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Identifying, Increasing Awareness, and Supporting Military-Connected
Adolescents in Public Schools

Amanda Bushman

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Educational Specialist

Melissa A. Heath, Chair
Blake Boatright
Jason McDonald

Department of Counseling Psychology and Special Education
Brigham Young University

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ABSTRACT

Identifying, Increasing Awareness, and Supporting Military-Connected Adolescents in Public Schools

Amanda Bushman

Department of Counseling Psychology and Special Education, BYU
Educational Specialist

Of the nearly 1,000,000 children of active duty members of the military, around 80% attend civilian schools not affiliated with the Department of Defense Education Activity ([DoDEA] DoDEA, 2018; Department of Defense [DoD], 2018). This creates a need for schools to be aware of the challenges that military-connected (MC) students face and understand how best to support them. Recent research indicates that the prevalence of mental health problems in MC youth populations has been rising since the war on terrorism began (De Pedro et al., 2011). MC youth experience an array of internalizing and externalizing problems, including stress disorders (Gorman et al., 2010) and emotional problems (Chandra et al., 2010). One main concern among MC youth is that they may be at a higher risk for suicidality than their non-MC peers (Gilreath et al., 2016; Reed et al., 2011). Creating a positive and supportive school climate may actually prevent suicidality among adolescent students (Birkett et al., 2009; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2014). However, research indicates that MC students may experience a less positive school climate than their non-MC peers (Berkowitz et al., 2014). This study focused on understanding the experience of MC students within a public secondary school in the Mountain West region of the United States.

This study utilized a case study approach. A researcher interviewed five staff members serving as teachers, counselors, or administrators who had been employed at the school for at least two years and who had experience working with MC students. Overall, there did not appear to be a reliable way to identify MC students within the school. Further, participants' perceptions varied on who they thought was best able to identify MC students and whether it would be useful for staff members to know which students were connected to the military. MC students at the school appeared to be supported through school wide supports rather than through supports specific to the military student population.

It is recommended that schools consider whether identifying MC students within their population and implementing supports for these students would be beneficial. Districts, particularly those located near military bases, should consider guiding schools on policies and common practices when working with military populations. State organizations should assess the value of collecting data on military student outcomes throughout their state.

Keywords: military-connected, suicide, adolescent, public school

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

TITLE PAGE	i
ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iv
CHAPTER 1: Introduction	1
CHAPTER 2: Literature Review	3
Stressors Military-Connected Children Face	3
Suicidality in Military-Connected Adolescents	7
School Climate and Suicidality.....	9
Educating Military-Connected Youth.....	11
Existing Strategies to Support MC Students.....	16
Identifying and Supporting MC Students in Public Schools	19
CHAPTER 3: Method.....	20
Participants.....	21
Procedures.....	22
Data Analysis	24
Trustworthiness.....	25
CHAPTER 4: Results	27
Identification.....	27

Communication.....	31
Available Support	34
Challenges.....	37
Strengths	38
MC Students Within the School Culture	40
CHAPTER 5: Discussion.....	42
Implications for Educators.....	42
Implications for School Districts	43
Implications for State-Level Organizations	44
Limitations	44
Implications for Future Research.....	45
Conclusions.....	46
References.....	49
APPENDIX A: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol A.....	61
APPENDIX B: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol B	63
APPENDIX C: IRB Approval	65
APPENDIX D: Consent Form	67

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) is a federally-run school system designed to educate K-12 children of military servicemen and women, currently operates 161 schools throughout the United States, US territories, and foreign countries (DoDEA, 2020). While the latest data show that there are around 1,000,000 school-aged children of military parents who are either active-duty or reserve (Department of Defense [DoD], 2018; DoDEA, 2018), during the 2019-2020 school year, only approximately 70,000 attended DoDEA schools (DoDEA, 2018). The majority of school aged military dependents (specifically 80% of school-aged children of active-duty military personnel and an unknown number of children of reservists) attend public school, while the rest attend private schools, charter schools, or are homeschooled (DoDEA, 2018).

There are potential disadvantages for MC students attending civilian schools. Simply being embedded in the military culture may help MC adolescents gain a sense of self-sufficiency that will help them adapt to stressors that arise in military life (Mmari et al., 2010). Students who attend civilian schools may not feel this sense of community. Schools may also be unprepared to handle the unique challenges that MC students face. Mmari and colleagues (2010) found that many parents felt their MC child's civilian school was ill equipped to handle challenges their children experienced while having a deployed parent.

One conceptual framework for considering how to positively support MC students attending civilian school comes from the extant research on school climate. Studies investigating MC student populations have defined school climate as an integration of student's caring relationships with teachers and peers, their perception of physical safety, and their sense of

belonging (Astor et al., 2013). Findings from De Pedro (2012) indicate that school climate can have a positive influence on the social and emotional health of MC students, specifically in terms of decreasing depression and victimization. A healthy school climate may also act as a protective factor against suicidality specifically, which MC children may experience at higher rates compared to non-MC children (Cederbaum et al., 2013; Gilreath et al., 2016; Reed et al., 2011). In their meta-analysis of 18 samples which included nearly 200,000 participants overall in the general and across various subpopulations (though none of which included MC populations), Maraccini and Brier (2017) found that students who feel a connection to their school reported significantly less suicidal thoughts and behaviors. However, Berkowitz and colleagues (2014) found that MC parents rated their children's secondary schools as having significantly less positive school climates than did non-MC parents. Although these differences were statistically significant, the actual magnitude of these differences were small.

A first step in supporting MC students is to identify them on state and local levels. When the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) was signed into law in 2015, Local Education Agencies (LEAs) across the United States became required to identify and track students who have a parent who is an active-duty service member (Military Child Education Coalition, 2019).

However, states have varied in their implementation of this requirement and it is unclear whether LEAs are currently obtaining any data on MC students.

This study was conducted in order to gain insight into how school personnel identify, perceive, and respond to the needs of MC youth. The importance of understanding the experience of MC adolescents attending public schools has important implications for educators and state organizations in how to best support these students.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

According to the most recent data available from the DoD (2018), there are over 1.3 million active duty members of the military. Around 37% of them have child dependents, totaling up to nearly 1,000,000 children of active duty members across all active duty branches, ages 0-22 years old (DoD, 2018). Pre-9/11 research has indicated that, compared to their peers, MC youth were psychologically no worse off than their non-MC peers. Group studies comparing MC youth to non-MC youth found either no difference in levels of psychopathology (Jensen et al., 1995), found lower rates of psychopathology (Morrison, 1981), or found a higher occurrence of only acute, temporary emotional and behavioral symptoms (Jensen et al., 1986). However, more recent research has shown that the prevalence of mental health problems in MC youth populations is rising, likely due to the long-running war on terrorism and the stresses that wartime creates for military personnel and their families (De Pedro et al., 2011).

Stressors Military-Connected Children Face

Research has shown that MC youth are at higher risk for an array of internalizing and externalizing problems, including stress disorders (Gorman et al., 2010), depressive symptoms, (Cederbaum et al., 2013; Lester et al., 2010), and other emotional and behavioral difficulties (Chandra et al., 2010). According to research findings, there are several factors related to military life that potentially put MC youth at a higher risk for negative psychological outcomes.

Deployment

According to the DoD (2012), one of the most studied stressors in military families is the deployment cycle, which includes pre-deployment (preparation), deployment (physical separation), post deployment (physically returning home), and reintegration (reintegrating into

roles at home). As of 2010, 1,046,866 guard, reserve, and active duty military personnel with one or more dependent child had deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom and/or Operation Enduring Freedom (Board on the Health of Select Populations, Institute of Medicine, & Committee on the Assessment of the Readjustment Needs of Military Personnel, Veterans, and Their Families, 2013). Data published in the same year showed that a parental deployment increased children's mental and behavioral health visits by 11%, with behavioral disorders increasing by 19% and stress disorders by 18% (Gorman et al., 2010).

Alfano et al. (2016) found similar results in their review, which suggested that several studies have linked parental deployment to an increase in MC youth receiving mental health care services. Other studies have found that a deployment of either a parent or sibling increased the risk of depression in MC youth (Cederbaum et al., 2013). Chandra et al. (2010) also found a positive correlation between the cumulative length of parental deployments and emotional difficulties in children. Parental combat-related deployments specifically have been associated with depressive symptoms (Lester et al., 2010; Reed et al., 2011), externalizing symptoms (Lester et al., 2010), and suicidal thoughts (Reed et al., 2011).

The physical deployment phase of the deployment cycle is not the only time of increased stress for military families. In a review of the extant literature, Alfano et al. (2016) found evidence of an increased rate of maltreatment in MC children during pre-deployment, deployment, and reintegration periods. This reflects the ongoing stress military families experience during the whole deployment cycle. In fact, some MC youth find readjusting after a parent returns home to be one of the most difficult times during the deployment cycle (Mmari et al., 2010).

