem Statement

The problem is that military-connected students may face a lack of consideration and responsiveness to their needs from public colleges when transitioning from military lifestyle norms to higher education (Hanna, 2020; Lunceford et al., 2020; Sikes et al., 2020). Military-connected students may be at risk of social-emotional hardships, as well as academic challenges

related to periods of transitions (Spencer et al., 2020). Although military-connected students exist in large numbers in the US and are recognized for supporting their serving parents, little is known about how they wear that identity and their lived experiences within the military ethos (Hanna, 2020). Military identity is complex and challenges congruent with military life may be best understood in relation to defensive processes frequently embedded within military experience (Burgin & Prosek, 2021). Prosek and Burgin (2020) postulated that investigators' insistence on academic and behavioral discrepancies of military-connected children is not harmonious with the construct of military lifestyles which moved family members to conform to military standards, because of the families' reflection of the service members' ethos. Military-connected students are a unique and diverse population that increasingly experience transitions other than combat trauma (Hanna, 2022). Transition stressors surrounding deployment reintegration or service termination may present significant challenges beyond what had been previous believed (Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018). The positive adjustment to civilian life fluctuates and military-connected students are directly affected by this transition (Cramm et al., 2019).

Amid adversities, military families navigate through predicaments by confronting the issue that is causing the stress (Stewart & Echterling, 2021); hence it is important that higher education institutions understand what makes military-connected students resilient. Transitioning these students must take into account how they fit into new environments and process the military and nonmilitary persona and expectations that shape their identity (Clary & Byrne, 2021). Gaining an inclusive understanding of the experiences of military-connected students transitioning to higher education will add to the body of literature from a student's perspective. Public schools are critical in supporting and promoting inclusion and diversity; military-connected youth often remain muted (Hanna, 2020). Military-connected students develop

remarkable resiliency when their needs are recognized and addressed (Rossiter et al., 2020). Thus educators must learn more about military-connected students and about their needs (2020).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of military-connected students transitioning from a military way of life to higher education. At this stage in the research, as it related to military-connected high school students' way of life, transitioning is defined as events or non-events that may determine changes in relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles (Anderson et al., 2012). Schlossberg's (1981) theory of transitioning adults guided this study. It provided an inclusive framework for the transition process and a broad understanding of the exclusive nature of military-connected high school students in relation to transition.

Significance of the Study

Military organizations have developed support programs to increase resilient behavior within military families. There is a significant need to break cultural barriers in order to ensure children and families can access those resources (Frain & Frain, 2020). A recent study highlighted the need for access to evidence-based mental health resources, as well as for transition services to help military-connected families face challenges, as poorly managed transitions created critical risks (Bond et al., 2022). Within the past decade, changes to the military services Transition Assistance Program focused on the military members obtaining employment after the military career is completed, but little attention was given to meeting family transition requirements (Whitworth et al., 2020).

Theoretical Frameworks

Several theoretical frameworks may help illuminate the multifaceted interaction of the compound factors involving military transitions (Pedlar et al., 2019). Schlossberg's (1981) adult transition theory drove this study. Although it is not widely used (Griffin, 2015), reserchers have utilized Schlossberg's theory to investigate what transitioning veterans may experience and to suggest ways to provide supporting resources for military members attending academic institutions or those seeking employment (Anderson & Goodman, 2014). According to Anderson et al. (2014), Schlossberg mentioned three distinct types of transitions: anticipated predictable transitions, for example events such as graduation; unanticipated transitons, such as the passing of a close relative of the family or a divorce (military families encountered both predictable and unanticipated transitions, according to Mancini et al., 2018); and lastly non-events, that is, events that were expected to happen and did. Non-events may include missing a job offer (2014).

Schlossberg (1981) describes four factors that affect the quality of one's periods of transition, calling them the 4Ss: situation, self, supports, and strategies. Military transition theory is one of the initial simulations to build on Schlossberg and is used to apply key insights into the military transition (Kintzle & Castro, 2018). Military transiton theory is focused on the military member in terms of moving from a military structural culture to civilian culture (2018). The current study adds to other recent works by documenting the lived exiperence of military-connected students transitioning to higher education. It highlighted coping skills that may be employed by military-connected students as they transition from a military way of life to higher education.

Empirical Application

Schlossberg et al. (1995) centered on the transitions that adults may experience throughout life and the intrinsic mechanisms they develop to cope and adapt. "Situation"

involves the individual's sense of control and how they assess a transition (Evans et al., 2009); it examines the characteristics of a transition and how its significance may sway the individual's actions. Accordingly, individuals may consider the duration of the situation, whether it is perceived as positive or negative, and if additional stressors are presented to further complicate matters (Anderson et al., 2012; Goodman et al., 2006). Individuals may respond differently depending on where they are in life, sometimes reacting differently to different types of transitons or even to similar situations occurring at different points in life (Schlossberg, 1981). Schlossberg (1981) defined "self" as an individaul's stage of life, their physical and mental health, racial background, belief systems or values, and prior experience. "Support" addresses intimate relationships with relatives, friends, and institutional resources (Whitworth et al., 2020), while "strategies" refers to the individual's competencies to handle the transition process through comportment (Ward, 2020).

Practical Significance

This study contributed to exploring the silent voices of military-connected students attending public universities. Increasingly, researchers have investigated military veterans transitioning from military to civilian life; for instance, in relation to higher education (Bergman et al., 2020; Yeager & Rennie, 2021; Hunter-Johnson et al., 2021), to military identity (Binks & Cambridge, 2018), to post-military empolyment (Greer, 2017; Ward, 2020), and, coming full circle, to the psychological aspects of transitioning (Shue et al., 2021). Navigating military-connected identity in a public space may present difficulties (Kintzle & Castro, 2018). Thus, highlighting research gaps focused on the military-connected child transitioning to higher education.

Research Questions

Military-connected students may experience transitions throughout their parents' military career. Their experiences may require them to define their intrinsic capacity to navigate stressful situations inherent to the military lifestyle. Common stressors include parental deployments, transferring schools every two to five years, moving away from friends, perpetually being the "new kid," and experiencing a reintegration after periods of family separation (Riggs & Riggs, 2011; Owen & Combs, 2017; Sullivan et al., 2019). Military-connected students may take on the military ethos of their service-connected parent. Portions of military identity may persist after separating from the service that may support or hinder positive social adjustment or welfare (Flack & Kite, 2021). Social organization, including military substructure, encompasses people, their common identity, and their interactions. The research questions were designed to explore how military-connected students experienced these changes.

Central Research Question

How do military-connected students describe their transition experiences to higher education?

Sub-Question One

How do military-connected students describe their identity during transitioning situations to higher education?

Sub-Question Two

How do military-connected students describe their coping strategies when transitioning to higher education?

Sub-Question Three

How do military-connected students describe their support systems?

Definitions

1. *Deployment*: Deployment includes number of emotional stages. Pre-deployment involves service member and family training, while deployment is the first month of absence. Sustainment involves the bulk of the family separation where routines are formed around the stress of uncertainty of the loved one's return (Lester & Flake, 2013). Redeployment covers the last month away from home. The final stage is post-deployment, in which the service member reintegrates with family members (Long, 2021).
2. *Resilience*: Sustained aptitude or positive adjustment while facing periods of adversity (Easterbrooks et al., 2013).
3. *Transitions*: Any situation, event, or non-event resulting in changed relationships, altered routines, assumptions, or roles (Schlossberg, 1981).

Summary

Military-connected students may experience a variety of transitions related to the military way of life. Guided by Schlossberg's (1981) 4S principles, this research investigated how military-connected students experienced transition, how they see themselves, what strategies they developed, and what were their systems of support. More often than their civilian counterparts, military-connected students have attended on average six to nine different schools over the course of their elementary and secondary education (MIC3, 2019). Recent research showed that military-connected students experienced more negative outcomes than that of their peers (Astor et al., 2013). Other researchers also mentioned that military youth may find it difficult to adjust to new locations. However, it is noteworthy that Mahar et al. (2018) reported that military-connected students were more likely to seek a family medicine practitioner than their civilian counterparts. Given that research has generally been focused on schools and providing assistance to military students, this project examined the lived experiences of the

students themselves and how their experiences offered important insights into this phenomenon. This research may have the potential to help discover different ways to positively affect military-connected students' capacity to cope with stressful situations related to transitioning to higher education.

Chapter One addressed the dearth of military-connected students' voices in recent studies pertaining to their coping strategies. The purpose and significance of the study was to outline the relationship of coping strategies to this unique population. Chapter Two addressed the problem outlined in Chapter One and uncovered the underlining gaps that guided the current study.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

An intentional review of the literature was conducted to discover the background and gain an understanding of military students transitioning to public colleges or universities. It was grounded on Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory. This chapter covered relevant studies of military-connected students with self-identified stressors related to transitioning to higher education. The study followed the theoretical framework represented by Schlossberg's 4Ss (situation, self, support, and strategies), which are relevant to assisting in coping and reducing stressors in military-connected children. What follows is a comprehensive review of related data to identify the gaps in the literature comprising a basis for conducting this research. Lastly, the summary identifies what the data has shown thus far and presents topics for continued investigation.

Theoretical Framework

Change is the central theme surrounding transitions. The first step in handling change is understanding the distinct types of change (Schlossberg, 2011; Anderson et al., 2011). An important part of the theory behind change is identifying short-to-intermediate term outcomes that may be required to meet ultimate long-term goals (Reinholz & Andrews, 2020). Changes reflect the vigorous influence of diverse social, cultural, technological, historical, and political landscapes. Challenges linked to military career transitions may increase the likelihood of poor behavior in veterans (Shue et al., 2021), even years after leaving the service (Ravindran et al., 2020).

Military students may experience transitions in several situations ranging from permanent change of stations (PCS), short-term and long-term deployments (De Pedro et al., 2018),

attending several different schools (Cramm et al., 2019), discovering who they are (Zurlinden et al., 2021), community support systems (Spencer et al., 2020), and coping strategies (Moore et al., 2017). To increase awareness of the theory of transitions, one must explore the theoretical framework designed by Schlossberg (1981). Generally speaking, adults are faced with increasingly difficult challenges throughout their lives (Goodman et al., 2006), but beyond these challenges, military spouses face an array of challenging situations related to deployment (Kritikos et al., 2020). Similarly, this study recognized military-connected students as young adults dealing with stressful transitions. Bridging gaps is the fundamental criterion for effective governance of transitions (O'Neil & Nalbandian, 2018).

Schlossberg recognized that different people cope with transitions in different ways, even responding differently to similar situations at different periods of their lives. For some, the process occurs with little effort, while others falter to find their appropriate position, even for years (Schlossberg, 2011). The 4Ss begin with life's situations. For military-connected students, transitioning from school to school is difficult enough on its own. Military-connected students move on average three to nine times during their school-aged years (MCEC, 2021). Transitioning to something familiar would be easier to handle than transitioning to something altogether new or foreign (Schlossberg, 2011).

The next S of Schlossberg's 4Ss is self, which refers to the individual's inner strength, used for dealing with stressful life events. She goes on the mention that the individual's level of optimism, resiliency, and ability to deal with ambiguous situations is key. Self-identity centers on how internal mechanisms and personal characteristics sway coping (Griffin, 2015). Griffin (2015) proposed that characteristics such as age, gender, and economic status may shape the way individuals handle change, while Anderson et al. (2012) and Goodman et al. (2006) noted the

significance of elucidatory panache, optimism, self-confidence, resilience, values, and commitment in this process plays a greater role in creating positive outcomes. They suggested that the more confident the individuals are with themselves, the more likely they are to view the change as a positive event. Erikson (1968) intellectualized identity as a continuous sense of monotony expanding over time. He listed three collective elements that shape an individual's sense of identity: biological characteristics, psychological factors, and cultural contexts. Military-connected students may rely on their identity (structure) as it relates to military culture to navigate difficult periods of transition (Camacho et al., 2021; Lechuga et al., 2021).

Next in the 4Ss comes support. Military lifestyles pressured family members to conform to military standards, signaling that the families reflect the members Schlossberg (2011) stated that the support at an individual's disposal is vital to one's sense of well-being during times of transition. Support is essentially social and it bends to manage how desired feedback, caring, and affirmation have the potential to foster smooth transitions (Goodman et al., 2006). Adapting to the world in the absence of a military support complex, education and health care are issues identified as key in the transition phase (Thomas, 2018). Installation housing developments may contribute to military-connected students' sense of community and as a support system. Military family support initiatives have continuously evolved across military eras, frequently requiring adjustments that take into account the kaleidoscopic ethos of military and family essentials (Mancini et al., 2018). Support should not be focused solely on the active-duty member because it may fall short in supporting the family as a unit (2018). Transitioning military-connected students have a wide variety of support systems such as education, which is both a high priority and an integral part of the military (Sikes et al., 2020). Military student liaisons located on university and college campuses are systems built to support military-connected students

throughout the transitioning process into college (2020). This does not eliminate the stresses of transitioning, however; it merely gives students a constant system to engage with. Sikes et al. (2020) stated that military liaisons understand military culture and provide a single point of contact for military-connected students that supports military identity.

This brings the theory to the last of Schlossberg's 4Ss: strategies. Coping strategies have been described as a mechanism individuals use to try to change a situation, that would reframe the situation, and those skills that help reduce stress (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). Both military service and military family life demand families cultivate two-pronged strategies that allow for acclimatization to existing transitions by first diminishing family liabilities and then bolstering resilience (Mancini et al., 2018). Coping strategies highlight one's innate abilities to handle transitions through personal behaviors (Evans et al., 2009), including coping responses to a favorable change in the situation or the meaning of a transition as well as ways to manage the stress associated with transition (Evans et al., 2010; Ryan et al., 2011). Pearlin and Schooler (1978) lamented that there are no magic coping repertoires that handle stress so remarkably as permanently eliminating the stressors. They further mentioned that during non-stressful times, coping skills are ready to be engaged to reduce any negative effects.

Other researchers have used Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory to investigate the lived experiences of pregnant adolescents and adolescent mothers' coping strategies during the transition to motherhood (Gbogbo, 2020) using interpretative analysis. It has also been employed by researchers investigating ex-felons transitioning into, though, and out of higher education (Leary, 2018). Leary (2018) classified this kind of study under post-positivism and asserts that the research verified that mentoring matters, for both kids and grown-ups. The theory has been widely used to ground research into military-connected service members' transitions (Ward,

2020; Gordon et al., 2019). Still others have used Schlossberg's transition theory to investigate disabled African American veterans' transition to a Historically Black University (Lewis & Wu, 2021; 2019). This study concluded that disabled students with combat experience were significantly more likely to require a wide range of mental health services while at university.

Transitions are common to military-connected students, as these are far more likely to have multiple experiences in changing schools, as noted by the Military Child Education Coalition. As for transitions considering veterans' social and mental health support systems, combat experiences are often looked upon as the principal research objective (Kent & Buechner, 2021). Increasingly, evidence that transition stress related to deployments or exiting the service may be an additional factor (Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018). There are disparities in research based on military-connected dependent students transitioning to higher education.

The theory of transitions informed this study by chronicling the lived experiences of military-connected students transitioning to higher education that have managed associated stressors in real-time on a personal level. Many adults are not sure what they desire out of life (Schlossberg, 1975), and arguably this may also be true of young adults such as military-connected students. Taking stock of the decisions made during periods of transition is pivotal for individuals in developing effective coping skills (Schlossberg, 1975; Schlossberg, 2007). The researcher documented how military-connected students traverse a lifestyle that forced them to develop skills and coping strategies that encourage resiliency and perseverance in order to be successful in higher education.

Related Literature

There is some agreement in the literature surrounding this topic in terms of common concerns dealing with military-connected students. The U.S. armed forces population comprises

1.35 million active-duty soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines, civilian personnel, over 800 thousand National Guardsmen and Reservists, and more than 23 million veterans (DMDC, 2017; Burgin & Ray, 2020). According to reports, upwards of 2.7 million troops have experienced deployments into hostile environments or recurring training commitments that take them away from their assigned duty stations (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022; St. John & Fenning, 2020). Currently, the DoD estimates there are 1.7 million force-dependent children worldwide (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022; St. John & Fenning, 2020). It is widely accepted that military-connected children are at risk for diminished academic achievement, developing social-emotional health issues, and undesired behavioral outcomes (Burgin & Ray, 2020; Moore et al., 2017). According to Burgin and Ray (2020), military children experience frequent moves both across state lines and overseas due to their parents' relocations (MCEC, 2021; MIC3, 2019). Military family deployment experiences and regular moves can negatively affect social, emotional, and psychological outcomes among military-connected students (De Pedro et al., 2017; De Pedro & Esqueda, 2020).

Situations

Military-connected students' lives are filled with changes; deployments, frequent moves, and parental separations are common military stressors in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom (Hess & Skomorovsky, 2019). According to Schlossberg's transition theory, having experienced a particular transition previously in life does not necessarily equate to a viable coping strategy. In other words, a military-connected student that has developed coping skills following a parent's deployment to a known location may not be able to effectively engage those same coping skills if the deployment location is unknown. Adding this situation to changing schools, a new home, and new friends may understandably present challenging

transitional periods. The fallout of military factors may not be the same for all children at all times, given that the military components of the military-connected child's well-being are critical to understanding the stressors these families face (Hess & Skomorovsky, 2019).

Parental Deployments

One of the chief factors for military-connected students transitioning to higher education includes the cycles of deployments. Following the events of September 11, 2001, 2.77 million servicemen and women have served on 5.4 million deployments (Wenger et al., 2018), signaling that deployments represent significant experiences within the armed forces (2018). Wenger et al. (2018) found that 57% of members were married and 45% of these had children. This study found that both the number of deployments and the cumulative length of time spent deployed influence service members and family outcomes. Deployments among other military operations may play a significant role in the mental health of military-connected children (Johnson et al., 2018). Military-connected college students may be at greater risk for mental health disorders (Johnson et al., 2018; Cunitz et al., 2019). Johnson and others draw attention to plausible mental health disparities associated with the military way of life. This research suggests there are implications for health care workers in treating military-connected students. Military-connected students, depending on their maturity level, may present anecdotal behaviors as they adjust to stressors representing different stages of the deployment cycle (Sullivan et al., 2019).

Deployment begins with the predeployment phase. Deploying families attend training sessions and briefings to prepare them for what is to come and to tell them what they should expect. Military-connected children attending these predeployment events may learn skills to help them cope with their feelings and adjustment to their changing roles (Whiteman et al., 2020). According to research, after many years of deployment cycles, the negative effects

experienced by military-connected children are beginning to show signs of higher risk for physical, psychological, and behavioral health issues and make them vulnerable to the effects of toxic stress (Rossiter et al., 2020; Wretman & Bowen, 2019). Wretman & Bowen's (2019) study suggested that having any parent in the military is likely to produce detrimental consequences in military children due to deployments.

