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EXPLORING ACADEMIC OPPORTUNITIES FOR MILITARY-CONNECTED STUDENTS:  
A SYSTEMS THEORY APPROACH

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A Dissertation  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Learning Sciences

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By  
Georgia L. McKown  
August 2023

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Accepted by:  
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## ABSTRACT

Military-connected children experience frequent disruptions to their daily lives as a result of military lifestyle demands like frequent relocations and service-related separations from their service member parent. These disruptions impact all areas of their lives including their homes and schools. While the body of research concerning military-connected children's experiences at school has grown over recent decades, little is known about specific individual and contextual factors that may serve as assets or constraints. Knowing more about specific factors that influence school experiences for military-connected youth is a critical step in promoting and scaling home- and school-based interventions.

This three-paper dissertation begins by situating extant literature into Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory framework to provide a model for conceptualizing the numerous factors directly and indirectly influencing the school experiences of military-connected students. Next, it explores patterns in individual survey responses from military-connected parents to identify relationships between demographic variables, military lifestyle demands, and parent-school satisfaction. Finally, the dissertation uses a positive youth development framework to examine the school experiences of military-connected teens through focus group discussions with teens, their parents, and their teachers. Taken together, these pieces help to provide a cohesive framework and updated foundation for understanding the school experiences of military-connected children.

The results of this dissertation highlight the strengths of military-connected students and families and the immense opportunities all stakeholders have to support them and address their evolving needs. The findings for all three papers provide necessary insight for understanding the military-connected student's experience and intentionally leveraging new and existing resources to meet their needs.

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to the millions of military-connected families who have served and sacrificed but most specifically to the military-connected students I had the pleasure of serving in my own classrooms. Your experiences taught me so much and inspired this work in ways you may never know. Thank you for your patience as I learned about you and sought out the best ways to support you. I hope this dissertation is one of many steps I take to continue to advocate for you and students like you for years to come.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work would not have been possible without the guidance, mentorship, and encouragement of so many. This work is the result of so many people pouring into me and helping me along the way. Thank you to every teacher, mentor, and friend who took an interest in this work and reminded me how important it is for students and families.

I would like to thank the members of my committee for their guidance and encouragement throughout this process. Thank you to my chair, Dr. Faiza Jamil, for your coaching and feedback. Thank you, Dr. Luke Rapa for your guidance on qualitative and mixed methods and for always encouraging me to stay the course. Thank you, Dr. Matthew Madison for always answering my quantitative questions with grace. Thank you, Dr. Ed Bowers for helping me work through a new theoretical framework with patience and curiosity. I'm certain I never would have made it to this point without all of you and your commitment to me and this work. Thank you also to the Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC) for the opportunity to use some of your survey data in this project.

Thank you to my family and friends for taking this journey with me and to the members of the CLAD Lab for helping me process and prepare this work over many years; your guidance and questions have been invaluable. A special thanks to Jacquelyn Williams, Mary Schreuder, Amanda Bennett, and Robert O'Hara for your frequent check-ins that helped me conceptualize and discuss this work. Thank you to Dr. Shanna Hirsch for taking me under your wing and graciously mentoring me throughout my graduate school journey. Finally, thank you to Abby Stephan for your collaboration, coding support and friendship throughout this journey. Your help has been invaluable, and I look forward to many years of friendship and collegiality to come.

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## INTRODUCTION

*I was overwhelmed. It was well after the end of the school day, and I was still sitting at a student-height table in my second-grade classroom trying to understand what my stacks and stacks of student data were telling me. I was desperately assembling spreadsheets and checklists to try to decipher patterns in the data that explained the variation in knowledge and skill both within students and across my class. How could a student read well beyond grade level but not be able to recognize some of the most common sight words or digraphs? Why were some of my students able to name all the continents and oceans and others could not name the ocean 10 miles away from our school? I was consistently trying to identify the source of these learning gaps, but the answer was never clear until I looked away from specifically academic components to consider my students' personal circumstances. Being new to the school, I had failed to realize some key demographics of the neighborhood; more than two thirds of my students had an active duty military service member parent, and almost all my students had attended at least two different elementary schools by the start of second grade. After this realization, I was on a mission to read as much as I could about the military community and lifestyle as well as research that could help me support my military-connected students. I found some key resources for this journey as a classroom teacher, but as I embarked on my research journey, I came to find a need for additional empirically supported interventions for military-connected children, their families, and the education professionals who serve them.*

The United States is home to over 2 million service members who are parents to nearly 1 million children (U.S. Department of Defense, 2021). About 54% of the children are school-age and of these, more than 80% attend public schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2021; American Association of School Administrators, 2019). Military-connected children have a

unique combination of lifestyle demands that can impact their academic and social-emotional development. Most notably, military-connected children and their families face high residential mobility and frequent work-related separations from their military family members. Both challenges require substantial transitions and adjustments within the family and home. While challenges like these are not limited to military-connected children and families, the unique combination of lifestyle demands they experience has been understudied, with limited suggestions for addressing or supporting these specific competing needs in tandem. Educators and other professionals who serve military-connected communities have limited access to or knowledge of substantiated interventions for supporting military-connected students (Harrison & Vannest, 2008; Ruff & Keim, 2014; Cheeseman, 2020), leaving a potential gap in educational services and opportunities for military-connected students when they may need it most. Further exploring the school experiences of military-connected students, their families, and their educators is a vital preliminary step in developing targeted interventions to meet their needs.

The purpose of this three-manuscript dissertation is to explore the educational experiences of military-connected students through the perspectives of the students, their parents, and educators who serve them. The first piece, “Understanding the Military-Connected Student: Bioecological Views on Military-Connected Students’ Academic Development,” uses the theoretical framework of bioecological systems theory to situate extant literature concerning military-connected students, providing a framework further evaluating their development in context. The second paper, titled “A Latent Class Analysis of the Academic Achievement and Wellbeing of Military-Connected Students,” explores parental perception of schools’ abilities to meet the needs of military-connected students using a latent class analysis of a secondary data set. The final manuscript, “Exploring the Academic Experiences of Military-Connected Students:

A Qualitative Study of Teachers, Parents, and Students in Schools in the United States,” investigates the perceived impacts of military lifestyle demands on academic experiences for military-connected students from the perspectives of military-connected youth, their parents, and their teachers. The overarching purpose of this work is to further explore the complex and compounding realities of military lifestyle demands for military-connected students from multiple perspectives to identify where schools, communities, and other key stakeholders can concentrate their efforts in the future. This integrative statement includes a rationale for the dissertation, the theoretical frameworks guiding the work, a description of each manuscript, and an impact statement describing the relevance of the work as a whole.

## **Background**

### **Residential Mobility**

Residential mobility, or moving homes, is a common obstacle for many Americans, but especially for military-connected youth and families. Residential mobility has been broadly studied across American children, and about 35% of children move three or more times in their school-age years (Busacker and Kasehagen, 2012). High residential mobility in non-military student populations has been significantly related to academic challenges in the current grade and future grades (Schmitt & Lipscomb, 2017), increases in behavioral problems, decreased classroom engagement, stalled reading skill growth (Lleras & McKillip, 2017), and increased internalizing behaviors (Anderson & Leventhal, 2017). Residential mobility is common in groups of people beyond military-connected people including migrant workers, people experiencing homelessness or housing instability, and people with careers in other highly mobile fields (e.g., sales, medicine). Research on residential mobility indicates that above average rates of residential mobility in youth is related to academic and social-emotional challenges as well as

family stress (Cordes et al., 2019; Russo & Fallon, 2015). Each of these groups experiences residential mobility differently and has different assets and constraints that impact their ability to cope and adjust. Although research generally depicts high residential mobility as negatively impactful, exploring its effects in context in specific populations can offer additional detail. For example, military-connected children experiencing high residential mobility typically have at least one parent with a high school diploma or its equivalent, stable employment, and housing (U.S. Department of Defense, 2021). It is likely that these assets may offset some of the more adverse effects of residential mobility seen in other highly mobile populations where the relocations are more commonly related to financial hardship. Exploring the nuanced timing, frequency, and effects of residential mobility specifically in the military-connected community may reveal unique opportunities for support and interventions.

Military-connected children move more than their civilian peers, with 33% of military-connected families moving every year, and the average military-connected child moving six to nine times in their school-age years (Bradshaw et al., 2010). In addition to more frequent moves, military-connected children's relocations also more frequently result in non-routine school changes. Changing schools mid-year or in grades where other students remain in the same school amplifies the disruptions of moving (Lleras & McKillip, 2017). The frequency and timing of military-connected moves make them stressful on the family and social support systems for the students, making it increasingly difficult for them to adjust to the environment of the new school (Bradshaw et al., 2010).

Residential mobility also impacts the learning and development of military-connected students. Children and adolescents who experience non-routine school changes and residential mobility demonstrate difficulties in reading, academic engagement, and internalizing and

externalizing behaviors both in the years of their moves and beyond (Lleras & McKillip, 2017; Anderson & Leventhal, 2017; Bradshaw et al., 2010). These challenges can be explained by the frequently changing social and learning environments for military-connected youth. With the transience of students, teachers, and other community members in military-connected communities, social contexts are constantly in flux. The nature of military-connected communities is to be frequently in transition as specific groups of service members transition to and from the military installation, taking their spouses and family members with them. As such, residential mobility is a challenge both for military-connected individuals and the communities where they most often reside. Because people co-construct knowledge and understanding through shared learning environments and spaces, constant and frequent transitions require people to reestablish their social contexts and learning relationships with their peers and mentors (Zittoun, Levitan, Cangíá, 2018). As military-connected youth move, their social and educational environments are disrupted, requiring them to reestablish new relationships and contexts in their new, often highly transient location and potentially detracting from their learning and development.

### **Service-Related Separations**

Service-related separations are a reality of military service and vary a great deal across service branch, duty status, rank, and specialization. Service-related separations are any work assignment that requires a service member to be away from their assigned duty station and family. Service-related separations include lengthy separations like deployments as well as temporary duty travel and training exercises. The frequency and duration of these separations vary with the specifics of a service member's position. For example, the average duration of a deployment in the years 2001-2010 for the Air Force was 4.5 months, while the average duration

for the Army was 9.4 months (Institute of Medicine of the National Academies, 2013). Additionally, there is variation in deployment length based on duty status, with Air Force National Guard members deploying for an average of 3.5 months and Marine Corps reserves deploying for an average of 11.9 months (Institute of Medicine of the National Academies, 2013). While there is limited public information tracking other service-related separation lengths and frequencies, these examples illustrate how a service member's employment status impacts the amount of time they may spend away from their assigned duty station and family.

Service-related separations impact the development and learning of military-connected youth in several domains. Deployment has been found to have a negative relationship with academic adjustment, and students experiencing a parental deployment perform lower on standardized academic tests than those who have not recently experienced a deployment (Card et al., 2011; Phelps et al., 2010). Additionally, children whose home caregiver is negatively responding to deployment are more likely to experience maladjustment and externalizing behaviors (Chandra et al., 2010). Research on deployment has also found that perception of the separation more accurately predicts home caregiver and child outcomes than length or frequency of separation (Burrell et al., 2006).

These findings suggest that youth development and learning are disrupted by transitions of deployment. Deployment impacts parenting duties within a family throughout its entire cycle. For many families, this means multiple shifts in parental roles like shifts like household responsibilities, childcare, and parent-child relationships that can be confusing and disruptive to children and adults alike (DeVoe & Ross, 2012). Without adequate scaffolding and guidance from knowledgeable adults or mentors, children and adolescents often have difficulties processing the challenges presented by the deployment cycle (Louie & DeMarni Cromer, 2014).

In turn, these complicated circumstances can overshadow or distract youth from other appropriate and necessary tasks and opportunities that are essential to their overall learning and development (i.e., engagement at school, relationships with peers). Informed support from educated professionals can help military-connected families to be prepared to successfully navigate the challenges of the deployment cycle or disruptions related to other service-related separations (DeVoe & Ross, 2019).

### **Professional Awareness of Military-Connected Students**

An additional challenge to the lifestyle demands military-connected students face is the general anonymity of military service members in communities. Only about half of one percent of the US population has served in the military at any given time in the past 20 years, meaning that many Americans likely do not personally know anyone who has served or is presently serving (Schaeffer, 2021). This anonymity has been connected to a general misunderstanding of the experiences of service members and their families (Pew Research Center Social and Demographic Trends, 2011), and it carries over into institutions like schooling. Teachers and other school-based professionals often lack knowledge of military culture and lifestyle demands that could empower them to better-serve their students (Ruff & Keim, 2014). When teachers fail to explore and understand the contexts in which their students learn and construct understanding, they potentially misjudge students' knowledge and strengths (Harrison & Vannest, 2008). Addressing this lack of understanding requires a critical evaluation of military-connected students' experiences in schools and existing interventions intended to support them in order to guide the development and scaling of additional supports.

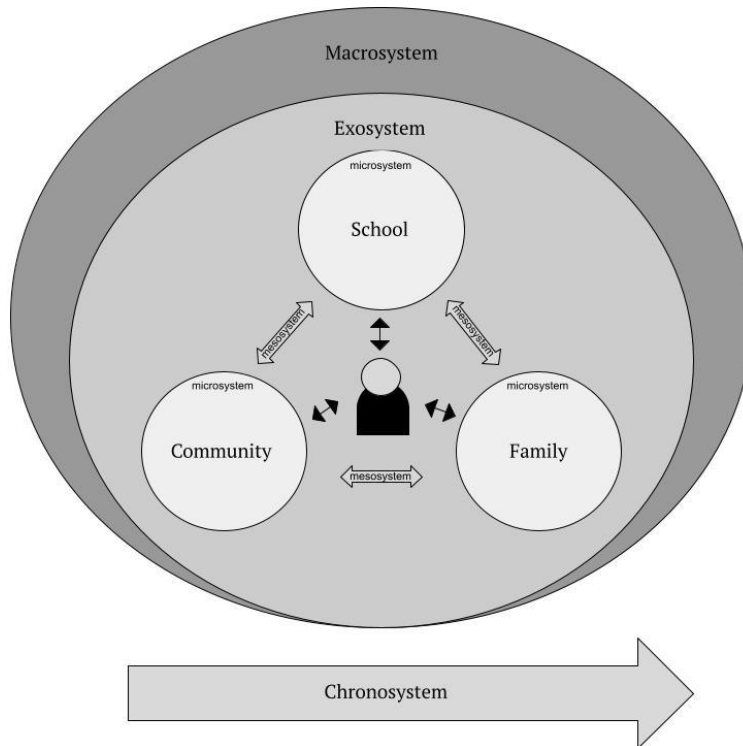
### **Theoretical Frameworks**



This dissertation will use a theoretical framework that draws on two relational developmental systems theories to address the complexities military-connected students face across multiple contexts in an effort to identify adaptive contextual features and supports (Figure 1.1). First, Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological systems theory will be used to capture and situate some of the bidirectional complexities facing military-connected students in their educational experiences. This theory serves as a framework to organize existing research concerning military-connected students and explore the diverse experiences they face because of military lifestyle demands. Additionally, positive youth development serves as a framework to explore supportive contexts for positive development for military-connected children and youth (Lerner et al., 2015; Figure 1.2). Taken together, these theories help to frame the unique experiences of military-connected children while also offering perspectives on how specific contexts, like schools, can be constructed to function as adaptive developmental environments.

**Figure 1.1**

*Bioecological Systems of Military-Connected Youth*



Military-connected youth, like all people, exist and develop within a series of interconnected systems that have varying impacts on their daily lives. Bronfenbrenner (2005) explained this as bioecological systems theory, which is composed of nested systems called the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. The effects of the components of each system influence the individual at the center, but with varying intensities. The microsystem is made up of the interactions an individual has on a daily basis, like a child's interactions with their parents, siblings, classmates, and teacher. The mesosystem is the interactions between elements of the microsystem like the relationship between a child's school and their parents. The exosystem represents the systems that indirectly impact an individual's life like the way a parent's job may impact a child's home life through the availability of resources,

time, and emotional energy. The macrosystem is the cultural norms, beliefs, and laws of a place a person lives; elements of the macrosystem can vary by location, requiring individuals to adjust or assimilate to new conditions. Finally, the chronosystem represents the influence of a specific time in history on other systems like the ways 21st century issues like the COVID-19 pandemic may affect individuals in addition to other systemic challenges. Additionally, systems and the individuals within them bidirectionally impact each other, meaning that the presence or absence of a person or event changes the entire system.

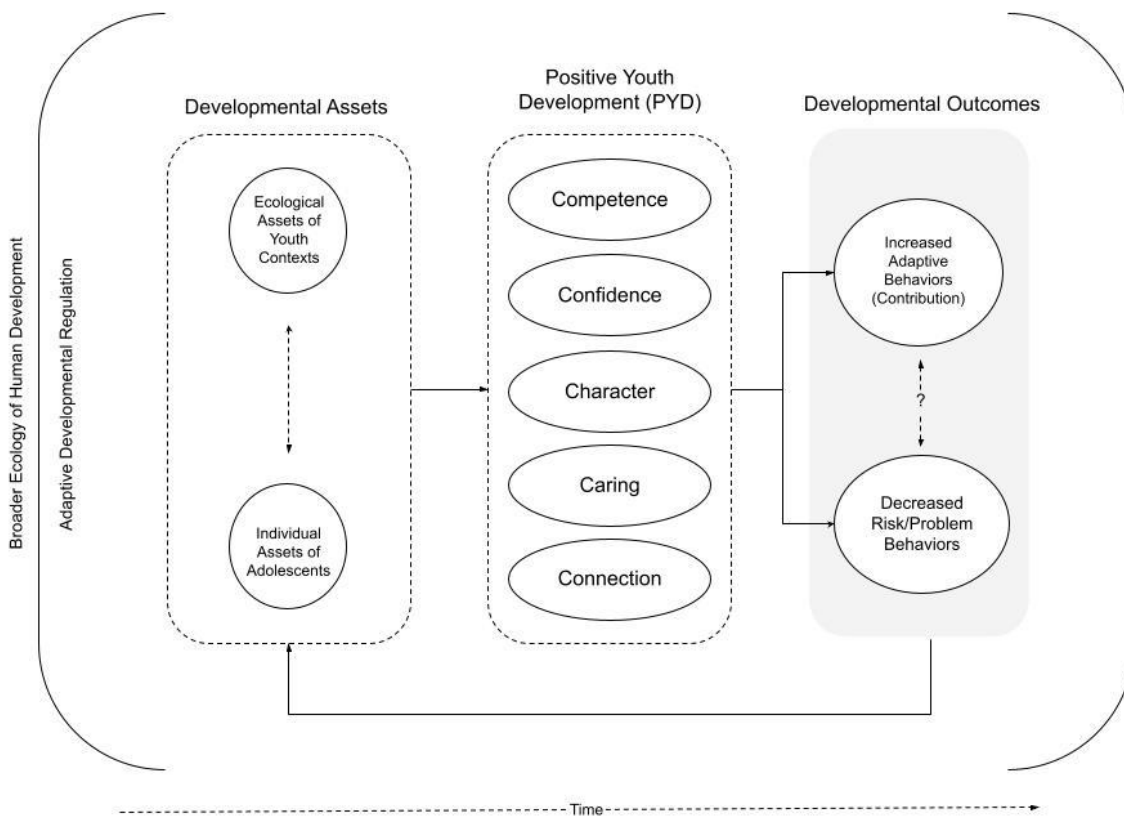
This theoretical framework also allows for consideration for the specific domains of person, process, context, and time (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Situating the exploration of military-connected students' educational experiences in this way allows space to explore at the individual level, across the contexts of school, home, and community, and across all periods of youth development to identify pivotal opportunities for improvement and sustainment. Additionally, this framework is helpful in examining the developmental experiences of military-connected youth because it allows researchers to explore the ways in which military lifestyle demands impact youth but also the ways in which military-connected youth and families impact other structures and functions within society.

Theories of positive youth development (PYD) help to frame supportive processes within bidirectional relationships between persons and contexts (Figure 1.2) (Lerner & Lerner, 2015; Overton, 2015). Understanding contextual factors that promote positive development in military-connected youth is critical to building communities of care within and beyond academic contexts (Kudler & Porter, 2013). PYD supports this pursuit by serving as a foundation for the person-centered nature of development and is specifically useful for examining the role of contexts like family, school, and community in positive outcomes for youth (Lerner et al., 2015; Overton,

2015). Using Lerner’s Five Cs of Positive Youth Development model (2009), competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring, in the examination of school experiences for military-connected students will help to situate their experiences in the contexts, or microsystems, where their most frequent developmental interactions occur. Using the PYD and bioecological systems theory highlights the critical role of supportive, intentionally structured environments in adaptive outcomes for youth in context. Using these two relational developmental systems theories across this dissertation provides a theoretical framework to capture the nuances of specific individual and contextual factors that can function as assets or constraints in the academic trajectories of military-connected youth.

**Figure 1.2**

*Positive Youth Development Process Model for Military-Connected Youth*



*Note.* This conceptual framework illustrates the relational developmental systems model of the iterative and bidirectional relationship between developmental assets and positive youth development (PYD). It is supported by the Lerner and Lerner (2015) model of PYD.

### **Research Design Overview**

The purpose of this series of studies is to investigate the educational experiences of military-connected youth and how those experiences have been shaped by contextual factors that families, schools, communities, and other stakeholders may have power to influence and improve. Looking into military-connected student experiences in these ways can serve as a guide for targeted and intentional development of services and supports designed to meet their needs. While there are numerous nonprofit organizations (e.g., Military Child Education Coalition, Blue Star Families, National Military Family Association, Partners in Promise, Military Family Advisory Network), Department of Defense initiatives, and legislative efforts (both state and national) intended to support the needs of military-connected families and children, few have taken the blended approach of using quantitative and qualitative data together to assess what services are successful and where there may be additional need.

The first paper of this dissertation entitled “Understanding the Military-Connected Student: Bioecological Views on Military-Connected Students’ Academic Development” is a theory synthesis paper situating existing research regarding military-connected children from multiple disciplines into Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological systems theory (2005) as a framework for capturing the complexity of military lifestyle demands for students. The extant literature on the topic includes a variety of theories used for primarily intervention-based research studies across multiple diverse domains of development and well-being (i.e., medicine, nursing, psychology, counseling, education, teacher education). While these studies can be helpful in

supporting military-connected children in specific contexts, they generally do not capture the complexity of bidirectional, context-specific relationships where development occurs. In this theory synthesis paper, bioecological systems theory serves as a framework for organizing existing research studies to clearly demonstrate how the combination of lifestyle demands military-connected students face is more complex than individual studies may accurately represent. This framework provides a comprehensive model for exploring the ways in which frequent and compounding military lifestyle demands can impact all systems of an individual's life. Situating existing research in this way helps to highlight the need for additional work that examines military-connected students in context.

The second paper titled “A Latent Class Analysis of the Academic Achievement and Wellbeing of Military-Connected Students” uses secondary data analysis to explore commonalities in schooling experiences across military-connected students in a variety of situations. This paper utilizes parent data from the Military Child Education Coalition's 2020 MilKids Now Education Survey. Using latent profile analysis (LPA), this study takes a person-centered approach to look for commonalities in parent school satisfaction based on several topical item sets including: demographic items, residential mobility and transition issues, academic program challenges, academic transition challenges, social-emotional development challenges, social-emotional home challenges, deployment-related challenges, parent transition skills, and available school services.

The study sought to produce two models, an LPA and a latent class analysis (LCA), with the first representing overall construct measures and the second representing the influence of specific variables. The LPA model provided the most critical insights into profiles of military-

connected students who are currently supported by existing educational and social-emotional initiatives in schools and where there may be potential for new resources and services.

Paper 3, titled “Exploring the Academic Experiences of Military-Connected Students: A Qualitative Study of Teachers, Parents, and Students in Schools in the United States,” explores the school experiences of military-connected students through the perspectives of the youth, their families, and educators who serve them to explore perceptions of military lifestyle demands and support structures within schools in context. This qualitative study includes voluntary participant triads and dyads made up of one military-connected student, one parent or guardian, and sometimes one education professional. Triads and dyads were first interviewed together as they respond to prompts about the child’s educational experiences followed by role-based focus groups of parents and students. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and transcripts were coded using emergent coding to identify thematic patterns and directed content analysis to examine evidence of positive youth development (Saldaña, 2009). The relationships between the themes from this study and extant literature are discussed.

### **Significance**

The academic opportunities and development of children are shared responsibilities, and for military-connected children, those responsibilities are shared across many communities and schools. To adequately support the nearly 1.6 million military-connected children in the United States, ongoing commitments to understand their current challenges and successes and concerted efforts to maintain and develop necessary interventions are needed (U.S. Department of Defense, 2021). This dissertation sought to explore the unique needs of military-connected children with methods that capture the complexities of their situations.

A more comprehensive understanding of specific assets and constraints that impact school experiences for military-connected students prepares service providers to meet their needs more expediently. Armed with this knowledge, nonprofits, schools, and education researchers can set out to examine these needs in their own contexts to develop more informed and targeted interventions. Given the call for more generalizable research in this population (Harrison & Vannest, 2008; Kudler & Porter, 2013; Military Child Education Coalition, 2020; Cheeseman, 2020), the results of this research can help those serving military-connected students most directly to focus their energy where it is most needed.

The results of this work can also assist policymakers as they work on legislation in support of servicemembers and their families. Initiatives like Purple Star Distinction Programs that recognize schools that are supportive of military-connected students are of growing popularity in state legislatures across the country. More than 30 states have adopted or proposed legislation in support of these programs since 2017, with more surely to follow (Military OneSource, 2022). Results of this research can help those in leadership positions to consider models like bioecological systems theory and PYD as they examine which elements of a military-connected students' education their policies may be able to influence. Intentional sustainment and improvements to educational policy that positively impact educational opportunities for military-connected students make schools and communities more stable and supportive of all students (Kudler & Porter, 2013).

Lastly, this work helps to draw attention and support the needs of military-connected families as they escort their children through the schooling process. Parents often share sentiments of needing additional resources and support to assist their children through their many academic and social transitions (Military Child Education Coalition, 2020). This research gives



them additional insight on where to focus their energy and what key factors may lead to more adaptive educational experiences. While this work cannot capture all facets of the experiences of military-connected children and families, it aims to function as another resource for understanding their needs and promoting improvements across systems where they can be most effective.

