Impact of Military Lifestyle on Children: A Literature Review

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Abstract

The purpose of the literature review is to examine the research on the factors of military lifestyle that affect children of service members. In order to begin a discussion about military lifestyle, three key themes were identified: parental deployment, frequent relocations, and educational service delays. The paper seeks to identify unique challenges for military-connected students and examine military lifestyle implications. This project concludes with suggestions for future research and for equitable policy enactment.

Keywords: military-connected students, military-connected families, parental deployment, mandated military moves, and educational systems

Impact of Military Lifestyle on Children

The purpose of this literature review is to examine how the unique conditions of military life: parental deployments, frequent relocations, and delays in educational services, can significantly impact military-connected students' academic progress, emotional well-being, and access to support systems. Military-connected students often face instability, separation from caregivers, and frequent school transitions, which can disrupt learning and hinder social-emotional development. This review also seeks to identify equitable and holistic educational practices that can be adopted in public school systems to better support these students. Although there is growing recognition of the challenges faced by military families, a gap remains in the literature regarding how schools can implement structured, inclusive, and sustainable interventions that meet the diverse needs of this population.

Context

There are approximately 1.2 million school-aged children of active-duty service members enrolled in schools across the United States and overseas. About 80% of these students attend public schools within the United States (Military Child Education Coalition [MCEC], n.d.). Due to the transient nature of military life, children often transition between schools multiple times throughout their educational journey as a result of Permanent Change of Station (PCS) orders. These frequent transitions, combined with family separation during deployments and the unique pressures of military culture, present distinct and unique challenges for military-connected students.

According to Military OneSource (n.d.), there are between 450 and 500 military bases in the continental United States, not including installations located overseas. Every U.S. state has at least one military base within its borders. States with larger populations

often have more military installations, meaning military-connected students are a significant presence in many communities nationwide.

As a special education resource mathematics teacher, military spouse, and service member, I live and work in a community with a high concentration of military families. Rainer School District in South Puget Sound, Washington, is located near Evergreen Evergreen Joint Base-McChord, one of the largest military installations in the country. Washington State has a strong military presence with members of the Army, Air Force, Navy, and Coast Guard within its state borders. In 2024, Rainer School District served over 1,300 military-connected students which represented more than 15% of the district's total enrollment (LocalTalk Contributor, 2024). While the district offers educational support to these students, firsthand experience as a district employee reveals gaps in the consistency and quality of that support due to systemic strain and a lack of tailored and implemented strategies.

Importance

Understanding the experiences of military-connected students is crucial for addressing disparities in how educational services are provided to them. Military life introduces factors that may affect students' academic progress, behavior, and emotional well-being. If these challenges are not adequately recognized, they may be misinterpreted as disabilities or behavioral problems, leading to either inappropriate referrals or failure to provide needed services (Esqueda et al., 2012).

This research is particularly relevant to educators, school leaders, policymakers, mental health professionals, and military families. Frequent relocations often disrupt educational continuity, and educators must be equipped to support students during these

transitions. Policymakers and military advocates can leverage this research to develop policies that ensure military students receive equitable support. Mental health and social service providers can better collaborate with schools when they understand how military-related stressors manifest in children.

As an educator and member of a military family, I am personally invested in this work. The children in my classroom and future family members of my own are affected by these systemic factors. I believe that identifying and addressing the unique needs of military-connected students is essential for creating inclusive, responsive, and supportive school environments.

Purpose

This literature review explores how military lifestyle factors - specifically parental deployment, frequent relocations, and educational service delays, affect children in military families. It seeks to inform educators, administrators, and stakeholders about the challenges these students face and to promote policy and practice changes that provide more effective support.

Focal Questions

- According to the research, how does parental deployment impact children's emotional well-being, behavioral functioning, physical health outcomes, and susceptibility to child maltreatment?
- According to the research, how do frequent relocations influence a child's social-emotional development?

- According to the research, how does the military lifestyle influence a child's academic achievement in relation to academic adjustment, delays in transitional services, and school staff perspectives?

Literature Review

The literature reveals three prominent themes. First, parental deployment is associated with increased emotional distress, behavioral issues, and health risks for children. Multiple studies confirm that children of deployed parents are more likely to experience depression, anxiety, and even increased rates of maltreatment (Gibbs et al., 2007; Reed et al., 2011).

Second, frequent relocations due to PCS orders disrupt students' academic progress and social development. Military-connected students often report difficulty maintaining friendships and staying on track academically due to these transitions (Bradshaw et al., 2010). Yet, few schools have formal systems in place to support these transitions.

Third, delays in the transfer of special education services can impede students' access to critical support. Clark and Bright (2020) highlight how service gaps during transitions can delay evaluations, disrupt Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), and hinder academic success. While many districts, including Rainer School District, use Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), these frameworks often lack the specificity required to address military-specific stressors.

By examining these key areas, this paper seeks to bridge the gap between research and practice and highlight ways in which educators and policymakers can create a more responsive and equitable environment for military-connected students.

Parental Deployments

In this section, I look at the growing body of research exploring how parental deployment influences the lives of military-connected children. Across the literature, four prominent themes consistently emerge: emotional outcomes, behavioral challenges, physical health concerns, and an increased risk of child maltreatment. These interconnected areas highlight the complex and far-reaching effects that deployment-related separation can have on children's overall well-being and development.

Children's Emotional Outcomes

In this section, I look at the research on how children of military families emotionally respond to parental deployment and how support systems influence their ability to cope. Huebner et al. (2007) conducted a large-scale mixed-methods study involving 1,457 military families stationed at multiple military bases, along with 191 community leaders and service providers. The study used both surveys and 11 focus groups to examine how military families and their surrounding communities respond to deployment. Adolescents were found to have stronger coping mechanisms and more defined family roles than younger children, allowing them to manage stress more effectively. The study highlighted the importance of support networks in mitigating deployment-related stress.

In a 2010 study, Chandra, Martin, Hawkins, and Richardson conducted a qualitative analysis exploring how school staff perceive the emotional and social effects of parental deployment on children. This study involved semi-structured interviews with 200 school professionals: including teachers, counselors, and administrators, who work directly with military-connected students. Participants were selected based on their proximity to military communities. Using thematic analysis, researchers found that students with deployed parents commonly demonstrated emotional responses such as depression, sadness, anger,

and anxiety. The study underscored the need for school staff to be better equipped to identify and support the social-emotional needs of these students.

In a systematic review published in 2014, Creech, Hadley, and Borsari examined the broader impacts of military deployment and reintegration on parenting and child development. The review included both qualitative and quantitative research with an emphasis on emotional, behavioral, and social outcomes. Findings revealed that both deployment and reintegration posed challenges to family cohesion, particularly for children who experienced heightened anxiety and inconsistent emotional support. This research pointed to the necessity of integrating school and community-based support systems that can bridge the emotional gaps created by parental absence and reentry.

Esposito-Smythers et al. (2011) conducted a qualitative study using focus groups with 107 adolescents aged 12–18 to explore emotional and behavioral symptoms in youth affected by deployment. In these focus groups, teens described feelings of sadness, worry, social withdrawal, and disrupted sleep and eating patterns. They also shared behavioral concerns such as irritability, disrespect toward adults, and difficulty concentrating in school. Despite showing resilience in some areas, youth indicated that ongoing, unsupported stress related to deployment significantly undermined their well-being.