Mental Health of At-Home Parent

During deployments, the at-home caregiver plays a critical part in the psychological wellbeing of MC children. More specifically, the adverse effects of parental deployment on children are tied to the psychological health of the non-deployed parent (Chandra et al., 2010), as well as the child's bond with both parents (Riggs & Riggs, 2011). Stress in the non-deployed parent may increase the chance of poor psychosocial functioning in MC children experiencing a parental deployment (Flake et al., 2009). In mothers specifically, Finkel et al. (2003) found that the presence of depressive symptoms in mothers of MC children was predictive of withdrawal, sadness, and anxiety in children. In the same study, a positive relationship with the mother was correlated with lower rates of loneliness in children.

Parental Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

The nature of a deployment and the lasting negative psychological effects of deployment on military personnel may also lead to negative outcomes in MC children. A greater amount of combat exposure has been linked to a greater occurrence of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms after deployment (Taft et al., 2008). In fact, recent studies have placed the prevalence of combat-related PTSD in military personnel and veterans anywhere between 4 and 19% (Kok et al., 2012; Richardson et al., 2010).

Research has shown mixed results on the psychological outcomes in MC youth whose parents struggle with PTSD. Davidson and Mellor (2001) found no difference between self-esteem or trauma symptoms in children of Australian Vietnam veterans with PTSD compared to children of veterans without PTSD and children of civilians. However, some studies have found higher rates of aggression and anxiety in children of veterans with PTSD (Glenn et al., 2002). In comparing the children of veterans with PTSD to children of veterans without PTSD of the same

age, sex, education level, family income, level of parental education, parental employment status, ethnicity, and residential area, Maršanić et al. (2014) found significantly higher rates of internalizing and externalizing symptoms in the children of veterans with PTSD.

PTSD in combat veterans has been linked to poor family functioning (Davidson & Mellor, 2001), even when controlling for individual or family factors such as substance use and other psychiatric disorders (Jordan et al., 1992). Harkness found that children (aged 6–16) of combat veterans presented a greater amount of depressive symptoms, anxiety, hyperactivity, deficient social skills, delinquency, and academic difficulties, though Harkness hypothesized that these adverse effects may be a product of family violence related to PTSD rather than the result of a PTSD diagnosis itself (as cited in Maršanić et al., 2014). Additionally, combat-related PTSD in mothers specifically may play a significant role in family functioning, with numbing and lack of control symptoms in female veterans negatively affecting family adjustment (Taft et al., 2008).

Relocation

On average, MC children will move six to nine times during their school years, which is roughly three times more than their non-MC peers (DoDEA, 2018). Several studies have shown that frequent relocations can be psychologically harmful to youth (Finkel et al., 2003; Weber & Weber, 2005). Weber and Weber (2005) found that relocations were associated with children's aberrant behavior, though a positive finding was that the impact on behavior seemed to improve with subsequent relocations as children acclimated to moving. Perhaps not surprisingly, Finkel et al. (2003) found that the longer MC children lived in their current residence, the better their peer relationships and the less loneliness they experienced.

On the contrary, other studies have shown that even though a source of stress, relocations may actually strengthen MC adolescents' resilience (Easterbrooks et al., 2013; Mmari et al., 2010). One study found that relocation and loss of social connectedness among peers was one of the highest cited sources of stress for MC youth, as reported in focus groups of MC adolescents, their parents, and school personnel (Mmari et al., 2010). The same study also found, however, that frequent relocations were perceived as making MC adolescents more resilient and self-sufficient than non-MC adolescents. Additionally, the stress of relocating may also be buffered by family cohesiveness (Finkel et al., 2003).

Suicidality in Military-Connected Adolescents

One potential negative emotional outcome that MC youth face is an increased risk for suicidality (Gilreath et al., 2016). According to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control (2020), suicide was the second leading cause of death for Americans ages 10–14 years old and the second leading cause of death for those aged 15–23 years old. Research on the pathways of suicidal behavior are somewhat mixed, with some findings tying risk for suicidality to psychological disorders, such as mood disorders (Bridge et al., 2006), and some findings indicating that suicidal behavior can manifest independently from other disorders (Cash & Bridge, 2009; Melhem et al., 2007). In the general adolescent population, approximately 90% of those who complete suicide have a psychiatric disorder (Bridge et al., 2006).

In a survey of over 300,000 9th and 11th graders in California, children of military personnel were significantly more likely to experience suicidal ideation, more likely to make a plan for suicide, made more suicide attempts, and made more suicide attempts that required medical treatment, even when controlling for grade, sex, and race/ethnicity (Gilreath et al.,

2016). In Gilreath et al.'s (2016) study, the prevalence of suicide attempts in children of military personnel was approximately 12%, compared to approximately 7.3% in non-MC youth. Similar, results were reported by Reed et al. (2011), who found that MC adolescents were more likely to report experiencing suicidal thoughts compared to non-MC youth, with some differences across age and gender.

Certain risk factors may raise MC adolescents' risk for suicide. Living away from one or both parents puts adolescents at an increased risk for suicide (Bridge et al., 2006), therefore experiencing a parent's deployment may increase the risk for suicide. In a correlative study, Cederbaum et al. (2013) found an association between parental or sibling deployment and suicidal ideation in MC youth when controlling for grade, gender, and race/ethnicity. Specifically, with older youth (9th and 11th graders), having two or more familial deployments increased the prevalence of suicidal ideation by 34 % (Cederbaum et al., 2013).

Parental mental health may also put MC youth at higher risk for suicide, as psychopathology in a parent is a risk factor for attempted and completed suicide in adolescents (Bridge et al., 2006). Parental PTSD specifically may raise MC adolescent suicide risk. Maršanić et al. (2013) also found that children of male Croatian veterans with PTSD had significantly higher incidences of suicide attempts.

The frequent relocations that MC youth experience may put them at a higher risk for suicidality. In a group of adolescents aged 11–17 years, Cash and Bridges (2009) found that making frequent moves during childhood was associated with a greater likelihood of attempting suicide. This relationship was significant even after controlling for possible extraneous variables. Other data, however, has shown that associations between relocation and suicide attempt may be explained by other factors related to relocation, such as genetics and environment (Bramson et

al., 2016). To the author's knowledge, no studies have investigated the relationship between suicidality and relocation specifically among MC youth populations.

The pervasiveness of suicide in the population of military personnel and veterans may contribute to suicidal behavior in MC youth. When controlling for age and gender, statistics from 2014 showed that suicide risk for US veterans was 21% higher than the general civilian adult population (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2016) and data from 2015 shows that the suicide rate in the active duty personnel population is 20.2 per 10,000 (DoD, 2016). This prevalence in the military population may trickle down to MC youth either through familial pathways or through exposure to suicide. Research supports the idea that suicidality is familial, possibly even genetic (Cash & Bridge, 2009). In a prospective study, Lieb et al. (2005) found that children of women who attempted suicide were five times more likely to experience suicidal ideations and nine times more likely to attempt suicide themselves. Other research has found a greater relationship between suicidal behavior in children of parents who attempted suicide and had a mood disorder compared to children of parents who only had a mood disorder (Melhem et al., 2007), indicating that suicidality may be passed down to children independently from other disorders. Similarly, Wilcox et al. (2010) found that the risk for suicide was three times higher in children and adolescents whose parents had completed suicide compared to children and parents had died from other causes.

School Climate and Suicidality

A healthy school climate may act as a protective factor against suicidality. Much of the literature in this area relates to suicidality and school climate among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBTQ) students. In their meta-analysis of 18 samples of adolescents in grades 6-12, which included nearly 200,000 participants overall, Maraccini and Brier (2017) found that

higher school connectedness was associated with reduced levels of combined suicidal ideation and suicide attempts among general, high-risk, and sexual minority adolescents. Hatzenbuehler et al. (2014) found that lesbian, gay, and bisexual students who lived in areas with school climates that were protective of non-heterosexual students experienced fewer suicidal thoughts than those who attended schools with less protective climates. Similar results were found by Birkett et al. (2009). In their study of over 7,000 7th and 8th graders, they found a significant interaction between reported school climate and sexual orientation in terms of suicidal/depressive thoughts (Birkett et al., 2009). Among heterosexual, questioning, and lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) students, those who reported a high positive school climate reported lower cases of experiencing higher levels of depression/suicidality (Birkett et al., 2009). Denny et al. (2016) also found that positive school climate buffered against suicidality in both-sex attracted and same-sex attracted male students, but not in females.

To the author's knowledge, only one study has investigated the relationship between school climate and suicidality among MC adolescent students. De Pedro et al. (2018) utilized data from the California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS), a survey administered by the California Department of Education (CDE), which included responses from 14,493 7th, 9th, and 11th graders in six different school districts in Southern California. Participants self-reported their perceptions of their school's climate on factors related to safety at school, caring relationships, high expectations, school connectedness, and meaningful participation. The survey also included self-report questions related to emotional wellbeing, depressive symptoms, and suicidal ideation. Results showed that while a significant association was found between military-connection (having either a parent or a sibling in the military) and suicidal ideation, factors of school climate (school connectedness, meaningful participation, and feeling safe) were each significantly

negatively correlated with suicidal ideation (De Pedro et al., 2018). Overall, when accounting for school climate, military connection was not a significant predictor of negative mental health outcomes.