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## CHAPTER II

### PAPER 1: UNDERSTANDING THE MILITARY-CONNECTED STUDENT: BIOECOLOGICAL VIEWS ON MILITARY-CONNECTED STUDENTS' ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT

#### **Abstract**

Military-connected children and families experience numerous challenges and disruptions because of common military lifestyle demands like frequent residential mobility and service-related separations. Research about military-connected children and families is spread across numerous topic areas and journals, making it difficult to extrapolate an accurate model of the challenges they face and the tools they use to overcome them. In this theory synthesis paper, extant literature is situated within a systems theory framework to provide a model for understanding the many systemic factors influencing military-connected children and families both directly and indirectly. The paper highlights common topics explored in research while also discussing their impacts on the school experiences of military-connected children. Additional findings are discussed and recommendations for future research about understanding and supporting the needs of military-connected children are provided.

## **Introduction**

The United States' military service members are parents to over 1.6 million public school children (U.S. Department of Defense, 2021). These students face unique lifestyle demands related to their parent's employment like residential mobility, frequent deployments or service-related separations, and family stress that accompany these transitions. The effects of these lifestyle demands impact all members of military-connected families including partners and children. While the effects present differently in each impacted family member, research has established relationships between military lifestyle demands and changes in behavior, mental health, and wellbeing (Anderson & Leventhal, 2017; Gjelsvik et al., 2018). Additional research suggests that these transitions may also impact the academic experiences of military-connected students to varying degrees (Card et al., 2011; Phelps et al., 2010). Because family member wellbeing is often linked to a service member's decision to continue or leave military service, promoting family support services is critical to military success (Mills & Torte, 2018). Exploring how these service-related transitions impact military-connected students is critical both to supporting this evolving student subgroup and maintaining a prepared and qualified military force.

While military-connected students represent a large subgroup in America's public schools, research exploring military-connectedness and academic performance is limited. Academic development refers to a person's learning over time as measured by key performance indicators of achievement commonly accepted in schools (i.e., grades, standardized test scores, graduation and promotion) (Reardon, 2013). Successful academic development is tied to academic opportunities such as quality schools with adequate resources, educational support in the home, and engaging extracurricular activities (Reardon, 2013; Reardon et al., 2018).

Military-connected students' lifestyle demands can make access to academic opportunities challenging, potentially stunting academic development. Existing research on military-connected students largely focuses on challenges related to their parent's employment (e.g., behavioral, social-emotional) with limited study of the impact on academic outcomes. Of the studies that address outcomes for military-connected children, many have limited samples, narrow interventions, and linear designs that do not capture the complexity inherent in a military family's lifestyle.

First, this paper provides a definition of lifestyle demands military-connected students face and then explains how military-connectedness may be related to academic outcomes. Additionally, the paper uses bioecological systems theory to organize existing research findings about military-connected children and families to further explore assets and constraints of the military-connected lifestyle. Finally, the study provides an explanation of why a systems theory approach to the academic development of military-connected children provides a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences of military-connected students and offers suggestions as to how researchers may employ this framework in future work. As a theory synthesis paper, this piece seeks to integrate a wide range of literature exploring the experiences of military-connected students through the lens of bioecological systems theory in an effort to organize common constructs, themes, and findings. Bioecological systems theory provides a framework for understanding how existing studies, when taken together, offer a more holistic view of the educational experiences of military-connected students.

### **Domain Theory: Military Lifestyle Demands**

#### **Residential Mobility**

A key research topic concerning military-connected youth and families is residential mobility. Military service members move frequently, and approximately 33% of military service members relocate each year (Clever & Segal, 2013). Additionally, the average military-connected student relocates six to nine times in their kindergarten through twelfth grade career, three times more than the average American child (Clever & Segal, 2013). In existing research on military-connected students, military-related residential mobility has been found to have a significant relationship with externalizing behaviors and maladjustment (Chandra et al, 2010; Anderson & Leventhal, 2017; Gjelsvik et al., 2018).

Residential mobility has been extensively studied in other student populations such as homeless children, children of migrant workers, and refugees and has been found to significantly impact academic outcomes. For example, when studied in predominantly civilian student populations, high residential mobility is related to academic challenges in the current school year and beyond (Schmitt & Lipscomb, 2017), increased internalizing behaviors (Anderson & Leventhal, 2017), and decreases in academic performance (Cordes et al., 2019). These findings suggest that while student groups experiencing high residential mobility face unique demands and challenges, there is reason to believe that residential mobility may impact academic development and opportunities for military-connected students similarly to other highly mobile student groups beyond what has already been studied.

### **Deployment**

Existing research concerning military-connected students and families also focuses heavily on the impacts of military service member deployments and other service-related separations. A deployment is an extended work assignment for the military member that requires him or her to work away from his assigned station and home for a period of weeks to years



(Military.com, n.d.). Deployment, a recurring part of military service, is a cycle including three stages: pre-deployment preparation, deployment, and reintegration. Military service also includes frequent shorter separations for training exercises and work assignments. While shorter than traditional deployments, these periods of absence require military families to adjust to the service member's absence and return, often with short notice (Operation Military Kids, 2021).

Deployment and service-related separations require substantial adjustments for military families. Burrell and colleagues (2006) found that familial roles shift during all phases of deployment to prepare for and recover from the absence of the service member parent, affecting both the home caregiver and children. These changes in familial relationships and responsibilities are a frequent reality for military-connected families, and have been found to increase stress, anxiety, and externalizing behaviors in military-connected children (DeVoe & Ross, 2012; DeVoe et al., 2019). More recent studies concerning the deployment cycle have identified changes in mental health (Cramm et al., 2019), parenting interactions (O'Neal & Mancini, 2021), and wellbeing (Clark et al., 2018) for both the home caregiver and children in the home.

## **Purpose**

While military-connected students and families are of increasing interest in empirical research, the work is split across numerous domains (e.g., medicine, psychology, family studies) with few examples of collaborative, interdisciplinary work. These siloed investigations and results present limited conceptualizations of the experiences of the military-connected student, and often fail to address the complexity of the compounding lifestyle demands and circumstances they face. This paper uses the lens of Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological systems theory to examine the academic development and opportunities of military-connected

students. Bioecological systems theory offers opportunities to conceptualize how systemic disruptions related to parental employment reverberate through all of a military-connected student's systems and provides researchers and other key education and public policy stakeholders a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges military-connected students face.

### **Method Theory: Bioecological Systems Theory**

Bioecological systems theory posits that people exist at the center of a series of complex, nested systems called the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (Figure 2.1) (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). These systems have variable impacts on the individual and their environment and include bidirectional relationships between an individual and the people, processes, contexts, and time periods in which they develop and live.

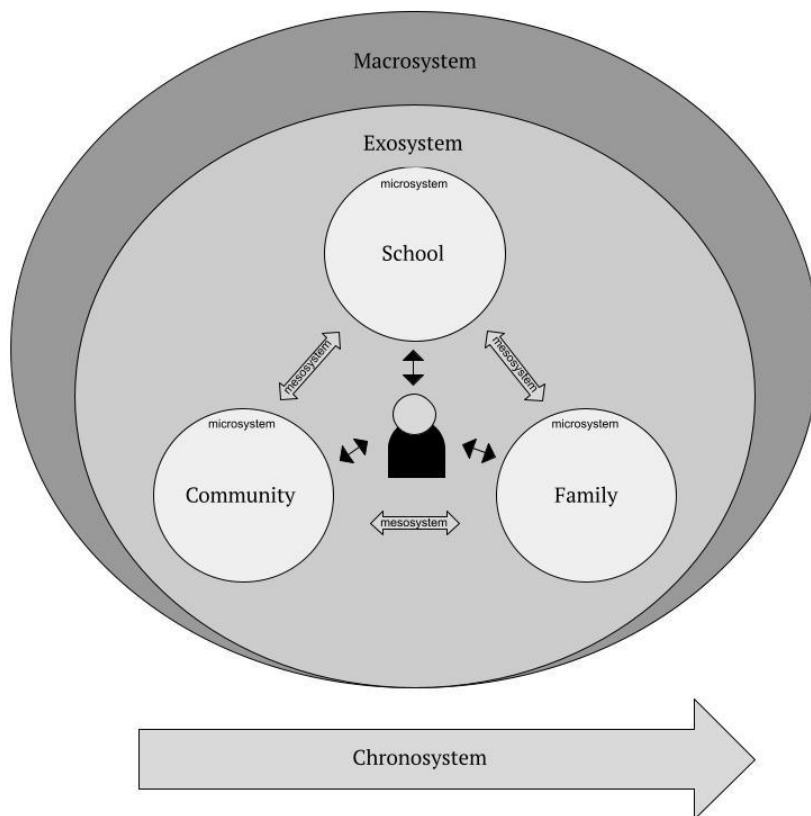
Bioecological systems theory allows for an examination of a person's development to include multifaceted interactions and layers that other theoretical frameworks may not adequately detect such as a study evaluating the relationship between parental deployment status and student behavior at school. While these findings may help to make sense of the relationship between deployment and student behavior in the study, they may not capture the impacts that deployment may have had on participants' other systems such as home caregiver stress or family functioning. Considering multiple systemic interactions related to deployment and student behavior may provide a more comprehensive understanding of how deployment and student behavior may be related in context including potential mediators. Bioecological systems theory uniquely combines these perspectives and accounts for other contexts impacting individual development.

Examining the academic opportunities and development of military-connected students through the lens of ecological systems theory helps to streamline the existing fragmented

research around this student group. Organizing the existing research in this way helps to condense a collection of research with a variety of topics, methodologies, and findings into a more distilled image of lifestyle demands that impact the academic development of military-connected students.

**Figure 2.1**

*Bioecological Systems of Military-Connected Youth*



### **Microsystem**

The microsystem is the system closest to the individual, and Bronfenbrenner defines it as a “complex of interrelations within the immediate setting” (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. 54). The microsystem is critical to a person’s development because it has the most direct influence on

their daily life and includes the bidirectional relationships they experience the most including their family, coworkers, friends, and peers. Additionally, the functioning and quality of relationships in the microsystem impact development beyond mere presence or absence (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). For military-connected youth, like many other groups, the microsystem can be composed of relationships that function as both assets and constraints for optimal development such as healthy family dynamics and supportive school environments. By reviewing existing research studies that examine microsystemic relationships for military-connected students, we can more thoroughly understand their daily lives including factors that impact their academic opportunities.

### ***Family System***

As it is for most children, the family system is a primary component of the microsystem for military-connected students (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). A child interacts with their immediate family or household members daily and relies on them for care and support. Members of the family all exist as features of the other family members' family system, so one's presence or absence and disposition has the potential to impact outcomes differently for each person. Some primary differences between the family systems of military-connected students and their civilian peers include the challenges of the deployment cycle and residential mobility.

***Residential Mobility.*** Residential mobility is disruptive to a family system because it results in many changes for all members of the family. Residential mobility prompts a physical location change for members of the family but can also impact family functioning and economic status. The frequent relocations for military-connected families often put additional strain on familial relationships as access to school and peer groups is disrupted (Bradshaw et al., 2010). When family systems are supportive and adaptive, they serve as assets during residential

mobility, but strained or maladaptive family systems can further complicate the already stressful process of relocation (Spencer et al, 2016). In their study exploring the impacts of military-related transitions on adolescents, Bradshaw and colleagues (2010) found that the unpredictable timing and stress of military relocations resulted in an increase in family stress, especially when a child was resistant to the change. More recently, Spencer and colleagues' research (2016) suggests that positive perception and emotional priming ahead of relocation within the family can mediate the effects of frequent relocations for both highly mobile military and civilian families. Acknowledging the impacts of residential mobility on the military-connected family system helps to underscore the level of uncertainty associated with the military lifestyle.

***Deployment.*** The presence or absence of a parent or family member can drastically alter daily functions of each individual, as well as the family unit as a whole because of each member's bidirectional impact on one another (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Deployment can be stressful on the entire family at every stage of its cycle (i.e., pre-deployment, deployment, reunion, and reintegration) (DeVoe et al., 2019). Each phase requires roles and responsibilities to shift and a period of transition. During a military deployment, the home caregiver is the spouse or co-parent who continues to manage the family responsibilities throughout the military service member's absence. Home caregiver stress varies across length and duration of military deployments, and it largely depends on personal perceptions of the circumstances and coping skills (Burrell et al., 2006; Donoho et al., 2017; O'Neal et al., 2018). These findings suggest that the changes deployment imposed on a child's microsystem permeate relationships and experiences within the family, changing the daily interactions both within the home and with the deployed parent. Conceptualizing deployment in this way helps to frame it as a complex,

ongoing challenge for military-connected children in an effort to understand how it impacts many areas of their learning and development.

### ***Peer Network***

Another critical component of the microsystem is the peer network. This system includes the people close in age or developmental stage who an individual most closely interacts with daily. For children and adolescents, this system may include peers at school and afterschool activities as well as neighbors in their community. Research around peer groups suggests that the perceived value of peers increases throughout childhood and adolescence, making peer relationships more influential in later developmental stages (Blakemore, 2018). The peer system can function as an asset or constraint for development for military-connected students, as it does for their peers from civilian families. Research in the military-connected community has found that social-connectedness to peers can be a supportive factor for military-connected children experiencing transitions (Astor et al., 2013; Farley, 2017; Vannest et al., 2020). Findings suggest that social-connectedness helps to ease the challenges of adjusting after a relocation when peers understand or have experienced some of the challenges of being military-connected like residential mobility and deployment (Mmari et al., 2010; Ruff and Keim, 2014). Deployment and residential mobility undoubtedly impact peer relationships, but additional research has found that living near a military installation or in a community that is knowledgeable about military experiences help military-connected students to build supportive peer networks (Mmari et al., 2010).

### ***School Context***

An individual's school system includes both the social and academic norms and expectations of formal education. States individually plan and manage their own educational

systems in accordance with federal policy, so schooling experiences can vary widely based on location. For military-connected students, frequent residential mobility also means frequent changes to their school system, sometimes at non-traditional transition points (e.g., changing schools mid-year or between grades that are normally within the same school). Non-traditional school changes are associated with significant disruption to learning and school-based relationships and have even been linked to academic difficulties beyond the grade where the school change occurs (Schmitt & Lipscomb, 2016). Additional research suggests that the effects of school changes for military-connected students can be mitigated through partnerships between schools and within communities to help ease transitions and lighten the burdens of school transitions such as the transfer of credits, access to extracurricular activities, diploma requirements, and course sequencing (Kudler & Porter, 2013). Challenges with the school system for military-connected children are sometimes more noticeable in the relationships between different school systems or between school systems and other microsystems; this will be discussed further in later sections of this paper. Understanding the challenges to the school system of military-connected students helps to demonstrate how their academic opportunities and outcomes may be different from their civilian peers’.

### ***Community System***

The community system represents the experiences a person has with activities or groups outside of their family and school or workplace on a regular basis. For children and adolescents, the community system may include recreational sports, religious organizations, scouting groups, or volunteer opportunities. Community systems activities offer youth opportunities for exploration and growth in their interest areas and to build relationships with peers and community members; participation in the community system helps foster mentorship and growth

for youth and adults while also building connectedness (Lerner et al., 2005). The community system can serve as a protective factor for children and youth when its services and values align with conditions for optimal development (Leventhal, 2018; Lerner & Lerner, 2015; Lerner et al., 2021).

For military-connected students, the community system may also include interactions with the military installation, other members of their parent's unit or command, or community programming specifically designed to help military families. Much of a military-connected individual's community system changes each time they relocate including their extracurricular activities as well as their healthcare and other service providers (Kudler & Porter, 2013; Astor et al., 2013; Mikolas et al., 2021). This requires a military-connected family to reestablish their community systems after every move, determining what community supports are available in their new location and learning new norms and expectations. Additionally, having a large military-connected population means that a community is constantly adjusting to the rotation of residents, impacting the leadership and availability of community resources. Acknowledging this bidirectional relationship between a military-connected individual and their community system highlights the complexity they face in maintaining supportive community bonds.

### **Mesosystem**

The mesosystem represents the relationships between microsystems. In the mesosystem, the individual is an active participant in multiple interacting microsystems. For children in the United States, the mesosystem generally includes interactions between family, peer, school, and community activities (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). The mesosystem is composed of the relationships and interactions that occur between an individual and the people and groups in their daily life.

### ***School and Family Interactions***



For military-connected students, the mesosystem is where different elements of the military lifestyle interact, each offering opportunities for meaningful interventions. For example, a teacher's or school staff member's knowledge and sensitivity around assets and constraints of the military lifestyle can serve as a meaningful support in the interactions between military-connected families and the education systems that serve them. In their paper evaluating impacts of school transitions on military-connected students, Ruff and Keim (2014) suggest that variation in teacher and school staff member knowledge about military-connected students and their educational needs results in inconsistent teacher support. This disconnect in expectations and beliefs between microsystems (e.g., family and school) can also lead to misunderstandings about military-connected students and even harmful stereotyping that can limit student access to supportive services (Mmari et al., 2010; Ruff and Keim, 2014; Cheeseman, 2020).

Additionally, parents take on the role of student advocates during relocations or school transitions. Military-connected students often face challenges with mismatched educational requirements, prerequisite courses, and special education services between schools (Berg, 2008; Farley et al., 2022). In these instances, parents of military-connected students take on the burden of advocating for their children, seeking out military support resources or even legal counsel to ensure schools are meeting their children's needs (Partners in Promise, 2020). The interactions between the family and school microsystems in these cases have lasting impacts on the ongoing relationships between family and school for parents, children, and school staff. This is further complicated for military-connected students and families because they must reestablish and renegotiate this relationship every time they relocate. The interactions between family and school systems for military-connected students are critical and fluid but often fall short of the communication and cooperation needed for ideal outcomes for students.

### ***School and Peer Interactions***

Schools are a primary source of peer relationships for young people, and the routines and programming they establish can help to support their students' social connections. Schools often ascribe to mission statements or behavior management programs that seek to uplift and connect students. Additionally, school clubs and activities help to connect students who may not otherwise be classmates. Residential mobility can make participation in school activities difficult for military-connected students because of their frequent, non-traditional school changes that disrupt their peer networks and can cause them to miss sign-up and try-out periods for school activities. To help with this, schools seeking to support their military-connected students have developed programming to help connect new students in their schools (e.g., Student2Student, Anchored4Life, student ambassador programs). Programs focusing on peer networking and building relationships have helped military-connected students feel connected to their new school and community, and programs focusing on building resilience and coping skills have helped students navigate the challenges of the military lifestyle together (Watson, 2017). These programs go beyond only serving military-connected students because they bring awareness to the military lifestyle for other students and teachers in the school, prompting learning and reflection (Watson, 2017). Additional empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness and scalability of these programs could help schools in meeting the needs of the military-connected students going forward. Exploring school-based programming designed to support military-connected students has the potential to ultimately improve schooling for all students because they create shared understanding and holistic relationships that promote social-connectedness and development.

### ***Family and Community Interactions***

The family and community systems also have bidirectional relationships for individuals on a daily basis. These relationships can be enhanced when the values and norms are similar in each system (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Families and communities interact often in programming contexts and share knowledge of their experiences. For military-connected families, the community system has been found to be a critical resource during deployment-related separations. The strain of deployment is often associated with family stress, especially if the home caregiver is overwhelmed by household responsibilities (Chandra et al., 2010). Researchers have examined the relationship between deployment and home caregiver stress, and have suggested that family-centered interventions like family therapy and deployment preparedness programming could help to alleviate some of the burden (Green et al, 2013; Everson et al., 2017). Communities that prioritize programming and events that acknowledge and serve military-connected members can help to alleviate the strains of the military lifestyle while also strengthening the bonds between community members. In their review of existing community programs, Kudler and Porter (2013) recommend that more empirically evaluated community supports for military-connected families are needed in order to evaluate their efficacy and contributions. Additionally, they suggest that by using a public health approach to build communities of care that identify military-connected members, the entire community is strengthened despite residential mobility. Communities and families can strengthen one another when they work in tandem to address ongoing challenges and embrace their diverse members.

### **Exosystem**

The exosystem represents the interaction between a system an individual is a member of and another system that indirectly impacts them. For example, a primary exosystem relationship for children is the relationship between their home and their parent's workplace. While a child is

not a member of their parent's workplace, their parent's experience at work undoubtedly impacts their home life with their parent via stress level, compensation, schedule, and other factors. For the military-connected student, this is where the implications of their parent's military career can be seen very clearly.

### ***Military Policies and Procedures***

Military policies and procedures go largely unnoticed by civilians in the United States, but the military has made efforts to support educational opportunities for military-connected public school students in several ways. For example, the Department of Defense has the Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP) which offers military-connected families support in meeting the needs of family members with special medical and educational needs (Health Promotion and Wellness Public Health Assessment Division, 2019). The program offers help identifying services and also protects service members from being stationed at military installations where their family member's needs cannot be adequately met. While this program aims to bridge gaps in services, each military branch manages their own EFMP. This has led to discrepancies in services and programming due to service branch and assigned installation (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2020). It is also suspected that service members are sometimes reluctant to enroll their family members in EFMP for fear that it may prevent them from advancing in their career even though the policy expressly forbids it (Combat Development and Integration, 2016). While the EFMP is credited with helping many military-connected families feel more prepared as they move, misunderstandings about the program and inconsistent support still leaves more to be desired (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2020).

These policies impact students as a result of their parent's employment but are not taking place in systems students participate in actively. Examining military policies and procedures that

ultimately impact student learning and development through a systems theory lens helps to demonstrate the complexity of academic opportunities for military-connected students.

### *Legislative and School Policies*

Schools also function as an extension of local, state, and federal governments. Schools are the final step to formally acting on legislative policies related to how education functions, and they have to navigate a great deal of complexity in complying with all statutes. Because most school-related policies are managed at the state and local levels, there is a great deal of variability in services and policies when students move across state lines. As military-connected families relocate, they often navigate changes in academic policies and offerings between the sending and receiving schools. While they can lean on supports like the military school liaison at the installation for support, they often must pivot and make compromises to one or more of their child's academic opportunities with each move. The Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children (the Compact) is an agreement signed by all 50 governors committing to a series of common supports (enrollment, placement and attendance, eligibility, and graduation) for active duty military-connected students attending public schools. While this agreement seeks to support continuity of educational opportunities for military-connected students, knowledge of and adherence to the Compact is often inconsistent among education professionals (St. John & Fenning, 2020). While the existence of the Compact and similar policies intended to support military-connected students is promising, limited professional development and accountability measures reduce their overall effectiveness. Legislative and school policies impact academic opportunities and development for military-connected students, but the policies are not supportive enough if they cause undue stress and burden on families as they navigate service-related residential mobility.

## **Macrosystem**

The macrosystem is the system where the norms and values of the micro-, meso-, and exosystems amalgamate to form a broader social context (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). The belief-systems, lifestyles, and organizational structures in the macrosystem permeate all of the other systems closer to the individual and broadly impact development. Examining cultural beliefs about the military and military-connected families at the macrosystem-level helps to reveal opportunities for education and programming to inform the public about the military lifestyle and promote community and school-based supports across the country for military-connected students.

### ***Military Culture***

The military and the military-connected community have belief-systems, lifestyles, and organizational structures that impact individuals operating within them. This system includes some of the normalized lifestyle demands explained in this paper like frequent relocations and deployments as well as other features unique to the military community. The military has a hierarchical structure for employment and responsibility that carries over into employees' lives outside of work including insignia on their uniform, housing types, and who they may befriend or see in romantic contexts (Schlosser, 2014). Unlike in civilian culture, this ranking system is rigid, and servicemembers' ranks are visible on their uniforms and in their titles. These factors may influence the academic experiences and opportunities military-connected students have at school in addition to the influence of other sociodemographic factors in civilian communities.

### ***Cultural Sentiments about Military Service***

A key feature of the macrosystem is civilian sentiments about military operations or military personnel. Unlike during previous wartime engagements like World War II or the

Vietnam War, most Americans have not been engaged with the happenings of the US military on a regular basis during post 9-11 operations (e.g., Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) or Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF)) (Pew Research Center Social and Demographic Trends, 2011). This is largely attributed to the shift from a reliance on Selective Service (i.e., “the draft”) to build a short-term militia to relying on recruiting to maintain a standing volunteer force and coalition of private contractors (Baker, 2008). Relying on volunteers to join the military generally means that fewer people know someone actively serving, furthering the anonymity of military service members among the general public. While strong public sentiments about military activity have led to challenges in the past (e.g., Vietnam War-era protests), a lack of public engagement and awareness can also be problematic. When military service members and their families are invisible to the public, addressing their needs through policy and practice is difficult.

Understanding the general public’s lack of knowledge about military operations or the military lifestyle helps to reveal additional challenges in implementing the community and school-based supports that have been shown to improve outcomes for military-connected students. When stakeholders or policymakers are generally unaware of the needs of a student group, they cannot advocate for their needs. Recently groups like the Military Child Education Coalition, Partners in Promise, Military Family Advisory Network, and the Military Interstate Children’s Compact Commission have worked to bring awareness to the needs of military-connected students and families in an effort to bridge these gaps in understanding and programming.

### **Chronosystem**

The chronosystem is the broadest of the bioecological systems, and it represents the time in history that events occur. It helps us to contextualize events and attitudes while also acknowledging differences of experience and opinion across generations based on the period in

which they have lived (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). By examining the chronosystem of today's military-connected students and their parents, we capture some of the complexities of the modern military lifestyle that may not have been true for military families of previous generations.

### ***Ongoing Military Conflicts***

The United States' military history is complex and parallels American involvement in conflicts at home and abroad. A key facet in the chronosystem of today's military families is the post-9-11 military deployment of troops to the Middle East and around the world as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Enduring Freedom, and other related conflicts. These are the longest ongoing military conflicts in American history and have had a profound impact on the present generation of military families. Wartime military operations are different from peacetime efforts, and expect more from military members in terms of physical and emotional sacrifices (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2010). In wartime, service members are deployed more frequently for longer stretches of time. During these deployments, they are often in more dangerous locations than peacetime efforts, and are often exposed to increased violence and combat. Twenty years of ongoing conflict means that a great deal of military service members have experienced numerous deployments to combat zones, increasing the exposure to traumatic events. With these more common deployments comes an increase in the disruptions for military-connected families; they experience more separations, more reintegrations, and a greater risk of injury to their family member who serves. In this way, post-9-11 veterans and their families are experiencing a different type of military-connectedness than most generations before them. Taking these differences into account helps to paint a more accurate picture of the military experience and can help educate the service providers and policy makers who want to support military-connected students and their families.



### ***Historical Events***

Major historical events also shape the chronosystem of an individual. While 9-11 impacted Americans and military service members in concrete ways, other ubiquitous events impact their systems in similar and different ways from the general public. While there is little existing research so far about the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and its resulting restrictions on the military community, it has undoubtedly shaped their lives. Military-related relocations and deployments did not stop because of the COVID-19 pandemic, adding a new layer of complexity to the transitions military families make so frequently. Students transitioned to virtual schools near new installations, often without the opportunities to say goodbye to peers or meet new classmates in person. Examining how time-specific cultural and historical events impact military students and their families differently helps to illuminate opportunities for meaningful research and interventions intended to support them.

