THE EXPERIENCE OF MILITARY FAMILIES ACCESSING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE: A HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

Kristine Clothier

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy Education: Organizational Leadership

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Abstract

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand accessing early childhood education and care (ECEC) opportunities by military families using government and private programs. The study focused on 12 families who have children ages three to five years old enrolled in an ECEC program. The philosophical foundation used in this study is Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology. The theory provided an underlying construct and structure to understand the interconnectedness of ECEC stakeholders and the impact of government policies on ECEC access. The study explored the lived experiences of military families who seek access to high-quality equitable early childhood education opportunities. The lived experiences of military families were collected through interviews, focus groups, and journal prompts. Explication centered on synthesizing bracketed narratives into thick descriptions, identifying themes, and generating an essence appropriate to hermeneutic phenomenology. This study focused on the gap of unknown lived experiences of military families to understand the problem that military children in the United States do not have equitable access to high-quality early childhood education and care programs. The study found that navigating ECEC access is overwhelming due to an information gap that necessitates relying on a network to identify resources. Extensive waitlists, the COVID-19 pandemic, and distance from extended family create a daunting challenge for military families exacerbated with each relocation.

Keywords: equitable access, military families' needs, high-quality early childhood education and care, policy

Dedication

To my family, whose steadfast belief in me was stronger than my doubts. To my mom, who taught me the importance of education and never hesitated to express her pride in my efforts. And to my children, who motivated me to become Dr. Mom. I am blessed beyond measure to be surrounded by unconditional love, enduring patience, and limitless encouragement.

Acknowledgments

Dr. Perry, Dr. Strafaccia, and Dr. Bruce, I am grateful for your guidance, time, and dedication to my journey.

My deepest gratitude to my participants, I am honored to share your experiences. I am humbled by your selfless desire to make accessing early childhood education better for the families following in your footsteps. Thank you for your service to our country and your investment in my education.

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List of Abbreviations

Administration for Children & Families (ACF)

Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF)

Child Development Center (CDC)

Child Development Program (CDP)

Child Welfare Information Gateway (CWIG)

Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness (CMFR)

Department of Defense Education Activities (DoDEA)

Department of Defense Instruction (DoDI)

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

Family Child Care Program (FCC)

Headquarters Marine Corps (HQMC)

Military Childcare dot com (MCC)

Military Childcare in Your Neighborhood (MCCYN)

National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA)

National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER)

Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion (OASH)

Permanent Change of Station (PCS)

School Age Care Program (SAC)

United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF)

U. S. Government Accountability Office (GAO)

Universal Prekindergarten (UPK)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Military families with young children need equitable access to high-quality early childhood education and care programs. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand accessing early childhood education and care (ECEC) opportunities for military families using government and private programs. The study's goal is to understand how families perceive their experiences accessing ECEC to inform policymakers on the best practices of expanding ECEC opportunities to meet the needs of military children. Policies developed prior to 2023 are based on subject matter expert recommendations without a full grasp of the lived experiences of military families (U.S. Government Accountability Office [GAO], 2023). Chapter One provides the historical, social, and theoretical background of ECEC. Then, the problem statement, purpose statement, and research questions are discussed. Finally, the significance of the study is described.

Background

Early childhood is a period of development, between birth and eight years old, with rapid brain growth and a crucial window of opportunity for education (Larose et al., 2021; United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2023). Early childhood education and care is pre-primary education that establishes a foundation for all future education (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF], 2023). Healthy development in early childhood establishes long-term social, emotional, cognitive, and physical skills that prepare children for educational experience (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion [OASH], 2023). ECEC programs are critical for mental and physical development, have lifelong benefits, and help reduce the achievement gaps of at-risk children (OASH, 2023;

UNICEF, 2023). The following sections discuss the historical, social, and theoretical contexts pertinent to this study.

Historical Context

While the history of early childhood education and care begins in the 1500s, the official United States' ECEC began in the 1830s with two types of programs: day nurseries providing basic care and supervision for disadvantaged children of working mothers and nursery schools with an educational focus for middle- and upper-class children (Backes & Allen, 2018; Kamerman & Gatenio-Gabel, 2015; Millat & Murray, 2023). Day nurseries, now recognized as daycares or early childhood care centers, expanded rapidly with the country's industrialization and emigration (Kamerman & Gatenio-Gabel, 2015; Millat & Murray, 2023). Nursery schools, now recognized as preschools, Kindergartens, and early learning centers, increased significantly in the 1960s with the establishment of Head Start (Kamerman & Gatenio-Gabel, 2015) and President Lyndon Johnson's *War on Poverty* (Backes & Allen, 2018; Joshi et al., 2016).

Urie Bronfenbrenner was a founder of the federal Head Start program, formed in 1965 to provide impoverished families with education, health, and support services (Backes & Allen, 2018; Gilstrap & Zierten, 2022). Much of the Head Start program was founded on the research Bronfenbrenner conducted at Cornell University as a professor of human development (Gilstrap & Zierten, 2022). Bronfenbrenner's 1967 paper "The Psychological Costs of Quality and Equality in Education" formed educational policies that are still prevalent in ECEC policies. The article began to address the societal disparities in prenatal care and access to education. Bronfenbrenner called for active involvement in work with disadvantaged children that forms the basis of early childhood intervention that continues today.

Social Context

Early childhood education and care is a multifaceted topic with many interrelated stakeholders (Department of Defense [DoD], 2023) requiring an expansive understanding of the historical, cultural, and societal motives for the current ECEC framework (Adams et al., 2022). Following the year 2020, social context is best understood with a basic understanding of how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the phenomenon (Millat & Murray, 2023). The pandemic severely altered children's trajectory of well-being (Benner & Mistry, 2020; Pattnaik & Jalongo, 2021; United Nations, 2022) by limiting the number of children who could access high-quality ECEC (Davies et al., 2021; Yoshikawa et al., 2020). The childcare landscape shifted to informal settings that do not yield the same language, social, and long-term benefits as high-quality ECEC programs (Bassok & Galdo, 2016; Davies et al., 2021) and pushed ECEC to the verge of collapse (Pattnaik & Jalongo, 2021). The pandemic spotlighted the vitality of ECEC programs and the disparity of high-quality ECEC access (Benner & Mistry, 2020; Davies et al., 2021; Millat & Murray, 2023; Pattnaik & Jalongo, 2021; Yoshikawa et al., 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the nation's critical dependence on sustainable childcare for economic, and family health (Administration for Children & Families [ACF], 2023; Banghart et al., 2021; King et al., 2022; Millat & Murray, 2023). The Department of Defense (DoD) views affordable and available childcare as an essential aspect of family readiness to increase job performance, retention, and financial well-being (GAO, 2023; Kamarck, 2020; White House, 2023). During the 2023 in-depth study, GAO interviewed family members who expressed concerns regarding waitlists and costs associated with childcare. In September 2021, 77,000 military children were enrolled in DoD's childcare program, with an additional 25,800 receiving subsidies for civilian care in March 2022 (GAO, 2023). More than $1 billion in

appropriated funds are annually invested in DoD childcare programs (GAO, 2023; Kamarck, 2020). In response to COVID-19 Congress delegated $53 billion as temporary relief to stabilize the childcare market between 2019 to 2022 (ACF, 2023; Lou et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2022). A complete understanding of the lived experience of military families accessing ECEC programs is required to ensure the most effective use of this significant investment.

Theoretical Context

Research on military families' well-being uses family systems theory to investigate the transactional nature of community partnerships (Classen et al., 2019; Sands et al., 2023). Life course theory forms a framework for military family life education (Mancini et al., 2020; Woodall et al., 2022), and the macro-level sociohistorical COVID-19 pandemic altered children's development through stratification (Benner & Mistry, 2020). Military family dynamics were explored using various theories, including attachment theory (Dancik et al., 2021; Tupper et al., 2020), social connectedness theory (St. John & Fenning, 2020), and social-ecological theory (DeVoe et al., 2020). Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory (1979) is needed to fully understand the transactional nature of how military families function within multiple social, cultural, and regulatory environments.

Problem Statement

The problem is that military children in the United States do not have equitable access to early childhood education and care (ECEC) opportunities (Kalluri et al., 2021; King et al., 2023; Millat & Murray, 2023; National Institute for Early Education Research [NIEER], 2019). ECEC is proven to serve as a protective factor (Bartlett & Smith, 2019; Larose et al., 2021) for children exposed to adversity prevalent in families with at least one parent serving in the United States military (Mogil et al., 2022; Rogers et al., 2021). The United States does not have a national

ECEC policy resulting in variations across states and communities (Backes & Allen, 2018; United Nations, 2022). State and local policies create access challenges especially prevalent in families with low incomes, racial minorities, non-standard work schedules, infant and toddler-age children, and/or living in rural areas (Banghart et al., 2021; Henly & Adams, 2018; Morrissey et al., 2022; Warner-Richter & Lloyd, 2020).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand accessing early childhood education and care opportunities for military families using government and private programs. At this stage in the research, the experience of access to early childhood education and care is generally defined as an attempt to register or enroll children ages three to five years old in childcare or preschool programs. ECEC programs are generally defined as learning programs offered at childcare or school-based facilities funded by the Department of Defense, state, or private organizations. The theory guiding this study is Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory (1979).

Significance of the Study

The significance of this phenomenological study is to explore the lived experiences of military families accessing ECEC programs at federal, state, and private childcare centers or educational institutions. Military families' unique needs are underrepresented (Classen et al., 2019; Lawson et al., 2022; Manser et al., 2019; Skomorovsky & Wan, 2019) leaving policymakers without clear guidance as they expand Universal Pre-kindergarten (UPK) in Department of Defense Education Activity (Jowers, 2022). Policymakers and practitioners need to base decisions on recent ECEC programs and research (Negussie et al., 2019). The literature indicates timely, high-quality data leads to a targeted response and may anticipate future needs

(Azuma et al., 2020; United Nations, 2022). This study contributes to the current literature by highlighting barriers specific to military families accessing ECEC programs.

Theoretical

When applied, Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory (1979) stimulates a new understanding of the military family dynamic. The theory highlights the interconnectedness of early childhood education and care stakeholders, the generational evolution, and the shifting cultural and political attitudes that impact military families' immediate environment (Adams et al., 2022; DoD, 2023). Many studies focused on military deployments and resiliency but few focused on how policy impacts ECEC access (Classen et al., 2019; Cramm et al., 2018). Urie Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory of human development (1979) provides a framework for understanding how early childhood education and care politicization impacts ECEC access for military families. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory has been used by other studies to frame the contextual variables across systems that influence children's socioemotional development and learning (Alam et al., 2022; Classen et al., 2019; Tupper et al., 2020; Williams, 2021) as well as factors that determine military family resilience (Cramm et al., 2018). The theory examines child development within the complex system of relationships accounting for mutual accommodation between the individual and the changing environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1973, 1977, 1979).

Empirical

Military parents need access to high-quality ECEC opportunities as a protective factor to mitigate the increased risks inherent in military service (Lawson et al., 2022; Mogil et al., 2019, 2022; Ohye et al., 2020; Skomorovsky & Wan, 2019; St. John & Fenning, 2020; Vannest et al., 2021). This study contributes to policymakers' understanding of the lived experience of military

families accessing ECEC by clarifying the benefits of, and need for, high-quality ECEC. The study identifies needs specific to the Nation's military children and the unique challenges their families encounter accessing ECEC opportunities.

Practical

Research throughout the years indicates a significant financial investment in expanding equitable access to high-quality ECEC (Adams et al., 2022; Banghart et al., 2021). The findings of this study encourage policymakers to improve ECEC access for military families based on feedback received from this study's participants. The research provides data and strategies to create policies that increase equitable access to care. One-third of new military recruits have a military parent who has served, creating an argument for high-quality childcare access as a national security issue by rationalizing that current ECEC program participants are future military members (Kamarck, 2020). Ensuring high-quality ECEC opportunities for military children improves the social-emotional, self-regulation, and increased resiliency skills (Ha et al., 2020; Le Menestrel & Kizer, 2019; Negussie et al., 2019) of the eventual recruiting pool (Kamarck, 2020). Congressional Members, the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Department of Education, and state, and local policymakers benefit from this study by using the data to implement build forward better strategic policies (UNESCO, 2022) to serve military families' unique ECEC needs.

Research Questions

The purpose of the following research questions is to obtain a better understanding of how military families experience accessing ECEC programs. The central research questions focus on the experience of families seeking high-quality early childhood education and care programs that are tied to positive child outcomes (ACF, 2023; GAO, 2023). Sub-questions one

and two expand the little research that has focused on military families' options for ECEC and the factors that influence how military families select programs from their available options (GAO, 2023). Sub-questions three and four investigate the unique circumstances impacting how military service and government regulations influence military children's ECEC experiences as military families have unique needs that differ from their civilian counterparts (Child Welfare Information Gateway [CWIG], 2023; GAO, 2023). This study includes one central research question and four sub-research questions.

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of military families who seek access to high-quality equitable early childhood education opportunities?

Sub-Question One

How do military families describe their options for early childhood education and care?

Sub-Question Two

How do military families describe the factors that influence their choices in selecting ECEC programs?

Sub-Question Three

How do military families describe the effect of their military service on their children's early childhood education and care experiences?

Sub-Question Four

How do military families perceive the influence of government policies on their children's early childhood education and care options?

Definitions

1. *Childcare Desert* - More than three young children for each licensed childcare space (Prusinski et al., 2022).
2. *Early Childhood Education and* Care - Early childhood education and care are programs that serve children ages birth to six years old (Moloney & Pope, 2015). Early Childhood Education is enrollment in any type of formal schooling at least one year before the official age of primary school entry (King et al., 2020). For this study, ECEC is an educational program located within a childcare or school setting that serves children ages three to five, or six years old prior to the start of kindergarten.
3. *Equity* - For the purpose of this study, equity means the consistent and systematic fair, just, and impartial treatment of all individuals (White House, 2021).
4. *High-Quality ECEC* - High-quality ECEC has four aspects; structural elements like teachers' qualifications, classroom environment and activities, teacher-student interactions, and rating systems such as national accreditations (Bassok & Galdo, 2016; Pianta et al., 2016).
5. *Military Family* - For the purpose of this study, a military family is a family unit of at least one adult guardian and one child under the age of 18, with at least one adult guardian serving in the United States Armed Services as either active-duty, reserve, or guardsman. Military benefit rules determine family eligibility as a service member and their spouse and/or children (Le Menestrel & Kizer, 2019).
6. *Nonstandard work hours* - For the purpose of this study, nonstandard work hours included work schedules outside the typical Monday to Friday between 8:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. (Henly & Adams, 2018).

7. *Policymakers* - For the purpose of this study, policymakers are local, state, or federal government officials who make regulatory, restrictive, or facilitating policies. Examples include members of Congress, the Secretary of Defense, interest groups, political parties, and the media.

Summary

In this chapter, a current problem in early childhood education has been articulated. Military families have inequitable access to high-quality early childhood education and care programs and military children are at greater risk of adverse childhood experiences (Lawson et al., 2022; Mogil et al., 2019, 2022; Ohye et al., 2020; Skomorovsky & Wan, 2019; St. John & Fenning, 2020; Vannest et al., 2021). ECEC programs are critical for mental and physical development, have lifelong benefits, and help reduce the achievement gaps of at-risk children (Larose et al., 2021; OASH, 2023; UNICEF, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the nation's critical dependence on sustainable childcare for economic, and family health while shining a light on the disparity of high-quality ECEC access (ACF, 2023; Banghart et al., 2021; Benner, & Mistry, 2020; Davies et al., 2021; Pattnaik, & Jalongo, 2021; Yoshikawa et al., 2020). As ECEC programs recover from COVID-19, policymakers need a complete understanding of the experience of military families accessing ECEC programs to effectively delegate the significant funds that are annually invested (Adams et al., 2022; GAO, 2023; Smith et al., 2022). A gap in the literature exists pertaining specifically to military families' access to ECEC programs. This phenomenological study examined the lived experiences of military families as they access early childhood education and care opportunities.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

A systemic review of the literature was conducted to explore the lived experience of military families accessing early childhood education and care (ECEC) in the Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) and Child Development Centers (CDCs). Chapter Two offers a review of the research on that topic. In the first section, Urie Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory (1979) of human development is discussed, followed by a review of recent literature on the benefits of ECEC, the demand for increased quality ECEC opportunities, and policies that impact ECEC. Lastly, the literature surrounding military families' unique needs and motivations for selecting specific educational institutions. Finally, a gap in the literature is identified that military families are underrepresented in ECEC research and their unique experiences accessing ECEC programs are required to ensure policies accurately address the needs of the Nation’s military children.

Theoretical Framework

Military families' ecological systems are complex, with the Department of Defense (DoD), Congress, and public policy significantly impacting their daily lives, including their children's education opportunities (Ormeno et al., 2020). Understanding military families' experiences accessing early childhood education and care requires an ecological framework to identify how interrelated systems impact education options and decision-making processes. Military families have unique challenges and family dynamics, relying on complex relationships to manage numerous relocations (DoD, 2023), extended periods of separation, and the risk of death or harm (Blamey et al., 2019; Lawson et al., 2022; Manser et al., 2019). Urie Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory of human development provides a framework for

understanding the politicization of early childhood education and care (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000).

Bioecological Theory of Human Development

Bronfenbrenner's ecology of human development theory first published in 1974 and 1979, explained how child development occurs within a complex system of relationships. Bronfenbrenner described his theory as the process human development takes within and between interdependent systems, microsystems, mesosystem, exosystems, macrosystems, and chronosystem, and must be evaluated in systems terms to investigate and research human ecology (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). The child's ecology consists of the immediate settings where people interact and includes the social meaning of the interactions (Tudge et al., 2021). The central idea in Bronfenbrenner's original ecology of human development theory, 1967-1979, was mutual accommodation between the individual and the immediate environment as a transactional relationship (Bronfenbrenner, 1973, 1977). Bronfenbrenner's investigations led to his assertation that a childcare program must reach the home and community (Tudge et al., 2021). Bronfenbrenner (1989) noticed how individual traits either invited or discouraged reactions from their environment and which of these characteristics increased positive interactions. Societal change is only effective with policies and practices that promote reciprocal interactions and community connection (Tudge et al., 2021). Phases one and two defined environmental feedback, individual characteristics, mutual accommodations, and interrelated systems; the third phase focused on the developing person and their interactions during everyday activities as 'engines of development' (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000, p. 118). Throughout his theory development, Bronfenbrenner highlighted the essential role of early childhood education in

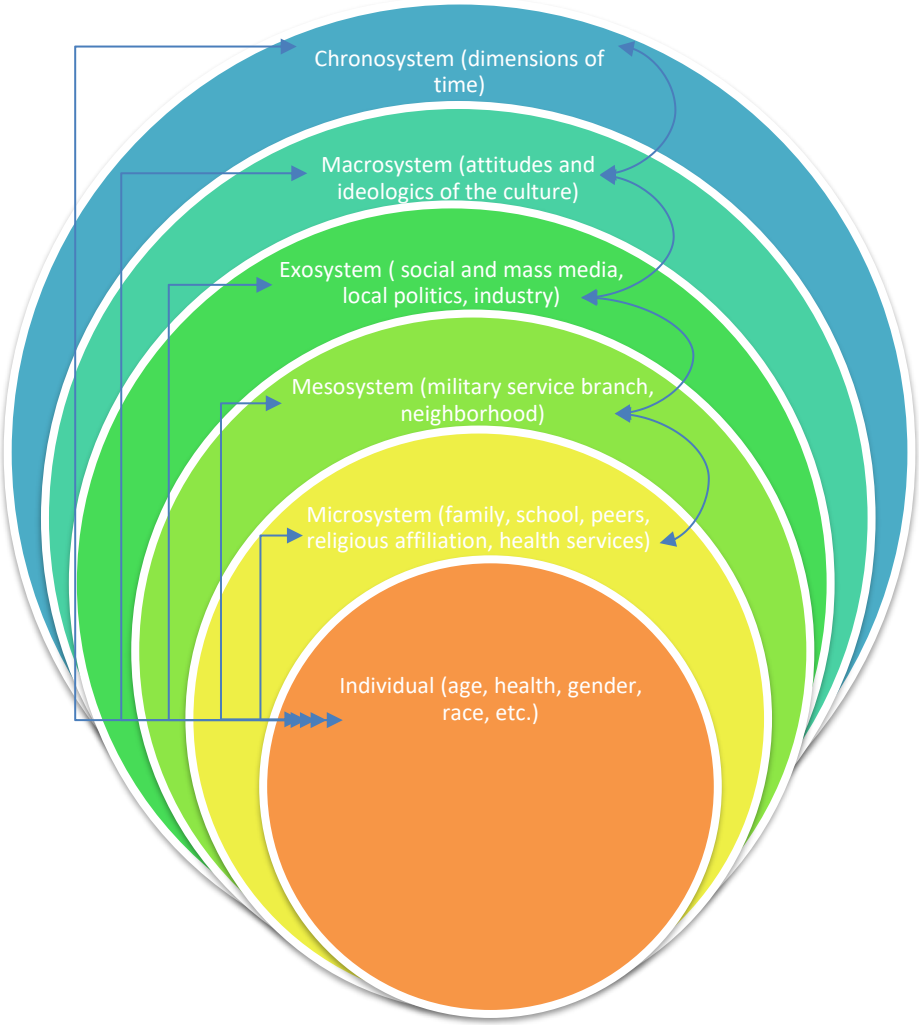
creating competent children, empowered families, and connected communities (Bronfenbrenner, 1985, 1994; Tudge et al., 2021).