Educating Military-Connected Youth

In addressing mental health outcomes, particularly suicidality, in MC youth, education appears to be especially relevant. The DoDEA, a federally-run school system designed to educate K-12 children of military servicemen and women, currently operates 161 schools throughout the United States, US territories, and foreign countries (DoDEA, 2020). While the latest data show that there are about 1,000,000 school-aged children of active-duty and reserve military parents, only approximately 70,000 attended DoDEA schools during the 2019-2020 school year, while the rest attended public, private, or charter schools or were home-schooled (DoDEA, 2018). Overall, the majority of school-aged military dependents attend public school (DoDEA, 2018).

There are potential disadvantages for MC students attending civilian schools. Simply being embedded in the military culture at a school run by the DoDEA may help MC adolescents gain a sense of self-sufficiency that will help them adapt to stressors that arise in military life (Mmari et al., 2010). Students who attend civilian schools may not feel this sense of community. Mmari et al. (2010) found that many parents felt their MC child's civilian school was ill equipped to handle the challenges that accompany having students with a deployed parent. Further, teachers in civilian schools may not be aware of the resources available to their students, even if those resources are within their own school (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Arnold et al., 2014).

Academically, research has shown that high mobility and experiencing a parental deployment may put MC students at a higher risk for experiencing school failure (Bradshaw et

al., 2010; De Pedro et al., 2011). Overall, the military lifestyle creates unique challenges in the education of MC students. A recent study which sought to address these challenges found that military personnel had four major concerns about the education of their children; lack of educational options, inconsistency in content and standards between states, lack of support, and ineffective state and district policies to identify and support MC students (Mesecar & Soifer, 2017).

Educational Options for MC Students

Parents of MC students have cited education opportunities as one of their highest concerns regarding military family lifestyle (Blue Star Families, 2017; Bradshaw et al., 2010). Structurally, there are four main ways that MC students are educated. DoDEA schools, schools that are only available on major military installations, are built within the military culture and designed to meet the academic and emotional needs of MC students (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Russo & Fallon, 2015). Academically, students who attend these schools generally perform above national averages, especially African American and Hispanic students (Kanellis & O’Gara, 2013). However, DoDEA schools are not available to the large majority of MC students, with only 70,000 of MC students attending DoDEA schools (DoDEA, 2020). Homeschooling is proving to be a good option for families who do not want to transition their child to a new school every time they have a permanent change of station (PCS; Hefling, 2018), with roughly 10% of MC students being homeschooled (Military Interstate Children’s Compact Commission, 2016). Private schools can offer more flexibility to meet the lifestyle and academic needs of MC families but are not accessible by many MC families due to geographic availability and cost, with only around 10% of MC students attending private or parochial schools (Military Interstate Children’s Compact Commission, 2016). Around 80% of school-aged children of active-duty

military personnel attend public schools (DoDEA, 2020.). While not a disadvantage, there are certain issues that MC students face in mainstream schools, especially less-flexible public schools.

State Instructional Content and Achievement Standards

One of the biggest challenges that MC students face in public schools is the difficulty in transitioning from school to school. Because of inconsistencies between states in terms of curriculum, frequently changing schools can lead to MC students either missing out on critical curriculum or having to repeat topics they have already learned (Bradshaw et al., 2010). Frequently changing schools can also lead to MC students not meeting the requirements to graduate from high school on time (Bradshaw et al., 2010). In July of 2006, the Interstate Compact was drafted to address the eligibility, enrollment, placement, and graduation issues that MC students face. Its goal is to provide a consistent policy for curriculum and requirements for MC students in every state and district that chooses to join (Military Interstate Children's Compact Commission, 2016). All 50 states have implemented the Interstate Compact, but to varying degrees (Mesecar & Soifer, 2017), and many MC students still suffer academically as a result of high mobility.

Supporting MC Students in Civilian Schools

School personnel play an important role in promoting the success of MC students. In order to support MC students, it is important that teachers and school administrators understand the issues that military families face (Russo & Fallon, 2015). Academically, school structures themselves, such as academic requirements and absence policies, make it difficult to meet the needs of MC students (Arnold et al., 2014; Bradshaw et al., 2010). MC students would likely benefit from policies that allowed for more flexibility. MC students also may miss out on

important instructional supports. It can be challenging to assess an incoming student's current level of academic functioning and needed educational supports, particularly if the student's prior school does not provide the student's records in a timely manner (Arnold et al., 2014). This leaves students without academic supports that would benefit them, particularly in the period before, during, and after a school transition.

Emotionally, positive teacher relationships can be a positive support for MC children (Astor et al., 2013). However, some teachers may not have the experience, knowledge, or skill to respond to the needs of their MC connected students (Arnold et al., 2014; Bradshaw et al., 2010). Researchers have proposed that the best way to approach this issue is through fostering a culturally competent approach in education (Arnold et al., 2014). Even if educators are not highly familiar with the dynamics of military lifestyle, they can get to know their students individually and become aware of MC student's home life and community in order to better support them. However, school staff may not be attentive to the needs of MC students because they are not aware when a student is part of a military family (Military Child Education Coalition, 2016a).

Methods of Identifying MC Students

Until recently, there was no consistent or reliable data available on the educational outcomes of MC students who attend non-DoDEA schools. Continued efforts from organizations like the Military Child Education Coalition, which supports the education of MC students, as well as endorsements from senior leaders of several military branches (who want to retain service members who have school-aged dependents) helped to establish legislation to inform decisions on supporting MC students (Military Child Education Coalition, 2016b; Understanding ESSA, 2017). In 2015, the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA, 2015), which includes a

requirement called the Military Student Data Identifier (MSI), was signed into law (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). The MSI requires states to identify and track students who have a parent who is an active-duty service member (though it is encouraged that they also track children of guard and reserve troops) and report this data to the U.S. Department of Education (Military Child Education Coalition, 2019). However, many states are not aware of the MSI. Mary Keller, president and CEO of the Military Child Education Coalition, estimated in 2016 that 15-19 states were tracking their military students (Nicosia, 2016). Other estimates put the number as low as 12 (Education Commission of the States, 2016).

The state board of education for the Mountain West state in which this study was conducted submitted their first draft of the state plan in December of 2017 and resubmitted a revised draft in February of 2018 (STATE State Board of Education, 2018 [*NOTE: specific STATE in which the study was conducted was redacted to protect confidentiality*]). While there is no specific mention of the Military Student Data Identifier in the state's plan, representatives from the state board of education have said that they plan on collecting data on MC students and reporting it to the U.S. Department of Education (official from the STATE State Board of Education, personal communication, March 27, 2018). This will depend, however, on the willingness of school districts to implement a system of tracking and reporting their MC students to the state board of education.

For some time, the state has been providing LEAs with an identifier to indicate military connectedness through the "Parent/Pupil Survey," which includes an identifier about whether the parent is active-duty member of the armed forces, as well as the parent's name, rank, and branch of service (Legal Information Institute, 2016; official from the STATE State Board of Education, personal communication, April 4, 2018). However, state LEAs, even those that are nearby major

military installations, have not consistently utilized this flag in the past (official from the state board of education, personal communication, April 4, 2018). In fact, the district in the state that includes a military base only reported having one military-connected student in 2017 (official from the state board of education, personal communication, May 8, 2018). Without accurate representation of the MC student population, the validity of findings from the MSI may be in question.

MC students present unique factors that educators need to be aware of and prepared for. Whenever possible, schools should employ highly effective teachers and implement best practices in instruction in order to support the learning of all students, including those who are MC. School personnel should also be flexible with students who are transitioning into their school, allowing for alterations in course requirements and school policies in order to best meet their needs. Teachers and administrators need to be aware of how to support their MC students, both emotionally and academically, in order to support their academic and lifetime success. To do these things, school personnel need to identify their MC students and get acquainted with their needs. Lastly, data on MC students should be collected nationwide, either federally or by states, in order to inform best practices in supporting MC students.

Existing Strategies to Support MC Students

Some civilian schools have implemented specific ways to support MC students. Several studies have highlighted the importance of socioemotional support for MC students (Arnold et al., 2014). Teachers have expressed the importance of promoting peer relations between MC students and their civilian classmates (Arnold et al., 2014). Some schools hold student meet and greets when a new student moves in, giving them the opportunity to meet and socialize with their new classmates. Others implement a type of buddy system, pairing new students up with existing

students who show them around campus. MC adolescents have reported that these strategies are helpful through the process of starting a new school (Mmari et al., 2010).