### **Discussion**

Exploring existing research about the developmental contexts of military-connected students through the lens of bioecological systems theory provides a useful framework for understanding the unique assets and constraints of the military lifestyle. Up to this point, much of the research about the development of military-connected students has focused on relationships between a few isolated variables. While these approaches are critical to the phenomenological foundations of military-connected children as a unique student subgroup, they may not be enough to develop meaningful interventions to support them holistically in schools and communities.

### **Captures Complexity of Circumstances**

A primary reason to use bioecological systems theory as a framework for studying military-connected children is the theory's unique way of capturing the complexities of human development. The nested systems approach provides space for researchers to explore the interactions between a child's various systems and interactions. For example, the mesosystem provides a conceptual framework for understanding how the relationships between home and school expectations and experiences impact student learning. Situations in a child's home impact their contributions to the classroom community, and a child's experiences at school may impact their interactions at home. Additionally, a child whose parent is deployed may be experiencing some social-emotional challenges at school, changing the classroom context for peers and teachers. A less than positive school experience may also create strife within the family system as the home caregiver tries to help the child adjust. While it may seem intuitive to study relationships like these with a more direct approach at first, exploring the bidirectionality of these relationships provides additional insight into how schools can do more to understand the needs of their students and how those approaches may be interpreted by parents and students.

### **Framework for Building Understanding**

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory provides a thorough framework for understanding how the unique combination of military lifestyle demands may impact different aspects of life for military-connected children and families. Developing this framework for wide use in studying military-connected children and families stands to enable understanding in the communities that serve them. Existing research with limited samples, linear variable relationships, and short-term interventions may not provide a sufficient framework for professionals and community leaders to understand the complex lifestyle demands facing military-connected families. The bioecological systems framework provides a model for

exploring how consequences of military lifestyle demands ripple through all systems, sometimes leading to unexpected consequences. Using this framework in both ongoing research and professional development could offer a new perspective and level of understanding for those most able to support academic opportunities and academic development for military-connected students. While evidence-backed, school-based interventions specifically for military-connected youth are limited, research has called for informed communities of care to identify and test emerging support strategies (Kudler & Porter, 2013). Viewing the academic opportunities and development of military-connected children through bioecological systems theory offers researchers, practitioners, and policymakers alike the opportunity to build a greater understanding of what military-connected communities experience and how best to alleviate their stressors.

### **Suggestions for Future Work**

Future work concerning academic experiences of military-connected students should employ ecological systems theory or similarly complex systems theories in an effort to capture the bidirectional relationships that military-connected children and families have with their systems. In addition to these theoretical frameworks, additional research should include methods capturing longitudinal and multivariate analyses related to both socio-demographic and military-specific variables. These studies stand to provide additional phenomenological understanding around the academic experiences of military-connected students while also detecting new relationships specific to under-researched or under-served populations. More research in these specific areas can help lead to additional targeted interventions to meet the needs of specific subgroups of military-connected students, making the most of strained resources. By situating

extant within the bioecological systems theory framework, patterns and gaps are revealed, laying the groundwork for future research and holistic interventions for military-connected students.

### **Conclusion**

Examining existing research about military-connected students through the lens of bioecological systems theory provides a more comprehensive framework for capturing the complexities of their experiences. Common military lifestyle demands like deployment and residential mobility occur frequently and sometimes unpredictably for military families. Exploring the stress those transitions place on all of a person's ecological systems is critically important to understanding how military-connectedness directly and indirectly impacts the academic experience of children. Using ecological systems theory in this way helps position researchers and other educational stakeholders (i.e., school professionals, educational policy makers) to develop and implement more holistic interventions for military-connected students and families to meet needs beyond those which are most obvious in the school setting.

The ecological systems theoretical framework also embraces the complexities of increasingly diverse experiences for military-connected students and families. Military service experiences vary as a result of both socio-demographic factors (age, sex, education, ethnicity, religious affiliation, marital status, employment, and income) and military service factors (e.g., service branch, rank, duty status). Recognizing that experiences of military service members and their families vary requires theoretical frameworks and research methods that capture nuance related to intersectionality.

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## CHAPTER III

### PAPER 2: A LATENT CLASS ANALYSIS OF THE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AND WELLBEING OF MILITARY-CONNECTED STUDENTS

#### **Abstract**

Military-connected students and families are increasingly diverse, and their experiences with military service are not monolithic. These experiential differences extend beyond service members to their family members, including their children's experiences at school. This study explores the school experiences of military-connected students through parental perceptions of their children's schools. Using latent profile analysis, a type of latent class analysis, this study uses individual survey response patterns (N= 2177) to explore the relationship between demographic variables, items related to military lifestyle demands, and parent-school satisfaction. The results suggest that the sample is best represented by four distinct classes. Features of each class and variables significantly influencing class membership are discussed. Exploring features of these latent classes helps to demonstrate which demographic factors and contextual situations may be most closely related to parent-school satisfaction for military-connected students and families. Implications and suggestions for future research are discussed.

## **Introduction**

Military service has changed over American history as military interests and technology have evolved. The United States' military has been involved in both wartime and peacekeeping missions around the world throughout most of its history. Military interventions in the Middle East following the September 11th, 2001 (9-11) terror attacks have led to the longest ongoing military conflicts in the history of the United States and have changed expectations and experiences for military service members (Pew Research Center Social and Demographic Trends, 2011). From the fall of 2001 to August 30th, 2021, the United States' military maintained wartime operations, meaning that the war engagements in Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Enduring Freedom, and their affiliated agendas remained a top priority of both the Department of Defense and the federal government.

In addition to the strain these long-term military conflicts have put on government resources, they have also impacted the surge of military members who joined the armed forces in response to the 9-11 terror attacks (Institute of Medicine of the National Academies, 2013). In the 12 months following the 9-11 attacks in the United States, more than 200,000 people joined the United States' Armed Forces as either active or reserve duty (DeSimone, 2021). While this surge represents the largest number of enlistees over a 12-month period in the past 20 years, only 0.5% of the United States' population has served on activity duty at any given time since September 2001 (Pew Research Center Social and Demographic Trends, 2011). The small percentage of Americans serving also speaks to the relative anonymity of military service members and their families in the United States at large. It is common for civilians to not personally know anyone actively serving in the military, and 84% of service members in a 2011 Pew Research survey indicated that they felt the American public had little or no understanding

of the problems that those in the military face. Additionally, the small number of Americans actively serving in the military often meant that service members were deployed and relocated multiple times in the years following 9-11, increasing the risk of combat-related trauma and injury as well as instability in their homes. Military service has always been accompanied by tremendous sacrifice, but the expectations since 9-11 have been especially challenging for service members and their families.

### **Military-Connectedness**

Issues related to military service extend beyond the military service members themselves. According to the Department of Defense 2020 Demographics Report, nearly 50% of active duty military service members are married, and United States' Military service members are parents to more than 1.5 million children. These family members are referred to as dependents by the armed forces, and their lives are impacted considerably by their service member's career. Two of the most common challenges military-connected families face are residential mobility and deployment. These two expectations mean families are in a near-constant state of transition both physically and relationally as they navigate their lives within and beyond the context of their military service.

Residential mobility for military-connected families is a function of military operations, and service members are relocated to new duty stations or locations as their skills are needed domestically and abroad. Nearly a third of military members relocate in any given year, and the average military family moves every 2-3 years (Clever & Segal, 2013). Residential mobility with this frequency can be stressful on military dependents and communities because of the constant flux of the family units themselves as well as the service providers and professionals in the communities where they often live (Davis & Finke, 2015). These transitions impact entire

communities near military installations; even when a military-connected family is not relocating, their doctors, teachers, friends, and other critical support personnel may be. These relocations are stressful and require families to reestablish their norms and routines including those related to their children's schooling with every move.

An additional challenge for military-connected families is deployment. A deployment is an extended work assignment for the military member that requires them to work away from their assigned duty station and home for a period of weeks to years (Military.com, 2018). Deployment is a recurring part of military service and is a cycle including three broad stages: pre-deployment preparation, deployment, and reintegration (Louie & DeMarni Cromer, 2014; DeVoe & Ross, 2012). Familial roles shift during all these phases to prepare for, endure, and recover from the absence of the servicemember parent, affecting both the home caregiver and children (Burrell et al., 2006). Similar to residential mobility, these frequent transitions require flexibility from children and families that extend beyond the period of physical separation. Being a dependent of a military service member means that spouses and families endure unique lifestyle demands that impact and disrupt their daily lives as well as their developmental opportunities.

### **Diversity of Military Experiences**

Although there are some similarities in the experiences of all military-connected children and their families, they are not monolithic. Their experiences vary a great deal based on their service member's service branch, duty status, and rank in addition to the diverse conditions experienced by civilians like education level and socioeconomic status (Chandra & London, 2013). Understanding how a service member's experience may differ due to these factors can

help educators and researchers develop impactful interventions for targeted subpopulations of military-connected families and communities.

### ***Service Branch***

Service branch refers to the division of the military a person serves with: Army, Marine Corps, Navy, Air Force, Coast Guard, or Space Force. These branches have different ranking and organizational structures that impact both service member specialties and expectations of service, including frequency of residential mobility and deployment. For example, deployment durations vary between different service branches with the Air Force experiencing the shortest average deployments at 4.5 months, to the Army experiencing the longest at 9.4 months (Institute of Medicine of the National Academies, 2013). Additionally, over half of the 2.15 million service members deployed between September 11th, 2001 and December 31, 2010 were in the Army, and 82% of Army deployments during that time were to Iraq or Afghanistan (versus the Coast Guard with only 9%) (Institute of Medicine of the National Academies, 2013). As a result of these deployment-related differences, military-connected families have different deployment experiences including frequency, duration, and level of concern for their service member's safety as a result of service branch. Considering the service branch when examining the experiences of military service members and their families may help to capture differences that may otherwise go unnoticed. A broader understanding of the nuances of service branch expectations among the civilian population and education professionals could help schools differentiate the support they offer to military-connected students to better meet their individual needs.

### ***Duty Status***

Duty status refers to whether a service member is active duty, reserve duty, or serving in the National Guard. Active duty service members are employed full-time by the Department of

Defense and can be deployed at any time (National Center for PTSD, 2012). They live with their families on or near their assigned installation, as appropriate for their position and their family's needs. Active duty service comes with expectations that members are prepared to deploy at any time, and includes frequent relocations as units and personnel change duty stations to meet the needs of the military as a whole. Active duty service members and their dependents have access to a myriad of benefits as compensation for their service including: access to military child care services, child and youth programming, health insurance via Tricare, spousal support groups, and parenting support. Active duty service comes with the highest and most consistent level of commitment from service members and their families throughout their service career.

Reserve and National Guard members typically do not work full-time for the Department of Defense but commit to monthly and annual training to maintain a standing, trained military force. Reserve duty service members work under their respective branch (e.g., Navy commands the Navy Reserves) and work for the Department of Defense part time. Reserve duty members train monthly for their positions in an effort to respond to needs in the country or abroad and to fill roles of active duty service members when they deploy. National Guard members are generally managed by the state where they live, except in wartime. They are dispatched by a state's governor to respond to emergencies, but can also be deployed by the federal government to war zones overseas. Both reserve and National Guard duty members can be deployed abroad, and post-9-11 military conflicts resulted in the longest stretch of reserve and National Guard activations since the Korean War. National Guard and reserve members often live far from military installations and other service members, and rarely benefit from the community and support services available on and near military installations (Pinna et al., 2018). As a result, their military experiences are often isolating and are weathered without the support of other military-

connected families or professionals like therapists or counselors who specialize in supporting their needs (Lemmon & Chartrand, 2009).

Veterans are former service members who have left military service. Some veterans choose to join the National Guard or reserves, but many leave the military. The veteran population in the United States is estimated at over 18 million, but the number of veteran-connected children and dependents can be difficult to estimate (United States Census Bureau, 2020). Veterans are not easily tracked because they live in civilian communities and mostly assume civilian lifestyles (i.e., working for non-governmental organizations). The term veteran includes those who left the military for any “other than dishonorable reason,” meaning that anyone who left the military without being dismissed for misbehavior. This broad definition means that veterans are an extremely diverse group with respect to their military experiences, qualifications for retirement benefits, disability status, and eligibility for work in the civilian sector. These differences impact veterans’ ability to live and work outside the military culture, thus altering the way they may be able to care for their children and families. In their 2011 report “The Military-Civilian Gap: War and Sacrifice in the Post-9/11 Era”, Pew Research found that about half of post-9-11 era veterans indicated that they had experienced strains in family relations since leaving the military, and 44% indicated they had a difficult adjustment to civilian life, a 19% increase from veterans from earlier eras (Pew Research Center Social and Demographic Trends, 2011). While not all entities consider children of veterans in their definitions of military-connected students, understanding how veteran status impacts military-connected children and families can provide valuable insights into how schools and communities can support them.

### ***Rank***

Rank in military service refers to a person's level of skill or position within their branch and command. Each branch of the military has a unique structure, but service members can generally be classified as either enlisted or officer rank. These ranks come with varying degrees of responsibility and compensation, with low-ranking enlisted service members earning the least and high-ranking officers earning the most. Higher ranks also come with increased responsibility and expectations from service members. Certain high-ranking positions are only typically available to officers commissioned from military academies or who completed Officers' Candidate School (OCS; called Officer Training School for the Air Force) or Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) programs at participating universities (Baker, 2008). These officers have college degrees and have completed military training during their time at college or shortly after. People with specified professional degrees (e.g., doctors, lawyers, chaplains) can commission directly into officer positions without completing the OCS or ROTC training requirements in many cases. Enlisted personnel can also work through the ranks of the military over the course of their careers and complete OCS as non-commissioned officers (Baker, 2008).

Enlisted service members are those who joined the military without prior training at a military academy or ROTC program. Many of them do not have college degrees when they join, and they generally cannot progress to the highest ranks of military service. Non-commissioned officers (NCOs) are high-ranking, enlisted service members, but they still have lower compensation and advancement opportunities compared to commissioned officers. Enlisted service members represent a majority of the military: 82.7% of the active duty force and 84.2% of the reserve duty force (Department of Defense, 2020). Because the military pay scale is configured according to rank and years of service, officer-level members generally earn more than enlisted members. A service member's rank has a relationship with the opportunities



available to their family including compensation, education, training specialization, and more. The education-level, employment opportunities, and compensation typical of officer-status military members are thought to be related to better military service experiences for military-connected families including decreased marital conflict (Allen et al., 2011), stronger family communication (Wilson et al., 2014), and increased access to parenting support (Gewirtz et al., 2014). Exploring the implications of a service members' rank can help to elucidate the diversity of experiences within the military-connected community, but more work is needed to capture underlying differences that may exist as a function of rank including those that impact opportunities available to their family members.

Examining relationships between diverse circumstances of military-connected families and school experience helps us to understand how and under which conditions schools are prepared to support them. There are multiple programs and initiatives from the Department of Defense, non-profit organizations, researchers, and even schools that intend to support the needs of military-connected students, but exploring the extent to which these services support them across different contexts can provide valuable insight about scalability and impact more broadly. Additionally, this work can help stakeholders decide which interventions might fill gaps in their existing programming for otherwise underserved students in their specific communities. This paper's purpose is to explore patterns in how different military lifestyle demands and parent-school satisfaction are related for diverse military-connected families using latent class analysis. By evaluating the relationships between school experience and various indicators of life circumstances for military-connected students, we can learn how to meet the needs of all military-connected students rather than those whose needs are most obvious.

## **Literature Review**

Exploring the existing literature about military-connected students and families helps to situate the present study. This growing area of research has helped to establish the needs of military-connected students with respect to their social-emotional and developmental needs across multiple contexts. Largely, this research has focused on social-emotional wellbeing, deployment-related challenges, home caregiver support, and academic challenges.

Research across other parent and student groups suggests that parent perceptions of schools can provide insight into how both academic and extracurricular supports within a school are meeting student needs (Chambers & Michelson, 2020). Including this variable in this study helps to examine how schools are supporting military-connected students holistically rather than purely academically. Understanding the school experiences of military-connected children across different environments and phases of their many military-related transitions can provide the critical insight about their schooling and learning that is needed to develop lasting and impactful interventions.

### **Social-Emotional Challenges**

Social-emotional wellbeing is a key marker of healthy development. Social-emotional wellbeing includes self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship awareness, and responsible decision-making that help children to navigate and thrive in social contexts (Nieme, 2020). Children who learn social-emotional skills have improved academic outcomes and classroom behaviors compared to peers, and social-emotional learning can be fostered both within and outside the traditional classroom setting (Durlak & Mahoney, 2019). There are many circumstances that are known to be challenging for social-emotional wellbeing including relationship challenges like parental divorce or separation (Raley & Sweeney, 2020) and psychological challenges like feelings of not belonging or fitting in (Korpershoek et al., 2020).

Social-emotional wellbeing has been studied in highly mobile youth in a variety of circumstances like children of migrant workers, children experiencing homelessness, refugee children, and military-connected children; these students often face challenges to their social-emotional and wellbeing outcomes (Choi & Oishi, 2020). Students who experience high residential mobility, like military-connected students, have been found to have increased internalizing and externalizing behaviors and decreases in overall flourishing (e.g., self-regulation and curiosity) (Anderson & Leventhal, 2017; Gjelsvik et al., 2018). Considering a student's social-emotional wellbeing in measures of their academic experience allows for greater understanding of their overall development, and provides additional context for support they may need from their school like counseling services and peer transition support.

### **Deployment-Related Challenges**

Deployment impacts the development and learning of military-connected youth in several domains. Deployment has been found to have a negative relationship with academic adjustment, and students experiencing a parental deployment perform lower on standardized academic tests than those who have not recently experienced a deployment (Card et al., 2011; Phelps et al., 2010). Research on deployment has also found that perception of the separation more accurately predicts home caregiver and child outcomes than length or frequency of separation (Burrell et al., 2006).

These findings suggest that youth development and learning are disrupted by transitions of deployment. Deployment impacts dynamics within a family throughout its entire cycle; for many families, this means multiple shifts in roles and responsibilities that can be confusing and disruptive, especially for children (DeVoe & Ross, 2012). Without adequate scaffolding and guidance from knowledgeable adults or mentors, children and adolescents have trouble

processing the challenges presented by the deployment cycle. In turn, these complicated circumstances can sometimes overshadow appropriate and necessary tasks and opportunities that are essential to military-connected children's overall development (e.g., engagement at school, relationships with peers) (O'Neal et al., 2018). Without adequate support from educated professionals and community service providers, many military-connected families are not prepared to successfully navigate the developmental challenges of the deployment cycle (Kudler & Porter, 2013).

### **Home Caregiver Support**

A home caregiver in a military-connected family is typically a civilian spouse who continues to support the family unit at home throughout transitions like relocation or deployment. These caregivers face numerous challenges related to their military lifestyles like under and unemployment from frequent relocations (Burke & Miller, 2018) accompanied by the social and psychological stress of the parenting and relational demands during deployments and service-related separations (Chandra et al., 2010; Donoho et al., 2017). The military also has expectations of service member spouses unlike most civilian employers; for example, spouses of service members in positions of leadership are often expected to attend and organize events for the Command (professional team to which the service member is assigned) and Family Support Groups (FSG) (Baker, 2008). These responsibilities continue and even multiply during times of relocation and deployment; not all home caregivers thrive under these pressures (O'Neal et al., 2018).

The health and wellbeing of the home caregiver is related to the health and wellbeing of the rest of the family. For example, Chandra and colleagues (2010) found that school staff and teachers of military-connected youth reported increased rates of social and emotional challenges

during deployment, especially when the home caregiver was experiencing poor mental health. Additionally, they found children whose home caregiver is negatively responding to deployment are more likely to experience maladjustment and externalizing behaviors at school (Chandra et al, 2010). In their 2016 study, Lester and colleagues found social-emotional and psychological wellbeing outcomes for highly mobile, military-connected students are mediated by strong parent-child relationships and effective parenting. These findings suggest that while military-connected students are at increased risk of social-emotional and psychological wellbeing challenges, supportive communities and interventions for parents have potential to mediate those risks.

### **Academic Challenges**

Academic experiences for highly mobile students, like military-connected students, are often challenging. Frequent school transitions make it difficult for students to maintain educational progress and meet promotion and graduation requirements (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Ruff & Keim, 2014; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019). For military-connected students, this is especially complicated because their relocations typically take them across state lines where the educational policies set by local education agencies and state legislatures may vary significantly. While the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children (the Compact), signed by all 50 states and the District of Columbia, strives to support military-connected students and families with enrollment, placement, attendance, eligibility, and graduation requirements during transitions, not all school professionals are aware of the Compact or the implications it has for their incoming military-connected students (St. John & Fenning, 2020). Without proper support structures in place within both their sending and receiving schools, military-connected students are often left with gaps in

their academic path that are further hindered by slow transfer of records and inflexible registration policies (Ruff & Kiem, 2014; Harrison & Vannest, 2008).

Academic journeys for military-connected students with special education needs are additionally complicated. Much like promotion and graduation requirements, special education identification procedures and services not expressly identified in federal law (e.g., Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004) are determined by state and local education agencies. For military-connected students with special education needs, this means that their individualized education programs (IEP) or 504 plans (i.e., legally binding special education agreements between schools and families) are often rewritten upon arrival at each new school. Although schools must provide comparable services to a transfer student while reviewing their previous plan, they are permitted to rewrite a new plan to fall in accordance with their own policies and procedures within a “reasonable period of time” after receiving a new student (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). State legislatures or departments of education typically determine what is considered a reasonable period of time to reevaluate a student’s existing IEP or establish a new IEP. In their 2020 survey, Partners in Promise, a non-profit organization serving military-connected families with children with special education needs, found that 63% of respondents had a child without their IEP related services or support following a move and 82% reported their child was without their special education services for a month or more following a military-related relocation (Partners in Promise, 2020). These findings suggest that military-connected families who have children with special education needs face additional obstacles to education that may impact overall education experience and outcomes.

Social-emotional challenges related to military lifestyle demands like deployment and frequent relocations impact academic progress and educational opportunities for military-

connected students. Children and adolescents who experience non-routine school changes and residential mobility demonstrate difficulties in reading, academic engagement, and internalizing and externalizing behaviors both in the years of their moves and beyond (Lleras & McKillip, 2017; Anderson & Leventhal, 2017; Bradshaw et al., 2010). Cramm and colleagues (2019) found, in their scoping review, military-connected children and adolescents have more mental health issues than their civilian counterparts and that residential mobility and parental deployment contribute to the mental health challenges of military-connected youth. Taken together, these findings have implications for the academic challenges military-connected students face. Teachers and school professionals notice these challenges in military-connected students (Chandra et al., 2010), but often lack the professional development or concrete skills needed to feel prepared to intervene and offer support (Ruff & Keim, 2014; Harrison & Vannest, 2008).

### **Parental Perception of School**

How schools meet the needs of students is critical to overall student success, but school success is primarily discussed with regards to how students perform on standardized tests and meet legally-mandated graduation requirements. While these outcomes can be valuable in capturing student learning outcomes, they fail to capture other elements of the school experience like social-emotional wellbeing, community engagement, and quality of the learning environment (Gibbons & Silva, 2011). Researchers have posited that parent evaluations of schools help to provide insight on how schools meet student needs beyond strictly academic performance outcomes (Aldridge & McChesney, 2020; Berkowitz et al., 2018). By capturing parental perceptions of school services and climate, researchers better-understand the

complexities of the relationship between home and school in a child's education (Chambers & Michelson, 2020; Hampden-Thompson & Galindo, 2017).

Parents' perceptions of schools have significant implications for their children's education. How parents feel about the success of their child's school has been found to impact student attitudes about school and learning, parental involvement in their child's education, and future decisions about what school a child should attend (Schueler et al., 2014). Additionally, in their 2016 study, Hampden-Thompson and Galdino used data from 10,000 students from the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England and found that school-family relationships are a predictor of achievement, and that the relationship is mediated by the degree of parental satisfaction with the school. These findings help support the notion that how parents perceive schools matters, and that these perceptions impact future educational opportunities and outcomes for children.

While research suggests that parental perceptions of school correlate with supportive school experiences, there are inconclusive findings about the factors that most impact parental perceptions of school. For example, Friedman and colleagues (2007) used factor analysis from survey results of more than 30,000 parents of school-age children in the US to explore components of parental school satisfaction. Their study concluded that school communication and involvement, school resources, quality of leadership, and budget adequacy most significantly impacted parental school satisfaction. Additionally, Charbonneau and Van Ryzin (2012) explored parental satisfaction with school using survey data from New York City Public Schools and found that parents formed their school satisfaction judgements based on factors very similar to those officially measured and reported by schools (i.e., student performance on standardized tests, changes in student proficiency rates on standardized tests, and school climate data from an



external reviewer related to goal setting and leadership). Additionally, Schueler and colleagues (2014) found no evidence that parental response patterns differed between academic and social components of their school climate survey, suggesting that there is still an additional need for more granular information about what influence's a parents' perception of their child's school. These findings suggest that while parental perceptions of their child's school can be a measure of schooling experience, there is still a need for more research to understand which elements of a school environment lead to greatest parent school perception and student success.

With respect to military-connected students, parent-school relationships and satisfaction are especially complicated. School staff and leadership often have limited understanding of the military lifestyle and may not have the awareness of resources needed to support military-connected students (Ruff & Keim, 2014). While there are ongoing initiatives to enhance teacher knowledge of military-connected students (e.g., military student identifier, Purple Star Schools, Joining Forces), there is limited research about which school- and community-based support initiatives have the greatest impact on measures like parent school satisfaction. For example, the Purple Star Schools (PSS) designation program strives to recognize schools taking specific steps to support military-connected students. Requirements of Purple Star Schools vary slightly as a result of the state legislatures that enact their accompanying legislation, but are generally expected to have a staff member serving as a military liaison, a dedicated webpage for military students, staff professional development about the military-connected lifestyle, and a student-led transition program for new students (Military Child Education Coalition, 2020). While PSS are not officially recognized in every state, asking parents to indicate which elements of PSS they currently know of in their child's school could help to reveal which features of PSS may be the most important to parental school satisfaction. Having a greater understanding of how and under

what circumstances parents of military-connected students are satisfied with their child's school can provide insight into which interventions could be replicated on a larger scale.