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory of human development provides a framework to connect the benefits of ECEC with the policies that impact military families access to quality ECEC opportunities within an inequitable society. In this research, Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory of human development examines the macro-level impact of government policy on the microsystem of military families' ECEC experiences. The military lifestyle is fraught with vulnerability, anxiety, and uncertainty, with profound implications for the development and well-being of military children (Lawson et al., 2022; Manser et al., 2019; Ohye et al., 2020). While some studies indicate higher levels of resilience, others found adverse psychological outcomes for military-connected children (Lawson et al., 2022; Manser et al., 2019; Ohye et al., 2020).

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory frames the interconnected relationships between exosystem-level policies, community access, and family structures to demonstrate the need for expanded ECEC programs for military families. Research questions used this systems theory to capture which sphere influences participant's lived experiences accessing ECEC programs. Data synthesis thematic development analyzed participant responses using Bronfenbrenner's theory to determine which system encompasses the reported factors. Findings were reported within the systems to guide appropriate actions at the various levels. This study added to the theory by identifying the environmental factors influencing participants' lived experiences within the chronosystem.

Figure 1

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory of Development



Note: Adapted from Small et al., 2013.

Related Literature

Early childhood education and care experiences shape future generations by enhancing the well-being of children and families (Negussie et al., 2019; Niederdeppe et al., 2021; White House, 2023). There is a proposal to expand Universal Pre-Kindergarten (UPK) through the Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) school system (Jowers, 2022). While families are likely to participate in UPK, there are contributing factors to consider, primarily

access to quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) and policies that influence equity (Hardy et al., 2021; Prusinski et al., 2022). Even when former President Obama made the care and support of military children a top priority for national security (Kasearu & Olsson, 2019), current policies limit early childhood education access to many military children (Prusinski et al., 2022; White House, 2023). Military families lack fundamental knowledge regarding the benefits of high-quality ECEC experiences, impacting their enrollment decisions (Kamarck, 2020; Manser et al., 2019; Prusinski et al., 2022). This study focused on the phenomenon of military families' experience of accessing ECEC programs to understand how to expand UPK to ensure all military children have equitable early childhood education opportunities.

Benefits of Early Childhood Education and Care

A broad cross-section of existing literature forms a consensus that early childhood is a critical period of development (Hardy et al., 2021; Loewenson et al., 2021; Mogil et al., 2022; Mollborn et al., 2021; Niederdeppe et al., 2021; Park & Hassairi, 2021; Pierce, 2021). During this critical period, early learning programs develop children's cognitive, social-emotional, language, and literacy skills (Archambault et al., 2020; Azuma et al., 2020; Mendez Smith et al., 2021; Negussie et al., 2019; Neimanns, 2021; Pac, 2021; Pierce, 2021). Not all early learning programs are equal or accessible (Archambault et al., 2020; Mendez Smith et al., 2021). Only high-quality ECEC programs have long-term benefits to lifetime earnings, college success, health, and decreased crime participation (GAO, 2023; Heckman & Karapakula, 2019; Hotz & Wiswall, 2019; Mendez Smith et al., 2021; OASH, 2023). High-quality ECEC requires qualified teachers and a collaborative partnership with families (Carroll-Meehan et al., 2019).

There is significant and growing evidence that high-quality ECEC impacts children's development and readiness for school (Archambault et al., 2020; Bartlett & Smith, 2019; Hotz &

Wiswall, 2019; Mendez Smith et al., 2021; Niederdeppe et al., 2021). This evidence spurred the Biden-Harris administration to propose a comprehensive early childhood agenda, including universal prekindergarten (McSorley, 2021). Current preschool initiatives demonstrate a substantial increase in low-income household children's reading and math scores (Hotz & Wiswall, 2019; Mendez Smith et al., 2021), leading to efforts to expand UPK to support the nation's youngest children (McSorley, 2021). Congressional members from both U.S. political parties (McSorley, 2021; Park & Hassairi, 2021) and governments worldwide recognize that an investment in child well-being is critical to building a country's future (Archambault et al., 2020; Dodman, 2021; Loewenson et al., 2021; Neimanns, 2021; UNESCO, 2023; UNICEF, 2023; White House, 2023). Public spending on children signifies an investment in the future generation of workers to build a stronger economy and nation (Lou et al., 2022; White House, 2023).

ECEC supply varies widely throughout the United States, with demand exceeding supply and creating geographical childcare deserts in rural areas (Adams et al., 2022; GAO, 2023; Herbst, 2022; Malik et al., 2020; Mendez Smith et al., 2021; Prusinski et al., 2022; White House, 2023) where many military installations are located. In the United States, 51% of communities meet the childcare desert category (Azuma et al., 2020; Millat & Murray, 2023). A 2019 analysis of 35 states found 30% of working parents with young children lack access to formal childcare (Azuma et al., 2020; GAO, 2023). In 2015 only 40% of children aged four were attending a federally funded preschool program, even with overwhelming evidence of an 80% return on investment in early childhood education (Department of Education [DOE], 2015). The insufficient supply of childcare programs is attributed to a lack of government funding coupled with the expense of operating a labor-intensive program (Prusinski et al., 2022; Richter et al., 2017).

Education Empowers Families

Educational attainment has a positive correlation with improved physical, mental, and emotional health (Negussie et al., 2019; Richter et al., 2017). Families view education as one way to transcend the cycle of poverty; spotlighting the need for increased access to high-quality ECEC to expand families' lifestyle options (Baranyai, 2023; Dodman, 2021; Mendez Smith et al., 2021). Lifestyle choices are based on interrelated social identities, normative practices, and an understanding of health (Mollborn et al., 2021; Schmitz, 2020). High-quality ECEC programs increase equity by implementing evidence-based curricula and providing services to families that directly impact social-emotional skills and family health (Bassok & Galdo, 2016; Hardy et al., 2021; Negussie et al., 2019). Blanden et al. (2022) conducted a quasi-study in England to evaluate the impact of an additional three and one-half months of ECEC based on date-of-birth eligibility cutoff dates for children aged three years old. The study also compared the short-term achievement levels of children who attended different quality preschools. The empirical strategy used a regression discontinuity design to evaluate data from the National Pupil Database from four cohorts of children during the 2008-2011 academic years. Findings included small benefits from the additional three and one-half months of ECEC attendance and significant benefits for children who spent time in highly rated ECEC programs. Blanden et al. (2022) concluded policymakers' careful consideration of observable characteristics of teacher practices that signify high-quality care can lead to regulation and inspection regimes that support high-quality ECEC and maximize the benefits for young children.

Education Increases Resiliency

Children's development is influenced by their homes, friends, school, community, society, and access to various services (Hardy et al., 2021; Kasearu & Olsson, 2019; Pattnaik &

Jalongo, 2021; Williams, 2021; Yoshikawa et al., 2020). Enriching environments allow young people to act as agents in their own lives and create equity (Kasearu & Olsson, 2019; Loewenson et al., 2021). Self-motivated children who believe they can succeed, regardless of the obstacle, and maintain a positive attitude, fare well when broader structures and relationships support their positive outlook and competencies (Crivello & Morrow, 2020; Kasearu & Olsson, 2019). High-quality ECEC participation improves children's self-regulation, persistence, motivation, ability to make friends, and problem-solving abilities (Ha et al., 2020; Negussie et al., 2019; Oades-Sese et al., 2021).

Access to Early Childhood Education and Care

ECEC is an investment in human capital when safe, nurturing, culturally supportive environments offer high-quality learning and are accessible (Birkeland & Grindheim, 2021; Lahire et al., 2021; Mendez Smith et al., 2021; Pierce, 2021). Access to ECEC is defined as requiring reasonable effort for families to select affordable child education arrangements that support child development and meet the families' needs (Azuma et al., 2020; Banghart et al., 2021; Mendez Smith et al., 2021). When these criteria are not met, access does not exist, and children's futures are limited because they are denied the benefits of quality ECEC opportunities (Hardy et al., 2021; Mendez Smith et al., 2021; UNICEF, 2023). Access to high-quality ECEC opportunities is limited for low-income, young children with diverse backgrounds (Hardy et al., 2021; Herbst & Tekin, 2014; Mendez Smith et al., 2021) and military families who experience additional adverse outcomes associated with the young age of parents, and less stability (Ormeno et al., 2020; Vannest et al., 2021). Researchers have focused on evaluating how policy changes improve ECEC access (Ha et al., 2020; Jenkins & Nguyen, 2022), without considering how to maximize the positive effects policy can make on equitable access (Richter et al., 2017).

Equitable Access

Concern about unequal access to high-quality ECEC rose to presidential levels in 2013 (Bassok & Galdo, 2016) and remains a concern for the current administration (White House, 2023). President Obama's State of the Union address acknowledged the importance of ECEC and lamented the lack of high-quality, affordable programs (White House, 2013). ECEC opportunities vary significantly across communities based on racial and economic composition (Bassok & Galdo, 2016; Hardy et al., 2021), with licensed care severely limited in low-income and rural communities (Giapponi Schneider et al., 2017; Ha et al., 2020). Families who use subsidies are more likely to choose licensed facilities (Giapponi Schneider et al., 2017). However, high-quality ECEC programs are less likely to participate in subsidy programs due to the low reimbursement rates (Giapponi Schneider et al., 2017). Only 15% of eligible children receive childcare subsidy benefits (Azuma et al., 2020).

Policy reports base ECEC access on single factors of availability or affordability (King et al., 2020; Thomson et al., 2020), which do not identify the instability of the program (Ha et al., 2020; Jenkins & Nguyen, 2022), or the disparity of quality in subsidy participation found by Giapponi Schneider et al. (2017). Researchers are expanding the conceptualization to a multidimensional construct (Henly & Adams, 2018; Paschall et al., 2021; Thomson et al., 2020) to address equitable access to high-quality ECEC programs. Equitable ECEC access requires programs that 1) are affordable, 2) are within reasonable commuting distance, 3) are developmentally appropriate, 4) meet families' schedules, and 5) reach all children including those historically underserved (Azuma et al., 2020; Paschall et al., 2021; Thomson et al., 2020). Equitable access is achieved when affordable ECEC arrangements support all families without excessive administrative burden (Azuma et al., 2020; Jenkins & Nguyen, 2022).

Legacy of Inequality

Socioeconomic groups continue to be divided by access to quality education and care experiences (Archambault et al., 2020; Mendez Smith et al., 2021; Neimanns, 2021; OASH, 2023; Pac, 2021; Schmitz, 2020; Williams, 2021). A case study in Jamaica succinctly addressed inequality as a legacy of colonial experiences that created dominant groups with superiority attributions based on race and instilled through dominance and subordination (Dodman, 2021). Education systems throughout the world were established within this colonialism structure, with superior groups attending higher quality schools and poverty-stricken families relying on overcrowded all-aged schools with poorly trained teachers (Dodman, 2021; UNICEF, 2023).

Early intervention programs in the United States were largely founded on the Perry Preschool Project study (Allen et al., 2021; Scherer, 2021) and Urie Bronfenbrenner's paper "The Psychological Costs of Quality and Equality in Education" (1967). While this research garnered widespread support for preschool intervention, the programs illustrate the racial bias prevalent in the concept of targeting ECEC for disadvantaged children (Allen et al., 2021; Scherer, 2021). Bronfenbrenner recognized how White indifference and hostility psychologically impacted the Black community (1967). He attributed the children's defeatist attitudes directly to their color and, within that group, their gender. Children's failures were blamed on a lack of effort, motivation, discipline, and attention span. The article failed to note that these were caused by and promoted through racial policies and societal norms designed to maintain a White supremacy culture that continues to shape ECEC policies (Allen et al., 2021; Dodman, 2021). The term disadvantaged, emerged with the Perry Preschool Project to characterize Black children who were viewed as culturally, socially, and educationally deprived due to poverty and inept parenting (Allen et al., 2021; Scherer, 2021). Early childhood education and care policies need to

pivot from the deficient model and focus on a collaborative, community approach to building children's resources (Baranyai, 2023; Hardy et al., 2021).

Multidisciplinary community-based teams are essential for shaping holistic policies that provide meaningful support for families and communities (Archambault et al., 2020; Loewenson et al., 2021; Pierce, 2021). Families select ECEC programs partially based on proximity to their homes, exacerbating the inequity of care due to historic residential segregation (Hollett et al., 2022) and neighborhood ecological makeup (Hardy et al., 2021). Social advantages may be passed intergenerationally as lifestyles during early childhood, while parents and early childhood educators are highly influential (Dodman, 2021; Mollborn et al., 2021; Pierce, 2021). School education signifies hope for escaping the cycle of poverty that many families, including military families, experience (Crivello & Morrow, 2020; Dodman, 2021). Social arrangements and community institutions set the framework for nurturing child development and attachment (Hardy et al., 2021; Pierce, 2021; UNESCO, 2022). When families lack proper support or safety nets, children use their social relationships to manage unanticipated challenges (Crivello & Morrow, 2020; Dancik et al., 2021). When this critical social support is available during difficult times, it alters children's trajectories (Crivello & Morrow, 2020; UNESCO, 2022). Positive relationships between parents and ECEC educators support children's development and expand their lifestyle options (Bartlett & Smith, 2019; Mendez Smith et al., 2021; Pierce, 2021; Tang et al., 2022). Lifestyle options are impacted by social categories manifesting structural inequities that continue through generations (Dodman, 2021; Hardy et al., 2021; Mollborn et al., 2021).

Increasing Equity

Early childhood planning, development of strategies, and delivery of service are complex issues (Park & Hassairi, 2021) involving multiple layers of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological

model. Children's homes, families, ECEC programs, healthcare access, and neighborhoods form the child's ecology (Baranyai, 2023; Hardy et al., 2021). Military families are deeply influenced by their neighborhoods, community, and interacting systems (Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness [CMFR], 2019b). Interactions within their ecological setting shape the child's development (Hardy et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2022). The macrosystem houses the federal, state, and local government influences on policy content, legislative effectiveness, and program enactment (Hardy et al., 2021; Park & Hassairi, 2021) where political partisanship often opposes government investment in social issues (Niederdeppe et al., 2021). Various mesosystem influences include health and human service providers, educational institutions, and early childhood agencies that advocate for equitable access to high-quality ECEC programs (Park & Hassairi, 2021) creating critical public support necessary for the political feasibility of increased funding (Niederdeppe et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2022). Local boards and intermediate agencies regulate program delivery and requirements, creating a diverse range of services and governance challenges (Park & Hassairi, 2021) that influence the microsystem of parent-teacher-child relationships.

Early childhood education and care programs offer a significant opportunity to decrease disparities and promote child health and well-being (Hardy et al., 2021; Negussie et al., 2019; UNESCO, 2022). ECEC programs provide social-emotional learning experiences that lower children's conflicts, increase their engagement, and enhance their outcomes and well-being (Oades-Sese et al., 2021). Access and quality of ECEC programs are critical to achieving meaningful disruption of systemic inequities (Ha et al., 2020; Mendez Smith et al., 2021; Pierce, 2021; UNESCO, 2022). Davies et al. (2021), reported that children from less affluent backgrounds were disproportionately disadvantaged when ECEC attendance is disrupted. In an

exploratory study that included 189 United Kingdom families, surveys were used to identify how ECEC attendance during the COVID-19 pandemic affected children's language skills and cognitive development. Results indicated children from lower socioeconomic status who attended ECEC continued to experience demonstrated pre-pandemic ECEC cognitive and language benefits.

Current literature focuses on ECEC benefits for children at risk due to poverty and fails to identify the risks military children face and their need for quality ECEC programs (Manser et al., 2019; Mogil et al., 2019; Rogers et al., 2021). A congressional report published in 2023 conducted a literature review spanning 20 years and only identified one study specific to the DoD childcare programs (GAO, 2023) demonstrating a need for this study. Two rapid literature reviews conducted by Penn State University in collaboration with the Department of Defense examined how to support military families and the impact of military service on children (CMFR, 2019a, 2019b). Both literature reviews identified insufficient research examining military families concerning the topics (CMFR, 2019a, 2019b).

Karre et al., with the Office of Military Community and Family Policy, the Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at Penn State University collaborated with the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) to evaluate the military Child Development Program in a report published July 19, 2022. This report is the most recent and comprehensive study on military childcare designed to understand the role military ECEC programs play in children's development, school readiness, and parental absenteeism. Data was collected from parents, staff, management staff, and independent observers from 20 military CDCs. The quasi-experimental design compared military children enrolled in CDCs with military children enrolled in community child care centers. Data collection was disrupted due to COVID-19 and participant

attrition rates. The sample size for civilian childcare centers was unexpectedly smaller impacting the ability to compare CDCs and civilian centers accurately. Even with the limitations and disruptions, the following findings were consistent with research: military CDCs operating within accreditation standards, with perceived leadership support, and higher scores on environment rating scales, offered higher-quality care which improved child well-being. Parents using CDCs reported missing fewer days of work due to childcare arrangements than parents using civilian childcare centers. The waitlist for installation CDC's can range from a few months to over a year (MCC, 2023), impacting access to high-quality ECEC programs.