The effects of parental deployments on military-connected students can be significant and can negatively affect their behavior, social-emotional adjustment, and academic performance. Researchers have found that children of deployed parents have increased rates of mental health concerns (Cunitz et al., 2019), indicating that deployments are not solitary occurrences, but rather represent a series of transitions that the entire family must circumnavigate (Whiteman et al., 2020; St. John & Fenning, 2020). Whiteman and others defined predeployment as the period after the military member and their families have been notified of a pending deployment. The predeployment cycle concludes after the service member leaves their home station en route to predeployment training or the actual deployment theater of operations (St. John & Fenning, 2020).

The deployment phase of the cycle has drawn considerable attention from researchers trying to gain further insights into military families, broadly noting the challenges faced by the non-deploying parent's parenting and mental health (Flittner O'Grady et al., 2018). The deployment may be seen as a family stressor due to the prolonged absence of a parent coupled with the dangers faced within the operational theater (Gewirtz et al., 2018). The deployment cycle ends when the service member redeploys back to their home station; this is termed the reintegration phase. Similar to the predeployment phase, there is a dearth of research on family dynamics during the reintegration period. This period is not free of stress, even though reunion

offers families a chance to return to pre-deployment life (Whiteman et al., 2020). Reintegration is a uniquely stressful period, and the strains involved in reintegrating into the new family structure may be challenging for the military family (Hinojosa et al., 2021; Mallonee et al., 2020). Researchers have suggested that service members and their families are underserved during the reintegration period and highlight the need for intervention aimed at improving family relations during this period (Mallonee et al., 2020).

Parental Stress During Deployment

The left-at-home parent and the deployed parent unanimously express tremendous shifts in parenting dynamics and household responsibilities at each transition of the deployment cycle. As soon as the member deploys, duties and responsibilities are reassigned to the left-at- Military lifestyles pressured family members to conform to military standards, signaling that the families reflect the membershome parent, rendering them essentially a single parent (DeVoe et al., 2020). Parental military deployment was determined to negatively affect children's mental health, as suggested by the assessment of several psychopathological symptoms (Cunitz et al., 2019). Apart from the nonmilitary parent's mental health, the stresses of parenting during deployments may therefore present challenges for military children. While some military-connected students may handle deployment well, the deployment of a parent may contribute to some individuals developing mental health issues (Williamson et al., 2018). It is important to note that the deployed parent may also contribute to the child's stress (St. John & Fenning, 2020). Deployment may comprise a significant portion of a child's life, and deployed parents may return at a child's different developmental stage, one that requires a different approach to parenting than when they left (Julian et al., 2018). Military parents' emotional stress had been attributed to children's externalized behaviors (St. John & Fenning, 2020).

A principal challenge of each deployment phase is reunion and reintegration (Zurlinden et al., 2021; Julian et al., 2018). Reintegration demands that the redeploying parent drop the military culture and embrace the current family structure. Military structure places a high importance on routines and rules, seemingly discouraging emotional expression; this may not be the best means of raising military-connected children (Julian et al., 2018). As the parent's stress intensifies, the undesired or problematic behaviors of the children also increase. The literature documents that military children are influenced by their own experiences and the mental health experiences faced by their parents, both at home and deployed. Parental stress may influence children's behavioral and social-emotional performance, specifically during the deployment phases. Researchers have posited that the support of parents during each deployment phase is vital to promoting the child's well-being and mental health (St. John & Fenning, 2020).

Deployments represent periods of high stress for military families and there is growing evidence linking deployments with a wider range of adverse mental health issues for both spouses and military-connected children (Trautmann et al., 2018; Warfield et al. (2018). Since 2001, more than two million members have deployed to what are often considered hostile locations (Carter & Renshaw, 2016; U.S. Department of Defense, 2022; Allen et al., 2020); understandably, deployments are always an expectation for military-connected students and may be stressful situations for spouses and military-connected children (Wretman & Bowen, 2019). Researchers have found that health care utilization increased during periods of deployments (Warfield et al., 2018).

Communication between the deployed member and their family can become strained, which can be harmful and distracting for the mission (Carter and Renshaw, 2016). Hence making sure children are connected to the deployed parent is important to the spouses of deployed

members (Trautmann et al., 2018). Arguably, communication is beneficial for military-connected students' social-emotional health, and a lack of communication can sometimes produce additional stress. Carter and Renshaw state that there are clear gains and drawbacks resulting from different types of communication between family members and the deployed member. Military-connected children have grown up with the knowledge and experiences of parental deployments and separations as a normal way of life (Rossiter et al., 2020).

Military-connected children that have experienced multiple deployments with parents in combat locations and experienced more than ten deployments within their educational career are described by Rossiter and others as "Blue Star children." Many service members return home with seen and unseen injuries, which at times require that the military-connected child take on the role of caregiver. A current review of the literature concluded that family separations and deployments were reliably found to negatively impact military-connected kids (Farnsworth & O'Neal, 2021). For military-connected children, parents being deployed parents is not unexpected; rather, deployments represent a series of transitions that they must manage (Whiteman et al., 2020).

Deployment-related Disorders

Considering the importance of stress in eating and obesity disorders, it is critical to understand the influences of the distinctive stressors to which military-connected children may be exposed. Military-connected children appear to be at greater risk for emotional difficulties including eating disorders (Pearlman et al., 2019; 2020). Studies have shown that parental comments concerning weight, while sometimes well-intended, may be perceived as negative by the child. Siblings may also contribute to weight disorders by teasing their family members (Pearlman et al., 2019; 2020). Parent-related stress may also affect adolescent eating habits.

Parental anguish correlated with the frequency of parental deployments was found to be a factor in adolescent shape and weight issues and global eating pathology. Pearlman and researchers' study included a racially and ethnically diverse participant sample of male and female military-connected dependents, and researchers conducted structured interviews to assess eating disorders. They also measured the frequency of parental deployments and parental distress to correlate with eating disorders. This study's findings are typical of a small portion of male and female adolescent military dependents (Higgins Neyland et al., 2020; 2019).

Other studies have investigated the connections between military-connected kids and their parent's careers as these relates to excess weight gain and symptoms of depression and anxiety. Results showed that military-connected adolescent children were vulnerable to the cultural stressors of the military structure that may place them at higher risk for excess weight gain and emotional distress when compared to their civilian peers (Pine et al., 2021).

Relocations

Military families move every two to three years, meaning that they may relocate up to six times within a school career. This impacts the continuity within their community, extracurricular activities, and close friendships, and suggests that the family unit is a vitally important source of support and consistency (Pearlman et al., 2019; 2020). Millions of military-connected children share the unique experience of being reared all over the world (Zurlinden et al., 2021). In a study investigating school transitions among military-connected kids, researchers found that stresses related to frequent relocations are a common theme (Farnsworth & O'Neal, 2021). The unpredictable landscape of relocations was deemed particularly challenging (Bradshaw et al., 2010). Military-connected kids may feel anger towards their parents because of the frequent moves. The qualitative data suggested the predominant stressors on military students include

tension at home, strained relationships with friends, adjusting to a new school, academic challenges, and student/teacher associations (2010). A prevalent stressor associated with relocations is the challenge of meeting new people and sustaining intimate relationships. Participants indicated how difficult it was to leave their long-time friends. They also noted how knowledge of the pending move caused their friends to isolate them in order to lessen the impact of their moving away (Bradshaw et al., 2010).

This phenomenon is not exclusive to the American military but is found in all Canadian Commonwealth armed forces, which are described as making intense demands on military members and their families (Perreault et al., 2020). Similar to the U.S., Canadian military families are subject to the stresses related to relocations, such as childcare, education, and health care (2020). The expectations of planning for the future are limited, and the lack of predictability and personal choice adds further stressors (Rowan-Legg, 2017). Bullock's (2017) study established that although Canadian military-connected adolescents believed that relationships are challenging, they were not prominent indicators of adolescent well-being. The evidence showed that negative responses to relocation are more supportive of the recency of the transition than its cumulative effects (Manser, 2020). When considering the correlation between mobility rate and negative behaviors as related to relocation recency, Perreault et al. (2020) found these problematic observations may be transient and may explain the strain of coping with new environments. However, observed relocation challenges, although contracted, endured a statistical trend ($p=.06$) and were slightly constant one year after the relocation (Perreault et al., 2020).

Family Separations

Family separation is one of many challenges experienced by military-connected children (Mogil et al., 2021). The parental commitment to service affects the well-being of the family as a whole, including the children (Mogil & Paley, 2019). During military-associated family separations, in light of deployments or training missions, the parent at home may experience a variety of emotional challenges, including, anxiety, loneliness, and irritation related to stressors involving increased responsibilities in the family. The temporary absence of the separated parent along with concerns about the absent parent's safety may contribute to one's emotional state as well (DeVoe et al., 2020). The build-up of psychological tension may decrease the at-home parent's ability to support the needs of the children during the transition of family separation (Ross et al., 2021). Scholars have recognized that parental service commitments may be present for families, even after the commitment ends (Mogil et al., 2021). Adolescent children depend on their parents for external regulation of emotion, and behavior may become strenuous, particularly when the parent is experiencing baseline stages of emotional inconsistencies themselves (Mogil et al., 2021).

Independent investigations of military-connected families showed that parental separation symptoms were associated with the children's emotional and behavioral health (DeVoe et al., 2018; Hajal et al., 2020). These findings indicate that anticipatory mediations are designed to help children deal with their emotional development surrounding the mental capacity of the at-home parent during family separations (Mogil et al., 2021). It is important to study the outcome of parental separations within the context of military-connected children's transitions. However, just as stress and hardship can resonate in relation to parental military service, resiliency may also be developed (Mogil et al., 2021; Acker et al., 2020). The family narrative and emotion regulation behaviors promote the parents' reflectivity (Acker et al., 2020) and the experiences of

their children from a developmental perspective (Mogil et al., 2021). Research on the military father's relationships found that although there are many challenges to parenting during separations, nearly all participants describe positive adaptations, often with the support of the at-home parent. This study also found that many fathers did not view separations as a negative experience. Conversely, a study of the Canadian military investigating the impact of family separations (deployments) on the well-being of school-aged children found that this phenomenon negatively impacted the child's well-being, routines, and family dynamics (Skomorovsky & Bullock, 2017). The authors lamented that while this view may promote military mission effectiveness, it also presents missed opportunities in preparing military-connected children for this transition (Drew et al., 2021).

Community (Sense of Belonging)

A sense of community may be regarded as a resource for resiliency (Bullock et al., 2022). Community impacts the entire family, affecting adults and children alike (O'Neal et al., 2018). Investigators have consistently noted that lacking a sense of community was one of the barriers to military-connected students' transition to higher education (Williams-Klotz & Gansemer-Topf, 2017). Community support may be particularly important for military families due to the increased significance of social support during stressful situations related to military service (Conforte et al., 2017). Military families are a part of an interrelated community of support, whereas they also have a mutual impact on one another (Makhija et al., 2019).

Clary & Byrne (2021) investigated youth veterans transitioning to higher education. A key finding was that veteran students between the ages of 18 and 22 shared that their transition experiences to higher education resembled starting over. They expressed feeling that they did not fit in with their peers and that they were not prepared to navigate the higher education

atmosphere. Participants in this study remarked that others viewed their military identity as a central point of their existence. During such periods of isolation (Derefinko et al., 2018), some may feel they lack a mission or purpose due to the disparate support or unclear provocation from others. This study exposed some challenges that military-connected students may face as they move into higher education. They further highlighted the methods used by educational professionals to help this group through this process. While this study focused on emerging adults between the ages of 18 and 29, it is important to recognize the similarity with traditional higher education students and to note the glaring difference in life experiences (Clary & Byrne, 2021). The social-emotional outcomes were included in a study investigating child mental health outcomes in the military. Investigators found that parents reported a higher probability of child mental health conditions for non-deployed veterans. As the parent's mental health increased on the ordinal scale, the children's probability of having mental health conditions decreased (Hinojosa et al., 2021).

A study using the social organization theory of action and change analyzed 223 military families to examine how the adults' sense of community and community engagement is correlated with their coping abilities (O'Neal et al., 2018). This study further connected the well-being of military-connected children. It is important to consider the community connections within military families surrounding their unique challenges (Kritikos et al., 2020). The military community regularly experiences relocations, parental absences, and the stress associated with the danger faced by the military member's service (Conforte et al., 2017). This situation made community connections even more critical, as they represent an additional source of familial resources and support (O'Neal et al., 2018).

Self

Although Schlossberg's theory is not specific to military-connected students, it has been applied to a diverse array of fields (Leary, 2018; Harry & Weight, 2021; Collom et al., 2021). As it relates to self, Schlossberg's theory focuses on two factors: personal and demographic characteristics pertaining to how one views life, such as socioeconomic status, gender, age, and other personal attributes, and psychological resources, including ego development, perspective, and values (Schlossberg, 1981). Students' reluctance to self-identify their military-connected status to educational institutions may limit the administration's ability to provide needed support (Hill & Cathcart, 2021). Military cultural identity may afford many positive experiences to its members and their families. These families may also enjoy beneficial personal development such as enhanced coping strategies, flexibility, positive social skills, diverse interests, and awareness of different cultures. Military-connected students might identify with their military parents' military service, thus making it difficult to separate themselves from the military culture.

Military culture has influenced the prescriptive social expansion of self-identity that conflicts with nonmilitary standards (Carpenter & Silberman, 2020). Identity development involves how individuals acquire and calculate identity-related information and process challenge (Hartman et al., 2021). Life-changing events can alter an individual's sense of identity. Schlossberg (1981) categorized such events as anticipated or unanticipated transitions. Self-efficacy is the extent to which an individual perceives that they can manage a particular stressor. Youths that are not sure of themselves feel less capable of handling stress and may be overtaken by their stress, leading to undesired outcomes (Carlie & Lucier-Greer, 2020). Military-connected students are unique in that they are more likely to have behavioral health concerns than their civilian peers (Wooten et al., 2019). The social-emotional intelligence of military-connected students is vital in dealing with transitions. Stressors due to parental deployments also result in

elevated anxiety and reports of poor quality of life in military school-aged children, consequently impacting social, emotional, and academic performance.

Military Grit

Duckworth et al. (2007) coined the term "grit" to illustrate the display of resiliency in the face of difficulty and having a sincere military mindset towards future goals (Blaauw-Hara, 2016). Duckworth defined grit as passion and perseverance to achieve long-term goals of individual significance (Duckworth et al., 2019). This notion bears a resemblance to Bandura's theory of academic self-efficacy or the judgment of an individual's ability to complete a course of action to accomplish the task at hand (2016). In a study of military-connected and non-military-connected students at West Point, it was found that non-cognitive traits, such as grit, may have a greater influence than cognitive predictors of achievement in relation to the initiation period at West Point, while on the other hand, cognitive abilities were trusted predictors of academic success and grades (Duckworth et al., 2019). The theory suggested that talent multiplied by effort equals skill; skill consequently determines achievement (Ursua et al., 2021). One study, conducted at Uniformed Services University of Health Sciences, found no significant variances among genders, the author stating that grit is composed of perseverance of determination and steadiness of interest, which is positively connected with performance and achievement in various disciplines (Ursua et al., 2021). Another study found that grit had a positive effect on male participants but no significant effect on female participants (Whipple & Dimitrova-Grajzl, (2021), and a study of grit as an organizational culture found that there may be a culture of grit within the military structure (Luning et al., 2022).

Other researchers that investigated grit as a construct, questioning its significance as a reliable predictor of achievement (Credé et al., 2017). This study, representing over 66,000

individuals, revealed that the higher construct of grit is not unanimously confirmed. Credé and others found that grit is strongly associated with conscientiousness. After controlling for conscientiousness, researchers found that perseverance of effort components had significantly stronger validities than the consistency of interest, noting that this explained the variance in academic performance. In light of Duckworth et al.'s (2007) broad acceptance of grit as a narrative predictor and basis of performance, some reliable theoretical and empirical explanations may warrant a deeper understanding of the grit construct (Credé et al., 2017). Credé et al. (2017) found that mediations designed to improve perseverance and passion may only represent anemic effects on performance and achievement. They questioned the validity of grit as presented by Duckworth and others, noting that the primary construct of grit may rest in the perseverance factor (Credé et al., 2017).

Identity

According to the author, military kids fit the third culture kid model. "Third culture kids" was coined by researchers in the 1950s to refer to those children that spend considerable amounts of their formative development outside of the parent's home culture and start to identify with a foreign culture (Hanna, 2020). During this developmental stage, adolescents may attempt to find themselves through individual tenets and by exploring various roles (Miller et al., 2020). Military identity shapes how individuals see themselves relative to the outside world, and the inevitable separation from the military esprit de corps and culture introduces a significant identity modification and may present a crisis for some (Kleykamp et al., 2021). This identity shift takes place through a process of everchanging reference groups, in which individuals gauge themselves less on the aspect of previous roles and more on the expectations of the role they are entering. Reference groups are the standards by which one measures oneself and individuals

seeking to join the group adopt the standards of the reference group. Identity shifts serve as a turnstile, in that they legitimize a role transition. This shift dictates building a post-military persona, escaping military-connectedness, and moving towards reflecting more on oneself as a civilian. This transition is materialized through preemptive socialization (Kleykamp et al., 2021).

One study investigating student service members and veterans on university campuses found that veterans are stereotyped by their peers. It found that six characteristics were assigned to veterans: disciplined, leader, masculine, mentally unstable, stuck in the past, and stressed (Motl et al., 2022). The results showed that veterans are more acclimatized to these negative connotations and may be reluctant in revealing their military-connected status.

Separating from the military-connected environment affects the family as a whole and it is important to consider the entire ecological context to understand the experience (Corry et al., 2022). Despite the positive outcomes of military service transition programs, significant gaps remain in understanding the contributing factors that make transitioning more difficult for some members and how to address these challenges. The authors in this study recognized the dearth of research related to the military family while concentrating on the transition process of the military spouse (Corry et al., 2022). Similar to the military member, spouses may face a host of challenges not limited to childcare needs, shifting family roles, loss of military identity, and a sense of community (Thomas, 2018). Family members acclimatize to military culture, regularly taking on the military identity along with their military branch and mantra (Corry et al., 2022).