This section collectively illustrates that although military-connected youth can show resilience, the absence of consistent support and the chronic nature of deployment stress can significantly impair emotional and behavioral well-being.

Children's Behavior Outcomes

In this section, I look at the research on the emotional and behavioral risks faced by children during parental deployment, particularly through age-specific lenses. Aranda et al.

(2011) conducted a cross-sectional study that synthesized findings from 28 literature sources focused on deployment-related emotional and behavioral outcomes in three age groups: early childhood (ages 0–5), school age (6–12), and adolescence (11–18). The study found that children with a currently deployed parent were twice as likely to be considered "at risk" for emotional and behavioral problems compared to peers without a deployed parent. Specifically, children ages 3 to 5 with a deployed parent scored significantly higher on measures of externalizing, internalizing, and overall psychiatric symptoms. When evaluated using the Pediatric Symptom Checklist (PSC), children with deployed parents again showed elevated rates of psychosocial morbidity. These results were clinically and statistically significant, suggesting that the youngest children may be especially vulnerable to the emotional toll of parental absence.

In a related study, Barker and Berry (2009) examined behavioral impacts in young children with a currently or recently deployed parent. Their study surveyed 57 military families with at least one young child and an active-duty parent, collecting data at two time points: three to four months into the deployment and four to six weeks after the deployed parent returned. The study found that children with deployed parents, who on average were absent for about half of the child's lifetime, demonstrated increased behavioral challenges. Results indicated a direct relationship between the number of deployments a parent had experienced and the severity of behavioral issues in their children. The study emphasized how even temporary and expected absences can disrupt the emotional regulation and behavior of young children when they occur frequently or for extended periods of time.

Chartrand et al. (2008) expanded upon these findings by focusing on the cumulative effects of prolonged deployment-related separation. The study explored stress and

emotional strain within military families and identified a consistent correlation between longer parental absences and elevated family stress. These increases in stress were associated with significant emotional and behavioral hardship for children. Chartrand and colleagues reinforced the conclusion that duration and frequency of deployment are key risk factors that compound emotional instability among children and families during and after separation.

This section highlights how emotional and behavioral risks are compounded by both the child's age and the length of parental absence. The research shows that deployment-related separation can disrupt emotional regulation, increase psychiatric symptoms, and heighten stress for families with young children. These findings reinforce the need for early, developmentally appropriate interventions that specifically address the vulnerabilities of children experiencing repeated or prolonged parental deployments.

Children's Health Outcomes

In this section, I look at the research on how parental deployment is associated with increased substance use, emotional distress, and reduced healthcare access among military-connected children. Reed et al. (2011) conducted a cross-sectional analysis using data from the 2008 Washington State Healthy Youth Survey. The study surveyed 606 students in grades 8, 10, and 12 and utilized multivariable logistic regression to evaluate associations between parental deployment and adolescent well-being. Findings revealed that adolescents with deployed parents were significantly more likely to report binge drinking, depressive symptoms, suicidal ideation, and a reduced quality of life. Specifically, 8th-grade girls were more likely to report suicidal thoughts and low quality of life, while 10th- and 12th-grade

boys demonstrated higher odds of reporting depression and suicidal ideation. These findings indicate a gendered response to deployment-related stress in adolescents.

In a similar study, Acion et al. (2013) conducted an observational cross-sectional survey using statewide data from Iowa students in grades 6, 8, and 11. Participants were asked about their use of alcohol, prescription drugs, and other substances. The survey showed that across all grade levels, children of recently or currently deployed parents were significantly more likely to engage in binge drinking and prescription drug abuse compared to peers from non-military families. Using logistic regression models, the study found that parental deployment was a strong predictor of increased substance use. These findings were consistent across multiple school districts and emphasized the need for school- and community-level substance abuse prevention programs tailored to military-connected students.

In a systematic review, Trautmann et al. (2015) explored how deployment since 9/11 has affected children under six years old. Reviewing 42 studies published between 2001 and 2014, the researchers examined the emotional and behavioral health of young children during critical developmental stages. Findings revealed that 40% of children in military families were under the age of six and that this age group was especially vulnerable to emotional and behavioral disruptions. The review found a strong correlation between deployment and increased incidence of anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, and externalizing behaviors in young children, especially when consistent caregiving support was lacking.

In a 2010 study, Edie et al. examined how parental deployment affects children's access to healthcare within the military health system. The researchers studied administrative data to determine whether well-child visits varied depending on parental deployment status. Findings showed that children of young, single military parents received significantly fewer well-child

visits during the parent's deployment compared to children of married military parents. This reduction in routine healthcare access points to another layer of vulnerability for military-connected children, especially when caregiving structures are less stable or consistent during parental absences.

This section demonstrates how parental deployment extends beyond emotional disruption, increasing the risk for substance abuse, reduced health service utilization, and psychological distress, especially in children with non-parent caregivers or during early developmental stages. Collectively, these studies underscore the need for systems of support that address the mental, behavioral, and medical needs of children during and after deployment.

Children Maltreatment

In this section, I look at the research on the relationship between parental deployment and increased risk of child maltreatment in military families. Gibbs et al. (2007) conducted a descriptive case series using the Army Central Registry to examine substantiated incidents of child maltreatment among 1,771 enlisted U.S. Army families who experienced at least one combat deployment between September 2001 and December 2004. The study used conditional Poisson regression models to compare the rates of maltreatment during periods of deployment and non-deployment. Results showed that the rate of maltreatment was 42% higher during deployment periods. This study demonstrated a significant link between combat deployment and increased household stress resulting in elevated incidents of child abuse or neglect.

In a related study, Rentz et al. (2007) conducted a time-series analysis of Texas child maltreatment data collected from 2000 to 2003. The study examined patterns among both military and nonmilitary families, with a focus on how deployment cycles affect rates of

child maltreatment. Findings revealed that maltreatment rates nearly doubled during large-scale deployments and spiked during both deployment departures and returns. Further analysis showed that the majority of perpetrators were nonmilitary caretakers, especially civilian female spouses. These findings support the idea that the stress of deployment disrupts family stability, increasing the risk of harm to children left behind.

McCarroll et al. (2008) examined the demographic and contextual factors that contribute to increased child maltreatment within military households. The study identified that children whose parents suffered from deployment-related PTSD were more likely to experience all forms of abuse, including physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, as well as neglect. Results showed gender-based differences in maltreatment, where girls were more likely to experience emotional and sexual abuse and boys more likely to face physical abuse. The study also found that lower household income and prolonged exposure to deployment-related trauma elevated the risk of maltreatment for all children in military households.

In a study conducted by Gilreath et al. (2011) on adolescent military youth in Southern California, researchers investigated the overlap between military-connected students and exposure to violence, maltreatment, and school-related challenges. Results showed that military-connected youth reported significantly higher rates of weapon carrying, verbal and physical victimization, and suicidal ideation than their civilian peers. The study concluded that both parental deployment and having a sibling in the military were associated with increased risk of depression, emotional distress, and behavioral issues. These experiences further disrupted the school environment for these students, contributing to long-term educational and mental health challenges.