Policy Shapes Perception

Policies shape public perception of values, norms, and ideas (Neimanns, 2021). In societies with gendered ideals, childcare may not fit their values or conceptions of a mother's role (Archambault et al., 2020; Niederdeppe et al., 2021). Policies must be integrated, rights-based, and culturally appropriate for children to thrive (Archambault et al., 2020; Hollett et al., 2022; Loewenson et al., 2021; Mendez Smith et al., 2021). Societal support for public welfare programs depends on material self-interest or collective cultural values (Busemeyer & Goerres, 2019). Individuals who benefit from welfare programs, including increased labor access from public childcare availability, are more likely to support childcare subsidies (Busemeyer & Goerres, 2019). Institutional contexts, political ideology, altruism, and religiosity influence perceptions of fairness and social justice, generating widespread support for welfare policies (Busemeyer & Goerres, 2019).

Childcare and education policies are central to social investment welfare (Dodman, 2021; Neimanns, 2021). Policy variations across countries demonstrate lower incidences of child poverty and increased child well-being when robust childcare is available (Kasearu & Olsson,

2019). Early educational experiences and care have become the forefront of America's public policy during the past 40 years (Hotz & Wiswall, 2019). In the United States, federal funding for ECEC has increased over the last few decades (Morrissey et al., 2022) with a 62% increase in the last 10 years (Pac, 2021).

Policies Impact Early Childhood Education and Care

Currently, 20% of American children live in poverty, many in single-parent homes (Hotz & Wiswall, 2019; Mendez Smith et al., 2021). Access to nonparental care is a requirement for maternal labor force participation (Azuma et al., 2020; Hotz & Wiswall, 2019; Neimanns, 2021; Pac, 2021; Schmitz, 2020; Thomson et al., 2020). The argument for childcare as a public issue, rather than a private concern primarily impacting women in the workforce (Ramey, 2020), spurred government policies to regulate and fund ECEC programs (Busemeyer & Goerres, 2019). Historically ECEC policies invested the limited public funds by prioritizing at-risk populations through early intervention programs that disproportionally enrolled minority families (Hollett et al., 2022). Targeted interventions are more economically and racially segregated than universal ECEC programs (Hollett et al., 2022). Racial bias peaks between ages three and five years old, creating a critical opportunity for intergroup contact with equal-status interactions prevalent in universal ECEC programs to disrupt the formation of racial prejudices (Hollett et al., 2022).

Universal ECEC programs significantly impact the labor force when they increase participation rather than serve as a substitute for existing care (Hotz & Wiswall, 2019; Niederdeppe et al., 2021). Stable parental employment decreases child maltreatment, which is linked to increased stress and lower income levels, when job satisfaction is present (Maguire-Jack et al., 2022; Mendez Smith et al., 2021; Pac, 2021; Schmitz, 2020). Low-income families

engaged in non-standard work hours and low-paying jobs may increase the use of corporal punishment when work stress increases (Herbst & Tekin, 2014). ECEC can mitigate the impact of stress and trauma by providing consistent positive caregiver relationships, promoting family bonding, and healthy parenting (Bartlett & Smith, 2019; Maguire-Jack et al., 2022; Mendez Smith et al., 2021; Schmitz, 2020).

Child Care and Development Fund

Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) is the nation's most comprehensive subsidized childcare policy with $4.2 billion invested in 2016 (Backes & Allen, 2018; Henly & Adams, 2018). The CCDF reduces childcare expenses, increases parental employment, and promotes child well-being (Barnes & Henly, 2018; Herbst, 2022; White House, 2023). To qualify for funding, family income to be less than 85% of the adjusted state median income (Backes & Allen, 2018; Herbst & Tekin, 2014; Pac, 2021). The grant regulations prioritize ECEC opportunities for low-income families to remove barriers to work (Barnes & Henly, 2018; Maguire-Jack et al., 2022), and children who are vulnerable, homeless, or in foster care (Bartlett & Smith, 2019). Children must be 13 years old or younger, and parents must be enrolled in training or education activities (Backes & Allen, 2018; Herbst & Tekin, 2014; Pac, 2021; Schmitz, 2020). Head Start, Early Head Start, state, and universal prekindergarten programs offer part-day programming during typical school year schedules (Lessard et al., 2020; Morrissey et al., 2022; Pac, 2021).

A recent reauthorization of the Child Care and Development Block Grant included a recommendation to improve ECEC access (Banghart et al., 2021; Giapponi Schneider et al., 2017; Henly & Adams, 2018; Paschall et al., 2021). President Biden issued an executive order in 2021 requiring federal agencies to address systemic barriers to accessing benefits and services in

federal programs including ECEC opportunities (White House, 2021). Policymakers need equity-focused research to meet the demand to improve ECEC access (Banghart et al., 2021; Hardy et al., 2021).

Military Child Care Act of 1989

As the United States Military Servicemember demographics shifted from single males, to include females, and working spouses, the need for childcare increased (Kamarck, 2020; King et al., 2022). Informal and unregulated childcare services created hazardous conditions and widespread child abuse (Bessette, 2020; Kamarck, 2020). Mission readiness demands military families have access to quality child care (Bessette, 2020; King et al., 2022). In 1989, Congress passed the Military Child Care Act intending to improve the quality, safety, access, and affordability of military childcare (Bessette, 2020; Kamarck, 2020). These same goals continue to permeate childcare policy (DoD, 2022a; GOA, 2023). Military families have expressed mixed reviews with some families highly satisfied with child development program (CDP) quality, and others frustrated with the lack of access and incompatibility with their unique needs (Kamarck, 2020). A 2007 RAND report and 2012 GAO follow-up report found that the DoD's metric for measuring childcare demand was inaccurate and 10% of families had unmet childcare needs (GAO, 2012; Moini et al., 2007). Additional concerns included 48% of dual-military families required multiple childcare arrangements, 7% of military fathers, and 37% of mothers missed work due to childcare issues (Moini et al., 2007; GAO, 2012). Defense Secretaries continue to make efforts to improve access to quality childcare and take action to address the complex problem through National Defense Authorization Acts and Defense Memos.

National Defense Authorization Acts, Executive Orders, and Defense Memos

Child development program quality, safety, accessibility, and affordability have been the central goal of Congressional policies, State of the Union addresses (White House, 2013), and Executive Orders (White House, 2021, 2023) since the Military Childcare Act of 1989. The policies are included in many fiscal years' (FY) National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) requirements (Kamarck, 2020), and Department of Defense memos (Austin, 2023; DoD, 2022a, 2023). The DoD recognizes high-quality care requires skilled staff, a standardized high-quality curriculum, sufficient facility capacity, and effective waitlist management (DoD, 2022b; Kamarck, 2020; White House, 2023).

The FY2018 NDAA addressed staffing uses and CDC hours of operations (Kamarck, 2020; National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2018 [NDAA], 2018). Military childcare dot com (MCC) was implemented in response to the FY2020 NDAA's requirement to address childcare wait lists and improve access (NDAA for FY 2020, 2020). Military Childcare dot com is the one-stop gateway for DoD-approved childcare options for military families (MCC, 2023). Families can explore options in their area, learn about fee-assistance programs, identify their priority level, and request care (MCC, 2023). The MCC website is the official waitlist management platform and is regularly updated to ensure accurate information and a positive user experience (Austin, 2023; Kamarck, 2020). The FY2020 NDAA (2020) also authorized $158 million for military construction to increase facility space and approved direct hire authority for CDP staff to improve the hiring process.

Fee Assistance Programs

The DoD offers a fee assistance program that reimburses civilian programs the cost difference between the civilian rates and DoD's sliding fee scale (Kamarck, 2020). The fee

assistance programs allow families the opportunity to select civilian ECEC programs for the same cost as installation CDPs (MCC, 2023; Kamarck, 2020). Fee assistance programs were expanded to include Military Child Care in Your Neighborhood-PLUS to increase military family care options (Austin, 2023). Families living off base are more likely to choose civilian childcare options to increase community connections and build local support networks (Kamarck, 2020).

Military Culture Impacts Children's Development

Much of the research on military families was conducted post-9/11 with a focus on families' well-being from a recruitment and retention perspective (Le Menestrel & Kizer, 2019; Woodall et al., 2022; Zellman et al., 2009), or their resiliency during the deployment cycle (Classen et al., 2019; CMFR, 2019b; Cramm et al., 2018; DeVoe et al., 2020; Saltzman et al., 2016; Tupper et al., 2020). Relevant results identified the unique stressors, coping strategies, and emotional and psychological impacts on home-front parents and military children (Classen et al., 2019; Cramm et al., 2018; Ormeno et al., 2020; Tupper et al., 2020). Military culture includes strength, sacrifice, and belonging to a mission bigger than themselves, where one person joins, but everyone serves (Blamey et al., 2019; CMFR, 2019b; Mancini et al., 2020; Mogil et al., 2019). The military culture is distinct in its language, guiding principles, traditions, beliefs, strengths, and challenges (Ormeno et al., 2020).

Military families have increased communication, cohesion, routine, and role challenges (Mogil et al., 2022; Ohye et al., 2020; Rogers et al., 2021), requiring protective factors prevalent in ECEC programs (Bartlett & Smith, 2019; Sands et al., 2023) to ensure children achieve their potential (Negussie et al., 2019). ECEC is most effective when it is responsive to families' culture and background, amplifying the impact on children beyond classroom experiences

(Bartlett & Smith, 2019; Classen et al., 2019; CMFR, 2019b; Mendez Smith et al., 2021). ECEC creates social and cultural responsibility by promoting community and belonging (Birkeland & Grindheim, 2021; Rogers et al., 2021), particularly important for military families (CMFR, 2019a). Access to these programs is limited for military children due to policies and a lack of parental knowledge (Classen et al., 2019; Drew et al., 2021; Kamarck, 2020; Manser et al., 2019).

Risk Factors

Parental military service impacts the service member and their children, half of whom are under six years old (DiPietro-Wells et al., 2020; Drew et al., 2021; Lawson et al., 2022; Mogil et al., 2022; Ohye et al., 2020; Rogers et al., 2021; Skomorovsky & Wan, 2019) with over 30% ages two years to five years old (GAO, 2023). Young children in military families are at higher risk of anxiety (Ohye et al., 2020; St. John & Fenning, 2020; Vannest et al., 2021), maltreatment, and psychological and behavioral disorders (CMFR, 2019a; Lawson et al., 2022; Mogil et al., 2019, 2022; Ormeno et al., 2020; Skomorovsky & Wan, 2019), especially when military service negatively impacts parental caregiving practices (Le Menestrel & Kizer, 2019). Military children experience significant stress that disrupts their development (CMFR, 2019b; Lawson et al., 2022; Ohye et al., 2020; Rogers et al., 2021; Skomorovsky & Wan, 2019). Chronic stress causes structural changes in young children’s developing brains decreasing cognitive skills and increasing fear and emotional distress (Hardy et al., 2021; Le Menestrel & Kizer, 2019). Preschool-aged children were twice as likely to fail the Ages and Stages Questionnaires (ASQ-3), and Ages and Stages Social-Emotional Inventory (ASQ: SE) when their military parent was deployed (St. John & Fenning, 2020).

Parental psychological well-being is critical to military children's development (Classen et al., 2019; Kritikos et al., 2020; Le Menestrel & Kizer, 2019; Mogil et al., 2022; Schmitz, 2020; Tupper et al., 2020). Military parents spend long periods in the deployment cycle during their children's early development (Blamey et al., 2019; Drew et al., 2021), impacting children's mental health and attachment relationships (CMFR, 2019a; Ohye et al., 2020; Ormeno et al., 2020; Rogers et al., 2021; Skomorovsky & Wan, 2019; St. John & Fenning, 2020). Separation due to military movements decreases parental psychological well-being for the parent at home (Kritikos et al., 2020; Mogil et al., 2022; Rogers et al., 2021; St. John & Fenning, 2020). Returning service members may experience mental health issues that cascade on family functioning (Blamey et al., 2019; Drew et al., 2021; Mogil et al., 2022; St. John & Fenning, 2020). The inverse is that military family members' well-being, positively or negatively, determines the service member's readiness for the military mission (Le Menestrel & Kizer, 2019; Woodall et al., 2022).

Protective Factors

It is important to expand beyond a deficit model and include the unique strengths and protective factors of military communities. Military families develop resiliency skills and coping strategies including flexibility, resourcefulness, and adaptability (Cramm et al., 2018; Ormeno et al., 2020; St. John & Fenning, 2020). Kritikos et al. (2020), reported female home-front parents use benefit-finding strategies to adapt in times of stress (CMFR, 2019b). Using a mixed methods methodology, Kritikos et al. (2020) conducted a study that included 26 home-front mothers, interviews and questionnaires were used to identify four military-specific benefit themes. Participants found a deeper level of pride in their military service, personal strength, friendships, and community support. This study is relevant as the well-being of the home-front parent

directly influences children's social-emotional outcomes and high-quality ECEC programs increase family well-being (DoD, 2022a; Kamarck, 2020.)

Tupper et al. (2020) conducted a similar study with 51 Canadian military families with a child aged three to six years old. Of these families, 11 fathers were actively deployed. The study included a control group of 34 nonmilitary families with similar characteristics. The findings were consistent with previous research, identifying children with deployed fathers presented with significantly higher levels of internalizing and children with military fathers not deployed also displayed higher levels of internalizing than their civilian counterparts. Negative impacts were mitigated by the home-front parent's coping mechanisms, a secure parent-child attachment, and the quality of their relationship. The findings identified having a meaningful family identity and a strong support system were lifestyle protective factors for military families. High-quality ECEC programs reinforce family culture and offer a support system (Bartlett & Smith, 2019; MilitaryOneSource, 2021).

Early childhood education and care providers are a protective factor for military children, especially during increased parental psychological distress (Le Menestrel & Kizer, 2019; Mendez Smith et al., 2021; Pattnaik & Jalongo, 2021; Rogers et al., 2021). ECEC is a protective factor for children exposed to adversity (Bartlett & Smith, 2019; Larose et al., 2021; Mendez Smith et al., 2021; Schmitz, 2020). Caring ECEC providers offer stability and support (Bartlett & Smith, 2019; Carroll-Meehan et al., 2019; Cramm et al., 2018; Davies et al., 2021) that is not always available to military children due to parental separation during deployments and training that range from weeks to months (Drew et al., 2021; Lawson et al., 2022; Rogers et al., 2021). Military ECEC programs focus on social-emotional development and self-regulation skills (DoD, 2022b; Kamarck, 2020), which are crucial for military children to develop resiliency,

lower risks for behavior problems, and increase school success (Le Menestrel & Kizer, 2019; Oades-Sese et al., 2021). There is a need for accessible, family-centered programs that understand the unique needs of military children and their cultural norms (Drew et al., 2021; Mogil et al., 2022; Ohye et al., 2020; Rogers et al., 2021; St. John & Fenning, 2020).

Motivation for Selecting Specific Education Programs

Parents are the gatekeepers to children's ECEC attendance and make program decisions based on various factors, including peer socialization and trustworthy providers who reinforce their family's culture (DiPietro-Wells et al., 2020; Mendez Smith et al., 2021; Prusinski et al., 2022; Schmitz, 2020; Tang et al., 2022). Social, cultural, and economic factors create an information gap and impact ECEC equity (Prusinski et al., 2022). Working-class families are more likely to trust ECEC programs that are known and familiar (Prusinski et al., 2022). Families that understand the benefits of high-quality programs value staff longevity and employee job satisfaction (Backes & Allen, 2018; Rogers, 2021). Military families have socially, culturally, and economically diverse backgrounds representative of the nation (MilitaryOneSource, 2021; Ralston & Spindel, 2022).

Families seek affordable ECEC options, compatible with their work schedules, and located near their home or work locations (Backes & Allen, 2018; Giapponi Schneider et al., 2017; Herbst & Tekin, 2014; Hollett et al., 2022; Kamarck, 2020; Mendez Smith et al., 2021). Parents' job characteristics, including the number and schedule of work hours, schedule predictability, and flexibility, influence their ECEC choices (Backes & Allen, 2018; Herbst & Tekin, 2014; Kamarck, 2020; Mendez Smith et al., 2021; Prusinski et al., 2022). Short advance notice of work hours and last-minute shift changes create challenges in accessing publicly funded ECEC opportunities (Adams et al., 2022; Mendez Smith et al., 2021). Military families

have non-standard work schedules that often exceed 40-hour work weeks, participate in shift work, and stand 24-hour shifts (GAO, 2023; Kamarck, 2020). Training and deployment schedules require weeks or months of extended absences (Skomorovsky & Wan, 2019). Non-standard work hours require multiple ECEC arrangements, increasing the burden of accessing high-quality care (Mendez Smith et al., 2021).

Types of ECEC Opportunities Available for Military Families

The United States Department of Defense (DoD) child development program (CDP) is the largest employer-sponsored childcare program in the United States (Kamarck, 2020). The DoD began a full-fledged commitment to providing quality childcare to military families with the Military Child Care Act of 1989 and continues to provide additional options and innovative programs to meet this commitment (DoD, 2021). The DoD offers a range of childcare supports critical for military families' mission readiness (DoD, 2021). The CDP serves over 200,000 children and employs 23,000 employees in over 800 CDCs, and School Age Care (SAC) programs worldwide offering care from six weeks to 12 years old (Kamarck, 2020; Kasearu & Olsson, 2019). Currently, the DoD programs only accept children from single or dual active-duty military families, families with an active-duty military member and a full-time working spouse, and DoD employees with the same spouse employment criteria (Kamarck, 2020). Other childcare solutions include fee assistance for community-based childcare, free access to a subscription service for hourly care, and a recent pilot program for in-home care (DoD, 2021). While these programs are beneficial, the onus on finding qualified providers who meet the criteria falls on the military family, adding to their childcare burden (DoD, 2021; King et al., 2020).

A 2023 Congressional Report examines military childcare and the DoD efforts to provide affordable, quality care for families (GAO, 2023). The report details the on-base DoD child and youth program as well as the fee assistance program for families who use childcare agencies off-site of the installation (GAO, 2023). The DoD establishes programmatic and oversight requirements including staff training, compensation rates, provider-child ratios, and accreditation standards in Department of Defense Instruction (DoDI) 6060.02 (DoDI, 2020). These standards regulate military childcare programs for all services to strive for consistent high-quality care and require an annual internal certification process to ensure compliance with all Federal mandates and statutory requirements (DoDI, 2020).

King et al. (2022), conducted an exploratory study to determine gender disparities in active-duty Air Force parents' childcare access. This is one of the few studies specific to military childcare. The study analyzed two Air Force survey datasets to examine gender gaps in access, costs, and perceptions of childcare on career progression and retention. The findings discovered 19% of all active duty, 30.3% of females, and 16.7% of males, new to the installation reported significant challenges accessing quality care. Reported waitlist times exceeded one year in 21% of cases, 5-6 months in 15.8% of cases, and 3-4 months in 17.9% of cases. The study is limited to Air Force participants and survey data, however, the recommendations for policies and programs that improve childcare support and access through improved subsidy programs are consistent with the literature.

Child Development Programs

Child development programs include child development centers (CDCs), School Age Care (SAC), Family Child Care (FCC), and 24/7 care (DoDI, 2020; MCC, 2023). CDCs provide childcare for children six weeks to kindergarten enrollment, typically five to six years old,

Monday through Friday during standard work hours (DoDI, 2020; MCC, 2023). SAC programs are facility-based and offer care for children enrolled in kindergarten through seventh grade, typically five years to 12 years old, Monday through Friday during standard work hours when children are not in school (DoDI, 2020; MCC, 2023). FCC is a home-based program where certified individuals provide care in their homes according to their preferred schedules (DoDI, 2020; MCC, 2023). When available, 24/7 care is a facility-based program that supports non-standard work hours (MCC, 2023). This study focused on CDCs as they are the primary ECEC program for military families. As of September 2021, over 49,000 children were enrolled in military CDCs on installations worldwide (GAO, 2023).