### **Gaps in Existing Literature**

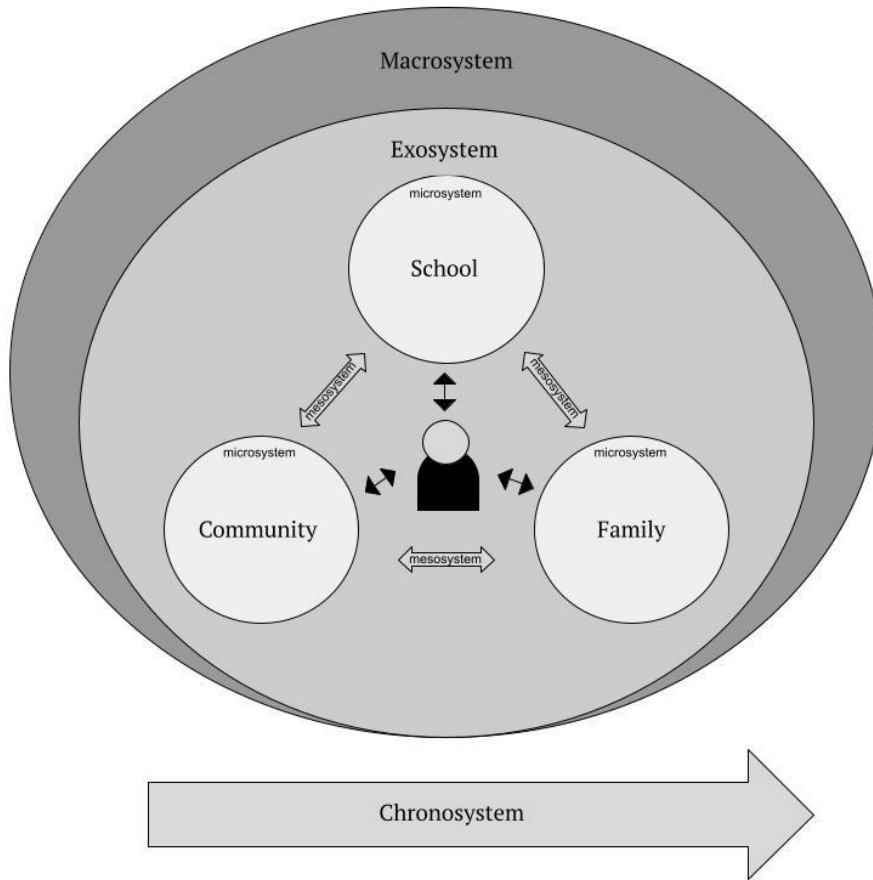
Even though there is a growing collection of research about the experiences of military-connected children and home caregivers, there is limited research on how military-connectedness and military lifestyle demands impact educational opportunities and development. Even more specifically, there has been nearly no exploration of how differences between military-connected families may relate to students' educational experiences. There is complexity in the service experiences for military service members and their families, suggesting a need for more nuanced research to examine where the greatest needs may exist. Considering how different military-specific variables may impact a students' educational experiences can help to reveal challenges and opportunities for improvement within the military, community, and school systems to enhance educational experiences for children. Examining these differences could help to support targeted interventions and initiatives to help children and families whose needs may not be met by existing programming or whose challenges may have been overlooked.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study uses bioecological systems theory as a framework for understanding how different factors of a military-connected child's life may impact perceptions of their schooling experiences. Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory clarifies the relationships that occur between the different components of a person's life. The theory includes a series of nested developmental contexts called the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem, with the individual positioned at the center (Figure 3.1) (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

**Figure 3.1**

*Bioecological Systems of Military-Connected Youth*



The microsystem includes those interactions and relationships closest to the individual like their family, school, and workplace. These are the repeated interactions that shape a person's daily life. For children, the microsystem includes their interactions with their immediate family, teachers, and classmates. These interactions have the potential to foster strong relationships because they are so frequent and consistent. Healthy, supportive relationships within the microsystem are supportive of overall development, including resilience (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Relationships in the microsystem can be challenging for military-connected youth because of their frequent transitions related to parental deployment and relocation. These military lifestyle

demands often mean that their relationships with their parents, classmates, and neighbors are often in flux.

The mesosystem is made up of the interactions between a person's microsystems like the relationship between a person's home and their school or between their peer group and their family. For military-connected students, the relationship between their family life and their school life can be complicated by misunderstanding about the military lifestyle (Ruff & Keim, 2014). The relationship between teachers and students is critical for learning and development, but teachers have been found to have limited knowledge about military-connected students and how to support their learning (De Pedro et al, 2014; Ruff & Keim, 2014; Hathaway et al., 2018). Without much working knowledge of the common lifestyle demands of military-connected students and families, teachers are less equipped to build strong, meaningful relationships (St John & Fenning, 2020). Relationships in the school-family mesosystem are critical because they facilitate continuity of expectations and support across the contexts where a child spends the most time.

The exosystem includes the indirect relationships between a person and a setting that they are not generally a part of, through the influence it bears on a developmental system in which they regularly spend time. This includes the relationship between a child and their parent's workplace because the parent's experiences at work influence conditions in the home. Relationships in the exosystem influence a person through their interactions with others. An example of an exosystemic relationship for military-connected children is their relationship to decisions made by their parents' service branch or the Department of Defense. As the Department of Defense reassigns commands or service members to new duty stations or

activates units, it indirectly impacts their families and children through relocation and deployment-related separations.

The macrosystem represents the overarching characteristics of a culture or social context that influence the belief systems, expectations, and opportunities a person may have. When taken together, these systems help build a comprehensive representation of a person's development and growth by capturing many of the influential factors at play. For military-connected students, an example of their macrosystem is how Americans perceive the military. Since late 2001, general appreciation for military service members has been common, but the perceived anonymity of military service members makes many aspects of their service invisible (Pew Research Center Social and Demographic Trends, 2011). Without widespread acknowledgment and education of the expectations of the military lifestyle, society is largely limited in how it can support military-connected children and families.

The chronosystem is the system most distant from the individual at the center of the system framework and represents the time in history when a person lives. For children today, the chronosystem includes the state of the global economy, geopolitical conflicts and agreements, the COVID-19 pandemic, and other large-scale events and happenings that apply only to this unique time in history. For military service members, these events often result in an increase in deployments and activations, increasing transition-related challenges for their children and families. While these large-scale events create lasting effects on the population as a whole, they also have cumulative effects on the service members and their families who are often called to intervene.

This framework is useful specifically in examining parental perceptions of schooling experiences for military-connected children because it helps to capture some of the complexity in

their unique childhood experiences. By capturing complexities in multiple systems, this theoretical model helps to explain the similarities and differences between military-connected and civilian children as well as those within the military-connected population. As such, within the bounds of the study, the lens of bioecological systems theory helps to illustrate the ways in which schools may currently acknowledge and address the needs of military-connected children and opportunities for improvement to interventions to support them.

The study reflects the significance of each of the systems of bioecological systems theory, specifically focusing on the interactions between them in an effort to capture some of the nuance and complexity of being a military-connected student. Additionally, the study seeks to explore patterns in schooling experiences for military-connected students with indicators across multiple systems to identify specific groups of students whose military experiences may not be accurately reflected in extant literature.

### **Research Questions**

1. Based on measures of parent school satisfaction, do subgroups of parents with similar survey response patterns exist?
2. If so, how are these subgroups related to demographic factors, academic challenges, social-emotional challenges, deployment-related challenges, parent skills, or school services available?

### **Methods**

To identify potential patterns in parent school perceptions, this study will use a latent class analysis (LCA; Lazarsfield, 1950). Latent class analysis is a person-centered methodological approach by which underlying classes of respondents can be statistically uncovered and interpreted. This study applies an LCA to a recent survey administered to military

families by the Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC), a leading non-profit in issues related to military-connected children, in cooperation with Texas A&M University- Central Texas. Results of this analysis will allow for comparisons across military-connected respondents in an effort to identify patterns in how and under what conditions military-connected students and families are satisfied with and best-supported by schools.

## **Dataset**

The data for this study come from the Military Child Education Coalition's 2020 Military Kids Now survey dataset. The 2020 Military Kids Now survey was designed with nearly 80 closed and open-ended responses to capture the educational experiences of military-connected students through the perceptions of the students (ages 13 and up), their parents, and education professionals who serve them (Military Child Education Coalition, 2020b). The survey began collecting data in early 2020, and in spite of the COVID-19 pandemic, collected more than 5,100 responses, spread across every state and territory in the United States. Participants were recruited to complete the survey through the wide sharing of the survey across social media platforms via MCEC and their partners' accounts. The purpose of the survey was to learn more about the challenges military-connected students face and how those experiences impact their academic experiences. The dataset is not publicly available, but was made available for use in this study through a data-sharing partnership between MCEC and the author.

To answer this study's research questions, detailed in the following sections, data were downloaded and formatted. Some items were recoded to account for missing data, and additional variables were transformed to create indexed participant scores. These are also detailed further in the variable sections below.

## **Sample**

The sample for the study includes parents of military-connected children whose children attend a formal school (i.e., public school, private school, DoDEA school, virtual school, charter, and not homeschooled). Formal schools were selected for this study to better understand how systemic policies, practices, and interventions may influence military-connected students. Those who indicated their child was homeschooled were excluded from the sample because they did not receive the parent-school satisfaction item on the survey. Parents were selected as the sample for this study because they can speak to the educational experiences of their child(ren) at different schooling levels and developmental stages. Parents were also the largest response category for this study with more than 3,000 responses (N= 3443), and the responses varied across service branch and duty status. Some groups were over or undersampled relative to the composition of the military as a whole (See Table 3.1 and Table 3.2). Noting the discrepancies between the sample and population is critical because it impacts the generalizability of the results (Mullinix et al., 2015). For example, the undersampling of National Guard and reserve force members in this dataset may provide an inaccurate representation of their experiences; it will be critical to highlight this when interpreting the results of this study.

**Table 3.1**  
*Sample Demographic Characteristics*

	Active Duty		Reserve		National Guard		Veteran	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Army	1041	29.49	27	0.76	60	1.70	128	3.63
Navy	633	17.93	11	0.31	4	0.11	64	1.81
Marine Corps	185	5.24	4	0.11	2	0.06	28	0.79
Air Force	1057	29.94	24	0.68	44	1.25	81	2.29
Coast Guard	121	3.43	0	0.00	4	0.11	12	0.34
Total	3037	86.03	66	1.87	114	3.23	313	8.87



**Table 3.2**  
*Demographic Characteristics of the United States Military as of 2020*

	Active Duty		Reserve		National Guard	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Army	418245	20.1	274581	11.5	336703	14.1
Navy	341996	14.3	101223	4.2		
Marine Corps	180958	7.6	98952	4.1		
Air Force	329614	13.8	95079	4.0	107414	4.5
Coast Guard	40558	1.7	7724	0.3		
Total	1311371	57.5	577559	24.1	444117	18.6

*Note.* Data are from U.S. Department of Defense, 2021

## **Variables**

### *Demographic Questions*

The demographic portion of the survey included items about a parent’s service branch, duty status, distance to assigned installation, child’s school type, child’s school level (i.e., elementary, middle, high school), and child special education status. Details about the phrasing and answer choices for each demographic item are provided in Appendix A. These items have been recoded in the data with numeric values assigned to each available answer choice. For example, for the item related to duty status, responses have been recoded so that 1= Army, 2= Air Force, 3= Navy, 4= Marine Corps, 5= Coast Guard, >5 two or more branches in the family. Details regarding how each item has been recoded are available in Appendix B.

A transformed variable was computed to represent the distance between the respondent’s assigned installation and the ZIP code of their home to approximate their access to installation partners and services. A person’s proximity to their assigned installation for services has been

used in prior research within the military and veteran communities with respect to access to medical, counseling, and other support services (Nelson et al., 2017). Largely, these studies have found that living further than 40 miles from an installation results in a decrease in utilization of on-site services (Nelson et al., 2017; Cozza et al., 2017). Including this variable in this analysis may provide insight into how military-connected families' education experience varies relative to their home's distance from their assigned installation.

### ***Parent Satisfaction with School***

The parent satisfaction with school item was a single likert-type item phrased as "Do you feel the school is prepared to meet the needs of military-connected students? (e.g., academic, social/emotional, transition, etc.)." Parents were able to respond with one of the following five responses: no, I'm not sure, yes, I wish not to answer, or does not apply. This item provides critical information about how satisfied parents are with how their child's school meets the needs of military-connected students.

### ***Academic Challenges***

These close-ended items relate to information about challenges a participant's child(ren) have experiences with respect to their education. They provide information about barriers to education a child or children may have experienced in their experience as a military-connected student.

**Mobility-Related Academic Challenges.** Mobility-related academic challenges are those issues that a person has experienced as a result of military-related residential mobility and non-routine school change, a school transition outside of those typical for most students (e.g., changing schools mid-year due to a relocation versus a typical school change between middle and high school). This was formatted as a single item where participants checked the box for

only those challenges their child(ren) had experienced or a box indicating that they had experienced none of the issues. They include learning gaps, differences in academic standards, credit transfer issues, course alignment issues, availability of courses, differences in graduation requirements, grade point average calculation issues, and understanding state and national testing requirements.

**Program-Related Academic Challenges.** Program-related academic challenges refer to issues parent respondents report with respect to accessing academic programming for their children. This was formatted as a single item where participants checked the box for only those challenges their child(ren) had experienced or a box indicating that they had experienced none of the issues. These items include accessing gifted education programs, accessing advanced education programs, accessing career and technical education programs, transferring special education documentation, accessing appropriate special education placement and supports, and maintaining eligibility for extracurricular activities.

**Transition-Related Academic Challenges.** Transition-related academic challenges items include those associated with transitioning between schools. This item was formatted as a single survey item where participants checked boxes for each challenge they had experienced or a box indicating that they had experienced none of the issues. They include language barriers/differences, moving mid-school year, scheduling differences between the former and new school (i.e., traditional vs. block scheduling), differences in the academic calendar (i.e., start and end dates), preparing for the college application and enrollment process, and preparing for career choices.

### ***Social-Emotional Challenges***

This survey included two closed-ended items related to social-emotional challenges military-connected students face. They provide more information about the developmental impacts of military lifestyle demands with respect to peer and family relationships and other indicators of wellbeing.

**Social-Emotional Development Challenges.** Items related to social-emotional development challenges ask participants to indicate if their child has experienced social-emotional difficulties. This item was formatted as a single closed-ended question where participants checked boxes for experiences their child had or an alternate box if their child had not experienced any of the listed challenges. Participants were asked if their child had difficulty with any of the following feeling of acceptance/“fitting in” (school and local culture), making friends, depression/substance abuse/ self-harm, etc., addressing bullying concerns (cyber and/or in-person), dealing with peer pressure, managing stress, and building self-confidence.

**Social-Emotional Family Challenges.** Items related to social-emotional family challenges include difficulties within the family that have been found to impact development and wellbeing. This item was formatted as a single closed-ended question where participants checked boxes for experiences their child had or an alternate box if their child had not experienced any of the listed challenges. Participants were asked if their child was coping with divorce or separation, coping with the loss of a family member or friend, dealing with parent deployment/reunion, handling changes in home life and/or academics due to a service member's injury/health, coping with challenges when a parent leaves the military, or dealing with poverty/homelessness.

### ***Deployment-Related Challenges***

This survey also included one item related to issues military-connected students may experience during deployment and other military-related separation. This item was intended to

measure social-emotional or academic issues for military-connected youth that have been correlated with or are suspected to be related to parental deployment in prior research. This item was formatted as a single closed-ended question where participants checked boxes for experiences their child had or an alternate box if their child had not experienced any of the listed challenges. Deployment challenges included academic grade fluctuations, withdrawal from school activities, withdrawal from friends, changes in behavior/discipline, physical changes (appetite, drug use, self-harm, etc.), and role changes (taking on new/additional responsibilities).

### ***Parent School Transition Skill Items***

Parent school transition skill items ask parents to indicate whether they had certain knowledge or skills related to common challenges to school transitions faced by military-connected students. This item was formatted as a single closed-ended question where participants checked boxes to indicate whether or not they had the listed skill or knowledge. Participants could also indicate if a skill did not apply to their family situation. Skills listed in this item include: locating documents to enroll a child in a new school, finding age requirements for enrolling in early childhood education, hand-carrying official documentation to new school for initial evaluation, creating a portfolio of student work to supplement student transcripts, locating immunization requirements for a new school, advocating for appropriate student placement, advocating for appropriate IEP or 504 accommodations, advocating for gifted education placements, advocating for extracurricular activity placements, informing school of special consideration of student absences due to deployment and student transition, knowledge of variation between graduation exams between states, locating information about graduation requirements between states and abroad, obtaining graduation-waivers for students who transition during their senior year of high school.

### ***School Services Items***

School service items ask participants to indicate which listed services are available at their child's school. These are broken down into two categories: available school services and Purple Star School designation services in an effort to examine if and how supports specifically named in Purple Star School designation programs specifically support military-connected students.

***Available School Services.*** Available school services items ask parents to indicate which, if any, support services for military-connected students exist at their child's school. This item was formatted as a single closed-ended question where participants checked boxes for services available with an additional check box if none of the named services were available. Services in this item included: student mentoring programs, welcoming events, student leadership programs, new student assistance programs, recognition of the Month of the Military Child, Purple Star campus/school designation, ceremonies honoring military service members, military unit adopt-a-school, professional staff dedicated to student transitional support, webpage/ social media site for student transitional support, college and career readiness classes/activities for highly mobile students, farewell procedures/activities for departing students, and student club/organization for student transitional support.

***Purple Star School Designation Services.*** Purple Star School Designation items specifically asked participants to indicate which elements of a Purple Star School their child's school currently has in place. This item was formatted as a single closed-ended question where participants checked boxes for services available or left them blank if not available. The item included the four following services: having a designated on-site staff member who acts as a military liaison/point of contact, having a webpage with information that supports transitioning

to the school, having a student-led, campus-based student transition program, and having professional development for staff that addresses supporting military-connected students.

### **Data Analysis**

The analyses began with descriptive statistics in SPSS version 26 to provide general information about how the sample varies from the population of military-connected personnel. These details provide critical insights into how the patterns or trends from the data may represent subgroups of military-connected students and families. Descriptive statistics were first run for the whole sample and then were broken down into subgroups by identifiers like service branch, duty status, and school type to explore variability within the sample. Sample characteristics can be found in Table 3.1.

**Confirmatory Factor Analysis.** A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used to identify the relationships between variables within a construct and across the data set. The goal of CFA is to identify the factors that account for variance and covariance among a set of indicators (Brown & Moore, 2012). With each sub-topic area including multiple, distinct experiences or situations related to the overarching construct, confirmatory factor analysis were used to verify the factor structure within the observed variables while also testing their relationship to the latent construct. For example, a CFA on the mobility-related academic challenges construct would define the factor structures for the items in mobility-related academic challenges item set. The CFA was performed mapping individual items onto their latent constructs (named and detailed above and in Appendices A and B), and fit was evaluated via model fit metrics including model chi-square statistic, standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), comparative fit index (CFI), Tucker Lewis index, and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) (Kline, 2011; Brown, 2015). A model with the best fit has a low model

chi-square value, a SRMR less than 0.08, a CFI value greater than 0.90, a TLI value greater than 0.90, and a RMSEA value less than 0.08 (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Vandenberg & Lance, 2000).

After identifying a model with good fit, items with poor construct fit or deemed to be redundant were moved to other constructs where theoretically and statistically appropriate or excluded to identify the best-fitting model for the data and constructs available (Brown & Moore, 2012). This step is critical because it provides justification for how individual items or measures are related to specific latent constructs. Identifying and utilizing items from the best-fitting model within the most appropriate latent constructs help to reduce redundancies and organize the items in the most parsimonious fashion (Brown, 2015).

**Latent Class Analyses.** Following the CFA, latent class analysis (LCA) was used for inferential analysis of the data. LCA is a person-centered approach to inferential analysis that uses the individual respondents as the point of analysis rather than item responses. Focusing on the patterns in participants rather than item responses helps researchers to understand how meaningful patterns occur across individuals (Collins & Lanza, 2010). In the present study, the classes from the model helped to reveal latent subgroups of military-connected parents with similar response patterns with respect to their demographics, child's academic experiences, social-emotional experiences, deployment experiences, parent skill items, available school services, and their satisfaction with their child's school. The adjusted sample (N= 2177) for the LCA and subsequent analysis is reduced due to casewise deletion which removes incomplete responses from the sample. This ensures only respondents with complete survey responses are included in the analyses (Collins & Lanza, 2010). In the case of this study, participants who did not respond to the parent-school satisfaction item were removed from the analyses because it was used as a dependent variable.



LCA involves testing multiple nested models to reveal a model with the best fit. Determining the best model includes comparison on several fit statistics including Akaike's information criterion (AIC), Bayesian information criterion (BIC), and sample-adjusted BIC (SABIC). These values are compared across all models, and models with lower values are generally accepted as having better model fit in conjunction with other model fit indicators (Collins & Lanza, 2010). Entropy values can also be used to compare models, with entropy values approaching one indicating clearer delineation of classes within the model (Celeux & Soromenho, 1996). The Lo, Mendell, and Rubin (LMR) test compares models; a significant  $p$ -value ( $p < .05$ ) for the LMR indicates that a model ( $k$ ) fits the data significantly better than a model with one fewer latent class ( $k - 1$ ) (Nylund et al., 2007).

**Multinomial Logistic Regressions.** With LCA, it is also critical to evaluate the impacts of independent variables or predictors on model-indicated class membership (Collins & Lanza, 2010). To determine the individual and interaction effects of predictors (i.e., demographic items, academic items, social-emotional, parent transition skill items, school service items, etc.) on group membership, a multinomial logistic regression (MLR) was included in the analytic plan during the LCA. Interpreting the MLR includes identifying a reference group and examining the significance of the likelihood ratio test statistic to identify which, if any, variables significantly impacted profile group membership. The results of this regression helped to identify which, if any, predictors have statistically significant impacts on latent classes in the model.

**Multi-Model Plan.** Analyses to answer this paper's research questions required both a latent profile analysis (LPA) and a latent class analysis (LCA) to understand how different experiences may impact overall parent school satisfaction for military-connected students. LCAs and LPAs utilizing the same dataset have been found to sometimes reveal different profile groupings, and

employing both methods along with close inspection of graphical information and background research provide the most relevant and useful results (Achterhof et al., 2019).

The first model was an LPA including the indexed scores for constructs composed of multiple items. An LPA is a type of LCA that allows for continuous variables rather than categorical (Collins & Lanza, 2010). For these variables, respondents checked boxes indicating challenges their child or family had experienced. Creating index scores captured the extent to which participants' children or families have assets or constraints for learning and development in the given construct categories (e.g., academic challenges, social-emotional challenges, deployment challenges, parent skills, school services). The intention of this model was to provide a more generalized understanding of how the specified latent constructs were observed across the sample via profiles.

A second model, an LCA, included the full set of variables without indexed scores, providing opportunities for specific variables to influence the model independently. This was necessary in this case because the variables in a list could not be assumed to have equal weight in a person's development. For example, the construct of social-emotional family challenges includes "dealing with parent deployment/reunion" and "dealing with poverty/homelessness," among other items. Including these in a model separately was intended to help to capture the extent to which these social-emotional challenges distinctly influenced schooling experiences for military-connected youth in the sample. The intention behind including this model was to offer additional clarity about which specific observed variables may influence the overall model.

Examining the results of both the indexed and individual models helped to elucidate the ways in which academic, social-emotional, and deployment challenges influence academic experiences when examined with parent skills and available school services, both generally and

with respect to specific and unique challenges. There are benefits to each particular model, each contributing different levels of information toward the research questions (Achterhof et al., 2019). The LPA in this paper is a more concise model for understanding the relationships between the constructs and parent-school satisfaction holistically. The LCA in this paper was intended to offer more granular detail about the influence of specific items within the constructs. The purpose of utilizing both models was to capture the detail required to explore profiles of military-connected students and the assets and constraints that influence their educational experiences.

## **Results**

To begin analysis, descriptive statistics for each item were evaluated for normality. All assumptions were satisfied. Table 3.3 includes descriptive statistics for each item used including means, variances, skewness and kurtosis. Additionally, Table 3.3 includes reliability estimates for each scale. Reliability for all scales is reported as McDonald's  $\Omega$ ; the social-emotional development challenges, parent school transition skill items, and available school services scales scored above .80, suggesting they are reliable measures (Henson, 2001). The additional scales were retained despite their lower reliability scores because the focus of the model was to explore how the set of items constituted a latent construct rather than how the latent construct influenced participant response patterns. For example, items in the SEHOME scale represent social-emotional family challenges that some individuals may experience; it is unlikely that an individual would experience all of these challenges, and the challenges themselves are not linked to one another. When used as a factor, SEHOME shares some insight into how social-emotional family challenges may or may not influence parent-school satisfaction.