Emotional Intelligence

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Children's Mental Health (2022) emphasized that one in six young children have mental or behavioral disorders. Vannest et al. (2021) examined data from 2,852 participants and discovered that military-connected students

were not at greater behavioral risk than other groups. This quantitative investigation, carried out in the southern district of Louisiana and using a reliable psychometrically sound rating instrument of risk for emotional and behavioral disorders, found that students in grades 9 to 12 did not present any statistical differences in the risk level of military-connected and nonmilitary-connected students (Vannest et al., 2021). Although, researchers found no statistical differences between the two identified variables, they did identify significant correlations between the local populations and the national norms, which suggest that socioeconomic factors were involved. They also examined CDC reports on internalized disorders, which have increasing over the past decade. Although this study produced important data points to contribute to the literature on the topic, limitations noted by the researchers stood out. The sample was local, which is not an uncommon finding, given the funding requirements of conducting broader research. The data also compared unequal sample sizes, which may have reduced the validity of some measurements.

Other researchers found that military-connected students did present a higher risk for adverse outcomes when compared to their nonmilitary-connected counterparts (Castillo et al. 2017) and faced unique challenges growing up compared to nonmilitary children (Veri et al., 2021). The authors recognized that traditional research has been focused on active duty service members almost exclusively without considering their family members. Recent inquiries showed that military-connected youth experience social-emotional health vulnerabilities due to the military culture and lifestyle (Veri et al., 2021). Although many families exhibited a high resilience in response to military structure, military-connected children are at risk for emotional and behavioral challenges, which in turn may impact the family (Ridings et al., 2019; 2018; Briggs-Gowan et al., 2019).

Still, other studies suggested that school transitions play less of a role in military-connected students' mental health (Hinojosa et al., 2021), finding that military family status appears to be a positive aspect of the mental health of military-connected children. They found that nonmilitary and military students that were not subject to deployments but experienced multiple residential moves were at far greater risk of mental health issues. This suggests that frequent moves may be detrimental to students unaccustomed to school transitions. This may also highlight the effectiveness of pre-deployment training and briefings associated with deployment cycles (Griffith, 2020). One study of the Army Readiness Groups' effect on military families found that such support systems were effective for two-thirds of the participants studied; being most beneficial to the military spouses. The most prevalent use was associated with other military-based services dealing with spousal loneliness and coordinating childcare (Griffith, 2020). Some limitations noted by Griffith (2020) highlight the need for a more recent survey rather than archived data. Only a single questionnaire was used in the study, whereas interviews can be a much more reliable structure, allowing the researcher greater control (Barrett & Twycross, 2018).

Frequent moves, family separations, and parental health factors are characterized as predictors of child health outcomes, and this is true in military and non-military families alike (Hinojosa et al., 2021). As previously mentioned, military children experience elevated mobility rates, changing schools at an average rate of six to nine times, outpacing civilian students by three times on average (De Pedro et al., 2017). The authors stated that the situations that military-connected students may find themselves in can lead to social alienation or exclusion from peer groups, thereby placing military-connected students at risk of being victimized in an educational setting. In addition to military-specific challenges, military-connected students face

harassment, placing them at risk of school victimization (De Pedro & Esqueda, 2020). Given the negative mental health outcomes regarding times of transitions and separations, clinicians must be aware and prepared to meet the need (Burgin & Prosek, 2021). De Pedro et al. (2020) found that military-connected students had significantly higher rates of victimization. Their study showed that 31% of military-connected students reported being pushed or shoved compared to 20% of non-military-connected students. Military-connected students reported being victimized by false rumors or lies within 12 months at a rate of 43%, compared to 33% for nonmilitary-connected students in the study.

These studies showed that military-connected students face demanding situations beyond those normally associated with the military way of life. Many military families have built strategies and strengths in relation to transitions and separations due to deployments (St. John & Fenning, 2020). The outcomes of deployment on children can be significant, altering their behavior, social-emotional development, and academic performance (2020). Public schools can play an important part in supporting and promoting inclusion; however, unintentionally marginalized military-connected students may remain invisible in public schools due to a lack of awareness by school administration and staff. Thus, providing professional psychoeducation regarding deployment cycles to teachers may help them identify military-connected children's behaviors related to each cycle (St. John & Fenning, 2020). Canadian researchers determined that, going forward, it is necessary to provide military awareness training for pre-service educators (Hill & Cathcart, 2021). Military-connected students are a bastion of academic resiliency while wielding the two-edged label of being the new kid, which makes them able to meet new people but also makes them weary of creating bonds that are often temporary (Le Hanna, 2020).

Supports

Support is the next S of Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory, according to which support systems deal with close relationships, family, a network of friends, and communities (Schlossberg, 1981). Support systems strengthen and encourage students to seek positive outcomes. There are more than 440 military installations near public school systems (Spencer et al., 2020), and nearly 90% of military-connected students attend school in public school districts (Military Child Education Coalition, 2021; Military Interstate Children's Compact Commission, 2019; U.S. Department of Defense, 2022). Spencer and co-investigators sought to measure the effectiveness of school-based mentor programs. The unique characteristics of military-connected students suggested that additional measures were warranted to meet their needs. A study conducted by De Pedro et al. (2017) stressed the importance of school staff and professionals across all environments to recognize the strengths inherent in military-connected students as they work to mitigate challenging triggers. Many military-connected students developed skills related to transitions and family separations (St. John & Fenning, 2020), and a great deal may be gleaned from transition experiences (Robbins et al., 2019).

Robbins et al. (2019) further mentioned that while military families face unique stressors, how parents respond to those stressors can positively impact their child's growth. Mallonee et al. (2020) found that poor mental health among service members and their spouses was correlated with heightened reunion stress. However, Robbins et al. (2019) found that the social-emotional connection between parents and children has been shown to promote healthy relationships (Mallonee et al., 2020).

School-based supports such as counselors, social workers, and school psychologists can provide mental health support for military-connected students as they advocate for their needs

(St. John & Fenning, 2020). School-based interventions can benefit military-connected children by lessening the social seclusion by enriching social connections to teachers and the school community at large (Ohye et al., 2020). Researchers have indicated that school staff are expected to teach and support a wide range of students on any given day. The emergence of the military-connected student garners important considerations from school social workers and school psychologists (Capp et al., 2017).

Close Relationships

Although each family member may experience deployments differently, they are interconnected through their unique attachments to each other (Clark et al., 2018). On the one hand, adolescent relationships may become strained during the military-related separations phase of reintegration, while on the other hand, adolescents may develop meaning (dos Santos et al., 2022) out of the parent's absence in ways more sophisticated than younger children can. Military-connected adolescents commonly mentioned the stress of initiating and maintaining close friendships and the stress of separating from long-time bonds (Perreault et al., 2020). Communication is an important aspect of close relationships: whereas infrequent communication during periods of separation increases tension within relationships, frequent communication may decrease family members' anxiety concerning the ambiguity of the separation experience and also promote personal growth (Clark et al., 2018).

Family Dynamics (Parent-Adolescent Relationships)

Researchers have hypothesized that military stressors are uniquely related to parental-adolescent relationship quality. Conversely, they conclude that most stressors are not uniquely related to an adolescent's perceived relationship quality with the active-duty parent. However, Farnsworth and O'Neal (2021)found that support related to the frequency of deployments was a

uniquely related stressor connected to the parent-adolescent relationship. The more deployments that were experienced, the more participants reported a poorer quality of relationship with both parents (Farnsworth & O'Neal, 2021). Reintegration impacted the civilian and active-duty parents differently. Unfortunately, reunion and reintegration into the new family routine may be challenging (Zurlinden et al., 2021). As the civilian parent took on the role of head of household in the absence of the active-duty parent, during the reintegration phase, the adolescent and the civilian parent must adjust to their changing roles and family routines. As the active-duty member is regaining their bearings as head of household, they are also reexamining family dynamics (Farnsworth & O'Neal, 2021). The transition from deployment to returning home for reintegration may be overwhelmingly demanding for military families while they try to manage the changes that occurred during deployment and recognize new family dynamics (Knobloch & Theiss, 2018). Children may find it challenging to adjust to the modified family dynamics but may also welcome new opportunities for independence (Williamson et al., 2018). The effects on youth may be reconciled through their impact on parents and the caregiving support system (Perreault et al., 2020).

Sibling Relationships

The effect of deployment can be particularly difficult on children, varying from a desire to take on what would be considered parental responsibilities to handling fears for the absent parent's safety (Higgins Neyland et al., 2020; 2019; Cunitz et al., 2019). Whiteman and other researchers have investigated the military-connected siblings' relationships during the deployment phases. The results revealed that sibling relationships were altered across the deployment cycle. Their relationships became less agreeable while the one parent was away and became more harmonious during the reintegration period. It was found that children

experiencing a deployment may be at greater risk for maladjustment, given that they had experienced increased sibling rivalry during the deployment period. It was highlighted that the significance of examining the military as a family unit presented an important segue for future prevention and intervention efforts with military families (Whiteman et al., 2020). Research showed that military family deployment stressors may present at any period during the deployment phases; educational institutions in particular must be able to provide support to military families as they face these transitions (St. John & Fenning, 2020). Interparental conflict related to military deployment was also found to have negative impacts on adolescent members of military families. Researchers linked siblings' appraisals of greater interparental conflict to their outcomes (Quichocho & Lucier-Greer, 2021).

Victimization

De Pedro et al. (2016) examined the relationships between school climates and peer victimization among military-connected students. The study noted that within the context of military contingencies, research has found that military-connected youth experience a higher rate of school victimization. De Pedro and others found that the connectedness that military-connected students feel contributes to a positive outlook. Military installations have support programs in place to assist family members experiencing difficult life events (Hinojosa et al., 2021). De Pedro et al. (2016) based their study on seventh-, ninth-, and eleventh-grade students attending 38 schools in six military-connected districts. They addressed the focus of their research using the core element of student demographics, school climate, and victimization; items from military-connected elements included assessing military connection, deployment, and school transitions. Their findings revealed that key components such as school connectedness

plays a significant role in reducing school victimization of military-connected students, highlighting that deployments and school transitions play a significant role in peer victimization.

Support and Training

Focusing on the strengths of military-connected students is a positive way to establish interventions to prevent a host of intensifying issues by children of military families (Hess & Skomorovsky, 2019). Evidence-based programs are an effective way of supporting military-connected students. The goal of evidence-based initiatives is to replace ineffective programs with practices suited for better outcomes. These programs may also soften the stigma associated with seeking social and mental health support while increasing access to quality care (Hess & Skomorovsky, 2019). The authors of this study concentrated on the well-being of military-connected children across several NATO countries. They placed strict inclusion and exclusion criteria to develop a unified model of child well-being related to military-connected children. They did not examine the attachment relationships developed in early childhood, admitting that this relationship plays a role in how children (adults) cope and deal with various stressors related to the military lifestyle. Another quantitative study found that military-connected families candidly mention or infer family-centered practices to be significant measures educators must engage with regarding military-connected students. This study recognized the importance of understanding the military lifestyle and how it affects the family unit (Classen et al., 2019). Although military-connected students have established programs dedicated to supporting their needs, many families voiced frustrations in locating these services.

Although few evidence-based programs have been developed by Gewirtz et al. (2018), programs such as Families Overcoming Under Stress (FOCUS) is an evidence-based program, developed by the US Navy Bureau of Medicine jointly with UCLA and Harvard, centered on

teaching military-connected families how to handle stress and build resiliency (Rogers et al., 2021). According to researchers, FOCUS is thoroughly evidence-based, having undergone extensive study, review, and control trials; it is not solely focused on military-connected students but it is adaptable to the needs of military families (Julian et al., 2018).

Strategies

Schlossberg's 4S theory concludes with strategies for coping with transitions. She divided them into three categories: those that modify the situation, those that control the meaning of the issue, and those that manage the stress in the aftermath. According to one study, the evaluation of a stressor generates emotional and physical responses resulting in behavioral reactions (Lie et al., 2018); hence positive experiences with strategies can create positive coping expectations.

Situational Awareness

Military families are aware of the potential challenges they face in connection with military service. Evidence abounds that military deployments affect relationships in the entire family (Myrick et al., 2018). Studies have described the military as the most engrossing and arduous institution in American society (Ormeno et al., 2020). In part, frequent relocations and deployments are credited for the above-average mental health issues faced in military families (2020). Military children live day-by-day with the expectation of their service members preparing for military conflict. Their everyday situation includes detachment, separation, and a constant display of patriotic ceremonies performed by the military installations and military-connected schools. Military families are acclimated to a culture that reveres toughness and strength, precision and perfectionism; moreover, the military considers military families as

heroes for their service and creates an impediment to communicating emotions while also miscalculating their experiences and frustrations (Frain & Frain, 2020).

Coping Mechanisms

Military-connected students may form positive coping strategies through their experiences abroad by adapting to new cultures and diverse groups (Bradshaw et al., 2010), thus giving the situation a positive outlook. Military students may develop positive coping strategies for making new friends, strategies that may help reduce academic stress and improve optimism (Cabras & Mondo, 2018). Researchers have investigated individual strategies for coping with career indecisions, hypothesizing that participants would use fewer productive strategies for coping with career decisions. The study conducted by Lipshits-Braziler et al. (2017) sampled 254 young adults embarking on career decisions to determine which coping strategies are effective for individuals dealing with career decisions. Their results showed that coping strategies were classified according to their accepted effectiveness. Emotional information-seeking, problem-solving, flexibility, and self-regulation are among the productive strategies, while the less productive strategies include delegation, escape, isolation, and opposition. Their study showed that 96% of the participants were aware of the positive strategies, and that few reverted to nonproductive strategies (Lipshits-Braziler et al., 2017). Schlossberg defined strategies as a plan of action for increasing one's capabilities for dealing with particular transitions (Sargent & Schlossberg, 1988).

When military students face transitions, they must decide whether they can cope with the issue or identify a weakness in this area and seek support systems (Clary & Byrne, 2021). Military-connected students shared their parents' experiences of transitions as related to their well-being (Myrick et al., 2018). Military-connected emerging adults were the focus of a study

conducted by Clary & Byrne (2021), who wanted to show the major challenges of military-connected students transitioning to higher education and provide clinicians with techniques to assist future students. The participants in this study mentioned feeling they did not fit in. Clary & Byrne (2021) noted that the military functions as a team, whereas civilians function individually. Military-connected students are familiar with structured systems (Sikes et al., 2020). Participants expressed feelings of starting over, not being able to relate to others, and lacking a purpose and plan (Clary & Byrne, 2021). Children raised in a military environment are naturally exposed to the military lifestyle (Cramm et al., 2019). Accordingly, they transition to new locations for an unknown period, experience family separation frequently due to extended training and deployments, and live with the heightened awareness associated with the military (Cramm et al., 2019). Cramm and others mentioned that parental injuries could affect a child's mental health. Their study sampled 3,278 articles, of which 86 were included in the study, to investigate the mental health outcomes of military-connected children. The two most revealing themes suggested that, first, children growing up in a military environment seem to have more mental health issues than their civilian counterparts, and second, military-related mobility and deployment have a significant impact on children's mental health (Cramm et al., 2019), a finding in line with other studies (Burgin & Ray, 2020; De Pedro et al., 2016; Griffith, 2020).

The literature revealed that military families were more likely to use mental health services, particularly during deployments. This may be associated with predeployment training and briefing, as noted by Griffith's (2020) research mentions earlier. Nondeployed family members may experience a wide range of situations and stressors during the deployment of their loved one (Myrick et al., 2018). Cramm et al. (2019) described the most pronounced concern as the mental health of the parent. They list the scoping review of the literature related to parental

health issues such as PTSD most noticeably (Collins, 2018), stemming from military missions. However, they ended their review by stating that although military families have the ability to experience both resilience and vulnerability, the military's unique lifestyles push these attributes to the limit. They concluded by stating that more research should be done to better understand the influential factors that can be beneficial to military-connected children (Cramm et al., 2019).

Dos Santos and others listed coping strategies for each phase of the deployment cycle. Starting with the pre-deployment phase, they state that accommodation (focus on the positive, accepting the situation) was one of the coping strategies most used by children to deal with the parent's military mission. They also reported that the support search was a strategy widely used by military children. They stated that children's main sources of pre-deployment support were parents and peers, further stating that the type of support sought was fundamentally comfort through greater closeness (dos Santos et al., 2022). When parenting demands outpace resources, parents' stress surges and parenting effectiveness fade (Louie et al., 2021). Dos Santos and others (2022) stated that participants also listed other strategies during the pre-deployment phase, such as a feeling of helplessness, opposition strategy, and negotiation strategy through persuasion.

The central strategy employed during the deployment phase focuses on communication between the child and the service member, resulting in emotional support (Mulholland et al., 2020). The frequency of communication of deployed parents with their teenager did not contribute to adolescent functioning, but the more positive and less controlling dialogue was associated with adolescent higher functioning (Friedman et al., 2017). Military families must keep moving forward during deployments by maintaining daily activities which rest largely on the non-deployed parent (DiPietro-Wells et al., 2020). Keeping a routine was also an important

strategy, as some participants view routines as critical and counted problem-solving strategies as essential during the absence of the active-duty member. The idea of being helpless was also revealed during this phase. Lastly, some children partly exhibited opposition behaviors as a challenge to the deployed parent (dos Santos et al., 2022).

Post-deployment presented unique stressors, as evidenced in family strain to accept new routines developed during the deployment phase (Hinojosa et al., 2021; Mulholland et al., 2020). During the post-deployment (reintegration) phase, participants showed a concern for a readjustment of the family dynamic, attempting to make it as close to what it was prior to the deployment (Clark et al., 2018). The search for information about the deployment was also practiced during the post-deployment phase. The participants mentioned that the lived experience of reintegration results in greater closeness of the family nucleus as well as greater responsibility, wisdom, and individual growth (dos Santos et al., 2022).

Built-in Resiliency

Resiliency is a by-product of the military lifestyle. Participants in one study listed resiliency as a tribute to their ability to cope with military-related challenges as presented by their narratives, and parents lauded the effectiveness of their creative strategies employed to comfort their children during deployment (Mulholland et al., 2020). A strong sense of community armed military-connected youth with an important resource of resiliency (Bullock et al., 2022). It has been suggested that military-connected adolescents may seek a sense of support, affiliation, and trust among like-minded peers. Huebner (2019) stated that military families favor turning to military friends, because of the latter’s ability to understand their unique experiences, which creates a bond.

Summary

Research thus far has focused on military-connected children of varying ages, primarily based in the US. It has covered issues surrounding deployments, family separations, relocations, disorders, and the importance of parental mental health and its role in military-connected children's mental health. The research has highlighted the need for building school-based support programs to assist military-connected students during transitions. Recent research focuses on the mobility of the military way of life stemming from a high number of operations to deployment locations. As evidenced by the literature, military-connected students may experience different stressors not identified in recent studies that may be revealed in a qualitative study.