Sure Start

Sure Start is a Department of Defense Education Activities (DoDEA) program based on the principles of Head Start (DoDEA, 2018; MilitaryOneSource, 2023). The program offers research-based preschools focusing on education, health, and social benefits for military families stationed overseas (MilitaryOneSource, 2023). Sure Start has limited enrollment spaces and admits students based on military sponsors' rank (MilitaryOneSource, 2023). These program restrictions prevent a significant number of military children from attending ECEC programs before age five.

Department of Defense Education Activities (DoDEA) Prekindergarten

A memorandum dated March 22, 2023, from the Secretary of Defense directed an expansion of universal prekindergarten programs that will include all DoDEA schools within the next five years (Austin, 2023; DoDEA, 2023). An additional 6,000 prekindergarten students will have access to UPK by School Year 2029-2030 (DoDEA, 2023). Providing ECEC for four-year-old children in 60 military communities with a DoDEA program will improve access (DoDEA,

2023). It will not solve the problem, only 13% of military students attend a DoDEA program (Manpower & Reserve Affairs, 2023). Access will continue to be limited for children outside the geographic areas and all three-year-old military children.

State Sponsored Preschool

In the United States, 44 states offer some type of preschool program (Parker et al., 2018). Each state has different funding sources and eligibility requirements creating a disparity of opportunity (Parker et al., 2018). A 2015 Department of Education report found 60% of four-year-old children were not enrolled in publicly funded preschool even though high-quality preschool has an $8.60 return on investment for each $1 allocated (Azuma et al., 2020; Department of Education, 2015). Military children who live in states with preschool programs are subject to the eligibility requirements as determined by each state, creating challenges during relocations.

Federally Sponsored Preschool

Head Start is a federal program funding no-cost childcare centers for eligible low-income families (Backes & Allen, 2018; Hotz & Wiswall, 2019; Joshi et al., 2016; Mendez Smith et al., 2021). In 2016 the federal government invested $9.2 billion in Head Start and Early Head Start (Backes & Allen, 2018). Approximately 80% of Head Start participants are three- and four-year-old children (Hotz & Wiswall, 2019; Pac, 2021). Head Start aims to close the achievement gap for at-risk children by providing programs to improve social skills and health outcomes (Morrissey et al., 2022; OASH, 2023). Due to funding constraints, Head Start only has the capacity to serve less than half of all eligible families (Azuma et al., 2020; Joshi et al., 2016; Morrissey et al., 2022). Many military families do not qualify for Head Start, and those that do may miss the registration deadlines due to relocations.

Expanding Policies

In the 1980s military childcare programs were considered the worst of all childcare programs requiring the Military Childcare Act of 1989 (Campbell et al., 2000; Moini et al., 2007). A decade later, with extensive policy reform, strict regulations, and systematic quality assurance programs, military childcare was acclaimed as a model for the nation by 2000 (Campbell et al., 2000; Moini et al., 2007), demonstrating the power of policies. Expanding childcare policies can address access to care inequalities and create positive, egalitarian attitudes across socioeconomic groups (Dodman, 2021; Mendez Smith et al., 2021; Neimanns, 2021; Pac, 2021). Effective and informed ECEC policies and services are critical to long-term learning benefits, employment opportunities, and health outcomes (UNESCO, 2022). The current childcare and education landscape perpetuates socioeconomic inequality by favoring higher-income and dual-earning families who can afford the higher fees associated with quality (Dodman, 2021; Kasearu & Olsson, 2019; Malik et al., 2020; Mendez Smith et al., 2021; Neimanns, 2021; Pac, 2021; White House, 2023). Generous public spending can reduce constraints, increase maternal employment, and reshape normative perceptions of gender equality (Archambault et al., 2020; Maguire-Jack et al., 2022; Neimanns, 2021; Pac, 2021; Schmitz, 2020). Investment in ECEC programs can reduce turnover, and improve staff health outcomes (White House, 2023). A study by Bassok et al. (2021) on teacher turnover analyzed 5,900 teachers across 1,500 programs within child care, Head Start, or school-based pre-kindergarten. The study found turnover rates in 2017-2018 were 48% for childcare teachers, 34% for school-based teachers, and 18% for Head Start teachers (Bassok et al., 2021). Turnover rates are primarily due to inadequate compensation (UNESCO, 2022) characteristic of the ECEC field (Carroll-Meehan et al., 2019).

The 2006 reconstruction term build back better originally described natural disaster restoration efforts that adopted mitigation and prevention measures (Der Sarkissian et al., 2023). Before the disaster event, improvements to system vulnerabilities were difficult to implement (Der Sarkissian et al., 2023). The event catalyzes change and creates opportunities for structural improvements (Der Sarkissian et al., 2023). International organizations are extending the concept with the idea to build forward better, in the post-pandemic rebuilding, government policies, and strategic visions (UNESCO, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic revealed global systemic inequalities (Lee & Morling, 2022; Rajan et al., 2021), reduced public service budgets, and exacerbated poverty, malnutrition, and learning deficits (UNESCO, 2022), reversing decades of progress to end poverty (United Nations, 2023). Governments and organizations around the world strive to increase equity by building forward better rather than returning to the previous status quo by building back better (Lahire et al., 2021; United Nations, 2023). The Government of Iraq published a White Paper acknowledging its vital role in mitigating and restructuring educational inequities (Lahire et al., 2021). A government commitment to, and significant investment in, high-quality, accessible, affordable, and equitable ECEC programs shapes the foundation of children's development and create societal stability, economic productivity, improved health, and systemic advantages (Rajan et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2022). The United States House of Representatives passed a Build Back Better Act in November 2021 with specific rules requiring, States, Territories, and Tribal agencies to carry out activities to improve the quality and accessibility of childcare (Committee on the Budget, 2021).

Summary

The literature is clear that high-quality ECEC opportunities have a positive impact on children's development, school readiness, and lifetime achievement (Archambault et al., 2020;

Heckman & Karapakula, 2019; Hotz & Wiswall, 2019; Mendez Smith et al., 2021; Myran & Masterson, 2021; Neimanns, 2021; Pac, 2021; Park & Hassairi, 2021). While countries worldwide recognize the significance and strive to capitalize on the benefits of ECEC, access remains inequitable (Archambault et al., 2020; Dodman, 2021; Loewenson et al., 2021; Myran & Masterson, 2021; Neimanns, 2021; Pac, 2021; Schmitz, 2020; Tang et al., 2022; UNICEF, 2023). Universal childcare is needed to establish an effective prevention strategy and boost at-risk children's cognitive abilities (Larose et al., 2021) and social-emotional competency (Oades-Sese et al., 2021) by providing a safe, supportive, and positive environment (UNESCO, 2022). When children receive affirmation, their sense of achievement increases (Crivello & Morrow, 2020). They can overcome obstacles with supportive caregiving practices and a safe environment (Bartlett & Smith, 2019). Educational or social constructs based on Bronfenbrenner's (1985) bioecological theory of human development influence positive change for individuals.

A lack of robust research data and evidence collected on ECEC programs specific to military families requires this study to include research informed by efforts in civilian populations. Abundant research examines ECEC representation and access for children of disadvantaged backgrounds and proposes intervention frameworks (Archambault et al., 2020; Baranyai, 2023; Crivello & Morrow, 2020; Dodman, 2021; Heckman & Karapakula, 2019; Mendez Smith et al., 2021; Mollborn et al., 2021). Military children have diverse ethnic, racial, and economic backgrounds (CMFR, 2019b; Mogil et al., 2022), and family compositions (CMFR, 2019b; Le Menestrel & Kizer, 2019). Military families are concerned about having equitable access to high-quality ECEC and the resulting positive outcomes (Kamarck, 2020). This study addressed the underrepresentation of military families in ECEC research and their experiences accessing care opportunities within the education system by examining how policies,

accessibility, and systems impact their children's development using bioecological theory as a framework.

A greater emphasis is needed to understand context, cultural variability, and how social relationships impact individuals (Crivello & Morrow, 2020; Dodman, 2021). Previous studies examine individuals' access to early childhood education in isolation (Morrissey et al., 2022) and do not consider the overall impact and interconnectedness of families' experiences accessing ECEC (Saltzman et al., 2016; Thomson et al., 2020). To ensure policies meet the needs of families, research is needed to understand the parent's point of view (Henly & Adams, 2018). Research specific to military families' well-being is lacking (CMFR, 2019b; Lawson et al., 2022; Manser et al., 2019; Ohye et al., 2020; Skomorovsky & Wan, 2019), creating a gap in research that must be addressed to inform policymakers' decisions on how to expand early childhood opportunities within the DoD system.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand accessing early childhood education and care opportunities by military families using government and private programs. Chapter Three offers a detailed research plan, including the research questions and sub-questions. In the first section, settings and participants are discussed, followed by the researcher's positionality and interpretive framework. The second section describes the procedures and data collection and analyses. Finally, the trustworthiness and ethical considerations are examined.

Research Design

A qualitative study was necessary to understand the experiences of military families accessing ECEC in their natural settings to make sense of the barriers they encounter. Qualitative research provides a rich description of the complex ECEC phenomena by illuminating the experience of military families. The researcher is a key instrument in data collection, providing insights, hypotheses, and validity (Corbin et al., 2014) to establish trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Moustakas (1994) and van Manen (2016a) asserted that phenomenological research is designed to examine the experience of those involved with a phenomenon and derive meaning from those experiences. A phenomenological approach is therefore appropriate for this study to examine the lived experiences unique to military families, their perspectives, and the meaning they ascribe to the phenomena of accessing ECEC programs. This study requires sensitivity to military families' lived experiences found in van Manen's (2016b) hermeneutic phenomenological approach and the ability to interpret the phenomena of accessing ECEC opportunities. Individual interviews are the foundation of phenomenological research (Creswell

& Poth, 2018). The researcher compared individual interviews from 12 military families experiencing the phenomena and translated their experiences using the hermeneutic circle (Peoples, 2021). Martin Heidegger (2007) described the circle as beginning with the answer, or dasein the definition of being, then formulating questions to determine if the presupposed definition is accurate. This becomes circular as the answers redefine the dasein and generate additional questions (Heidegger, 2007).

Phenomenology is based on principles identified by Edmund Husserl (1931) as the reflective study of consciousness from the first-person view. Hermeneutic phenomenology is a study of persons by a researcher who cares about participants' experiences (van Manen, 2016b) and focuses on the researcher's interaction with the data (Peoples, 2021). Creswell and Poth (2018) describe hermeneutic phenomenology as an interplay of six research activities: 1) select a phenomenon with an abiding concern, 2) identify essential themes that constitute the nature of the lived experience, 3) write a description of the phenomenon, 4) maintain a strong relation to the topic of inquiry, and 5) balance the parts of the writing to the whole 6) finally the researcher interprets the meaning of the lived experience. Hermeneutic research is primarily a writing process that describes the finite details of participants' experiences translated through the researcher's lens, and then all the parts are reintegrated into a whole description of the phenomenon's essential values (van Manen, 2016b). Heidegger's philosophical influence on hermeneutic phenomenology as practiced by van Manen, yields more subjective results than Husserl's mathematical and sober approach to phenomenology, as practiced by Moustakas (Sass, 2021). Hermeneutic phenomenology is most appropriate for this study as the researcher has a shared lived experience with the participants.

Research Questions

Research questions narrow the purpose of a qualitative study to the central and sub-questions addressed in this phenomenological study of the lived experiences of military families (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By studying intentionality and discovering the noema and noesis (Moustakas, 1994) of military families' experiences, the researcher identified the essence of accessing ECEC. Discovering the fundamental essence of the phenomenon better informs subject matter experts and policymakers on how to support military families by expanding equitable access to high-quality ECEC opportunities.

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of military families who seek access to high-quality equitable early childhood education opportunities?

Sub-Question One

What are the lived experiences of military families who seek access to high-quality equitable early childhood education opportunities?

Sub-Question Two

How do military families describe the factors that influence their choices in selecting ECEC programs?

Sub-Question Three

How do military families describe the effect of their military service on their children's early childhood education and care experiences?

Sub-Question Four

How do military families perceive the influence of government policies on their children's early childhood education and care options?

Setting and Participants

A site is a location where participants gained experiences that are of scientific interest to the researcher (Cohen et al., 2000). In a phenomenological study, participants are individuals who have experienced the same phenomenon and can articulate their experiences, even if those experiences occurred at different site locations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This section describes the sites and participants who experienced the phenomenon of accessing ECEC opportunities.

Site

Cohen et al. (2000) addressed the underlying myth that effective research requires an unbiased researcher ignorant of the field site. The authors (2000) stipulate familiarity assists the researcher in gaining access to the site and participants. An Institutional Review Board ensured the research was conducted with minimal bias (see Appendix A). Sites in the study included military child development centers, private childcare programs, and preschools funded through state, federal, or private institutions. Childcare centers range in size from small programs, less than 100 children with one Director, to large programs, over 300 children with three Directors. Military childcare sites are regulated and monitored through OSD oversight with annual compliance inspections. Civilian programs are regulated and monitored through their State designated agencies. All certified sites in the study maintain accreditation through NAEYC. These sites are appropriate for the study as they provide early childhood care and education programs for children ages three to five years old. For this study, digital video conference technology (e.g., Microsoft Teams, Zoom) and Microsoft Outlook allowed for participants to be selected based on relevant attributes rather than their geographic locations.

Participants

Moustakas (1994) recommended a sample size of 10-25 participants to achieve

saturation, or the point where no new insights arise (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study included 12 participants through snowball and maximum variation sampling. An information sheet with study details and participant rights was provided (see Appendix B) when participants responded to the recruitment letter (see Appendix C). A pre-screening questionnaire garnered demographic information from the participants identified and recruited through networking to ensure participants met the criteria (see Appendix D). Participants must be affiliated with the United States military with at least one parent being an active-duty military member or Department of Defense employee. Each family must have at least one child between three and six years old who attended an ECEC program within the last 12 months. Families must have experience with accessing one or more ECEC programs.

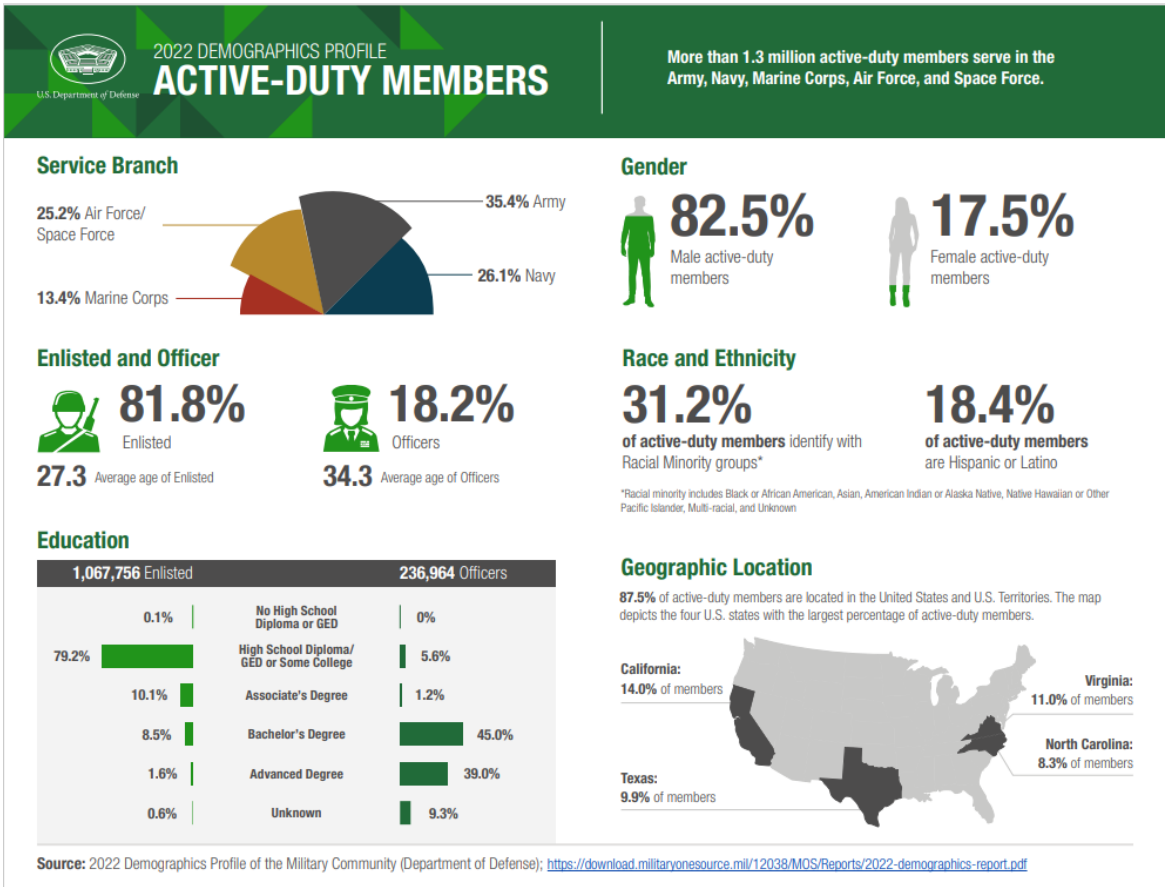
Recruitment Plan

Researchers must determine the most purposeful sampling method to obtain a representative population with enough participants to achieve saturation (Creswell & Poth, 2018) My research consisted of a snowball and maximum variation sampling of 12 military associated families with children ages five and under. I began the recruitment process through social media and by contacting individuals I have a personal relationship with to requests their assistance in recruiting families who meet my criteria. I have contacts in each military service who work closely with military families. I provided my contacts with a recruitment letter (see Appendix C), detailing the purpose of the study, the time commitment, and a request for their participation. Once my contact identified willing participants, I emailed the family to thank them for their time and explain the process. I answered their questions, scheduled the individual interview, and asked them for participant referrals. Data collection began as each participant reviewed the information sheet (Appendix B).

I used referrals to snowball my sample for maximum variation to include participants representative of the diverse military population. Figure 2 below displays active-duty family demographics (MilitaryOneSource, 2021). I targeted participants of various military ranks, family household compositions, and military services. Classen et al. (2019) recommended future research control for potential differences between military services and ranks. I recruited participants through social media and LinkedIn (see Appendix E). In the event a potential participant did not respond to my initial email within five days, I sent a reminder email on day six and day 10. Two weeks following the introduction email, I considered non-responsive potential participants as non-participants.

Figure 2

Active-Duty Military Family Demographics



Researcher's Positionality

Researcher positionality is how researchers position themselves within the study in relation to social position, experiences, and beliefs (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this study, my views are shaped by my life experience as an over 40-year-old White educated female with conservative political and social beliefs and extensive early childhood education and care professional experience. The first section examines my interpretive framework and philosophical assumptions. The next section further details my ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions. Finally, my relationship with the participants, subject, and biases are explored to identify how they influence my role as the human instrument.