**Table 3.3**  
*Descriptive Statistics for Continuous Study Variables*

	Mean	Variance	Skewness	Kurtosis	Reliability
RMAC					0.75
RMAC1	0.44	0.25	0.26	-1.93	
RMAC2	0.44	0.25	0.23	-1.95	
RMAC3	0.18	0.15	1.68	0.92	
RMAC4	0.16	0.13	1.85	1.44	
RMAC5	0.23	0.18	1.30	-0.314	
RMAC6	0.09	0.08	2.82	5.93	
RMAC7	0.12	0.10	2.37	3.64	
RMAC8	0.31	0.21	0.84	-1.30	
RMAC9	0.19	0.15	1.58	0.50	
ACPRO					0.46
ACPRO1	0.32	0.22	0.76	-1.42	
ACPRO2	0.25	0.19	1.17	-0.63	
ACPRO3	0.07	0.06	3.38	9.54	
ACPRO4	0.19	0.15	1.59	0.52	
ACPRO5	0.16	0.14	1.81	1.28	
ACPRO6	0.23	0.18	1.30	-0.31	
ACPRO7	0.25	0.19	1.15	-0.68	
ACTRANS					0.60
ACTRANS1	0.05	0.05	4.29	16.43	
ACTRANS2	0.36	0.23	0.59	-1.65	
ACTRANS3	0.20	0.16	1.45	0.11	
ACTRANS4	0.28	0.20	0.99	-1.02	
ACTRANS5	0.13	0.11	2.18	2.74	
ACTRANS6	0.07	0.07	3.25	8.58	
ACTRANS7	0.27	0.10	1.05	-0.90	
SEDEV					0.78
SEDEV1	0.57	0.25	-0.30	-1.91	
SEDEV2	0.58	0.24	-0.32	-1.90	
SEDEV3	0.33	0.22	0.73	-1.48	
SEDEV4	0.28	0.20	0.99	-1.03	
SEDEV5	0.18	0.15	1.68	0.83	
SEDEV6	0.42	0.24	0.33	-1.89	
SEDEV7	0.50	0.25	0.01	-2.00	
SEDEV8	0.10	0.09	2.78	5.60	
SEHOME					0.10
SEHOME1	0.04	0.04	4.54	18.63	
SEHOME2	0.12	0.11	2.34	3.45	
SEHOME3	0.44	0.25	0.26	-1.93	
SEHOME4	0.06	0.06	3.56	10.65	
SEHOME5	0.12	0.11	2.31	3.36	
SEHOME6	0.01	0.01	10.40	106.07	

SEHOME7	0.29	0.21	0.93	-1.13	
DRC					0.68
DRC1	0.25	0.19	1.16	-0.66	
DRC2	0.11	0.10	2.46	4.05	
DRC3	0.15	0.13	1.97	1.86	
DRC4	0.48	0.25	0.08	-1.99	
DRC5	0.09	0.08	2.90	6.42	
DRC6	0.27	0.20	1.06	-0.88	
DRC7	0.18	0.15	1.63	0.66	
PTS					0.83
PTS1	1.78	0.37	-2.46	4.26	
PTS2	1.36	0.64	-0.73	-1.06	
PTS3	1.69	0.45	-1.86	1.78	
PTS4	1.00	0.87	0.00	-1.86	
PTS5	1.57	0.63	-1.39	0.02	
PTS6	1.32	0.84	-0.68	-1.47	
PTS7	1.18	0.51	-0.28	-1.01	
PTS8	1.13	0.75	-0.25	-1.62	
PTS9	1.37	0.78	-0.79	-1.25	
PTS10	1.26	0.88	-0.53	-1.65	
PTS11	1.39	0.53	-0.74	-0.78	
PTS13	1.17	0.65	-0.32	-1.40	
PSS					0.03
PSS1	0.33	0.22	0.74	-1.45	
PSS2	0.20	0.16	1.47	0.15	
PSS3	0.21	0.17	1.44	0.07	
PSS4	0.34	0.22	0.70	-1.51	
SHS					0.80
SHS1	0.09	0.08	2.97	6.84	
SHS2	0.14	0.12	2.04	2.15	
SHS3	0.10	0.09	2.75	5.54	
SHS4	0.16	0.14	1.83	1.34	
SHS5	0.25	0.19	1.18	-0.60	
SHS6	0.04	0.04	4.51	18.31	
SHS7	0.22	0.17	1.35	-0.18	
SHS8	0.05	0.05	4.26	16.17	
SHS9	0.08	0.08	3.00	7.05	
SHS10	0.06	0.06	3.75	12.02	
SHS11	0.03	0.03	5.14	24.46	
SHS12	0.03	0.03	5.41	27.21	
SHS13	0.06	0.05	3.84	12.72	
SHS14	0.29	0.21	0.93	-1.13	

*Note.* Reliability values displayed are McDonald's Omega. Full descriptions of each variable name are available in Appendix A.

## Confirmatory Factor Analysis

A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was run on a model including the nine scales (mobility-related academic challenges, program-related academic challenges, transition-related academic challenges, social-emotional development challenges, social-emotional family challenges, deployment-related challenges, parent school transition skill items, available school services, purple star school designation services) to examine the extent to which items in each scale supported the overall reliability of the measure (Hatcher, 2013). The chi-squared test ( $X^2(2378) = 9114.66, p < .000$ ) indicated that the nine-factor model is not an adequate fit. This test is sensitive to large sample sizes, so we rely on additional fit indices to interpret model fit (Hatcher, 2013). The model was deemed reliable with model fit indices within recommended ranges including root mean square error of approximation ( $< 0.60$ ), and standardized root mean square residual ( $< 0.08$ ) (Hatcher, 2013). The comparative fit index and Tucker Lewis index were lower than the typical threshold of 0.95 but were still approaching ideal fit for a model with many factors (Bentler, 1990). Results from the CFA are shown in Table 3.4.

**Table 3.4**  
*CFA Results for Model 1 Including Indexed Scale Items*

	df	X <sup>2</sup>	<i>p</i>	RMSEA	CFI	TLI	SRMR
Model 1	2378	9114.66	0.00	0.03	0.85	0.84	0.03

## Latent Profile Analysis

An LPA was conducted to determine the latent classes in the data with respect to parent-school satisfaction. Additional scaled scores for mobility-related academic challenges, program-related academic challenges, transition-related academic challenges, social-emotional development challenges, social-emotional family challenges, deployment-related challenges, parent school transition skill items, available school services, purple star school designation

services were included and demographic items (distance to installation, branch, duty status, school type, high school, middle school, elementary school, special education status) were included as covariates. All LPAs were conducted using MPlus v8.3. Model fit statistics are reported in Table 3.5. Each model number corresponds to the number of latent classes within the model, starting with three classes. Model 4 was retained for its low AIC (77773.77), low BIC (78274.11) and SABIC (77994.53) as well as its high entropy (0.99) and significant LMR  $p$ -value ( $p < .001$ ). An additional 5-class model was run with the same predictors and covariates, but the model could not replicate the log likelihood due to local maxima despite using 25000 random starts, the same number used for the four-class model. This indicates that the model was attempting to extract too many classes, and that the four-class model is a better fit for the data (Muthén & Muthén, 2017). Multinomial logistic regression results are included in Table 3.6. These results are detailed below within the description for each class because the results provide insight into class membership. Class 4 was selected as the reference class for the multinomial logistic regression because of its similar demographic proportions to the overall sample (Muthén & Muthén, 2017). Additional details about counts, proportions, and means for specific scales and categorical covariates for each class can be found in Table 3.7 and Table 3.8 respectively.

**Table 3.5**  
*LPA Model Fit Summary*

Model	Log Likelihood	AIC	BIC	SABIC	Entropy	Smallest Class (%)	LMR $p$ -value
3	-39292.46	78536.91	78912.17	78702.48	0.95	14	<.001
4	-38798.89	77773.77	78274.11	77994.53	0.99	11	<.001

*Note.* AIC= Akaike’s information criterion; BIC= Bayesian information criterion; SABIC= sample-adjusted BIC; LMR= Lo, Mendell, and Rubin test.

**Table 3.6***Multinomial Logistic Regression Results Predicting Profile Membership*

Class	Predictor	B(SE)	df	p-value	Odds Ratio (OR)	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Class 1	DISTINS	-0.29(0.16)	3	0.04	0.75	0.43	1.07
Class 1	HS	0.65(0.20)	3	0.02	1.91	1.51	2.31
Class 2	HS	0.45(0.19)	3	0.05	1.57	1.19	1.95
Class 3	DISTINS	-0.32(0.10)	3	0.00	0.73	0.53	0.93
Class 3	BRANCHT	-0.10(0.05)	3	0.04	0.91	0.81	1.01
Class 3	SCHOOLT	-0.18(0.09)	3	0.02	0.84	0.66	1.02

*Note.* Comparison of classes to class 4. Only results significant at the  $p < .05$  level displayed. DISTINS is distance to installation, HS is child in high school, BRANCHT is service branch affiliation of family, SCHOOLT is school type attended by children in family.

**Table 3.7.***Retained Four-Profile Counts, Proportions, and Covariate Means*

Variable	Class 1	Class 2	Class 3	Class 4
	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)
	232 (11%)	271 (12%)	1178 (54%)	496 (23%)
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>
RMACT	<u>3.45(6.53)</u>	2.99(6.07)	1.64(2.33)	2.23(3.73)
ACPROT	1.29(4.20)	1.20(3.27)	1.24(1.87)	<u>1.47(2.80)</u>
ACTRANST	<u>1.31(3.73)</u>	1.08(3.27)	1.16(1.87)	1.04(2.80)
SEDEVT	3.08(7.00)	<u>3.20(6.07)</u>	2.97(3.27)	3.02(4.67)
SEHOMET	0.88(2.8)	0.87(2.8)	0.85(1.40)	<u>0.91(1.87)</u>
DRCT	1.41(4.67)	<u>1.62(4.67)</u>	1.46(2.33)	1.41(2.80)
PTST	5.97(12.60)	<u>6.17(11.20)</u>	6.08(5.60)	6.01(8.40)
PSST	<u>4.00(0.00)</u>	3.00(0.00)	0.00(0.00)	1.62(0.93)
SHST	<u>1.49(6.53)</u>	1.45(6.07)	1.35(2.80)	1.16(3.73)

*Note.* Values underlined are the highest across the four classes.



**Table 3.8***Counts and Percentages of Class and Sample by Categorical Covariates*

	Class 1		Class 2		Class 3		Class 4		Full Sample
	n(%)	% of Sample	n(%)	% of sample	n(%)	% of sample	n(%)	% of sample	n
<b>Distance to Installation</b>									
Close	206(88.79)	9.46	225(83.03)	10.34	1065(90.41)	48.92	413(83.27)	18.97	1909
Near	15(6.47)	0.69	19(7.01)	0.87	51(4.33)	2.34	43(8.67)	1.98	128
Far	11(4.74)	0.51	27(9.96)	1.24	62(5.26)	2.85	40(8.06)	1.84	140
<b>Service Branch</b>									
Army	98(42.24)	4.50	96(35.42)	4.41	434(36.84)	19.94	172(34.68)	7.90	800
Air Force	63(27.16)	2.89	84(31.00)	3.86	441(37.44)	20.26	159(32.06)	7.30	747
Navy	46(19.83)	2.11	63(23.25)	2.89	210(17.83)	9.65	115(23.19)	5.28	434
Marine									
Corps	17(7.33)	0.78	21(7.75)	0.96	52(4.41)	2.39	30(6.05)	1.38	120
Coast									
Guard	7(3.02)	0.32	7(2.58)	0.32	38(3.23)	1.75	19(3.83)	0.87	71
2+									
Branches	1(0.43)	0.05	(0)	0.00	3(0.25)	0.14	1(0.2)	0.05	5
<b>Duty Status</b>									
Active	196(84.48)	9.00	228(84.13)	10.47	988(83.87)	45.38	410(82.66)	18.83	1822
Reserve	2(0.86)	0.09	4(1.48)	0.18	21(1.78)	0.96	9(1.81)	0.41	36
National									
Guard	3(1.29)	0.14	4(1.48)	0.18	26(2.21)	1.19	8(1.61)	0.37	41
Veteran	18(7.76)	0.83	26(9.59)	1.19	94(7.98)	4.32	44(8.87)	2.02	182
2+ Statuses	13(5.6)	0.60	9(3.32)	0.41	49(4.16)	2.25	25(5.04)	1.15	96
<b>School Type</b>									
Charter	7(3.02)	0.32	9(3.32)	0.41	19(1.61)	0.87	7(1.41)	0.32	42
DoDEA	10(4.31)	0.46	2(0.74)	0.09	87(7.39)	4.00	21(4.23)	0.96	120
Private	19(8.19)	0.87	18(6.64)	0.83	114(9.68)	5.24	41(8.27)	1.88	192
Public	190(81.9)	8.73	240(88.56)	11.02	943(80.05)	43.32	420(84.68)	19.29	1793
Virtual	6(2.59)	0.28	2(0.74)	0.09	15(1.27)	0.69	7(1.41)	0.32	30
<b>School Level</b>									
High									
School	104(44.83)	4.78	110(40.59)	5.05	379(32.17)	17.41	156(31.45)	7.17	749
Middle									
School	102(43.97)	4.69	121(44.65)	5.56	411(34.89)	18.88	182(36.69)	8.36	816
Elementary									
School	149(64.22)	6.84	179(66.05)	8.22	844(71.65)	38.77	349(70.36)	16.03	1521
<b>Special Education Status</b>									
Parent-	63(27.16)	2.89	58(21.4)	2.66	271(23.01)	12.45	129(26.01)	5.93	521

School Satisfaction										
No	81(34.91)	3.72	96(35.42)	4.41	357(30.31)	16.40	169(34.07)	7.76	703	
I'm not sure	39(16.81)	1.79	45(16.61)	2.07	215(18.25)	9.88	92(18.55)	4.23	391	
Yes	80(34.48)	3.67	102(37.64)	4.69	436(37.01)	20.03	176(35.48)	8.08	794	
Wish not to answer	4(1.72)	0.18	2(0.74)	0.09	10(0.85)	0.46	4(0.81)	0.18	20	
N/A	1(0.43)	0.05	2(0.74)	0.09	5(0.42)	0.23	1(0.2)	0.05	9	
Blank	27(11.64)	1.24	24(8.86)	1.10	155(13.16)	7.12	54(10.89)	2.48	260	

### *Class 1*

The results of the four-class model are presented in Tables 3.7 and 3.8. Class one contained 232 parents and 11% of the sample. This class had the highest means for RMACT (mobility-related academic challenges;  $M=3.45$ ) and ACTRANST (transition-related academic challenges;  $M=1.31$ ) as well as the highest means for PSST (purple star school designation services;  $M=4.00$ ) and SHST (available school services;  $M=1.49$ ). This class also had the lowest percentage (34.48%) of members indicate that they were satisfied with the school's ability to meet the needs of military-connected students.

Multinomial logistic regression results suggest that this class is significantly different from class four with respect to the distance between the members' homes and their assigned installation (DISTINS;  $p=.04$ ; OR=.75) and whether the respondent's children were in high school (HS;  $p=.02$ ; OR=1.91), with those living close to their assigned installation being more likely to be in class 4 than class one and with those having a child in high school being more likely to be in class 1 than class 4. These results suggest that an individual indicating that they lived close to the installation or having a child in high school significantly impacted an individual's likelihood of being in class 1 versus class 4, and that both distance between home and assigned installation and school level significantly impact class placement in the model.

### *Class 2*

Class two contained 271 parents and 12% of the sample. The class had the highest means for SEDEVT (social-emotional development challenges;  $M=3.20$ ), DRCT (deployment-related challenges;  $M=1.62$ ), and PTST (parent school transition skills;  $M=6.17$ ). Additionally, this class had the highest percentage (37.64%) indicate that they were satisfied with their child's school's ability to meet the needs of military-connected students.

Multinomial logistic regression results suggest that class two is significantly different from class four with respect to whether the respondent's children were in high school (HS;  $p=.05$ ; OR=1.57) with 40.59% of class two and only 31.45% of class 4 indicating that they had a child in high school. These results suggest that an individual who indicated they have a child in high school is significantly more likely to belong to class 2 than class 4.

### ***Class 3***

Class 3 is the largest and contained 1178 parents and 54% of the sample. This class did not have the highest means for any indicator but did have the lowest means for RMACT (mobility-related academic challenges;  $M=1.64$ ), SEDEVT (social-emotional development challenges;  $M=2.97$ ), SEHOMET (social-emotional family challenges;  $M=0.85$ ), and PSST (purple star school designation services;  $M=0.00$ ). These findings suggest that individuals in class 3 experience the lowest average number of challenges across the three classes in these specific domains. Additionally, class three had the lowest percentage of respondents indicate that their child's school was not prepared to meet the needs of military-connected students (30.31%).

Multinomial logistic regression results suggest that class 3 is significantly different from class four with respect to the distance between the respondent's home and their assigned installation (DISTINS;  $p<.00$ ; OR=.73), the service branch affiliation of the family (BRANCHT;  $p=.04$ ; OR=.91), and the school type attended by the child(ren) (SCHOOLT;  $p<.02$ ; OR=.84).

These findings suggest that those living farther from the installation, those affiliated with the Army or Air Force, and those attending school types other than public schools were more likely to be in class 3 than class 4. Those living near the installation, affiliated with service branches other than Army or Air Force, and attending public schools were more likely to be in class 4 than class 3.

#### ***Class 4***

Class 4 contained 496 respondents and 23% of the sample. This class had the highest means for ACTRANST (transition-related academic challenges;  $M=1.47$ ) and SEHOMET (social-emotional family challenges;  $M=0.91$ ). Additionally, this class had the highest percentage (18.55%) indicate that they were not sure if they were satisfied with their child's school's ability to meet the needs of military-connected children. Because class 4 was used as the reference group for the multinomial logistic regression, it does not appear as a line item in Table 3.6. Class 4 was significantly different from each class, and the specific differences for each class were covered in the class descriptions above and when used as the reference class for interpreting Table 3.6.

#### **Latent Class Analysis**

An additional latent class analysis (LCA) was run to explore latent classes with each survey item included individually. This model included a total of 86 variables and 8 covariates, making it computationally demanding (Muthén & Muthén, 2017). The estimation time for the model was more than 190 hours, making adjustments and multiple models unfeasible. The results from the best-fitting model (3 classes) indicated poor fit with two very small classes ( $n=70$  and  $n=20$ ) and one very large class ( $n=2087$ ). Additionally, the model's results did not provide any novel insight or interpretable answers to the research questions and attempts to

adjust the model parameters were unsuccessful. Further discussion of the study's results will rely on those from the LPA model discussed above.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the existence of latent classes within the sample with respect to parent-school satisfaction and to understand how those subgroups were related to demographic items and scaled-item variables related to academic and social-emotional wellbeing and the effects of military lifestyle demands.

Latent classes revealed in the sample help to provide context for situations military-connected families experience that may be related to parent-school satisfaction. Class 1 represented individuals with the highest challenges related to residential mobility and academic transitions, the greatest average number of school services and purple star services, and the lowest percentage of individuals indicating they were satisfied with their child's school's ability to meet the needs of military-connected students. The findings from class one suggest that while there are schools taking steps to meet the needs of military-connected students, those schools may not be taking the right steps to address challenges related specifically to residential mobility and transition.

Additionally, class 2 represented individuals with the highest means for social-emotional development challenges, deployment-related challenges, and parent school transition skills. These parents indicated that their child faced challenges unique to the military lifestyle but that they, as the parent, had built skills to help them overcome them. Parents in class 2 also had the highest percentage of respondents indicate they were satisfied with their child's school's ability to meet the needs of military-connected students of any class. These results suggest that perhaps the current social-emotional interventions deployed in schools may be working to address the

needs of military-connected students. Similarly to other work in the space, these findings also suggest that timely and relevant parent education resources for service members and their spouses could help empower parents to support their children academically and social-emotionally (Aronson et al., 2011; Clark et al., 2018; DeVoe et al., 2019).

Class 3 members had the lowest means mobility-related academic challenges, social-emotional development challenges, social-emotional family challenges, and purple star school designation services. This class also had the lowest number of parents indicate that they were not satisfied with their child's school's ability to meet the needs of military-connected students. This was the largest class, and while they were not the class with the highest parent-school satisfaction, the findings suggest that military-connected students with lower mobility-related and social-emotional challenges may have parents who are more satisfied with their child's school's ability to meet their needs. This class is primarily comprised of active duty Army and Air Force families who live close to their assigned installation and attend public, private, and DoDEA schools. The findings from this class raise additional questions for future research about the relationship between these constructs to further understand the directions of influence. In other words, more research is needed to understand whether the supportive schools reduce challenges, the reduction in challenges bolster supportive schools, or a combination of the two.

Finally, class 4 members had the highest means for transition-related academic and social-emotional family challenges while also having the highest percentage (18.55%) of participants indicating that they were not sure if they were satisfied with their child's school's ability to meet the needs of military-connected children. This class had the lowest percentage of parents of high school students and had the lowest percentage of Army families than any other class. These class attributes may suggest that there may be something unique about the

experiences of parents of older children or Army-connected families that could provide insight into their school experiences. Findings from class 4 suggest that individuals with children younger than high school may be unsure of whether their child's school is prepared to meet their needs, especially when they are experiencing transition-related or social-emotional challenges within their family.

### **Bioecological Systems Lens**

Findings from these latent classes help to provide critical context for the bioecological systems influencing military-connected students. Variables included in the analysis represent factors present in each of the bioecological systems (i.e., microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem), and offer insight into how each impacts parent satisfaction with school.

#### ***Microsystem***

Made up of the systems closest to the individual on a daily basis, functioning of the microsystem is critical to developmental success (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Findings from this study suggest that many microsystemic factors influence both class membership and parent-school satisfaction. Distance between home and the assigned installation and school type were both significant results for the multinomial logistic regression in this model, suggesting that being near the base community and its resources and selecting the best school type for your child significantly impact microsystemic interactions for both parents and children in military families.

#### ***Mesosystem***

This model also offers insight into opportunities to understand and improve mesosystemic interactions for military-connected students, families, and communities. The mesosystem is the relationships and interactions between an individual's microsystems

(Bronfenbrenner, 2005), and in the case of military-connected students, this is primarily their families, schools, and communities. This model's results highlight the ongoing needs for additional research and interventions demonstrated in past research to support military-connected families and their schools (DeVoe et al., 2019; Esqueda, 2012; Masten, 2013). For example, class one in this model had the highest averages for several types of academic transition challenges and school service items, but still had the lowest average for parent-school satisfaction. These findings suggest that these mesosystemic interactions still need improvements to increase awareness, skills, and intervention efficacy across domains for military-connected students.

### *Exosystem*

The exosystem is the indirect interactions an individual experiences as a result of their micro and mesosystems (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). For military-connected children, their most obvious exosystem influences to their education are their service member parent's job and the decisions and policies governing their school system. Results from this study suggest that distance between an individual's home and their assigned installation and service branch influence class membership, suggesting that parent-school satisfaction differs for those living closer to their assigned installation or belonging to specific service branches in the sample. These findings provide new opportunities to examine specific services and opportunities on military installations and within service branches and evaluate their impact on parent-school satisfaction and other academic and social-emotional outcomes for military-connected youth. Exploring this may provide interventions and services from specific locations or branches to replicate or scale to serve more military-connected families.

### *Macrosystem*



The macrosystem is the larger social and cultural context for development (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), and for military-connected children this is largely how the United States perceives the military and military service. Results from this study suggest that communities and school structures in the United States still lack the acknowledgement and support that military-connected students and families need to feel successful. Only 36% of the sample in this study indicated that they believed that their child's school was prepared to meet the needs of their military-connected student and many families in the study were still experiencing transition challenges that have been mentioned in research and calls to action for nearly a decade (e.g., transferring student records, accessing extracurricular activities). These findings suggest that there is still work to be done in raising awareness, sympathy, and action to support the needs of military-connected students across the country.

### ***Chronosystem***

The chronosystem represents the influences of the time in history when a person has lived, and in the case of the present study, a primary component of the chronosystem is the COVID-19 pandemic. Data for this study were collected in 2020 right before and during the earliest days of COVID-related closures and shutdowns. Families during this time were likely experiencing an increase in stress and worry about their children's academic and social-emotional wellbeing much like the rest of the world (National Military Families Association & Bloom, 2022). Additionally, results of this model provide some insights into the timing of development within a family. Results suggest that there are differences in parent-school satisfaction related to school level of the child. These findings highlight the value of time and experience with the military lifestyle and the need for timely parent resources, training, and

skills. Examining these results with those chronosystemic events in mind provides critical context.

By examining latent classes, this model offers novel insights into unique relationships and patterns that exist across the sample. In this specific model, the LCA results help to reveal how demographic and situational factors like how close an individual lives to an installation, the transition related challenges they experience, and what level of school their child attends may impact their overall perceptions of school. Exploring these factors through a bioecological systems framework helps to highlight the many factors and stakeholders who have the opportunity to influence parent-school satisfaction within the military-connected community.

### **Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

This study's results should be interpreted with consideration paid to its limitations. Firstly, this study relied on a convenience sample of survey respondents to the Military Child Education Coalitions MilKids Now 2020 survey. Because of its reliance on volunteers, it is possible that this sample overrepresents parents with strong opinions, both positive and negative, about their child(ren)'s academic experiences. Additionally, the survey tool did not include items about service member rank or other sociodemographic factors. Future work with this population should strive to obtain a more representative sample and include items related to rank, socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, and other sociodemographic items to provide additional insight into how these variables may be related to parent-school satisfaction and other issues in the military-connected community.

The sample for this study also underrepresented National Guard and reserve duty service members. The military experiences for this group are distinctly different from active duty service members, and this undersampling makes it difficult to apply study findings to them. In addition

to the need for representative sampling, future work should continue to explore and highlight the experiences and needs of National Guard and reserve members due to their unique military experiences. These groups are often underrepresented in research about military families, leaving a tremendous gap in knowledge about how to best meet their needs.

Additionally, the initial plan to utilize both an LPA and an LCA was not feasible with the resources and time available for this project. The LCA was more computationally demanding than expected and very lengthy estimation times did not allow for model modifications or comparisons necessary for model building and proper interpretation. Because of this, the model did not yield useful or interpretable results to answer the research questions of this study. Future analyses of this model should examine LCA reductions and multistep approaches to reducing complexity in an effort to still generate a useful and interpretable model. Additional research in this area should consider accounting for these additional opportunities for reduction to glean the most insight from complex LCA models.

Finally, it is critical to consider the timing of data collection for this work in interpreting its results. Data for this study were collected in the early spring of 2020, just before and during the height of pandemic-related school closures and shutdowns. It is possible that concerns tied to COVID-related school closures and learning interruptions are not accurately reflected in these results because of the timing of data collection. Additionally, data for this study were collected before the United States military forces withdrew from Afghanistan in August of 2021, officially ending the longest ongoing military conflict in American history. The timing of both of those events has likely impacted military-connected families, and future research projects should continue to prioritize measuring the effects of these major events on this population.