Experience has shown that military families are acutely aware that the military mission places them perpetually in second place (Le Hanna, 2020). The current study used transition theory to gain a better understanding of how each participant processes periods of transition. This study could help predict where military students are more vulnerable to stressors of the military way of life and help develop a better support system to reduce the negative effects of transitions. Current support systems may use this study to measure their effectiveness and address any shortcomings identified by the participants' lived experiences.

Military-connected high school students transitioning to higher education has been regularly defined as a cross-cultural matter (Stone, 2017), whereby a shift between a social collective military structure is weighted against the individualistic pursuit of a degree (Hill & Cathcart, 2021). Within the military complex, these students are immersed in history, tradition, and unique military-branch culture. After enrolling in higher education, this structural cloak diminishes, presenting a transformative experience for many military-connected students immersed in uncertainty (Hill & Cathcart, 2021).

The researcher centered the current study on Schlossberg's transition theory as it relates to military-connected students transitioning into higher education colleges and universities in Alaska. The investigation focused on the coping strategies and support systems that are employed to manage that transition.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of military-connected high school students transitioning to higher education. The experiences of military-connected students transitioning were defined through the lens of Schlossberg's (1984) transition theory. This chapter presented the methodology and motivation for defining the grounding principles of this qualitative study. Successively, the descriptive research questions investigated the quintessence of the transitioning experiences of the participants documented in the data are visible. The contributing dynamics of site selection, the method of choosing the participants, and the determinants for selection were defined in this chapter. The site signified a strong underpinning for exploring the participants' experiences of military-connected students in higher education. The design framed Moustakas' (1994) approach to conducting data collection, instrumentation, and data analysis and outlined the researcher's procedures and focus.

Research Design

The qualitative method was appropriate to examine the lived experiences of military-connected high school students transitioning to higher education. Phenomenological research can answer questions and provide insights into how military-connected students may experience transitions. Qualitative research is the thorough examination of phenomena investigating the essence of conscious experiences (Moustakas, 1994; Vagle, 2018) using an interpretative research design. In the late nineteenth century, German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey (1976) originated a form of social investigation to understand human experiences instead of gaining proof for a hypothesis and an eventual generalization (Mills & Birks, 2014). According to (Denny & Weckesser, 2019), qualitativve research does not postulate that every experience may

be applied generally. Its aim, rather, is to understand the point of view from the participants' perspective, as opposed to formulating a generalization across a large population (Mills & Birks, 2014). Essentially, qualitative research considers why individuals think or react in a particular way and how they develop their understanding of complex thoughts and actions within their lives (Denny & Weckesser, 2019).

Conversely, quantitative research answers what happens, focusing on delivering insights and an understanding of that experience and its meaning (2019). Quantitative research focuses primarily on numerical values (Powell T. C., 2020); it presents numerical values of attitudes, sentiments, behaviors, and additional defined variables that may apply to a larger generalized sample group (Mohajan, 2020) and is conducted unbiasedly (2020). Phenomenology may be explained as an approach that seeks to describe the substance of a phenomenon by investigating or understanding it from the perspective of those who have lived it (Teherani et al., 2015). The qualitative method is best suited to the current study, given its focus on understanding the experiences of military-connected students' perspectives of the phenomenon. Most quantitative studies use the language of predictability or traditional statistics (Small, 2008), widely accepted as sufficiently rigorous in that a third party may reproduce the results in a different setting (Brunsdon, 2016). Moustakas (1994), reflecting on Dilthey's (1976) description of hermeneutics, stated that to understand the human experience, one must be able to express what is underlying and to go beyond the human experience. Interpretation of data is a key element in qualitative research (Aspers & Corte, 2021). Dilthey (1976) believed that the circumstances and the environment related to experiences influence the researcher's interpretation of the data, while Edmund Husserl (1970) sought to assign equal value to objective and subjective experiences, determined as he was to find a universal foundation for philosophy and science (Laverty, 2003).

Therefore, using a transcendental phenomenological design was appropriate, since the aim is to obtain an unbiased description of the data represented by the participants' experiences, as opposed to a hermeneutic phenomenological design that gives credence to the interpretations of the researcher's descriptions and co-constructed meaning.

According to Moustakas (1994), a transcendental phenomenological approach engages in methodical and organized efforts to set aside predispositions regarding the phenomenon being explored in order to produce a study free of researchers' prejudices, principles, and familiarity with the phenomenon garnered from preceding experience and studies. It seeks to be open (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), amenable, and ingenuous to hearing participants describe their experience of the phenomenon (1994). Charmaz (2010) agrees with Blumer (1969), who asserted that social researchers establish a deep familiarity with their studied phenomenon. Charmaz (2010) defined intimate familiarity as gaining a level of knowledge and understanding that permeates the experience.

Empirical phenomenological research returns to the experience to deduce comprehensive descriptions that highlight the origin of a contemplative structural analysis that presents the essence of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). Neubauer et al. (2019) detailed three contemporary traditions that bridge the gap between transcendental phenomenology and hermeneutics phenomenology. Neubauer and others credited the seminal works of Edmund Husserl, as they describe contemporary approaches to phenomenology. Lifeworld research is a blended approach that explores how daily experiences manifest in the lived experiences of individuals through perspectives of selfhood, sociality, embodiment, temporality, and spatiality (Ashworth, 2003). A post-intentional phenomenology is a blended approach that regards the phenomenon as the unit of analysis while asserting that phenomena are multiple, partial, contextual, and in flux,

simultaneously producing and provoking entwined intricacies (Vagle, 2018). An interpretive phenomenological analysis is a blended approach that seeks to convey detailed accounts of the lived experience of a phenomenon through participants' personal experiences and personal acuities of objects and events. Accordingly, contrary to other approaches, in interpretive phenomenological analysis a researcher plays an active role in the process (Tuffour, 2017; Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). Empirical phenomenological research was beyond the novice researcher's comfort level and was deemed inappropriate for this study. Other contemporary research approaches, such as narrative, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study, were also deemed inappropriate for the current study.

Research Questions

Military-connected dependents are subjected to multiple forms of transitions over the course of their K-12 education. By the time they graduate high school, they would have moved some three to six times on average. The questions below were designed to get at the heart of how they described their transitions to higher education given the military culture they grew up in and how they built coping strategies to manage their transition.

Central Research Question

How do military-connected students describe their transition experiences to higher education?

Sub-Question One

How do military-connected students describe their identity during transitioning situations to higher education?

Sub-Question Two

How do military-connected students describe their coping strategies when transitioning to

higher education?

Sub-Question Three

How do military-connected students describe their support systems?

Setting and Participants

The participants in this study were military-connected students who have experienced periods of transitioning to higher education in Alaska. There are two universities in Alaska near military installations, one in Fairbanks and the other in Anchorage. Students may have experienced deployment, family separations, frequent relocations, and other transitions related to the military way of life.

Setting

Alaska is the forty-ninth state of the United States, earning statehood on January 3, 1959. The interior consists of five military installations—three Army, two Air Force, and one Space Force—spread across five or more public school districts. This study took place in public colleges and universities that serve a significant number of military-connected students, primarily at higher education institutions within Alaska, where the military-connected student population averages about 25% of the roughly 14,000 students in high school grade levels, including schools located on military installations.

Community demographics for District I include 84% White, 1% Black, 3% Asian, 2% American Indian/Alaskan Native, and 9% identified as two or more races. This district comprises 79% married couples, 16% female head of household, and 4% male head of household. The median income per household for parents with children in public schools is $106,250 for a population of 2,246. According to the most recent information, 35% of all households have a bachelor’s degree or higher. Community demographics for District II include 84% White, 9%

Hispanic, 1% Asian, 1% American Indian/Alaskan Native, and 4% stating two or more races. The community comprises 78% married couples, 7% couples living together, 11% female heads of household, and 4% male heads of household. The median income per household for parents with children in public schools is $104,286. The data states that 28% of all households have a bachelor's degree or higher for a population of 4,436. The majority of community demographics for District III comprises 70% White, 4% Black, 8% Hispanic, 3% Asian, 7% Asian American/Alaska Native, 1% Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and 7% two or more races. Married couple households make up 61%, cohabitating makes up 11%, with 18% female head of household and 10% male head of household. The median income for parents with children in public schools per household is $91,418, and the population size of 99,072. District III is the largest and most diverse of all the districts used in this study (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022).

This setting was chosen because of the potential number of military-connected students who attend public schools in this area (Tableau Public, 2022). Military personnel's transition or completion of a permanent change of station (PCS) occurs every two to three years on average, deployments being between three to15 months (U.S. Army, 2022; Military One Source, 2022). High schools within these districts provide a data-rich environment in which to conduct this study. Each district is structured in the traditional fashion and comprises teachers, counselors, principals, school administration, a superintendent, and elected school board members (Fairbanks North Star Borough School District, 2022; Delta/Greely School District, 2022; Denali Borough School District, 2022).

Participants

Participants in this study were recently graduated military-connected high school

students, at least 18 years of age, attending colleges or universities in Alaska and other universities. In a phenomenological study the participants are not necessarily located at a single site (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It is most important that participants articulate their lived experiences of the phenomenon being investigated (van Manen, 2014). Criterion sampling was appropriate when all of the individuals studied represent the group that have lived the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants will have experienced school transitions within six years and at least one parental deployment and one relocation or switched schools due to military missions. Researchers have varying approaches to what comprises an adequate number of participants. Dukes (1984) suggests that studying three to 10 subjects is sufficient to investigate one phenomenon. The researcher gathered 10 participants across ethnic and gender groups to add a broader understanding from different backgrounds.

Recruitment Plan

The sample pool consisted of colleges and universities that serve high densities of military-connected students, with the bulk of the participants coming from the most military-populated areas. After gaining IRB approval to proceed, consent forms were administered to participants (see Appendixes A and B). The study investigated 10 participants from the chosen sites. As the selected setting did not garner an appropriate number of participants to conduct a viable study, the pool was widened to other higher education institutions beyond Alaska. Participants were selected using criterion sampling. In criterion sampling, participants that meet or exceed the given parameters may be selected to join the study (Palinkas et al., 2015). Criterion samples may select participants from standardized questionnaires for in-depth follow-up (Patton, 2002). According to Patton (2002), purposeful sampling is widely adopted in qualitative research for identifying information-rich cases, particularly in areas with limited resources. It entails

identifying and selecting participants that are familiar with the phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants may be identified using a standardized questionnaire (Patton, 2002). In the current study, participants were solicited via questionnaire. Potential candidates met the established criterion of being military-connected, over eighteen years of age, and having had transitioning experiences. The primary method of contacting participants was through their school email account with approval from the institutions. The researcher provided an invitation to join the study by asking the military liaison office to forward it to potential participants. Contacting potential students through online questionnaires via social media platforms was an alternative. Any participant that met or exceeded the criteria could be included in the initial selection.

Consequently, an iterative method of sampling and re-sampling to narrow an appropriate sample is usually suggested (Palinkas et al., 2015). The rationale for this sample area was identified based on the vicinity of the military installations within the selected areas. According to Alaska Public Media, Alaska boasts that over 70,000 veterans were living in the state in 2015 (Hughes, 2022), and nearly 14% of Alaska's adults have served in the military. There are roughly twelve to fifteen thousand military personnel assigned to installations within Alaska that rotate every two to three years (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022). The interior of Alaska is limited in numbers of military-connected high school students over 18 who may be enrolled in higher education. The study was introduced through potential candidates using social media, school districts, and word of mouth. The researcher did not select anyone with whom they have had personal contact. All individuals selected were asked to sign a consent form (see Appendix B).

Researcher's Positionality

This phenomenon was examined from a social constructivist frame of mind which accentuates the socially constructed notion of knowledge. The researcher believes that knowledge increases with continued social interaction and experiences, which are not predetermined outcomes. Constructivism posits that people create society and society creates people in a continuous back-and-forth process (Onuf, 2013). The researcher was aware of the perspective biases inherent in having been in the military for more than 35 years, serving the first 26 years in the Air Force and currently 12 years in the civil service with the Department of the Air Force. Accordingly, researchers do not discover new revelations free of personal values because data does not happen in isolation (Manjikian, 2013). The researcher submitted that the social constructivist paradigm increases one's understanding of the military-connected student's transitioning experiences and contributes to the body of knowledge of all stakeholders.

Interpretive Framework

The researcher believes that learning is a direct consequence of social engagement using language and that knowledge is amassed by collaboration between the investigator and the study participants. The investigator interprets conversation and subjectively assigns meaning as the observer (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Accordingly, others emphasize the significance of culture and contextual understanding of what is experienced within society, thereby constructing knowledge founded on this understanding (Derry, 1999; McMahon, 1997). Social constructivism may be considered an achievement of daily interactions within an environment (Mocanu & Sterian, 2016). In an educational framework, constructivism may be explained as understanding that transpires because of a student's cerebral activities. Social constructivism embraces the process of individuals constructing knowledge while recognizing that knowledge exists with a solid environmental influence (Walker & Shore, 2015; Vygotsky, 2012). Social constructivism

provided the appropriate tenets with which to understand the participants' language.

Philosophical Assumptions

The researcher's life's journey has led to this point. The researcher has invested more than half of their life in the military and currently deals with military-connected students' access to education in a professional capacity. The researcher does not interact directly with students in such a way as to influence their decisions. The researcher advocates for military-connected students through interactions with educators, district administration, and state governments regarding military-connected initiatives. Military-connected students have much to add to the public school system and their collective transitioning experiences will provide a great deal of knowledge to all stakeholders.

Ontological Assumption

In terms of the aim of this study, one distinctive trait related to ontological assumptions relative to qualitative research is that more than one reality exists (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and that there is no single reality of truth. The authors discussed several axioms (Guba & Lincoln, 1982); this study focuses on two. The nature of reality is the first of the two axioms. They state that in the complex or life sciences, there is little doubt that tangible realities exist with the purpose of inquiry consisting of actual events, objects, and observable processes found in nature (1982). Conversely, phenomena inquiry has no reality in a physical sense and cannot be touched. Lincoln and Guba (1982) also mentioned that these social constructs have no reality; instead, they only exist in people's minds. The second axiom is the Inquirer-Object Relationship. Accordingly, the authors state that it is unreasonable to suggest that the inquirer maintain a discernable distance from the phenomenon studied in the hard sciences. The social/behavioral sciences ordinarily recognize that human subjects of inquiry may be influenced by the

relationship with the researcher (1982). The researcher's ontological assumption is that there is only a singular reality stemming from multiple points of view. In other words, multiple realities exist in tandem as singular realities or various truths.

Epistemological Assumption

The positivistic epistemological assumption accepts that truth exists, independent of the observer (Guba & Lincoln, 1988), and reality is frankly and dispassionately ascertainable by employing scientific devices (Casti, 1989). Using this method, the researcher is presumed capable of observing and investigating the study participants conceptually and without prejudice. This methodology aims to isolate what is eternal from what is momentary and what is essential from what is unnecessary (Negri et al., 2019). Epistemological assumptions serve as an intrinsic frame of reference for interpreting experiences and self-relevant data and for answering questions about life's meaning, significance, and purpose (Berzonsky, 2004). Negri and others state that reality exists, but knowledge of that reality only exists through a subjective analysis. They contend that knowledge of reality is a complex effort that implies the possibility of multiple elucidations and perspectives (2019). In this way, epistemological assumptions are vague and unequivocal (Kelly et al., 2018). Accordingly, a researcher must interact with participants and engage in meaningful conversation and deliberation in order to create knowledge (Guba et al., 2011). Following my ontological assumptions, my epistemological assumptions are also a part of my reasoning for choosing this approach to investigate the problem. This study will interpret the reality and truth of each participant, assuming to discover that the meaning of multiple experiences will be revealed.

Axiological Assumption

Assuming that all researchers bring values to a study, however, qualitative inquirers make

their values known (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher made no concessions about their extensive connection to the military, whose positive and less positive aspects they have experienced. This confession required constant reflection on the intricacy required to present the findings free of a researcher's assumptions about the participants' experiences as the meaning of their collective experiences was interpreted. The assumption of diverse values coexisting in this study brought up the issue of personal values and various other stakeholders. This study may be of particular interest to school districts, teachers, and military leadership. The researcher has had practically a lifetime of insights into military life and believes that the military has been a rewarding way of life, however difficult it can sometimes be. Under these prepositioned traits, the researcher heard each participant's voice while understanding the life and lifestyle they followed.

Researcher's Role

The nature of how knowledge is created in qualitative inquiry and the conditions influencing the creation provide the researcher with the dispensation of an insider (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher captured data from the participants' lived experiences from a specific moment in time (Chauvette et al., 2019). The researcher's role as a human instrument in this study represented their professional position as a School Liaison Program Specialist with the Department of the Air Force. It was the responsibility of the researcher to protect the identity of the participants in this study by following the institution's prescribed processes (Chauvette et al., 2019). The researcher's connection stemmed from 26 years of active-duty experience and more than 12 years in their current role. Qualitative researchers are encouraged to be aware of personal influence and self-appraisal (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher did not hold any authority whatsoever over the students in this study. Any information gathered was not shared without

prior approval (Chauvette et al., 2019). As a School Liaison, the researcher has advocated for military-connected students at various levels as this may relate to their K-12 education. The researcher intends to use only the data collected from the transcripts and used bracketing to diminish the potentially detrimental consequences of predeterminations that may weaken the research development (Tufford & Newman, 2010).

Procedures

The researcher did not begin any data collection prior to IRB approval. All prescribed IRB approval processes throughout this study to alleviate unethical practices concerning the participants or stakeholders, specifically regarding informed consent, protection of privacy, and confidential reporting (Chauvette et al., 2019), were followed. Fully aware of the difficulty of obtaining the appropriate consent to begin to collect data, it was the researcher's responsibility to ensure all participants that their participation was not shared beyond the consent agreement (Heaton, 2008). Participants were informed of the conditions of data storage time limitations and disposition thereof. However, as stated by Chauvette et al. (2019), researchers cannot guarantee participants how their data may be used or reconceptualized by others in the future. The interviews were recorded using two electronic devices such as an iPad. Interviews not conducted in person were recorded using iPads and an application such as Zoom or MS Teams. All recordings became part of the data collection and were kept in a secure location to prevent authorized disclosure.