Pedro (2015) outlined the gap in educational interventions and professional development for supporting military-connected youth, especially in schools. The study emphasized that until 2011, almost no research had explored the specific school experiences of military-connected students. Since then, very few programs have been developed to train educators or create school-based interventions to address the complex realities faced by this population. The research called for a shift from reactive to proactive strategies, emphasizing a whole-school prevention model that supports early identification and ongoing monitoring of military-connected students using schoolwide data and interventions.

This section highlights the compounded risks of child maltreatment and academic failure associated with deployment-related stress, particularly when caregiving systems are disrupted or unsupported. The studies underscore the need for preventative school-based frameworks that are proactive rather than reactive, equipping educators with the tools and training needed to identify at-risk students early. A primary prevention model, along with professional development for school staff, can help reduce negative outcomes and better support the well-being and long-term success of military-connected children.

Military Directed Relocations

In this section, I look at the research on how frequent relocations disrupt the educational stability and social development of military-connected students. Military-connected students with active-duty parents move approximately six to nine times from kindergarten through high school—three times more than their civilian counterparts. Each transition uproots children across state and national borders, introducing them to new schools with different cultures, expectations, curricula, and high school graduation requirements. According to national estimates, there are approximately 1.2 million active-

duty military-connected children, and nearly 200,000 of them change schools each year. Over 80% of these students are enrolled in local public school systems, meaning their educational experiences are largely shaped by the capacities of civilian educational institutions.

Since 2010, all 50 states and the District of Columbia have adopted the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children, a policy framework designed to ease educational transitions. The Compact addresses issues such as placement, enrollment, attendance, and graduation requirements. While the implementation of this compact has reduced some inconsistencies, challenges continue persist. This is particularly true in the areas of course placement, credit transfers, and academic continuity. For military-connected students receiving special education services, inconsistent documentation practices and school-specific processes further complicate transitions. These issues often result in delayed service delivery, reevaluation requests, or adjustments to Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) that create unnecessary academic setbacks.

The structure of public education in the United States, rooted in state and local control, further complicates matters for mobile students. With curriculum, standards, and school priorities varying across districts, military-connected students face recurring disruptions in both academic progression and social integration. Historically, less than 10% of education funding has come from the federal government, which limits national influence over local school operations. As a result, despite federal acknowledgment of military-connected students' needs, support services and academic accommodations remain unevenly implemented across the country.

Relocating Children with ASD

In this section, I look at the research on how frequent relocations uniquely affect military families raising children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). As stated previously, military families relocate three times more often than non-military families. Military families with children with ASD face typical military lifestyle hardships in addition to inconsistent, delayed services, and a lack of continuity in care and support. Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is typically characterized by repetitive behaviors, restricted interests, and atypical social and communication styles. While autism is considered a lifelong disorder, the degree of functioning varies among individuals.

In 2016, Davis et al. conducted a study using an online survey methodology to examine the experiences of military spouses raising children diagnosed with ASD. The final dataset included 189 cases. Descriptive statistics and frequency analyses were used to analyze participant demographics and service delivery concerns. Nonprobability sampling allowed researchers to set inclusion criteria based on responses. Results showed that 78.6% of military spouses reported delayed service delivery and gaps in continuity. Additionally, 63% stated their child only had access to some required interventions, while 58.6% found it difficult to locate trained professionals. Nearly half of respondents (49.4%) reported challenges finding providers who accepted Tricare, and 54.4% noted that those who did were located far from home. Most notably, 63% of families observed delayed progress in their child's development due to interruptions in care following relocation. These findings underscore the systemic service barriers faced by families navigating the transitory nature of military life.

In 2018, a report on the Autism Care Demonstration for Army Services evaluated access to Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) for military children with ASD. The report

found significant barriers to care compared to civilian peers, particularly related to disruptions in therapeutic routines following permanent change of station (PCS) moves. Researchers Sterling-Turner and Jordan (2007) noted that disruptions in care can lead to loss of acquired skills and increased behavioral issues. Although there is a robust literature base on autism care, gaps remain when focusing specifically on military families, particularly in relation to relocation-related challenges such as isolation, delayed or unavailable services, and provider inaccessibility.

In a 2022 study, Farley et al. conducted an online survey of 25 military caregivers to further explore service access for children with ASD. The survey employed purposive nonprobability sampling, targeting active-duty military families or spouses with children under age 21 diagnosed with ASD. Participants were required to be English-speaking and caregivers of children receiving autism-related services. Results showed consistent delays in care due to long waitlists, difficulty obtaining referrals, and slow intake processes. These findings aligned with earlier studies by Davis et al. (2016) and Davis and Finke (2015), highlighting themes such as discontinuity of care, poor collaboration between service providers, and caregiver stress and isolation.

This section affirms that military families raising children with ASD face compounded challenges during mandated relocations. Disruptions in therapeutic care, long waitlists, and limited access to trained professionals result in significant setbacks for children's development and increased stress for caregivers. Despite policy efforts, families continue to report barriers that hinder timely and consistent service delivery across duty stations.

Transitions Related Stressors

In this section, I look at the research on how the culture of constant change within military life contributes to chronic stress for military families. As denoted several times throughout this review, military families experience a unique set of life stressors that stem directly from their lifestyle and the demands of military culture. Hall (2008) captures this reality, stating, "the defining word for the military family is change; change is what their lives are about." Relocation becomes a persistent and pervasive stressor that shapes the daily lives of these families, especially for those with high-ranking service members, who are often required to move even more frequently than others.

In 2014, Millegan et al. conducted a retrospective cohort study examining the effect of geographic mobility on the mental health service use of military children. The study reviewed administrative records from the Military Health System (MHS) for all children of U.S. active-duty service members aged 6 to 17 during the 2008 fiscal year. Participants were divided into two cohorts: ages 6–11 and 12–17, and assessed for mental health service use (outpatient, inpatient, and emergency visits) in the following year. A total of 548,366 military-connected children were included, of whom 24.9% had experienced a geographic move in 2008. Regression analysis showed that a variety of factors: such as child age, gender, race, psychiatric history, parental psychiatric history, and service branch, were significant predictors of mental health visits. The data revealed that children who relocated were more likely to receive a mental health diagnosis in 2009, particularly adolescents aged 12–17. Among those who had moved, there were higher rates of diagnoses for attention deficit disorder, conduct disorders, drug problems, adjustment disorders, and suicide attempts.

In 2010, Bradshaw et al. conducted a qualitative study exploring the lived experiences of mobile military students and their families during a period of large-scale domestic relocation following Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) policies. The study included 11 focus groups held across eight military bases, involving students, parents, and school staff from the Air Force, Army, Navy, Marines, Reserves, and National Guard. Participants were eligible if they had undergone at least one mandated move and were enrolled in public schools serving the base. Each focus group consisted of 8–10 participants and was facilitated by a trained moderator. The goal of the study was threefold: to identify transition-related stressors, assess student coping mechanisms, and evaluate school-based support strategies. Findings revealed that the most common stressors faced by military students included tension at home, disrupted peer relationships, unfamiliar school environments, and inconsistent academic expectations. Participants highlighted the importance of improved communication between sending and receiving schools, peer mentorship programs to support newcomers, and better training for school staff to connect with transitioning students. Both parents and staff emphasized the need for greater standardization of academic policies and service access to reduce disruption and support student success.