Interpretive Framework

As researchers, philosophies and beliefs impact how we examine and frame our inquiries (Creswell & Poth, 2018). My interpretive paradigm is founded on Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model, which describes how each person develops within their specific experiences and in turn, impact their environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1980; Chachar et al., 2021). My views align with the transformative framework that advocates for individuals in marginalized groups who deserve a platform to share their voices (Chachar et al., 2021). I admire resiliency, determination, and perseverance and intend my dissertation to inspire an action agenda. My theoretical lens is the desire for all people to value individual stories and find strength in our differences to build a unified society. This paradigm shaped my study as I worked to accurately reflect the participants' strengths and share their voices with policymakers to impact change in military families' access to high-quality ECEC programs.

Philosophical Assumptions

Philosophical assumptions are assumptions and beliefs instilled through our experiences, educational journeys, and interactions that shape our decisions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative researchers examine and write about their philosophical assumptions as part of the interpretive framework to provide transparency in how they impact the practice of research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). My philosophical assumption closely aligns with the transformative framework as I desire to advance an agenda for change and explore the power policymakers exert in relation to equitable access to high-quality ECEC opportunities. Transformative constructs aim to contribute to societal change through education by empowering individuals to challenge cultural norms (Alam, 2022). Transformative change requires macro-level shifts in social constructs, laws, regulations, and individual behaviors (Naito et al., 2022).

Ontological Assumption

Ontological assumptions examine the nature of reality with the understanding that reality is as varied as the individuals who perceive the experience or phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). While conducting a qualitative phenomenological study, I discovered a multitude of perspectives and identified themes from the participants' actual words (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As a researcher, it is vital to consider and understand how the participants', readers', and my own perceived realities influence the topic. The nature of reality shifts depending on a person's view of the phenomenon, the same way perspective shifts based on the angle of an illusion sculpture.

Epistemological Assumption

The epistemological assumption is the reconciliation of subjective evidence obtained from participants with the researcher's first-hand knowledge obtained in the field (Creswell &

Poth, 2018) or through an emic perspective (Rossman & Rallis, 2016). As individuals tell their stories or report their experiences, their knowledge is limited based on their own interpretations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As the researcher studies the participants' lives, work, and interactions, they learn firsthand about the circumstances that influence them (Creswell & Poth, 2018). While conducting research, I cannot rely solely on subjective interviews and must use additional data collection methods to triangulate themes. Knowledge-based on emotional reality is as valid as knowledge based on scientific laws.

Axiological Assumption

An axiological assumption is how the researcher interprets the study through their values and biases to shape the narrative of the participants' experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Values are the basis of humanity along with morals, they guide interactions and decision-making (Hester, 2020). My values are founded in my Christian faith and formed my character. I believe in human dignity, integrity, and kindness. I try to follow God's command to love thy neighbor as thyself (King James Version 1769/ 2016, Matthew 22:39). As I share participants' experiences through thematic development, I empathized with their frustrations and celebrated their successes. Hermeneutic phenomenology always has an underlying essence of bias (van Manen, 2016b). As I conducted the study, I remained as objective as possible to protect the integrity of the findings by focusing on the participants' experiences.

Researcher's Role

Qualitative researchers are personally involved in all stages of the study, with extensive interactions between the researcher and participants creating possible ethical challenges as researchers evaluate and interpret data (Sanjari et al., 2014). As a human instrument in phenomenological research, my task was to transform the data of participants' lived experiences

and categorize themes to record the essence through a comprehensive description of the phenomena (Sanjari et al., 2014). As a prior service Air Force active-duty member, and Marine Corps spouse for 20 years, while raising three children, I have personal experience as a military family accessing early childhood care and education. I also have professional experience working in multiple ECEC positions beginning in 1998 and continuing today as a Department of Defense (DoD) civilian employee at Headquarters Marine Corps (HQMC) as a Child and Youth Programs Compliance Specialist. Currently, I inspect Marine Corps child development centers, school-age care, youth, school liaison, and youth sports programs to ensure compliance with DoD and HQMC policies and regulations. I do not have a present relationship with any participants; however, I have a shared understanding of their military experience and family dynamics. Depending on which ECEC program the participant's children attend, I may be familiar with the site as a former employee or current inspector. Participants represent all United States military services, and my familiarity is limited to Marine Corps programs. My possible bias includes a belief that military service impacts children and that high-quality ECEC programs are a protective factor essential for social-emotional development. I believe DoD policymakers implement well-intentioned policies without a comprehensive understanding of the implication for military families. These beliefs may have formed a confirmation bias as I interpreted and analyzed the data.

Procedures

Procedures are the methods and processes of conducting research, from obtaining permissions, collecting, and analyzing data, and performing rigorous verification to establish trustworthiness (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This section begins with an explanation of obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from Liberty University (see Appendix A), study

permissions, and the participant recruitment plan. The following sections detail the data collection plan and trustworthiness verification process.

Data Collection Plan

Individual interviews are the foundational data collection method in phenomenological qualitative research (Cohen et al., 2000; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Rigorous application of various data collection approaches is essential to ensure a thorough understanding of the phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This section examines the three data collection approaches (a) individual interviews, (b) focus groups, and (c) journal prompts in detail and describes how the data will be analyzed and synthesized to triangulate participants' lived experiences accessing ECEC programs.

Individual Interviews

Phenomenological interviews use open-ended questions in an informal, interactive manner to elicit a comprehensive account of the person's experience with the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Individual interviews are guided conversations centered around the research questions to learn the participant's viewpoint on a specific experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I borrowed participants' experiences with the phenomenon to uncover a deeper meaning (van Manen, 2016b). Virtual interviews were conducted with the active-duty military parent, DoD employee, or their spouse via Microsoft Teams or Zoom to study their experiences accessing early childhood education and care opportunities. Interviews were recorded for transcription and analysis. Recordings were stored on a USB drive and secured in a locked safe when not in use and will be maintained for three years following the study completion. Initial participant contact during the recruitment process included a brief description of the objective of the study. The intent of this study was to discover the lived experience of military families accessing early

childhood education and care to better understand the factors that influence ECEC selection and how policies impact ECEC opportunities.

Interviews consisted of 16 semi-structured questions and were scheduled for 30 minutes to an hour with follow-up interviews as needed. Participant interviews began with the following statement of the ethical considerations of confidentiality, privacy, and reproduction of the research associated with this study. Before we begin our conversation, I want to assure you all references to participants will include pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality, data will be stored in a locked safe to protect your privacy, and the study details will only be submitted to Liberty University for the purpose of my dissertation review. Any further use of this study will remove interview transcripts and include only the literature review, methods, analysis, and findings. While this study relies on your unique experience and offers you the opportunity to share your input, your participation in this process is completely voluntary. Throughout our conversation, you may elect not to respond to a question, prompt, or make clarifying statements. At any point during this study, you may choose to withdraw your consent for any reason.

Table 1

Individual Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your family.
2. Please describe your experience accessing early childhood education and care opportunities. CRQ
3. How would you describe your options for ECEC? SQ1
4. What types of ECEC options did you pursue? SQ1
5. Explain what factors influenced why you selected each type of ECEC option to pursue. SQ2

6. What ECEC location is your child currently attending? SQ2
7. Explain what factors influenced your decision to enroll your child in their current ECEC location. SQ2
8. Describe the challenges, if any, you encountered accessing ECEC. CRQ
9. How many ECEC programs has your family participated in? What factors influenced the change from one program to another? SQ1
10. What information do you wish you had prior to beginning your ECEC journey? CRQ
11. Describe the impact your military service has on your child's ECEC experience. SQ3
12. How does your child(ren) relate to you being in the military? SQ3
13. How do you feel government policies impact your child's early childhood education and care options? SQ4
14. Thinking broadly, each State has policies and regulations, and the Department of Defense has policies and regulations that impact families. Is there a policy or regulation you would change or add? SQ4
15. How do ECEC policies influence your decision to continue military service? SQ4
16. Thank you for your time and willingness to share your experience, is there anything you would like to add or a topic that you feel is important for me to understand?

Individual interviews develop a conversational relationship between the participants and the researcher (van Manen, 2016b). Question one established an essential rapport between the researcher and participants, connecting them to the study (van Manen, 2016b). Question two was a ground tour question breaking the ice and allowing the participant to share their experience with the phenomenon in their own words (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Questions three and four explored families' perceptions of their ECEC care options. These questions attempted to

understand the participants' points of view in their lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Questions five through seven allowed participants to explain the factors they considered in the decision-making process and the outcome of their decision. Questions eight and 10 revisited the central research question by asking specifically about challenges. Question nine revisited sub-question one adding how many ECEC programs participants used and their reason for leaving each one. These questions occur later in the interview when participants was more relaxed and less concerned with pleasing the interviewer, lessening the chances of acquiescence bias (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Questions 11 through 15 addressed how participants view the influence of outside entities on their lived experiences. Finally, Question 16 offered participants the opportunity to share additional information they felt was important and the previous questions did not address (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Responses discovered possible solutions to the problem regarding a lack of high-quality ECEC opportunities available for military families and the challenges of accessing ECEC. Qualitative research experts reviewed the questions to ensure clarity and applicability.

Focus Groups

After the semi-structured individual interview, focus group sessions were conducted with participants. Focus groups were divided into three groups to allow for intimate settings to ensure all participants have an opportunity to share. Participants signed up for one of the scheduled TEAMs focus groups based on their schedules. Flexible dates and times were chosen to accommodate participants' schedules. Meeting invitations were sent out one week prior to the scheduled date, and a reminder sent the day prior. The hermeneutic interview is a conversational relationship between the researcher and participants eliciting rich insight into a phenomenon (van Manen, 2016b). The focus groups expanded this relationship to include other participants. The

researcher anticipated individual interviews revealed only the most recent or emotionally charged lived experiences relevant to accessing ECEC programs due to memory reconstruction errors (Pearson et al., 1994) and focus groups sparked additional insights. Focus groups and analysis added breadth to the research questions and literature framework by validating, expanding, and supporting participants' interviews.

Table 2

Focus Group Questions

1. Please share a fun memory about an event your child(ren)'s ECEC program hosted with parents. Maybe a parent's pancake breakfast or a dress-up day. SQ1
2. What did you expect to discover in this process? CRQ
3. Why did you select your child(ren)'s current ECEC program? SQ2
4. Please explain how your branch of the military impacts your family's ECEC experience. SQ3
5. How would you categorize ECEC policies and regulations impact on your family? SQ4
6. What would you say is the best part of being a military family? SQ3

The questions above elicited details of participants' lived experiences of accessing ECEC programs. Question one was a grand tour question to allow the group to build comradery and relates to their ECEC options. Question two is included to inform the hermeneutic analysis between the participant's presuppositions and the comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Questions three through five identified the similarities and differences among the military branches. The questions were intentionally sequenced to begin the focus group with personal experiences at the microsystem and then expand to concentric systems of

Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory of development. Question six ended the focus group on a positive note by asking participants to share something they value about being a military family.

Journal Prompts

A journal prompt is a statement or question that provides participants with a clear direction for their response (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A premise of the hermeneutic phenomenological method is that humans attempt to make sense of their experiences through narratives (Cohen et al., 2000). Journal prompts allowed participants the space and time to reflect and write their responses close to their pre-reflective experiences (van Manen, 2016b). Journal prompts were appropriate for this study as they activate a narrative construction and allowed the participant to share their experience and feelings in their own words providing rich narrative data (Cohen et al., 2000). To facilitate journal prompts, I emailed each participant prompts for reflective writing, activation of narrative construction, and fill in the blank with expansions. Participants had seven days to respond with their prompt responses. If seven days passed without a reply, I sent a reminder email and instructions to complete the response within four days.

Table 3

Journal Prompts

Please respond to the following questions using three to five sentences for each question.

1. Write a description of a challenging experience you recall while accessing early childhood education and care opportunities. Provide the following information in your descriptive account of the experience: your feelings, mood, emotions, setting, time of day/night, time of year, and duration of time, during the experience. CRQ
2. Tell me the most important aspect of your experience accessing ECEC opportunities. SQ1

3. Please complete the sentence and answer the following questions. I am _____ with my child's current ECEC location. What do you like about it? What would you change about it? SQ2
4. Please fill in the first blank regarding a specific detail of your military services, for example (rank, duty location, job duties, etc.). Please complete the sentence with anything you would like to share. If I knew _____ would impact my child's ECEC experience, I would _____. SQ3
5. Please complete the sentence and expand on your thoughts. I wish policymakers understood _____ about military families. What would you change about current policies? SQ4

Data Analysis

Hermeneutical thinkers value the researcher's assumptions as a guiding force for anticipation, expectations, and questions (Grondin, 2016). The timing of the focus groups after the individual interviews and literature review made a hermeneutic lens appropriate as the researcher and participants had pre-formed ideas. The reflexive thematic analysis considers how the researcher's views, values, history, and thinking patterns influence the findings (Bailey, 2018; Braun & Clarke, 2013) and how active-duty families' political and cultural factors influence their perspectives (Patton, 2015). Using the reflexive approach allowed the coding process to evolve as unexpected meanings emerged (Hani, 2022). Coding, clustering, and identifying patterns reduced confirmation bias. Data analysis was conducted using the methods and procedures of phenomenal analysis as described by Max van Manen (2016b). Transcriptions of the individual interviews and focus groups were completed using Microsoft Teams or Zoom and reviewed by the participants for accuracy and clarification (Burgess et al., 2022). Journal

prompt statements, individual interview transcripts, and focus group transcripts were horizontalized by regarding each relevant statement as having equal value. I assigned meaning to each horizon using the Saldaña (2021) method of first and second-cycle coding. Each relative sentence in the interview transcript was given a structural code descriptive of the context. The structural codes were consolidated under their applicable central or sub-research question. The first-order codes led to statement meanings and were clustered to develop themes and created textural descriptions. I used second-cycle coding to identify the pattern codes that provided the basis for thematic development during data synthesis.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness includes open-ended naturalistic criteria that cannot be satisfied to the unassailable level (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Quantitative research provides rigor, reliability, and objectivity through statistical analysis of numerical data (Gall et al., 2007). Lincoln and Guba (1985) provided parallel terms for qualitative research to assure trustworthiness in the study. Using these parallel terms of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability the procedures are outlined to prove this study's rigor and trustworthiness to the greatest extent possible. Member checking, triangulation, auditing, and thorough data analysis can persuade readers to a high level of trustworthiness in the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Credibility

Credibility is how truth is measured in qualitative research to ensure the study's conclusions accurately reflect the participant's experience with the phenomenon (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I achieved credibility in three ways: (a) prolonged engagement and persistent observation, (b) triangulation, and (c) member-checking.

Prolonged engagement and persistent observation

This study used prolonged engagement by investing sufficient time to learn the participants' culture, test for misinformation, and build trust (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I used Bronfenbrenner's bioecology systems theory to understand how the participants shape and are shaped by their environment. As a previous active-duty military member, military spouse, and current ECEC specialist, I established participant trust and engagement. During the data collection process, I was cautious of distortions and situated motives (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Using persistent observation, I increased salience, scope, and depth by focusing on characteristics and elements that were most relevant to the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Triangulation

Triangulation is a process of verifying data from one source or method against other sources or methods (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I triangulated data collection methods, sources, and data analysis methods. This study used individual interviews, journal prompts, and focus groups to triangulate raw data during data collection. Data analysis was triangulated using two types of coding and different thematic testing methods. To begin coding, I used van Manen's (2016a) reflective method to holistically read the transcripts, then used the Saldaña method (2021) to test the statements with Moustakas' modification of the Van Kaam method of analysis (1994). I used a theme development table and tested thematic statements using Moustakas' modification of the Van Kaam method of analysis (1994) and Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory as a lens to test codes during the synthesis analysis.

Member Checking

Member checking is a continuous informal and formal process of checking data, themes, interpretations, and conclusions with participants to adequately represent their reality (Lincoln &

Guba, 1985). As a previous active-duty member, a military spouse with dependent children, and an early childcare professional, I have extensive experiences similar to participants that offer an insider's advantage, or emic perspective (Rossman & Rallis, 2016). This advantage was beneficial in establishing a connection with participants, understanding their vernacular and common military acronyms, and capturing the essence of their experiences. I clarified their concepts rather than assume we had a collective perspective. I provided each participant with a transcript of their interview and offered them an opportunity to review the thematic coding to ensure accuracy.

Transferability

I created the conditions for transferability using thick descriptions of the participants and how they represented the population to which the findings will be generalized in all contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Thick descriptions examine the eidetic nature of the experience to reawaken, evoke, or demonstrate reflectivity of the lived significance of the phenomenon with depth (van Manen, 2016a). The reader will ultimately decide if participants represent the parameters for transferability to other conditions. Current literature does not explore military families' experience accessing ECEC. This study will improve policymakers' understanding of the emotional and mental investment required by military families as they navigated the process.

Dependability

I used effective thick descriptions, member checking, and reflexivity to demonstrate dependability and replicable findings. Thick descriptions and member checking are described above. Reflexivity is applying a systematic attitude during research and constructing knowledge while considering and removing my biases and personal experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I achieved reflexivity by keeping a voice diary to bracket my bias in this study. I am a verbal

processor, so using voice memos allowed me to explore my perspective during data collection and coding to identify my bias and isolate them from the participants' voices. The study went through an inquiry audit with my dissertation chair, committee member, and the director of qualitative research.

Confirmability

I established confirmability through (a) triangulation, (b) member checking, (c) thick descriptions, and (d) audit trails. Confirmability ensured the findings are based on the participant's experiences without my bias, motivations, or interests influencing the outcome (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Triangulation, member checking, and thick descriptions are detailed above.

Auditing is a process for external validation when the auditor works on behalf of the general readership to conduct a detailed assessment of the studies' trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The auditor requires an audit trail (see Appendix I) of a residue of inquiry records that connect the conclusions to raw data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Researchers who systematize, relate, cross-reference, and attach priorities to data during the data collection process ensure a thorough audit is possible (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). An algorithm for the audit process will confirm if the findings are grounded in data, if the category structure is clear, explanatory, and fits the data, and free of inquirer bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The auditor conducts a negative case analysis to determine the extent that negative evidence was accommodated during the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Ethical Considerations

Completing qualitative research requires following specific processes to protect participants, researchers, and the study itself. Researchers are obligated to minimize the risks

participants may face during the study including emotional distress, and maintaining confidentiality (Weckesser & Denny, 2022). Ethical researchers will protect participants' rights by fully disclosing the voluntary nature of participation, the right to withdraw consent at any time, potential impacts of the study, how electronic and/or physical data will be collected and securely stored, how long data will be maintained, and whether pseudonyms will be used to protect confidentiality (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Permissions

I used a participant information form (Appendix B) that began with a statement of intent (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A primary component of ethical research is participant selection and respectful practices (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Past research has targeted vulnerable populations, inflicted long-term damage on participants, and created a deep mistrust within researcher relationships (Scharff et al., 2010). Researchers who respect people, minimize harm, and practice justice will form relationships and establish trust by maintaining culturally appropriate interactions (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 151). A parable in the Bible examines a consequence of being ill-prepared as a mockery "lest haply after he hath laid the foundation and is not able to finish it, all that behold it, begin to mock him" (King James Version 1769/2016, Luke 14:29). The consequences for an ill-prepared researcher can range from wasted resources to irreparable harm to participants. An Institutional Review Board (IRB) was conducted before beginning research to sit down and count the cost. The purpose of the IRB was to examine the study design and establish ethical guidelines prior to data collection to protect future participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Other Participant Protections

The information form (Appendix B) included participants' rights regarding question responses during the interview and the decision to withdraw from the study at any point (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participant interviews began with a statement of the ethical considerations of confidentiality, privacy, and reproduction of the research associated with this study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Collected data including interview recordings, journal prompt email responses, and focus group transcripts, were stored on a USB drive, and secured in a locked safe when not in use. Data will be maintained for three years following the study completion, then destroyed (Creswell & Poth, 2018). All researcher notes, memos, and coding documentation used pseudonyms for participant names and geographic locations (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Summary

Qualitative research requires robust processes to ensure findings accurately reflect the participants' experiences rather than the researcher's bias. Lincoln and Guba's (1985) parallel terms for qualitative research assure this study is trustworthy. Participants were integral to ensuring an accurate reflection of their experiences. I anticipated decisions were influenced by accessibility, perceived quality of care, and the financial costs of the programs. Data from this study was analyzed and interpreted to provide meaning and develop research findings. Throughout the data collection process, the researcher maintained reflective notes and memos to assign meaning to first impressions and emerging themes in the role of a human instrument. Analytical insights form the basis of the hypothesis that is explored and tested as additional data is collected. Findings were grounded in the data and authenticated with constant comparison until all themes and concepts were explored and saturation occurred.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand the lived experience of military families accessing early childhood education and care opportunities using government and private programs. Chapter Four describes the participants in table format and narrative. The themes are presented in narrative form to demonstrate how each was derived from data sources. Relevant quotations are included as they related to themes, subthemes, and research questions. Outlier data is detailed in the data collection findings. Participants' responses to research questions are presented and the chapter concludes with a summary of the findings.