In some schools, teachers have played an integral role in supporting MC students by eating lunch with new MC students and introducing them to other staff, taking the time to talk with them personally, and even attending their extracurricular events (Arnold et al., 2014). Other teachers have cited the importance of predictable classroom environments where MC students can feel safe during times of stressful events at home, such as a parental deployment (Arnold et al., 2014). Other techniques teachers have employed include classroom procedures to support MC students, such as reading or writing activities that teach coping skills (Arnold et al., 2014).

One conceptual framework for considering how to positively support MC students comes from the extant research on school climate. The United States Department of Education has identified the importance of a positive school climate for districts, schools, teachers, parents, and students (2014). School climate has become a widely researched topic, though there is some confusion and inconsistencies concerning the definition and operationalization of the term “school climate” (Rudasill et al., 2018). Rudasill et al. (2018) have proposed a theoretical framework which synthesizes the common elements used in various models. Their definition of school climate includes “the affective and cognitive perceptions regarding social interactions, relationships, safety, values, and beliefs held by students, teachers, administrators, and staff within a school” (Rudasill et al., 2018, p. 46). Similarly, Zullig et al. (2010) identified five domains for conceptualizing school climate: order, safety, and discipline; academic outcomes; social relationships; school facilities; and school connectedness. Studies investigating school climate in MC student populations have defined school climate as an integration of student’s

caring relationships with teachers and peers, their perception of physical safety, and their sense of belonging (Astor et al., 2013).

Findings from De Pedro (2012) indicate that school climate can have a positive influence on the social and emotional health of MC students in terms of depression, suicidal ideation, and victimization. Specifically, teacher relationships appear to be important to MC students. In a large study conducted by the Military Child Education Coalition (2012) involving more than 900 interviews of MC families and school personnel, reports from MC students indicated that caring relationships with adults, such as teachers and coaches, were essential to their resiliency during a parental deployment. Data indicated that this was particularly important among high school students.

De Pedro (2012) suggested that rather than focusing on ways to support MC students specifically, taking a school-wide approach to strengthen school climate could potentially have a positive impact on MC, while also benefiting non-MC students. However, MC students may experience a less positive school climate than their non-MC peers. Berkowitz et al. (2014) found that MC parents rated their children's secondary schools as having statistically significant less positive school climates than did non-MC parents, though these differences were not large. Regarding safety specifically, MC students may also feel less safe at school. Gilreath et al. (2014) found that students who had a parent in the military experienced more physical and nonphysical victimization compared to students with a sibling in the military and non-MC students. Students who had a parent in the military were also more likely to carry a weapon. The same study also found that a greater number of parent and sibling deployments and relocations that resulted in a change of school were related to increases in victimization and weapon

carrying. Studies have shown, however, that a healthy school climate can be a protective factor against both physical and nonphysical victimization among MC students (De Pedro et al., 2016).

Identifying and Supporting MC Students in Public Schools

Understanding the effect of a supportive school climate on emotional outcomes, specifically suicidality, among military-connected students could have important implications for MC students, particularly the over 900,000 who attend civilian schools (DoD, 2016) and may not experience a strong positive school climate. Before this work can be done, however, a first step is needed; examining whether schools are currently identifying their MC students and what they do to support them. Identifying and supporting MC students was cited as a main concern for parents of MC children (Mesecar & Soifer, 2017), but the primary investigator was not able to identify any qualitative studies investigating how MC students are identified and how that relates to support these students receive. The present study sought to understand these procedures through the following research questions:

1. How aware are school staff of which students are military-connected?
2. Do school staff members take steps to promote a supportive school climate for military-connected students?

CHAPTER 3

Method

The aim of this study was to examine how aware staff members were of MC students and whether there were any procedures in place for supporting these students. Researchers utilized a case study methodology. Yin (1994) describes the case study as an appropriate methodology when your research questions involve the “how” or “why” of a “set of events over which the investigator has little or no control” (p. 9). Yin (1994) identifies the primary application of the case study as describing complex “causal links in real-life interventions” (p. 10). In the present study, the researchers sought to understand and describe variables within a system that they had no control over. Thus, a case study methodology was chosen because it is well-suited to understanding the “how” and “why” of our research questions. In their review of qualitative case study reports, Hyett et al. (2014) stress that the goal of case study research is to understand the “complexity of the object of study” and that researchers should “seek out what is common and what is particular” (p. 2) about a specific case. Our goal was to understand the culture and support systems in place for MC adolescent students in this particular school.

Case study methodology lies within the larger framework of qualitative naturalistic research methods. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews in the tradition of a naturalistic inquiry approach (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Naturalistic inquiry can be described as a method where the researcher “observes, describes, and interprets the experiences and actions of specific people and groups in societal and cultural context” (Salkind, 2010, p. 880). Distinction between the roles of interviewer and interviewee are blurred as the researcher studies the phenomena within the context of which it occurs (Tullis Owen, 2008). Qualitative naturalistic methods yield deep, detailed information about the case being studied (Tullis Owen, 2008). Our

aim was to study the school holistically as an embodiment of the experience of MC students within a public school, which took precedence over producing generalizable results.

Participants

The research team received approval from the Institutional Review Board as well as the school district where the study took place to conduct this research. The research team also received informed consent from all participants. Participants in this study included five staff members serving as teachers, counselors, or administrators at a secondary school in the Mountain West region. Two participants were male and three were female. One participant had a member of the military in their immediate family. The scope of our case study included adolescent MC students at a particular secondary school. The school that served as the location for this study was chosen through purposeful sampling because its school zone includes the on-base housing of a nearby military base. This creates a substantial MC student population (which administrators have estimated to be around 10%, or 200 students) within this school, presenting a unique opportunity to investigate how school climate can impact MC students who attend public schools. This school is located in an urban city with a population of about 78,000 people and a median annual household income of about \$75,000. About 87% of residents are Caucasian, about 12% are Hispanic, about 2% are Asian, and about 2% are African American (United States Census Bureau, 2019). To protect the confidentiality of the participants, in this manuscript we will not refer to the school, city, or state in which the study was conducted. In the body of the manuscript and in the reference section, identifying information is altered. For example, we refer to STATE rather than the actual state's name, and CITY rather than the actual city's name.

Sample Size

When conducting qualitative naturalistic interviews, saturation is often reached after a small number of interviews, around 12 but less than 20 (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Since our methodology was chosen in order to understand this case (the school) as a holistic system and not to yield generalizable results, we conducted three interviews with five participants. With multiple interviews across participants, we concluded that the number of participants was sufficient to saturate the themes that arose from the data.

Recruitment

We used purposeful sampling to select participants that (a) had worked at the school for at least two years in order to have an understanding of the school culture and (b) had experience working with MC students. Criteria for having experience working with MC students included factors such as having interacted with multiple MC students in the classroom, having provided school counselling services to multiple MC students, and having a broad knowledge of the overall culture of the school in regard to MC students. These criteria allowed the researchers to study the experience of MC students within the larger culture and context of the school. We discussed these standards with the principal and asked for participant recommendations. We also discussed the principal's rationale for recommending participants and how it fit within our criteria. Based on this discussion, we selected potential participants. Potential participants were recruited through email and offered a \$20 Amazon gift card for their participation. The principal recommended seven potential participants, five of whom agreed to participate.

Procedures

These interview methods were pilot tested with the school principal, assistant principal, and a school counselor at the same secondary school this study was conducted in. An informal,

unstructured interview was conducted. Administrators and the school counselor could recall several instances of having interacted with MC students, were open to discussing their experiences with MC students, and appeared to have an overall interest in supporting their MC students.

Interviews took place in classrooms and offices at the school. At the beginning of each initial interview, the researcher conducting the interviews shared her personal investment in the topics they would be discussing and why she valued hearing about participant's experiences and knowledge concerning MC students. Interviews were conducted in two phases; (1) an initial interview to gain a breadth of information and build trust with participants and (2) an in-depth interview to collect more focused information. Initial interviews took approximately 20 minutes, where participants answered five open-ended questions. During the second round of interviews, participants were asked 19 open-ended questions. These interviews took approximately 30-40 minutes. During both rounds of interviews, the researcher followed a semi-structured interview protocol. Participants were given the opportunity to expand and elaborate on their responses, or to discuss related topics as they came up. Occasionally, the researcher probed for more specific information or examples from participants.

If participants had a lot to say about a specific question and got off topic, they were allowed to continue sharing their experiences and views on that topic. They were only redirected back to the initial question if their response was not pertinent to the experiences of MC students, or students in general, at the school. We sought an in-depth understanding of the school climate and used interview questions as probes to guide the interview rather than direct questions (Patton, 2002).

Data Analysis

Interviews were recorded and transcribed. The researcher conducting the interviews also noted any thoughts and noteworthy experiences during interviews and data analysis in a research journal. Researchers analyzed data using a hermeneutic approach. This approach involves allowing the investigative process to unfold as it happens, rather than enforcing strict guidelines or imposing theoretical frameworks (Jackson & Patton, 1992). This type of analysis can be viewed as having no rigid beginning or end, but rather “spiraling” into deeper levels of understanding (Jackson & Patton, 1992, para. 14). Based on this approach, the research team established guiding principles for the interview protocol prior to conducting interviews.