This section confirms that the culture of constant change within military life leads to chronic stress that affects children's mental health and academic adjustment. Geographic mobility is linked to increased rates of mental health diagnoses and emergency visits, particularly in adolescents. Focus group data further highlights that military students face substantial difficulties with peer relationships, adjusting to unfamiliar environments, and managing academic expectations. Together, these findings underscore the need for

improved school-based supports, peer mentorship opportunities, and standardized academic policies to better support military-connected students through frequent transitions.

Military Lifestyle Impact on Children's Education

Military lifestyles bring frequent transitions combined with deployments, no donut increasing stress related to military-students and their families, often resulting in negative impacts on both education and academic achievement. As most parents and teachers will tell stakeholders, negative consequences do not just affect academic and achievement, but go on to affect other scepters of these students' lives. Challenges may also manifest in social-emotional struggles, reduced social connections, and may manifest in behavioral problems.

Academic Adjustment

In this section, I look at the research on how parental deployment influences military-connected students' academic adjustment and performance. Angrist and Johnson (2000) analyzed standardized test data in relation to parental military absences and household relocations. The study highlighted that both parental absences and household moves, particularly involving single parents or mothers serving in the Army thus negatively affected children's academic achievement. Their analysis of U.S. Army personnel data revealed a correlation between deployment and increased rates of referrals for physical, intellectual, and emotional disabilities during the deployment period.

Engel et al. (2010) conducted a meta-analytic review of studies on deployment and academic adjustment. Their synthesis found that parental deployments were consistently linked to poorer academic outcomes, including reduced academic engagement and lower standardized test scores. The analysis identified middle childhood as the developmental

stage most vulnerable to academic disruptions during a parent's deployment. The review also emphasized that the duration of deployment significantly influenced outcomes, noting that deployments lasting 19 months or longer were associated with the most substantial declines in academic performance among elementary and middle school students.

In a qualitative study, Chandra et al. (2010) examined how school personnel perceive and respond to academic challenges among students with deployed parents. Semi-structured interviews with 200 educators, including teachers, counselors, and administrators, revealed that students often exhibited reduced participation, difficulty concentrating, and incomplete assignments during parental absences. These academic struggles frequently occurred alongside emotional issues such as anxiety and sadness. The study's findings suggested the importance of integrating academic and emotional support systems to improve student outcomes during deployment cycles.

This section confirms that academic adjustment is significantly impacted by parental deployment. From decreased test scores to emotional distress that interferes with learning, students face a host of academic barriers during extended or repeated deployments. Research shows that the length of deployment, age of the child, and presence of emotional stressors all influence school performance. These findings suggest that schools should prioritize early identification of academic risk, implement deployment-specific interventions, and provide ongoing academic and emotional support to military-connected students.

Delay in Transitional Services

In this section, I look at the research on the overlooked experiences of military families with preschool-aged children, particularly those with special needs. Horn and Palmer (2019), through reporting in Hattiesburg, United States, noted that "limited research

has focused on the unique needs of military families and their preschool-age children and even less work focused on military families whose preschool children have special needs or disabilities." This finding underscores a significant gap in early childhood intervention literature. It highlights the urgent need for developmentally appropriate programming that is responsive to the unique and often unrecognized stressors associated with military family life such as frequent relocations, prolonged parental absence, and inconsistencies in care and education.

Bright and Clark (2020) examine how systemic educational practices affect the special education referral process for military-connected children, including those in preschool. Their research points to three main influences on the referral process: teacher perception, standardized testing, and the strength of school-based support systems. Teachers may be inclined to refer students who exhibit behaviors associated with emotional distress, especially those connected to deployment or relocation, without fully understanding the context. Additionally, standardized testing used in referral evaluations may not account for disruptions in learning due to school transitions. Bright and Clark emphasize the critical importance of trained personnel such as counselors and special educators in making informed decisions that consider military-specific factors.

This section shows that the needs of military preschoolers, especially those with disabilities, are often overlooked. The limited availability of targeted early childhood research and the misalignment between military life and special education systems contribute to delays in service access. Teacher misunderstandings and inappropriate reliance on standardized testing further hinder accurate identification. For meaningful progress, there must be a concerted effort

to train staff, adjust evaluation tools, and build responsive early intervention systems tailored to the unique stressors of military families.

Perspectives of Educational Professionals

In this section, I look at the research on how school personnel perceive and respond to the academic and emotional impacts of parental deployment on military-connected students. Chandra et al. (2010) conducted a qualitative study using focus groups and semi-structured interviews with administrative staff, counselors, and teachers who worked closely with students from United States Army families. Participants were asked about the behavioral, academic, and emotional challenges faced by students with deployed parents. While many educators perceived that students were coping well, the study revealed that a significant number were struggling with deployment-related stress, which affected their school performance. School personnel noted that parental deployment often led to sadness and anger, negatively influencing peer relationships and disrupting classroom dynamics. De Pedro et al. (2014) conducted a qualitative study in Fall 2010 that involved interviews with 31 participants from a wide range of professional roles, including school administrators, community-based military educators, education researchers, and staff. Participants were selected based on their proximity to military-connected public schools. The study aimed to provide foundational insight for educational research and future policy initiatives by capturing the perspectives of school and community stakeholders. Findings indicated that military-connected students face distinct cultural and academic challenges that require targeted school interventions. While some schools had developed internal practices to support these students, many public-school systems were underprepared to address their needs. Stakeholders emphasized the

importance of creating data-driven systems for identifying military-connected students and ensuring staff receive training on appropriate intervention strategies.

Classen et al. (2019) explored the experiences of military families with young children with disabilities, focusing particularly on early educators in districts connected to military bases and families of deployed service members with children under the age of eight. Using a multicase qualitative research design, the study examined how participants navigated military culture and the added complexities of raising children with developmental delays. The research highlighted the importance of collaboration between the Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP) coordinator, military base leadership, and school systems. This partnership was shown to reduce stigma around EFMP enrollment and improve the development and modification of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for young children. The study reinforced the idea that effective support for military families requires integrated efforts between civilian education services and military programs.

This section shows that school personnel and stakeholders recognize the distinctive emotional and academic needs of military-connected students, yet support systems and policy development remain inconsistent. These studies emphasize the need for collaborative partnerships, targeted training, and data-based identification systems. By improving communication between military and civilian agencies and expanding school-based training, educators can more effectively respond to the challenges posed by parental deployment and ensure military-connected students receive equitable support.

Conclusion

Key overlaps across these peer reviewed academic studies emphasize the complex relationship of military lifestyle and its effect on parental deployments, frequent relocations, and

children's education. Under the topic of parental deployments, four emerging themes of children's emotional, behavioral, health outcomes, and maltreatment were studied. By addressing these overlapping, dynamic issues, school districts can understand and better support military-connected children, in order to better foster emotional well-being and academic success.