Data Collection Plan

The three essential elements for collecting data in this study were questionnaires, focus groups, and interviews. According to Jain (2021), a questionnaire containing open or closed questions should be sent to the prospective pool of participants.m To generate a potential pool of

participants, the researcher started with the introduction and soliciting questionnaire distributed via the institutions' email list of military-connected students. The questionnaires were sent to a comprehensive list of possible candidates to determine their correct fit for the study. After collecting the returned questionnaires, the researcher assigned them to groups determined by the responses according to the participants' experiences. The questionnaires became part of the data collection and were stored in the same manner as had been other data: on a password-protected device.

Participants were then grouped into focus groups based on factors such as but not limited to age, gender, location, and branch of service connection to ensure that each group contained some degree of diversity. Focus groups consisted of two to four participants in each session, determined by the availability of the participants. The researcher engaged with participants via email to welcome them to the study and thanked them for their participation. The researcher provided a schedule of possible dates on which to conduct the focus group to determine the best fit according to participants' schedules. The researcher did not offer participants a monetary incentive to join the study. After each session, the researcher provided participants with a transcript to verify that the data and assigned themes were accurate. The researcher made any necessary edits commensurate with the participants' explanations.

Following the completed transcript review, the researcher scheduled interviews with participants. The researcher engaged participants using email to express continued appreciation for their contributions, schedule interviews, and distribute consent forms for their signature. Interviews were conducted via an internet application. The researcher recorded interviews using two methods, with the consent of each participant, and stored them on a password-protected

device. The data was transcribed and emailed to the participants for clarification. The researcher made the adjustments according to the participants' experiences.

It is widely accepted that qualitative researchers may triangulate data collection approaches to increase the prospect that the study findings and researcher interpretation are credible (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Each aspect of qualitative research may support the researcher in generating a deep and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon studied (Lester J. N., 2020), rendering the researcher's ability critical to each approach, as each may generate a large amount of data (Barrett & Twycross, 2018). Qualitative research is positioned to discover, unearth, describe, and understand what lies behind the studied phenomenon about which little may be known (Cypress, 2015). Therefore, it is important that the researcher become intimately familiar with the depth and breadth of the content (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Qualitative research uses rigorous data collection procedures by talking to participants in focus groups, among other methods of gathering rich data (Cypress, 2015). In-person focus groups have been the norm in qualitative research (Richard et al., 2021). For the convenience of engaging with participants, conducting virtual focus groups—given the abundance of personal computers, mobile devices, and availability of dependable internet (Richard et al., 2021)—is a feasible, efficient, and economical approach that affords broad participation and fosters diverse perspectives (Waterhouse et al., 2022). The focus groups were conducted using an internet-based platform, followed by interviews in the same manner.

The three basic types of interviews are structured, semi-structured, and unstructured. Structured interviews are relatively quick to administer and are questionnaires with predetermined questions that allow slight variation. By nature, they encourage limited participant response and offer little depth (Gill et al., 2008). In contrast, semi-structured interviews provide

questions, although the interviewer can nudge an interviewee in order to delve further into the responses through follow-up questions (McGrath et al., 2019). The researcher purposefully designed semi-structured interviews to encourage participants to re-live their experiences and elaborate beyond the general recall of events.

Questionnaires Data Collection Approach

The strength of qualitative research is its intensive collection of data from several sources of information (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Questionnaires were the first data collection point from this study's participants. One of the most considerable changes in questionnaire data collection is the move away from traditional interviewer-centric modes to more self-administered modes (Beatty et al., 2020). These changes have required researchers to adjust their delivery for questionnaire evaluation (2020). Due to the vast distance of potential participants, the researcher used the self-administered mode. Questionnaires are uniquely positioned to produce data on attitudes and behaviors for which there may be no acceptable alternative (Beatty et al., 2020). Accordingly, questionnaires may be more complex than expected for novices, and much attention is required to their flow, format, and length (Kazi & Khalid, 2012). When developing new questionnaires, researchers should always test and validate to ensure they measure what was intended and is reliable (2012). The researcher emailed the questionnaires to determine participants' eligibility for inclusion in the study based on the criteria and an additional questionnaire to gauge the richness of participants' experiences.

Questionnaire Questions

QQ1. The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of how military-connected students experience transitions. How do you describe transitions from a military-connected student point of view? This question is designed to understand what each participant

considers a transition following Schlossberg's (1984) 4S model.

QQ2. How do periods of transition change your perspective? This question is driven by Schlossberg's (1984) concepts of self-identity in the 4S model. The language of the questionnaire should be understood at the participants' level (Kazi & Khalid, 2012).

QQ3. How would you describe your personality as it relates to the military lifestyle? This question is also driven by self-identity.

QQ4. Describe an experience during transitional periods when a situation did not work out. The experience could be related to a move, deployment reintegration, or pending parental retirement. This question aims to get at difficult experiences that may occur due to situations that may not be considered a transition. According to Schlossberg (1984), transition periods may occur in missed opportunities or unexpected experiences.

QQ5. How would you describe your experience receiving support to deal with transitions relating to a parental deployment? This question is driving the conversation directly towards deployment behavior. The literature review often listed deployments as a period of transition.

QQ6. Describe what support systems may be available to help you navigate transition periods. Schlossberg (1984) lists support as one of the critical components of the 4S model.

Questionnaire Data Analysis Plan

Given the limitations of the literature, Jain (2021) suggested enlisting the assistance of a subject matter expert. Open-ended questions will drive deep, meaningful data. Commonly recognized mailed questionnaires are considered an appropriate instrument for collecting data. Beckett and Clegg (2007) suggest that personal encounter ethics may differ from those occurring at a distance. They conclude that researchers should be more accepting of the possibilities of a mailed questionnaire for garnering accurate qualitative data. They refer to interviewing being a

purposeful choice of the researcher instead of the traditional default method in qualitative research (2007). Self-administered questionnaires merely require a process to disseminate the instrument to participants. For the current study, questionnaires were distributed through email. Participants were asked to complete the questionnaire at their convenience within two weeks. Questions should be simple, straightforward, and easily understood, using minimal words and space focusing on what needs to be asked (Kazi & Khalid, 2012) and, therefore, may produce considerable complexity (Adamson et al., 2004). Questionnaire transcript questions were scrutinized and coded for thematic repetition by reading the responses several times for clarity. Questionnaires were collected and compared to self-reported school enrollments based on military-connected status eligibility. An initial directorial code structure was established and modified as required by the data. All notes made during the process were to be included and treated as data. Once themes were developed and assigned, all data was checked to ensure no new concepts had risen. The researcher asked a peer to review the results for clarity.

Focus Groups Data Collection Approach

Focus groups are among the most used research instruments in the social sciences (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). A focus group is a group of participants designated and assembled by the researcher to discuss and comment on lived experiences relating to the studied topic (Powell & Single, 1996). According to Powell and Single (1996), focus groups may be conducted either prior to, concurrently with, or after a quantitative study or separately to investigate complex phenomena not adaptable to quantitative research. Focus groups may generate verbal and observable data, which must be coded and analyzed for content (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). Proper focus groups are unequivocally designed to exploit group dynamics to garner distinctive data types. In other words, instead of the researcher asking individual

questions, participants are encouraged to hold conversations with one other, asking questions and exchanging insights based on each other's experiences (Kitzinger, 2006). Focus groups begin with a pre-circulated demographic questionnaire, followed by a presentation of the topic, and the researcher setting the ground rules concerning ethics and data storage. Group size is a significant factor in conducting focus groups (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014), with six to eight participants being optimal. The researcher conducted three focus groups with two to four participants in each group. Each session began with an introduction and set the ground rules (Krueger & Casey, 2015). The focus groups took place virtually over a meeting internet platform. An assistant may take notes and record the sessions using at least two modes (Krueger & Casey, 2015). The researcher did not use an assistant but primarily used an iPad to record sessions.

Focus Group Questions

FGQ1. Describe an experience that made this study important to you. This question builds trust, gets the participants thinking about the study's significance, and encourages everyone to participate. (CRQ1)

FGQ2. Describe your experience with the academic environment at your school.

a. Describe an experience where the school met/did not meet your academic needs. (SQ2)

This line of questioning also makes the group comfortable and builds their trust by focusing on their needs.

FGQ3. Who can describe how they felt at their last relocation? This question allows each participant to join the conservation without feeling as if everyone must speak in order. (SQ1)

FGQ4. What is your ideal experience of transition? This question is designed to set the mark of their comfort zone, discussing what eases their concerns. (SQ3)

FGQ5. If you could ask to change anything about your transitioning experiences, what would that be? This question is designed to create new ideas about transitioning. (SQ2)

FGQ6. Describe the military installation support experiences during deployment reintegration. (SQ3)

FGQ7. Describe an experience that distinguishes your military identity apart from your civilian counterparts. The researcher must guide the discussion in a manner that does not seem rigid by avoiding the tendency to follow a predetermined order of topics (Morgan, 1997). (SQ1)

FGQ8. What would you say is the essential topic of the discussion?

a. What questions do you feel should have been asked?

This question asks participants to reflect on the entire focus group experience (Krueger & Casey, 2015). (CRQ)

Focus Group Data Analysis Plan

The researcher followed Kruger and Casey's (2002) techniques to analyze the data from each focus group. They suggest having an assistant handle the recording devices and take notes to be analyzed for clarity immediately following the focus groups. This data must be easily identifiable (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Moderators should look for quotes, key points, potential follow-up questions, and new ideas (2015). The authors list a five-step data analysis process starting while the group is in a session and listening for inconsistent statements and striving to understand. First, the researcher should also take notice of any vague or cryptic responses (2015). Step two, immediately after the focus group, the authors suggest creating a seating diagram, checking the recording, debriefing with the assistant, noting themes, interpretations, and ideas, and annotating field notes (Krueger & Casey, 2015; Morgan, 1997). The practical significance of this process is crucial as it relates to coding the data from each focus group

(Morgan, 1997). Step three, within hours after the focus group, researchers should make backup recordings, transcribe the data, read transcripts, listen to recordings and compare notes. The fourth step involves analyzing and comparing each focus group, comparing/contrasting results, and describing the findings and the uses of quotes (Author, 2002). Since both groups are dealing with the same subject discussed in the same order, the chief business of the analysis is addressing the topics (Morgan, 1997). The fifth and last step is preparing the final report, using a narrative style described by themes, or the researcher may choose to proceed question by question. Even though this is the last step, by no means should it only be applied in the final stages (Morgan, 1997).

Next, the data should be shared with the assistant and a trusted peer to confirm themes and important content. Krueger and Casey (2015), suggest dissecting the data into bite-size pieces of digestible information. This involves color coding and highlighting themes and quotes that may stand out as significant. Similar to other forms of qualitative data, the nature of coding in focus groups differs between techniques that apply a priori to the coding versus those that produce codes through a more emergent encounter with the data (Crabtree & Miller, 1992; Creswell & Poth, 2018). According to Krueger & Casey (2015), transcripts should be read in one sitting with occasional breaks. This research study followed Krueger and Casey's data analysis methods. After the analysis was completed, all collected data was scanned, filed on a password-protected device, and stored in the cloud storage format.

Individual Interview Data Collection Approach

Individual interviews have been the best instruments for obtaining qualitative information (Richards & Schwartz, 2002; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interviews are widely employed in qualitative research to gain information about exploring a specific problem (Döringer, 2021).

Qualitative interviewing stresses the prominence of examining experiences and interviewees' perspectives for developing a better understanding of reality (Edwards & Holland, 2013). Qualitative interviews are preferable when the aim is to understand the participant's subjective perspective of a phenomenon rather than facilitating generalizable findings of large participant pools (McGrath et al., 2019). Good interview questions are designed to be open-ended, requiring participants to expand beyond one-word answers (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Unstructured interviews are appropriate for indirect research paradigms and are efficient (Barrett & Twycross, 2018), while semi-structured interviews facilitate a focused investigation of a specific problem (Fossey et al., 2002). Creswell and Poth (2018) stated that the researcher should allow the interviewee to add meaning without relinquishing control of the process. Interviews for this study were scheduled to last 25 to 50 minutes, considering participants' willingness to continue (Buser et al., 2016), and the students in this study were not likely to commit to long, drawn-out sessions. At this point, the researcher assigned emergent codes for themes connected to pertinent information. After each session, the data was transcribed and coded for thematic paradigms. Like focus group sessions, in the interest of time, sessions were conducted virtually. All sessions began with an introduction, rules of engagement, data storage, disposition, and future use of data. The researcher also ensured that participants were still comfortable with the study's previous informed consent declaration and confidentially. The researcher continued recording interviews using the iPad method.

Individual Interview Questions

1. Please describe your previous transition experience with the most recent relocation or PCS. (CRQ) This question aims to actively listen to the participant (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994).

2. Describe any academic challenges you may have encountered regarding military-connected transitions to higher education. (CRQ) This question aims to steer the participant to a specific experience directed to predictable themes and perceptions (Roberts, 2020). Here the researcher's background will guide the discussion toward the problems occurring.
3. Describe how your military-connected identity affects transitioning to higher education. (SQ1)
4. What is your understanding of transitions related to deployments? (SQ2) This question seeks to understand what the participants understand about transitions that occur aside from moving. Schlossberg's (1984) transition theory is driving this line of inquiry.
5. Describe how your military-connected strategies have benefited or not benefitted you. (SQ3) Community connections play an essential role in helping individuals and families manage stressors and challenges (O'Neal et al., 2020).
6. Describe how experiences within the surrounding community come into play with your military-connected identity. (SQ3) There are geographic or structural components of a community that have significance defined within relationships and associations (O'Neal et al., 2020).
7. Describe an experience where the military leadership's support systems were engaged during transition periods. (SQ3) Unlike your civilian counterparts, military leadership will often have an awareness of demanding periods of transition and are uniquely able to provide support. Members often support each other during these times (O'Neal et al., 2020).

8. What else would you like to add to our discussion of your experiences with transitioning to higher education that we have not asked? (CRQ)
9. Describe your challenges when working with school administration during transitioning. (CRQ)

Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan

Qualitative approaches are diverse, multifaceted, and distinctive (Holloway & Todres, 2003), and should be the primary analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Qualitative data analysis includes collecting, bracketing, and coding for thematic references, starting as soon as the investigator begins (Sinkovics & Alfoldi, 2012). Each process is interconnected and often occurs concurrently (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher employed thematic coding as referenced by Braun and Clarke (2006), as they state that it should be the first method a researcher should learn. As a novice researcher, the flexibility of thematic analysis proved beneficial. Considering this method's flexibility, the researcher must not limit that flexibility (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke (2006) outline a six-phase guide to performing thematic analysis that covers the pitfalls, describes what makes practical thematic analysis, and lists the advantages or disadvantages of thematic analysis.

An essential factor in thematic analysis involves the researcher's positionality. The researcher must acknowledge their theoretical perspectives and values relating to the study (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To understand how truth is constructed and interpreted, the researcher's biases, including values, beliefs, and emotional intelligence, should be recognized as essential to the process (Campbell & Wasco, 2000). It is important to understand what counts as a theme. Just because something comes across several data sets does not necessarily identify it as a theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher used a data-driven approach in the analysis of themes.

According to Patton (2002), an inductive approach means the data is strongly linked to the identified themes. The data is specifically collected to answer the research questions and is not driven by the researcher's theoretical concerns (Patton, 2002). This study followed the semantic level, which sticks with the data stated by the participants, refraining from going beyond to reach some deeper meaning than what was stated (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The six phases of thematic analysis start with the researcher becoming familiar with the data by transcribing, repetitive reading, and noting ideas. Phase two involves generating initial codes, capturing exciting features across the entire data set, and classifying data relevant to each code. Phase three involves searching for themes and collating codes into potential themes. Phase four comprises reviewing themes and verifying if these themes work at the appropriate level. Phase five relates to identifying and labeling the themes. This process is a continuous analysis aimed at refining the specifics of each theme. The report is produced in stage six. The final analysis relates to the research questions and the literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Document Analysis Data Collection Approach

The documents collected for this study include questionnaires, focus group data, and interview sessions. Each recorded focus group and interview session will be transcribed into a document to be analyzed. The recordings themselves were also part of the data collected. The final document analysis compared questionnaires, focus group data, and interviews to triangulate for validity. Data triangulation involves comparing multiple data collection methods to strengthen a study's credibility (Denzin, 1978). Through triangulation, researchers will gain a better and deeper understanding of the phenomenon experienced (Jentoft & Olsen, 2019).

Document Analysis Data Analysis Plan

Data analysis processes may be a daunting task for novices attempting an exhaustive

organization of information to identify themes and other rigorous aspects that many researchers may consider difficult (Meyer & Ward, 2014). Data analysis is an operational plan that is updated continuously throughout the life of the study (Jablonski & Guagliardo, 2016). Qualitative research requires the investigator to decide the purpose of the study, determine the type of data to be collected, and develop a plan to analyze the information. Conducting a document analysis may decrease some of the ethical complications associated with other qualitative approaches (Morgan, 2022). Each process requires tactics to be considered and put into play, but the strategies are fundamentally independent of whether the methods are a highlighter, standard Microsoft Office products, or particular purposes software like MAXQDA. In the current study, Microsoft Excel was used to organize and identify themes.

Data Analysis

Triangulation enhances the validity of qualitative inquiry (Morgan, 2022; Denzin, 1989). After each data collecting method, the next step is performing thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is ideal because of its adaptability (Morgan, 2022); it is not theoretically motivated and does not advocate the epistemological analysis of ontological frameworks (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The analytic process involves locating, selecting, evaluating, and synthesizing the information (Bowen, 2009). The researcher applied a thematic analysis to the three methods, questionnaires, focus groups, and interviews. Document analysis is frequently combined with other research methods for triangulation, which uses multiple methods to increase social phenomena research beyond the intrinsic biases that may be found in singular methodologies (Denzin, 2017). By cross-referencing information collected from different sources, the researcher may compare findings across all data sets, reducing researcher bias (Bowen, 2009). A qualitative meta-analysis synthesizes primary data collected from the research study (Habersang et al.,

2019). Its purpose is to identify recurring themes across data sets. Qualitative meta-analysis may allow the researcher to identify new relationships between the context which was not previously revealed (Maxwell, 2013). The final report from questionnaires, focus group data, and interviews were merged into one M.S. Excel spreadsheet to determine the consistent themes throughout the study.

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) posed the question concerning trustworthiness in qualitative research, asking why the reader should believe what is in the study. They proposed the criteria of internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity, and described how to meet them (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Trustworthiness or meticulousness is crucial to the assurance readers may have in the results of any study and should be an area of focus when digesting the findings (Connelly, 2016). Padgett (1998) stated that reactivity and researcher or participant biases threaten trustworthiness. The following strategies may be employed to address or enhance the trustworthiness of the findings as being the genuinely lived experiences of the participants.