Hermeneutics also involves self-reflection and disclosure of the researcher’s own bias, who then challenges their own interpretations of the data (Jackson & Patton, 1992). The researcher who conducted the interviews is a graduate student studying school psychology who greatly values supporting children emotionally in school. She was a military spouse for over six years and feels very connected to the military community in general. She also has several nieces and nephews who are MC. These factors likely contributed to researcher bias in the present study.

Analysis of transcripts was conducted in three phases, according to the method outlined by Jackson and Patton (1992). First, the two co-investigators and the research assistant who transcribed the interviews read through the transcripts independently with an unfocused intent to understand the context rather than the content. Next, a more in-depth reading of the data was conducted by each in order to identify categories and themes within the text which answered our research questions and those that did not. Through several more independent readings, each member of the research team identified patterns in responses as well as uncommon, unique

responses. The research team then came together to discuss themes that they had found independently. During this time, the researchers sought confirmation or inconsistencies in the themes identified. With each successive reading of the data, the themes uncovered were further refined and a deeper understanding achieved. The final data report included themes found in interview responses as well as quotes that exemplified these themes. After themes were identified, participants were given the opportunity to read through their interview transcripts to ensure their responses were accurate and that they aligned with their understanding of the interview questions.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of our findings, the research team employed methods outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Participant responses were analyzed by the researcher who conducted the interviews as well as two researchers who were not involved in interviews. Each researcher conducted multiple readings of the transcripts independently, identifying major themes as well as unique participant responses. The research team then came together for debriefings to discuss their findings. Researchers worked together to review significant quotes, clarify findings, and further refine major themes. This process took place for both interview phases. Based on these debriefings, major themes and important findings were identified.

Member checks were conducted after interviews were complete. Using the original transcripts, the interviewer consulted with participants through email to verify the accuracy of the information collected from participants. This gave participants the opportunity to clarify their responses and ensured that their views were accurately represented.

Finally, the research team conducted a literature check to investigate how the current findings related to the extant literature. By reviewing the existing literature, researchers were

able to see how the current findings supported or contradicted other findings. This comparison allowed for a broader understanding of the limitations, generalizability, and authenticity of the current study.

CHAPTER 4

Results

Five adult staff members at a high school in the Mountain West region were interviewed individually about their experiences in relation to MC students who attended the participating school. All participants had direct experiences working with MC students in various roles, such as helping them register for courses or providing them with academic instruction. All participants had been employees at the school for at least two years, some for up to 13 years. The research team analyzed typed transcripts of the interviews using the hermeneutic method, identifying common themes.

Six major themes emerged from the data. These six major themes included the following: (a) Identification (methods of identifying MC students); (b) Communication (communication among staff, between school and families, and between the school and the school liaison officer concerning MC students); (c) Available Support (current and past supports available for MC students); (d) Challenges (the challenges MC students face); (e) Strengths (the strengths of MC students); and (f) MC Students within the School Culture (the experience of MC students within the school culture).

Identification

When it came to identifying MC students within the school, no consistent and reliable methods appeared to be available to school personnel. Participants could not speculate an exact number of how many MC students attend the school, but some interviewees thought that there was a way to access a list of MC students, though administrators denied that such a list existed. One interviewee mentioned a federal card that MC students fill out, which may be related to the

district's implementation of the MSI. However, this participant also said that the school "can't necessarily make a list from that."

One participant speculated whether identifying MC students was part of the school's responsibility: "I don't think somebody's responsible for it because it's not part of what we do. Or is it? Are we supposed to identify?" Interestingly, many interviewees thought that other individuals were better able to identify MC students than they were themselves. For instance, teachers thought that counselors would be able to easily identify them, while counselors thought that teachers would. Many people mentioned that the registrar and the office secretaries could easily identify MC students. No one mentioned that they themselves were in a good position to identify the MC population.

Interviewees discussed various informal ways that MC students are identified, such as by teachers who had taught at the school long enough to become familiar with which families were MC, by teachers who took the time to get to know their students individually, by teachers who were connected to the military themselves, by counselors who initially enrolled MC students, and by looking at the location where students were moving from if they enrolled in school in the middle of the year. However, most of these methods of identification occurred only if they came up in conversation. Regardless of the reliability of methods for identification, interviewee responses reflected three main methods that were utilized within the school: by students self-identifying, by the school's registrar, and by looking up addresses.

Most Common Methods for Identifying MC Students

While self-identification was mentioned by many participants as a way to determine which students were MC, some participants mentioned that not all students would likely self-

identify. Some thought that students would not be comfortable with sharing that information.

One participant generalized about their experiences with MC students:

I had some kids whose parents [were] deployed, and they [didn't] want people knowing because it's hard to talk about and they miss them, and they [didn't] want to get emotional in front of people. And so sometimes they like to be identified, sometimes they don't.

Another participant thought that families may not want to self-identify as MC, saying that “some people don't like when the government, and they view us as government, asks them questions. Like, personal questions.” Another participant said that they did not know if they, as a school employee, had “the right” to know whether students were MC or not. Self-disclosure, while a commonly mentioned method of identifying MC, brought up some confidential and ethical considerations for participants.

Many interviewees mentioned that the most reliable way to identify MC students was if their home address was on the military post. However, based on participant responses, it appeared that few employees look at student's addresses regularly. One participant said, “I don't think teachers ever, or at least if they ever do, it's very rare, look at a student's address because normally when they communicate, we don't send letters home in the mail anymore.” Another participant mentioned that counselors had the ability to look up a student's address, but it was not a common practice. “[They] could look at their address but when [they] have a kid walk in asking [them] questions about their schedule or something, [they] don't look up their address.” Even if school personnel did try to identify which students were MC by looking up students' addresses, this method would not be a reliable way to identify the entire population, since (as many participants mentioned) not all MC students live on base. While looking up addresses may

be a good first step in identifying if a student is MC, it does not appear to be a reliable way of identifying individual MC students, nor the entire MC student population as a whole.

The registrar was mentioned several times when it came to how MC students were identified. One participant said that “if it were to be one person [in charge of identifying MC students, it would be] the registrar.” Another participant said that the registrar would be the most likely to be able to identify which students were MC because the registrar “has to look at their addresses to make sure they're in our boundaries,” indicating that this method of identification may rely heavily on student addresses and may not be reliable. Participants also stated that MC students and parents may self-disclose to the registrar that they are MC, as the registrar is often their first point of contact. However, a few participants mentioned that the registrar does not share this information with school staff and there was no indication that any formal recording identifies which and how many students are MC. Overall, while the registrar may be in a good position to identify which students are MC, this method of identification may not be reliable, nor consistently used.

Beliefs About the Usefulness of Identifying MC Students

Some interviewees thought that it would be useful to formally identify MC students within the school, while others thought it was not the school's responsibility. One interviewee said that “for most things [it's not useful to know who MC students are]. Because we just help them with whatever they need regardless of anything else.” Another participant said, “I don't know if it matters from the teacher's perspective what their parents do for a living.... I don't think that's our goal to identify. We're not trying to identify.” Some interviewees thought it may be an invasion of student privacy if they were to be asked about their MC status, or that identifying them may alienate them from their peers. One participant said they felt that whether staff should

be made aware of which students are MC depends on the case of individual students. Still, some interviewees thought that identifying MC students would “absolutely” be helpful in knowing how to best support them. Others thought it may be helpful to know when an MC student was experiencing a parental deployment. Some mentioned that it may be useful to know MC status when students were preparing to apply for college, since any military-related moves may impact their earned credits and graduation requirements. Overall, interviewees’ perceptions varied greatly on this topic.

Communication

When it came to communication, interviewees mentioned no formal lines of communication between MC families, school staff, or the school liaison officer concerning MC students. The school liaison officer is a point of contact for military families to help navigate school-related issues. This individual is paid by the military and connected to a specific military base. All forms of communication happened on a case-by-case basis as concerns arose with these students. When concerns arose, staff, families, and the school liaison officer communicated through email, phone calls, or face-to-face meetings.

Staff Communication

Interviewee responses indicated that within the school, any communication between staff members--such as teachers, counselors, and administrators--concerning MC students who may need extra support happened on a case-by-case basis. One participant mentioned that MC students who were struggling could be discussed at the school’s weekly case management meeting. While there was no formal process for informing teachers and staff which students were MC, interviewees commonly mentioned informal lines of communication. Communication

included emails and as-needed face-to-face meetings. Staff members informed teachers or other personnel of a student's military background when they thought it was needed.