Action Plan

I am examining the research on the impact of the military lifestyle on children of service members, with a specific focus on how this lifestyle influences their educational experiences. Several studies have emphasized the need for further research that explores the unique challenges faced by military-connected children. To better understand these impacts, I will compare existing literature with current practices at my place of employment, where I serve as a 6th–8th grade Special Education Resource teacher, and offer my own recommendations for improvement. The Action Plan section is organized into three distinct areas that reflect core aspects of the military lifestyle: parental deployments, frequent relocations, and access to educational services. The following three guiding questions framed my research:

- According to the research, how does parental deployment impact children's emotional well-being, behavioral functioning, physical health outcomes, and susceptibility to child maltreatment?
- According to the research, how do frequent relocations influence a child's social-emotional development?
- According to the research, how does the military lifestyle influence a child's academic achievement in relation to academic adjustment, delays in transitional services, and school staff perspectives?

For the sake of this portion, my place of employment has been given a pseudonym. I currently work at Carter Middle School in the state of Washington as a special education mathematics resource teacher for grades six to eighth. In the 2025-2025 school year, 745 students were enrolled at the beginning of the school year. The gender breakdown is 51% male and 48% female. The school is 39% White, 29% Hispanic, 13% two or more races, 9% Asian, 6% Black, 4% Pacific Islander, and 1% American Indian. Specifically related to the focus of this paper, 11% of the student population has a military parent and 18% of students have disabilities. In the following subsections, three tables are presented. In each table, the first column will state what research states, what my current school practices and implements, and the third, what I, the author, recommend in order to best align what the research presents.

Parental Deployments

In this section, I examine the best practices regarding the impact of parental deployments on their children. Parental deployments occur when a military parent is assigned to a temporary duty station away from home, often in another state or country. These deployments can last from several months to over a year and typically involve high levels of stress and unpredictability. For military-connected children, this means prolonged separation from a primary caregiver, disruptions to routines, and increased household responsibilities, particularly in single-parent households. Emotional responses such as sadness, anxiety, anger, and worry are common, especially among younger children who may not fully understand the nature of their parent's absence. In addition to emotional distress, behavioral challenges and academic disengagement are frequently reported during and following a deployment period.

Best practices recommend proactive strategies that offer both emotional and academic support for military-connected students during parental deployment. Schools can play a critical

role by offering consistent access to counseling services, creating peer support groups, and integrating social-emotional learning into the classroom. Frequent communication between educators, military family liaisons, and caregivers helps ensure that children's needs are identified early and met appropriately. Additionally, professional development for school staff on the unique challenges faced by military families can enhance sensitivity and responsiveness. These collaborative practices foster stability and promote resilience in children navigating the complexities of deployment-related separation.

Table 1

Parental Deployments

What research states:	**Carter Middle School Practices:**	**Personal Recommendations:**
Children affected by parental deployment are at increased risk for substance abuse, particularly when cared for by non-parent caregivers (Reed et al., 2011; Acion et al., 2013; Esposito-Smythers et al., 2011).	CMS uses ESD 113 services that include substance use screening, prevention education, individual and family counseling, group therapy, and case management support.	Develop peer groups focused on healthy coping and decision-making for students facing deployment. Conduct regular check-ins with at-risk students. Coordinate with Evergreen Joint Base to streamline referrals to prevention and treatment services.
Deployment departures and reunions increase family stress and raise rates of child maltreatment, with nonmilitary caregivers most often involved (Gibbs et al., 2007; Rentz et al., 2007; McCarroll et al., 2008).	The Military Support Team coordinates with Evergreen Joint Base and includes MFLCs, who provide short-term counseling and support. MFLCs are not consistently available across all district schools.	Expand MFLC access district-wide to ensure equitable service delivery. Provide workshops for civilian caregivers to enhance parenting skills and build awareness of deployment-related stress. Establish clearer CPS referral pathways and support structures.
Older adolescents may exhibit more adaptive coping mechanisms than younger children during deployment,	Character Strong curriculum is delivered during advisory periods, and Second Step is used for SEL and bullying	Adapt SEL curriculum with military-specific examples and stress scenarios. Increase counseling services for

but deployment overall increases emotional and behavioral challenges (Huebner et al., 2007; Chandra et al., 2010; Creech et al., 2014).	prevention. These are used across grades 6–12.	younger students. Embed regular emotional check-ins during known deployment cycles.
Chronic deployment-related stress combined with weak support systems can lead to long-term emotional and behavioral problems in youth (Esposito-Smythers et al., 2011; Flake et al., 2009; Creech et al., 2014).	CMS implements PBIS schoolwide and supplements with individual or small-group instruction for students who need behavior reinforcement.	Train staff in trauma-informed practices and the behavioral impact of deployment. Use MTSS to identify students under chronic stress and integrate behavior specialists for wraparound services.
Military children have elevated risks of depression, suicidal ideation, anxiety, and psychosocial morbidity compared to peers with non-deployed parents (Mansfield et al., 2011; Aranda et al., 2011; Lester et al., 2010).	Mental health specialists provide one-on-one and small group support, teach mental health lessons, and respond to crises when flagged by counselors.	Implement a districtwide emotional wellness monitoring system during deployment periods. Train teachers to recognize signs of distress and refer students promptly. Facilitate interdisciplinary collaboration between classroom teachers, mental health teams, and school counselors.

Military Directed Relocations

In this section, I examine the best practices regarding the impact of parental deployments on their children. Parental deployments occur when a military parent is assigned to a temporary duty station away from home, often in another state or country. These deployments can last from several months to over a year and typically involve high levels of stress and unpredictability. For military-connected children, this means prolonged separation from a primary caregiver, disruptions to routines, and increased household responsibilities, particularly in single-parent households. Emotional responses such as sadness, anxiety, anger, and worry are common. This is especially true among younger children who may not fully understand the nature of their parent's

absence. In addition to emotional distress, behavioral challenges and academic disengagement are frequently reported during and following a deployment period.

Best practices recommend proactive strategies that offer both emotional and academic support for military-connected students during parental deployment. Schools can play a critical role by offering consistent access to counseling services, creating peer support groups, and integrating social-emotional learning into the classroom. Frequent communication between educators, military family liaisons, and caregivers helps ensure that children's needs are identified early and met appropriately. Additionally, professional development for school staff on the unique challenges faced by military families can enhance sensitivity and responsiveness. These collaborative practices foster stability and promote resilience in children navigating the complexities of deployment-related separation.

Table 2

Military Directed Relocations

What research states:	**Carter Middle School Practices:**	**Personal Recommendations:**
Military families experience barriers in intervention access, continuity, and quality after mandated moves (Davis et al., 2016; Finke et al., 2019; Farley et al., 2022).	CMS staff refer new families to liaisons at Evergreen Joint Base. Some counselors support service transfer but there is no centralized onboarding system.	Implement a standardized intake and onboarding system that screens for previous interventions, EFMP status, special education, and mental health needs. Assign a case manager upon enrollment.
Students who experience geographic relocations have higher rates of diagnoses such as ADHD, conduct disorders, adjustment disorders, and suicidal ideation (Millegan et al., 2014; Gilreath et al., 2011; Trautmann et al., 2015).	CMS has two full-time counselors and one mental health specialist, but no mandatory mental health screenings during transition.	Within the first 30 days, conduct universal screening for military-connected students using trauma-informed tools. Develop data tracking systems for follow-up support.