## **Implications**

This study provides a few novel contributions to the research concerning the school experiences of military-connected students. Firstly, this study utilizes a dataset with responses from across the nation to explore latent classes of military-connected families with respect to parent-school satisfaction across numerous demographic variables and items related to military lifestyle demands. This method analyzes data from parent perspectives to provide distinct profiles that can be used in further research and interventions. These data provide an updated snapshot of how military-connected families felt about school in 2020 on a broader scale than many other research studies, and the results provide new information about how parents are perceiving their child(ren)'s academic experiences. Perhaps most importantly, results from this study further support the need for intentional and timely interventions for increasingly diverse military-connected families in future research and practice.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the school experiences of military-connected students through parental perceptions of their child(ren)'s school(s). This study used latent profile analysis to explore individual response patterns across a sample of military-connected families, identifying four distinct groups, each with key participant characteristics and variables of interest. These findings, while not exhaustive, provided needed insight into how current school-based and military interventions may be supporting individuals with specific characteristics within the military community while simultaneously shedding light on potential gaps and opportunities for improvement. When examined through the lens of bioecological systems theory, these findings highlight the everchanging needs of the military-connected community and numerous opportunities for stakeholders within all systems to identify and support the needs of military-connected children and families. This study serves as an additional

resource in the body of research seeking to understand this increasingly diverse and mobile student population in an effort to ensure schools and communities are prepared to meet their needs.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Survey Items**

#### **Demographic Items**

1. Please enter your zip code
2. Please select your branch of service (Army, Air Force, Navy, Marine Corps, Coast Guard)
3. Please select your affiliation with the military (active Duty, reserve, National Guard, veteran)
4. What military installation is nearest to your current residence? (please select the state with the installation nearest to your residence from the drop-down menu below [if out of the US select that option]; after selecting an option, another drop-down list will be displayed. Please select the military installation from the second drop-down menu)
5. Your children's school- please select school type- select all that apply (Charter school, DoDEA [K-12], Homeschool, Private school, Public school, Virtual school, Other [please specify])
6. Your child(ren)'s grade level- select all that apply (9-12th, 6th-8th, Prekindergarten-5th)
7. Is there a student with exceptional needs living in your home? (Yes, No)

#### **Parent Satisfaction with School**

Thinking of your child(ren)'s current school:

1. Do you feel the school is prepared to meet the needs of military-connected students?  
(Yes, No, I'm not sure, I wish not to answer, Does not apply)

#### **Mobility- Related Academic Challenges**

1. **Curricular Concerns-** select all that apply (Being unprepared for curriculum differences (learning gaps), Addressing variations in state academic standards, Transferring credits, Interpreting transcripts/course alignment, Finding equivalent courses (e.g., foreign languages, advanced courses, AP, IB, etc.), Meeting graduation requirements, Calculating grade point averages, Understanding state/national testing differences/requirements, None of the above apply)

### **Program-Related Academic Challenges**

1. **Programs/Placement-** select all that apply (Accessing gifted education programs, Accessing advanced academic programs (honors, Advanced Placement, etc.), Accessing career and technical education programs, Transferring special education documentation (e.g., IEP, 504 Plan, Behavior Plan, HS Transition Plan), Accessing appropriate special education placement and supports, Maintaining eligibility for extracurricular activities (e.g., sports, band, choir, orchestra, debate, etc.), None of the above apply)

### **Transition-Related Academic Challenges**

1. **Transition Concerns-** select all that apply (Handling language barriers/differences, Moving mid-school year, Handling schedule discrepancies between sending and receiving schools (i.e., traditional vs. block schedules), Dealing with school-year calendar discrepancies (i.e., conflicting start and end dates), Preparing for the college application and enrollment process, Preparing for career choices, None of the above apply)

### **Social/Emotional Challenges**

1. **Social-Emotional Development Challenges-** select all that apply (Feeling of Acceptance/“Fitting in” (school and local culture), Making friends, Addressing behavioral mental/health concerns (anxiety, depression, substance abuse, self-harm, etc.),

Addressing bullying concerns (cyber and/or in-person), Dealing with peer pressure, Managing stress, Building self-confidence, None of the above apply)

2. **Social-Emotional Family**- select all that apply (Coping with divorce or separation, Coping with the loss of a family member or friend, Dealing with parent deployment/reunion, Handling changes in home life and/or academics due to a service member's injury/health, Coping with challenges when a parent leaves the military, Dealing with poverty/homelessness, None of the above apply)

### **Deployment-Related Challenges**

1. Has/have your child(ren) experienced any of the following challenges during family separation (e.g., deployment, TDY, etc.)- select all that apply (Academic grade fluctuations, Withdrawal from school activities, Withdrawal from friends, Changes in behavior/discipline, Physical changes (appetite, drug use, self-harm, etc.), Role changes (taking on new/additional responsibilities), My child(ren) have not experienced any of the above challenges)

### **Parent School Transition Skill Items- Level of Understanding**

1. I understand... (Yes, No, Does not apply)
- how to find the documents I need to have in order to enroll my child(ren) in a new school.
  - how to find information about differences between states regarding minimum age requirements for enrolling early learners (e.g., Kindergarten and 1st grade students).
  - I should hand-carry unofficial transcripts to a new school for initial evaluation.

- how to help my child(ren) create a portfolio with examples of student work, assessments, etc., that could help supplement my child(ren)'s transcripts from other schools, states and countries.
- how to find information about state immunization requirements and exceptions for new students.
- how to advocate for appropriate classroom and/or educational program placement for my child(ren).
- how to advocate for appropriate placement of my child(ren) with IEPs or 504 Plans into appropriate classrooms or programs.
- how to advocate for placement of my child(ren) into gifted programs.
- how to advocate for my child(ren) for placement into extracurricular activities, including sports and academic groups.
- how to inform schools that student absences may be given special consideration when related to parent deployment and student transition.
- graduation exams may be different between states.
- how to find information about graduation requirements in different states and countries.
- how to obtain graduation-waivers for students who move in their senior year of high school.

### **School Services Items**

1. **Available School Services-** Thinking of your child(ren)'s current school, what events, special activities, and/or resources are offered for military-connected students?- select all that apply (Student mentoring programs, Welcoming events (e.g., socials, mixers, etc.), Student leadership programs, New student assistance (e.g., tours, lunch buddies, etc.),

Recognition of the Month of the Military Child, Purple Star campus/school designation, Ceremonies honoring military service members, Military Unit Adopt-a-School, Professional staff dedicated to student transitional support, Webpage/social media site for student transitional support, College and career readiness classes/activities for highly mobile students, Farewell procedures/activities for students getting ready to PCS, Student club/organization for student transitional support, I am not aware of any events, special activities or resources)

2. **Purple Star School Designation Services-** Which of the following has prepared the school to meet the needs of military-connected students?- select all that apply (Having a designated on-site staff member who acts as a military liaison/point of contact, Having a web-page with information that supports transitioning to the school, Having a student-led, campus-based student transition program, Having professional development for staff that addresses supporting military-connected students). Note that these are included in the data codebook (Appendix B) as Purple Star School items (PSST) because they are the four most common requirements of state-run Purple Star designation programs.



## Appendix B

Theme	Survey Item	Variable Name	Code Definitions
Demographic Variables	Response ID	PartID	assigned code from dataset
	Distance between home and assigned installation in miles	DistIns	binned 1= 0-20, 2= 21-40, 3= 40+
	Service Branch	BranchT	1= Army, 2= Air Force, 3= Navy, 4= Marine Corps, 5= Coast Guard, >5 two or more branches in family
	Duty Status	DutyT	1= active, 2= reserve, 3= National Guard, 4= veteran, >4 = 2 or more statuses in family
	School Type	SchoolT	1= Charter, 2= DoDEA, 3=Private, 4= Public, 5= Virtual
	Has child in high school	HS	0= no, 1= yes
	Has child in middle school	MS	0= no, 1= yes
	Has child in elementary school	ES	0= no, 1= yes
<b>RMAcT</b>		RMAcT	index, 0-8
Please select any of the following mobility and transition challenges experienced/encountered. Academic challenges experienced/encountered(select all that apply)Curricular Concerns			
	Being unprepared for curriculum differences (learning gaps)	RMAc1	0= no, 1= yes
	Addressing variations in state academic standards	RMAc2	0= no, 1= yes
	Transferring credits	RMAc3	0= no, 1= yes
	Interpreting transcripts/course alignment	RMAc4	0= no, 1= yes
	Finding equivalent courses (e.g., foreign languages, advanced courses, AP, IB, etc.)	RMAc5	0= no, 1= yes
	Meeting graduation requirements	RMAc6	0= no, 1= yes
	Calculating grade point averages	RMAc7	0= no, 1= yes
	Understanding state/national testing differences/requirements	RMAc8	0= no, 1= yes
	None of the above apply	RMAc9	0= no, 1= yes
<b>AcProT</b>		AcProT	index, 0-6

Academic challenges experienced/encountered(s elect all that apply)Programs/Placement			
	Accessing gifted education programs	AcPro1	0= no, 1= yes
	Accessing advanced academic programs (honors, Advanced Placement, etc.)	AcPro2	0= no, 1= yes
	Accessing career and technical education programs	AcPro3	0= no, 1= yes
	Transferring special education documentation (e.g., IEP, 504 Plan, Behavior Plan, HS Transition Plan)	AcPro4	0= no, 1= yes
	Accessing appropriate special education placement and supports	AcPro5	0= no, 1= yes
	Maintaining eligibility for extracurricular activities (e.g., sports, band, choir, orchestra, debate, etc.)	AcPro6	0= no, 1= yes
	None of the above apply	AcPro7	0= no, 1= yes
<b>AcTransT</b>		AcTrans2	
Academic challenges experienced/encountered(s elect all that apply)Transition Concerns			
	Handling language barriers/differences	AcTrans1	0= no, 1= yes
	Moving mid-school year	AcTrans2	0= no, 1= yes
	Handling schedule discrepancies between sending and receiving schools (i.e., traditional vs. block schedules)	AcTrans3	0= no, 1= yes
	Dealing with school-year calendar discrepancies (i.e., conflicting start and end dates)	AcTrans4	0= no, 1= yes
	Preparing for the college application and enrollment process	AcTrans5	0= no, 1= yes
	Preparing for career choices	AcTrans6	0= no, 1= yes
	None of the above apply	AcTrans7	0= no, 1= yes
<b>SEDevT</b>		SEDevT	index, 0-7
Social/Emotional challenges experienced/encountered(s elect all that apply)Healthy Development			
	Feeling of Acceptance/“Fitting in” (school and local culture)	SEDev1	0= no, 1= yes
	Making friends	SEDev2	0= no, 1= yes
	Addressing behavioral mental/health concerns (anxiety, depression, substance abuse, self-harm, etc.)	SEDev3	0= no, 1= yes
	Addressing bullying concerns (cyber and/or in-person)	SEDev4	0= no, 1= yes
	Dealing with peer pressure	SEDev5	0= no, 1= yes

	Managing stress	SEDev6	0= no, 1= yes
	Building self-confidence	SEDev7	0= no, 1= yes
	None of the above apply	SEDev8	0= no, 1= yes
SEHomeT		SEHomeT	index, 0-6
Social/Emotional challenges experienced/encountered(select all that apply)Home Life/Family Relationships			
	Coping with divorce or separation	SEHome1	0= no, 1= yes
	Coping with the loss of a family member or friend	SEHome2	0= no, 1= yes
	Dealing with parent deployment/reunion	SEHome3	0= no, 1= yes
	Handling changes in home life and/or academics due to a service member's injury/health	SEHome4	0= no, 1= yes
	Coping with challenges when a parent leaves the military	SEHome5	0= no, 1= yes
	Dealing with poverty/homelessness	SEHome6	0= no, 1= yes
	None of the above apply	SEHome7	0= no, 1= yes
<b>DRCT</b>	index, 0-6	DRCT	
Has/have your child(ren) experienced any of the following challenges during family separation?(e.g., deployment, TDY, etc.)Click on the question mark for separation definitions			
	Academic grade fluctuations	DRC1	0= no, 1= yes
	Withdrawal from school activities	DRC2	0= no, 1= yes
	Withdrawal from friends	DRC3	0= no, 1= yes
	Changes in behavior/discipline	DRC4	0= no, 1= yes
	Physical changes (appetite, drug use, self-harm, etc.)	DRC5	0= no, 1= yes
	Role changes (taking on new/additional responsibilities)	DRC6	0= no, 1= yes
	My child(ren) have not experienced any of the above challenges	DRC7	0= no, 1= yes
<b>SPED Status</b>	Is there a student with exceptional needs living in your home?	SPED	0= no, 1= yes, 3= I wish not to answer, -999= missing
<b>Parent-School Satisfaction</b>	Do you feel the school is prepared to meet the needs of military-connected students?(e.g., academic, social/emotional, transition, etc.)	ParSat	0= no, 1= I'm not sure, 2= yes, -999= missing

<b>ParKwT</b>		PTST	0-13, total number of skills marked "yes", does not count "DNA"
Parent transition skills	how to find the documents I need to have in order to enroll my child(ren) in a new school.	PTS1	0= no, 1= does not apply, 2=yes
	how to find information about differences between states regarding minimum age requirements for enrolling early learners (e.g., Kindergarten and 1st grade students).	PTS2	0= no, 1= does not apply, 2=yes
	I should hand-carry unofficial transcripts to a new school for initial evaluation.	PTS3	0= no, 1= does not apply, 2=yes
	how to help my child(ren) create a portfolio with examples of student work, assessments, etc., that could help supplement my child(ren)'s transcripts from other schools, states and countries.	PTS4	0= no, 1= does not apply, 2=yes
	how to find information about state immunization requirements and exceptions for new students.	PTS5	0= no, 1= does not apply, 2=yes
	how to advocate for appropriate classroom and/or educational program placement for my child(ren).	PTS6	0= no, 1= does not apply, 2=yes
	how to advocate for appropriate placement of my child(ren) with IEPs or 504 Plans into appropriate classrooms or programs.	PTS7	0= no, 1= does not apply, 2=yes
	how to advocate for placement of my child(ren) into gifted programs.	PTS8	0= no, 1= does not apply, 2=yes
	how to advocate for my child(ren) for placement into extracurricular activities, including sports and academic groups.	PTS9	0= no, 1= does not apply, 2=yes
	how to inform schools that student absences may be given special consideration when related to parent deployment and student transition.	PTS10	0= no, 1= does not apply, 2=yes
	graduation exams may be different between states.	PTS11	0= no, 1= does not apply, 2=yes
	how to find information about graduation requirements in different states and countries.	PTS12	0= no, 1= does not apply, 2=yes
	how to obtain graduation-waivers for students who move in their senior year of high school.	PTS13	0= no, 1= does not apply, 2=yes
<b>PSST</b>		PSST	0-4, sum of purple star school components offered at current school
Which of the following has prepared the school to meet the needs of military-connected students.(select all that apply)	Having a designated on-site staff member who acts as a military liaison/point of contact	PSS1	0= no, 1= yes

	Having a web-page with information that supports transitioning to the school	PSS2	0= no, 1= yes
	Having a student-led, campus-based student transition program	PSS3	0= no, 1= yes
	Having professional development for staff that addresses supporting military-connected students	PSS4	0= no, 1= yes
<b>SchServT</b>		SchST	0-13, sum of school supports/services for MCS offered at current school
What events, special activities, and/or resources are offered for military-connected students?(select all that apply)			
	Student mentoring programs	SchST1	0= no, 1= yes
	Welcoming events (e.g., socials, mixers, etc.)	SchST2	0= no, 1= yes
	Student leadership programs	SchST3	0= no, 1= yes
	New student assistance (e.g., tours, lunch buddies, etc.)	SchST4	0= no, 1= yes
	Recognition of the Month of the Military Child	SchST5	0= no, 1= yes
	Purple Star campus/school designation	SchST6	0= no, 1= yes
	Ceremonies honoring military service members	SchST7	0= no, 1= yes
	Military Unit Adopt-a-School	SchST8	0= no, 1= yes
	Professional staff dedicated to student transitional support	SchST9	0= no, 1= yes
	Webpage/social media site for student transitional support	SchST10	0= no, 1= yes
	College and career readiness classes/activities for highly mobile students	SchST11	0= no, 1= yes
	Farewell procedures/activities for students getting ready to PCS	SchST12	0= no, 1= yes
	Student club/organization for student transitional support	SchST13	0= no, 1= yes
	I am not aware of any events, special activities or resources	SchST14	0= no, 1= yes

## CHAPTER IV

### PAPER 3: EXPLORING THE ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES OF MILITARY-CONNECTED STUDENTS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF TEACHERS, PARENTS, AND STUDENTS IN SCHOOLS IN THE UNITED STATES

#### **Abstract**

Military-connected teens and their families face multiple complex military lifestyle demands like frequent residential mobility and service-related separations. These challenges influence teens' academic and social-emotional experiences, but little is known about how these students navigate these challenges in their own lives. This study explores the experiences of military-connected teens in their own words and in the words of their parents and teachers through triadic focus (i.e., with a teen, parent, and teacher) groups followed by role-based focus groups. Additionally, this study specifically situates the military-connected teen's experience in a positive youth development (PYD) framework in an effort to explore individual strengths and contextual assets. Resulting themes are defined and discussed using Lerner and Lerner's 5Cs of PYD. Limitations, implications for practice, and suggestions for future research are provided.

## **Introduction**

The landscape of schooling in the United States has evolved greatly over its history, especially with respect to the student population. Over the past two decades, the American population has become increasingly diverse with respect to nearly every sociodemographic factor (Frey, 2021). As Americans have grown more diverse, their lifestyles and circumstances have evolved as well. These changes have led to an increase in diversity in elements of the student population including variables like race and ethnicity, family and living arrangements, socioeconomic status, and parental employment. These changes are especially relevant for teachers and school professionals because they have implications for the way they work with students and families. Schools have a responsibility to identify changes in their communities and adapt to provide the most relevant and appropriate educational experiences for their students.

Schools are most successful when they understand their students' diverse needs and have structures and strategies in place to support them (Sanders & Galdino, 2014). With communities and student bodies growing more diverse than ever, it is critical that schools have on-going initiatives to educate their staff and implement innovative, proactive strategies to meet their evolving needs (Raphael et al., 2014). Teacher training related to trauma-informed teaching, social-emotional learning, and diversity, equity, and inclusion are growing in prevalence in teacher education and on-going professional development, giving teachers the tools they need to meet their students where they are (Martin et al., 2014).

Military-connected students are a key subgroup of nearly one million whose academic and social-emotional needs at school may not be as easily recognized by teachers and school staff. Teachers and school staff have knowledge gaps about their military-connected students resulting from unfamiliarity with the military lifestyle and accompanying stressors (Fenning,

2021; Harrison & Vannest, 2008), and those knowledge gaps result in decreased teacher confidence in working with military-connected students and families (Horton, 2005). Exploring how teachers, military-connected students, and their parents perceive schooling experiences can provide insight into which existing school-based supports may be working and where there may be additional needs.

### **Literature Review**

The impacts of military-connectedness on children and families are of growing interest in research in medicine, psychology, education, and other fields. Military-connectedness has varying definitions as it relates to qualifying for specific services or initiatives, but the term generally refers to a person having an immediate family member serving in the United States Armed Forces. According to the federally established Military Student Identifier for public schools, military-connected children are those who have a parent or guardian serving as active duty in the US Armed Forces (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). Many schools and other service providers have expanded this definition to include children of reservists, people serving in the National Guard, veterans and retirees because of the lasting impacts of military service. Military-connected children and families face numerous lifestyle demands including residential mobility and service-related separations, each associated with specific transitions and challenges (Cozza, 2014). Exploring the most common lifestyle demands of military-connected families helps provide vital context for the learning and development of military-connected children.

#### **Residential Mobility**

Among the most challenging lifestyle demands for military connected families is residential mobility. Residential mobility refers to a change in a person's living conditions or home. Residential mobility is common, with 13% of Americans moving each year (Frost, 2020).



Moves happen for a variety of reasons, positive and negative, but residential mobility is generally not viewed as a challenge unless it happens often or is accompanied with non-routine school change. Frequent non-routine school changes (e.g., moving mid-year or changing schools when other students typically would not) are of concern because of their threats to academic and social adjustment and are associated with internalized and externalized behavior problems and decreased engagement in classroom activities (Lleras & McKillip, 2017).

Military-connected children move 2.4 times more frequently than their civilian peers, often relocating 6-9 times before they are 18 years old (Clever & Segal, 2013). These physical relocations are paired with home, school, and extracurricular changes that disrupt almost all of the daily routines of children and families. Understanding the pervasive effects of frequent residential mobility on military-connected children and families is a core component of supporting their needs.

### *Home*

Residential mobility causes challenges within a family's home environment beyond the physical change of location, including academic adjustment. For many military-connected families, these relocations require significant amounts of parental advocacy to ensure their child's new school meets their specific needs. In spite of agreements like the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children intended to ease the burdens of these school transitions, academic transition issues remain a top concern for military families (Blue Star Families, 2021). Most military-related residential mobility occurs across state lines, further complicating the moves by requiring parents and students to navigate a new landscape of state and local-level policies and regulations (Clever & Segal, 2013). For example, states and local education agencies often have variability in their enrollment procedures, standardized testing

formats and requirements, kindergarten enrollment ages, credit-bearing course sequences, and graduation requirements. These situations often require parents of military-connected children to invest a great deal of time preparing for their child's school transition including identifying differing requirements, contacting a military school liaison, or even hiring an educational advocate for support (Cramm et al., 2019).

School transitions can be even more challenging for parents of children with special health and education needs where qualifying criteria and available services can vary greatly by location (Aronson et al., 2016). The military branches have established the Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP) to assist families with accessing required services for family members with special health and education needs such as access to medical specialists or applied behavior analysis therapy (Health Promotion and Wellness Public Health Assessment Division, 2019). While EFMP was established to ensure service members are only stationed where their families' needs can be met (i.e., service providers are local and available for the family member's unique needs), the program is not always appropriately utilized or supportive for military families, leaving parents to identify new providers, establish care, and manage billing and paperwork on their own with each new duty station (Health Promotion and Wellness Public Health Assessment Division, 2019; Aronson et al., 2016). Additionally, each service branch oversees their own EFMP program independently, further complicating the spread of information and the streamlining of services (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2020). Navigating transitions like these takes parental knowledge, skills, and time that impact their ability to attend to other work and family obligations (Cramm et al., 2019). It is not feasible for all parents of military-connected families to advocate for their children's needs in this way, likely resulting both in

undue stress and unmet health and educational needs for military-connected dependents and children.

Parents and families also guide their children in processing the social-emotional impacts of military-related relocation. With a third of military service members relocating every year, military-connected families live in communities that are constantly in flux (Clever & Segal, 2013). Parents and children both experience the emotional toll of frequent farewells and reintegrations as they and their peers are re-stationed cyclically, meaning that even in years when a family remains at the same station, their peers and service or care providers are still often changing. These transitions require frequent logistical and social-emotional attention from caregivers of military-connected children to maintain healthy relationships and access to necessary services (Cramm et al., 2019; Farley et al., 2022; Davis & Finke, 2015). Relocation has been found to impact psychosocial outcomes in military-connected children including mental health issues, substance use, social integration, peer support, and other behavioral problems (Tong et al., 2018). Additionally, the strain of relocation has also been found to disrupt family functioning in marital satisfaction and functioning, marital stability, communication, and quality of parent-child relationships (Tong et al., 2018). The stress, frequency, and uncertainty associated with military-related relocations are disruptive, and their impacts can be observed across all facets of family life.

### ***School***

As military-connected children change schools, they face numerous challenges to their academic progress. Because schools are primarily regulated at the state and local levels, academic course schedules, available services, and evaluation measures vary greatly across locations. For military-connected and other highly mobile student populations, this often means

missed requirements, learning gaps, and challenges accessing educational services (Pears et al., 2015; Herbers et al., 2012; Hunt, 2020).

School mobility for military-connected families is especially complex for families with children who need special education services. While the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) defines fourteen classes of identified disabilities that schools must support, states and localities often have legal authority to generate their own eligibility measures, criteria, and intervention schedules (Congressional Research Service, 2020). As military-connected families move into new states and municipalities, their children with special education needs often have to be reevaluated for eligibility and services (Aronson et al., 2016). In their 2021 survey results, Partners in Promise, a nonprofit organization specializing in special education access for military-connected children and families, found that military-connected students with previously established special education needs waited an average 5.75 months to receive their needed services following a relocation (Partners in Promise, 2022).

An added challenge to frequent school transitions for military-connected students is their general anonymity and a lack of awareness about their unique lifestyle demands. While there are service members and veterans in most communities across the country, less than one percent of the US population has ever served in the Armed Forces, and most Americans personally know no modern service members or veterans (Pew Research Center Social and Demographic Trends, 2011). This lack of knowledge about military service members in the community extends into schools where teachers and other education professionals have struggled to identify military-connected students and meaningful interventions to support them. While efforts like the inclusion of the Military Student Identifier in the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) and key organizations like the Military Child Education Coalition and The Clearinghouse for

Military Family Readiness at Penn State are working to bridge these gaps, awareness about this student population and use of resources to serve them still remain low in the education community (Ruff & Keim, 2014; Hicks, 2020; Hunt, 2018).

### **Service-Related Separations**

Another frequent challenge for military-connected families is navigating the realities of service-related separations. Service-related separations include any work assignments that require a military service member to be away from their home or assigned duty station. These separations include deployments, which typically span 6-12 months, as well as other temporary work assignments that vary in length. The frequency and duration of service-related separations vary by service branch, duty status, and service member specialization, so military-connected families can have very different separation experiences. For example, from September 11, 2001 to December 31, 2010, 85% of deployed service members were enlisted rank, with 50.3% being Army service members (Institute of Medicine of the National Academies, 2013). Additionally, 48.8% of service members deployed in that time were parents, and the average deployment time was 7.67 months with an average of 1.72 deployments per service member. These statistics help to illustrate the range of experiences service members have related to service-related separations and how the variability in frequency and duration of separations may impact families differently across the total force.

### ***Home***

Service-related separations also impact family functioning because of the frequent disruptions to family life. These separations are best captured by the deployment cycle: pre-deployment, deployment, post-deployment (DeVoe & Ross, 2012). During each of these phases, familial roles and responsibilities shift. For example, during the pre-deployment phase, the

service member and home caregiver's attention shifts to preparing for deployment including scheduling, updating legal documents, packing, and arranging for additional support for the home caregiver in the service member's absence like home maintenance or childcare (DeVoe et al., 2019). In the deployment phase, children and the home caregiver often experience social-emotional shifts in the home environment to accommodate for the absent parent and familial roles and responsibilities change, typically including a redistribution of household responsibilities (DeVoe & Ross, 2012). Shifts like these also take place when the service member returns from a deployment or other service-related separation as the service member reintegrates into daily family life and reassumes responsibilities. While this is generally a celebratory time, it can still be disruptive to family functioning to upset routines set into place during a parental absence (DeVoe & Ross, 2012). Challenges related to service-related separations can be even more difficult for the 3.9% (n=52,667) of active duty service members who are single with children or 2.4% (n=32,478) of service members in dual military relationships with children because they often have to rely on someone other than their spouse to serve as a home caregiver during a service-related separation (Department of Defense, 2020). Overall, service-related separations cause frequent transitions within the family and home environment that require readjustment for all members.

### *School*

Challenges from service-related separations are not limited to the home environment. As military-connected children adjust to phases of the deployment cycle, effects of deployment can be observed both in their social-emotional and academic adjustment. Deployment has been found to negatively impact academic adjustment, and students with a deployed parent have been found to perform lower on standardized tests than those without (Card et al., 2011; Phelps et al., 2010).

Additionally, children with deployed parents experience an increase in behavioral and stress disorders and an increase in behavioral-related healthcare visits (Gorman et al., 2010). Specifically in school, children with a deployed parent have been found to have increased rates of problem behaviors and a decrease in academic functioning compared to both civilian peers and military-connected peers not currently experiencing a parental deployment (Moeller et al., 2015). There is limited empirical evaluation of school-based interventions intended to support the needs of military-connected students during and following parental deployment, and while schools and other stakeholder groups are taking steps to provide group counseling and other interventions to students experiencing service-related separations, their efficacy and scalability have rarely been evaluated (Cheeseman et al., 2020; De Pedro et al., 2014). This gap leaves schools that are striving to support their military-connected students without clear guidance on how to best use their limited resources. Taken together, these findings illustrate that the effects of service-related separations, especially deployments, extend into the classroom for military-connected students.