Credibility

Credibility is strengthened when the analysis represents a solid basis for the findings (Haven et al., 2019). The certainty of the research results rests on the scope with which the findings truthfully describe reality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility is enhanced by the researcher explaining their experiences as a researcher and confirming the findings with the participants (Cope, 2014). A qualitative study is credible if the descriptions of the lived experiences are quickly recognized by others that share similar experiences (Sandelowski, 1986). Strategies to combat these issues include prolonged engagement, triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking, among other tools (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility must stem from

participant recruitment, consistency of data collection, and participant clarification (White et al., 2012). Credibility was achieved in the current study using three of the methods stated above: triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking.

Triangulation

In this study, the researcher correlated qualitative methods, data collection, and themes to uncover the experiences of military-connected students transitioning to higher education. Data triangulation methods included the questionnaire responses compared to focus group dynamics, final reports, and interview transcripts. Triangulation allows the researcher to substantiate and cross-index the results (Barnes & Vidgen, 2006). Triangulation of the theory consisted of Schlossberg's (1984) transition theory.

Peer Debriefing

The researcher enlisted trusted peers with experience in this phenomenon. Peer-debriefing is the process whereby the investigator pre-selects a disinterested peer and conducts exhaustive discussions about the findings and progress of the study (Spall, 1998; Janesick, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Peer debriefing will help establish the study's validity and credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The experiences of the peer debriefer and the researcher are presented in first-person accounts (Cooper et al., 1998). The Department of the Air Force and other services assign school liaisons to each state or area of responsibility to assist parents of military-connected students navigate their K-12 education experiences. These professionals were the researcher's chief source to verify findings or themes. The researcher identified each professional and documented their input to be included in the data collection. Participants' confidentiality was protected by pseudonyms.

Member Checking

Trustworthiness of the findings is the basis of top-quality qualitative inquiry. Member checking is a method used to solidify the credibility of the results (Birt et al., 2016). The researcher often fulfills the role of data collector and data analyst, lending potential bias to researchers themselves (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Birt et al. (2016) suggest that biases may be decreased by working with research participants to check and clarify results. The seminal work of Lincoln and Guba (1985) stressed member checking as a means of creating rigor in qualitative research, positing that credibility is fundamental in the truthful descriptions of the experienced phenomena.

For any study to be creditable, the researcher must be able to present unbiased narratives of the lived experiences of the participant before the findings become tainted by an investigator's preconceived positions. This technique, known as bracketing, is frequently credited to Husserl (Dowling, 2007; Beech, 1999; Ashworth, 1999). Bracketing is the practice whereby the researcher holds their presupposition at bay in order to understand the experiences as they are before applying logical explanations and before they are assigned to concepts of previous knowledge or experiences (Beech, 1999). While bracketing materializes as unpolluted philosophy, it remains a procedural standard upon which empirical work in phenomenological psychology stands. In order to reveal the psychological dominion, the researcher must bracket the presupposition that the methods and structures of the psychological world relate to some natural, objective reality (Ashworth, 1996). Phenomenological research allows an investigator to explore the experiences of the participants. It is important that the investigator be able to bracket any preconceptions concerning logical explanations of their world. The researcher in the current study addressed biases by bracketing, putting away preconceived impressions of truth and reality

and instead reflecting on what each participant was saying. Member checking was employed to verify accuracy.

Transferability

Transferability between contexts is a direct function of the similarity between the fittingness of two situations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which depends on the theoretical underpinnings across the two contexts (Hellström, 2008). The transferability proposition brings a repeatable generalization into focus, as the researcher stipulates that findings may be transferred to a new setting (2008). Transferability may be accomplished as the researcher provides sufficient information about themselves as the researcher or instrument and the researcher-participant relationship to allow the reader insight into how the findings may transfer (Morrow, 2005). Transcription guidelines were established to ensure the accuracy of the transcriptions by comparing them to recorded data (White et al., 2012). The researcher in the current study contended that military-connected students experience transition similarly to members of other groups.

Dependability

Dependability is related to reliability in quantitative terminologies; it is achieved when another researcher may replicate the study following the decision trail of the original researcher (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Audit trails are achieved by describing the specific purpose of the study, discussing the participants' selection process, describing how and how long data was collected and how data was reduced and analyzed, explaining interpretation and presentation of the findings, and explaining the techniques used to secure the credibility of the information (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). The researcher established and completed a

detailed, comprehensive accountability matrix of how all data collection and analysis were conducted following seminal works (Guba & Lincoln, 1988; Sandelowski, 1986).

Confirmability

Confirmability is achieved when credibility, transferability, and dependability have been proven (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Confirmability champions neutrality, presenting the findings shaped by the participants' perceptions, not researcher bias or predisposition (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Reflexivity requires the researcher's self-critical assertiveness about how their preconceptions affect the researcher. Reflective research affords an extensive picture outlook with an interpretation that creates new insights, allowing for developing confirmability of the study and, above all, leading the reader to trust the credibility of the findings and pertinence of the study (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Reflexivity considers the researcher's communication with the field and its members as an explicit part of knowledge instead of labeling it a prevailing variable (Flick, 2014). In the current study, the researcher created an auditable transcription that chronicled the procedures, data collected, data analyzed, and final reports, followed by triangulation and concluding with reflexivity.

Ethical Considerations

To avoid any potential ethical concerns related to conducting research using underage participants, the researcher selected current or recently graduated students over 18. Selecting participants from this group avoids delaying IRB approval. According to Liberty University's guidelines and the state statutes, students under the age of consent require a signed consent form to be on file. The researcher did not collect any data prior to IRB approval.

Permissions

Academic institutions advise researchers on the proper procedures for including human

subjects within a study. Liberty University's Human Subjects Consent-to-Participate form was submitted for each participant as deemed appropriate by the IRB. Following IRB's approval (see Appendix A), the researcher requested permission from the colleges and universities to access potential participants (Appendix B). Request forms provided by Liberty's SOE Doctoral Community were used for the study, with approved forms assigned to appropriate appendixes.

Other Participant Protections

All participants were fully informed of the study's processes and expectations, that their inclusion in the study is strictly voluntary, that they may withdraw at any time, and that their information will not be included in the final report apart from the focus group data. Confidentiality was established using pseudonyms for both the site and the respondents, and all records were stored on a password-protected device or secure cloud format. The data will remain securely stored for at least three years, after which the determination may be made to extend the study to other researchers. The researcher offered no monetary benefits to any respondents. No apparent risks are known at this research stage; should any arise, they will be brought to the appropriate authorities for resolution.

Summary

In this chapter, the basis and rationale of the decision to conduct this study using the transcendental qualitative design was presented. This project provided insights into the transition experiences of military-connected students transitioning to higher education. Schlossberg's (1984) transition theory comprised the foundational strength of the study. Data collection and analysis followed the works of Lincoln and Guba (1984), Moustakas (1994), Patton (2002), and Braun and Clarke (2006; 2013). This chapter presented the research methodology and how it planned to unfold, and the researcher's role as the principal investigator. The participants were

selected using criterion sampling from the area associated with the site. Moustakas (1994) was fundamental to coding and defining the themes presented during the data collection. Each instrument helped to reveal the transition experiences from the participant's perspective.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of military-connected high school students transitioning to higher education. The central research question and sub-questions investigated how military-connected students describe their transition experiences to higher education. This chapter presents a sequential structural format beginning with summaries of the participant testimonies that represent their reflective experiences considering their transitions. The researcher used phenomenological principles to identify emerging themes, harmoniously formed subthemes, and participants' quotes to answer the corresponding research questions. Lastly, the chapter summarizes the findings, outliers, insights for future research, and provides a conclusion.

Participants

The process of selecting the appropriate participants was central to this study. The group that was chosen is known for being less forthcoming with personal information. Military members are trained not to divulge too much information, and the authors further stated that military members live with a heightened cognizance of the risks associated with military service (Cramm et al., 2019). This project investigated the experiences of recent military-connected high school graduates attending higher education institutions. The first step was to identify colleges and universities that would potentially yield a diverse population of military-connected students. This required some degree of familiarity with military installations that were also located near higher education campuses. Each campus was chosen because it had a military support/liaison to assist in identifying potentially military-connected students. First, the researcher contacted the military liaison via email and later by phone, speaking directly to the college's director of

military assistance. The initial attempt did not prove fruitful, as the researcher was directed to contact a different office, which was located on a military installation; however, the central focus of this office was active-duty members.

The researcher selected institutions in Alaska's two largest cities with a combined population of about 325,500 (United States Census Bureau, 2023). This location is home to two military installations, one Army and one Air Force, with a combined population of 32,000, including active-duty and family members. The researcher spent considerable time requesting permission to importune students to participate in this project, which did not guarantee any students would volunteer to participate. The researcher requested similar support from at least nine other institutions, resulting in similar conclusions without acquiring participants who met the screening criteria. The researcher polled family and friends' connections through social media outreach, leading to one willing participant returning the screening information and the signed consent form; however, the individual's participation did not materialize. In a final approach, the researcher connected face-to-face with the parents of known military-connected college students. The researcher interacted with an estimated forty parents to garner the final twelve participants, of which two never responded to the researcher's requests to schedule the focus groups or interviews after they had signed the consent form.

Each data collection process contributed to the findings. The questionnaires presented were important to the results. The questionnaires allowed the participants to shape their personal contributions to the project. The focus groups gave participants an opportunity to hear the experiences of others and expand on what they had previously had shared. The participants became comfortable with sharing their experiences in the interviews and contributed rich data that revealed the themes discussed in the findings and results.

Jason

Jason is a Black military-connected college graduate with a promising career in mechanical engineering. He experienced relocations in his adolescent and early teenage years mostly in the southern United States. He had an indomitable personality with a persistence to finish whatever he started. Jason's demeanor was poised and confident about the subject matter under discussion. He readily interacted with the others in the focus group without knowing that the other participants had attended the same high school. His father was an officer in the Army National Guard, which afforded him the opportunity to experience many different environments that helped to shape his worldview. He credited his military-connected background for the way he sees other people. In the focus group, he expressed that he had experienced challenges in maintaining the rigors of the engineering major and credited African-American engineering support groups along with school resources and sheer determination as being pivotal to finishing his degree. During the interview session, Jason lauded his father for instilling the military culture into his upbringing and said he gets his leadership style from his dad always following a plan.

Charles

Charles is a Black male with eighteen years of military-connected life lessons. Charles is familiar with relocations associated with the Air Force. When answering the questionnaire, he credited the military regiment for building his character and recognized he is who he is because being a military dependent enabled him the see things that most Americans do not. He had just finished his first year of college and was on the east coast participating in an engineering internship. He knew that with deployments come stress and change; however, he was prepared and aware of the resources provided to deployed families. Charles was consistent throughout

questionnaires, focus group, and interview in attributing to the military his opportunities to travel and meet new people and experience new cultures, and his ability to make new friends.

Sylvia

Sylvia is a Black female with 18 years of experience connected to the Air Force. She is Charles' older sister. Her interview added a positive outlook on her military experiences even though there were some tough situations with her father deploying to sometimes dangerous locations. She graduated from college and obtained a prestigious position in the infectious disease field. She had planned her whole life out until she met with her college academic advisor: this meeting opened her mind to a world of different possibilities in terms of where she would go and what she could do. She vividly recalled how her father's deployment affected her in an emotional manner. She mentioned her parents trying to explain relocation as being a heavy subject. Age has taught her to experience things from a logical perspective and accept that things must get done. Her participation in the focus group encouraged others to join the discussion, as she relished the opportunity to jump into new experiences without holding back.

Kendra

Kendra, a Black female connected to the Air Force for 18 years, was the most loquacious of all of the participants. She contributed rich engagement during the focus group and her interview. She graduated from college in South Carolina where she joined the Air Force ROTC program. During her interview, she intimately recalled classmates and instructors making her feel as if she did not deserve to be there, that she had not earned her opportunity on her own merit. She felt comfortable seeking out others and making everyone feel welcome and remembered her dad deploying to Guam prior to his retirement. She was proud that he trusted her to step up and help her mom carry on in his absence. She cherished the sweatshirt her father

gave her when he deployed. Kendra was commissioned in the Air Force and is continuing her education in dentistry. The questionnaire revealed that Kendra described herself as being personable and extroverted, readily admitting that she is a driven and determined person.

Debra

Debra is a White female and a proud Navy kid. Her father served 20 years before he retired. She recalled her final relocation was from Japan to Alaska during her adolescent years. She had grown up in Japan and this was her first big move, as she was much younger during the other relocations and did not remember those experiences. During the interview, she admitted being upset at having to leave her friends and recognized the difficulty of leaving the familiar for the unknown. Getting to Alaska, meeting new friends, and in a way restarting the process made it much easier for her to transition. Data from her interview shows she likened moving away to college to moving in the military, and being away from her family for the first time was an adjustment. She viewed the military as part of her core family and knew that the military-connected community is not the norm at her new location, as it was not part of many conversations around campus. She graduated from UAF and continued on to law school at Gonzaga University, where she is now practicing family law and which she very much enjoys.

Tanner

Tanner is a White male who drew his military affiliations from his mother's 22 years in the Air Force. He recalled the transition from high school to college as being an easy one. During the interview, he admitted he did not apply himself academically while in high school, a mindset that changed quickly in college. Tanner received a full-ride football scholarship, which took the burden of student loan debt off his mind. He majored in sports management and now lives in Texas. Tanner recognized the sacrifices his family made pursuant to the military lifestyle.

Deployments were especially difficult for him and his brothers and forced him to mature very quickly. The military community stepped in to foster Tannner and each of his three brothers during their mother's deployments, of which he recalled there were many. They were separated and lived with numerous other families while she was deployed, which understandingly presented significant life experiences. He explained he had to grow up fast and deal with each situation in a mature manner. In the focus group and interview, Tanner mentioned how he and his brothers experienced a lot of growth while their mother was deployed, which was helpful in higher education.

Brad

Brad is a White male and Tanner's younger brother. He graduated from college with a major in criminal justice. He remembered all of the relocations growing up and now prefers to live in the southern states. He recalled time management being one of the bigger challenges when he transitioned to higher education. He was sometimes overwhelmed by having so many things to do all at once. During the focus group he seemed to have kept a mental count of the number of deployments and the number of years his mom deployed, as he stated she deployed eight times in eleven years. Like his older brother, he reiterated the significance of having to become self-sufficient at such a young age; however, this experience prepared him for the real world, although his demeanor during the focus group suggested that he is still adjusting to that transition. He summed up the military-connected experience as being structured: it is a completely different atmosphere from the one ...beyond the military gates.

Jeffery

Jeffery is a White male in his second year of college transition majoring in finance. His father retired when he was younger, so deployments were not in his wheelhouse. He felt that

going to college presented a different academic environment than what he was accustomed to. He recalled his high school being on a military installation and being strict and regimented, whereas higher education was more hands-off, as he had to create different strategies to manage his freedoms. Jeffery spent his secondary years all at one high school and recognized that his experiences were uniquely different from the others in the group. Although he spoke fondly of the surrounding community, he admitted that his new community is not like his adopted hometown of Alaska. True to his questionnaire responses, Jeffery was respectful, courteous and always on time for each session.

Myra

Myra is the first of her generation of her family to attend college. She is of the Asian descent and admits that her parents could not help her transition to higher education because they had not gone to college. She was studious, graduated from college, and is currently working in finance with the Department of the Air Force. She was fortunate that her father retired before her secondary years because this meant there were no relocations. She does not recall how she experienced deployments because she was too young. She recalled how her mother did not drive at the time her father was deployed and that she must have relied on the military community to manage that transition. She extolled her father's habits of planning everything, even vacations, as symptomatic of her own planning for transitions. She recently transitioned away from her family all on her own, and although she cried every day along the journey, she knew she could count on her military-connected experiences to pull through. She went on the acknowledge the lack of diversity in the college she attended and recognized a similar demographic at her new location, as stated in the interview.

Chad

Chad is a Black male associated with the Air Force. He is in his junior year of college in Alaska. During his interview he stated that in reviewing the current landscape of his old high school, he felt he could have been better prepared for the transition to higher education, referencing the current courses now available. He viewed transitions related to relocations as being similar to going to college because he got to explore something different. He stated that all he needed during the transition to higher education, or any transition, was the parents who supported him. In his interview, he noted that having the support of family and friends is the driving force behind transitions. If he could ask for one thing during the transition to higher education, it would be to have been better prepared by the school administration. His high school administration could have better prepared him for the transition to higher education by starting earlier. Chad did not experience deployment in a significant way except for looking forward to the reintegration period. He referred to himself as "military" when asked about why he was living in Alaska, insinuating the lack of diversity in Alaska and referencing his ethnicity.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Student	Age	Sex	Ethnicity	Branch	Graduated	Years Connected
Jason	24	M	Black	Army (Guard)	Yes (Engineer)	11
Charles	20	M	Black	Air Force	(2nd yr., Engineer)	18
Sylvia	22	F	Black	Air Force	Yes (Infectious diseases)	18
Kendra	22	F	Black	Air Force	Yes (Air Force Officer)	18
Debra	26	F	White	Navy	Yes (Attorney)	8
Tanner	28	M	White	Air Force	Yes (Sports Business)	20

Brad	24	M	White	Air Force	Yes (Criminal Justice)	16
Jeffery	20	M	White	Air Force	(2nd yr. Finance)	14
Myra	26	F	Asian	Air Force	Yes (Finance)	12

Results

Following the sequential order similar to Chapter Three, the researcher extracted the essence that describes the distinctive thematic characteristics that developed within the data. Participants' direct comments were extrapolated to authenticate the decisions and to demonstrate how the researcher chose each theme. This chapter also identified unanticipated outlying themes that were not suggestive of the research questions.

The researcher distributed questionnaires via email to each participant. Subsequent responses revealed that the Jeffery viewed transitions as a necessary part of life, that the military had prepared him for the transition to higher education. Chad stated, "As uncomfortable it may be, the transitions and change are necessary for growth." Jason remarked, "…transitions may be described as challenging at times—but doable. Over time, I have gained a level of adaptability which eases the transition process." Adaptability was evident throughout the remarks of other participants leading up to the focus group sessions.

During the focus group sessions, the theme of community stood out. Sylvia credited the military community for her preparation in transitioning to higher education. She said that being in the military and transitioning to different schools, and being involved in different cultures and different atmospheres allows us to be more well-rounded when we get to college. The researcher noticed that participants presented the military as part of their identity, as Sylvia mentioned.

Jason stated that the military community structure "…definitely helps with the college transition."