Students report stress due to tension at home, difficulty adapting to school environments, peer conflict, and academic challenges (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Huebner et al., 2007; Chandra et al., 2010).	CMS uses Character Strong and PBIS to address SEL but has no transition-specific strategy for mobile students.	Enhance SEL implementation with mobile student-specific modules. Create targeted group supports led by school counselors for newly transitioned students.
Peer pairing helps mitigate transition stress by creating connection and familiarity in new school settings (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Esposito-Smythers et al., 2011; De Pedro et al., 2014).	Informal peer pairing exists in some advisory classes, but it is not standardized or tracked.	Formalize a Welcome Buddy program through the counseling office. Train peer mentors to support new students in their first 6–8 weeks. Include orientation routines and check-ins.
Increased communication between sending and receiving schools is critical for easing academic and emotional transitions (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Engel et al., 2010; Classen et al., 2019).	Rainer School District communicates with sending schools, but the process lacks consistency and comprehensiveness.	Create a standardized digital transition form shared between sending and receiving schools that includes IEP, 504, SEL, and academic placement data. Use counselors as transition liaisons.
Staff training specific to military family stressors improves connection and support (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Kudler & Porter, 2013; Chandra et al., 2010).	CMS staff receive general SEL training; no specific PD on military family dynamics or stressors.	Provide annual military-specific professional development including transition stress, deployment trauma, and EFMP supports. Partner with base MFLCs and EFMP coordinators.
Lack of academic service continuity during transfers creates delays in access to IEP/504 supports (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Davis et al., 2016; Bright & Clark, 2020).	CMS follows Washington state guidelines but lacks a formal districtwide protocol for rapid IEP/504 continuation for military-connected students.	Adopt a districtwide military-connected student policy that mandates immediate continuation of IEP/504 plans, streamlined records transfer, and academic placement alignment.

Military Lifestyle Impact on Children's Education

Military lifestyles bring frequent transitions combined with deployments, no doubt increasing stress related to military-students and their families, often resulting in negative impacts on both education and academic achievement. Military-connected students with active-duty parents move approximately six to nine times from kindergarten until their high school graduation - three times more than their civilian counterparts, often across state and national borders. Course placements and credit transfers continue to be constant barriers for transitioning students and opportunities for academic achievement and advancement. School specific site's cultures and processes around special education complicate transitions for an already susceptible population.

More recent studies have focused on the impact of deployment-related parental absences of the U.S. Army personnel data and their children's standardized test scores. Results showed that both household relocations and parental absences, especially with single parents, mothers in the Army, affected children's test scores. The length of a deployment significantly affects negative academic outcomes. In 2011, results showed that a parent who was deployed for 19 months or more, is associated with lower test scores in both elementary and middle school aged students.

Moreover, teacher biases or a lack of understanding of military-specific stressors may lead to misinterpretation of a child's needs. Standardized testing is used to assess eligibility for special education services but does not accurately capture the challenges military students face. Standardized testing does not take in consideration the child's disruptions in their educational history due to frequent relocations.

Table 3

Military Lifestyle Impact on Children's Education

What research states:	**Carter Middle School Practices:**	**Personal Recommendations:**
Household relocations and parental absences, particularly involving single parents or mothers in the military, negatively impact children's academic performance and increase referrals for special education and disability services (Angrist & Johnson, 2000; Engel et al., 2010; Chandra et al., 2010).	CMS uses the Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) framework to provide three tiers of academic and behavioral interventions. Tier 3 includes individualized supports for students not progressing in Tier 2. MTSS integrates data from behavior and academic performance.	Initiate academic and behavioral screenings for all military-connected students at enrollment. Use universal screeners to flag students needing early intervention. Ensure IEPs and 504s are transferred without delay through coordinated district communication.
Schools prone to frequent parental absences should implement structured programs to reduce negative academic outcomes linked to prolonged deployment (Engel et al., 2010; Flake et al., 2009; Esposito-Smythers et al., 2011).	CMS has two full-time school counselors and one full-time mental health specialist who provide deployment-related emotional support and referrals as needed.	Develop schoolwide peer mentoring programs and targeted emotional support groups for military-connected students. Implement weekly staff-led check-ins for consistency and belonging during parental absences.
District-level staff, including counselors, special educators, and social workers, play a key role in identifying and supporting military-connected students at risk of academic or behavioral challenges (Bright & Clark, 2020; De Pedro et al., 2014; Kudler & Porter, 2013).	CMS and Rainer School District partner with military liaisons and community agencies. Multidisciplinary teams review academic and behavior data regularly through MTSS.	Designate a military family liaison on staff and provide regular professional development focused on cultural competency and military-specific stress. Establish a tracking system that monitors mobility and emotional risk indicators.
Parental deployment has been shown to lead to increased emotional distress, including sadness and anger, which interferes with peer relationships and classroom participation (Chandra et al., 2010; Huebner et al., 2007; Esposito-Smythers et al., 2011).	CMS counselors offer small group and individual counseling sessions, and MTSS includes SEL interventions, though deployment-specific support is not formalized schoolwide.	Expand trauma-informed practices across classrooms. Provide professional development on deployment-related behavior patterns. Facilitate student sharing circles and community-building strategies to foster peer support and emotional expression.

Summary

Military-connected children face unique stressors and challenges associated with the military lifestyle. These stressors are not limited to the stress and anxiety of their parent(s) going on deployment, multiple moves across state and national borders, and the fear or stress of their parent while being deployed, and loss or injury of a parent. These stressors can increase risk for emotional behavior, social, mental health, and educational effects for military-connected children (De Pedro et al., 2011; Esposito-Smythers et al., 2011) Despite increased attention and initiatives to help mitigate the negative effects of stressors experienced of military-connected children and promote general well-being, there is still a lack of evidence-based intervention and research in this particular area. In regard to schools, school staff, social workers, mental health professionals, and educational researchers may overlook military-connected children's educational experiences. Department of Defense schools may be more supportive in supporting the needs of military connected students, but the vast majority of these children attend civilian public schools which may lack adequate services and support. In civilian schools, personnel may be unaware and unfamiliar to the unique needs of military-connected children (Esqueda et al., 2012). This knowledge gap underscores the importance of examining how military lifestyle factors impact students—a focus explored in the following discussion.

Discussion

The purpose of the literature review is to examine the research on the factors of a military lifestyle on children. This literature review aims to explore the impact of military lifestyle and its effect on children through the emerging themes: parental deployments, frequent relocations, and

educational service delays. Additionally, this literature review will discuss how to develop more equitable and holistic practices to support military-connected students

Discussion of Findings

The research of the effects of military lifestyle on children was focused around three questions: How does parental deployment affect children's emotional, behavior, health outcomes, and child maltreatment? How does frequency relocations affect a child's social emotional development? How does military lifestyle affect a child's education through academic adjustment, delay in transitional services, and the perspectives of school staff? This section is used to answer these initially proposed questions and discuss ways schools could implement these key findings.