### **Gaps in Literature**

While there is a growing body of research into the academic and social adjustment of military-connected students, studies generally focus on the skills or experiences of a single stakeholder group (e.g., students, parents, or service providers) or military lifestyle demand (e.g., deployment or service-related separation, residential mobility) in isolation. These studies are valuable in establishing foundational understanding of how military-connected students experience school, but they often fail to capture the complexity of bidirectional relationships from multiple perspectives (i.e., teachers impact students and students impact teachers). Additional work is needed in exploring these bidirectional relationships to capture necessary

detail about what processes and resources may be most supportive of military-connected students and their environments. Work in this area will help researchers and practitioners alike as they strive to develop and implement strategic interventions.

Similarly, there has been limited research accounting for the compounding effects of multiple military-lifestyle demands. Exploring the realities of concurrent military lifestyle demands more accurately captures the experiences of most military-connected families. It is commonplace for a military-connected family to still be adjusting from a relocation when their service member leaves for an extended training exercise or deployment. Overlapping military lifestyle demands are routine for military families, and understanding how their effects impact families is critical for identifying the best supports and tools to meet their needs. Capturing the impacts of military lifestyle demands on children and school experiences from multiple diverse stakeholder perspectives offers a unique perspective into how to support military-connected students and families both generally and individually in the future.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In an effort to examine the experiences of military-connected students across environments and from multiple perspectives, this study is structured around relational developmental systems (RDS) metatheory. RDS serves a metatheory because it describes existing theory in a systematic way that accounts for the holistic factors that influence a person's development (Lerner & Callina, 2013). Because of this, RDS metatheory incorporates features of multiple individual theories, harnessing overarching features of systems theories to explain relationships. Studies framed in this manner seek to explore the bidirectional interactions between individuals and their contexts across both the lifespan and ecological settings (Lerner & Callina, 2013). More specifically, RDS metatheory helps to identify the impacts of a person's

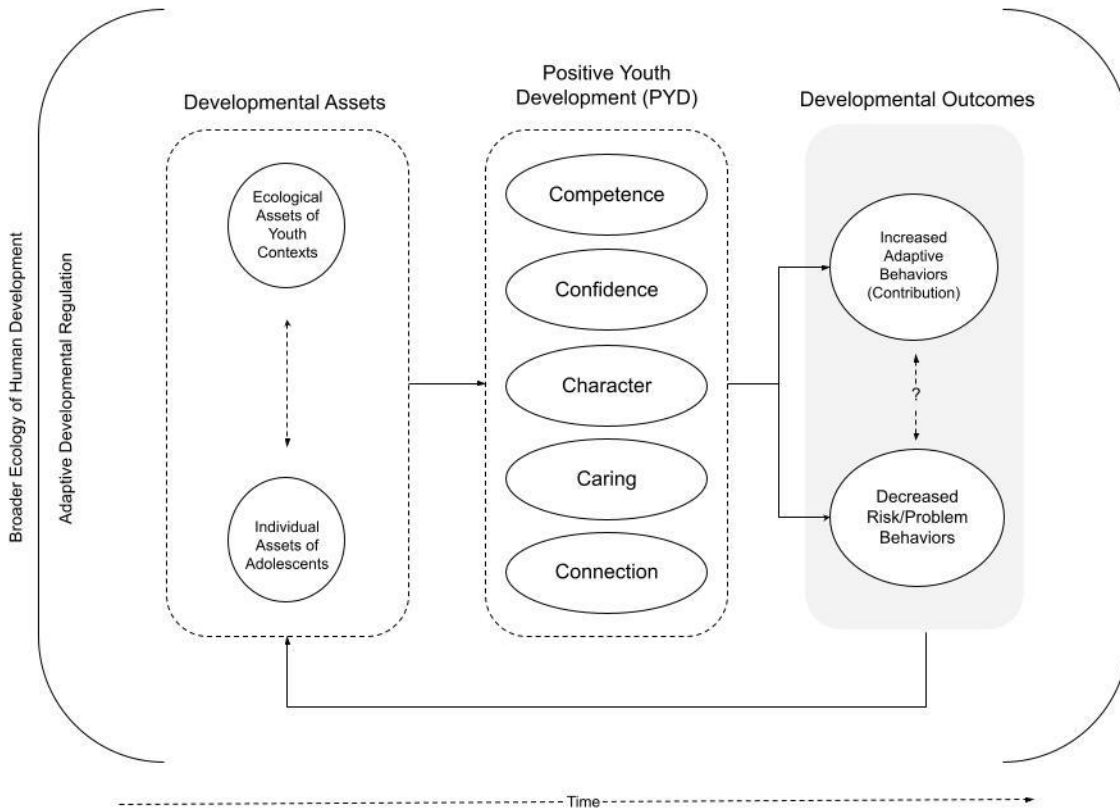


fundamental attributes, status attributes, and contextual characteristics on adaptive functioning. RDS is useful in exploring positive youth development (PYD) because it situates adaptive developmental regulation within both the broader ecological context and time. This contextualization helps to capture nuance and complexity related to circumstances like location and time in history. Additionally, PYD models adapted from RDS account for both individual and contextual developmental assets and the relationship between them as factors of positive youth development. Individual assets include features such as self-regulation, school engagement, and hopeful future expectations (Lerner et al., 2012). Ecological assets of youth contexts include features of a specific environment such as positive and sustained adult-youth relationships, leadership opportunities, and skill-building activities (Lerner et al., 2012). Identifying and exploring the relationship between individual and contextual assets and how the two support PYD in military-connected youth may offer nuanced insights into how to best support this distinct subgroup.

A prominent RDS model is Lerner and Lerner's Five Cs of PYD which suggests that key features of environments that youth frequent, when aligned with participants' strengths, are promotive of thriving (2015). The model posits that PYD can be measured through the Five Cs of competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring (Lerner, 2009). Evaluating existing supports and structures via the Five Cs provides insight into which individual and contextual assets are most promotive of PYD. This model is displayed in Figure 4.1.

**Figure 4.1**

*Positive Youth Development Process Model for Military-Connected Youth*



*Note.* This conceptual framework illustrates the relational developmental systems model of the iterative and bidirectional relationship between developmental assets and positive youth development (PYD). It is supported by the Lerner and Lerner (2015) model of PYD.

**Competence**

Competence is the positive view a person holds of their own actions in domain-specific areas (e.g., social, academic, cognitive, and vocational domains) (Bowers et al., 2010; Lerner et al., 2005; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Competence empowers youth to feel a sense of pride in their skills and knowledge in a given area and promotes feelings of belonging when there is value placed on the domains in which an individual displays competence. Exploring how

military-connected students perceive their own competence and competence-building interactions in social, academic, cognitive, and vocational domains stands to inform how schools may harness their strengths and support the needs of their frequently transitioning military-connected students.

### **Confidence**

Confidence is a person's internal sense of self-worth and self-efficacy. It is a person's general self-regard and is not considered to be domain-specific (Bowers et al, 2010; Lerner et al., 2005; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Confidence can grow or diminish as a result of social context and quality of relationships. Understanding how military lifestyle demands impact confidence and opportunities to build confidence in military-connected youth may provide nuanced context for transition supports families and schools can implement to limit developmental impacts.

### **Connection**

Connection describes the mutual, bidirectional bonds an individual has with people or institutions including those with peers, family, school, and other community structures (Bowers et al., 2010; Lerner et al., 2005; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Connectedness fosters feelings of belonging and mentorship opportunities that are supportive of healthy development. Examining connectedness in military-connected youth, their parents, and their educators can provide insight into opportunities to foster resilience and authentic relationship building in spite of their highly mobile lifestyle.

### **Character**

Character is an individual's adherence to and respect for cultural or contextual norms, values, standards, or behaviors. It also includes morality and integrity, specifically with respect

to decision making (Bowers et al., 2010; Lerner et al., 2005; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003).

Military-connected children coexist in multiple sets of cultural and contextual situations: those of the military community, those of what they consider home, and the amalgamation of all of the places they have lived (Hunt, 2018; Pollock & Van Reken, 2010). Further investigation into how the military lifestyle has impacted their perceptions of their character and interactions that foster character development can provide insight into how military-connected youth understand themselves and their roles in society.

### **Caring**

Caring represents an individual's capacity to feel and exhibit sympathy and empathy for others who may be experiencing distress (Bowers et al., 2010; Lerner et al., 2005; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Military-connected children and youth are often praised for their resilience and adaptability. Additional research into how the military-connected lifestyle may support perceptions of caring may help guide additional research and interventions for student transition programs and other strength-based opportunities for military-connected youth to serve as leaders and mentors for peers.

While numerous studies have explored the relationship between developmental assets (i.e., ecological assets of youth contexts and individual assets of adolescents) and positive youth development using an RDS framework, it has been less frequently applied in qualitative methodological approaches or studied specifically in military-connected youth. Utilizing the Five Cs as a qualitative framework offers opportunities to explore interactions between people, contexts, and processes in a holistic fashion and through participants' own words (Alberts et al., 2006; Hershberg et al., 2014). The limited existing research specific to military-connected students in this space makes exploratory qualitative work valuable because it offers opportunities

to explore new processes or interactions that may be specifically promotive in this subgroup (Glesne, 2016). Because of their unique lifestyle demands, specifically understanding promotive holistic developmental assets for military-connected youth stands to improve academic and overall development for military-connected students and other highly mobile populations. Within the present study, this framework helps to highlight the ways in which home, school, and community contexts can be promotive of thriving in military-connected youth. Asking military-connected youth, their parents, and their teachers to reflect on aspects of their individual attributes, contextual factors, and perceived development offers a unique opportunity to better understand the impacts of their lifestyle demands and to identify adaptive developmental assets.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the perceived effects of military lifestyle demands on school experiences for military-connected students from the perspectives of military-connected youth, their parents, and their teachers?
  - a. What are schools, families, and individual students doing to mitigate these effects?
  - b. What are the perceived effects of these interventions, and how are they promotive of PYD?

### **Methods**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the perceived impacts of military lifestyle demands on academic outcomes for military-connected students from the perspectives of military-connected students and their parents and teachers. This study uses a qualitative approach to answer the research questions because it offers opportunities to capture the complexities of military-connectedness from multiple perspectives while also revealing

potentially unexplored assets and constraints of youth contexts and individual military-connected students that may not have been included in the previous work.

## **Procedure**

This study utilized focus groups for data collection because the format allows for guided conversation between participants and between the participants and the researcher (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013). Focus groups provide unique opportunities for participants to respond to one another, and this discussion can result in rich dialogue and deeper understanding of complex phenomena (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013).

The first set of focus groups occurred with each parent, student, and teacher triad in an effort to capture their unique perspectives on academic experiences and challenges faced by military-connected students. These focus groups focused on educational experiences of the specific student through their own lens as well as the lenses of their parent and teacher. These focus groups occurred first to capture the unique experience of each student through the lens of the triad's members without influence from other study participants or experiences (Fern, 2001). Due to challenges with participant recruitment, there were two triadic focus groups and five dyadic focus groups including a parent and a student. Results of these focus groups reveal how developmental assets unique to an individual's experience may influence their personal school experiences and PYD.

Additional focus groups took place with participants according to their role (i.e., parents, teachers, or students) to identify additional similarities that may exist across their experiences. These focus groups occurred after the triad focus groups to encourage cross talk, group reflection, and shared experiences that are most likely among peers (Fern, 2001). The results of these role-specific focus groups reveal information about what developmental assets and

processes may support the PYD of military-connected youth broadly. Due to numerous scheduling challenges with teacher participants, there are no teacher focus group results to report in this study. The full interview protocol for all three focus group types is available in Appendix A. Consent forms were collected for all participants via Qualtrics XM including parental consent and individual assent for student participants. Focus groups occurred via Zoom and were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

### **Sample**

Participants for this study were solicited from social media pages and groups of military parents and spouses. Parents were selected as the target for screening because of their close relationships with both their child and their child's teachers. Interested parents completed a screening form with demographic and contact information as well as items related to the child's academic and social-emotional experiences. The sample for this study included seven parents, seven teens, and two teachers. While all families were asked in screening to include the contact information of a teacher or school staff member they would like to include, five of the participating parents indicated that they did not know a teacher or school staff member well enough to include them. The parent sample included seven mothers all of whom identified as White; additionally, all the families were currently on Active duty military orders with four families being Army affiliated, two being Air Force affiliated, and one being Marine Corps affiliated. All of the participating families were mid-level officer rank (i.e., O4-O6) in their respective service branch.

The teen sample included five males and two females. The teen participants' ages were between 13 and 18 ( $M= 15$ ) with three attending middle school and four attending high school. Six of the teen participants identified as White and one identified as two or more races. Two of

the teen participants were currently attending a DoDEA school, one was attending a private school, and four were attending public schools. Teens in this sample had moved an average of seven times in their P-12 careers with a range of between five and twelve moves. An overview of sample characteristics can be found in Table 4.1.

**Table 4.1**  
*Participant Demographics*

Variable	Full Sample N=14	
	Parents <i>n</i> =7 % ( <i>n</i> )	Teens <i>n</i> =7 % ( <i>n</i> )
Race		
White	100% (7)	86% (6)
Two or More	0% (0)	14 % (1)
Sex		
Female	100% (7)	29% (2)
Male	0% (0)	71% (5)
Service Branch		
Army	57% (4)	
Air Force	29% (2)	
Marine Corps	14% (1)	
Duty Status		
Active	100% (7)	
Rank		
O4-O6	100% (7)	
School Type		
DoDEA		29% (2)



Private	14% (1)
Public	57% (4)
School Level	
Middle School	43% (3)
High School	57% (4)
Enrolled in EFMP	29% (2)

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### **Data Analysis**

Transcribed focus group recordings were initially coded using an exploratory analytic approach. Data were analyzed through provisional coding with a prepared list of codes based on prior research or literature review (Saldaña, 2009). These codes were revised, modified, and expanded to reflect the data (Dey, 1993; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Then, an additional second round of directed content analysis coding took place to identify components of positive youth development from Lerner & Lerner’s Five Cs in participant responses. Directed content analysis uses an existing theory or conceptual framework to help determine an initial coding scheme in an effort to validate or extend an existing theory (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Content analysis in this instance sought to provide insight into how participants perceived the impacts of military-connected lifestyle across roles and experiences. Taken together, these two rounds of analysis captured both the expected codes and themes from existing research as well as extended the understanding of relational developmental systems metatheory to military-connected youth.

Analyses were conducted by both the primary researcher and a secondary coder with qualitative research experience. The primary researcher prepared preliminary codes to share with the second coder and then each coder analyzed focus group transcripts independently. Coders then met to discuss codes and redefine themes and subthemes. Each coder then independently

reanalyzed transcripts before meeting again to compare findings. Ultimately, coders reviewed codes, themes, and occurrences to resolve 100% of discrepancies. Detailed names and descriptions of themes, codes, and examples can be found in Table 4.2 and are discussed in detail below.

**Table 4.2**  
*Themes, Codes, and Examples of Individual and Contextual Assets*

Theme	Codes	Examples
Individual Assets		
Advocacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parental advocacy               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Identifying appropriate school</li> <li>○ Identifying extracurricular activities</li> <li>○ Exploring new duty station/community</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Student self-advocacy               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Having a seat at your own table</li> <li>○ Parents listening to child concerns or desires</li> <li>○ Seeking out opportunities</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<p>“Through experience we've kind of learned where we need to push and how hard and how high. I like to keep the kids on kind of an even keel, so if they were at a certain place or a certain level at one school, I make sure that the next school has those opportunities or is aware of the fact that this kid is an achiever and ‘Please don't let them slide.’...I'm kind of up [the school's] nose a little bit, but I'm really involved in their schooling as much as I can be” -Parent 3</p> <p>“I feel like I kind of have to advocate [because] it takes some time to adjust when I move to different schools. One school will have two teachers teaching the subjects. Another will have like a block schedule, and I kind of need some time to adapt and understand how what works. And sometimes there can be problems, and I have to advocate for myself</p>

Sense of Urgency

- Needing to start planning immediately for a relocation
  - “Jumping right in” at a new location to make friends or get involved
- Effects of cumulative experience
  - “No time to wait it out” or “can’t afford one bad year”

and ask questions and kind of just give it time to understand.” -Teen 1

"I would say that the kids who are military, they form friendships more quickly. They jump in more quickly, because they know they've got to take advantage of everything they can as soon as they can, because they're going to be gone before they know it...I rarely get a military student who's a wallflower. They're usually writing. They're going, 'Okay, what you get. Let me get at it.' And so that's kind of nice." -Teacher 1

“They just kept saying ‘give them time’, and I’m like ‘I get it. You’re right, but we do need to address it now because we’re here two years, and we’re leaving.’ So, I always have been the one carrying his data, pushing, [and] advocating for him because sometimes he needs more than ‘Oh, let’s just wait and see.’ Because I know if you wait and see, that window of opportunity can close rather quickly.” -Parent 4

Positive Outlook and Informed Perspectives

- Modeled by parents/home caregiver
- Giving the new place a chance/ Something to learn at every place
- Diverse experiences offer unique perspective
  - Curiosity
  - Adaptability
  - Global perspective

“Not only my mom has been optimistic in the moving process but also my sister. She was kind of like my only friend during COVID because it was virtual school. She was excited to go to a new place where she could

actually have new friends outside of virtual school, and she kind of transfers that energy to me. She's like 'Aren't you excited to move to a new place with new opportunities?'" -Teen 1

"I feel like in general, I'm just much more well-rounded, and I feel like I've been able to immerse myself in different cultures. I know that a lot of people haven't gone outside of their own state, and I think that the privilege of being able to experience more of the world has led me to be better-rounded person. And because of this I think I have a more not realistic worldview, and I have a better sense of what the world is like...Having been in other places also allows me to adapt. Being in the military, you have to adapt all the time, and also I feel like that makes you a very versatile person." - Teen 2

"What I've seen with [Teen 4], and with many of our students, is that his parents have taken this opportunity of living abroad to actually bring his curriculum and bring his subjects to life in the real world... Our students get to really see what they study and what they study about and get to visit places that most people maybe wait a lifetime to just spend a two-week vacation trying to go

see when they're retired.” -  
Teacher 4

### Ecological Assets of Youth Contexts

#### Influence of Non-parental Adults

- Teachers, Coaches, School Counselors
  - Make a difference
  - Knowledge about military-connected students helps
  - Help connect students to school rapidly
  - Can help advocate for appropriate academic/extracurricular placements
  - Serve as an additional check-point for accountability and mentorship (especially when a service member parent is away or unavailable)

“I've noticed when we've gone to a Purple Star School that is military fluent, they really know what they're doing with the kids, and they really make it a point to support them and get them into community together.” -  
Parent 3

“At the middle school, the principal knew military kids, and it was very open, and [Teen 2] and I received help from a phenomenal individual from the Ukraine. If it hadn't been for her, I don't think [Teen 2] would be where she is now. There were always one or two individuals [at each duty station] that helped us because we were facing stumbling blocks, and if it hadn't been for them, I don't know, I think it would have been a lot different.” -Parent 2

“There's always been assistance and the ability to help with all types of students. So like, if I was behind that, [teachers] would help me catch up. But then, since I was almost always ahead and specifically in math, [the teachers] were always able to help support me, get me up into a higher

Leveraging  
Military-  
Connected  
Community

- Typically knowing someone everywhere you go
  - mothers help facilitate these relationships
  - Attending community events
- Using spouse networks to help select a home/school/activity in a new location (virtual-facebook or in-person)

class, or at least a program where I could accelerate that more and more without necessarily leaving the grade level.” -Teen 4

“[Other adults can help when] your parents are like away on trips for a while because I know they can be like weeks to months away from home. That can be hard on you mentally. But also, they're not there to check in on you with your grades and everything, so it could just be harder for you to keep your grades up if dad or mom is gone all the time, and you just have no one to help keep you accountable.” -Teen 3

“We always try and like throw or go to a party or like a potluck. Like when I got here, there was a potluck that one of the families threw and I got to meet a friend of a good friend of mine that I now know in my class. That's also how you can meet a bunch of people, and it should be a priority.” -Teen 4

"Word of mouth of, you know, where military kids are being successful is part of it, too, where there may not be a program specifically for military kids, but that parent grape vine is alive and well, and we definitely rely on each other to help steer the ship in the right direction." - Parent 1

Critical Role of Extracurricular Activities

- Student transition groups
  - Mixed reviews
  - Can be very helpful for adjusting to a new building, schedule, norms, etc.
  - Need to be organic and not just a place for all the new kids
- Sports and other activities
  - Feelings of belonging to a team
  - Opportunity to earn your place

“I try to join sports. because usually it's a very tight knit group. You get to meet a lot of people very quickly and connect with them very fast because you're together all the time practicing together. You get to know each other very well. And I feel like that's a great way to connect with people. All the friends that I have right now, we met either on sports teams or in like a special extracurricular team.” -Teen 3

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## Results

The results of this study are represented by six themes. Themes represent both individual assets of adolescents and ecological assets of youth contexts. Themes related to individual assets of adolescents include advocacy, sense of urgency, and positive outlook and informed perspectives, and themes related to ecological assets of youth contexts include influence of non-parental adults, leveraging military-connected community, and the critical role of extracurricular activities. Each theme is discussed with its subthemes and examples below.

### *Individual Assets of Adolescents*

**Advocacy.** Parent, teen, and teacher participants often mentioned both the need for and power of advocacy in supporting the needs of military-connected teens; subthemes in this area include parental advocacy and teen self-advocacy. Parents frequently discussed how they strategize to identify appropriate neighborhoods, schools, and activities for their teens before and after a relocation. Parents indicated that despite their best efforts for a smooth transition, sometimes these school and activity decisions require intense parental advocacy and teen self-

advocacy for transferring records, appropriate academic placements, and inclusion in sports and extracurricular activities. For example, Parent 3 shared:

Through experience we've kind of learned where we need to push and how hard and how high. I like to keep the kids on kind of an even keel, so if they were at a certain place or a certain level at one school, I make sure that the next school has those opportunities or is aware of the fact that this kid is an achiever and 'Please don't let them slide.'...I'm kind of up [the school's] nose a little bit, but I'm really involved in their schooling as much as I can be.

Parents also indicated that they leverage The Military Interstate Compact, military spouse networks (in-person and online), military Student Liaisons (sometimes called Student Liaison Officers or SLOs), and school counselors to support them in their advocacy efforts.

Teens also highlighted their experience advocating for themselves both at school and in their extracurricular activities. Specifically, they mentioned “having a seat at your own table” and appreciating their parents working with them to identify new opportunities when they relocate rather than making unilateral decisions. For example, Teen 1 shared:

I feel like I kind of have to advocate [because] it takes some time to adjust when I move to different schools. One school will have two teachers teaching the subjects. Another will have like a block schedule, and I kind of need some time to adapt and understand how what works. And sometimes there can be problems, and I have to advocate for myself and ask questions and kind of just give it time to understand.

Additionally, teens highlighted that their parent’s advocacy often waned as they built more of their own self-advocacy skills, suggesting that this individual asset is learned and refined through both observation of and scaffolded support from a parental figure.



Teacher participants mentioned appreciating parent and teen advocacy as they transition to a new school. While some parent participants mentioned not always feeling welcome or appreciated for their advocacy attempts at their teen's school, teacher participants in this study discussed the value of parental participation and teen perspectives in making academic and social-emotional decisions together as military-connected students transition into their schools.

**Sense of Urgency.** Participants across roles frequently mentioned the sense of urgency with which military-connected teens make decisions and attempt to establish themselves following relocation. Nearly every participant mentioned some version of feeling like they need to “jump right in” at a new duty station and that there is no time to wait on making friends, engaging in activities, and building social networks. Teens specifically highlighted that even in years when they may not be moving, significant portions of their peers in military-connected communities may be, and that makes them more eager to form relationships quickly upon arrival.

Additionally, parents highlighted the pressures of the cumulative effects of the common attitude of “let's wait and see” that they had often heard in their teen's schooling experiences. They shared that while a conservative approach can make sense for some students, it can be especially damaging to military-connected students because of their frequent transitions. For example, Parent 4 shared:

They just kept saying ‘give them time’, and I'm like ‘I get it. You're right, but we do need to address it now because we're here two years, and we're leaving.’ So, I always have been the one carrying his data, pushing, [and] advocating for him because sometimes he needs more than ‘Oh, let's just wait and see.’ Because I know if you wait and see, that window of opportunity can close rather quickly.

Experiences like these contribute to feelings of urgency in adjusting academic and social-emotional placements and opportunities for military-connected students to prevent compounding issues across P-12 experience and beyond.

**Positive Outlook and Informed Perspectives.** Participants frequently mentioned how the military-connected lifestyle had informed teens' outlook and understanding of the world. Parents mentioned observing their teen "making the most" of the opportunities of their military-connected lifestyle including the opportunities to learn and experience new things at every new duty station. For example, Teen 3 shared:

It's just that I do try to be as optimistic as possible about these things ...because it is really hard to move every time because I connect so well with a bunch of people, but I make the most of my time [at each place].

Teens discussed that they appreciate these new opportunities as well and specifically highlighted that their mothers and siblings help them to maintain a positive attitude during relocations and transitions. For example, Teen 1 shared:

Not only my mom has been optimistic in the moving process but also my sister. She was kind of like my only friend during COVID because it was virtual school. She was excited to go to a new place where she could actually have new friends outside of virtual school, and she kind of transfers that energy to me. She's like 'Aren't you excited to move to a new place with new opportunities?'

Additionally, parents, teens, and teachers highlighted how the perspectives of military-connected teens seem different from many of their civilian peers. Specifically, participants mentioned their teens being especially open to new and diverse students and cultures and

attributed this difference to their teen's exposure to many different lived experiences with the military lifestyle. For example, Teen 2 shared:

I feel like in general, I'm just much more well-rounded, and I feel like I've been able to immerse myself in different cultures. I know that a lot of people haven't gone outside of their own state, and I think that the privilege of being able to experience more of the world has led me to be better-rounded person. And because of this I think I have a more not realistic worldview, and I have a better sense of what the world is like...Having been in other places also allows me to adapt. Being in the military, you have to adapt all the time, and also I feel like that makes you a very versatile person.

Additionally, teachers mentioned military-connected students' unique perspectives in understanding academic concepts in both history and math because of their exposure different regions of the world and to different academic standards and pedagogical practices. For example, Teacher 4 shared:

What I've seen with [Teen 4], and with many of our students, is that his parents have taken this the opportunity of living abroad to actually bring his curriculum and bring his subjects to life in the real world... Our students get to really see what they study and what they study about and get to visit places that most people maybe wait a lifetime to just spend a two-week vacation trying to go see when they're retired.