Participants described military-connected experiences as important factors in their resiliency. They were accustomed to frequent moves, deployments, and changing schools. They credited family and friends as playing a key role in coping with transitioning to higher education. During the interview one participant stated, "…once you start making friends, it becomes way easier," and that being away from family was "…one of the biggest transitions." (Debra)

Table 2

Theme Development

Themes	Subthemes	Corresponding RQ	Sample of Supporting Data
Community	Family and Friends Positive Attitudes	Central Research Question	"I guess, just in terms of support system. I think a lot of us grew up with like a core family, that is moving with you. But then you get a stronger friend group all the time. So, I think that was a big support system. You have like core friends I'm saying, a bunch of extended family, usually for me, at least." (Kendra)
Planning for Transitions	Military Identity Determination	Sub-Question 1	"And when I want to do something, I you know, I do whatever it takes to get it done." (Jason)

Preparedness	Resources	Sub-Question 2	"Some strategies I use was, some strategies I use were basically just putting my best foot forward, no matter what the situation looked like." (Jason)
Adaptability	Resiliency	Sub-Question 3	"I feel like a common theme that we all did discuss was the adaptability factor, like you know transitioning and moving, and things like that." (Charles)

Note: Themes were developed based on the researcher's understanding of military culture.

Community

The military way of life is uniquely challenging to children, especially during their secondary years. The military member may be called to relocate or deploy on short notice. Having to relocate, leaving behind the familiar community to transition to another new and different place, may shape individuals' worldview. Community is central to military-connected high school students' personalities. "Because I think it does have a huge influence on the community and on the culture of just how people interact with each other, and pretty much every way, it affects your way of life," stated Jeffery in his interview. The military community members understand the culture, accept the challenges, and strive to manage their lives. The community members support each other without weighing too much on individual backgrounds, meaning that the military community welcomes all backgrounds to join its ranks. Diversity and support are the essence of the military community, as Charles said during his interview:

> "I would say my surroundings help introduce me to new people. So, it allowed me to build my character. I am able to go to new communities, meet new people, have new experiences, and it allowed me to see more cultures and be more diverse in my views or my view of life, just to always be able to expand on that."

Family and Friends

Military-connected high school students lean on their family and friends to navigate transitions associated with the innate structure of the military. Family members learn to pull together while going through relocations, deployments, and family separations. Siblings connect and adapt to changes in family dynamics and accept new roles in the absence of a parent. Military-connected high school students count on family and friends while transitioning to higher education. Tanner stated in his interview, "…for myself, moving so much, you know, you make tons of different friends, and then it sucks that you have to move and leave, but then you get more friends at the new base, or wherever it maybe." "So, you have always kind of kept that support system with you as you move on."

Positive Attitudes

Students transitioning to higher education focus their energy on the positive aspects of the transition, choosing to view change with a positive attitude. Participants in this study recognized how their attitude reflected on them individually. In her interview, Sylvia exclaimed, "But really, it is empowering to me that even though I am stressed, I can still overcome, I can still move, and I can still get things done."

Planning for Transitions

Military-connected high school students may experience an array of transitions related to their parents' service and they understand that active-duty service requires individuals to plan for transition because it is a fact of the military lifestyle. Sylvia remarked, "I try to plan as much as possible for transitions and prepare as early as possible. If a sudden transition occurs, I try to focus on the aspects I can control by using the flexibility and adaptability skills I learned as a military-connected student." In her interview, Myra credits her planning and seeking support with growing up in the military community.

Military Identity

Individual identity carries more weight beyond the gates of a military installation. Inside those gates, people blend in with other cultures to form a cohesive team capable of overcoming challenging circumstances. This characteristic is developed through a deliberate regimen of training techniques and experiences that often influences the families of active-duty service members. Military identity is established through inculcating tradition and championing the language, principles, and customs inherent to military culture (Winters et al., 2023). As such, military identity may be defined as the prominent presence of past military service, beliefs, and norms on an individual's post-military sense of self (Dolan et al., 2022). Nonetheless, military identity is not permanently fixed to military-connected students; they can engage it when they feel it is appropriate or meaningful to an outcome. Jason said in the interview, "My personality has a strong resemblance to the military lifestyle. My determination, strong work ethic, and organization are all traits that have been influenced by my father."

Determination

Participants reflected on their determination to see any given tasks through until the end. They understand that higher education is another transition to navigate and possess the intrinsic

determination to accomplish their goals. When asked to describe himself in the questionnaire, Jeffery stated, “I would describe myself as timely, persistent, and respectful. The military played a substantial role [in] developing these traits.” Other studies confirm that determination is a significant part of military identity and culture (Luning et al., 2022). The dynamics that form each individual’s impetus comprise three essentials: competence, automony, and sense of belonging to a group. The more these three characteristics are galvanized, the less an individual will require extrinsic motivation (Sáiz-Pardo et al., 2021).

Preparedness

Being prepared is another trait that is intentionally developed in military culture. Military service members feel as if they always must be prepared for everything. They are trained to prepare for the known and to expect the unknown. Kendra lauded experiences during the interview, “I have had first-hand accounts with relocations, and I carry that perspective on during my transition towards transitioning from a military child to a commissioned officer.”

Resources

Military leadership recognizes that service members are trained; they are not unbreakable. The military service members and their families have resources to assist them through transitions. Military-connected dependents become aware of these resources at the appropriate time during transitions. They naturally engage with others who are experiencing similar situations. Chad stated, “Some support systems available during a transitional period would be friends, activities for [a] deployed service member[’s] family, and for relocation, the military base itself. By accepting and welcoming and providing the family with appropriate resources such as psychologists to help people readjust, many can smoothly transition from one place to another,” as shown on the focus group data.

Adaptability

Adaptability is understandably a prominent part of the military way of life. The ability of military-connected students transitioning to higher education was evident throughout several participants' stories. Charles mentioned during the focus group, "I was able to come up to new people and just learn how to adapt to a new environment and get comfortable." Alternatively, Sylvia recalled, "So not worrying about the circumstances of what can or may not fall through, but the adaptability of knowing." Kendra agreed with Jason: "Talking about the safe space and learning how to overcome and adapt to different things, in different environments, and learning to cope with different personalities, too." The participants in this focus group fed off one another to present rich data.

Resiliency

Military-connected students transitioning to higher education expressed resiliency in matters of transition. Adaptability and resilience are interwoven into the military lifestyle. Resilience was evident within the data. Tanner and Brad experienced family separations due to their mother's many deployments. They both presented a positive attitude as they recalled their experiences. Tanner relied on a positive attitude to engage his resiliency. Debra's input was, "Give yourself space to be angry or upset about it, and then the next day, keep going." It is widely accepted that psychological resilience is crucial to coping with the cognitive, emotional and social stressors associated with military culture (Nindl et al., 2018).

Outlier Data and Findings

The participants in this study were disciplined and mostly stayed on topic, although there were some outliers during the focus group discussion and the interviews. The researcher found that the Black and Asian participants were aware of their ethnicity being a factor in how others

perceived them transitioning to higher education. Previous studies have concluded that racial individuality is often significant in evaluations of the person; hence the exceedingly striking social identity classification for many Black people (Patil et al., 2018). Cross' (1971) Nigrescence Theory posits that Black people are socialized into predominately White culture, resulting in racial ambiguity (Winters et al., 2023). White participants did not mention race or ethnicity as a concern during their transition to higher education.

Diversity

Diversity played a dual role as the outlier in this study. Triangulation uses multiple methods to increase social phenomena research beyond the intrinsic biases that may be found in singular methodologies. Some of the minority participants stated that they felt uncomfortable interacting within their higher education environment. Jason opined during the focus group, "There are a lot of different people, but for me, in mechanical engineering—it would not be many black people." In the focus group and interview, Kendra said, "I was the only black female senior cadet, and it was difficult to maneuver that because I had expectations put on me that were underlined but not physically stated, but I felt like I always had to prove myself."

Several participants looked at diversity through a different lens. The military comprises people from all walks of life, embodying the essence of diversity. During the focus group and interview, Tanner mentioned being around diverse people, people from different countries, states, and backgrounds. Charles agreed: "The military experience as a dependent helped shape my personality by introducing diversity and cultural awareness."

Research Question Responses

The research questions were designed to discover the essence of the military-connected students' experiences while transitioning to higher education. The questionnaire questions, focus

group questions, and interview questions correlate with either the central question or one or more sub-questions. The researcher did not waver from the design, asking the questions as written, although some participants asked for clarification on some of the questions. The researcher acknowledged that through the course of conducting the focus groups and interviews, participants wanted to discuss various subjects not part of the current study.

Central Research Question

How do military-connected students describe their transition experiences to higher education? They did so as merely just another relocation. This mindset enabled them to navigate the stressful situations they faced during their transition to higher education. Kendra wrote, “In my opinion transitions can come in many ways, but what remains the focal point is how you carry out a transition, which can be a beautiful experience. … I have utilized the tools I have learned from my military-connected childhood to navigate through my academic journey.”

Family and friends are overarching determinants while coping with the stresses of the military lifestyle. Family is a constant source of strength in coping with transitions. Military-connected students realize that they will come and go, continually leaving their friends behind or seeing their friends leave. Chad noted, “As we have to move around a lot and make new friends, it is essential to be able to put yourself out there and meet new people.”

Keeping a positive attitude becomes an important trait when military-connected students transition to higher education. Kendra said, “I view myself as a personable and extroverted person, I feel like I’ve never met a stranger.” Tanner stated in his interview that he could be placed in any environment and thrive in it regardless of the circumstances. Chad stated, “It’s all about establishing yourself into the new place.” Lastly, Charles added, “The military helped me become more comfortable with going out and seeing different things.”

Sub-Question One

How do military-connected students describe their identity during transitioning situations to higher education? The military-connected students describe their identity as a quasi-military member, essentially serving alongside their military parents. Their parents are trained to plan for the expected outcome and prepare to adapt to changes. Sylvia wrote, "The interpersonal skills I have directly correlates to the military lifestyle. My communication, leadership, problem-solving, conflict resolution and decision-making skills all resemble the military lifestyle. They all emphasize community, connection, and how to achieve a common goal." Participants credit their military-connected experiences for shaping their worldview and introducing them to diversity and cultural awareness. Their determination to see each task through derives from their military parents' training.

Sub-Question Two

How do military-connected students describe coping strategies when transitioning to higher education? Military-connected students develop coping skills starting from their first relocation, the first parent deployment, or the first time they have to change schools due to their military parent. Jeffrey related his timeliness and his pleasant demeanor to his father serving in the Air Force. He also stated, "So, I think the military was good for building relationships with staff in higher education as well; having that respectful attitude, that is in the military and the sort of inherent politeness of it—of just being there early."

The military way of life requires many resource agencies within its ranks. Resources are provided to military-connected students for a variety of situations including transitioning to higher education. Sylvia, speaking of resources, said, "I think it's interesting, seeing how the impact of having that support or lack of support now being in the role to provide that same

advice and that same support onto others." Charles, agreeing with his sister, stated, "I felt that a lot of the benefits that the military base provides, like after school care, helped us out." Kendra continued, "We've learned how to go through transitions and find resources."

Sub-Question Three

How do military-connected students describe their support systems? Jason said, "I feel like a common theme that we all discussed was the adaptability factor, like, you know, transitioning and moving, and things like that. We all have our different ways to cope with that." Military-connected students build their support systems one transition at a time. They recognize that it is just part of being military-connected. The ability to adjust when dealing with the stresses associated with transitioning to higher education is evident in the data. Kendra said, "Flexibility is the key to air power, and it's the key to all the things we do in life."

Resiliency is part of the military equation. The military lifestyle requires individuals to be resilient and to bounce back stronger with each transition. Military-connected students reflected on their resilient practices that they relied on when transitioning to higher education. Charles credits communication for his resiliency through transitions: "The biggest takeaways are, communicate with family, talk to your family, if I have a problem, being able to tell them about my problems." Sylvia related resiliency to eating her ten pancakes: "To just push through and do what needs to be done, just to be consistent in what I need, and to eat my ten pancakes every day, to do what needs to be done, and just push through that way."

Summary

The data revealed four essential themes that summarize how military-connected students describe their transitions from high school to higher education. These themes were aligned with the research questions and related subthemes which were supported by the participants' quotes.

Military-connected students find that community matters as they transition away from their familiar surroundings to a new environment on college campuses. A constant connection to family and the friends they gained while experiencing the military way of life resulted in their adopting positive attitudes about transitions in general. Participants viewed planning for transitions as a strategic part of their military identity and was crucial to their determination to complete each challenge they faced during college. The participants relied on being prepared for the transition to higher education while admitting that the stress persisted through the process. However, resources enabled them to build resilient practices that helped them transition to higher education. The concept of adaptability was raised in several parts of this study. Participants expressed the focus group, interviews, and the questionnaires in terms of how being able to adapt to different situations or circumstances drove their thinking process during the transition.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this study was to describe the lived experiences of military-connected high school students transitioning to higher education. This chapter presents a precis of the findings examined in correlation to the empirical and theoretical literature outlined in Chapter Two. A comprehensive discussion of the study's contemporaneous methodological, practical, empirical, and theoretical implications is represented. This is followed by a brief discussion addressing the representations consciously employed to help define the study's limitations, acknowledging prospective weaknesses that may become apparent. Lastly, after considering the findings, limitations, and delimitations, the researcher provides recommendations and prospective narratives for future research.

Discussion

The purpose of this section is to interpret to the current study's findings, considering the theoretical and empirical literature examined in Chapter Two. The researcher illustrated how the current study is related to previous projects examining military-connected students transitioning to higher education and validated the reasons for this study's relevance. Additionally, the researcher identified areas where the current study intensified the latitude of previous studies, focusing on the gap in the literature regarding this population. The researcher addressed the limitations and delimitations, then offered suggestions for continued research in this area. The researcher framed this section using Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory to highlight significant aspects of military-connected students' experiences with an element of leaving familiar surroundings to transition to higher education.

Summary of Thematic Findings

In summary, military-connected students transitioned to higher education with a positive attitude and a determined demeanor to succeed. They were able to deal with stressful experiences and adapt their perspectives to changing situations. Despite having professional resources, they relied on family and friends who have experienced similar transitions and were able to understand their situation. Military-connected students prepared for transitions as an inevitable function of the military way of life and have carried this technique throughout their life, specifically as it pertained to transitioning to higher education. Military-connected students expect transitions and are prepared to adapt to a new environment. They viewed diversity in two ways: first, as a challenge related to being within a minority population, and secondly, as positive experiences indicative of military culture.

Interpretation of Findings

Military-connected high school students present a variety of individual experiences related to transitioning to higher education. Each experience is derived from their journeys within the military way of life and how they engage strategies for coping with transitions that underpin their resiliencies, as evidenced in their ability to manage an array of stressful situations. When attempting to answer the central research question and obtain clarity on how military-connected high school students experience transitioning to higher education, they expressed their desire to be a part of something larger than themselves. This theme is evident in their experiences within the military community.

Military-connected students regard their family and friends as their strongholds when dealing with many transitions. The confines of the military installation are an extension of their family, thus creating the essence of belonging to something greater. The support they garnered from like-minded individuals within their community propelled them to move through the

obstacles they faced when transitioning to college. This idealism reflected their positive attitudes towards their experiences despite their challenges growing up in this community. Military-connected students from different service organizations experienced a transition in similar ways. No matter which military branch they are connected to, community is essential, and planning for transitions was a consistent theme.

Military-connected students described their identity during transitions to higher education as being part of the military. They recognized that their experiences do not signify that the non-military population is unfamiliar with the military way of life as an experience. Military-connected students described how their parents' training blended into their decision-making processes. They described their identity as serving alongside an active-duty service member. They expressed a determination to always move forward in the face of challenges, finish the course, and complete each task, all of which leads to preparedness. They described preparedness as an essential coping strategy when transitioning to higher education. Having experienced relocations, their parents deploying, and family separations, military-connected students have learned to mentally prepare for transitions ahead of time. They start by examining past experiences and deciding what benefitted them and what did not. By doing so, they decide what strategies to employ during their transition, leaning into all available resources.

Resources for coping with the military lifestyle offer an insight into coping with the transition to higher education. Even though military leadership has anticipated the need for resources to be available for active-duty members and their families, the current study found that military-connected students turn to family and friends most often during transitioning to higher education. They described how their experiences increased their flexibility and have allowed

them to adapt to the environment where they find themselves. This notion of adaptability is the final theme in this study.

Military-connected students noted how they overcame transitions as a byproduct of being affiliated with the military. They adapted their perspective when transitioning to higher education, such as changing their perspective about switching schools every two to three years on average. They would prepare for reintegration after a parent's return from a deployment, when their family dynamics had changed, and they adapted to their newly assigned roles and responsibilities within the family. The theme of adaptability was foregrounded when they discussed how they had reverted to their family position prior to the deployment. They adapted to their new role of responsibility for their personal growth as they transitioned to higher education. The researcher found that military-connected high school students transitioning to higher education represented the quintessence of resiliency.

Furthermore, diversity was a discernable observation for minority participants and a significant growth point for other military-connected students when transitioning. Black and Asian participants recalled feeling like they were out of place. In comparison, White participants championed diversity as part of their military identity. All participants recognized that the military, as a whole, is a microcosm of the United States while also recognizing that the military lifestyle broadened their understanding of different cultures.

The Military is my Community and Part of my Identity

The participants in this study repeatedly described themselves as being part of the military by way of the structure and ethos of the military lifestyle. They use their experiences of living within the military community to navigate other life challenges. Transitioning to higher education presented them with an opportunity to engage with the coping strategies they learned

throughout their time spent around military installations. They credited their strengths to their parents' military connection. The current study revealed that military-connected student may experience transition much the same manner as do adults. They have the same apprehensions and concerns when facing the transition to higher education as an adult faces when changing jobs. Military-connected students seek out like-minded individuals to connect with and decrease the fog of the unknown environment.

The Military is a Different World

Military-connected students have experienced more change by the time they have graduated than have most other groups. They may have transitioned to as many as six schools and different locations around the country and across the world. They are forced to be in a constant state of preparedness for the next challenge. It is difficult to compare this group to students who have lived in the same place for their entire life or even had their secondary education at a single school. The determination of military-connected students to finish what they started when they set out for higher education was evident as they graduated and went on to promising careers in challenging fields.

Built Military

Thanks to their many transitions, military-connected students are not fragile. They are resilient and poised to handle life's challenges because of the residual benefits received from their parents' military commitment. Deployments, relocations, and other challenges associated with the military have positioned military-connected students to be better prepared than their civilian counterparts. Moreover, the diversity of the military way of life is paramount to their successful transition to higher education.