Parental Deployments

In this section I address the first question posed in my rationale: How does parental deployment impact children's emotional well-being, behavioral functioning, physical and mental health outcomes, and their risk for maltreatment?

Research indicates that when parental service members leave for deployment, children are affected in numerous ways. During both departure and reintegration periods, military families often experience heightened stress, and the rate of child maltreatment increases (Gibbs et al., 2007; Rentz et al., 2007; McCarroll et al., 2008). Notably, female civilian caregivers were identified as the most frequent perpetrators during deployment-related maltreatment incidents. Additionally, children with deployed parents are at an increased risk for emotional distress and high-risk behaviors, such as substance use and depressive symptoms (Reed et al., 2011; Acion et al., 2013).

At my current practicum site, CMS responds to student needs by providing access to two full-time school counselors and one full-time mental health specialist. These professionals offer individual and group counseling, social-emotional support, and crisis intervention. CMS also collaborates with the district's Military and Family Life Counselor (MFLC) program when available, delivering short-term, non-medical counseling to military-connected students. In addition, CMS utilizes a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) to track student progress and ensure timely behavioral and emotional interventions. However, CMS currently lacks a deployment-specific protocol to systematically identify, and support students affected by parental deployment.

These findings suggest a critical need for schools to implement standardized, district-wide procedures to respond to the unique challenges of deployment. This may include scheduled emotional check-ins for military-connected students, professional development for staff on deployment-related trauma, and ensuring equitable access to MFLC services across all campuses.

Military Directed Relocations

In this section I address the second question posed in my rationale: How do frequent relocations impact a child's social-emotional development and peer relationships?Research shows that frequent permanent change of station (PCS) moves often result in significant disruptions to a child's sense of belonging, peer relationships, and academic consistency. Bradshaw et al. (2010) found that military-connected students cited difficulty forming friendships, feeling disconnected, and the challenge of catching up academically as top stressors. These transitions are more than just logistical—they deeply affect a child's confidence, identity, and overall well-being.

At CMS, current onboarding practices for newly enrolled students are primarily administrative. Students and their families meet with office staff to complete registration and are given basic information about schedules and classroom locations. While counselors are available to meet with students upon request or teacher referral, there is no formalized peer-buddy system or structured transition support embedded into the school's welcome process. Teachers may offer informal support in the classroom, but it varies widely by individual initiative. Without consistent district-wide practices, we are missing opportunities to intentionally address the relational and emotional needs that come with relocation.

Moving forward, there are several actions we can take to strengthen our school's support for transitioning military students. First, CMS would benefit from implementing a peer-buddy or ambassador program. A structured system where incoming students are paired with a trained peer for the first few weeks of school could help them feel welcomed, provide guidance, and create early opportunities for friendship. Second, establishing a transition support checklist used by counselors and office staff to ensure every new student receives at least one scheduled check-in, along with communication to their teachers about the student's recent relocation and military background.

Additionally, using social-emotional screeners during initial enrollment would help staff identify students in need of more targeted support. These tools could inform counselor outreach, small group interventions, or referrals to our Military and Family Life Counselor (MFLC), if available. Teachers and staff would also benefit from training on the challenges faced by frequently relocated students and how to build inclusive classrooms that make space for newcomers to thrive socially and academically.

By integrating these practices, we can build a stronger, more intentional school culture that responds to the needs of our military-connected students—not just academically, but socially and emotionally. These changes would not only align with what the research recommends, but also reflect our ongoing commitment to equity, inclusion, and whole-child support.

Academic Achievement

In this section I try to answer my third question, "According to the research, how does the military lifestyle influence a child's academic achievement in relation to academic adjustment, delays in transitional services, and school staff perspectives?"

Research consistently demonstrates that parental deployment has a negative effect on students' academic outcomes. Findings from multiple studies indicate that deployments are associated with reduced academic engagement, lower standardized test scores, and increased academic struggles, particularly during middle childhood. Children of single parents or mothers serving in the military are especially at risk. The duration of deployment further compounds these issues. For example, deployments lasting 19 months or more have been shown to significantly impact academic performance in both elementary and middle school students (Angrist & Johnson, 2000; Engel et al., 2010).

At CMS, academic challenges are addressed through a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), which offers tiered interventions based on student needs. While effective for identifying and responding to general academic struggles, this system does not currently include military-specific monitoring or supports. Students affected by deployment or midyear relocation are integrated into the MTSS framework without intentional consideration of how military life may have disrupted their academic trajectory.

To better support academic adjustment for military-connected students, CMS should implement deployment-sensitive procedures within its MTSS structure. This could include early academic screenings for newly enrolled students with a military background, the development of individualized academic catch-up plans, and proactive collaboration with families to ensure that learning gaps are identified and addressed quickly. Additionally, systems for reviewing and aligning Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and 504 plans across school transfers would ensure continuity of support.

Research Practices Gaps

This project set out to explore how military lifestyle factors (parental deployment, frequent relocations, and delays in educational services) impact children of service members. In answering the central questions posed in the rationale, the findings revealed that these stressors consistently disrupt academic, emotional, and behavioral outcomes for military-connected students. The research aimed to determine whether schools are effectively identifying and supporting these students. Additionally, whether systems are in place to address the unique challenges they face. Drawing from both research and site-level observation, the results show that while awareness is growing, implementation across all settings remains inconsistent and insufficient.

There are gaps between evidence-based recommendations and current practices at Carter Middle School (CMS) are clear. Although the district, Rainer School District (Rainer School District), has received recognition for its military-connected student support, those practices are not standardized across all school levels. The literature strongly supports the use of peer-buddy systems and transition plans during PCS relocations to ease peer and academic adjustment (Bradshaw et al., 2010) yet, CMS has no formal structures in place. Students enter new academic

and social environments without any transitional guidance, which conflicts with best practice and leaves staff to respond reactively rather than proactively.

On a similar note, while Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) are in place, they are not tailored to military-specific concerns. This is particularly concerning in cases of behavioral difficulties that stem from deployment-related stress or instability. As highlighted in studies by Gibbs et al. (2007), Rentz et al. (2007), and McCarroll et al. (2008), deployment is associated with increased stress within families and a heightened risk of child maltreatment, particularly during the deployment and reintegration phases. Furthermore, adolescents with deployed parents show increased risk for substance use and depressive symptoms (Reed et al., 2011; Acion et al., 2013). At CMS, these behaviors are often addressed using general behavioral interventions rather than root-cause analysis specific to military life. Teachers and school staff are typically unaware of a student's military background unless it is disclosed directly which is an inconsistent and inequitable identification method.

Facilitators to improving support systems include existing district-wide frameworks such as MTSS and the presence of school counselors willing to assist military-connected students. Rainer School District's recognition via the Purple Star Award shows a foundational commitment to serving military families. These assets can serve as launch points for more future targeted interventions.