School-Family Communication

Some interviewees mentioned that many military parents tended to communicate to the school that they were MC when students first moved in. These parents often will contact the school prior to moving into school boundaries. One interviewee said that

Quite often military parents are communicating with us and asking us questions before they get here. Whereas anybody else who just moves into our boundaries, we generally don't hear from them until they show up. So, I feel like they are really good at communicating with us if they need anything or if they have questions about something.

Interviewees also said that some "military parents [were] very on top of what's going on with their kids" and that they were "easier to locate" when the school did need to communicate with them, presumably because they were used to communicating in a timely manner with their chain of command. Interestingly, one interviewee thought that MC parents were "demanding" and that they often expected more from teachers as far as ensuring their children received good grades.

Overall, there did not seem to be formal lines of communication between MC families and the school. A few interviewees mentioned ways that the school communicates with all parents (including MC parents) in order to foster school-family relationships, such as during parent teacher conferences, through email, and on social media. These participants seemed to view MC students and their families as a "general part of the student population" rather than a distinct group that necessitated formal practices of collaboration and communication.

School Liaison Officer

While some interviewees mentioned the school liaison officer, teachers specifically seemed to be unaware of who this individual was or what they were responsible for. One participant said, “I don't even know like [the school liaison's] job description. Like I don't know all [their] responsibilities.” Participants who did seem familiar with the school liaison officer said this individual could “[give] a good perspective as to what military families need” and that they would call the school liaison officer if they ever had questions about supporting MC students. In general, interviewees who mentioned the school liaison officer did so in terms of getting support for when a new MC student was moving in or when there was a specific “issue” with a MC student. One respondent said that they had seen the school liaison officer in the building before and also at a community meeting at the school. One participant seemed to be more aware of the school liaison's position in general, saying that this individual “[had] a really vital role with the communication from the school, the parents...they do a good job of making sure that we know that they are available and that there's other resources outside of the district as well.” Overall, it appeared that there was some emphasis on utilizing the school liaison officer for means of supporting the MC student population in general.

Usefulness of Communication

Some interviewees thought that it would greatly benefit MC students if there were formal avenues of communication between the school and MC families specifically, especially while a parent was deployed. Some interviewees also mentioned that it would benefit MC students to have formal lines of communication between staff members, particularly between school personnel and an individual responsible for identifying MC students. One interviewee mentioned

a very specific way that might be useful in improving communication between the school, families, and the school liaison officer:

I would like to see more of the parents involved... I would aggregate the data and find out who our military population is, and I would invite their parents. I would invite the students, I would invite them to the school, I would do a little powwow and say, "Hey what are your concerns?" And I would invite the liaison officer over and just kind of bridge that gap and just say "hey we have these resources available to you, if you have any concerns these are people you can go to." Maybe pull in a school counselor and let them know what the school counseling office is like, you know kind of do a one stop shop type of thing... in the evening have a reception and have them come in and meet the principal face to face and meet the counselors and meet the liaison officer, and all that stuff and meet the ROTC instructors and maybe invite some of the teachers in who are affiliated with the military, or know about military culture to come in. So, you're putting a face to the name and then the teachers can meet the parents. I think that would be super valuable and super powerful for our school in particular.

Not all interviewees thought that improving lines of communication would be helpful, however. One interviewee mentioned that lines of communication may actually be impossible due to formal policies within the district about student privacy.

Available Support

MC students appeared to be mostly supported through school wide initiatives rather than by interventions targeted at MC students specifically. Interviewees mentioned teachers, counselors, and peer groups as the main sources of support for MC students. Many interviewees

expressed that a MC student who was struggling either emotionally or academically could go to their teacher or counselor for help, the same as a non-MC student would.

Supports Specifically for MC Students

Some participants did mention specific ways that MC students are supported within the school. Teachers will often sit students who move in during the middle of the year next to existing students who they believe will be friendly and welcoming. Counselors often arrange campus tours for new students who recently moved into the neighborhood. Both of these interventions would likely benefit MC students who enroll in the school in the middle of the year. Interviewees mentioned that during other times that may be stressful for students, such as during a parental deployment, there are no specific supports in place unless an issue arises. When speaking of support available from counselors specifically, one participant said that the counseling center in the school tended to be more *reactive* rather than *proactive*. Other ways participants spoke of that the school supports MC students included live-streaming graduation ceremonies, which had been beneficial for families with parents who were deployed. Many interviewees mentioned peer groups, specifically groups of other students who live on base and those met through participation in extracurricular activities, as supports for MC students.

Some interviewees mentioned that when MC students transfer to the school, counselors and teachers do their best to make more academic accommodations, particularly regarding transferring credit:

When they're military there's more flexibility, more accommodation for the courses they've taken and what they're going to take here. So that's one of the reasons why it's important to know when they're coming....everyone is kind of aware in our offices that hey you know you've got to make sure that they're taken care of.

These accommodations appeared to be implemented on an informal, case-by-case basis, as no specific criteria were mentioned by any participants.

A few interviewees mentioned past programs that were put in place to support MC students. However, these programs did not last and are not currently in place. One participant said that “...part of the reason [the program] died down was because it wasn't utilized enough to really justify it.” Other reasons interviewees mentioned were a lack of team-driven effort, lack of support from school leadership, and turnover of students who were involved in these programs, as reasons why these programs were not sustainable.

Need to Provide Support for MC Students

Some interviewees thought that there was a need for specific supports for MC students. One interviewee mentioned a couple of possible ways to better support MC students, including identifying key adult staff members who are familiar with military culture to oversee programs for MC students and asking for teacher input when designing supports. Another participant thought that designating another student as a “battle buddy” for new MC students that move in would be a beneficial intervention.

Other interviewees expressed that it may not be necessary for the school to provide specific supports for MC students. One interviewee thought that the school may not be equipped to do so and that it may be more appropriate for MC students to seek resources on the military base. However, no one seemed to know what supports would be available on base. When speaking about their experience with a specific military family, one participant said:

I don't know when the families get here, especially if their military family member is not with them, how they are welcomed or what contacts they have...

But, it made me really re-evaluate ‘what do we have to offer these kids?’

One interviewee thought that the school could be doing a lot more to support MC students and offered specific ideas.

I think that's even a good thing to do is we could... send out a school wide survey about military students and kind of gather what information is out there that teachers are familiar with. Like what are their perceptions, and what do they do, what do they don't do, what have they not thought of as far as our military population.

Overall, there seemed to be varying perceptions on how useful it would be to have supports specific to the MC student population.

Challenges

When discussing things that MC students often struggle with, participants spent less time discussing this topic and offered more generalities than specific experiences. This may be due to a lack of awareness or because students may not often disclose to adults that they are struggling. One interviewee mentioned that MC students may not want to openly share their challenges in order to appear resilient. Some interviewees felt that MC students were likely to experience the same struggles that their non-MC peers do, such as fitting in and making friends. Participants did, however, mention two main struggles specific to MC students; frequent moves and experiencing parental deployments.

Frequent Moves

Interviewees mentioned that they had seen frequent moves affect MC student's friendships, their feelings of stability, and how connected they felt to the school overall. Interviewees interpreted this as being due to lack of effort from MC students to make friends and form social bonds because they know they will not stay in one place for an extended period of time. One interviewee talked about seeing some MC students form friendships with *bad crowds*

because these crowds seemed to be more inviting to new students. Another participant said that “[MC students] would come in here knowing that they are going to get an instant friend group, but they were guarded because they are going to have to leave their friends in two years.”

Interviewees also talked about the negative impacts frequent moves have on MC student’s academics, particularly due to inconsistencies in their education and earned credits after so many moves. Others mentioned that moving affected MC student’s ability to compete in sports, specifically if they moved in or out of the school in the middle of a season.

Parental Deployments

Interviewees all said that parental deployments appeared to be challenging for MC students, though most spoke in generalities while only a couple of interviewees offered specific examples. One participant had a MC student who became stressed from taking on more responsibility at home while their father was deployed. Some participants also identified the re-integration period of deployment as a possible stressful time for military families, during which they would have to readjust to their parent being home. Deployment was also mentioned as a source of stress because parents who were deployed could not attend school events, such as graduation or concerts.

Strengths

In spite of the challenges they face, interviewees saw various strengths in MC students. Participants described MC students as well-rounded, high-achieving, and non-judgmental towards people who were different from them. Interestingly, some of the strengths and struggles, which were previously discussed, contradicted each other. This may be because participants drew from different experiences with different students, which can vary greatly. As one interviewee put it, “each kid is as different as any other group. Some are very good self-

advocates and come and want this and that, others don't even care if they fail. One kid told me he didn't even care.” It is interesting to note that when discussing challenges, the main themes that emerged were external, while the main themes that emerged when discussing strengths were internal. Two main themes that emerged were resiliency and ambition.