### *Ecological Assets of Youth Contexts*

**Influence of Non-Parental Adults.** Parents and teens frequently mentioned the critical influence of non-parental adults like teachers, school counselors, and athletic coaches in supporting military-connected youth. Several parents specifically mentioned how school staff members with knowledge of the military lifestyle are especially helpful and supportive of their

students. Parent 3 shared “I've noticed when we've gone to a Purple Star School that is military fluent, they really know what they're doing with the kids, and they really make it a point to support them and get them into community together.” Parents also shared that teachers, coaches, and other schools staff members can serve as critical partners as they select and advocate for academic and extracurricular opportunities for their teen. For example, Parent 2 shared:

At the middle school, the principal knew military kids, and it was very open, and [Teen 2] and I received help from a phenomenal individual from the Ukraine. If it hadn't been for her, I don't think [Teen 2] would be where she is now. There were always one or two individuals [at each duty station] that helped us because we were facing stumbling blocks, and if it hadn't been for them, I don't know, I think it would have been a lot different.

Teens shared that teachers and coaches can be especially helpful in their transition to a new school. For example, Teen 4 shared:

There's always been assistance and the ability to help with all types of students. So like, if I was behind that, [teachers] would help me catch up. But then, since I was almost always ahead and specifically in math, [the teachers] were always able to help support me, get me up into a higher class, or at least a program where I could accelerate that more and more without necessarily leaving the grade level.

Additionally, teens discussed how coaches and teachers can serve as additional accountability figures when their servicemember parent may be deployed or away on a work assignment. Teen 3 shared:

[Other adults can help when] your parents are like away on trips for a while because I know they can be like weeks to months away from home. That can be hard on you

mentally. But also, they're not there to check in on you with your grades and everything, so it could just be harder for you to keep your grades up if dad or mom is gone all the time, and you just have no one to help keep you accountable.

Teachers also discussed their perceived role in helping military-connected students connect to their new school. They shared comments like “We would always try to make sure we included everyone, whether it be celebrating their food, or language, or religion” and “I just feel like it's our responsibility as military-connected educators to create the possibility of a welcoming space inside of our building, a place where a kid knows they are safe and welcome” describing their efforts to help military-connected students get acclimated to their new schools and communities.

**Leveraging Military-Connected Community.** Parents and teens both often discussed the value of the military-connected community as they navigate the military lifestyle. Parents specifically highlighted how they utilize the military-connected community to help them make decisions during and following relocations. They discussed feeling like they “always know someone where [they’re] going” and how they leverage those connections as they select schools and activities for their teens.

Teens also discussed the value of the military-connected community and mentioned appreciating the connections that their parents help facilitate for them when they are arriving to a new duty station. For example, Teen 4 shared:

We always try and like throw or go to a party or like a potluck. Like when I got here, there was a potluck that one of the families threw and I got to meet a friend of a good friend of mine that I now know in my class. That's also how you can meet a bunch of people, and it should be a priority.

In addition, teens mentioned how they often know military-connected peers at each new duty station and appreciate being able to see old friends and neighbors again as their paths cross at new locations.

**Critical Role of Extracurricular Activities.** Parents, teens, and teachers alike frequently mentioned the importance of extracurricular activities and sports in helping military-connected teens establish new networks and peer groups. All participants mentioned the value of school-based student transition programs, giving specific examples and suggestions of how they can be especially helpful. Parents suggested that these activities events should be clearly communicated to them so they can prioritize attendance for their teens. Teachers mentioned that they can see the value of these programs with their students but that these programs can be difficult to run without significant commitment from school leaders. Teens mentioned that these programs could be more helpful if they included help from established students before and upon arrival (e.g., guided tours, school handbook, school map) and if they were a blend of different types of students (e.g., not just new students and not just military-connected students).

Additionally, most participants mentioned the value of the opportunity to participate in sports, both at school and in the community, as a way of fostering belonging and normalcy. Teen 3 shared:

I try to join sports. because usually it's a very tight knit group. You get to meet a lot of people very quickly and connect with them very fast because you're together all the time practicing together. You get to know each other very well. And I feel like that's a great way to connect with people. All the friends that I have right now, we met either on sports teams or in like a special extracurricular team.

To describe how sports have helped him teen settle into a new community even when he may be in a location for a short time. Teachers also notice the effects of after-school activities for military-connected teens. One teacher mentioned the critical nature of extracurriculars and sports to help students establish a sense of belonging and fit in and another teacher described a specific set of activities as something that has “really worked well for him to develop as a leader.” Both teachers suggested that schools should continue to prioritize advertising and hosting these activities in schools with military-connected students. Even participants who mentioned difficulties participating in specific activities in the past mentioned other specific activities that helped them feel welcome and a sense of belonging following a relocation.

## **Discussion**

### **Addressing the Effects of Military Lifestyle Demands**

The findings of this study highlight the intentional steps teens, parents, and teachers are taking to address common facets of the military-connected lifestyle like frequent relocation, service-related separations, and living in highly mobile communities. These results illustrate novel findings specific to teens that are similar to those see in other RDS and PYD research, specifically related to the benefits of individual and contextual assets supportive of military-connected teens (Weston et al., 2021; Bowers et al., 2015; Lerner et al., 2013). Additionally, these findings provide novel insight into how teens, parents, and teachers understand the challenges of the military-connected lifestyle and detail specific actions and resources individuals and contexts can implement to address them.

Teens specifically discussed the steps they take to acclimate to new contexts and adjust during service-related separations. They often mentioned self-advocacy, rapidly seeking out and joining activities, and seeking out peers and mentors as steps they consciously take to find

support in new schools and communities following a move. Parents discussed the need to advocate and model advocacy for their teen, providing scaffolding for building friendships and a peer group, planning ahead, and leveraging the military-connected community as the conscious actions they take to prepare their teen for transition. Teachers discussed the critical need for increased awareness of the military-connected community to help educators and school staff support students in their classrooms and in the school-based activities they may sponsor or support. They highlighted that knowledge of the military lifestyle helps them to understand their students better and work together with parents and teens to support their academic and social-emotional needs. The findings in this study also suggest that formal programming in schools designed to support military-connected students or other highly mobile student groups like student ambassador programs or student transition groups may need more streamlining or refinement. While teens and parents often spoke highly of these programs at the elementary school levels, additional research is needed to understand how these programs can be most appropriate and effective for teens at the middle and high school levels to strengthen both individual and contextual assets for military-connected youth.

### **Promoting Positive Youth Development**

These findings help to illustrate the ways in which military-lifestyle demands and how families and schools address them are promotive of PYD. The themes and subthemes described above each represent components of the 5Cs of PYD and situating them within this framework helps to illustrate how individual attributes and contextual assets can be promotive of military-connected teens' academic and social-emotional experiences at school. These themes are displayed in Table 4.3.



**Table 4.3**  
*Study Themes and Corresponding 5 Cs of PYD.*

Theme	5 Cs of PYD
Advocacy	Competence, caring, confidence
Sense of urgency	Connection, competence
Positive outlook and Informed Perspectives	Confidence, caring, character
Influence of non-parental adults	Connection, confidence, caring
Leveraging military-connected community	Connection, confidence, caring
Critical role of extracurricular activities	Connection, confidence, competence

***Competence***

Evidence of competence can be seen in the themes of advocacy, sense of urgency, and the critical role of extracurricular activities. Taken together, these themes demonstrate how military-connected teens and their families build competence in navigating the specifics of the military-connected lifestyle and apply what they have learned in every new situation. This finding can help stakeholders in the military-connected community continue to build, maintain, and share bodies of knowledge to help ease the challenges of cyclical challenges of military life (e.g., relocation, service-related separation) without having to rely solely on lived experience. These results provide evidence into how military-connected teens view themselves and their abilities to navigate new situations and prepare themselves for success.

***Confidence***

The findings of this study are helpful in understanding how military-connected teens develop confidence in spite of navigating frequent transitions. The themes of advocacy, positive

outlook and informed perspectives, influence of non-parental adults, leveraging the military-connected community, and the critical role of extracurricular activities provide much-needed detail into how military-connected teens build and maintain confidence. These themes help to provide critical insight into how military-connected teens see themselves and how they rely on caring adults and available activities to continue to understand their own self-worth and the opportunities in their new locations.

### ***Character***

Evidence of character was clear in the theme of positive outlook and informed perspective. These findings help to highlight the ways in which military-connected teens are especially able to adhere to their own values and standards in new and developing contexts. Findings in this area showed that military-connected teens are comfortable doing the right thing and maintaining both curiosity and empathy even when tested by new peers and social settings. Their breadth and depth of schooling and cultural experiences may offer them an appreciation for differences and discernment for when to adapt to a setting and when to rely on their own moral compass.

### ***Caring***

The themes and subthemes of this study highlight the deep caring military-connected teens have for their families, schools, and communities. The themes of advocacy, positive outlook and informed perspectives, influence of non-parental adults, and leveraging the military-connected community each demonstrate the immense bi-directional care that takes place in areas with military-connected teens. These relationships model caring and prepare teens to care deeply about the people and places where they live, even if they are only there for a short time. Teens often mentioned caring for others and wanting to make the experience of being a military-

connected teen better for others who come after them as a motivator for sharing their experiences.

### ***Connection***

Many of the themes and subthemes in this study's results highlight military-connected teen's capacity and craving for connection. The themes of sense of urgency, influence of non-parental adults, leveraging military-connected community, and critical role of extracurricular activities provide a detailed picture of the many bonds and networks military-connected teens maintain. These connections shepherd military-connected teens through their many transitions and are simultaneously critical to their sense of belonging at any new location. The results of this study suggest that military-connected students prioritize connections and continue to collect and maintain these deep connections throughout their many relocations and transitions.

### **Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

The design of this study relied on volunteer participants to reflect and share on their personal lived experiences. As such, this qualitative approach resulted in a small convenience sample that was less diverse than the population of military-connected teens and families. With this design likely comes a degree of selection bias, meaning that individuals who choose to participate may already have strong feelings about their teen's schooling experience. Because of this, results of this study may not be an accurate representation of the most common military-connected experiences. Most participants in this study were White and all participants were on active duty and of officer rank in their respective service branch. While this study allows for a more nuanced understanding of this sample, the findings may not represent the experiences of students from other contexts, and additional research should focus on military-connected teens and their families across additional service branches, ranks, and duty statuses to further investigate the influence of these factors.

Additionally, teacher or school staff member participation in this study was low due to a myriad of scheduling challenges, resulting in limited information from their perspectives. Future work in this area should prioritize scheduling teacher interviews to avoid state testing and other cumbersome points in the academic year for educators. Intentionally scheduling in this way may allow more opportunity for teacher participation. Additionally, most parent participants (71%) indicated at screening that they did not know a teacher well enough to include them in their focus group, and those teachers who did participate in initial family focus groups did not respond to requests to participate in role-based focus groups. Future research should examine why parents of military-connected teens feel disconnected from their teens' teachers and if or how these feelings may be different from civilian families. Understanding these relationships may provide additional insight into how parents, teens, and teachers can cooperate to foster the most promotive academic and social-emotional climates.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to explore how parents, teens, and their teachers perceive and address military lifestyle demands and how interventions and strategies may be promotive of positive youth development. The study explored this through initial triadic and dyadic focus groups with a parent, teen, and sometimes a teacher and then another round of role-based focus groups and with parents and teens. This work took a novel approach in understanding how military-connected teens navigate military lifestyle demands with the help of adults and how their individual attributes and contextual assets equip them with adaptive qualities and skills like competence, confidence, character, caring, and connection. This study addressed a critical need in the literature by seeking to understand the military-connected teen experience and how schools and communities may continue to be supportive of their academic and social-emotional

needs. Applying RDS and PYD frameworks to the military-connected teen experience provides critical insight into the circumstances under which military-connected teens thrive.

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## Appendix A

### Interview Protocol:

Interviews will be conducted, recorded, and transcribed via Zoom.

Hi! Welcome to our focus group, and thank you so much for sharing your time with me today to share your experiences as a military-connected student, parent, or teacher. Today's session should last approximately 30 minutes, and will be recorded via Zoom. Your name, face, and voice will be removed from the transcript to protect your privacy.

Introduce yourself.

To begin, I will need you all to complete an informed consent form, if you haven't already. A pdf version of this form will also be provided to you via email.

[https://clemsan.ca1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_cHA5MDZ6Ct8XjD0](https://clemsan.ca1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_cHA5MDZ6Ct8XjD0)

Have participants introduce themselves.

Do you have any additional questions before we begin?

### Triad Interview Items:

1. How would you describe your/the student's academic achievement?
  - a. How has being military-connected impacted your/the student's academic achievement?
    - i. additional prompt if response only includes negative: What positive impacts of being military-connected have you observed on your/the student's academic achievement?
  - b. What experiences, services, or supports have improved your/the student's academic achievement?
    - i. additional prompt: For example, have there been specific activities, resources, school staff members, courses, family support, or accommodations that have helped you/ the student?
    - ii. How have they helped you/the student?
  - c. What experiences, services, or supports would you desire or recommend to improve academic achievement for military-connected youth?
2. How would you describe your/the student's social well-being including belongingness, fitting in, contributing to society, and satisfaction with friendships and relationships?
  - a. How has being military-connected impacted your/the student's social well-being?
    - i. additional prompt if response only includes negative: What positive impacts of being military-connected have you observed on your/the student's social well-being?
  - b. What experiences or supports have you observed that have improved you/the student's well-being?

- i. additional prompt: For example, have there been specific activities, resources, school staff members, clubs, family support, or other accommodations that have helped you/ the student?
  - c. What experiences or supports would you desire or recommend to improve social well-being for military-connected youth?
- 3. How has COVID-19 impacted you as a military-connected student/parent/teacher?
  - a. What was your experience like during the height of school closures? What practices were most supportive of your academic achievement and social well-being during COVID-19?
  - b. What was your experience like as schools have reopened and resumed normal operations? What practices were most supportive of your academic achievement and social well-being?
  - c.
- 4. What programs does your/ the student's school (past or present) have to support military-connected students?
  - a. Have you participated in them? How was your experience?
  - b. Are there programs that you'd like to see to help meet your needs as a military-connected student/parent/teacher?
- 5. What do you (the student) or your family do that is especially supportive of your academic achievement or social well-being that you would recommend to other military-connected families?
  - a. additional prompt: For example, are there specific things you do before, during, or after a PCS to ensure a smooth transition, or do you have specific strategies for settling into a new location or school that you could share?
  - b. additional prompt: What do you do as a teen or student to support your own academic achievement/social well-being? What strengths would you say you have that have helped you in your journey as a military-connected teen?
- 6. What do you (the student) or your family do that is especially supportive of your academic achievement or social well-being that you would recommend to other military-connected families?
  - a. additional prompt: What do you do as a parent to support your child's academic achievement/social well-being? What strengths would you say you have that have helped you in your journey as a parent of a military-connected teen?
- 7. What else would you like to share about your experience being a military-connected student/parent/educator?

**Student Interview Items:**

1. How do you know when you're being academically successful at a new school? What changes for you when you're having academic success?
  - What specific things have you done to try to be academically successful?
  - What specific things have other people (parents, teachers, classmates, etc.) done that have helped you to be academically successful?
2. How has being military-connected impacted your academic achievement?
  - additional prompt if response only includes negative: What positive impacts of being military-connected have you observed on your academic achievement?
3. How would you describe your social well-being including feeling like you belong, fit in, improve your school and community, and make and enjoy your friendships?
4. How do you know when your social well-being is in a good place at a new school?
  - What specific things have you done to try support your social well-being?
  - What specific things have other people (parents, teachers, classmates, etc.) done that have helped support your social well-being?
5. How has being military connected impacted your social well-being?
  - additional prompt if response only includes negative: What positive impacts of being military-connected have you observed on your social well-being?
6. How has COVID-19 impacted you as a military-connected student?
  - What role has technology played in your experience as a military-connected student?
7. What programs does your school (past or present) have to support military-connected students?
  - Have you participated in them? How was your experience?
  - Are there programs that you'd like to see to help meet your needs as a military-connected student?
8. What do you (the student) or your family do that is especially supportive of your academic achievement or social well-being that you would recommend to other military-connected families?
9. What else would you like to share about being a military-connected student?

## Parent Interview Items:

<https://forms.gle/v3NynDYnzQvWtywE6>

1. How do you know when your teen is being academically successful at a new school?  
What changes for your teen when they're having academic success?
  - What specific things have you done to try to help your teen be academically successful?
  - What specific things have other people (teens, teachers, classmates, etc.) done that have helped your teen to be academically successful?
2. How has being military-connected impacted your child's academic achievement?
  - additional prompt if response only includes negative: What positive impacts of being military-connected have you observed on your/your child's academic achievement?
3. How would you describe your child's social well-being?
  - For example, social well-being includes belongingness, fitting in, contributing to society, learning/growing, understanding cultural norms, satisfaction with relationships (Keyes, 1998; Ryff et al., 2007)
4. How do you know when your social well-being is in a good place at a new school?
  - What specific things have you done to try to support your teen's social well-being?
  - What specific things have other people (teens, teachers, classmates, etc.) done that have helped support your social well-being?
5. How has being military connected impacted your child's social well-being?
  - additional prompt if response only includes negative: What positive impacts of being military-connected have you observed on your/your child's social well-being?
6. How has COVID-19 impacted your military-connected student?
  - What role has technology played in your child's experience as a military-connected student?
7. What programs does your child's school (past or present) have to support military-connected students?
  - Has your child participated in them? How was their experience?
  - Are there programs that you'd like to see to help meet the needs of your child?
8. What do you (the parent) or your family do that is especially supportive of your academic achievement or social well-being that you would recommend to other military-connected families?
9. What else would you like to share about being a parent of a military-connected student?

## Teacher Interview Items:

1. How would you describe Student X's academic achievement (e.g. grades, learning, citizenship, work habits)?
2. How has being military-connected impacted Student X's academic achievement?
  - additional prompt if response only includes negative: What positive impacts of being military-connected have you observed on your/your child's academic achievement?
3. How would you describe Student X's social well-being?
  - For example, social well-being includes belongingness, fitting in, contributing to society, learning/growing, understanding cultural norms, satisfaction with relationships (Keyes, 1998; Ryff et al., 2007)
4. How has being military connected impacted Student X's social well-being?
  - additional prompt if response only includes negative: What positive impacts of being military-connected have you observed on your/your child's social well-being?
5. How has COVID-19 impacted you and your military-connected student(s)?
  - a. What role has technology played in your experience as a teacher of military-connected students?
6. What programs does your school have to support military-connected students?
7. Have you participated in them? How was it?
8. What training experiences, if any, have you participated in as a teacher specifically regarding military-connected students?
9. What do you do that is especially supportive of academic achievement or social well-being that you would recommend to other teachers of military-connected students?
10. Is there anything else you'd like to share about being a teacher of a military-connected student?

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

Military-connected children represent a sizeable and largely understudied student subgroup in America's public schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2021; American Association of School Administrators, 2019). These students experience significant academic and social-emotional disruptions related to military lifestyle demands like service-related separations and residential mobility, and their long-term effects are not fully understood students (Harrison & Vannest, 2008; Ruff & Keim, 2014; Cheeseman, 2020). The purpose of this dissertation was to add to the growing body of research on military-connected students by exploring their schooling experiences through their perspectives and the perspectives of their parents and teachers. The purpose of this chapter is to summarize the dissertation and outline implications for practice and suggestions for future research.

#### **Summary of Dissertation**

This dissertation consists of three separate papers striving to better understand the school experiences of military-connected children and families and how those experiences influence their academic and social-emotional development and wellbeing. Paper 1, detailed in Chapter 2, focuses on situating the extant literature concerning military-connected children into Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory (2005). While the bulk of research studies supporting the needs of military-connected students utilize a single developmental or learning theory, this theory synthesis paper utilized the bioecological systems theory framework to illustrate the numerous systemic influences effecting the academic experiences of military-connected students. The results of this paper serve as conceptual framework for the subsequent

papers because they highlight the influence of systemic challenges while also illustrating the potential for strategic interventions across all systems.

Paper 2, included in Chapter 3, focuses on exploring the school experiences of military-connected students through a latent class analysis (LCA) of parent survey data. More specifically, this study examines the existence of latent classes within the sample (N= 2177) based on parent-school satisfaction, demographic variables, and measures of military-lifestyle demands like residential mobility and service-related separations. The four resulting classes from this analysis highlight the diversity of experiences within the military community and the need for additional research into how some of the specific variables of interest impact individuals and groups differently.

Paper 3, detailed in Chapter 4, examines the school experiences of military-connected teens through their perspectives and the perspectives of their parents and teachers. This qualitative study utilized a semi-structured focus group format to ask stakeholders about their individual experiences in triadic focus groups with a teen, parent, and teacher as well as role-based focus groups for teens, parents, and teachers to share their common experiences. This paper specifically used a positive youth development (PYD) framework to examine the individual and contextual assets available to military-connected teens and how they may be promotive of PYD (Lerner et al., 2012). Results of this paper shed light on the steps families, schools, and communities are taking to support military-connected students that are meeting their needs and helping them to acclimate and thrive.

### **Discussion of Findings**



Results and discussions of individual papers are discussed in Chapters 2, 3, and 4. This section serves as a discussion of the results of the dissertation overall and how its findings contribute to the body of research about the school experiences of military-connected children.

First, the cumulative findings of this dissertation speak to the tremendous diversity of experiences military-connected students are facing in their schooling experiences. The first paper demonstrated that there are numerous systemic influences impacting the schooling experiences of military-connected youth. Additionally, the results highlighted how disjointed intervention attempts can be when those systems are not collaborative or aware of student needs. The second paper highlighted the relationships between demographic and situational variables for military families and parent-school satisfaction, specifically drawing attention to features of groups who are the most and least satisfied. In the third paper, multiple military-connected teens, parents, and teachers shared their lived experiences regarding academic and social-emotional wellbeing at school, giving specific examples of the critical role of informed school staff and accessible extracurricular activities. These results speak to the findings of other research pieces in the space outlining the needs for additional school-based support for military-connected students (e.g., (DeVoe et al., 2019; Esqueda, 2012; Masten, 2013) but also speak to their calls for future research exploring more nuanced and adaptive programming. While there are numerous school-based interventions in use across the country to support the needs of this student group, there are limited empirical evaluations of their efficacy and for whom they are most successful. Exploring the school experiences of military-connected students with special attention paid to both demographic and situational assets and constraints is critical for developing relevant and timely interventions.

These manuscripts also highlight the advantages of using a positive approach to exploring the experiences of military-connected students and their families. A great deal of research concerning military-connected students and families to this point has taken a deficit approach, primarily examining the challenges and difficulties brought on by military lifestyle demands. The results of this dissertation draw attention to individual and contextual assets and strengths that benefit military-connected students and families. For example, while Paper 1's focus is primarily situating extant literature into a bioecological systems theory framework, its results demonstrate the immense opportunity for improvement within and across all systems. Additionally, Paper 2 helps to provide evidence of relationships between demographic and contextual situations and parent-school satisfaction in an effort to draw attention to potential school services or opportunities that improve a school's ability to meet military-connected students' needs. Finally, Paper 3's results specifically share steps that teens and parents are taking to be successful academically and social-emotionally as they experience military lifestyle demands as well as the school-based interventions and opportunities they view as the most impactful. Taken together, these papers help to capture the assets of military-connected individuals and their contexts that may be worthy of cultivating and scaling with targeted interventions in additional communities. Exploring the military-connected student's school experiences in this way provides a helpful understanding of what is already working to their benefit.

### **Implications for Practice**

The results of this dissertation revealed several takeaways that can inform future interventions and practices targeted at supporting the school experiences of military-connected students. Firstly, the results of this dissertation draw attention to the fact that knowing and

serving military-connected students is a shared responsibility across all systems and jurisdictions. All three papers highlighted the numerous significant systems and structures that influence a military-connected child's educational experience, and when taken together, place onus on every parent, school staff member, education leader, legislator, military leader, and community member to do more to address their challenges and foster their strengths as their family serves the country. The results of this paper draw attention to the reality that everyone can do something within their own home, classroom, neighborhood, or other domain to raise awareness about military-connected children and families and advocate for the prioritization of their needs. Because they often live in highly mobile communities, having more permanent stakeholders as allies and advocates can be a critical force in raising awareness and taking action for military-connected students and families.

Another key implication from this dissertation is the opportunity for stakeholders to use what they may already have to support military-connected students. The findings of all three papers suggest that there are already systems, programs, and resources in place that work to support military-connected students when they are implemented with intentionality. While there are certainly benefits to newly developed resources, they often cost money and time that may not be available in the schools and communities that need them most. The findings of this dissertation suggest that there are key steps schools can take to be more welcoming and responsive to the needs of military-connected students including: being aware of military-connected students in their school, educating staff on military lifestyle demands, adhering to the components of the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children, clearly communicating procedures for transitioning into and out of a school, including military-connected students in peer transition or ambassador programming upon their arrival, and

advertising and admitting military-connected students to school sports and extracurricular activities. These specific examples are actions many schools are already attempting, and having this additional guidance may allow them to be more intentional with their limited resources as they continue to learn about and support their military-connected students.

### **Recommendations for Research**

The findings of this dissertation also resulted in suggestions for future research. The specific recommendations for each study are detailed within the full manuscripts in Chapters 2, 3, and 4. The recommendations included below pertain to the dissertation as a whole.

Firstly, additional research should focus on the needs of diverse military families. Because of the reliance on convenience sampling, many research studies about military-connected students represent the largest subgroups, active duty and Army. Because different services and resources are available for families of different service branches and duty statuses, research in this space needs to include broader samples. Additionally, there is a need for additional research about the school experiences of military-connected teens and young adults. Much of the extant research about military-connected students focuses on children in early and middle childhood. Military-connectedness often spans a child's entire P-12 experience and likely has lasting effects into post-secondary education and beyond. More research about how the assets and constraints of military-connectedness impact teens and young adults may provide critical insight into how interventions may be applied across the entire schooling experience. Finally, additional research should evaluate the efficacy of interventions designed to support the school experiences of military-connected students. Interventions like Purple Star School Designation and student transition programs are growing in popularity, and additional empirical

insights into how they work and for whom they are most impactful would be a critical step in intervention improvement and adoption.

### **Conclusion**

The three manuscripts of this dissertation highlight the growing needs for additional research about the academic and social-emotional school experience of military-connected students. There is growing diversity within the military-connected population, and this new generation of service members and their families requires updated research that reflects their nuanced and evolving experiences. While military-connected families are making the most of their available resources and individual strengths, there is still work to be done in ensuring their children have equitable and promotive school experiences across grade levels. This work explored existing research, extrapolated patterns from an existing sample of military-connected families, and discovered themes from focus group conversations with teens, parents, and teachers to better understand trends in the military-connected student experience. Taken together, this work expounded on prior research and outlined opportunities for additional research and interventions as stakeholders at all levels work to support military-connected students and families.

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