Participants

Participants for this study were recruited using the processes outlined in Chapter Three. After obtaining IRB approval, emails were sent to potential participants who responded to social media posts. As recruitment efforts became stagnant, I expanded my network by contacting former co-workers through text messaging. I extended participant criteria to include Department of Defense employees authorized to use military childcare and families with children enrolled in kindergarten who participated in ECEC within the previous 12 months. Criterion sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018) was used to recruit participants who met specified criteria. Specifically targeting participant representation from each major branch of the armed forces of the United States, various military ranks, and family household compositions. Participant demographics are not as diverse as originally planned. One participant is separated, one is divorced, and 10 are married. Of these, 10 have a full-time working spouse, one is a single parent, and one is a stay-at-home parent. While participants represent all branches of the Armed Services and rank structures, junior level ranks are not represented. Participants are senior enlisted members, field

grade officers, or the civilian equivalent. Volunteer or self-selection bias (Stone et al., 2023) is evident as all participants have higher education. One participant shared, “People with higher education understand the value of survey and studies. They realize this could impact something.” Another participant spoke for the group when she said, “Everybody that is participating with you is thinking, childcare is important, and anything we can do to help improve childcare for our kids, is worth the time and investment.”

Alice

Alice works as a nurse for the Marine Corps Child and Youth Programs. She is separated from her spouse of 11 years. Her spouse is an E-6 in the Marine Corps with 16 years of active service. At the time of the interview, their two children were 6 and 3. Alice described having “absolutely no idea what to do” and taking over 2 months to figure out how to get her child enrolled in care. After negative experiences using community care, Alice stated, “If a base Child Development Center was not an option, I would choose not to work.” When discussing CDC staff, Alice tears up when she asserts, “The women will change your life. They are the only reason I survived my child’s first 18 months.”

Alma

Alma is a mental health professional with a variety of experiences. She is married to a Naval Officer, O-4, with 16 years of active service. At the time of the interview, their two children were 8 and 4. She describes the experience of accessing care as “very hard to find care because of waitlists.” Her first child was on the waitlists from 8 weeks in utero and did not receive an offer for care until he was 3. The family had already moved to a new duty station. Throughout the interview, Alma repeatedly stated, “I wish there was more.” More funding to make quality care available to all socio-economic groups, more options for care with operating

hours that meet families' needs, and more base Child Development Centers because the staff understands military children's experiences.

Cindy

Cindy works full-time as a nurse. Her spouse retired from the United States Air Force after 26 years of active service. At the time of the interview, their two children were 6 and 4. Cindy shared a similar experience with other participants who have multiple children. She expressed the difficulty of accessing care in the National Capital Region, especially for multiple children. She accepted care and began paying for a space prior to the date she needed care because she did not want to lose the space. She said, "You get one spot for one kid, and then you wouldn't have a spot for the other, or it would be at a different location." When asked about her options for care, Cindy mentioned taking a job further away from her house so she could access affordable care on base. She was not aware of the military fee assistance program that would subsidize community care closer to her home until her friend told her about it on the day of our interview. Throughout the interview, Cindy repeatedly expressed how the lack of available information restricted her options for care to the base CDC. She felt her children were not prepared for kindergarten and the CDC staff had high turnover rates.

Ellen

Ellen is a Child and Youth Program Director. She met her spouse in college. He is a Technical Sergeant, E-6, in the United States Air Force. At the time of the interview, their four children were ages 13, 11, 9, and 3. Their family has participated in a variety of childcare types, including government-funded community care, family childcare (FCC) provided by Ellen, unauthorized childcare in a neighbor's home, and base childcare at multiple locations. Ellen explains their use of unauthorized care resulted from desperation and a lack of knowledge. She

stated, “Finding care in the National Capital Region was so hard, and I needed to work. I wasn’t aware of Childcare Aware until after I started working for Child and Youth Programs.” As Ellen detailed her experience with ECEC programs, she described negative experiences with each program except her own FCC. The negative experiences with government-funded and unauthorized care resulted in her refusal to use these types of programs. The negative experience with a specific base CDC, did not deter her from continuing to use alternate base CDC programs.

James

James is a Commander, O-5, in the United States Navy. His spouse works full-time as a nurse. At the time of the interview their three children were 7, 3, and 1. James described his experience accessing early childhood education as increasing in difficulty with each additional child. He shared the challenges of getting space for multiple children at the same time, which is essential for his spouse to participate in the workforce. He explained they received an offer for only one child, creating a financial burden when the family must pay for the space before the spouse can begin working because she is at home with the child still waiting for a space. James shared that his daily routine of dropping each child off at a separate care location prior to commuting to work has exhausted his emotions.

Jane

Jane is currently a stay-at-home mom with previous experience in higher education support services. Jane married an Active-duty marine in 2018 in the later part of his career. He is an E-7 and expects to retire in 2024. They relocated to Okinawa shortly after they married. While stationed in Okinawa, she completed her Doctorate and welcomed their first child in March 2019. At the time of the interview, their two children were 4 years old and 10 months old. She described her experience as “navigating parenthood without a manual” and stated the staff at the

base child development center helped guide her through the transition to motherhood in the absence of her extended family.

Janice

Janice is a Major, O-4, in the United States Army. Her spouse is former military and a current federal employee. At the time of the interview, their two children were 6 and 3. Janice describes herself as very naïve because she did not understand the waitlist process. Unlike other participants, Janice had advanced knowledge about when she would start a family, and where her next duty station would be. She says, “We lucked out, especially with the lack of planning. They had availability, and we got in exactly when we needed it.” She registered her second child as soon as she knew she was expecting. Her luck ran out when she received orders to the National Capital Region with only three months until her report date. Janice shared that, “Childcare became a main stressor as she began to second guess herself, wondering if she was willing to give her children the best care regardless of the cost. Childcare shouldn’t be more expensive than a graduate degree.” Even with military subsidies, her family spends $46,000 a year for two children to attend daycare.

Kandice

Kandice is a Department of Defense employee married to a Federal Law Enforcement officer. At the time of the interview, their two children were 6 and 4. Kandice is expecting their third child. Kandice is authorized to use military childcare; however, her priority rating is so low that she will likely not receive an offer for care. Kandice previously worked directly for Child and Youth Programs at an Army base. During her employment, she was the top priority and both her children attended base CDC. When describing her experience accessing ECEC, Kandice stated, “It can be hard knowing what’s available. I would have struggled without the resources at

my work because I didn't know where to start." Kandice has worked in multiple branches of military CYPs and shared, "Everyone has the same mission, there is a lot of oversight, but inconsistencies can be stressful for families. Additional continuity while respecting different services would be helpful." Kandice is grateful for her family's military childcare experience and believes the activities they participated in nurtured her children's attachment and excitement for the military culture.

Katie

Katie currently works as a Department of Defense employee in a position she is over-qualified for because she accepted the first job that qualified her for access to childcare. She is married to a Lieutenant Commander, O-4, in the Navy. At the time of the interview, their two children were 4 and 1. Katie shared two incidents of military orders being delayed or changed, which created a challenge accessing ECEC due to long waitlists. These delays forced her family to use community childcare with rates outside their family budget until space opened at the base CDC. Katie stated, "The base CDC feels like a little family. The staff understands military families. It is affordable and I feel secure because it is on base."

Lacy

Lacy is a Commander, O-5, in the United States Coast Guard with 23 years of active service. She has been married for five years to a surgical technologist. At the time of the interview, their two children 3 and 1. Lacy describes her life as interesting and chaotic with a lot of time spent together as a family. She laments that her children spend most of their awake time, Monday through Friday, in childcare, at least 50 hours a week. Throughout the interview, Lacy described the experience of accessing care as daunting and stressful due to long waitlists. She placed her first child on the waitlist within a month of discovering she was expecting. She felt

anxious until the moment she received an offer for care, beginning the week after she had to return to work. With her second child, she signed up on the waitlist the moment she learned she was expecting, even before sharing the news with her spouse. Lacy identified the need for a repository of information and credited her network, the tribe of moms who went before her, with helping her recreate the wheel to find resources.

Patty

Patty is a Lieutenant Colonel, O-5, in the United States Marine Corps with 24 years of active service. Patty is a single parent. At the time of the interview, her two children were 6 and 3. She describes her experience accessing ECEC as "great, without roadblocks, although navigating the systems can be daunting." She attributes her success to her ability as a researcher. She acknowledges the lack of a comprehensive source of information and the challenges with education. Also, that she is still learning new information about childcare programs, sometimes through rumors. Patty's children have been part of the military childcare community since infancy. She appreciates the safety of being close to emergency responders, the security of being on base, and the community that comes from CYP staff understanding military families. Patty explains the impact of her military service as incredibly positive. She feels her children have a sense of patriotism, awareness, and pride in the Pledge of Allegiance and National holidays. Tears formed in Patty's eyes when she described her personal experience with humanitarian orders and the Marine Corps' support during a medical situation. She shared, "What was required of me was to get my family healthy, so I could get back into the fight. The military is a family organization, and we pull together…to be our best when it matters most."

Amber

Amber teaches at her children's hybrid school part of the week. She is married to Tom, an O-5 Chaplain in the Navy. At the time of the interview their four children were 13, 10, 9, and 5. She described similar experiences to other participants with challenges getting spaces for multiple children, long waitlists for infant care leading to stress, and finding information by accident through word of mouth. At the half-way point of Tom's military career, he was debating getting out or staying in to retire, Amber resigned from her career as a nurse practitioner to stay home full time with the arrival of their fourth child. Even with Amber as the primary educator, Tom's military service interrupted the stability and consistency of their children's education.

Table 4

Military Affiliated Participants

Military Affiliated Participant	Interviewed Participant	Marital Status	Highest Degree Earned[1]	Service Branch	Rank	Spouse Employ-ment	Spouse Career[2]
Alice	Spouse	Sep	RN	Marine Corps	E-6	Full-time	Nurse
Alma	Spouse	M	OTD	Navy	O-4	Full-time	Mental Health Clinician
Cindy	Spouse	M	Bachelor's	Air Force	Re-tired	Full-time	Nurse
Ellen	Spouse	M	Bachelor's	Air Force	E-6	Full-time	CYP Director
James	Service Member	M	RN	Navy	O-5	Full-time	Nurse
Jane	Spouse	M	Doctorate	Marine Corps	E-7	Un-employed	Education Services

[1] Highest degree earned information was not originally collected during pre-screening. Some participant's education levels are estimated based on information shared during data collection.
[2] Spouse Career information was not originally collected during pre-screening. Information is based on information shared during data collection.

Janice	Service Member	M	Master's	Army	O-4	Full-time	Federal Employee
Kandice	DoD Member	M	Master's	DoD Civilian	N/A	Full-time	Federal LEO
Katie	Spouse	M	Bachelor's	Navy	O-4	Full-time	DoD Civilian
Lacy	Service Member	M	Bachelor's	Coast Guard	O-5	Full-time	Surgical Tech
Patty	Service Member	D	Bachelor's	Marine Corps	O-5	N/A	N/A
Amber	Spouse	M	MSN	Navy	O-5	Full-time	Teacher

Results

Triangulation of raw data occurred through a four-step process. Individual interview transcripts, focus group transcripts, and journal prompts were holistically horizontalized using van Manen's (2016a) reflective method. The Saldaña (2021) method was used to generate first-order coding across all collected data sources. Intermediate codes were organized in a theme development table to identify themes and inform narrative statements. Thematic statements were tested using Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory (1979) as a lens during the synthesis analysis. Transcripts and journal prompts were uploaded to MAXQDA Analytics Pro software and re-coded within the program as an additional validation effort. Participant interview transcripts produced 142 codes. Focus group transcripts generated similar codes, presenting two unique codes, a feeling of competition for childcare spaces, and a sense of hope that sharing their experiences will improve the future of childcare. Journal prompts allowed participants the opportunity to expand on ideas shared during interviews and produced 42 codes. These were consistent with codes generated during the individual and focus group interviews. Prominent themes were shared across military services, ranks, and family compositions. The relevant

themes, applicable quotes, and corresponding codes are presented in this section (see Table 5) as they relate to the research questions.

Table 5

Themes Generated Across Data Sources

Theme	Subthemes			
Information Gap				
Overwhelming Emotion	COVID-19	Relocation	Waitlist	Multiple Children
Factors Influence Choice	Culture	Quality		
Military Service	Impacts Family	Village		
Policy	Retention	Equity		

Information Gap

Throughout the interviews, focus groups, and journal prompts, participants shared the frustration and negative consequences associated with a gap of information surrounding access to early childhood education and care programs. The theme appeared in 39 coded segments across all three data sources. Ten of twelve participants expressed a lack of knowing where to start, when to start the process, what their options for care were, and how that impacted their options for care. Patty attended a military childcare summit in September 2023 with family member and leadership representation from all military services and the Department of Defense. She wants to write a talking paper to share lessons learned, “The immediate thought is there’s a gap in information and awareness of childcare.” Cindy shared, “I didn’t really have a lot of information on fee assistance. My friend told me about it yesterday.” Cindy took a position farther from home to access affordable care on base, because she was not aware she qualified for fee assistance at a program closer to her home. Ellen learned about family childcare (FCC) because she saw a sign in her neighbor’s yard. Ellen later became an FCC provider and began her career

with Child and Youth Programs.

Participants expressed finding information by accident, through their network, or as James stated, “By word of mouth on the ship. Someone mentioned fee assistance. There wasn’t anything formal.” Kandice credits her ability to access ECEC with her employer. “I would have struggled without it because I didn’t know where to start.” Patty said, “It might require a lot of deep research. If you don’t know where to find information, it can be challenging.” Janice pays it forward, “When my friends say they are moving, I have a cheat sheet I send to them with timelines.”

Overwhelming Emotion

The theme appeared in 21 coded segments across all three data sources. Nine of twelve participants expressed emotions of frustration, stress, anxiety, guilt, and exhaustion, which they attributed to the struggle of accessing ECEC. Participants identified the COVID-19 pandemic, relocations, and extensive waitlists as additional stressors, especially when families have multiple children who require some form of dependent care. Patty said, “I feel frustrated and unclear as to how I would execute my military duties and locate adequate childcare [during relocations].”

COVID-19

The sub-theme appeared in 20 coded segments across two data sources. The pandemic exacerbated overwhelming feelings associated with accessing ECEC for most participants. Lacy shared, “finding places that were taking new children was very difficult.” Janice relocated during COVID-19 and said, “I was meeting potential daycare centers through video feeds. I could only see what was in the background and I was trying to determine if I wanted to drop my child off there. It's very difficult to determine if one center is better than another.”

COVID-19 regulations identified specific professions as essential, or non-essential which impacted families' access to ECEC. For Cindy's family, she was considered essential, however, her spouse was not. "When they decided both parents must be essential to receive care, I don't think they thought about everybody else. It wasn't feasible for my husband to work from home and care for two children." In Alma's family, both parents were essential, and that would have made finding care easier. She said they relocated when "COVID-19 started kind of going away a little bit, people started going back into daycares, and it was hard to find daycare." Katie also relocated during COVID-19 and said, "We scrambled as soon as we knew where we were going to put him on wait lists. It didn't work out with the limited numbers of children that they were taking."

Relocation

The sub-theme appeared in 16 coded segments across all three data sources. Military families have a shared experience of relocating to meet the needs of their specific service, often referred to as a permanent change of station (PCS). The disruption to routines, established support networks, and ECEC programs provoke a myriad of emotions. Janice felt, "nervous and stressed" when trying to find care during a PCS and said it was "chaotic, fast, and furious" as she scrambled to find an ECEC program with only a 3-month lead. Jane had a similar sense of urgency when moving from Japan to North Carolina. She said, "I felt like I had to rush to figure it out." Katie felt frustrated trying to find ECEC in an unfamiliar area during a cross country move. She said, "Moving is so disruptive to military families and the brunt of the logistics and getting settled falls on the spouse, including finding adequate childcare."

Waitlist

The sub-theme appeared in 49 coded segments across all three data sources. Lacy shared

that her first ECEC experience was “daunting and anxious.” The process was so stressful as an already stressed-out mom-to-be, that with her second child, she felt, “Childcare actually came first because I knew how long it took for the waiting list.” One participant summarized the challenge as, “Childcare is in such high demand that some people are surprised that you really should be looking for care while you are pregnant, even if you don’t need it right away.” Patty was one of the people surprised. She said, “I didn't know you could go on the waiting list while you were pregnant. No one told me that.” Janice said she was naïve about the waitlist process with her first child. For her second child she said, “When I knew I was pregnant, I immediately registered her.” Cindy felt it took her child longer on the waitlist because “the younger the child is, the more difficult it is to get access.”

Even for older children, waitlists can take months. In Alma’s situation, her preschooler went to a center 40 minutes from their home while on the waitlist for their preferred location. Alma said, “She was on the waitlist for the one closer to the house. It took 6 or 7 months for her to get in.” Amber said, “It was stressful because we were unsure if there would be any childcare available, and we did not have any other options.” Katie agreed, “The wait lists are a challenge. We scrambled to put him on the waitlist as soon as we knew where we were moving.” James said, “The waitlists are very long.” His family waited almost a year for one child to be accepted into their preferred program, and they are still waiting on their second child to get space. Ellen wished, “I had been more realistic about the wait list. I know that it fluctuates every day, but I wish I would have been more aware.”

Multiple Children

The sub-theme appeared in 21 coded segments across all three data sources. Participants with multiple children who rely on dependent care, shared that waitlist challenges and the

emotional burden drastically increase with each additional child. Janice said, “The most challenging experiences I had accessing ECEC was finding a daycare with availability for both kids during a PCS.”

Amber said, “It was stressful when her school choice did not have availability for all four children.” James’ family tried to wait for all the children to have care before the second parent began working after a recent PCS. He said, “We had to ‘take the plunge’ and sign up the kids for three different daycares and ask a neighbor to help. Our emotions are pretty much ‘exhausted’ from waitlists.” Cindy shared a similar situation, “I have 2 kids in childcare, it’s expensive. We would have had to put her in one place and my son in another place. It's just easier to have them together.” Lacy feels fortunate and said, “My daughter goes to the same CDC. We were able to keep them together. It was ease of logistics.” Alma said, “we really wanted both of them to be at the same place.”