Resiliency

Many participants mentioned that MC students appear to be very resilient. They described them as able to “handle things” and as having healthy coping mechanisms. One participant said they thought “military students [were] very resilient because they come from a background where they are expected to get used to changes.” Some interviewees said that they saw new MC students seeking out peer groups, making friends easily, getting involved in school groups (such as student government), and that these students appeared to acclimate to the school’s culture easily. In contrast to how some interviewees described MC students, one participant thought that MC students may put forward a sense of false resiliency in order to appear strong. Overall, interviewees described the positive coping skills and resiliency they saw in students as a product of having to adapt to multiple changes.

Ambition

Interviewees also described MC students as able to advocate for themselves. They said that these students actively made plans for the future, such as mapping out what colleges they wanted to attend. Interviewees saw MC students as well-organized, specifically during the transition period of moving in from another school. Participants described MC students as having strong work ethics and as being assertive. One participant described a MC student as having a “broader global perspective about things” when it came to setting goals. Interviewees also

mentioned that parents of MC students appeared to be particularly supportive of their children, which may serve as a good model for MC students to advocate for themselves.

MC Students Within the School Culture

Schoolwide Supports

Overall, interviewees expressed that individually, they wanted to be supportive of MC students, and that systemically, the school was supportive and accepting of MC students. One interviewee mentioned that the school had clubs devoted specifically to MC students, though the researcher could find no evidence of these clubs from other school personnel or in the list of school clubs. However, the school does offer a variety of different clubs that MC students may participate in, which other interviewees mentioned. Regarding clubs, sports, and academics, many interviewees also mentioned that it was standard procedure for counselors and teachers to work with new students moving in, a practice that would benefit MC students as well as other new students.

In addition to specific supports previously mentioned, participants described various different initiatives in place to support students in general, not just those who were MC. They mentioned formal case management meetings, where staff meet to manage the cases of students who are struggling, whether MC or not. One participant said that “the kid who’s military connected is going to need some extra support and understanding. But... at the same time a kid who's homeless, you know, also needs different levels of support.” Overall, the school appeared to have schoolwide supports in place that would benefit MC students.

Culture

Many interviewees mentioned the transience of the student population. Many students, not just MC ones, move in and out in the middle of the school year. One participant stated,

...this school and most schools are big. So, you may never see some people in your class. So, I think the moving in is it's that people are just accepting here....So, I think it's good. It helps them feel welcome.

Another interviewee mentioned that there was a surprisingly large number of homeless students, as well as many apartment buildings located within the school boundaries, demonstrating that there were other populations within the school that frequently moved in and out. Interviewees also mentioned the diversity of the student body, mainly in terms of religion. These factors may be a benefit to MC students who enroll in the school in the middle of their secondary school education and have diverse backgrounds.

Concerning the experience of MC students specifically in terms of how they fit into the school climate, some interviewees said that MC students appeared to be well-connected to the school. Some saw MC students as having unique needs that may not be addressed within current school supports, while others saw them as similar to non-MC students needing no specific supports. One interviewee said they felt “like [MC students are] pretty well integrated into the school and have every opportunity and every experience that all the other students have.” Overall, the school climate appeared to be one that would be a good fit for MC students.

CHAPTER 5

Discussion

This study examined the perceptions of educators in terms of awareness and support for MC students. Previous research indicates that identifying and supporting MC students is a main concern of parents (Mesecar & Soifer, 2017), but to the researcher's knowledge, no studies have been conducted on whether MC students are actually being identified and how that information influences how public schools support these students. The main questions that the researcher sought to explore were whether school staff were aware of which students were military-connected and if school staff members take steps to promote a supportive school climate for military-connected students. To better understand these questions and to build a foundation for further research, a qualitative approach to gathering data was decided on by the research team.

Implications for Educators

Results from the current study suggest that educators may not be aware of which students within their school are MC, which supports claims made by the Military Child Education Coalition (2016a). There seemed to be no reliable way for any staff member to access an aggregated list of MC students at the school or to identify whether a specific student was MC. The federal card designed to track MC students that some participants mentioned (the MSI) also appeared to be vastly underutilized within the district the school was located, according to the most recent data available from state officials (official from the STATE State Board of Education, personal communication, April 4, 2018). According to the perceptions of participants in the current study, it may or may not be useful for schools to have access to this information. Schools should work within their districts to assess whether this information might be appropriate and useful in supporting MC students.

When it came to supporting MC students, there appeared to be no specific attempts to foster communication among employees about how to support MC students within the school. There also appeared to be no specific attempts to build strong school-family relationships among MC families. However, the school seemed to draw on their framework of schoolwide support in order to support MC students, which may be a sufficient avenue for supporting MC students (De Pedro, 2012). Some schools may benefit from having specific supports in place, such as pairing new MC students up with “buddies” when they move in (Mmari et al., 2010) or finding ways to foster strong relationships between MC students and their teachers (Arnold et al., 2014). Schools should assess the needs within their own populations and identify whether MC specific interventions would be beneficial.

Implications for School Districts

Schools would likely benefit from direction from their districts on the expectations for supporting MC students. Some participants in the current study were sensitive about the confidentiality of students’ records and questioned whether their district had existing policies that might deter them from asking students and families questions about their connection with the military. Some participants also questioned whether it was the school’s responsibility to track and support MC students. This ambiguity may interfere with teacher’s awareness of which students are MC and with their ability to support these students (Military Child Education Coalition, 2016a). It may be beneficial for school districts to give direction to their employees about expectations regarding working with and supporting MC students, particularly in areas where there may be large military populations around military bases.

Districts may also benefit from considering their role in collecting and reporting data on their MC students to their state boards of education, according to the guidelines in the ESSA.

LEA's are responsible for gathering and reporting data on MC students to their state-level education boards (Military Child Education Coalition, 2019), but the district of the school in the present study may be underreporting the number of MC students in their district, according to officials at the state level (official from the STATE State Board of Education, personal communication, April 4, 2018). Collecting this data could help improve the academic and social/emotional outcomes of MC students attending public schools (Military Child Education Coalition, 2019).

Implications for State-Level Organizations

States should consider whether they are setting appropriate expectations in their state guidelines for LEAs and school concerning the MSI requirement in the ESSA. The current plan for the state where this study took place includes no mention of the MSI. Accurately collecting this data statewide would likely inform national and local practices on how to support these students. Research indicates that MC students may be at higher risk for mental health problems, including suicidality (De Pedro et al., 2011; Gilreath et al., 2016; Reed et al., 2011). It may be beneficial for states to take a top-down approach in gathering data on MC student outcomes in order to inform whether supports are needed in this population rather than leaving it up to schools to assess their own individual needs.

Limitations

Several limitations existed in the current study. First, participants only included faculty and staff members, not students or parents. Perceptions may vary greatly between these individuals and staff members may not have a complete or accurate understanding of the experiences of MC students. The current study also only examined the experiences of MC students within one high school; other schools, such as elementary and middle schools, may

function differently. It is also important to consider geographical location when interpreting the findings of this study, as they may not generalize to areas outside of the Mountain West region. Lastly, limitations arise when considering participant's own awareness of whether students are MC. While part of the criteria for interviewees was that they have experience working with MC students in some capacity, there appeared to be no reliable way of identifying who MC students were within the school. Participants may not have known for sure whether a student was MC or not.

Implications for Future Research

While this study examined the experience of MC students within a public school environment from the perspective of school staff, it may be useful to look at the perceptions of parents and students. Specifically, future research should investigate parent and student perceptions in regard to the usefulness of identifying and providing MC students with specific supports within schools. While other studies have examined the experiences of MC students' parents and the perspectives from the student's point of view (Berkowitz et al., 2014; De Pedro et al., 2018; Gilreath et al., 2014; Mesecar & Soifer, 2017), the author could find no studies that investigated parent and/or student preferences for how MC students are identified and supported.

Findings indicate that the school included in the current study has no way of identifying who their MC students are. Future research should examine whether other public schools, specifically those with military bases within their boundaries, have a way to identify these students. Participants discussed ethical considerations in regards to trying to identify MC students and varied in their opinions of how beneficial it would be to do so. Other schools may have also considered these factors and established solutions.

Conclusions

The experiences and perceptions among interviewees varied. Some thought that there was a need to identify and support MC students within the school, some thought it would likely be unnecessary and even inappropriate. Some of the strengths and challenges among MC students that were identified by participants contradicted each other. These differing views reflect the nature of the real world; that any one person is complex and cannot be considered merely in terms of one specific factor. Rather, a holistic approach should be taken, an approach which may be better yielded through universal efforts to support all students. This type of approach has been supported by prior research and may be appropriate in supporting MC students (De Pedro, 2012). Schools should address the needs within their broader geographical area, their district, as well as their specific school in order to decide how best to identify and support MC students.