Implications for Policy or Practice

Military-connected dependent students transitioning to higher education may be the least studied of military-connected individuals. The literature covering veterans and their spouses has received the most significant empirical review. Traditionally, military-connected children are excluded from open-source research, partly because they are challenging to identify with certainty. The current study found that most institutions only have self-reported data on military-connected students. If students are not seeking military-connected benefits or tuition, they are not likely to self-identify to the administration.

Implications for Policy

The first implication for policy is enacting a system that can positively identify military-connected students with their associated connections. Military-connected students may fall into several categories depending on their service status or their parents' service. This policy may be carried at all K-12 public education schools as well. Although there are provisions in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), public schools do not have a verifiable number of military-connected students enrolled at their location.

Next, participants in the current study indicated they would have appreciated more assistance during their transition to higher education. If higher learning institutions developed a more structured approach for newly enrolled military-connected students by providing meaningful support, the results might ease the challenges that military-connected students face. Institutions aware of their military-connected student population could develop support groups that replicate their experiences and take military installations into account.

The final implication for policy concerns training for public schools that have military-connected students within their ranks. Programs such as Purple Star Schools promote the military-connected study of social-emotional health during the transition from school to school.

Participants expressed their regret for not having preparing more while transitioning to higher education. Purple Star Schools receive free training in relation to military-connected students, including training on how to connect students to the appropriate resources. Specifically, high school counselors might better assist students prepare for their transition by providing intentional support earlier in their careers. Military-connected students may benefit from becoming aware of those resources that are readily available to assist in their transition.

Implications for Practice

The current study presented a narrative for better communication from multiple stakeholders concerning military-connected students transitioning to higher education. There are programs that these students may need to be made aware of, programs that K-12 public school systems need to become more familiar with, and more resources that higher education institutions are not employing to assist this population. The military-connected population may not be apparent beyond the installation's gates, especially in communities far from military bases. The researcher contends that other populations of highly transient students may benefit from more awareness of their needs when transitioning to higher education.

Professional development for stakeholders around military-connected student populations could bring awareness to their experiences. The more educators at all levels know about the experiences of military-connected students, the more likely these students are to choose to pursue higher education. Universities progressively establish professional development training for staff in order to decrease the breach in understanding and accommodating military-connected students (Dillard & Yu, 2018). According to Dillard and Yu (2018), this training is designed to build empathy and communication avenues between staff and faculty and the transitioning military-connected student. Educators may consider partnering with established organizations supporting

military-connected students from kindergarten to college. A consciousness of military-connected students transitioning away from military structure to civilian life and accounting for their experiences has been identified an effective step in generating an inclusive environment on college campuses (Ghosh et al., 2020).

The implications for practice concerning diversity and inclusion have also been noted. Morris et al. (2022) found that experiencing the differing ideologies surrounding inclusion for marginal populations of students may be challenging for higher education professionals, and the military-connected student community presents similar characteristics. Their study found that institutions are adapting to the needs of military-connected students and addressing the common misconceptions associated with this group (Morris et al., 2022). Military-connected students generally speaking feel that they do not fit in with the higher education environment, that others only grasp their military identity. They often doubt their plan or purpose, which presents barriers to inclusiveness while navigating the transition to higher education institutions (Clary & Byrne, 2023). Incorporating military-connected students into the veteran population may allow them to connect with someone who understands their experiences.

Empirical and Theoretical Implications

The current study focused on the military-connected high school dependents transitioning to higher education. Research in this specific area could have been more extensive, particularly considering the number of participants. However, the current study confirms previous research on military families surrounding the transient culture of the military way of life. The methods and design were appropriate for examining the participants' life experiences. Schlossberg's transition theory is grounded in transitioning adults; the current study considered the 4Ss (situation, self, support, and strategy) as derivative in the finding.

Empirical Implications

The experiences of military-connected high school students transitioning to higher education share similar backgrounds about culture. They each took different approaches to their transition. Accordingly, the first step in managing change is understanding the diverse types of change (Schlossberg, 2011; Anderson et al., 2011). Each transition may elicit a different response as transitions are not set in stone; instead, things may change based on the individual's state of mind during the transition (Astor et al., 2013). Another feature of understanding change is assigning short-to-intermediate-term outcomes necessary to meet fundamental long-term goals (Reinholz & Andrews, 2020).

Before military-connected students enroll in college, they may have already experienced other transitions that left them with coping strategies. They will have likely experienced transitioning to multiple schools (Cramm et al., 2019), parents' long-/short-term deployments (De Pedro et al., 2018), discovering their identity (Zurlinden et al., 2021), and community support systems (Spencer et al., 2020). Schlossberg's transition theory posits that different people deal with transitions differently and respond differently to each transition, even if the transition was previously experienced. Military-connected participants have stated that as they experienced transitions, they adapted their strategies to meet the challenges with the full knowledge of past transitions.

Theoretical Implications

Theoretically, participants in the current study view transitions as a positive experience, albeit one filled with challenging situations. They portrayed an awareness that transition is merely something they must live with and make the best of. Contrary to the widely accepted portrayal of military-dependent students being academically fragile (Strobino & Salvaterra,

2000), the graduated participants went on to have promising careers as a result of their transient background. The researcher contends that this is a learned coping strategy developed over several years of transitions associated with military culture. The consciousness of time as past, current, and future indicates self-analysis and self-identity construction (Olry-Louis et al., 2022). Military-connected high school students observe each transition differently with each occurrence. Olry-Louis et al. (2022) stated that the transition is experienced, and that given meaning should be interpreted in two ways: first, considering previous and upcoming transitions, and second, the way the individual subjectively experiences the event.

The experiences of military-connected students transitioning to higher education are defined through the lens of Schlossberg's (1984) transition theory. The theoretical context surrounding research involving military-connected groups has previously been focused on school reform (Garner & Nunnery, 2018) and multi-tiered systems of support (Fenning, 2021), while other studies assigned no theoretical concept (Astor et al., 2009; 2012). Still others examined this population using Adlerian psychology theory (Kent & Buechner, 2021; 2019). Each element of the experiences related in the current study embodied the essence of Schlossberg's transition theory centered on the 4Ss: situation, self, support, and strategy. This study confirms that military-connected students transitioning to higher education engaged in each of the 4Ss during their transition. Transition theory was thus appropriate in analyzing the different experiences of each participant.

Limitations and Delimitations

There are limitations to consider when evaluating the findings. The use of self-reporting intentions by design carries a potential risk of indistinct reporting that may be attributed to social popularity, biases, and retroactively evoking and accessing emotionally challenging experiences.

It may be challenging to differentiate the causal relationship between transitions associated with military culture and transitioning to higher education. Although researcher biases were mitigated, it should be understood that not all biases can be totally eliminated with absolute certainty.

Limitations

The first limitation is that the researcher could only secure participants from the Air Force, the Army, and the Navy. Moreover, efforts to reach other armed services did not garner any participants. There are considerable constraints placed on access to information systems that can identify potential candidates for research purposes. Although there is a potential to access static helpful information to identify demographics associated with the military community, this does not provide the appropriate nuance needed to conduct empirical research. This study did include some diversity, although it could have been improved by using a broader participant pool.

This study limited the age of participants to 18 due to the implications derived from underage participants being included. This limitation did not appear to hinder participation in the study. The researcher did not limit the maximum age because this may have prevented older individuals from joining the study. The oldest participant was twenty-eight years old and was able to recall their transition-related experiences.

Another significant limitation was time itself. The researcher contacted several higher education institutions to gain support for the study, which proved fruitless. Few administrators responded to written requests to forward the approved email from the IRB. In addition, the military liaison located on the campus did not return emails or phone calls. The study would have benefitted had time been allotted to gather more participants. On the other hand, some participants had graduated several years earlier and may not have been able to recall the intimate

experiences as they lived them at the time.

The last noted limitation was the researcher's ability to keep the participants interested throughout the data-gathering process. Two participants returned the appropriate consent form and screening sheet but did not respond when the researcher scheduled focus groups or interview research. The researcher used Google Docs to gather some of the data. However, this confused the participants, who ended up providing emails or cell phone screenshots of the information.

Delimitations

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of how military-connected high school students experienced transitions to higher education. Thus, deciding to limit the scope to this group was appropriate. Including other groups may have dilute the information and skewed the data. Limiting the sample criterion to this segment is derived from the principles of a transcendental phenomenological approach. Essentially, participants are expected to be able to express themselves articulately and present complex narratives of their experiences.

Participants were restricted to those with at least one year of military-connected history. This decision stems from participants having to have experienced military culture to the extent it would have been imprinted upon the individual's self-identity. Schlossberg's transition theory refers to the self as the individual's inner strength. This study examined the individuals' optimism, resiliency, and ability to deal with transitions, given their connection to the military.

Recommendations for Future Research

Considering this study's findings, limitations, and delimitations, the researcher recommends multiple areas for future research. First, future research may consider how military-connected students describe preparing tofor attend higher education. The participants in the current study suggested that secondary schools could have better prepared them for transitioning

to higher education. They mentioned that counselors should start such preparations in the ninth grade instead of waiting for the junior year of high school. Such a study may determine if more resources should be allocated to this area.

Second, future research should consider the preparedness of higher education institutions to support military-connected dependents. There are current studies examining veterans and, to a lesser extent, veterans' spouses; however, research into military-connected dependents enrolled in higher education is sparse.

Lastly, future research may focus on military-connected students transitioning to other areas after high school. Statistics show that college enrollment has continually decreased over the last three years of tracking such data (Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, 2023). Thus, there is an opportunity here to examine how military-connected students transition to areas other than higher education alongside non-military ones.

Conclusion

This study examined how military-connected students describe transitioning to higher education, analyzing this phenomenon from the participants' lived experiences. The study was devoted to recording the students' voices, centered on the data obtained through the transcripts. The study emphasized the significance of being military-connected and transitioning to higher education institutions. From a historical perspective, military-connected groups are increasingly becoming the subjects of empirical research. From a social perspective, military-connected students take on the persona of their service-connected parents. The participants in this study confirmed this phenomenon in their transcripts, and the data indicates this to be the case. Schlossberg's transition theory was the most appropriate for this study, as it followed a transcendental phenomenological approach to analyze the information that was presented in the

participants' own words. The significance of this study is heightened by the implications for policies concerning this group, the most significant being the need for educational institutions to develop a system encouraging military-connected student identification methods. Studying this group is challenging if members are not readily identifiable across all educational platforms.

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Appendix A

Permission Request

2 Oct 2022

University of Alaska, Fairbanks
Military and Veteran Service
P.O. Box 756370
Fairbanks, Alaska 99775

Dear Ms. X,

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand the lived experiences of military-connected students transitioning from military way of life to higher education.

I am writing to request your permission to conduct my research at University of Alaska, Fairbanks. I am requesting access to your email list of military-connected students enrolled at your university. I am seeking to study military-connected dependent students between the ages of 18 to 26 years old.

Participants will be asked to complete the attached survey and contact me to schedule an interview. Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, respond by email to xxxx@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

Earnest Kincade
Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

30 Apr 2023

Western Kentucky University
Layaou Hall, Bldg. 65, Rm 103
Fort Knox, KY 40121

Greetings,

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand the lived experiences of military-connected students transitioning from a military way of life to higher education.

I am writing to request that you send a recruitment email on my behalf to the military-connected (dependents of military personnel) students enrolled at your university, Western Kentucky University. I am seeking to study military-connected dependent students who are 18 years of age or older and who have transitioned into higher education at a university level.

Participants will be asked to complete an online survey, participate in a focus group, and take part in an individual interview, of which the latter two will be recorded. Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, respond by email to xxxxx@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

Earnest Kincade
Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

9 Apr 2023

Eastern Washington University
214 Showalter Hall
Cheney, Washington 99004

Dear President Shari McMahan,

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand the lived experiences of military-connected students transitioning from a military way of life to higher education.

I am writing to request that you send a recruitment email on my behalf to the military-connected (dependents of military personnel) students enrolled at your university, Eastern Washington University. I am seeking to study military-connected dependent students who are 18 years of age or older and who have transitioned into higher education at a university level.

Participants will be asked to complete an online survey, participate in a focus group, and take part in an individual interview, of which the latter two will be recorded. Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, respond by email to xxxxx@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

Earnest Kincade
Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

30 Apr 2023

Northern Kentucky University
Nunn Drive, UC 131
Highland Heights, KY 41099

Greetings,

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand the lived experiences of military-connected students transitioning from a military way of life to higher education.

I am writing to request that you send a recruitment email on my behalf to the military-connected (dependents of military personnel) students enrolled at your university, Northern Kentucky University. I am seeking to study military-connected dependent students who are 18 years of age or older and who have transitioned into higher education at a university level.

Participants will be asked to complete an online survey, participate in a focus group, and take part in an individual interview, of which the latter two will be recorded. Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, respond by email to xxxxx@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

Earnest Kincade
Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

30 Apr 2023

Pennsylvania State University
128 Outreach Building
University Park, PA 16802

Greetings,

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand the lived experiences of military-connected students transitioning from a military way of life to higher education.

I am writing to request that you send a recruitment email on my behalf to the military-connected (dependents of military personnel) students enrolled at your university, Pennsylvania State University. I am seeking to study military-connected dependent students who are 18 years of age or older and who have transitioned into higher education at a university level.

Participants will be asked to complete an online survey, participate in a focus group, and take part in an individual interview, of which the latter two will be recorded. Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, respond by email to xxxxx@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

Earnest Kincade
Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

9 Apr 2023

Seattle University
901 12th Avenue
Seattle, Washington 98122

Dear President,

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand the lived experiences of military-connected students transitioning from a military way of life to higher education.

I am writing to request that you send a recruitment email on my behalf to the military-connected (dependents of military personnel) students enrolled at your university, Seattle University. I am seeking to study military-connected dependent students who are 18 years of age or older and who have transitioned into higher education at a university level.

Participants will be asked to complete an online survey, participate in a focus group, and take part in an individual interview, of which the latter two will be recorded. Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, respond by email to xxxxx@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

Earnest Kincade
Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

21 Apr 2023

University of Alaska, Fairbanks
1731 South Chandalar Drive
Fairbanks, AK 99775

Greetings,

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand the lived experiences of military-connected students transitioning from a military way of life to higher education.

I am writing to request that you send a recruitment email on my behalf to the military-connected (dependents of military personnel) students enrolled at your university, the University of Alaska, Fairbanks. I am seeking to study military-connected dependent students who are 18 years of age or older and who have transitioned into higher education at a university level.

Participants will be asked to complete an online survey, participate in a focus group, and take part in an individual interview, of which the latter two will be recorded. Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, respond by email to xxxxx@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

Earnest Kincade
Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

9 Apr 2023

University of Washington, Tacoma
1900 Commerce Street
Tacoma, Washington 98402-3100

Dear President,

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand the lived experiences of military-connected students transitioning from a military way of life to higher education.

I am writing to request that you send a recruitment email on my behalf to the military-connected (dependents of military personnel) students enrolled at your university, University of Washington, Tacoma. I am seeking to study military-connected dependent students who are 18 years of age or older and who have transitioned into higher education at a university level.

Participants will be asked to complete an online survey, participate in a focus group, and take part in an individual interview, of which the latter two will be recorded. Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, respond by email to xxxxx@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

Earnest Kincade
Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

13 Apr 2023

Wayland Baptist University
Fairbanks, Alaska

Dear X,

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand the lived experiences of military-connected students transitioning from a military way of life to higher education.

I am writing to request that you send a recruitment email on my behalf to the military-connected (dependents of military personnel) students enrolled at your university, Wayland Baptist University. I am seeking to study military-connected dependent students who are 18 years of age or older and who have transitioned into higher education at a university level.

Participants will be asked to complete an online survey, participate in a focus group, and take part in an individual interview, of which the latter two will be recorded. Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, respond by email to xxxxx@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

Earnest Kincade
Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

Appendix B

Consent

Title of the Project: Understanding the lived experiences of military-connected students transitioning from the military way of life to higher education: A qualitative study.

Principal Investigator: Earnest Kincade, Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

Invitation to Take Part in a Research Study
You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be 18 years old, a high school graduate, military-connected, enrolled at a college or university in Alaska, and have experienced military transitions such as relocations and deployments. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?
The purpose of the study is to understand the transition experiences of military-connected students transitioning to higher education.

What will happen if you take part in this study?
If you agree to participate in this study, I will ask you to do the following:

1. Take a brief survey that will consist of 4 questions. Write a brief 1-2 paragraph essay about your experiences with military transitions. Your name and your responses will be kept strictly confidential. All information will be securely stored; only I will have access to your answers.
2. Write a brief 1-2 paragraph essay about your experiences with military transitions. The same confidentiality will apply.
3. If selected for the study you will be scheduled for 30-50 minute face-to-face interview as well as participate in a focus group study with like students. The interview will be recorded using at least two methods in case one does not function properly. The recorded interview will be used to conduct the study. The same confidentiality will apply.

How could you or others benefit from this study?
Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study. Benefits to society include a better understanding of the coping experiences of military-connected students transitioning away from military life to higher education.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?
The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that would make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. If data collected from you is shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- 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.
- Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings. If information is breached, you will be notified.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

How will you be compensated for taking part in the study?
Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

What are the costs to you for taking part in the study?
To participate in the research, you will not need to pay for anything associated with this study.

Is your participation voluntary?
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 prior to submitting the survey without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide 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 section. 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.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?
The researcher conducting this study is Earnest Kincade. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at (000) 123-5467 and/or xxxxxx@liberty.edu. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Jane Doe, Ed.D., at jdoe@liberty.edu.

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?
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.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you may contact the study team using the information provided above.

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/video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____
Printed Subject Name

_____
Signature and Date

Appendix C

Research Questions

Phenomenological Research Questions:

Central Research Question

How do military-connected students describe their transition experiences to higher education?

Sub-Question One

How do military-connected students describe their identity during transitioning situations to higher education?

Sub-Question Two

How do military-connected students describe their coping strategies when transitioning to higher education?

Sub-Question Three

How do military-connected students describe their support systems?

Appendix D

Participant's Pseudonyms

Name	Pseudonym	Branch	School	Years Connected
[redacted]	Kendra	Air Force	South Carolina	18
[redacted]	Sylvia	Air Force	East Coast	18
[redacted]	Charles	Air Force	Texas	18
[redacted]	Jason	Army National Guard	Arizona	11
[redacted]	Jeffrey	Air Force	Pennsylvania	14
[redacted]	Tanner	Air Force	Oklahoma	20
[redacted]	Brad	Air Force	Oklahoma	16
[redacted]	Debra	Navy	Alaska/Washington	14
[redacted]	Chad	Air Force	Alaska	18
[redacted]	Myra	Air Force	Alaska	12