Factors Influence Choice

During the individual interviews, focus group interviews, and journal prompts, families discussed the multitude of factors that influenced their decision to enroll their child(ren) into previous and current ECEC programs. The overall theme generated 316 coded segments throughout all 23 transcripts and across all three data collection groups. The following 16 codes were clustered under the overall theme of factors: available, affordable, location, fee assistance, multiple children at same location, hours of operation, culture, inclusive, diversity, supportive CYP staff, quality, trust, safe, familiar, food provided, and social-emotional opportunities. Patty summarized her priority list as, “availability, staff engagement, ability to accommodate special needs, cleanliness and facility atmosphere, hours of operation, curriculum, nutrition, proximity to my workplace, lively atmosphere, and attention to details.” Amber stated, “The three main

factors in this order, were location, availability, and cost."

Childcare scarcity is directly correlated with the priority participants place on specific factors. Availability, location, and hours of operation become the primary focus, above affordability, and equivalent to safety. Alma said, "Price plays a role, but at this point, it was how close it is to our house and if they have openings." Jane agreed, "Finding space and tuition was just terrible…inflation and scarcity of preschools across the board." Janice expanded on the importance of location and availability to include the hours of operation. She said, "We picked the apartment we moved into based on daycare locations. We ended up going with a place that was not part of the fee assistance because of the hours they were open." Katie also based her decision on the hours of operation, "We needed something that was open long enough." James said, "We are not satisfied with the in-town care since it closes at 4:30 p.m., making pick-ups tight." Lacy explained why drop off and pick up times are a big influence. She said, "Limited hours of operation would have reduced my workday to a 6-hour workday. I wouldn't have been able to continue leading my team."

Culture

The codes inclusive, culture, diversity, and supportive CYP staff generated the sub-theme culture. Culture includes statements relating to understanding military family life, dynamics, deployments, and experiences. Alice specifically referred to the CDC when she said, "I love that they are so geared for parent-child experiences and understand the military family life." Alma agreed, "CDC options are great with understanding what the kids are going through and the services that they provide." Cindy said, "Being a military family, everybody's familiar with the CDC. They have a better understanding of the make-up of the military families and some of the challenges they face." Ellen explained, "The CDC teaches children to understand the military

and…what ‘thank you for your service truly means.’” Katie summarized, “The program understands the military lifestyle.” Lacy said, “The staff and curriculum are geared towards military. Staff understands the blending of new friends and new environments.” Kandice said, “One of my favorite aspects of CDC is my children being exposed to the community. It's a very beautiful and welcoming community.”

Diversity and inclusion are factors that influence the ECEC program families choose. Jane said, “I want her to be around children, not necessarily her background, but of different backgrounds. I want her to experience people who are different from her.” Regarding inclusion, Alice said, “There’s a whole team. They treat all behavior as a form of communication.” Katie shared, “I want him to have interactions with children that are different from him.”

Quality

The codes safe, social-emotional opportunities, food provided, quality, trust, and familiar generated the sub-theme quality. Quality includes statements regarding curriculum, education, regulations, oversight, accreditation, teacher qualifications, and turnover rates. When explaining ECEC program quality, Alma said, “As they get toward the older ages, like 3.5 to 5, they're not all equal. Some of the programs seem like they are just kind of trying to keep them alive, some provide education.”

Safety is an important indicator of quality for families choosing an ECEC program. Janice shared, “We decided if we were going to pay the amount of money they wanted, then our children are going to be safe.” Patty and Jane mentioned fast access to emergency response as in indicator of safety. Jane said, “The fire department is across the street and the nearest hospital is less than five minutes away.” Military families have a unique perspective and appreciate the additional element of safety when ECEC programs are located on installations. Lacy said,

“Safety, just because of where it's located, and the fact that you have to go onto a base.” Patty agreed, “On base there's safety. There's security being behind the gates.”

As participants shared why they selected their current ECEC program, the topic of food emerged. Families mentioned the quality of nutrition was assessed by reviewing the menu, but the main influence was whether the programs provided meals. Lacy said each time she considers changing programs, the deciding factor is meals. She explained, “They provide my kids a heathy breakfast, lunch, and snack, which takes one more logistical hurdle off my nightly plate, reducing stress and allowing me more quality time with my kids.” Katie expanded that thought, “Breakfast, lunch, and two snacks are included, which takes one thing off my plate, and helps expose both children to new foods on a regular basis.”

Participants identified other primary indicators of quality include social-emotional opportunities, regulation, coverage, and curriculum. Katie said, “Having the bigger group where he learns is important.” Alma also chooses larger group settings, “I try to get the big childcare's first. They seem safer and more regulated. They have better coverage than in an in-home program and we want the socialization for them.” In reference to family childcare, Cindy said, “I wasn't comfortable with that option. As a first-time parent you don't look into that type of thing.” James shared, “We had a good experience with the established ones [programs]. They had a curriculum and more staffing. The Navy CDCs are very well run, very regulated.” Kandice selected her current civilian program because, “They do a pre-K program. Their assessment aligns with the state assessments to prepare them for kindergarten.” Opinions on the education provided at CDCs vary. Cindy feels, “The Army curriculum Strong beginnings is not a good program. My child was not prepared for kindergarten. There's a lot of turn over at the programs.” Ellen had the opposite opinion, “I was really impressed with the Strong Beginnings program, and

I wish the Air Force had it. My kids were so prepared for kindergarten."

Military Service

Individual interviews, journal prompts, and each of the focus group transcripts, generated 48 codes. Codes were primarily either positively or negatively correlated with military service. The following positive codes included: shared experiences, increased resilience, pride, community, or village. Common phrases were, "I want to be like Dad," "proud that Dad keeps us safe," "the kids are excited about the military," and "they don't feel different than their friends." The negative codes included: impacts family and spouse career, interrupted, and increased emotional stress. One participant said, "I hope that in the future things get better for military connected families. It is a struggle to identify the best foundation for your children. They're already going through a lot of obstacles as military children."

Impacts Family

Katie described how her spouse's military service impacts her career. "Every time we move, I have to find a new job. I have not had the opportunity to really go up the ladder with additional responsibilities and additional pay." Jane empathized, "Most of the people I graduated with have advanced. I am still at entry level because of moving." Janice said, "My husband is trying to apply for jobs, but we don't know where we are moving until a few months out." Katie and James said part of the challenge for spouse employment is access to childcare and it is tough trying to pay for childcare without a job. Amber shared that she stopped working as a nurse practitioner because she could not find childcare in the area.

Village

Participants were quick to respond that the best part of being a military family is the community and experience. Kandice describes it as, "The military is a beautiful and welcoming

community." Katie appreciates, "The opportunity to build lifelong friends and establish a supportive village." Jane said, "ECEC programs are the village you always wanted to help raise a child." Patty agreed that ECEC programs fill the gap because, "We are away from extended family."

Policy

Initially participants said they did not know any government policies, or they had not thought about how policy impacted their family. When prompted about policies the participants mentioned earlier in the interview, two distinct views emerged. Participant responses from 21 transcripts, across all three data sources, identified 70 codes related to existing or desired ECEC policies. Polices were primarily viewed either positively or negatively in relation to whether they were perceived to increase or decrease quality, access, or affordability.

Retention

Participants place priority on health insurance and childcare when making decisions about career progression, military service retention, and future employment compensation. Policies that are perceived positively increase participants' satisfaction with the military and retention likelihood. Ellen said, "The Air Force is very family orientated. My husband is 100% staying in. My kids all need braces and with CYP, I know our children are safe and my husband can complete his mission." Alice shared a conversation between herself and her spouse regarding his intention not to re-enlist in 2020. The position he wanted to pursue had great health insurance, but when they did the cost breakdown, the decision to stay in the military came down to childcare access.

For participants in the study, policies that were perceived negatively did not discourage retention. However, participants acknowledged that their rank allowed them privileges and

flexibility that junior service members do not have. Janice explained, “You can use kids as an excuse maybe twice. Then you will be labeled. If I were more junior, I would get out to have a more stable life.” Lacy summarized the importance of ECEC policies on recruiting and retaining female service members. She said, “The first woman was admitted into the Coast Guard Academy in 1976. Women didn’t have the opportunity to serve before childcare. Childcare allows for more diversity of thought. Without available childcare, I wouldn't be in the military.”

Equity

Throughout the data collection process as participants shared their challenges, most participants expressed empathy toward families in perceived lower socio-economic categories. Phrases echoed the concept “I can’t imagine what (single parents, enlisted service members, etc.) do.” Participants recognize equitable access to childcare is necessary to overcome the achievement gap in socioeconomic issues prevalent in the United States. Janice said, “We cannot get past the gap in socioeconomic issues if we don't make childcare access equitable.”

Outlier Data and Findings

During data collection an unexpected theme emerged. As participants responded to interview questions about their challenges accessing ECEC, ECEC options, and government policies, four participants mentioned the Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA). Two of these participants included DoDEA in their journal prompt responses.

DoDEA

The code DoDEA appeared in eight coded segments within interview transcripts and journal prompts. Participants shared either frustration or gratitude about DoDEA’s enrollment policy dependent on whether their child(ren) were accepted or denied. Alice was grateful for a pilot program that allowed her child to attend school on base, even though they lived off base.

Patty expressed frustration with DoDEA's strict adherence to policy that denied her child the ability to attend school on base because they reside off base. Patty lobbied for an exception to policy on three separate occasions in her attempt to gain access to DoDEA.

Research Question Responses

Individual interviews, three focus group sessions, and journal prompts, obtained saturation and provided thematic data on the research questions that guided this hermeneutic phenomenological study. The five themes are aligned in accordance with the respective research question. Themes may be represented in multiple research questions. Each question is answered by the associated themes and sub-themes below.

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of military families who seek access to high-quality equitable early childhood education opportunities? Military families described their experience navigating ECEC access as overwhelming due to an information gap that necessitates relying on a network to identify resources. Alice described her feelings as, "An overwhelming fear when realizing she had no idea how to enroll her child into daycare." Lacy explained that the burden of filling the information gap relied on her ingenuity and relationships, "I had to do my own legwork and networking." Participants added that extensive waitlists, the COVID-19 pandemic, and distance from extended family created daunting challenges for military families to build supportive villages. Jane said, "Military moves are distressing. You are expected to uproot your family and start over in a new location. Having access to safe, affordable daycare when it is needed would make things much easier." Accessing ECEC programs requires the skill to navigate multiple websites, and the ability to discern accurate information from outdated anecdotal input offered by well-meaning individuals.

Sub-Question One

How do military families describe their options for early childhood education and care? Participants described their options as limited when they are searching for equitable, affordable, quality care. Families need available care that provides them a sense of trust when they are away from their children. Lacy explained she could not do her job without knowing, “My kids at a safe location. They're really being cared for.” Options are limited due to competition and reduced ECEC capacity. Jane said, “There was a lot of competition to get into very few spaces that were even more limited because of COVID-19.” Katie agreed, “There’s such a condensed area of military-connected individuals, as well as locals, it can be stressful to find a suitable option.” Childcare scarcity has increased parental stress in military families.

Sub-Question Two

How do military families describe the factors that influence their choices in selecting ECEC programs? Military families select ECEC programs that are accessible, affordable, safe, and provide quality care by teachers who understand the military culture, celebrate diversity, and build a community. Participants described multiple factors they consider when deciding on ECEC programs for their children. Participants place a subjective value on each factor and prioritize specific criteria when evaluating ECEC programs. However, values and priorities may shift when circumstances change. When participants are faced with limited ECEC options, availability will outweigh location and cost. Safety remains paramount while diversity and understanding military culture are considered ‘ideal’ factors. Families with multiple children enrolled in ECEC programs place a premium on programs that can accommodate all the children in one location. Amber stated, “there was no way we wanted to split them up for school.” Cindy

shared, “being able to meet the needs of both children was my main motivation for choosing where they are now.”

Sub-Question Three

How do military families describe the effect of their military service on their children’s early childhood education and care experiences? When asked how military service has impacted their children’s ECEC experience, participants initially stated, “It did not.” They rationalized that their children were too young to understand the implications of their parent’s job. The participants were especially adamant when deployments or relocations occurred when their children were under 5. As the interview progressed, participants shared details that offered insight into possible implications. Focus group meetings stimulated participants’ conversations about how military service impacts their families. Participants described the impact of military service on their children as an experience common amongst their friends. They recognized military service has both positive and negative ramifications on their children’s ECEC. Participants said military service increases their children’s resilience, patriotism, and pride in being a military child. Negative impacts include interruptions to their children’s ECEC education, their spouse’s career progression, and increased emotional stress. Katie said, “Moves are frequent and expected.” Jane added, “It’s hard to have a village these days.”

Sub-Question Four

How do military families perceive the influence of government policies on their children’s early childhood education and care options? Military families perceive policies that increase quality of care, affordability, and access, in as a positive benefit. These policies increase their satisfaction with the military and retention likelihood. Policies that limit access, or disrupt work schedules, are viewed negatively. While participants dislike these policies, they did not

influence retention decisions. Lacy explained, “Government policies that increase ECEC access, availability, and options, are paramount to us being able to continue to serve.”

Summary

Significant themes linked to participant experiences accessing ECEC are consistent with existing literature. The generated themes of information gap, overwhelming emotion, factors, military service, and policy are relevant to current ECEC policy proposals and participants’ emotional capacity. Each of the themes are grounded in multiple participant’s responses and data sources. Themes relate to the central research question guiding the study, and many align with the theoretical framework that shaped this study, as discussed in Chapter Five.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand accessing early childhood education and care opportunities for military families using government and private programs. This study was conducted by implementing a hermeneutic phenomenology research design. Twelve participants shared their experiences through individual interviews, journal prompts, and focus groups. By analyzing the collected data, I discovered answers to a central research question and four sub-questions. Answers were aligned using Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory (1979). This chapter includes five discussion subsections beginning with an interpretation of findings, identifying implications for policy and practice, examining the theoretical and methodological implications, acknowledging limitations and delimitations, and concluding with recommendations for future research.

Discussion

The following sections detail the findings of the study. The discussion begins with thematic findings, followed by my interpretations, and the implications for policy. Finally, I will identify the limitations and delimitations of the study and make recommendations for future research.

Summary of Thematic Findings

The hermeneutic phenomenological design of the study offered military families the opportunity to share their lived experiences accessing ECEC programs. Participants explored the influence of military service and government policy on their family's ECEC journey. This design was selected to identify the commonalities of military families' lived experiences across military services and various family compositions. Through the data analysis, I found commonalities in

military families' ECEC experiences include: (a) an information gap that increases stress and creates a need for networking to identify resources, (b) waitlists, the COVID-19 pandemic, and distance from extended family exacerbates the challenge military families face with each relocation, (c) there are limited options for quality, affordable, and equitable care due to competition for spaces and the current childcare crisis, (d) military service disrupts ECEC experiences and spouse employment, and (e) policies that expand ECEC availability are viewed positively and increase retention probability.

Interpretation of Findings

Military families experience multiple relocations during their careers. Each relocation disrupts the family dynamics and established support systems. Participants shared the vital role support systems, or villages, provide in the absence of familial proximity. Each move requires participants to identify, vet, and create new villages, taxing their emotional capacity. Participants lamented the lack of a central information system that would ease the burden of identifying and vetting ECEC programs.

ECEC waitlists compound the burden for families with multiple children, those who need care for extended hours, or when there is a short turn-around time for a relocation. Waitlists were especially daunting during COVID-19 and continue to be extensive in geographic areas identified as childcare deserts. While availability has narrowed ECEC options, many factors influence families' program decisions. Predominant factors prioritize safety, quality, and affordability with a strong desire for programs that understand the military culture, celebrate diversity, and build unity. Families praised the supportive military culture that provides a myriad of opportunities and a network of information they rely on to fill the knowledge gap. Participants recognized the importance of equitable ECEC programs to bridge socio-economic disparities.

Trust Matters Most

When asked to describe the factors that influenced their rationale for selecting their current ECEC programs, participant responses identified over 20 considerations. While each factor is important and relevant, ultimately, parents want a program they trust when they must be away from their children. Trust can be grouped along physical safety factors such as location on a military base, facility design, and program regulations. Or along emotional factors such as familiarity, social-emotional learning, and teacher-child interactions. Parents trust teachers who demonstrate compassion and genuinely care about children. When families feel teachers enjoy spending time with children and celebrate children's accomplishments, they trust the program. Participants said knowing their children are safe and cared for, allows them to focus on work and for the service member to accomplish their mission.

Military Service Requires Sacrifice

Participants discussed how the term 'thank you for your service' can feel like an empty platitude when policies are not supportive of their needs. Military CDC waitlists are based on a priority system where full-time working spouses fall below single and dual active service members. This lower priority level may mean families never get offered space in a military facility. The priority level impacts spousal employment opportunities and may require using multiple programs for siblings. Civilian childcare tuition costs often exceed university tuition costs for advanced degrees. Participants need supportive policies and practices to feel their sacrifices are truly appreciated.

Implications for Policy and Practice

This study demonstrates the need for policies and practices that improve military families' experience accessing ECEC programs. The policy implications require developing,

expanding, or modifying policies that increase equitable availability to affordable quality care and decrease disruptions to support systems. The implications for practice relate to participants' need to feel connected to their children during the day and facilitate positive teacher-child relationships within an inclusive, diverse, and culturally responsive environment. Each of these are vital due to military families' challenges accessing quality ECEC programs.

Implications for Policy

The results of this study offer implications for policy established by the Department of Defense (DoD) to ensure military families have access to accurate information, affordable, quality ECEC programs, and a decrease in relocations. Participants expressed the desire for less frequent PCS moves to facilitate spouse career progression, provide continuity of education, and form strong support networks. A policy expanding the average time on station to five years, rather than the current three-year rotation schedule, would reduce the number of PCS moves from seven per career to four.

The results of this study also offer implications for policy established by the Federal Government with Congressional funding. Participants revealed the universal need for affordable, quality childcare, and the importance for a federal policy to address inequitable access. The policy should base all childcare fees on household income, decrease teacher to child ratios, and increase teacher compensation to accurately reflect their vital role.

Implications for Practice

The results of this study offer implications for practice that could affect military families' ECEC experiences. Participants identified multiple areas for growth within ECEC programs. Participants value the civilian programs that effectively utilize technology to share information with families during care hours. It may be beneficial for military CDCs to offer this opportunity

for connection. Proximity to home or work was a high priority for families. It may be beneficial to expand CDC locations to include new sites within off-base neighborhoods with large military populations. While the waitlist was identified as a top stressor for all families, sibling care compounded the challenges. It may be helpful to make modifications to the waitlist management system that allow siblings to maintain their priority on the list until all children are accepted. While participants expressed appreciation for the fee assistance program, there is a need to adjust the cap limits based on duty locations.

Empirical and Theoretical Implications

The following sections focus on the empirical and theoretical implications of this study. The empirical implications integrate the data from this study with existing research on the challenges military families experience and the protective factor of ECEC programs. The theoretical implications are examined through the bio-ecological systems theory, which formed the framework for this study.