It is worth noting that while many emotional challenges for MC children have been identified in the literature, participants focused more on the strengths they saw in MC students. When they did mention challenges, they mainly discussed external stressors, such as moving frequently and experiencing parental deployments, rather than emotional concerns. Participants spoke of social concerns in terms of difficult peer relations, but none mentioned the broader socioemotional difficulties that many MC children face. Overall, participants placed more emphasis on positive traits like resiliency, assertiveness, and self-advocacy. This may be because MC students in the school where this study took place do not experience any adverse emotional health concerns compared to their non-MC peers. They may present as typical students. This discrepancy between participant's views and what has been found in research may also be because educators choose to focus on strengths. Schools certainly present many complex problems, at macro and micro levels, that may feel, or be, unsolvable. This sort of climate may

lead educators to place emphasis on what is going well rather than what is problematic. Another possibility, which was mentioned by one participant, is that the MC students at the school where the present study took place may have learned to mask any emotional distress they experience. The military lifestyle presents challenging circumstances that are inescapable. MC students may have learned to cope by focusing on positive aspects and displaying outward resiliency. It is important to note that all participants in this study communicated and appeared to be supportive of MC students. However, there seemed to be a gap between wanting to support and knowing where some MC students might need support.

The findings of this study may not generalize to other schools in other regions. However, there are some guiding principles that can be yielded from our findings. First, while there may be populations within schools that need attention, educators and school districts may not be aware of them. The MC population has unique challenges and needs just as other student populations do, such as homeless or LGBTQ+ students. Schools may not be cognizant of the risks that MC students face or how to support them. The MC student population should be given consideration in terms of risk factors and needed supports. Second, school culture plays a significant role in how MC students connect with the school. The school in this study had a very transient, diverse student population that appeared to create an open, welcoming environment for MC students. Numerous factors, such as number of students, median household income, crime rate, and number of minority students will impact the school culture and in turn influence how MC students exist within that culture. These factors cannot be controlled or separated from the experience of MC students. However, other factors can be controlled. Factors such as a school's responsiveness to student needs, how teachers interact with students, and how new students are received in a school can be changed in order to create an environment where all students,

including MC students, can thrive. Finally, educators and school staff need to put forth a united effort in whatever supports they put in place for MC students. Participants had varying opinions on the need to identify and support MC students. No participant in this study named themselves as someone who was able to identify which students were MC. A big factor in past programs fading out was that they were being run by only one person. This lack of cohesiveness did not appear to be due to a disinterest in supporting MC students, but in an inability to communicate effectively and establish a collective aim. Educators should establish a common goal and maintain a consistent, united effort in supporting MC students.

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APPENDIX A

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol A

- What can you tell me about the demographics of the MC students that attend this school?
 - Probes: how many are there, do they span across different grades
- What can you tell me about the social interactions and relationships that MC students have in this school?
 - Probes: with teachers, with peers, with school personnel
- What can you tell me about the physical safety of MC students at this school?
 - Probes: do they experience bullying
- What can you tell me about disciplinary action for MC students?
 - Probes: do school-wide policies apply to them, do they experience higher rates of disciplinary action
- What can you tell me about the academic outcomes for MC students?
 - Probes: how do they perform compared to their peers
- Do you think that MC students feel connected to your school?
 - Probes: do MC students feel welcome, do they feel like they fit in with their peers
- What sort of stressors do you see MC students experiencing?
 - Probes: deployment, more responsibility at home, high mobility
- What sort of strengths do you see in MC students?
 - Probes: maturity, resilience
- What are some of the family dynamics you see in MC students?
 - Probes: single-parent families, domestic violence, specific cultural beliefs, family history of mental health concerns (suicide)

- Are there any mental health concerns that you see in MC students?
 - Probes: suicide attempts, alcohol or substance abuse, depression
- Are there any behavioral concerns that you see in MC students?
 - Probes: impulsivity, aggression
- Do MC students take advantage of mental health services provided by the school?
 - Probes: school psychologist, social worker
- Do MC families communicate their needs to the school?
 - Probes: do they feel connected to the school, do they feel comfortable enough to ask the school for support

APPENDIX B

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol B

- According to what we found in the first interviews, the main three ways that MC students were identified were through the registrar, by looking up their address, or if these students self-identified as being MC. Is that what you have seen?
- Do you feel like these ways of identifying MC students provide an accurate idea of who is MC?
- Can you think of other ways that MC students are identified?
- Which staff do you feel are able to identify MC students?
- Whose responsibility do you think it should be to identify MC students?
- How should staff members be made aware of which students are MC?
- How do staff members communicate amongst each other about identifying which students are MC? (between teachers and counselors, counselors and administrators, etc.)
- What does communication between parents of MC students and the school look like?
- It sounds like the overall student body is very diverse and transient, with students moving in and out. How does this help or hinder MC students from fitting in?
- What sort of things do you see MC students doing to become more connected to the school?
- When considering the whole school environment, how do MC students fit in with non-MC students?
- When considering peer relationships, describe the connections MC youth make with peers.

- It sounds like the school has done some things in the past to help support MC students (the Student-2-Student program, going on base to register kids) but that these programs have fizzled out. Why do you think they didn't stick?
- What sort of things does the school liaison officer specifically do to support your students?
- Tell me about what type of support, if any, a new student receives when they move into the school/your classroom in the middle of the year.
- If a MC student is struggling with things like academics, who would they go to?
- If a MC student is struggling with things related to the military, such as a parental deployment, who would they go to?
- Have you seen any instances of MC students having strong support at home?
- Do you feel like it's useful to identify and/or support MC students?

APPENDIX C

IRB ApprovalINSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
FOR HUMAN SUBJECTS**Memorandum**

To: Amanda Bushman
Department: CP&SE
College: EDUC
From: Sandee Aina, MPA, IRB Administrator
Bob Ridge, PhD, IRB Chair
Date: October 10, 2018
IRB#: X18373

Title: *"Supporting Military-Connected Students in a Secondary School"*

Brigham Young University's IRB has approved the research study referenced in the subject heading as expedited level, category 6. The approval period is from **October 10, 2018 to October 9, 2019**. Please reference your assigned IRB identification number in any correspondence with the IRB. Continued approval is conditional upon your compliance with the following requirements:

1. CONTINGENCY: School district approval
2. A copy of the informed consent statement is attached. No other consent statement should be used. Each research subject must be provided with a copy or a way to access the consent statement.
3. Any modifications to the approved protocol must be submitted, reviewed, and approved by the IRB before modifications are incorporated in the study.
4. All recruiting tools must be submitted and approved by the IRB prior to use.
5. In addition, serious adverse events must be reported to the IRB immediately, with a written report by the PI within 24 hours of the PI's becoming aware of the event. Serious adverse events are (1) death of a research participant; or (2) serious injury to a research participant.
6. All other non-serious unanticipated problems should be reported to the IRB within 2 weeks of the first awareness of the problem by the PI. Prompt reporting is important, as unanticipated problems often require some modification of study procedures, protocols,

and/or informed consent processes. Such modifications require the review and approval of the IRB.

7. A few months before the expiration date, you will receive a continuing review form. There will be two reminders. Please complete the form in a timely manner to ensure that there is no lapse in the study approval.

IRB Secretary

A 285 ASB

Brigham Young University

(801) 422-3606

APPENDIX D

Consent Form

Consent to be a Research Subject

Introduction

My name is Amanda Bushman. I am a graduate student from Brigham Young University working with Melissa Heath, PhD, NCSP. I am conducting a research study to investigate school staff perceptions of school climate and suicidality among military-connected students (students who have a parent in the military). You were invited to participate because you have worked at _____ for at least two years and you have some experience interacting with military-connected students.

Procedures

If you agree to participate in this research study, the following will occur:

- you will be interviewed twice; once for approximately fifteen (15) to thirty (30) minutes and once for approximately thirty (30) minutes about your experiences with military-connected students
- the researcher will contact you after summarizing your interview answers in order to ensure you agree with the summary for approximately five (5) to ten (10) minutes
- total time commitment will be approximately fifty (50) to seventy (70) minutes
- the interviews will be audio recorded to ensure accuracy in reporting your statements
- the interviews will take place on _____ campus at a time that is convenient for you

Topics covered during the interview will include the social interactions, academic outcomes, stressors, and strengths that you have seen in your interactions with military-connected students at _____.

Risks/Discomforts

There is a risk of loss of privacy, which the researcher will reduce by not using any real names in the written report. The researcher will also keep all data in a locked office in a secure location or in a password protected electronic file. Only the researchers will have access to the data. At the end of the study, data will be destroyed after three years.

You may not feel at ease answering some of the questions asked during the interview. Participation is voluntary and you may choose to not answer any question or withdraw from the study at any time.

Benefits

Participants will be compensated with a \$20 Amazon gift card.

Confidentiality

Your name will not be used in any part of this research. The information gathered from your interview will not be identified as belonging to you.

Paper data and audio files from the interviews will be stored in a locked office in a secure location. Audio files will be also be saved electronically and transcribed in an electronic document. All electronic data will be stored on a password protected Dropbox only accessible to the researchers involved with this study. All data will be destroyed three years after the completion of the study.

Participation

Participation in this research study is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at any time or refuse to participate entirely without jeopardy to your employment or standing at the school.