Nonetheless, several barriers persist. First is the issue of identification. Without a centralized method of tracking military-connected students, schools rely on voluntary disclosure. This barrier directly hinders early intervention and systemic support. Second, lack of staff training limits the capacity of educators to understand and respond to military-specific stressors. While stakeholders are aware of the military specific challenges, there are no consistent

professional development focused on these students' needs (Brendel et al., 2013). Third, limited communication across school systems during PCS moves creates delays in transferring educational records, including IEPs. This disrupts the continuity of academic services and puts students at risk of falling behind (Bright & Clark, 2020). Lastly, standardized assessments used for special education eligibility often fail to account for interrupted learning due to relocations. These assessments may inaccurately reflect a student's learning needs that result in either over-identification or under-referral for special education services. As Farley et al. (2022) noted, the lack of continuity in services across districts can be especially detrimental for students with disabilities during transitions.

Despite these barriers, there is a strong potential for progress. The research points to the value of coordinated action among schools, families, and military agencies (Kudler & Porter, 2013). By building stronger communication pipelines, especially between Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP) coordinators and local educators, schools can more efficiently respond to the needs of incoming and transitioning students. De Pedro et al. (2014) emphasized the importance of responsive systems that include staff training, data-informed practices, and whole-school engagement models.

In sum, this discussion underscores a need for structured, school-wide systems that go beyond goodwill and scattered efforts. District policies must ensure consistent identification of military-connected students, equip staff through professional learning and development, and create tailored interventions that reflect the realities of military family life. The path forward involves transforming awareness into action through systemic and sustainable change.

Implications for Stakeholders: Teachers, Students, and Schools

Research indicates that the military lifestyle affects children in numerous ways. Examining the effects of parental deployment on children's emotional, behavioral, and health outcomes reveals several areas where schools can implement preventative and supportive practices. Stakeholders can begin to address these concerns by adopting a whole-school prevention model that incorporates data and standardized procedures to identify and monitor military-connected students. Such a model would help reduce negative outcomes including low motivation, academic failure, and poor mental health. Scholars also emphasize the importance of ongoing professional development for teachers, school counselors, and support staff to better meet the needs of this student population (De Pedro, 2014).

Kudler and Porter (2013) stated that effective support for military families requires intentional coordination between civilian and military service systems. A nationally scalable strategy would include formal partnerships among military base command leadership, local school superintendents, and Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP) coordinators. These partnerships could facilitate smoother transitions for military-connected students and improve the continuity of services, particularly for those receiving special education. In addition, a three-way collaboration among families, schools, and EFMP coordinators would help ensure timely development, implementation, and modification of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for eligible students.

Although the Rainer School District (Rainer School District) district has received recognition through the Purple Star Award for its commitment to military-connected families, site-level challenges persist. At Carter Middle School (CMS), military-specific services are not consistently provided. Instead, the school relies heavily on school counselors to support students

in military families. Teachers are often unaware of students' military-connected status unless this information is disclosed voluntarily by families or students.

Currently, CMS addresses student needs through the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS); however, this system is not tailored to address stressors specific to military life. For example, behavioral concerns arising from deployment-related stress may be misinterpreted, resulting in general interventions that do not fully address the underlying causes. Furthermore, for military students receiving special education services, communication between sending and receiving schools is often limited, leading to inconsistent progress monitoring, unclear academic goals, and delayed service delivery. These challenges are compounded by a lack of standardized procedures across educational institutions.

Additionally, standardized testing, commonly used to inform special education referrals, often fails to consider the academic disruptions caused by frequent relocations. These tests may not accurately reflect the learning needs of military-connected students and can lead to misidentification or under-referral for special services. As such, educational stakeholders must critically assess current referral and assessment practices to ensure they account for the unique educational experiences of this student population.

Implications for Future Research

As demonstrated across numerous studies, military-connected students face unique cultural and educational challenges that require intentional, school-based interventions. While existing research provides valuable insight into the emotional, behavioral, and academic impacts of military life, particularly in relation to deployment and frequent relocations, there remain are several areas in need of further scholarly exploration.

One pressing area is the need for research that supports the development of comprehensive identification systems for military-connected students. Such systems would allow educators to proactively address the specific needs of these students, rather than relying on voluntary family disclosure. In addition, longitudinal studies are needed to examine the cumulative effects of multiple relocations, deployments, and service interruptions across a child's educational trajectory. These studies would help determine how repeated transitions affect academic performance, mental health, and social-emotional development over time.

Furthermore, younger military-connected students particularly those in early childhood or preschool are underrepresented in the literature. Most existing studies focus on adolescents or school-aged children, leaving a gap in understanding the early developmental impact of the military lifestyle. Similarly, there is limited research on military families with children who have disabilities, despite growing concern over the delays and discontinuities in special education services during Permanent Change of Station (PCS) moves (Davis et al., 2016; Farley et al., 2022).

Research should also account for the diversity within military families, including rank, branch of service, racial and ethnic background, gender, and family structure. These variables may mediate how children experience and respond to the unique stressors of military life and should be considered when designing inclusive interventions.

In addition, while some districts have implemented promising practices: such as peer mentorship programs, military student liaisons, and trauma-informed support frameworks, there is little empirical data evaluating the effectiveness, scalability, and long-term outcomes of these interventions. Evaluative studies that use both qualitative and quantitative methods would provide much-needed evidence for policy and practice.

Lastly, future research should inform state and federal policy. With every state now participating in the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children, it is crucial to understand how policy is enacted at the school level and how it supports or hinders student success. Research that bridges education, military, and policy sectors will be essential in guiding equitable resource allocation, staff training, and service delivery.

Overall, there is a critical need for research that not only explores the lived experiences of military-connected students but also evaluates the structures meant to support them. There continues to be limited research on the unique needs of military families with children requiring special needs or disabilities. There continues to be a need on how to create effective partnerships between military and civilian entities to support and advocate for these groups. Bridging these gaps will lead to more responsive, data-informed practices and systems that effectively serve this highly mobile and often underserved population.

Limitations of the Project

The purpose of this project was to examine research on factors within the military lifestyle that affect children of service members. Three key themes were identified: parental deployment, frequent relocations, and educational service delays. This paper aims to highlight the unique challenges faced by military-connected students and explore the broader implications of military life. The literature review focused on peer-reviewed articles published between 2005 and 2024. Key terms used in the search included: military-connected students, military-connected families, parental deployment, mandated military moves, special education services, and educational systems. Sources were located using academic databases such as ERIC, JSTOR, Google Scholar, and the University of Washington library system. Articles were included if they were peer-reviewed, published within the identified time frame, and addressed the direct impact

of military-related factors on students. Studies were excluded if they predated 2005, lacked relevance to K–12 education, or presented outdated data or non-U.S. populations. Challenges in conducting this review included limited access to certain sources due to institutional subscription restrictions and barriers in locating comprehensive data from the action research site. Additionally, personal experience as a military spouse and educator working in a military-impacted school district may have influenced the focus of selected studies and the lens through which this research was interpreted.

Conclusions

Military-connected students face a distinct set of challenges as a result of their family's service-related responsibilities. This project explored the effects of parental deployment, frequent relocations, and educational service delays on children of service members. The research revealed that these factors contribute to emotional distress, academic instability, and gaps in educational services. This review examined the existing research, identified best practices currently in use, and offered general recommendations to improve how the educational field supports military-connected students.

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