Empirical Implications

The empirical implications of this study suggest an alignment with previous literature about ECEC programs and military families. The areas of alignment include criteria required for equitable access to and quality of ECEC programs, the impact of ECEC programs on children's school readiness, and the challenges specific to military families. Participants expressed the importance of available ECEC for parental employment. Access to ECEC programs is essential for children to benefit from the protective factors of life satisfaction and community associated with parental employment (Richardson et al., 2023). Furthermore, participant shared experiences consistent with research by identifying they have increased communication and routine challenges (Mogil et al., 2022; Ohye et al., 2020; Rogers et al., 2021), that require a sense of

belonging for their children to thrive (Bartlett & Smith, 2019; Sands et al., 2023). ECEC promotes community and belonging (Birkeland & Grindheim, 2021; Rogers et al., 2021) when programs are responsive to families' culture (Bartlett & Smith, 2019; Classen et al., 2019; CMFR, 2019b; Mendez Smith et al., 2021). All participants noted how influential a secure environment, social-emotional opportunities, and teacher-child relationships are as a reflection of a high-quality program. High-quality ECEC requires qualified teachers and a collaborative partnership with families (Carroll-Meehan et al., 2019) which impacts children's development and readiness for school (Archambault et al., 2020; Bartlett & Smith, 2019; Hotz & Wiswall, 2019; Mendez Smith et al., 2021; Niederdeppe et al., 2021). This study contributes to literature specific to military families, DoD childcare programs, and the impact of military service on children.

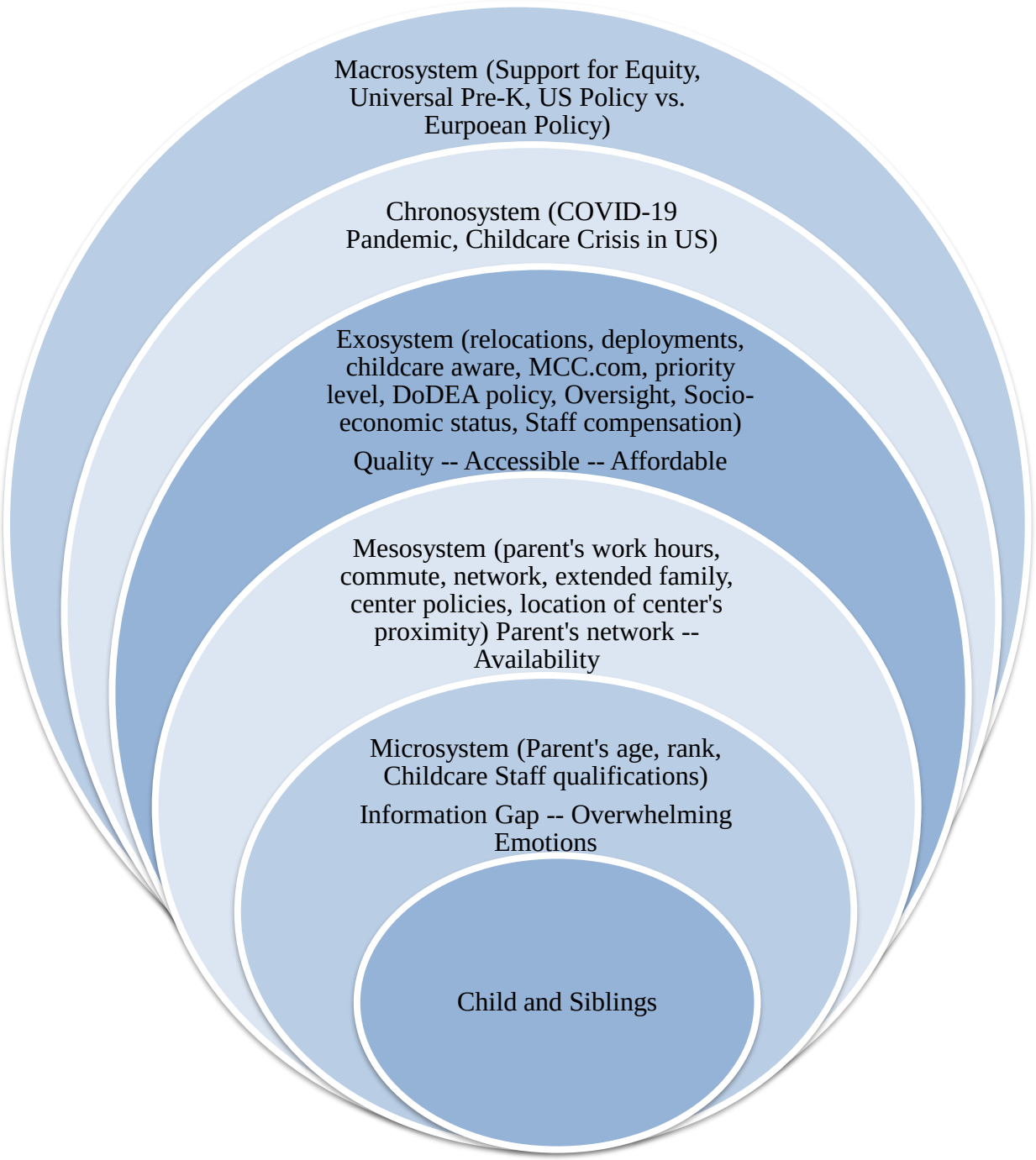
Theoretical Implications

This study was grounded in Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems theory (1977). Bio-ecological systems theory is the process human development takes between interdependent systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Bronfenbrenner highlighted the essential role of early childhood education in creating competent children, empowered families, and connected communities (1985, 1994; Tudge et al., 2021). This study examines the child's ecology, through the parent's experience, as the settings where interactions and social meanings (Tudge et al., 2021) influence their ECEC experience. Children's development is influenced by their homes, friends, school, community, society, and access to various services (Hardy et al., 2021; Kasearu & Olsson, 2019; Pattnaik & Jalongo, 2021; Williams, 2021; Yoshikawa et al., 2020). Participants noted how various factors influenced their child(ren)'s ECEC experience consistent with the interdependency within Bronfenbrenner's. bio-ecological system's theory (1977). Figure 3 below

displays study findings within the systems. This study added to the theory by identifying the factors that influence participants' lived experiences within the chronosystem.

Figure 3

Findings Displayed in Bio-ecological Systems.



Limitations and Delimitations

This section details the limitations and delimitations present in this study. The limitations were outside my control. These factors related to participant demographics and site geography. Delimitations were intentional decisions I made to focus on specific criteria and constraints.

Limitations

Generalization and transferability are limited for this study due to sample limitations and site locations. Participants in this study met specific criteria as an active-duty military family with at least one child enrolled in an ECEC program. These criteria allowed the study to address the gap of research specific to military families in ECEC literature. The sample size included 12 volunteer participants, 10 females and two males. While participants shared ECEC experiences with programs located in Japan and throughout the East and West coast of the United States, 11 participant sites included the National Capital Region. Additionally, participant demographics were not representative of the overall military composition. All participants possessed higher education degrees, 10 participants were married, and seven participants were part of the officer corps.

Delimitations

This study involved intentional delimitations to include only active-duty military families with children enrolled in an ECEC program. This delimitation was chosen to ensure participants had a shared phenomenon. An additional delimitation was the selection of a hermeneutic phenomenology to capture a rich descriptive understanding of military families' lived experience accessing ECEC programs.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study focused on participants with children three to five-years old enrolled in an

ECEC program. Additionally, participants are active-duty service members, their spouses, or DoD civilians authorized to use base childcare. Future research may expand participants to include guardsmen, reservists, contractors authorized to use base childcare, and junior-ranking service members. Comparing results may lead to additional transferability. This recommendation could reveal if military families of various ranks and service requirements similarly experience the phenomenon. Expanding site locations to include military installations in European and midwestern locations may also increase transferability. An additional recommendation for future research is a quantitative study using a Likert scale to measure how participants distinguish quality programs. Finally, I recommend a comparative case study to examine how societal support for universal childcare varies among Nations.

Conclusion

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to examine the lived experience of military families accessing early childhood education and care programs. Participants completed individual interviews, a focus group, and journal prompts. This study was grounded in Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems theory (1977) to understand the interconnectedness of policy, military service, and community on children's ECEC experience. This study utilized van Manen's (2016a) reflective method and the Saldaña (2021) coding procedures for analysis and thematic development. Five themes emerged: information gap, overwhelming emotion, factors, military service, and policy. Participants shared how vital networks are in the absence of extended familial support. Policies that increase quality of care, affordability, and access are viewed positively and impact satisfaction with the military and retention likelihood. Finally, participants shared that ECEC program quality relies on teachers who understand the military culture, celebrate diversity, and build community.

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Appendix A

Liberty University IRB Approval Letter

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

September 19, 2023

Kristine Clothier
Breck Perry

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY23-24-211 THE EXPERIENCE OF MILITARY FAMILIES ACCESSING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE: A HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

Dear Kristine Clothier, Breck Perry,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2.(ii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:
Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or

For a PDF of your exemption letter, click on your study number in the My Studies card on your Cayuse dashboard. Next, click the Submissions bar beside the Study Details bar on the Study details page. Finally, click Initial under Submission Type and choose the Letters tab toward the bottom of the Submission Details page. Your information sheet and final versions of your study documents can also be found on the same page under the Attachments tab.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at

Appendix B

Information Sheet

Title of the Project: The Experience of Military Families Accessing Early Childhood Education and Care: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Study
Principal Investigator: Kristine Clothier, Doctoral Candidate, School of Education, Liberty University.

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be 18 years of age or older and be an active duty or active reserve U.S. military member. You must have at least one child ages 3- 5- years old who attends an early childhood education and care program (ECEC). The ECEC program must be regulated by a state, federal, or private accreditation agency or have demonstrated quality assessments. 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 this phenomenological study is to understand accessing early childhood education and care opportunities by military families using government and private programs. Data will inform policymakers as they invest in universal prekindergarten and direct significant resources to improve equitable access to early childhood education and care programs.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:

1. The first task will be to participate in a Microsoft TEAMs audio-recorded interview that will take 45 to 60 minutes.
2. The second task will be to respond to 5 separate email prompts, over a 2-4 week period, that will take no more than 10 minutes each.
3. The third task will be to participate in a Microsoft TEAMs audio-recorded focus group interview that will take no more than 45 minutes.
4. The fourth task will be to review interview transcripts and provide clarification if needed. This task will take 15 to 30 minutes.
5. The last task will be to review the data analysis to ensure an accurate representation of your experience. This task will take no more than 30 minutes.
   The total time commitment for this study is anticipated to be 3 hours and 50 minutes.

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 informing military-connected professionals of the unique experiences and needs of military families. Benefits to the military community include informing policymakers of

military-specific challenges in accessing early childhood education and care. Benefits to literature include adding military-specific research to the Early Childhood Education and Care literature.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life. I am a mandatory reporter. During this study, if I receive information about child abuse, child neglect, elder abuse, or intent to harm self or others, I will be required to report it to the appropriate authorities.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher and members of her doctoral committee will have access to the records. Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.

- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- 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.
- Journal prompts and all other data will be maintained on a password-protected computer during the analyzing, writing, and publishing phases of the study.
- Interview and focus group recordings will be stored on a USB drive and secured in a locked safe at the researcher's home.
- All data including emails, recordings, and transcripts will be kept for a period of three years following the study completion, after which time transcripts will be shredded, the USB erased, and all other data deleted from the computer's hard drive.
- Only the researcher and members of her doctoral committee will have access to the data, recordings, and transcripts.

Is study participation voluntary?

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

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 paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Kristine Clothier. Y**ou are encouraged** to contact her at with any questions you have. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Breck Perry, at

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 IRB. Our physical address is

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.

Appendix C

Recruitment Letter

Dear Service Member or Military Spouse,

As a doctoral candidate in the School of Education, at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Ph.D. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand accessing early childhood education and care opportunities by military families using government and private programs.

Data will inform policymakers as they invest in universal prekindergarten and direct significant resources to improve equitable access to early childhood education and care programs. I am writing to invite you to join my study.

Participants must be 18 years of age or older and be an active duty or active reserve U.S. military member. You must have at least one child ages 3- 5- years old who attend an early childhood education and care program (ECEC). The ECEC program must be regulated by a state, federal, or private accreditation agency or have demonstrated quality assessments. Participants will be asked to participate in an individual interview, complete 5 email responses, participate in a focus group interview, review interview transcripts and provide clarification as needed, and finally review the data analysis to ensure an accurate representation of your experience.

It should take approximately 3 hours and 50 minutes over a 2-4 week time period to complete the procedures listed. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but participant identities will not be disclosed.

To participate please complete the attached screening survey and return it by email to

If you meet my participant criteria, I will contact you to schedule an interview. An information sheet is attached to this email. The information sheet contains additional information about my research. You do not need to sign the information sheet, but please read and review the document before deciding to participate.

Sincerely,

Kristine Clothier

Appendix D

Pre-Screening/Demographic Questionnaire

Qualifying Question:

Are you 18 years of age or older? Yes / No

Are you an active-duty or reserve U.S. military member on active orders? Yes / No

Do you have at least one child between 3-5 years old who attend an early childhood education and care program (ECEC)? *Note: The ECEC program must be regulated by a state, federal, or private accreditation agency or have demonstrated quality assessments.* Yes/No

Name:

Military Service Affiliation: Army, Air Force, Coast Guard, Navy, Marine Corps, Space Force

Service Member's Rank:

Marital Status: Single active-duty never married, Single active-duty Divorced or Widowed, Dual-active duty, active-duty with Full-time Working Spouse, active-duty with Part-time Working Spouse, active-duty with Student Spouse, active-duty with non-employed spouse (working in the home).

Child(ren)'s age(s):

Early Childhood Education and Care Program Currently Attending:

Appendix E

Social Media Invitation

Social Media study invitations to be posted on LinkedIn and Facebook

I am working toward my Ph.D. in Education: Organizational Leadership. As part of my dissertation, I am conducting a study about the lived experiences of military families accessing Early Childhood Education and Care programs to inform future policy. My study has been approved through Liberty University's Institutional Review Board.

I need 10-15 military families representing each branch of the U.S. Military. To participate you must be 18 years of age or older and be an active duty or active reserve U.S. military member. You must have at least one child ages 3- 5- years old who attend an early childhood education and care program (ECEC). The ECEC program must be regulated by a state, federal, or private accreditation agency or have demonstrated quality assessments. Participants will be asked to participate in a virtual interview, respond to 5 journal prompts, participate in a virtual focus group, review all transcripts, and review the data analysis from your portion of the study. All the procedures listed should take no more than 3 hours and 50 minutes.

If you or someone you know are interested in participating, please email at

An information sheet will be emailed to you once you have contacted me. The sheet will give you more information about my study and help you decide if you would like to participate.

Thank you for your time!

Appendix F

Individual Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your family.
2. Please describe your experience accessing early childhood education and care opportunities. CRQ
3. How would you describe your options for ECEC? SQ1
4. What types of ECEC options did you pursue? SQ1
5. Explain what factors influenced why you selected each type of ECEC option to pursue. SQ2
6. What ECEC location is your child currently attending? SQ2
7. Explain what factors influenced your decision to enroll your child in their current ECEC location. SQ2
8. Describe the challenges, if any, you encountered accessing ECEC. CRQ
9. How many ECEC programs has your family participated in? What factors influenced the change from one program to another? SQ1
10. What information do you wish you had prior to beginning your ECEC journey? CRQ
11. Describe the impact your military service has on your child's ECEC experience. SQ3
12. How does your child(ren) relate to you being in the military? SQ3
13. How do you feel government policies impact your child's early childhood education and care options? SQ4
14. Thinking broadly, each State has policies and regulations, and the Department of Defense has policies and regulations that impact families. Is there a policy or regulation you would change or add? SQ4

15. How do ECEC policies influence your decision to continue military service? SQ4
16. Thank you for your time and willingness to share your experience, is there anything you would like to add or a topic that you feel is important for me to understand?

Appendix G

Journal Prompts

Please respond to the following prompt in 1-2 paragraphs and email responses to akwillson@liberty.edu

1. Write a description of a challenging experience you recall while accessing early childhood education and care opportunities. Provide the following information in your descriptive account of the experience: your feelings, mood, emotions, setting, time of day/night, time of year, and duration of time, during the experience. CRQ
2. Tell me the most important aspect of your experience accessing ECEC opportunities. SQ1
3. Please complete the sentence and answer the following questions. I am _____ with my child's current ECEC location. What do you like about it? What would you change about it? SQ2
4. Please fill in the first blank regarding a specific detail of your military services, for example (rank, duty location, job duties, etc.). Please complete the sentence with anything you would like to share. If I knew _____ would impact my child's ECEC experience, I would _____. SQ3
5. Please complete the sentence and expand on your thoughts. I wish policymakers understood _____ about military families. What would you change about current policies? SQ4

Appendix H

Focus Group Questions

1. Grand tour question: Please share a fun memory about an event your child(ren)'s ECEC program hosted with parents. Maybe a parent's pancake breakfast or a dress-up day. SQ1
2. What did you expect to discover in this process? CRQ
3. Why did you select your child(ren)'s current ECEC program? SQ2
4. Please explain how your branch of the military impacts your family's ECEC experience. SQ3
5. How would you categorize ECEC policies' and regulations' impact on your family? SQ4
6. What would you say is the best part of being a military family? SQ3

Appendix I

Audit Trail

IRB Approval Received	September 19, 2023
Social Media request for participants on Facebook, LinkedIn, & Instagram	September 24, 2023
Interview with Jane who responded via LinkedIn on 9/26/23	September 29, 2023
Interview with Anne who responded via Facebook on 9/25/23	October 4, 2023
Sent follow-up social media request participants	October 9, 2023
Interview with Lacy who was a referral from a former employee	October 13, 2023
Interview with Patty who was a referral from a co-worker	October 17, 2023
Interview with Alice who was a referral from former co-worker	October 18, 2023
Interview with Katie who was a referral from a former employee	October 19, 2023
Interview with Janice who was a referral from a co-worker	October 21, 2023
Interview with Tom and Amber who were a referral from a co-worker	October 21, 2023
Interview with James who was a referral from a former employee	October 28, 2023
Interview with Kandice who is a co-worker	November 14, 2023
Focus group 1 interview with Janice, Amber, Alice, and Ellen	November 14, 2023
Focus group 2 interview with Lacy, Kandice, and James	November 15, 2023
Interview with Cindy who was a referral from a co-worker	November 19, 2023
Interview with Ellen who was a referral from a co-worker	November 21, 2023
Focus group 3 with Katie and Jane	November 21, 2023
Individual transcripts horizontalized	December 2-27, 2023
Focus group transcripts horizontalized	December 27, 2023

Journal prompts horizontalized	December 29, 2023
Individual interviews 1st level coding, structural code	December 28-30, 2023
Focus group interviews 1st level coding, structural code	December 30, 2023
Journal prompt 1st level coding, structural code	December 30, 2023
Thematic Development Table consolidated codes under research questions	December 30, 2023
Statement meanings identified	December 31, 2023
Statement meanings clustered to develop themes	December 31, 2023
Themes used to create textural descriptions	December 31, 2023
Bronfenbrenner's Theory used to test syntheses analysis	January 1, 2024
Participants' transcripts and thematic coding sent to participants	January 1, 2024
MAXQDA First-order coding, codebook, summary report	January 16, 2024
5 out of 12 Participant responses to transcript and coding review received	January 17, 2024
Quotes identified from journal prompts and transcripts	January 18, 2024

Appendix J

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